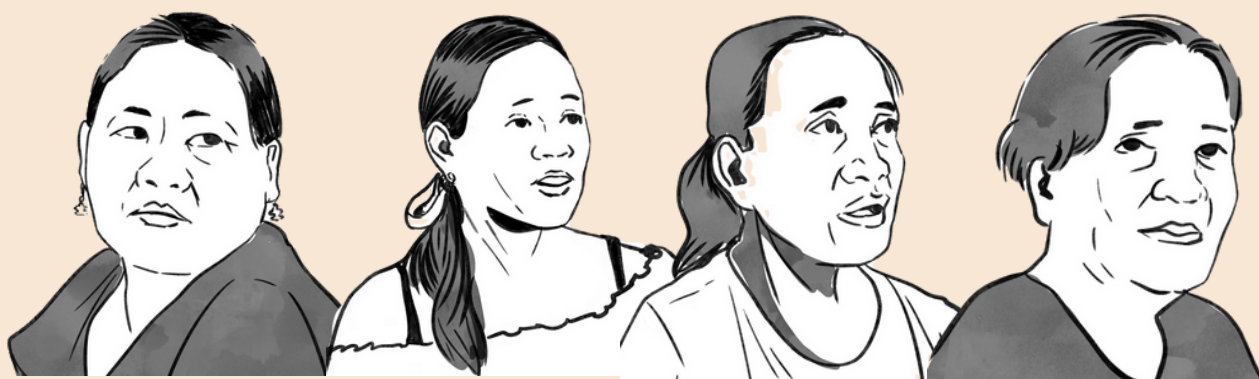
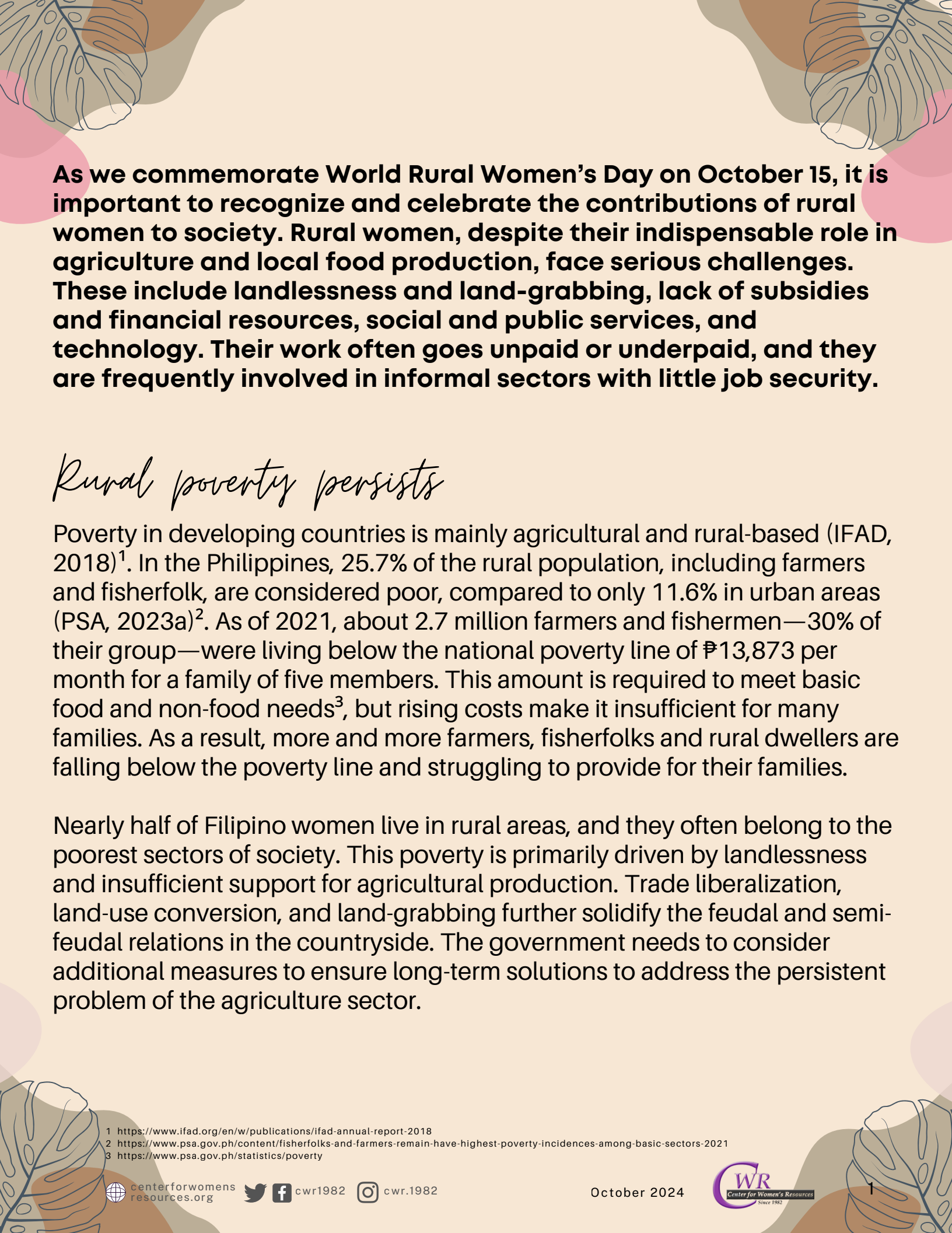




Celebrating the Hands that Feed:

The Fight of Women Farmworkers
for Land and Justice





As we commemorate World Rural Women's Day on October 15, it is important to recognize and celebrate the contributions of rural women to society. Rural women, despite their indispensable role in agriculture and local food production, face serious challenges. These include landlessness and land-grabbing, lack of subsidies and financial resources, social and public services, and technology. Their work often goes unpaid or underpaid, and they are frequently involved in informal sectors with little job security.

Rural poverty persists

Poverty in developing countries is mainly agricultural and rural-based (IFAD, 2018)¹. In the Philippines, 25.7% of the rural population, including farmers and fisherfolk, are considered poor, compared to only 11.6% in urban areas (PSA, 2023a)². As of 2021, about 2.7 million farmers and fishermen—30% of their group—were living below the national poverty line of ₱13,873 per month for a family of five members. This amount is required to meet basic food and non-food needs³, but rising costs make it insufficient for many families. As a result, more and more farmers, fisherfolks and rural dwellers are falling below the poverty line and struggling to provide for their families.

Nearly half of Filipino women live in rural areas, and they often belong to the poorest sectors of society. This poverty is primarily driven by landlessness and insufficient support for agricultural production. Trade liberalization, land-use conversion, and land-grabbing further solidify the feudal and semi-feudal relations in the countryside. The government needs to consider additional measures to ensure long-term solutions to address the persistent problem of the agriculture sector.

¹ <https://www.ifad.org/en/w/publications/ifad-annual-report-2018>

² <https://www.psa.gov.ph/content/fisherfolks-and-farmers-remain-have-highest-poverty-incidences-among-basic-sectors-2021>

³ <https://www.psa.gov.ph/statistics/poverty>



Recent data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) shows that the top three basic sectors with the highest magnitude of poverty in 2021 were: a) Individuals residing in rural areas (13.67 million); b) children (10.46 million); and c) women (9.99 million).

Around 2.98 million women working in agriculture face significant challenges due to lack of land ownership and limited access to financial resources. Data from PSA indicates that women represented approximately 25% of the agricultural workforce from 2007 to 2016⁴. However, there is a need to accurately recognize and account for women's contributions in agricultural work, given that it is often viewed as an extension of household duties. It is important to acknowledge and address this discrepancy, as women play a significant role in unpaid family agricultural work.

When it comes to land ownership, only 13.8% are women beneficiaries of agrarian reform programs⁵. According to an article published by the Philippine News Agency, citing the Department of Agrarian Reform's database as of December 2023, approximately 96,283 women have received emancipation patents or land titles after fully paying amortization for the land they cultivated and meeting all government requirements. Additionally, around 637,215 women have been awarded Certificate of Land Ownership (CLOA)⁶.

The data illustrate that women's contributions to agricultural production are often overlooked and undervalued. They are often not recognized as farmers, and therefore excluded as beneficiaries of land distribution. This not only limits their economic opportunities but also perpetuates their marginalized status within the agricultural sector.

The El Niño and La Niña phenomena and the climate crisis that decreased crop yields, rising production costs, and the influx of imported agricultural products exacerbates the situation of rural women.

⁴ <https://pcw.gov.ph/agriculture-fisheries-and-forestry/>

⁵ ¹ <https://www.ifad.org/en/w/publications/ifad-annual-report-2018>

² <https://www.psa.gov.ph/content/fisherfolks-and-farmers-remain-have-highest-poverty-incidences-among-basic-sectors-2021>

³ <https://www.psa.gov.ph/statistics/poverty>

⁶ <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1231214>

Struggles of women farmworkers in Guimba, Nueva Ecija

Guimba, Nueva Ecija, is home to thousands of farmers and farmworkers in rural villages. The majority of families derive their income from agriculture. Farmworkers, in particular, continue to suffer dire poverty and feudal and semi-feudal exploitation due to landlessness, agricultural backwardness, and rural maldevelopment.

The plight of farmworkers remains challenging, especially with the arrival of mechanized harvesters. The use of these harvesters, or *halimaw*, has led to a significant (more than 60%) decrease in demand for manual labor, further aggravating the already dire situation of farm laborers. As a result, many have been left without steady employment and are struggling to make ends meet.

Thus, despite government programs, the situation of farmworkers is not addressed. For instance, President BBM has recently launched the *Agri-Puhunan and Pantawid Program*, aimed at assisting farmer beneficiaries in Guimba, Nueva Ecija. The initiative, under the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP), allocated ₱3 billion to provide low-interest loans and subsistence allowances for farmers⁷.

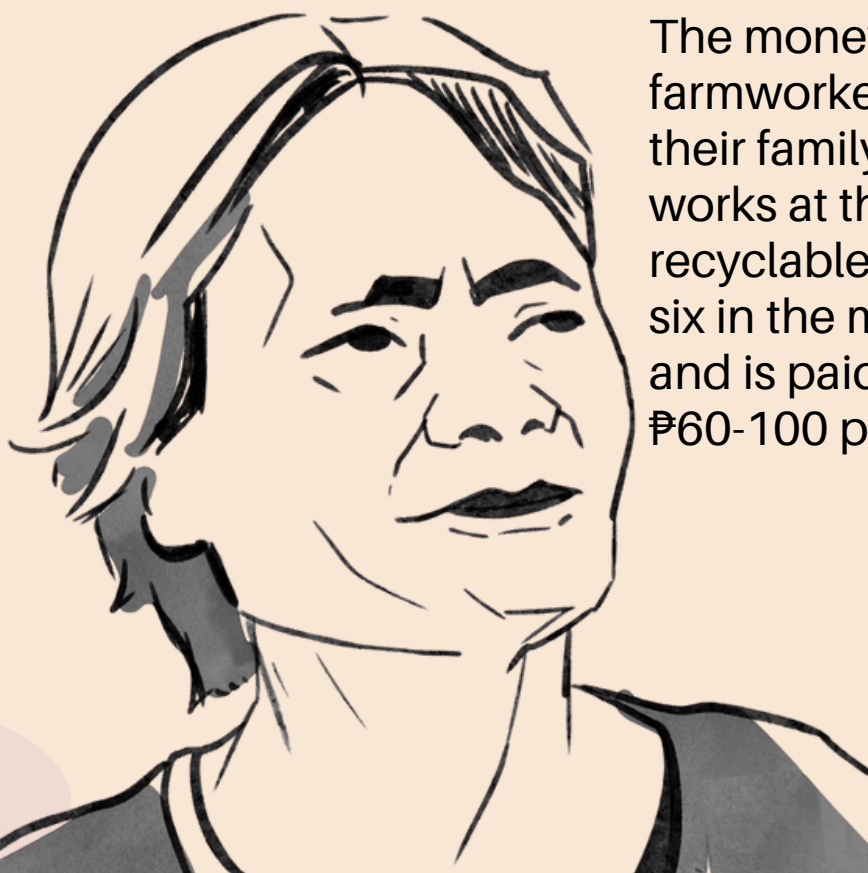
However, many believe that this program, while helpful for some, may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the farmers, and the loan component may only add to the debt burden of the farmers in the long run. According to the *Liga ng Manggagawang Bukid (LMB)*, farm laborers have been invisible from the government's programs and policies, leading to their continued exploitation and marginalization.

⁷ Under this program, each beneficiary will receive a total of PhP32,000 distributed in installments of PhP8,000 over four months.



Celia, 64, has been a farmworker since she was 12 years old. The physical limitations brought by her old age have limited her work to *pagbubunot* (weeding) instead of actual planting. She works in the land for a month and a half, where she is paid one peso per bunch or ₱400-500 per day and ₱300 per half day of work.

When she was 20 years old, she married her husband and had two children. One of her children is a coconut farmworker in Quezon province. Meanwhile, her other child, who has eight children, struggles to make ends meet. This extends Celia's responsibilities to theirs. For instance, whenever one of her grandchildren gets sick, she advances money from the *kabesilya* or middleman.



The money she earns from being a farmworker is never enough for the needs of their family. To augment this, Celia also works at the dumpsite as a scavenger for recyclable materials. There she works from six in the morning until five in the afternoon and is paid ₱300-500 per five whole days or ₱60-100 pesos per day of scavenging.

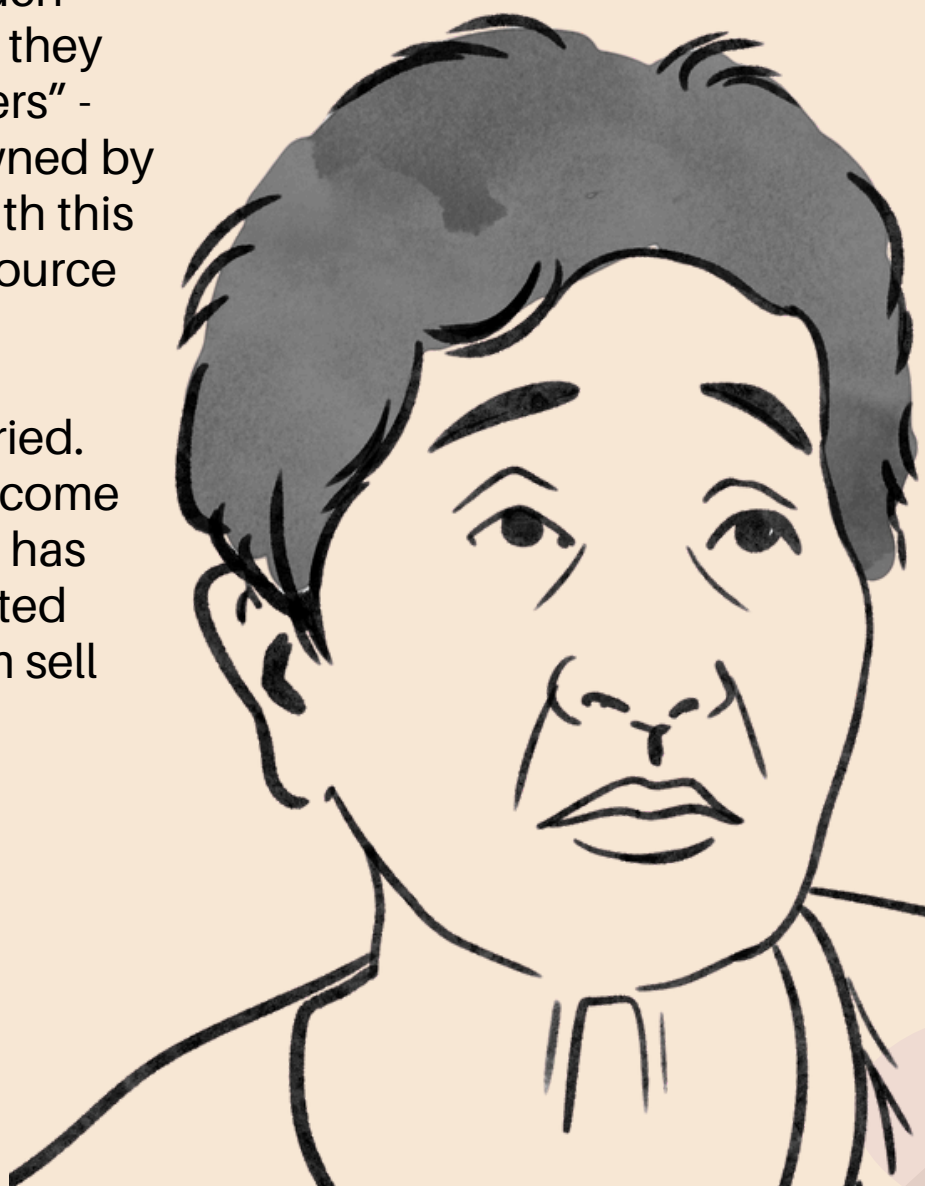
Celia

Grace started working on a farm when she was 15. She recalled that way before the combine thresher and harvester came, money used to come easier. With threshing, they still got to take home one cavan of rice grain. This is on top of getting paid for the work they did for harvesting.

Now, life as a farmworker is much more difficult because of what they would call halimaw or “monsters” - the mechanized harvesters owned by the rich in their community. With this halimaw, they lost their main source of income.

She was 21 when she got married. She thought that life would become better for her, but it didn't. She has seven children who all graduated from high school. Most of them sell goods for a living.

Grace





Belen

Life in Guimba as a farmworker is already difficult enough as it is. But for Belen, who began working at the age of 25, the circumstances were more difficult as she had to deal with her husband's frequent drinking and recurrent infidelity. She recalled that she would start mowing and plowing alone at dawn, while her husband was nowhere to be found. Years back, her husband owned several carabaos and hectares of land, but he would sell those to fund his vices, giving her so little while he spent a huge sum on alcohol and women.

Now, Belen is 72 years old, and she is still a farmworker. However, opportunities have been limited since the introduction of mechanized harvesters. She currently lives with her son, a backhoe operator, and mainly relies on her six children for financial support.



Ofelia

Ofelia has been a farmworker since she was 15 years old. At 29, she married a carpenter but struggled with her husband's drinking problems. Now, at 75, she continues to collect leftover palay after it has been threshed. As her health has already been in decline due to her age, she would often ask other people to carry home the palay she collected. With her husband gone and having known nothing else besides being a farmworker, she currently lives with her son and his family and relies on them for support.

Francisca



Francisca comes from a family of agricultural workers and began working in the fields when she was in 4th grade. During the planting season, which lasts about one and a half months, she works as a *kabesilya* or middleman. Her pay remains low, with her *porsyento* or share only amounting to ₱100 per hectare, in addition to her regular pay as a farmworker. In a day, they could only finish planting 3-5 hectares of land—her *porsyento* only amounting to ₱300 to ₱500.

During the gawat season, when there is no agricultural work, farmworkers like Francisca would take on non-agricultural jobs, like cleaning and construction work. At 59 years old, Francisca continues to work in agriculture. She and her husband earn income from their *porsyento* or share from two hectares of land. They have no children but have raised several adopted children and treated them as their own. They serve as Francisca's inspiration to continue her hard work.

Barbara began working on the farm at the age of 30. Since the introduction of machines like reapers and threshers, their livelihood was greatly affected. Now, she earns only ₱200 per day as a farmworker, just enough to buy food for their family. To cope with the increasing prices of goods and other basic needs of her seven children, she now works as a Barangay Health Worker and offers laundry services. Despite these additional jobs, the combined income she makes, and those of her children working in construction, remain insufficient for the needs of their family, causing her to still be dependent on formal and informal loan services.

Barbara





Nimfa started farming at 17 when she married an agricultural worker. They have four children, and life has been tough since her husband developed pulmonary edema and could no longer work as a *kabesilya*. Her daily income of ₱400 as a farmworker does not suffice for her family's needs, so she sells goods to make extra money. Now at 43, she works on nearby farms during the planting season.

Nimfa



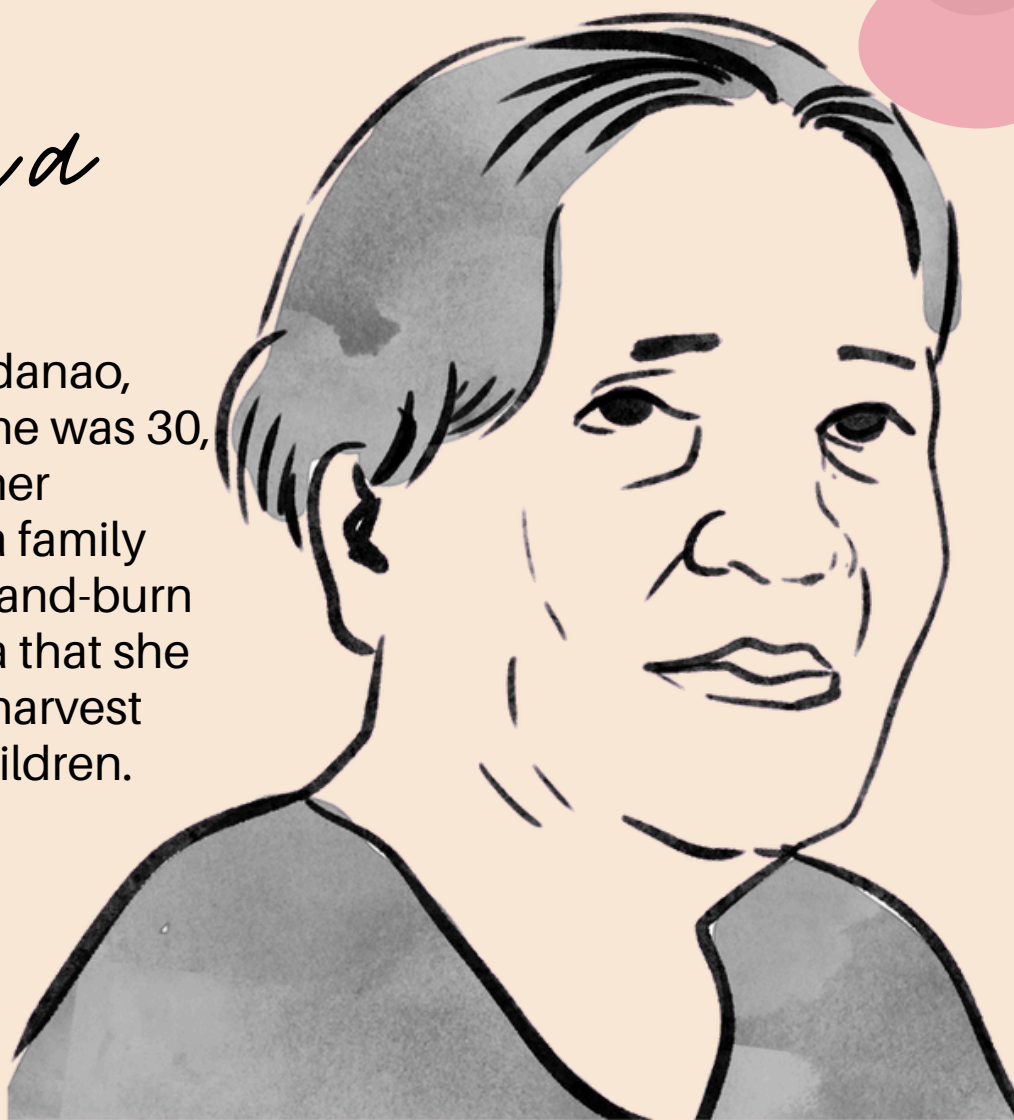
Rosa

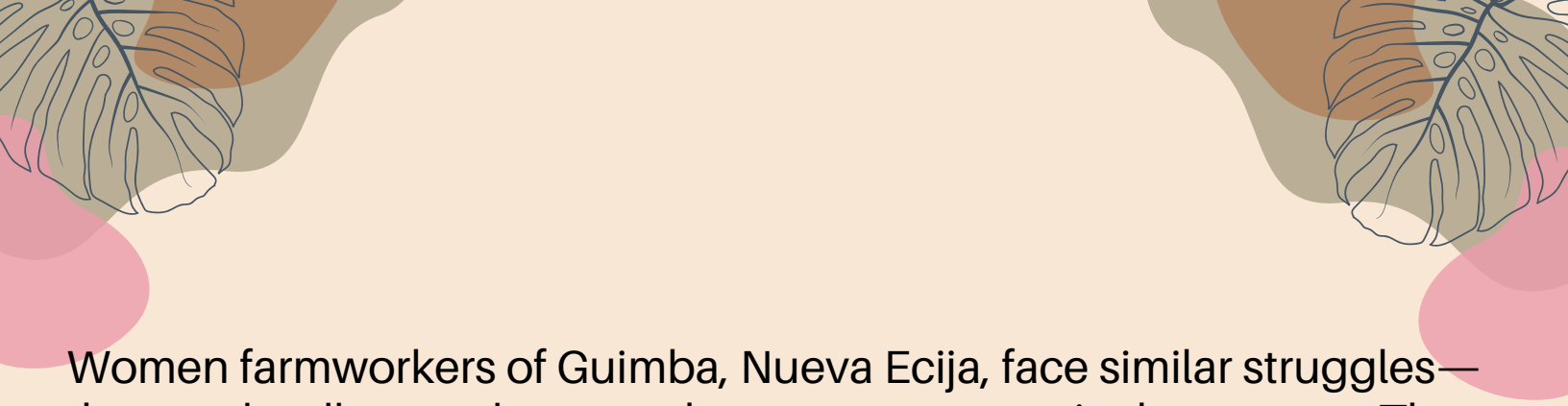
Before becoming a farmworker, Rosa began as a garments worker in Bulacan at the age of 16, and later on at Rizal, where she would meet her husband. She was able to sustain her family through the wage she earned in the factory until 1997. To provide for the needs of their family and grandchildren, she began working on farmlands in 2005. Rosa shared how their livelihoods were affected by the halimaw, which pushed her to join the Liga ng Manggagawang Bukid (LMB) in 2022. Since the machines came, agricultural workers only plant fruits like melons and watermelons to survive.

Gloria

Gloria, originally from Mindanao, moved to Guimba when she was 30, eight years after meeting her husband. She grew up in a family that does *kaingin* or slash-and-burn farming, but it is in Guimba that she learned how to plant and harvest palay to support her six children. Her husband is a former government employee.

Gloria is a kabesilya too. She would employ the tampa scheme or pay the workers in advance to ensure that they would work when the planting season begins. However, there had been instances when she had to finish planting the fields herself when the workers would not show up. To augment their income when it's not planting season, she works as a hairdresser and offers nail services. Now at 69, Gloria is uncertain about participating in the next planting season due to her health issues.






Women farmworkers of Guimba, Nueva Ecija, face similar struggles—they are landless and among the poorest sectors in the country. They are severely underpaid, and their role in the local food production remains largely unrecognized. The dire poverty has forced them into odd and unstable jobs, risking their health and security. The experiences shared by some of the women farmworkers paint a vivid picture of their challenging life journey. Starting work at a young age, typically between 10 and 17 years old, marrying young, and continuing to work well into their senior years, often past 65, highlights the relentless cycle of labor and economic necessity they face. Their stories underscore the pressing need for systemic change.

Finding collective hope and strength

Despite the challenges they face, women farmworkers found hope and strength in unity through their organization, the Liga ng Manggagawang Bukid (LMB). Organizing plays a crucial role in amplifying their voices, advocating for their rights, and fostering solidarity. Through collective action, they were able to address shared concerns, access resources, and influence policies that directly impact their lives.



One of the women farmworkers highlighted the importance of being part of an organization. During *gawat* or lean months, their collective strength has been crucial for their survival. For instance, in 2016, their organized efforts secured food packs for 4,000 farm laborers and their families through dialogues with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). This not only provided immediate help but also strengthened their sense of community and mutual support.

The women's appreciation of their organization is evident, and they recognize the value of a collective voice and action. By sharing their experiences and struggles as farm laborers, they were able to influence local policies such as an ordinance taxing harvester use and redistributing the funds to benefit their communities.

Each successful effort strengthens their sense of belonging and resolve. This shows the power of unity and collective action, which would create better conditions for farmworkers and their families.

Illustration: Vince Reasonoda



The Center for Women's Resources is a non-stock, non-profit, non governmental women's service institution that provides research, education and training advocacy and publications, library and data banking service for and about women.

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