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## Keepers of the Secrets of Rice

First posted 09:12:45 (Mla time) August 29, 2004

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FOR the longest time, the only way women were ever associated with rice was when they were cooking and serving it. Farming has always been regarded as a man's field, no matter if women prepared the seedbed, planted the crops, weeded the fields and did their share in harvesting, storing and marketing the produce.

Fortunately, two women scientists are fast revising that image through their work on rice research. Through their groundbreaking work at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Thelma Romero-Paris, Ph.D., and Flora Credo-de Guzman have surfaced women's role in agriculture.

De Guzman describes her job as "protector of one of humankind's most valuable treasures." That may sound pompous but as chief "banker" at IRRI, she makes sure that the world's three billion rice-eaters are assured of a steady supply of this staple. De Guzman and her team take care of the Institute's Genebank, the largest and most diverse depository of rice varieties in the world with 107,000 types from 110 countries.

The gene bank stores, propagates, documents, and distributes seed samples to farmers and countries that want to preserve their traditional rice varieties. De Guzman has helped elevate the IRRI Genebank to meet the highest international standards that it is now considered as "one of the best for others to emulate."

Paris an agriculture economist major with a doctorate in social ecology is coordinator, since 1994, of the Women in Rice Farming Systems Network sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Although she was not the first to shine the spotlight on women's role in agriculture and to call attention to their concerns, Paris has significantly advanced their cause through her research and advocacy.

Forced by circumstance

It is difficult to imagine, given these women's enthusiasm for their current jobs, that they started as rather disinterested rice scientists, forced by circumstance to go into a field that had since become both career and vocation.

De Guzman, a Caviteña, worked for her bachelor's degree in Agriculture (major in agronomy), only because a maternal uncle, a graduate of the University of the Philippines-Los Baños (UPLB), had insisted. The uncle who would become president of what was then the Don Severino Agricultural College (now Cavite State University), figured that, at the very least, she could teach at the college. Her family was not

exactly thrilled by the idea and told her, "Galing ka na nga sa bundok, doon ka pa rin pupunta. (You came from the boondocks, and now you want to go back there?)"

The sixth of seven children, De Guzman says she had no idea what she wanted to be when she grew up. Both her parents had only reached Grade IV, and her father became an occasional farmer and carpenter. Without much options, De Guzman entered UPLB. At the University, the agricultural sciences were still the main areas of study even in the '70s when she enrolled so most new students ended up in agriculture-related courses.

But even then, de Guzman says she still had no clear idea of what to do once she was out of the university. She was willing to take on any job although, ironically, working for IRRI was not one of her immediate goals. In the turbulent '70s, when campuses were hotbeds of activism and young people railed against the establishment, IRRI was seen as another "imperialist" ploy meant to take advantage of a developing country's valuable resources.

When a job opportunity opened up at the Institute after graduation, De Guzman took it thinking it would just be a temporary arrangement until a better opportunity turned up. Well, she never left and has not regretted her decision since. She also realized that far from being a tool of capitalists and imperialists at the IRRI, she was making a modest contribution to advancing the country's interest and that of other developing countries as well. Her job helps her protect the Philippines' traditional rice varieties from extinction.

The work that de Guzman and her team does has earned for them for three consecutive years until 2003, the Excellence in Science award for maintaining the world's most extensive collection of rice genetic resources. De Guzman personally received the prize in Nairobi last year.

A master of science in seed technology also from the UP College of Agriculture, De Guzman, wife and mother of two, has co-authored several scientific papers, among them the implementation of long-term conservation efforts for 95 percent of stored rice varieties.

Even after 25 years, De Guzman still finds her work interesting and challenging. She recalls this visit from a Mangyan delegation from Mindoro who donated their own seed samples to the Genebank so their community's future generations could still use them.

Paris' story is similar. The third of seven children, the Los Baños- born and bred scientist ended up at the UPLB not because of a burning desire to go into the agriculture sciences but because it was the practical thing to do. Her widowed mother worked as a dentist at the university infirmary so there were certain privileges the children could enjoy.

Paris, who briefly toyed with the idea of becoming a nurse, studied for a bachelor's degree in agriculture economics with no plans to work in the rice field but "because I wanted to have a glamorous job in a bank." During her time at UPLB, agriculture was pretty much a male turf.

By the time she graduated, however Paris' desire to work in a bank had started to cool. With many of her classmates working as research assistants in the university, Paris accepted a research assistant position at the Dept. of Agricultural Economics at UPLB.

Marriage ended her UPLB stint since her husband, who also had a degree in agricultural economics and was with the university faculty, went to the United States to pursue his post-graduate studies on a Fulbright grant. For four years in the US, she earned extra money as baby sitter, a billing and inventory clerk for a paper company and as a typist working on students' theses.

Back home, Paris would land her long-term job again without deliberately seeking it. Still working on his doctoral thesis, her husband had regular meetings with an expert at IRRI and Paris, who believes in destiny, decided to tag along. It turned out there was a vacancy and the IRRI official asked if the young wife would be interested to work as a researcher. She reported the following day, and has never left IRRI since.

IRRI's former research assistant would eventually become an Internationally Recruited Staff specializing on gender issues involving research, technology, and development. Though insisting she is not a feminist, Paris, a mother of two grown-up boys, began compiling data on the important role women played in rice production and processing. She would also develop a methodology that would include women's issues in rice farming systems research. This scientist got agricultural engineers and agronomists to develop tools that would lighten the workload of women, and introduced improved glutinous rice varieties that allowed them to make a more substantial contribution to the family income.

#### Initial opposition

Despite initial opposition from husbands or fathers who were not too keen to see women in more active roles, Paris persevered and worked on persuading the men that the whole process would also make their lives easier. As IRRI's first gender specialist in 1998, Paris has written 62 papers mainly on women's issues and has brought her advocacy to other parts of Asia.

Among the awards she has received are the Chairman's Excellence in Science Award for Local Professional, and the Special Recognition Award for Outstanding Contribution to IRRI's Programs from the institute itself.

She may have been thrust into her current work by circumstance rather than choice, but Paris is determined to do as much as she can in and out of IRRI to bring into focus gender issues and to help women advance by making them more productive.

With Paris in the field and De Guzman in the Genebank, women in farmwork and agriculture have finally found staunch allies and champions.

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