

# DOING SEX WORK IN MANILA: BODIES AND SELVES

.....  
*Eufracio C. Abaya*

Using data derived from field work and published literature, this paper examines how some female sex workers in two cities in Metro Manila live their lives in a constraint-ridden social world. Analysis shows that sex workers have developed strategies and tactics to confront such pressures as social prejudices, local morality, family obligations, risks in sex work and health imperatives. The paper also calls attention to some areas to consider in designing sexual and reproductive health interventions for female sex workers.

## *Introduction*

This study describes the experiences of nineteen (19) female sex workers in two cities in Manila, namely, Pasay City and Caloocan City. By exploring the experiences of these sex workers, one derives an understanding of how they live their lives as social persons in general and as sex workers in particular.

To gain access to what sex workers have to say about their situated world which they themselves have partly crafted, we engaged them in conversations about their lived experience.<sup>1</sup> (In social science parlance, these conversations are otherwise known as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key informants). In the process, we paid attention to the ways in which these sex workers orient themselves to local stereotypes about identities, local morality, family obligations, benefits and risks in sex work and the exigencies of maintaining a healthy body. To supplement the knowledge Female Sex Workers (FSWs) shared with us, we consulted what other authors have written about them.

---

<sup>1</sup>The staff of the Marie Stopes Clinic arranged these conversations with the permission of the managers of the sex establishments and of the sex workers themselves.

This text is divided into four parts. Part One, "Portraits of Female Sex Workers," describes the types of FSWs, narrates the process of becoming a sex worker, highlights the forces that push women to do sex work and provides a background of FSWs' socio-demographic characteristics. Part Two, "Doing Sex Work," focuses on the practice of sex work, including the attitudes of sex workers towards work, the benefits they derive from sex work, their dealings with different kinds of customers and their aspirations for the future. Part Three, "Her Body: Reproductive and Sexual Health," pays attention to the sex workers' concept of the body-in-health and body-in-sickness. Here, their ideas about sexual and reproductive health are laid out. Finally, Part Four, "Ruminations and Recommendations," embodies our reflections about the social world of FSWs, based on which we offer broad recommendations towards the enhancement of health work for and with FSWs.

### *Part One:*

#### *Portraits of Female Sex Workers*

The female sex worker is portrayed here as a social person in a social world. The female body sexualizes the work she does and marks the profession of sex work performed by the sex worker. The six types of female sex workers arrayed here are not meant to simply label the female sex workers professionally but rather identify the ways in which parts of the body are made to work sexually and sexually work. Central in this discussion is the identity of the sex worker and her female body which are both located in social spaces and practices.

#### *Six Types of Female Sex Workers*

- ◎ The *Masahista*. Women employed in massage parlors call themselves *masahista*. They also identify themselves as sauna bath girls and massage parlor attendants. According to them, they received "formal training" in *pagmamasaha* ("massaging") conducted in massage parlors. The identities of the masseuses working in the massage parlor we visited have been reduced to "numbers." A male

customer selects the number of a masseuse whom he considers *magaling* ("satisfying") at both massaging and giving sexual pleasure. The "services" take place in a room lit by a red bulb which creates a mood conducive to sexual encounters. Sex work for a fee is an option but the decision to provide it is left to the attendants.

Torrevillas (1993) notes that in some massage parlors in Quezon City, masseuses are displayed in a show room. Women are trained to do massage as well as "to please customers all the time" (Planas 1993:15). A customer takes his pick and receives massage service in a private room inside the premises. Invariably, sex work is an option.

- © The GRO (Guest Relations Officer). GRO is an alternative name for "hostess" or "bar girl." GROs entertain clients by "keeping them company," assisting them in their videoke/karaoke singing and "drinking" with them. The drinks and food consumed by the GROs are billed to the customer.

A customer is allowed to take out a GRO for three hours after paying the bar fine of P300 (P50 goes to the GRO). Sex work for a fee is arranged between the GRO and the client. She is not expected to stay with the customer the whole time. If she keeps the customer company for three hours, the customer usually gives a tip. The latter is also responsible for bringing the GRO back to the bar.

- © The Casa-based Sex Workers. These sex workers are employed in brothels or casas which usually operate from 3 p.m. until dawn. Subject to the terms of the casa, a client selects a FSW from a group in a show room. To take a sex worker out, a client pays P1,500 of which 700 to P1,000 goes to the sex worker. Casa-based sex workers command higher fees than the *masahista* and GROs.

The services of these women are not limited to sex. They also serve as tour guides and masseuses. Some of them are even taken out of town (e.g., Boracay and places in Laguna).

In addition, other types of sex workers include streetwalkers or pick up girls (Health Alert 1990) and the *akyat barko* or "ship boarders" (Philippine Daily Inquirer 1993). We were not able to conduct focus group discussions with these sex workers because of the difficulties in gaining access to them.

- ◎ The Street Walkers. Partly as a result of the closure of sex establishments in Manila, particularly in the Ermita district, sex workers in tandem with pimps have "sequestered" the streets and avenues of Quezon City and Makati City for marketing sex. Morales (1996:5) observes:  
*At its peak, Quezon Boulevard becomes so busy that over-enthusiastic pimps would actually flag down cars and virtually jump down the hood just to make their sales pitch.... 'Sir, babae, bata, magaling.' If you expressed the smallest iota of interest, the pimps would all but grab at your steering wheel themselves and direct you to a pack of girls watching on the sides.*
- ◎ The Akyat Barko. They are active in the Manila Bay area. With sailors as their main clientele, the akyat barko sex workers work hand-in-hand with pimps who usually arrange for the boat rides to the ships.

Finally, how do these sex workers react to popular labels such as "puta," "pokpok," and "hostess"? The masahista and GROs reject these degrading labels, arguing that sex work does not necessarily go with the work they do. The label hostess is acceptable to casa-based workers but not "puta" and "pokpok."

### *Becoming a Sex Worker*

The life of a female sex worker is lived in practice which is situational and constrained by historical conditions. How does this life take on a story? The following narratives count the ways.

Curiosity regarding sex work. Envy of a sex worker friend who earns a lot of money. In search of a job that pays well. A sick father unable to provide for the family. A broken marriage. Abandonment by a boyfriend. These circumstances tend to contribute to the process of becoming a sex worker.

*Case 1*

Ester met Rica, a former schoolmate, in Baguio. She noticed that Rica was earning a lot of money and had a lot of jewelry. Rica took Ester to her place of work. There, Ester discovered that Rica was involved in sex work. Ester was eventually recruited. At first, she cried a lot and refused to work but management insisted that she stay on. Now, she consoles herself with the money she sends to her grandparents and with pieces of jewelry. She once got depressed because she grew a kulugo (warts) in her genital area. She finally decided to leave Baguio to join her family in Novaliches.

*Case 2*

Aside from monetary considerations, Charito was curious and felt that she could do sex work. She even thought it would be fun. But even as she was content with her new friends at her place of work, she grew quite homesick. She discovered a job opening at the videoke place through a cousin who worked at a sauna in Caloocan City. Prior to her work at the videoke place, she was a housemaid in Navotas. This was in 1993. After nine months, she took a vacation. Returning to Manila, she worked as a maid in another household in Mandaluyong. She left after a year when she returned to the province for the graduation of her pamangkin ("nephew"). When she came back to Manila, she worked at a videoke bar.

*Case 3*

Before working as a GRO, Sonia worked in the Nelson factory in Binondo. But she developed allergies in her hands

and had to go home. In December 1995, she worked in a canteen in Novaliches earning P1,500 a month, but she was asked by one of her siblings to come home. She returned to Manila in May to stay with her aunt in Caloocan, landing a job in a bar she had applied to three weeks before the interview. She knew about the sex part of the job when she got in.

*Case 4*

Vilma worked as a factory worker in Caloocan in 1992. She quit her job after a year because she could not stand the heavy work load, especially the night shift. She worked in a sari-sari store in Cavite until she had to return to the province because of her father's illness. After three years, she came back to Manila and worked in a bar. Vilma learned about the work from an old schoolmate who also worked in a bar. Vilma wanted to know why this girl wore jewelry, had money to spend and looked as if she were content in life. The girl reluctantly told Vilma about her work. Vilma then asked her friend to get her into the business. At first, her friend tried to dissuade her but failed. Her friend then took her to a bar in Caloocan which was hiring GROs which she applied to and was accepted. Eventually, her friend quit the business and got married.

*More Cases in Brief*

Chanda claims that she does not have the skills to find a decent job to support a child; sex work is her best option. Christy's live-in partner abandoned her while Chona is separated from her husband. Both these women see the job of a sex worker as an option to get by. Violy accepted a job at the casa after her husband abandoned her and their child.

The above cases reinforce what other authors have suggested regarding the factors that push women into the sex trade. Añonuevo

(1987) cited poverty while Utusan Konsumer (1991) suggested loss of a woman's "sexual purity":

Sally, a sales girl, was 18 when she met John. He took her to discotheques, restaurants, shows and introduced her to the bright lights of the city. When John eventually proposed to her, she was in seventh heaven. She was even willing to indulge in pre-marital sex, secure in the knowledge that she would soon be John's wife. So, when John suddenly ditched her, she was shattered. She drifted in and out of several physical relationships wherein the men were only interested in her because she had a reputation for being easily bedded. Finally, she turned to prostitution, rationalizing that she might as well make money from what she had been giving away for free.

Conaco (1992) offered the same conclusions with respect to the factors that push women into sex work. These factors include poverty, the need to help the family, the desire to improve one's lot, force of circumstances, the influence of peers and one's personal choice.

### *Birthplace*

Table 1 indicates that the study participants hail from the rural areas of the Visayas and Mindanao. Typically, these areas are economically depressed, calamity-stricken and insurgency-ridden (Health Alert, 1988).

**Table 1. Place of Birth**

Type of Sex Worker	Samar	Davao	Gen. Santos City	Zamboanga	Surigao
Masahista	6	0	0	0	0
Guest Relations Officer	6	0	0	0	1
Casa-based sexworkers	1	2	1	1	0

### *Present Age and "Years in Service"*

The ages of the informants ranged from 18-28 years old, with a mean of 21.5 years old (see Table 2), slightly lower than that recorded by Conaco (1992) at 23.7 years old.

**Table 2. Age of Study Participants**

Type of Sex Worker	Age			Total
	15-20	21-25	26-30	
Masahista	4	1	2	7
Guest Relations Officer	5	2	0	7
Casa-based sexworkers	1	4	0	5
Total	10	7	2	19

Most of the study participants claim that they have been in the business for less than a year. The *beteranas* ("veteran") started young (as in 13 years old). Añonuevo (1987) observes that sex workers can be anywhere between 18 to the early 20's when they start out although there are those who can be as young as 13 or 14.

### *Level of Education*

The majority of the study participants are literate, having received at least an elementary education. Some have a high school education. This profile finds resonance in Conaco's (1992) observation that the majority of sex workers had gone through school but had low educational attainment.

### *Family Background*

The study participants come from large families, with 5 to 9 children. The exception is one who comes from a family of two children. All serve as the family breadwinners because their parents are either jobless, have very low incomes or have died.

Aware of the social stigma that goes with being a sex worker, some said that their families believe them to be housemaids, factory workers and sales clerks.

Others, however, disclosed that their families know what they are even as these family members are hard pressed to accept it. Their families come to their workplace to visit and ask for money. One of them recalled her mother's advice: *Magpakabait ka na lang* ("just try to be good."). Another one asserted: *Hindi naman nila maibibigay ang aking mga pangarap* ("[my family] cannot make my dreams come true").



*Part Two:*  
*Doing Sex Work*

To depict the conditions which made possible and eventually sustained the life of a sex worker is to intimate the problem of sex work: that it is not natural and normal work. Moreover, it also signals the beginning of an end. As female sex workers learn the ropes of the trade, so do they realize that their bodies and their health would in the long haul give way. The conditions under which they render service and the stress of daily transactions as well as competition from other bodies take their toll on the career of a sex worker. But as they do sex work, they devise strategies by which they earn money, help their families, and inevitably find their way out of sex work.

*Length of Service and Mobility*

Table 3 shows that most of the study participants are “newcomers” in the sex industry. Most have not worked in other sex establishments prior to their present jobs. This situation explains the difficulty in deriving data on the mobility of sex workers—meaning, their movement from one place of work to another. Nonetheless, one of the masahistas claims that she started out in Baguio. When she contracted vaginal warts, she moved to Manila. It was during her stint in Baguio that she learned about sex-related diseases and preventive health behavior. It was also in Baguio where she had her first experience in “unprotected” anal sex, an extremely painful sexual encounter she vowed never to do again.

**Table 3. Length of Service in the Present Job**

Type of Sex Worker	<6 mos	7-12 mos	>1 to 3 yrs.
Masahista	5	0	2
Guest Relations Officer	6	1	0
Casa-based sexworkers	1	0	4
Total	12	1	6

### *Attitudes Towards Work and other Sex Workers*

The casa-based sex workers refer to themselves as “hostess,” “entertainer,” or “waitress.” They are offended by the term *puta* (“bitch”) especially when said in public. Some believe that the public humiliation a sex worker experiences is of her own making especially when she behaves like a “puta.” To them, a stereotypical *puta* is *magaslaw* — that is, she wears sexy clothes, a lot of jewelry, has “blondie” hair and is boisterous in public.

In general, the study participants claim that they strive to remain simple; thus, the public would find it difficult to recognize them as sex workers. They are most humiliated when they are said to be *mukhang pera*. As one of them remarked: *Buhay namin ang nakataya, lalo na kung hindi mo kakilala ang kostumer mo* (“We risk our lives everytime we go out with a total stranger.”)

Is it a sin to engage in sex work? The study participants do not deny that sex work is sinful. They believe, however, that they are fated to become sex workers, given their life circumstances. With Mary Magdalene in mind, they contend that God would forgive them. Besides, they believe that committing adultery is more sinful than doing sex work.

Finally, the GROs and the *masahista* feel that it is more degrading to be a “call girl” or a “pick-up girl.” In their view, these sex workers do not have regular salaries, have to work closely with a pimp who often negotiate with “foreigners,” and do not enjoy the kind of protection GROs and *masahistas* receive from their employers. To be a “pick-up girl” is even more degrading because they line the streets waiting for customers— *nag-aantig sa labas* (“seducing”) and *nag-ha-hanting* (literally, “hunting” for customers).

### *Dealing with Customers*

At the casa, sex workers have different ways of treating customers. They are taught to be sensitive to the needs of the customers, *pagsisilbihan mo sila* (“you have to serve them”). They recognize

differences among customers as regards sexual behavior. There are customers who just want to literally sleep with a sex worker. In a given sexual encounter, there are customers who do sex once while some want sex more than once. Lastly, there are those who treat sex workers as wives.

Moreover, they consider Filipino customers as *baboy* ("pig") — being extremely disrespectful, crude and sex-starved. They feel fortunate that few Filipinos can afford their high fees; most of their clients are foreigners (e.g., Japanese, Arabs, Chinese, Americans, Taiwanese).

The GROs and *masahista* receive more Filipino clients than foreigners. Among foreign clients, they dread the Arabs who are known for their violent behavior and big penises.

To win the hearts of their customers, these sex workers treat them with *lambing* (meaning, with "tender care"), most especially the "well-to-do" clients. On the other hand, they try to evade customers who mask their sexual perversions with niceties.

The study participants revealed that they get three customers at most a night. To some, two customers a night is enough. In contrast, Conaco (1992) noted an average of 11.6 customers a night per sex worker.

### *Income*

*Trabaho lang ito...* ("This is just a job") — This is how many of the study participants see their participation in the sex industry. Money is of great importance. This is not to say, however, that sex has been reduced to peso value. Most of them revealed that they engage in free sex with men they have established intimate relationships with. In fact, most of them react very strongly to the popular notion that they are *mukhang pera* ("money-driven persona").

There are two types of sex workers in the *casa*: the "regular" and the "VIP". A regular gets a P700 share for every client while the VIP

gets P1000. There are no strict delineations between the regular girl and the VIP. "Beauty" is not the norm. (One sex worker says she looks prettier than some of the VIPs). One gains VIP status if she develops a prima donna image which warrants a bigger share of the fee paid.

Thelma says that she earns P700 per customer. She could earn as high as P10,000 a month. If she gets 15 customers a month, she would not have to work every night. Thelma is concerned about her safety. She would rather shoulder the fee the owner is entitled to rather than provide service to a suspiciously unsafe client.

A GRO receives a monthly salary computed according to the number of stubs they accumulate in a month (an average of 40 stubs a month). A GRO gets P50 per stub. Tips range from P50 to P300 a day. The lucky ones receive tips amounting to P500 to P1000 a day. On the average, they earn about P2000 worth of tips per month. As GROs, they also get commissions for drinks at P20 per drink. They get their commissions right after the customer leaves. However, it is rare that a customer will table a girl long enough to spend a lot on ladies\* drinks.

The masahistas were reluctant to disclose their monthly salary. However, they receive free board and lodging which would have some bearing on the monthly salary they receive. The number of customers they serve (determined by the number of stubs collected in a month) also affects the computation of their monthly salary. The masahista charges an average of P250 per customer.

Planas (1993) notes that in Quezon City, a masahista who is a *baguhan* (new in the business) receives only P20 of the P500 the owner receives from the client. Through time, her fee increases to P1,500, from which she receives P55. Planas contends that because of the small share a masahista gets, the large expenses she incurs from her personal expenses and the financial needs of her family, she is forced to do sex work. Planas (1993:15) writes:

*'Tao lang po ako,' Cristy said, 'Unang-una ayoko po sana. Pero itong mama, tatlong beses na pong nagpapamasahe sa akin. Sa pang-apat na beses, na-arouse na rin po ako dahil type ko rin siya, eh,' she said. 'Sabagay, kailangan ko rin ang pera. Magkano lang ang kinikita ko kung talagang masaha lang. Maski na may tip pa, kulang din... Sa uniform, make-up, mga gamit ko sa masaha, sa transportation, at pagkain ko... ay naku... at saka, may pinapa-aral pa ako.*

Clearly, of the three types of sex workers, the *masahista* earns considerably less than the GROs and *casa*-based sexworkers. To earn more, a *masahista* depends on the tips from the massage service as well as sexual services rendered.

Finally, as regards fees from sex work, Conaco (1992) notes that "the compensation for the service rendered ranged from P100 to higher, depending on the nature of the service rendered. One woman claimed she received P23,000 for surrendering her virginity to a Japanese client."

### *Expenditures*

Financial support to the family is a central concern among sexworkers. Not surprisingly, all the study participants claimed that the bulk of their earnings is allocated to family-based expenditures (food, clothing, shelter and education). Personal expenses included clothes, shoes, cosmetics, medicine, jewelry, snacks and leisure activities.

The ones in the business for some time claim that they are able to save a small amount through careful budgetting. In contrast, the *baguhans* are unable to save, given their irregular monthly income. As one of them put it: *Kung may pera, may gagastusin* (literally, "If there is money, there is money to spend.")

Most of these workers are given at least free lodging (or "stay-in" status). Sleeping quarters are provided. Because of the limited space

they have to share, sex workers have to put up with a lack of privacy as well as an unkempt and poorly ventilated room.

### *Fears Associated with Sex Work*

The study participants dread raids. At the time of the study, the videoke bar we visited was padlocked by the Caloocan City police upon orders from the City Mayor. Cynically, the GROs said that business would resume upon payment of a sizeable fine.

They also fear abusive customers. They are apprehensive whenever customers take them out, thinking that *hindi ka sigurado kung ano ang mangyayari* ("One never knows what might happen").

#### *Case 5*

Celia said that a drunk customer took her to a hotel. Before leaving the pub, Celia agreed to stay for the whole three hours the customer paid for. But the man was so drunk that he would not reach orgasm. For three hours, she tried—however painful. Finally, she wanted to leave but the customer would not let her. They argued until the man pulled out a knife and threatened to kill her. So she assured the man that she would stay. Celia managed to escape when she left the room on the pretext of asking for extra towels. She reported the incident to the hotel management. The hotel guards arrested the man.

#### *Case 6*

Rica shared her own experience. A customer refused to pay the P500 fee so Rica did not want to start working until the man paid. The man asked her to get money from his wallet. She refused and insisted that the man should pay her first. The customer then pulled out a gun. Traumatized, Rica ran out of the room.

[The GROs listening to Rica's story suggested in jest that the best way to control a drunk customer is to put him to sleep.]

The study participants, moreover, fear getting sick since that would mean a loss of income and medical expenses. Equally dreaded is getting pregnant. But there are a few who would not mind getting pregnant because *Ang bata ay parte ng iyong laman at dugo* ("The child is a part of your flesh and blood.")

### *Aspirations and Future Plans*

We asked the study participants to talk about their hopes and aspirations regarding their future life situation.

The hope of getting rich in the future dominates the minds of the study participants. In particular, the GROs and masahista plan to save enough money to get out of the business and have a better life. They aspire to get a good education (e.g., computer science) or set up a business (e.g., sari-sari store). They would like their own families and be able to put their children through school. However, they stress that they should be able to accomplish their personal goals first before embarking on married life.

The casa-based sex workers do not wish to work as entertainers overseas to improve their life situation. They would rather face the hardships here than deal with the difficulty of living in a totally different society. In the future, they wish for a faithful husband and children. One sex worker said: *Nagbago ka na nga, yung asawa mo naman ang magluluko* ("You've turned to a new life, yet you have to put up with a philandering husband"). Finally, they believe that luck or fortune (*swerte*) will partly shape their future. They all aspire to gain *swerte* in the future.

### *Part Three:*

#### *Her Body: Reproductive and Sexual Health*

In the discussion of sex work, the body coordinates the present and future of the female sex worker's reproductive and sexual health. The history of sex work bears on the sex worker's efforts at making her body safe and saleable. How this is constituted in the contradiction between safety and saleability is a matter of concern: the body becomes

a site of struggle for a possible future in the process of making the present work but only on the condition that it makes itself different, that it renews itself in the face of change.

The study participants were given an outline figure of the female body. They were asked to draw the reproductive organs in the figure. The objective was to determine the awareness of the participants of the reproductive organs, including their approximate locations in the body.

The results indicate that most of the participants could identify the vagina and its location, but only less than half know about the cervix, uterus (*matres, bahay-bata*), fallopian tubes (*tubo*) and the ovaries (*obaryo*). Some identified pubic hair as part of the female anatomy; only a few drew the breasts.

Moreover, those who were able to identify their reproductive organs have some understanding, however lacking, of some physiological processes. For instance, when asked why women menstruate (*nagrereglá*), they said that:

- ◎ *masamang dugo at dumi na galing sa lalaki* ("bad blood and filth transmitted by men")
- ◎ *para hindi ma-stuck yung dugo sa baba* ("to prevent blood from getting stuck")
- ◎ *natural sa babae* ("part of being a woman")
- ◎ *buong buong dugo sa loob ng katawan* ("blood clots inside the body")
- ◎ *palatandaan na hindi ka buntis* ("sign that you are not pregnant")
- ◎ *wala kang tumor* (you do not have a tumor)

Meanwhile, a healthy person, according to most of the study participants, has the following characteristics:

- ◎ *mataba* ("fat")



- ◎ *pawisin* ("sweats easily")
- ◎ *hindi malungkot* ("happy")
- ◎ *hindi maputla* ("not pale")
- ◎ *makinis ang kutis* ("has a smooth complexion")
- ◎ *hindi tuyong and kutis* ("skin is not dry")

However, they believe that these characteristics could be misleading, asserting that only after a medical check-up can one ascertain whether or not she is in good health.

A sick person experiences the following:

- ◎ *matamlay* ("languid")
- ◎ *mapulang mata* ("red-eyed")
- ◎ *nanghihina* ("feeling weak")
- ◎ *may makati-kati* ("itchy body parts")
- ◎ *masakit sa loob* ("there is pain inside").

We asked them what they do to stay healthy. To them, a person should eat right and get at least 7-8 hours of sleep, despite their work hours. Healthy food means lots of vegetables, fruits, rice, meat, fish and other food which contain vitamins, although one added softdrinks to the list.

In addition, one should practice personal hygiene by taking a bath at least once or twice a day and washing right after sex. Some of the GROs use laundry soap and toothpaste ("Colgate") to wash their vaginas. The cool effect of toothpaste makes them feel clean. Moreover, taking a bath regularly takes away the *pawis* ("sweat") which they believe makes the body weak.

Some of the sex workers take vitamins to fight weakness caused by lack of sleep. Others take antibiotics (e.g., Ampicillin and Ampicin) to combat probable infections caused by sex work. To cleanse the *matres*, they use Repadin. They added that they should regulate the

taking of vitamins to prevent gaining too much weight. As well, most of them fear that antibiotics can weaken the uterine lining.

These sex workers also visit health clinics, either for regular check-ups or for treatment, most claiming that they go at least once a month. Casa-based sex workers say that sex workers who receive more customers tend to go to the clinic more often. But they contend that frequent check-ups might also be harmful to the uterus. Visits to the clinic outside of their regular regimen, they said, might not be necessary if they do not feel sick. So long as they take the prescribed medicines, visits to the clinic may not be necessary. On the other hand, some sex workers do not go to the doctor until they experience pain. To some, this practice is foolish, arguing that there are ailments which do not show any physical signs, save for the *gasgas* which is readily discernable.

The study participants said check-ups usually involve a blood pressure check, a blood test and genital examination. They can also avail of "cleaning" or "washing" (vaginal douche).<sup>2</sup> A contraption (sex workers call it a *nguso ng bibe* ("duck bill") is inserted, and the vagina is washed with lukewarm water and blow-dried afterwards. Sex workers say that the procedure is not painful. In fact, it is *masarap* ("feels good"). They feel clean and at ease after the washing. Sometimes, swabs are obtained which the doctor examines under a microscope. It does not usually take long unless the doctor finds something wrong.

### *Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)*

We asked the study participants if they knew the meaning of the term STD. All of them gave a negative response. We then asked them what diseases sex workers commonly experience. They identified the following:

- ◎ *kanser sa suso or sist* (breast cancer or cyst)

---

<sup>2</sup>According to a staff nurse of a clinic, this practice is discouraged because "it sometimes pushes the bacteria in." Alternatively, they do swabs.

- ⊙ *tulo* (lit., “drip”; gonorrhea)—“white blood” secretions, painful *puson* (abdomen), extreme soreness while urinating, sore vagina, pus coming out of the vagina.
- ⊙ *gasgas* (abrasions in the vaginal opening)—caused by a big penis that enters a dry vagina; one could use vinegar to clean the *gasgas*
- ⊙ “cauliflower” or *kulunggo* (warts)—*kulugo na nagpatong-patong sa gilid ng kiki* (“warts on top of each other at the side of the vagina”), *nag-anak at nag-anak pag napabayaan tapos mag-nanana* (“if left untreated, they multiply and secrete pus”)
- ⊙ *impeksyon sa pagihi* (urinary tract infection)—*may dugo at nana sa ihi* (“presence of blood and pus in the urine”)
- ⊙ *impeksyon sa loob ng ari* (genital infection)
- ⊙ herpes
- ⊙ sipilis (syphilis)—*mahirap umihi* (difficulty in urinating)
- ⊙ AIDS—[to be discussed in a separate section]

The study participants explain that these infections are caused by the *sari-saring dumi* (“different kinds of dirt”) that enter the body (perhaps alluding to constant sexual encounters with different customers). One is likely to contract these diseases if she allows unprotected sex, does not visit the clinic and does not habitually clean her vagina.

### *HIV/AIDS*

The study participants liken “AIDS” to a double-crosser (*traydor na sakin*) because it can hit anyone anytime.

The casa-based sex workers said that to determine whether one is *pasitib* (“positive”), an AIDS test is needed. *HIV kung hindi pa malala* (“It is HIV if it is not yet severe”). *May AIDS na kung may mga butlig-butlig sa katawan* (“One has AIDS if you see blisters on the body”). None of the casa-based sex workers, however, has had an AIDS test.

To them, AIDS is not acquired through kissing. It is contracted through:

- ⊙ sexual intercourse
- ⊙ blood transfusion
- ⊙ needles previously used by a person with AIDS (PWA)

In contrast, a majority of the GROs and masahista said that AIDS is transmitted through:

- ⊙ close contact with a person with AIDS
- ⊙ kissing
- ⊙ sharing food with a person with AIDS

They added that AIDS came from syphilis. For prevention, they identified condom use as a strategy.

These study participants recalled the movies, "The Dolzura Cortez Story" and "The Secrets of Sara Jane," as eye-openers to AIDS. Based on their reactions to these movies, these sex workers had very strong feelings against the social demeanor of the PWAs in the movies.

### *Fertility Regulation*

The study population associated the use of birth control pills, IUD and condoms as well as tubal ligation, with the prevention of pregnancy (*para hindi mabuntis*).

They, however, stressed the *sayd epek* ("side effects") of pills. According to them, users of pills get fat, develop bigger breasts and become very temperamental. Also, they believe pills "clean" the uterus, resulting in heavy blood flow during menstruation. These perceptions explain why some of them are reluctant to use pills.

Sex workers consider IUDs ineffective and reject ligation on the grounds that it turns one into a sex maniac.

### *Condom Use*

Majority of the participants claim that condom use can prevent diseases contracted from sexual intercourse. They use *mga pampadulas*

such as KY, lotion and oil. If a customer refuses to wear a condom, they do a quick “test” to determine if the customer is safe by squeezing his penis. If the customer exhibits pain, the sex worker will refuse sex work unless the customer uses a condom.

The study participants agree that a sex worker should refuse a customer who refuses to wear a condom, even if this would mean a loss of income. One participant said that she threatened a customer who did not want to wear a condom by telling him that she is “sick with something.” Some GROs practice withdrawal if the customer refuses to wear a condom.

Some of them, however, have sex with their boyfriends who do not use condoms. As one of them put it, *iba yung binabayaran, iba yung hindi binabayaran* (“free sex is different from paid sex”). Others do not condone this practice, claiming that they manage to convince their boyfriends to use a condom. To them, not only does condom use prevent transmission of disease but pregnancy as well.

### *Abortion*

Abortion (*palaglag, nagpahulog, nagpakuha*) is recognized by the study participants as a means to stop pregnancy. The casa-based sex workers provided the following justifications for abortion:

- ⊙ an abortion is done when a person is not yet ready to have kids. It’s hard to have kids when there are no fathers to speak of
- ⊙ they do not want to have kids who might turn to sex work eventually
- ⊙ *dahil hindi naman sinasadya ‘yan* (“because it is an accident”)

They believe that it is ideal to abort *dugo pa lang* (lit., “just blood”). *Kasalanan kung tao na yung bata* (“It is a sin to abort a fetus”). Delayed menstruation is an indication of pregnancy. One way to abort pregnancy is by jumping up and down vigorously.

The masahista and the GROs, on the other hand, have reservations about abortions. *Kasalanan na nga ang pagiging ganito namin, bakit pa kami maglalaglag?* ("Inasmuch as our job is already sinful, an abortion would only aggravate it").

#### *Part Four:*

#### *Ruminations and Recommendations*

This study locates the social person in a social world. This person has the power to make sense of the world and to interpret it according to certain norms of making meanings. Such power, however, reckons with competing interests and claims to other modes of knowing and feeling the world. The social person in the social world, therefore, at once weaves and is hemmed in by relations of power, of the tension between constraint and creation.

This social person is a woman whose sense of her world and of herself lies at the vital center of performing acts of personhood and reenacting her role in the world.

What constitutes this world?

1. the practice of sex work which implicates systems of transaction between the sex worker and her client in the context of a workplace and under specific conditions of commodity exchange. Sex work involves the process and drama of initiation into the trade, anxiety over engagement, realization of possibilities and finally, the coming to terms with a present that can be changed in the future. The past, of course, is always evoked by the circumstances which had driven the sex worker to prostitution as well as the cherished values instilled in her by a vastly different moral world prior to this state of "work".
2. the relationship between self and work homes into the question of the identity of the sex worker as woman whose network of subjectivities taps into a range of choices and aspirations in relation to stereotypes of her perceived public

persona. Society reveals itself here very substantially but is highly mediated by family and filial duties, kinship traditions, religion and other social conventions. At stake in the sex worker's negotiation of identity is the notion of honor which is transcoded as sin within the idiom of catholic culture. The sex worker treads a social ground that has been staked out by structures of society. But as she walks the distance of the terrain, she uncovers routes of her own.

3. the body coordinates self and work in the context of health as the path and destination of a transforming and transformative self in relation to work and its prefigured end. How the sex worker takes care of her body and values its potential sustains the present terms of sex work and, in fact, maximizes its efficiency as market input. On the other hand, it foreshadows a future that is beyond the everyday toil of sex work. To maintain the health of the body is to ensure optimum performance of sex work at the same time that it saves the body from disease so that the sex worker could appropriate it later for marriage, family and the search for a better future. The body is, in other words, invested as a good in contradictory ways as it serves as investment to keep a profession going on the one hand, and is invested with a future possibility outside the constraints of commodity relations, on the other. The body becomes a site of struggle and reinvention. And health makes possible change in the life of the sex worker.
4. the intervention of agencies dealing with sexual and reproductive health must therefore focus on:
  - a. specific communicative modes through which sex workers articulate meanings of the world and how this articulation is embedded in experience which is made known through intimate encounters among persons — sex workers, NGO advocates, educators, policy makers,

academics. In this regard, the virtue of *magkwentuhan* (conversing) as a mode of communication should be recognized. These *kwentuhan* could swirl around the themes of "*Ang Katawan Ay Sumasalamin sa Pagkatao,*" "*Pahalagahan ang Katawan para sa Trabaho, Pamilya, at Kinabukasan,*" "*Huwag Maging Pabaya sa Sarili.*"

b. the concept that the personal is political, the private is public and the self assumes meaning in relation to others. The sex worker cannot simply be viewed as an individual victim but rather as a participant in the collective efforts to think about the conditions under which she lives and is made to live out her life. In this struggle, the body becomes a site of resistance, refunctioned as it is as a precondition to health and therefore to life.

c. The world of the sex worker is a socio-moral world because the practice of sex work makes it accountable socially and morally. Social and moral questions cannot but constitute the way things are and why they must be changed.

☪☪☪



### *Acknowledgment*

The author wishes to acknowledge Ms. Monica Santos, a graduate assistant at the CSSP Graduate Office currently pursuing a master's degree in Anthropology, for her kind assistance in data gathering.

### *References*

- Añonuevo, Carol. Prostitution in the Philippines. *Cast the First Stone*. Foreword by Bishop La Verne Mercado. Quezon City: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1987.
- Conaco, Ma. Cecilia G. Prostitution and the Transmission of AIDS/HIV: Implications on Disease Control Management. *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* (July 1992): 195-211.
- n.a. Prostitution: The Inhospitable Legacy. *Health Alert*. (December 1988): 344-349.
- n.a. Report on Prostituted Women. *Health Alert*. (November 1990): 467.
- n.a. "Why Women Are Led Into Prostitution." *Utusan Konsumer*. (Mid-November 1991).
- Planas, Charito. Of Saunas and Men. *Philippine Panorama*. (1 August 1993): 15, 33.
- Torrevillas, Domini. "Trafficking Women in QC Massage Parlors." *Philippine Star*. 7 September 1993.



PHOTOS FROM CSWCD DEVELOPMENT UPDATE  
VOLUME 1 No.1, JANUARY-MARCH 1996

