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ChATSEA Working Papers

|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
CULTIVATING ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN NAGA CITY, PHILIPPINES

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The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia project (ChATSEA)

Abstract
This paper examines how livelihood diversification and labour intensification in peri-urban areas are also sites in which gender relations are unsettled and (re)configured. With the aim of strengthening the links between feminist and agrarian change scholarship, I present an ethnographic account from Naga, a medium-size city in Bicol, Philippines, to explore how daily discourses and practices of livelihood change are implicated in (re)producing social identities along gender, as well as class and geographical, lines. In the first part of the paper, attention is devoted to the ways in which gender is constituted in the state policies and programs governing agrarian change. Drawing on policy documents and interviews with state officials, civil servants, local academics and NGO leaders, I highlight how local state practices and policies are both implicated in people’s tendency to diversify, and imbued with discourses that are inherently gendered. In the second part, the location and scale of analysis shift to one location expressive of these official discourses; Pacol, a small farming community located on Naga’s peri-urban fringe. Specifically, I consider how state-fed gendered discourses are (re)enacted in the process of livelihood diversification; how they are worked through in intra-household activities, decision-making and other performances.

Keywords
Philippines, gender relations, agrarian change, livelihood, agriculture.
Introduction

In recent decades, the Philippine agrarian landscape has been shaped by a number of dramatic transformations. Burgeoning urban centres and increasing educational and non-farm employment opportunities have run parallel with political instability, crippling foreign debt repayments, ineffective agrarian reform policies, and a shrinking of the state’s reproductive function; leaving people in rural and semi-rural areas to cope with these changes in various ways. One important strategy employed to negotiate these changing political economies has been to diversify away from farming as the main source of income. In Pacol, where the bulk of the research for this paper was conducted, most households now meet their basic needs, minimise risk and/or generate surplus through multiple income sources and occupations. For example, husbands and wives may engage in vegetable gardening, animal husbandry or vending, alongside farming. This process of diversification raises a number of important questions: Why do people pursue the strategies they do? Where do their ideas come from? Who pursues them? And what do they mean to the interests and identities of those rural residents concerned? In this paper I explore these questions using ethnographic insights obtained from Pacol, a small farming community located on the outskirts of Naga City, Bicol, and point specifically to the gendering of livelihood strategies that was highlighted by the research.

In pursuing this line of analysis I join an emerging body of post-structural and feminist scholars dedicated to understanding discourses, practices, and performances, as productive of gender identities, rather than simply reflective of them (Butler, 1994; Haraway, 1997). This theoretical framework, though applied to studies of natural resource management (Sundberg, 2004; Harris, 2006; Nightingale, 2006; Elmhirst, 2007a), migration (Silvey, 2006), and the industrial labor market, manufacturing and service sectors (Ong, 1988), has scarcely been applied to the rural agricultural sector, and certainly not the process of livelihood diversification before. Instead, scholars interested in the gendered politics of livelihood change have tended to naturalize gender by interpreting livelihoods as simply roles that men and women take on (Ellis, 2000; Kabeer and Van Anh, 2000; Eder, 2006), rather than activities actually constitutive of social relations.

My goal is this paper is therefore twofold. First is to emphasise the inadequate, or at least outdated, attention to gender relations in previous models of livelihood change, and to spell out some of the implications its integration may bring. My second purpose relates to the ways in which this integration is achieved. Specifically, I highlight some of the problems stemming from ‘structural’ analyses of gender, and emphasize the fresh perspectives opened up through a post-structural, performative approach.

This corpus of ‘questions’ provides the basis for the discussions that follow. They span a number of scales, sites, and literatures, and will be presented in three parts. I start out with an overview of previous work on gender and livelihood change, and hint at the new insights provided by a performative approach. I then proceed to the Naga context, where I present two case studies to ‘flesh out’ these theoretical claims in more depth. The former traces the involvement of state institutions in these changing political economies. Specifically, I consider how local state policies and practices associated with agrarian change are implicated in (re)configuring gender identities, and point directly to the notions of male responsibility and women’s rightful position in the home that they most ardently impress. In the latter I move to Pacol, one location expressive of these gendered discourses and practices, to understand how they are (re)produced and maintained in intra-household relations.

Situating Livelihood Diversification: Geographically & Theoretically

The village of Pacol is located approximately 6km from Naga City centre (see Figure 1) in the agricultural province of Bicol. With a popula-
tion of 8849 and area of 11.75km², Pacol is the largest administrative village in Naga and has been an important locus of agriculture since the 17th century. Traditionally the focus of extensive sugarcane, coconut, and vegetable production, the name of the village actually derives from a variety of banana that once grew in abundance there. Over the last two decades, however, the village landscape has taken on a different dimension. Once highly productive sugarcane and coconut farms have been converted into gas stations, flower plantations, and newly girded fields of subdivisions, and where farming once dominated production activities, non-agricultural livelihoods have gained increasing ground.

Whether the general shift away from agriculture is the outcome of necessity or choice is difficult to ascertain. Local labor force surveys and censuses provide little insight into these issues, and efforts to interpret the data on employment trends rest upon some fairly strong assumptions. Likewise, there are no comprehensive data on historical trends in local landholdings. The only longitudinal evidence of which I am aware consists of panel data on land conversion applications, obtained from the municipal office of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). This data shows an increase in approved applications since 1990, when the City first converted 15 hectares of sugarcane plantation into an Urban Poor Resettlement site. Since then, over 125 hectares have been legally converted into middle-class housing estates, sports complexes, cockpit arenas, and other non-agricultural forms of accumulation, while unauthorized land conversions have also taken place at a fast, albeit undocumented, pace.

Census data collected by the village council also demonstrates the declining importance of agriculture in the local labour market. Only 17.1% of men in the village are now estimated to work solely as farmers (Figure 2), the majority undertaking unskilled labouring and/or tricycle driving instead. Meanwhile, the range of primary livelihood sources adopted by women is even more varied than that of men. Although 65% of women in the village are still officially categorized as ‘housewives’ (Figure 2), most now partake in some form of income generation, many combining an artisan activity (e.g. hair-
dressing or tailoring) with animal husbandry and trade in daily-use goods. And while the lack of historical data inhibits statistical analysis of long-term employment trends, interviews with village elders suggested a ‘strengthening’ of these patterns over time: that is, the decrease in men’s employment opportunities has run parallel with an increase in the range and significance of women’s livelihood activities in the last few decades.

Figure 2. Gender-disaggregated management of livelihood activities (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled laborer</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private employee</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeepney/tricycle driver</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government employee</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store owner</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower planter/vendor</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled laborer</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas contract worker</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy and sell trader</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Census data, Pacol Village Council, 2007

that it registered a belated impact on a core concern of Agrarian Studies: “the constitution, composition and functioning of the actually existing households invoked by models of household (or ‘family’) production and reproduction” (Bernstein and Byres, 2001: 23). Since then, feminist work has exposed fundamental limits in the classic Marxist approach to agrarian change, problematizing prevailing notions of the ‘household’, and its relation to land, labour markets, and politics (Agarwal, 1986; 1994; Hart, 1991, 1997; Carney, 1988; Kabeer, 1991).

Where livelihood change is concerned, however, the intersections and conversations between feminist and agrarian studies have been surprising few. On the few occasions that gender has been acknowledged as a dimension of difference, livelihood diversification has been analyzed as a site of struggle over contested resources, and scholars have sought to determine the impacts on men and women (Ellis, 1999; Kabeer and Van Anh, 2000; Eder, 2006). Though important, this approach has rested on a fixed notion of the autonomous subject, whereby individuals are assigned coherent identities prior to their entry into the social relations that constitute livelihood change. Precluded from analysis have been the myriad ways in which gender identities are also at stake in the daily discourses and performances of livelihood struggles, both within and beyond the household.

Nearly two decades has passed since Joan Scott (1988) made the point in her brilliant introduction to Gender and the Politics of History that gender – in the sense of knowledge about the multiple and contested meanings of sexual difference – is neither given, fixed, nor confined to the household, but invoked and contested in a

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1 In fact, there has been an inadequate theorisation of diversification in the agrarian studies literature more generally. Just two years ago, Jonathan Rigg (2006) published ‘Land, Farming, Livelihoods, and Poverty: Rethinking the Links in the Rural South’ in World Development, in which he called for a revitalization of this literature to get it back up to speed with the dramatic global changes characteristic of the post-colonial era - economic, social, political, and ideological - and the shifts in intellectual concerns accompanying them.
variety of institutional arenas as parts of other struggles for power. This extended definition of politics is now one of the central insights of feminism, and arguably contains the key to moving beyond the essentialism and inertia implicit in the previous ‘structural’ approach; a challenge I modestly take up here.

By drawing on the theoretical insights of Judith Butler (1994) and other feminist and post-structural scholars committed to understanding how gender identities are constituted “in the action of knowledge production, not before the action starts” (Haraway, 1991: 29), I draw on my fieldwork in Naga and Pacol to explore how gender shapes people’s access to, and experiences of, livelihood diversification, without overlooking how it is also established and (re)configured as part of the same process. This examination of the ways in which gender is enacted through intra-household processes of livelihood change puts a significant new spin on the previous ‘structural’ approach.

Taking an anti-essentialist approach to subject formation and representation does not, however, entail a “facile view of identity as easily taken on or wilfully discarded” (Nelson, 1999: 5). Rather, the subject is understood as “constituted through language and disciplinary practices that are dynamic, constantly changing, yet time- and place-specific” (Sundberg, 2004: 46). Indeed, it is the repetitive performances of particular normative discourses that, Judith Butler argues (1993), produces gendered bodies, thereby (re)producing gender as social norms. Before diving into the (re)constitution of gender in diversifying households, then, I consider how gender discourses are produced and maintained in other institutional sites. The role of the local state is identified as especially important in this respect.

In development circles, post-structural feminists have long challenged the assumptions made with respect to the ‘neutral’ role of the state in development. Accepting the state not as a technical or material entity, but as a ‘plurality of discursive forms’ (Yeatman, 1990), they have underscored its very implication in marginalization, be it through its institutional organization, policies and/or implementation practices. Generally speaking, these critiques have focused on the tendency for development projects to be predicated upon Western pretensions of modernity, wherein neoclassical economics and evolutionism are invoked to provide ‘failsafe’ prescriptions for Third World development (Marchand and Parpart, 1995). Demonstrating that these mainstream constructions subsume, segregate, and essentialise ‘Third World’ women, they have called for a more contextual and pluralized approach to gender, which recognises the multiple axes and identities that shape their lives, and grants them greater access to the decision-making and cultural discourses determining their position.

In Southeast Asia, these debates have recently been taken up by a number of feminist scholars interested in processes of ‘development’ and ‘modernisation’. Several have analysed how definitions of ‘womanhood’ and the family are actively promoted by the state (Ong, 1990; Hart, 1991; 1997), and how global restructuring and flexible labour are impacting on women as they are seen to negotiate negative stereotypes, or on families as mobility and female labour force participation challenge so-called ‘Asian family values’ (Wolf, 1992; Chant and McIlwaine, 1995). More recently, scrutiny has also been applied to masculinist ‘man-as-provider/oppressor’ representations, building on a growing body of literature dedicated to men’s vulnerabilities or the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Ong and Peletz, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Cleaver, 2002; Elmhirst, 2007b). This literature focuses on how neo-liberalism and the global feminisation of labour, coupled with development projects that essentialise women as providers, all serve to disrupt the historical connection between provider identities and adult masculinities.

Specific to the agrarian change literature here has been geographer Gillian Hart’s (1991) gender analysis of production politics in rural Malaysia. In a paper prescient for its time, Hart carefully illuminated the importance of understanding men and women’s differential ability to
engage in labour struggles and access employment in conjunction with larger political-economic forces, including state-fed gender discourses. Over a decade since it was first published however, Hart’s article, nor Scott’s (1988) extended notion of politics on which it was based, have received anywhere near the level of scholarly attention they so clearly deserve.

In this paper I aim to traverse this theoretical gap by exploring how attention to gender – as a system of power constructed in multiple and intersecting arenas – offers fresh perspectives to the socio-spatial process of livelihood change. Adopting a Foucauldian theorization of power, the first section considers how local state regulation around agrarian change is imbued with hetero-normative gender discourses. In the second empirical section I move to Pacol to examine how these discourses are (re)produced, maintained, and unsettled in daily conjugal relations.

**Methods and Methodology**

To explore the gendering of livelihood change in these diverse institutional and geographical sites, the field research was comprised of a variety of ethnographic techniques. To understand how state policies and practices are implicated in (re)configuring gender identities, I devoted the first month of fieldwork to collecting policy documents, and conducting interviews with civil servants, City Councillors and other officials, local academics and NGO leaders.

In the second stage of fieldwork, I worked closely with ten households in Pacol, purposefully selected on the basis of their recently active attempts to diversify. Approximately three semi-structured interviews were conducted with both male and female members from these households in order to assess their differing experiences of livelihood change. Questions asked during these interviews touched upon a variety of livelihood-related topics, including the economy of households, the adequacy of state development programs, the means by which families cover deficits, and their personal and collective experiences of livelihood projects. The insights gained from these interviews and more general observations were followed up in four focus groups, held separately with the women and men. The participants were also asked to fill out livelihood journals, in which they listed their daily activities during a typical week, and the female respondents provided an economic breakdown of the familial budget over the course of a month.

Given that the researcher was a white, non-native woman, unfamiliar with the local language, it is important to note that these interviews and focus groups were reliant upon the skills and availability of a translator, a process that introduced its own problems and politics. Over the three months, the fieldwork became littered with translational ‘slippages’, and unequal power relationships were formed: between individual participants, the participants and myself, myself and the translator, the translator and the participants. Nonetheless, regular meetings with the translator, open-ended (semi-structured interviews, involved observations), and reflexive research methods (ethnographic notes) were undertaken to at least try and create more meaningful, productive and collaborative research spaces.

**State Construction of Gender: ‘Provider Males’ & ‘Responsible Mothers’**

This section focuses broadly upon Naga’s political economic context, and specifically the role of local state agencies in producing gendered discourses through a multiplicity of practices. In keeping with other feminist studies conducted in Southeast Asia (Hart, 1997; Ong, 1990; Elmhirst, 2007a/b; Ressureccion and Van Anh, 2007), I aim to demonstrate that state policies and practices in Naga are embedding people’s lives in a very particular set of subjectivities, constrained along gender, as well as class and geographical lines.
Situated in the agricultural region of Bicol, Naga was geographically advantaged during the colonial eras of regional specialization. Under Spanish and American colonial rule, it became an important hub of abaca and coconut production, the city and surrounding areas producing nearly half of Philippine exports in abaca by the end of the nineteenth century (Eviota, 1997: 40). Following post-WWII independence, however, and especially the Martial Law era (1972-1986), the city’s reliance upon agriculture was also to become crucial to its political-economic decline. Under the Marcos regime, the pernicious effects of political cronyism (unproductive state investments, ostentatious spending, burgeoning foreign debt, decline of subsistence agriculture and tenancy relations, landlessness and reliance on agricultural wage work) were felt throughout the country. But in Bicol, the agricultural base of the economy made the region particularly susceptible to exploitation and corruption. Because coconut- and abaca-growing areas were not covered by national land reform, Marcos and post-Marcos cronies were able to closely control surplus extraction in Bicol, and hence influence poverty levels. Even to this day it remains one of the most economically depressed regions in the country, with poverty and hunger incidences placed at 68.3% and 55%, significantly higher than their 39.9% and 34.5% national counterparts (Naga City, 2007).

These historical trends in political-economic relations have significantly shaped the development trajectory the local government of Naga has recently opted to pursue. In order to rejuvenate Naga’s previously sluggish labor market and economy, and make up its CDN $25,000 budget deficit (Naga City, 2000), local authorities have in recent decades increasingly directed resources away from the rural productive sector to the international financial system and service sector. Facilitated by the political-economic autonomy opened up through the 1991 Local Government Code and supported by national and international donor assistance, the local state has encouraged a growing number of service and retail companies to establish themselves in Naga, enticed by generous tax breaks, infrastructural amenities, a streamlined recruitment service, and other business-friendly incentives. Telecommunications, financial, and retail corporations such as SM Mall, China Banking Corporation and Philippine National Bank, have been especially attracted to the city through such incentives, which in 1997 were institutionalised in the form of the Naga City Investment Incentive Code. Situated predominantly in the urban ‘core’, these industries now employ 70% of Naga’s labour force and are also the driver behind the city’s staggering 6.5% annual economic growth (Prilles, 2000: 216).

On the other side of the political-economic coin, local state reductions in expenditure outlays on agricultural extension services and other infrastructures, together with inadequate agrarian reform, have left the rural agricultural sector struggling to cope. Although no official statistics exist, poverty is now known to affect a disproportionate number of rural residents (Prilles, 2000), who are largely now reliant upon livelihood diversification and migration to meet their subsistence needs. By the late 1990s, statistically recorded migrants made up 40% of Naga’s population, and migration was estimated to account for nearly 80% of its population increment (Prilles, 2000: 216).

Concerned with escalating levels of urban congestion, and other social dislocations that have accompanied urbanisation and industrialisation, rural poverty and inequality have become a palpable part of the local state’s policy agenda of late. In response, the government has adopted the policy rhetoric of ‘alternative livelihood sources’, underscoring the need for non-
agricultural employment and the move away from farming as a primary means of support. Gender has figured prominently in this process. On the basis that poverty alleviation and the promotion of balanced economic growth require the enhanced productivity of women in low-income households, state strategies have increasingly encouraged the expansion of women’s ‘alternative’ income-generating options through better access to micro-credit and skills training. In contrast, men are still seen as ‘farmer-breadwinners’ in state discourse, and so remain the principal recipients of agricultural assistance.

These agrarian policies and programs, and the gendered discourses with which they are imbued, play an important role in shaping individuals’ lives and livelihoods. Although arguably created with the best of intentions, increasing state regulation of the agrarian sector carries as many risks as it does opportunities for both the men and women concerned. Designed to assist women in ‘juggling’ multiple responsibilities, state livelihood policies in Naga assume, but do not challenge, existing gender divisions of labour. Instead, women’s presence and affectivity in the development process is associated with domesticity, or as one senior manager from the city’s Metro PESO employment and livelihood office put it, livelihood activities “come easy to women because they are an extension of the home.”

Imbued with a sense of ahistoricity and informality, state programs also advocate women’s role in livelihood diversification, while simultaneously devaluing their livelihood efforts. Even during Spanish colonial times, ‘peasant’ and working-class women in Bicol contributed significantly to the household budget through vending, farming, handicraft production and weaving (Eviota, 1995). But in official invocations these histories are negated, and women’s involvement in income generation likened to hobbies, time-fillers, or ‘alternative’ livelihood activities, rendering women, and their activities, economically and politically obsolete. For example, gender-disaggregated labour statistics underestimate the income-generating work done by women, and do not assign value to work done in the household. Meanwhile, the guidelines attached to micro-credit act as a disciplinary mechanism, constraining women’s livelihood options in various ways. The magnitude of micro credit and lack of state investment in credit cooperatives only enable the domestic production of marketable goods that can be sold in the city and its vicinity; the activities promoted have low productivity and returns, seldom generating enough income to finance technology that might lead to more profitable ventures, particularly when competing with the influx of cheap imports; and although trainings are offered in bookkeeping, capital build-up, savings mobilization, and a plethora of other issues pertaining to ‘professional development’, the skills and information required for venture into less ‘stereotypical’ livelihood pursuits remain strikingly absent. A key feature of many of my conversations with female ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ was frustration at not being able to ‘follow through’ with their livelihood ideas.

Local state welfare policies, such as the Women’s Welfare Program (WWP), are also implicated in the problematic representation of women’s rightful position in the home, both as ‘reproducers’ and pacifiers. According to the Women’s Development Agenda, the state directive that forms the ideological core of all programs geared towards women’s ‘needs’ in Naga, a woman has five major duties: 1) to be a loyal supporter to her husband; 2) to be caretaker of the household; 3) to produce future generations; 4) to raise her children properly; and 5) to foster peace and harmony in the home and community (Naga City, 2003). Through the City’s domestic violence agenda, the vanguard of the WWP of late, women are also designated as archetypal victims of violence, freezing them “into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves’, men into ‘subjects-who-perpetuate-violence’, and society into the powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) (Mohanty, 2004: 24). Or as one civil servant generalized, Naga City’s gender and devel-

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3 Interview, August 2, 2007.
opment policies “proceed from the fact that there is no equality.”

The naturalization and essentialization of gender relations was reflected in the attitudes of other City staff members as well. According to the opinions of one recently departed City Councillor:

“A harmonious household is a great contribution to development efforts... Women ensure that when their husbands come home from work they find peace and happiness at home. The children are also healthier and happier.”

Stated during a private interview, this official’s comments symbolically separate domestic and public spheres, suggesting that women have primary responsibility at home. They also insinuate that women are under the shelter and authority of their ‘provider’ husbands, a relationship reified by the top-down ‘hand-out’ nature in which welfare services are distributed by the local state. And they infer that women are accountable for peace and harmony in the home. When combined with the ‘gender-sensitive’ (read: women-centric) livelihood programs previously outlined, such gendered discourses point to the model of ‘responsible’ motherhood recently promoted by the local state in Naga. By constructing women both as reproducers and ‘domestic’ entrepreneurs (read: providers), this model encourages women to take on increasing income-generating responsibility in the face of poverty and economic insecurity; a representation that carries very real risks of burden.

For male citizens, local agrarian policies in Naga are no less essentialist, nor problematic. Although women have primarily been targeted for livelihood and welfare support, development policies are still founded on what Robert Connell (1995) terms ‘hegemonic masculinity’ – a form of masculinity occupying an elite position in a pattern of gender relations. In terms of rural livelihoods, the most insidious expression of this perspective lies in the creation of agricultural programs geared almost solely towards the needs of men, and in the masculinist attitudes of City staff. When I asked about the male bias in agricultural support, a senior CAgO employee replied, “Men are the heads of the family. They own the land... Women help, but men do the heavy work.” In further discussions with City staff, more references were made to the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’; to the assumption that providing for a family is part of what it is ‘to be a man’, and to the cultural amplification of male strength in both the allocation of tasks and the capacity for hard work. During these discussions, these staff members were employing centuries old discourses to represent men as household heads, breadwinners, and property owners with private authority over women.

Hierarchically gendered identities are also produced in village political structures, and as mentioned above, in agricultural programs that rest on nuclear, male-headed households. According to state law, households can register with the village administrative office as having a male or female head. But on agricultural assistance forms there are spaces to list household head and wife, a system predetermining the relative positions of the married couple. Moreover, while in principle women are not excluded from formal party politics, in practice they play a peripheral role in village political affairs. Their involvement is largely limited to participating in welfare and livelihood programs, including those concerning health, education and nutrition issues (Rural Improvement Clubs), and religious activities, while women leaders in these organizations are also rare.

At the same time as promoting these principles of male responsibility and authority, however, the urban-biased development model adopted by the City has left poorer men in rural areas ill-equipped to put them into practice. Instead, inadequate state investment in the agricultural sector, when combined with persistent

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4 Interview, August 7, 2007.
5 Interview, August 8, 2007.

MA Candidate, Geography, U. Of British Columbia
landlordism, rising inflation, and other natural and anthropogenic trends that continue to dampen agricultural productivity, has ensured that local development has become biased against their needs (see Plate 1).

By assuming that all men are beneficiaries of modernization, state policies have also ensured that money, and hence ‘alternative’ livelihood opportunities, remain elusive for many men too. Most of the programs offered by the CAgO involve the “lending of material inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, and infant livestock. No cash involved” (Naga City, 1999). Those requiring credit are referred on to the city’s Metro PESO employment and livelihood office and it’s ‘gender-sensitive’ agenda. I asked the same CAgO employee what this entailed:

“Well, I have spoken to colleagues at Metro PESO. Women can apply for assistance, technology, marketing assistance, financial assistance. The city government really tries to help women... They take care of the money.”

She candidly continued her gender analysis: “They tell me that women receive more loans because they do not have vices. For men, there are lots of vices, they can gamble, they can drink... gambling with whatever loans they have.”

These comments point to the general conflation of ‘gender’ with ‘women’ in the City’s development policies and discourse, and to the institutionalisation of culturally-elaborated and historical perceptions that women are more practical and financially astute than men.

**Plate 1.** No farmers allowed: subdivision development and the dislocation of land and livelihood practices in Pacol.

While government documents state that at least 50% of the beneficiaries of ‘socio-economic’ programs are women (Raquid-Arroyo, 2003), numerous conversations with City staff about women’s ‘exemplary’ budgeting skills led to inevitable suspicions about its underestimation. By uncritically glorifying women’s budgeting skills and ensconcing livelihood projects as women’s ‘turf’, these official discourses risk undermining men’s activities and hence ‘provider’ responsibilities, while placing added responsibility for survival and educational/occupational mobility on women.

Steeped in the liberal tradition, these local state discourses are also in danger of depoliticizing needs. Focused on the ‘universal’ condition of citizens (‘practical’ needs - micro-credit, health status, education), rather than their position (‘strategic’ needs - power over decision-making and the cultural discourses that determine their position), development projects in Naga seem to favour efficiency, instrumentalism and ‘fundability’ over pluralism and contextuality. Put differently, by reifying gender and

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7 Ibid.

8 See Sangeeta Kamat (2001) for an analysis of the various dangers stemming from donor-driven development and ‘empowerment’.
other social relations as ‘outside’ the development debate, they naturalize men’s and women’s ‘roles’ and divert attention away from the oppressive assumptions implicit in local institutional structures.

What have been the consequences of these policy prescriptions and assumptions for those subjects? How do these gender-differentiated structures of opportunities and risks influence the livelihood choices of women and men, and the kinds of agency they can exercise? This is, of course, a complex subject. Policy does not always turn into practice, and unintended consequences abound. Nevertheless, as I will illustrate, although these official invocations obviously do not determine people’s understanding of themselves, or their work, in any simple or direct way, they do shape the terrain of debate and contention on which people assign meaning in their everyday lives.

Open to Negotiation: Gender and Livelihood Politics in Pacol

Why have men in Pacol turned to limited, sporadic employment as construction workers or jeepney/tricycle drivers to supplement or replace their earnings from farming? And why are women becoming increasingly involved in more varied and complex forms of income generation? As mentioned previously, answers to these questions cannot be found in material conditions alone. What is also crucial, I will illustrate, is the differential interpellation of men and women in state policies and practices pertaining to agrarian issues.

In Pacol, the notion of male responsibility, or ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is crucial in shaping the kind of work that men do. In public discourse, it was common for men to invoke their capacity to provide. On my visits to households, for instance, they would often intrude in conversations in which I was engaged with their wives and ask them to make tea while they ‘took over’. Sometimes, they would also enhance their answers by contrasting their ‘capability’ with the apparent ‘vulnerability’ of their wives. At other times, they would invoke the symbolism of the gendered public-private divide, or devalue their wives’ activities as temporary or unskilled, to make themselves and their work look superior.

In doing so, these men were drawing explicitly from those official discourses outlined in the previous section to give the impression of male responsibility and superiority. Yet, the persistence with which they did this suggested more tenuous masculinities were at stake, and indeed further interviews identified several factors preventing poorer men from putting the principles of male responsibility into practice, including limited access to agricultural support, unfavourable tenure arrangements, and a spate of bad weather. Over time, many farmers admitted to owing large arrears of rent to landowners, to defaulting on debts for machines, fertilizers, and other inputs, and to feeling vulnerable to even slight changes in job prospects and the price of basic goods. They complained that subdivision development had led to the re-routing or disconnection of irrigation supplies, causing waterlogged soils in some areas, and desiccated ones in others. And the damage to irrigation facilities caused by recent typhoon activity was identified as another source of anxiety among farmers during my stay. Together, these factors have made farming much less efficient and profitable in Pacol, significantly reducing employment opportunities within the agricultural sector.

Yet, non-farming livelihoods were found to be no less elusive for many men either. The following exchange is taken from a female focus group and highlights some of problems men now confront in accessing non-farming livelihoods;

Virgie:
“You know, men are known to be strong and if they fail, people will think they are weak... men are afraid because of their ego. They will be humiliated if they fail.”
Kat:
“Can you think of any specific examples of this? When men are afraid?”
Paulina:
“Yes, just like if they need to borrow
money. The men will tell the wives to borrow money because they are shy to approach them...”

Throughout the research, many women admitted to borrowing informally on behalf of their husbands, and to their spouses only venturing into new income-generating arenas once they were assured of the financial rewards. A rather casual conversation with a local money-lender suggested that the need to appear financially afloat sometimes forces men into concealing their borrowing from this wives. She also reiterated the findings obtained from local officials and the focus group above, that the gravity of poor men’s inaccessibility to financial support is exacerbated by the cultural caricature of their irresponsibility with money. Her comments when I enquired as to why she only lent money to women: “because women know how to deal with people... If a man has money, he will just use it to buy liquor.”

Other data confirmed that the targeting of women in state livelihood programs has meant more ‘formal’ borrowing is inaccessible to many men too. Local government records suggested that, since 1994, only 11% of microcredit beneficiaries in Pacol have been male (Naga City, 2007), while in interviews men frequently lamented the personal/social obligations tied up with government assistance. Behind many of the anxieties of local farmers lay feelings of frustration, at being dependent on, dominated, and yet also denied access by local power brokers and their acts of often ‘state-led’ development.

The local notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ wasn’t the only form of masculinity restricting men’s livelihood choices either. The perception that masculinity must be expressed through ideals of heavy, arduous work was also highlighted as problematic to poorer men. In many cases, men’s tendency to couch their descriptions of their daily activities in terms of sweating, perspiring, and other bodily functions designed to ‘prove’ to me their manliness, subsided to admissions of anxiety and exhaustion. Several described days in which they had ploughed the fields on water and coconut juice alone. Others’ postures hinted at the physical demands inherent in their work. Farm machinery is still relatively uncommon in Pacol, and workers’ postures often reflected the hauling, pushing, lifting, carrying, bending, and squatting consequently incurred.

Moreover, the sense of superiority derived from this code of masculinity was found to be ‘closing off’ men’s livelihood ‘options’ on the grounds they were not ‘manly’ enough. A common response from husbands as to why they weren’t working as storeowners was that it was too ‘easy’, but further questioning revealed the threat of being cast as gay was more significantly at play. And while the potential for creative slippages in this particular construction of heterosexual masculinity may have been apparent in the case of male flower growers, an activity associated with femininity in Pacol since its inception in the 1970s, the relative stability of this version of gender was notable in the deprecatory remarks their involvement in the activity still attracts.

Whether through inadequate access to financial assistance and labour markets, or an unwillingness to breach what Judith Butler (1990) terms ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, my findings revealed that local concepts of masculinity may be coming at a price to poorer men in Pacol, rendering them vulnerable to livelihood change, and perhaps even subject to the so-called ‘crisis in masculinity’. Evidence of this kind of ‘crisis’ was reflected in their continual reference to ‘poverty’ as a means to justify their wives participation in income-generation, or as one man stated during a male focus group, “so many women are now working because of poverty, especially if their children are going to school... if they will not help the husband, they will suffer, the husband cannot provide all the needs of the family”

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dency to demystify their spouse’s livelihood activities as unprofitable and insignificant. As Eduardo, a farmer, stated when asked whether he would like to run a sari-sari store, “ay, that’s not my cup of tea. There is no big profit there, maybe if the store is very big, but if it’s small I will just be bored... I want to have a good job.”

Interestingly, the women showed no outward desire to challenge these problematic representations. On the contrary, they also positioned their livelihood activities as supplementary to their husbands’ and to their other reproductive responsibilities. When questioned about the benefits of their own income-generation, for instance, female participants tended to devalue their contributions by referring to the ‘petty cash’ it had brought, or by insisting it was only feasible because it could be combined with childcare and housework. When questioned about the household head, all of the women referred to their spouses, and many were adamant their husbands were emotionally ‘stronger’ than them too, adding that as women they were more prone to anxiety and indecision, including that associated with poverty.

During these occasions, both men and women were drawing on normative gender discourses to give the impression of male responsibility and authority, but whether these performances were illustrative of patriarchal relations again remains doubtful. The personal frustrations of failure to provide for dependent family members that gradually crept into many of the men’s voices certainly threw their claims of authority into question, as they intermittently expressed concerns about their obligations, and the expectations of this element of manliness. Moreover, other material collected during the fieldwork further undermined their claims. Close examination of the household ‘balance sheets’, for instance, suggested men’s incomes often failed to cover food costs, let alone accommodation, education expenses and other basic needs. In addition, these ‘balance sheets’ showed women’s incomes were much greater than their oral accounts would allow, making them the main or even sole breadwinners in their families. For example, although Clarita, a hairdresser, vendor, rice mill manager and dressmaker, typically referred to her activities as subsidiary to her husband Elio’s agricultural work, the balance sheets highlighted she earns nearly six times more than him over the course of the month.

Keen to understand the apparent contradiction between ideological expectations and material realities, I raised the data obtained from these ‘balance sheets’ with my female research assistant during a heady discussion over lunch. Clearly upset, she remarked, “being a wife is not very simple, even if it hard as a husband. I sacrifice a lot. If I don’t eat it’s ok, but I cannot just look at my kids if they are hungry. But for men it’s ok, they are not easily troubled...”13. Obviously, these difficulties cannot be ascribed to all of the women interviewed. Nevertheless, my research assistant’s remarks do point to the sharp disjuncture between generalized notions of male responsibility and finding the means to prepare the next meal that many women in Pacol now confront.

During my time in the village, I became acutely aware of the heavy reproductive responsibilities women now confront. Methodologically, this meant that meetings with the women had to be scheduled around meal times, and that coconut would be grated, beans shelled, and onions peeled as questioned were fielded. In terms of daily lifestyles, it means they worked far longer hours than men, the majority combining housework and childcare with income-generating work. According to their livelihood journals, some women worked 90-hour weeks, rising at 4am and not resting until long after their partners were in bed.

Perhaps unsurprising given the number of hours worked, childcare and domestic duties were revealed as a great source of mental and physical stress for the women. The abrupt switch from one job to another, and the lack of

12 Interview, August 17, 2007.

time to complete all jobs properly, was mentioned as particularly difficult and challenging. Respondents explained that their husband’s work (where this existed), although physically demanding and perhaps riskier, was easier than theirs in the sense that it entailed thinking and doing only one main type of activity. They regularly expressed concern at how their hectic schedules caused them anxiety and fatigue, and that their lifestyles made them feel spatially ‘bound’, as they had to conduct the majority of activities out of the home.

Given the work burdens and associated anxieties women face then, again, why the tendency for them to reinforce their position as mothers and wives? Why the ambiguity surrounding their (substantial) income contributions? And why did women equate income-generation with being able to buy personal treats, when the ‘balance sheets’ revealed their activities cover much more basic needs? Answers to these questions undoubtedly relate to how the ‘responsible’ mother has been institutionalised in state discourse as both a household caretaker and ‘alternative’ income generator. Whether it was expressed through improved school grades, or being able to throw parties for family and friends, women’s self-esteem did seem to be tied to their ability to be at the centre of the family and fulfil all domestic duties, while still working for income and/or running a business. But this representation of ‘responsible’ mothered is only part of the picture. Another piece of the puzzle relates to the ways in which men have been coping with industrialization, urbanisation, and the concomitant labour displacement; because it seems they have been coping with their incapacity to put the cultural ideas of male responsibility into practice in ways that make it difficult for women to directly challenge the work burdens they confront.

Chiming with Rebecca Elmhirst’s (2007b) study of masculinities in Lampung, Indonesia, my research uncovered a number of means by which poorer men have been attempting to reassert their masculinity and challenge women’s autonomy in the wake of unemployment and agricultural decline. Aside from devaluing their wives’ income generation as unprofitable and/or inconsequential, they have taken to dominating decision-making, drinking, and perhaps even engaging in aggressive sexual behaviour, to bolster their sense of manliness. A further strategy deployed is now to renew normative discourses of women’s reproductive work. Indeed, while men showed signs of doing some domestic work, even boasting to me on occasion that they were good cooks, their involvement tends to be limited to the less time-consuming projects (i.e. drying the dishes, making the bed). Although the men valued the housework done by their wives, they expressly pointed out that it didn’t ‘belong’ to them either. This was sometimes couched in terms of their own ineptitude at doing household tasks, or alternatively their wives’ proficiency in this realm, but it largely came down to simply refusing to do what was not ‘rightfully’ seen as theirs.

In interviews, men were also not wary of clarifying what an imbalance to these assumed gender roles would bring. Many insisted they would simply leave their wives if they failed to fulfill their reproductive responsibilities, or if their activities encroached upon their own ‘provider’ roles; suggesting their interests weren’t particularly bound up in the collective interests of the household. For women, on the other hand, marriage was marked out as a much less secure arrangement, as the following excerpts taken from a focus group illustrate:

“If the wife does not cook, the man will immediately hurt her, so there would come a time that the man will leave and they will separate”.

“Women take care of the families. If the wife is not a nagger, the family will be at peace”.

“I don’t want to decide on anything, because men just don’t want to be disempowered. If they will see that we don’t consider their decisions, they will look for other women who will depend on them… Yes, they will separate if the...
woman doesn’t know how to submit to the husband”.

These comments resound with other feminist studies of gender and interpersonal violence conducted in the Philippines and Southeast Asia (Angeles, 2001; Elmhirst, 2007b), in that women’s need to foster harmony and not directly challenge unequal gender relations is clearly related to threats of conjugal violence and fears about the breakdown of the family unit. Perhaps significantly, women’s need to foster harmony extended beyond the household as well, intersecting in important ways with notions of charity and responsibility for poorer neighbors, family members and friends. Several of the women drew analogies between their capacity to maintain domestic harmony on the one hand, and their role in promoting village harmony through their generosity in providing opportunities (low-interest loans, food, and even parties) for their neighbors. Interestingly, these notions of responsibility are perpetuated by state policies that place the onus for domestic and community harmony on women, even when other aspects of the public sphere (i.e. political governance, economic provision) are discursively treated as wholly male domains.

How else are women handling the contradictory experiences of reproductive and income-generating responsibility, and the problems stemming from men’s so-called ‘crisis in masculinity’? The various problems and anxieties recently generated by economic insecurity led Virgie, a widow, to confess that she would not remarry again. Two other women stated that, if they could turn back the clock, they would remain single, so that they could “come and go as they pleased”. When contrasted with alternative options, and viewed in the larger context of gender relations wherein husbands provide some assistance, however, these comments seem ambiguous at best. Nancy Fraser’s (1998) critique of contemporary US social policy as one in which there is no longer any ‘good dependency’ stands as a reminder of the potential value of cultural notions of legitimate dependency, and when theorized in the context of Pacol may help explain why most other women were unwilling to engage in any activity that could jeopardize their conjugal situation. It may also be tied to women’s eagerness to reinforce the appearance of conventional gender norms: why they gave tacit approval to ideologies of superior male status and strength by deferring to their husbands in interviews and focus groups; and why they were keen to help them avoid situations in which their prestige might be compromised.

In fact, my findings revealed that women now go to great lengths to maintain the semblance of normative gender relations, and hence assuage the shaky gender identities and associated ‘crisis in masculinity’ that livelihood change has invoked. Some confessed to deliberately downplaying their income contributions, and even concealing their earnings from their husbands, hiding money in kitchen jars and clothes drawers where they knew it was unlikely to be found. Others admitted that their tendency to represent their livelihood activities as *ad hoc* and ‘supplementary’, and to be vague about their incomes, was a tactic by which they could make claims on their husbands’ labor and time, because as one woman noted, “if your husband [knows] you have money, he will no longer strive to work”.

And later interviews hinted that women are actively renewing official representations of femininity and masculinity as another means to cope with economic insecurity, because to acknowledge a man’s authority, they suggested, was also to demand he fulfill his financial responsibilities.

Actively exercising normative notions of femininity was highlighted as advantageous to women in other ways as well. Reinforcing their cultural positioning as ‘supporters’, admitted several women, equipped them with a greater degree of occupational and financial flexibility than men’s ‘provider’ identities would allow. As Virgie stated during a focus group “women

14 Female focus group, July 28, 2007.

15 Female focus group, August 10, 2007.
can face failure without being ashamed”  

Given the ‘women-centric’ imperatives of government micro-credit projects, and women’s rather peripheral relationship to patriarchal village power structures, women have been better placed when it comes to financing their livelihood activities too. All ten of the women that participated in this study had obtained loans under the city’s ‘alternative’ livelihood program, and most supplemented them by borrowing informally from neighbors and/or by becoming members of private lending groups active within the area.

While this paper may therefore seem pessimistic since I have detailed the problems that residents in Pacol now face, it does indicate come cause for celebration. Namely, that women and men are both perpetrators and victims of gender discourses. In other words, increasing state regulation of development in agrarian communities may be problematic when it is imbued with normative constructions of the ‘male provider’ and ‘responsible’ mother, but both men and women are able to prize open official power structures and discourses when opportunities and subjectivities coincide.

Concluding Comments

In this paper I have sought to emphasise the need to integrate gender relations more readily into studies of agrarian change, and to do so in a way that enables understanding of how gender identities are brought into being and enacted in time and place. By drawing on concrete illustrations from Naga and Pacol, and analysing them through a post-structural theoretical lens, I have demonstrated how rural livelihood diversification can offer moments in which gender relations are unsettled and (re)produced in a multitude of institutional environments.

Central to this thesis is the role of state institutions in mapping ways of life in agrarian communities that are gendered, as well as classed. Indeed, this analysis has illuminated just how and why official discourses of the ‘responsible’ mother and ‘male provider’ are so problematic when they are (or aren’t, in the latter case) hitched to poverty agendas. In agrarian communities, where cutbacks in state spending have been particularly acute, these sorts of discourses risk increasing women’s work responsibilities, while pitting men against women, or worst still alienating men from the development process altogether. By construing persons as rational, predictable, and manipulable objects, they also screen out those dimensions of human agency that involve the construction and deconstruction of social meanings (Fraser, 1989).

While larger configurations of political-economic forces – including gendered discourses – undeniably define the terrain of struggle on which livelihood diversification takes place, however, they certainly do not rule out men and women’s own agency. On the contrary, the findings from this study have illuminated how individuals can actively exercise these discourses to mediate the shaky gender relations and associated problems that livelihood change has brought. For instance, official representations of male responsibility may be problematic for poorer men when inadequately backed up with material means, but men can still galvanise these discourses and other representations of femininity (i.e. women’s rightful position of the home) to re-assert their sense of masculinity. Meanwhile, women are not without their own discursive devices either. Principles of male responsibility may be problematic when they are so closely tied up to men’s self-esteem, but they may offer women some room for occupation manoeuvre and a means to make claims on their partners’ labour and time.

For gender theorists interested in the relationship between wider processes of governmentality and the materialisation of social identity in everyday life, the empirical substance of this paper has also provided further food for thought on the translatability and mutability of
normative discourses. Faced with the need to acquire food, accommodation, and other basic supplies, and where men are concerned, to fulfil what is culturally expected of them as ‘providers’, this analysis has demonstrated that people in rural areas may actively renew normative discourses to mediate the shaky gender relations induced through livelihood change. Rather than offering a simplistic reading of rising masculinity vulnerability and female opportunity in the context of economic insecurity and the feminisation of labour, it has hence told a more complex tale, wherein people use a combination of banal and extreme means to at least maintain the appearance of conventional gender relations.

References


