

# **AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF ECONOMIC CHANGE, GENDER AND POWER IN A VISAYAN FISHING COMMUNITY\***

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## **Introduction**

This paper discusses the relationship between gender and power. It describes how women resist, reduce and/or postpone the experience of male domination within the context of economic changes taking place in a Visayan fishing community. The gradual decline of household incomes dependent on small scale fishing has increased the economic and social importance of women, giving them greater leeway to negotiate for better terms in their relationships with their husbands. Women's active participation in production work to deter the further erosion of the household economy has provided them with opportunities to challenge male dominance and prevent the structuring of new modes of asymmetrical gender relations. However, this does not imply that the reproduction of notions of male dominance ceases as liberative social contexts emerge. Empirical data show the process of reproduction and erosion as occurring simultaneously.

In the production of their daily life, men and women continuously reproduce and challenge their gender identity. Construction of gender and power relations are, therefore, tied to meanings that they choose in carrying out the routines of life. Social interactions and negotiations provide the situations wherein con-

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\* Condensed from the paper read during the 4th Philippine Studies International Conference held at the Australian National University, Canberra on July 1-4, 1992. Research for the paper was supported by funds from Mombusho and the University of Tsukuba. The author is a member of the Visayas Maritime Anthropological Studies, a joint research program of the University of Tsukuba and UP Visayas.

cepts of male dominance and female subordination are constituted and reconstituted.

From the literature that is available so far, it is clear that the status of Filipino women declined with the introduction of patriarchal institutions in colonial times. The notion of male dominance has evolved through time to include the role of primary breadwinner, household head, community leader and protector of women and children. In turn, being a female has come to mean passivity, subservience to men and domesticity. While these notions of gender are still very much around today, changes in the larger society have impinged on everyday life, allowing both men and women to evolve new terms of relationships.

## **Research Area and Fieldwork Methodologies**

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in one of the 24 villages (barangays) in the municipality of Loay, island of Bohol. Loay lies south of the island. It is located 18 kilometers east of Tagbilaran City; bounded by the town of Loboc in the north, the towns of Albuquerque and Lila in the west and east respectively and the Bohol seas in the south.

The data used in this paper came from a household survey of the village and in-depth life story interviews of ten village women of different ages, marital statuses and occupations. Fieldwork took place in November 1991 and in the summer of 1992. The major sources of livelihood in the area are farming, fishing, livestock production and cottage industries. Rice and corn are the primary farm products, supplemented by rootcrops, legumes, vegetables and commercial crops like coffee and cacao. The majority of fishing households are engaged in municipal fishing. Government records show that the average family income has continuously declined during the past years due to the tremendous rise of fishing activities in the area and corresponding depletion of marine resources. Around 30 hectares of mangrove and nipa swamps that were turned into fishponds now produce an annual harvest of around 30 tons. The town has in its jurisdiction about 62 coral reefs and fishing grounds in ten of the 24 villages.

Loay has a total population of 12,677 (NSO, 1990) and an almost equal number of males (49 percent) and females (51 per-

cent). It has 2,024 households, two-thirds of which are mainly dependent on farming for their livelihood. One-fourth of all households derive the bulk of their earnings from fishing while others engage in skilled and clerical work. Like most Philippine rural communities, the community has a very large dependent population (56 percent) and a population growth rate of 1.2 percent per annum.

The village where intensive fieldwork was conducted is a coastal community with a total population of 1,047 and 185 households. Its demographic profile is very similar to that of the entire municipality since there is an almost even number of the sexes and a large population of children. More than one-third of all households subsist on fishing while the rest engage in farming and livestock raising. A handful of professionals and college graduates work in government offices or engage in private practice. Except for the mining of silica in the northern section of the village, there are no large-scale industries in the area.

### **Recent Economic Changes**

The Community residents claim that life in the village has become more and more difficult during the past years. Some respondents nostalgically recall how they could catch as much as thirty to fifty kilos of fish a day in the sixties and seventies. The present decline in harvest is attributed to the depletion of marine resources brought about by the encroachment of large vessels in the fishing grounds of the community. Others blame "outsiders", who use dynamite and nets with very fine mesh, causing the destruction of coral reefs and rapid depletion of marine resources.

The introduction of aquaculture in the early eighties also altered the economic life of the villagers. Although this became a very profitable business venture for some rich families, it negatively affected many poor fishing families. The conversion of many mangrove and nipa swamps into fish and prawn ponds deprived the residents of such items as land crabs, snails and fish as well as firewood and nipa leaves for making roof shingles. Many villagers have opposed the expansion of the aquaculture industry. They fear that further destruction of the swamps and cutting down of mangroves and palm trees will lead to the loss of

traditional sources of livelihood. There were, in fact, some clandestine moves to discourage fishpond operation. On one occasion, some of the fishponds were destroyed.

Government records show a significant decline in the average daily catch of fishermen. In 1978, for example, the estimated average amount of catch per day was 6 kilos. It was three times the amount of what fisherfolk get at present. Although some families have adjusted to the decline of reef resources by engaging in deep sea fishing, the majority cannot afford the nets suitable for this type of activity.

### **Women's Productive Activities**

One of the most common ways by which the residents adjusted to the decline of earnings from fishing was to involve other family members, particularly women and elder children, in gainful employment. Many adolescent boys and girls have left the village to work as skilled laborers and domestic helpers in Cebu and Manila. In the in-depth study of thirty households, nearly all (95 percent) have family members working in urban centers or abroad. But what the residents emphasized as their way of adjusting to economic difficulties was for the wives to actively participate in earning a living.

The majority of ethnographies of fishing communities do not describe the production activities of women and children. Such studies render women's and children's roles in fishing "invisible" (Nieuwenhuys, 1989). Two reasons are cited for the emphasis of many studies on the manly aspects of fishing. These are the initial preoccupation of ethnographies on the material and technical constraints on fishing as well as the fact that early anthropologists who did fieldwork in fishing communities were males (Nieuwenhuys, 1989).

The same observation can be made for most studies on fishing communities in the Philippines. There is the tendency to emphasize the technological aspects of fishing and the catching activities of men. As Israel (1991) points out, "very often, (the) studies fail to recognize the existence of certain women who join their husbands in fishing expeditions, as in the case of Muslim women in Davao fishing villages." Field researchers tend to gloss

over the pre- and post-production stages where women perform from fifty to seventy-five percent of the work. The few studies on women's activities in fishing communities, on the other hand, focus on their marketing and fish processing work as well as domestic and childbearing chores (Yater, 1982; Israel, 1991).

The women in the fishing village are active in domestic and production work. While some are directly involved in catching fish and collecting fry, shells and sea weeds, others are engaged in a wide variety of income-earning activities. Some of the work that women perform are fishing, gleaning, fish marketing and nipa thatching.

Although fishing is generally viewed as a male occupation, there are women who engage in it alone or in the company of their husbands and other male relatives, either intermittently or on a regular basis. The most common fishing gear that the fisherwomen of the village use are the hook and line (*panunton*) and a kind of beach seine called *sahid*.

Beach seine fishing is done by both sexes. Two to three persons are usually involved here. They cast the net in shallow water, then gradually pull it towards the beach. The women participate either by holding the net or by collecting the catch once the net is drawn to the shore. A bigger version of the *sahid* is very popular in the village. It is known as *baling*. This method requires around twenty persons, usually men, to cast a net more than three times the length of the *sahid*. Five elderly women claimed to have participated in this kind of fishing activity.

By and large, the more significant fish production roles of women include helping pull the net towards the beach, as in seine fishing, removing the catch from the net, making new nets and repairing old ones.

Gleaning is another production activity associated with women and children. It involves the collection of edible sea weeds, shells, eels, sea urchins and other organisms that thrive in shallow water and coral reefs. It is usually done during low tide in the early morning or late afternoon. This activity is time consuming as women and children spend between one to three hours to collect about one to two liters of shells. Many women depend on these marine resources for household subsistence when fishing is not possible due to bad weather.

Another fishing activity that women engage in is the collection of milkfish fry and prawns for sale to fishpond operators. A fishing gadget called *balsa* is used for this activity. It consists of a nylon net with extremely fine mesh held on all sides by bamboo poles. The women spend between one to two hours a day on this activity.

As in most fishing communities in the country, it is the women who market the catch of their husbands and sons. However, since the average daily fish harvest has declined across the years, there are fewer women now engaged in fish trading. Fishing is done two times a day, one in the early morning and the other, in the late afternoon. As such, fish vendors collect the catch between seven to eight o'clock in the morning and between six to seven o'clock in the evening. The traders either peddle the fish around the village or bring them to the town market. Each sells between three to fifteen kilos of fish a day.

The most common form of livelihood for the women is the manufacture of roof shingles made of palm leaves. Around thirty households in the village engage in this cottage industry, employing between two to a dozen women. Some work fulltime while others intersperse it with their child and home care chores. Those who have been in the job for years can finish about fifty to sixty shingles a day, working from seven o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the afternoon. They are paid around fifteen pesos for every hundred shingles produced or about US\$0.28 for a day's work. Many women claim that the amount they get from this job is not enough to meet the food and other basic needs of their families. Nevertheless, they keep the job for lack of better employment opportunities in the village.

Additionally, women are active in economic activities like managing a retail store, commercial manufacture of salted dried fish and fish sauce, and peddling of cooked food. A few are employed in the four shops located in the community or are engaged in farming. Some provide laundry or housekeeping services to more affluent families in the village.

A number of women also engage in the backyard production of vegetables and livestock to augment family income. There are a few elementary school teachers, office workers and health practitioners. All in all, there are around twenty five different sources

of livelihood for women in the village, in contrast to only fifteen types of jobs for men.

### **Challenges to Male Domination**

Closely tied to their production activities are the various tasks that women perform in the household. Like their counterparts in other rural communities in the Philippines, these women have the primary responsibility of maintaining the household and taking care of the children. The extent of their work at home, however, varies with the amount of time devoted to gainful employment. In most cases, household chores are shared with the children and occasionally, with the husband. Male contribution to home management and childcare is most significant in households where both husband and wife are economically active. It is in these households where negotiations for a more judicious share of household responsibilities and decision-making powers take place.

The results of the time allocation study involving thirty households reveal that the women perform the most number of household chores. However, those gainfully employed spend less time for domestic chores and childcare than fulltime housewives. Husbands of working women also tend to contribute more to domestic work and childcare than husbands of women who stay at home all the time.

Working mothers tend to relegate their home responsibilities to other female members and to their husbands, if there are no women in the house who can do the work. The men generally help in collecting firewood and fetching water. Some help in childcare, while others help wash clothes and clean the house.

The experience of women in reducing the burden of domestic and production work indicates the extent to which they actively participate in redefining their relationship with men. The challenge to male dominance in everyday life occurs when women start to question and resist the uneven share of work and power in the household.

The case of a young wife by the name of Dina illustrates this point. After giving birth to their fourth child, she realized the need to have regular work so that her children could live a better life.

At that time, her husband was earning very little since they did not own a fishing boat. He had to rent one everytime he would go out fishing. With a small amount of capital borrowed from a relative, she opened a small retail store in front of their house. It did not take long for the business to flourish. However, managing the store took much of her time from household chores and childcare. This started the quarrels with the husband. She claimed that her husband was resentful of the fact that she could no longer look after the children and the upkeep of the house. He was particularly upset about the long hours she spent attending to the needs of the customer. In the beginning, Dina claimed that she tried very hard to manage her time so she could simultaneously attend the business and the house. But as her husband's income from fishing fluctuated, she had to keep the store open longer.

She and her husband quarreled a lot for many years. He wanted her to close the store and find another job but she resisted. She argued with him "endlessly", and on several occasions even threatened to move with her children to her parents' town in Cebu. In the end, Dina said that her husband realized "what a fool he was for being so stubborn." He now helps run the store and shares in household work.

Since women hold the purse strings, their power to decide on family expenses becomes more meaningful when they themselves earn a living. Many of the village women experienced greater personal satisfaction in managing family finances when they did not have to depend completely on the earnings of their husbands. It also lessened marital disputes that occurred whenever husbands spent some of their earnings drinking or gambling.

The story of Manang, a woman who provides laundry service to affluent families in the village, shows how being economically active provides some leverage for women to negotiate for greater gender parity in marriage. Manang is a middle-aged woman with nine children. Since the start of her marriage, more than thirty years ago, she has suffered regularly from the physical battering and sexual abuse of the husband. In the lengthy narration of her life story are numerous episodes of how she struggled to counter such abuses. She describes her husband as a very temperamental, jealous and cruel person. He has spent most of his time and

meager income drinking, when he would find an excuse to beat and sexually abuse her.

After their third child was born, Manang decided to “do something about her life.” Before this, she would occasionally join her husband in his fishing trips or peddled the catch around the village. When it became more and more difficult for her to sustain the daily needs of her children and as her husband became more temperamental and “violent,” she started looking around for a more regular source of income. In those days, there were very few jobs available to women. Nevertheless, she found seasonal and part-time jobs. She went into farming and nipa thatching, performed household chores for affluent families in the village, sold lottery tickets and took on many other jobs. Having her own money to spend for the children and herself made her marital life more bearable. She no longer depended too much on the earnings of her husband. Although he still abuses her to this day, she claims that “it no longer occurs as often as it used to since he knows that (she) can leave him anytime.” In fact, at the time of the interview, Manang was already making plans to go to Manila and stay with a daughter. Whether she can really muster enough courage to leave her husband is uncertain. Nevertheless, she feels good about what she claims to be her little successes in subverting the abuses of her husband.

A similar case is that of a young woman who married about two years ago. Her husband abused her everytime he came home drunk. She decided to leave him after he slapped her in public. He accused her of spending too much time outside the house and not attending to his needs. At the time of separation, the woman got a job with a non-government organization. Apparently, this boosted her self-confidence and gave her the means to fend for herself. She admits that her husband is “courting” her back, and she wants to give their marriage another chance. However, she insists that their relationship will have to change. She plans to continue working and start taking charge of her own life.

Another situation, where challenges to male domination seem to occur is in women's attempt to gain control of their sexuality and fertility. Although there is very little gender difference in regard to views about the desired number of offspring, control of fertility and abortion, some of the women claim that in case of dis-

agreements, they have no choice but to follow their husbands' wishes. However, they claim to exercise some amount of resistance and manipulate the situation to their advantage. They make the husbands agree to their "demands," by either refusing or agreeing to have sexual relations. However, not all could do this since the others, like the battered women mentioned earlier, seem completely powerless to counter the sexual violence of their husbands.

An interesting but perhaps typical case is that of Rina, a twenty year old married woman with two children. Having come from a very poor family, she is determined to finish a college degree and eventually find a good paying job. Although she married early to escape the cruelty of her father, Rina has not stopped studying and pursuing her ambitions. While presently enjoying a college scholarship, she still has to earn some money for her school expenses and the needs of the family. Rina is determined not to have another child, at least for the moment. And since she does not like to use any of the family planning methods prescribed by local health officers, she claims to have prevailed upon her husband to limit their sexual relationship to two times a month. She is emphatic about the need to have control over their sexual relationship to prevent an unwanted pregnancy.

The life stories of the village women show how they challenge patriarchy both in the domestic and public spheres. While some choose to return to the parents' home after a serious marital dispute, others spoke of how they would get back at their husbands by not talking to them for days or by refusing to do some household tasks. But what is perhaps the most interesting strategy of resistance is the practice of giving male family members derogatory appellations. Wives taunt their husbands by calling them such names as "lasengero" (drunkard) and, "tapulan" (lazy). Some try to win the loyalty of their children and neighbors by talking about their husbands' shortcomings.

## **The Fit Between Social Structures and Everyday Forms of Resistance**

The reproduction of notions of male dominance is facilitated by women's effort to redefine their lives and reconstitute their gender. Such efforts always meet resistance, not only from men but from other women whose notions of a "normal life" is more in keeping with convention. In an interview with the village head, the author inquired about what government has done to intervene in marital disputes and prevent wife battering. The person was emphatic about his helplessness and lack of legal authority to "meddle in private affairs." Although aware of everything that was going on in all the households in the village he could not do anything to stop the husbands from abusing their wives. The law, he said, does not give local officials the power to enter a house and stop a couple from hurting each other. The house owner, he added, has all the right to kill a public official, if the latter enters his premises without proper authorization.

In an effort to project an image of impartiality and objectivity, traits that are considered essential for a public officer, the village head reasoned that in some of the cases, the wives had no one to blame but themselves for the beatings they received from their husbands. To bolster his claim, he cited the case of a wife who had an extra-marital relationship with a married man who lived in another town. When her husband learned about it, he beat her severely and even threatened to kill her if she did not stop her relationship with the other man. The village head argued that it was actually the wife who led her husband into such acts of violence. When the author inquired about the case from other villagers, they claimed that the husband had been beating her up even before the wife's extra-marital affair began.

The views of the village head were not really very different from those of the villagers. For example, the neighbors of Manang, the battered wife, mentioned earlier in this paper, were one in saying that a marital dispute is a private matter that should be left to the couple involved to settle. Manang herself recounted that:

In the early years of our marriage I would run to my parents and even to his relatives when I could

no longer endure his cruelty. But almost all of them especially his grandmother would tell me to endure my fate since he would eventually mature and become a good man. They told me not to answer back and try hard to please him.

Outside the household the challenges to male domination lie in women's efforts to appropriate for themselves social statuses that can provide more chances to participate in the production of knowledge, and interpretation of life as well as the day-to-day events in the community. Although the majority of formal and informal positions are still held by men, women exert some influence, managing the various social and welfare projects of government and mediating in conflicts between married couples, family members and neighbors.

An old woman serves as the folk midwife of the village. She exerts tremendous influence over the women who come to her for all sorts of medical and health advice. She claims to have delivered most of the residents who were born in the community since the early fifties. Her knowledge of herbal medicine and the care of pregnant and nursing mothers is so extensive that even former residents who now live in Manila go to her for medical advice and assistance. She has helped organize many community activities and intercedes in conflicts among neighbors and families.

A number of women are respected in the community for having excelled in their business ventures. Two of them are sisters who settled in the village in the early fifties and established a blacksmith shop. To this day, these women still manage the business, including the laborious task of marketing the products. Two other women engage in the wholesale trading of nipa roof shingles. They are known for having created many jobs in the community through their perseverance in tapping many outside markets. As informal leaders of the village they can get community projects going and influence the villagers to take a particular point of view over controversial issues and problems in the community.

During my first visit to the village, I was invited to attend a meeting of a group of women, mostly wives of fishermen, who had banded together to form an informal credit facility. They pool their savings and lend the money to the members and selected

non-members at a reasonable interest rate. Once in a while, the group initiates some money-making activities to boost its resources. In that particular meeting, two of the members who could not attend were represented by their husbands. The discussions focused on the financial status of the groups and the proposed project to slaughter a pig and sell it for profit to the neighbors, in time for religious festivities the next day. The men participated actively in the discussions but the decisions that were adopted were those proposed by the more articulate women members. One could sense the earnest efforts of the women not to be dominated by the two male attendees. The atmosphere of conviviality masked the pointed positions that both sexes took regarding the issues discussed.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Both men and women are active participants in the on-going creation of the social world. This is most clearly seen in the way they carry out their daily existence and social relationships. While prevailing social structures limit the possibilities of challenging male dominance, new developments also provide opportunities for little forms of resistance.

As discussed earlier, the household was directly affected by women's increased involvement in gainful employment. This seems to have brought about some changes in the members' share of the workload, even if the women continued to have the primary responsibility over child and home care. Negotiations to change the terms of relations take place, somehow shifting the locus of power slightly away from the men. It must be noted, however, that the double burden also increases the sense of exploitation. Thus, if male dominance means that the primary responsibility of providing for the financial needs of the family is borne by men, the shift of this to women in very real terms could initiate some significant discontent.

What this study has attempted to show is how women who cannot subscribe so easily to facets of male dominance in their immediate social world respond to it. It is possible that the minute forms of resistance that they choose to carry out, if only to make their day to day existence less oppressive, are not that significant

for others and the larger society. Nevertheless, we can find inspiration in what one social scientist has said, that many massive movements have their roots in the "collective minutae of existence."

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