Culture and Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the Philippines

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After eight years of debates, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (RA 10354) was passed in 2012. In the years that followed, opposition has continued, blocking or reducing access to many reproductive and sexual health services. One particularly sensitive issue, described in Section 16 of the law, is "mandatory age-appropriate reproductive health and sexuality education".

The fears around what is often called "sex education" revolve around the idea that discussions about sex would lead young people to engage in premarital sex and result in teenage pregnancies.

This argument confuses "sex education" – the traditional "birds and bees" lectures about reproduction and the reproductive system – with sexuality education, or even more importantly, comprehensive sexuality education or CSE, a term that is not used in RA 10354 but which was also opposed during the deliberations for that law.

As early as 2009, UNESCO had already published its "International Technical Guideline in Sexuality Education" promoting the concept of CSE (UNESCO 2009, 2018) but the law did not use the term.

The definition of comprehensive sexuality education is important: "CSE is a curriculum-based process of teaching and

learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

We can see that CSE is more than sex education, extending into what we might call life skills needed especially by young people. Debates have continued around what types of "knowledge, skills, attitudes and values" to promote. The result has been slow progress in getting any kind of sexuality education going, even the traditional forms. Meanwhile, many reproductive health problems continue to grow: high rates of teenage pregnancies, domestic violence and gender-based violence, and the spread of sexually- transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. In the last year, more attention has focused on gender-related problems in high schools and colleges, such as bullying, the posting of nude photographs, by male students, of female students, and fraternity-related violence such as hazing and rumbles.

One case, involving two fraternities (Upsilon Sigma Phi and Alpha Phi Beta) in the University of the Philippines Diliman became complicated because of CCTV footage showing the fraternity members hurling homophobic insults at each other, and the leaking of Upsilon social media exchanges that were extremely misogynistic and homophobic, as well as anti-Muslim and anti-indigenous peoples.

Clearly, CSE needs to be better implemented to address the many needs around sex and sexuality, the latter term to include gender. In my lecture today I will focus on the importance of culture for crafting a more effective CSE.

On an informal level, I frequently hear people saying that we Filipinos are conservative and therefore sexuality education will not work. But this argument runs counter

to what we see all around us, an unrelenting bombardment, through advertising, mass media, cinema and the Internet, of sexual images.

We forget as well that even "traditional" culture is imbued with sex and sexuality. Just look at the metaphors for genitalia: *mani*, flower, *tahong, monay* and many more for the female and, for the penis, such terms as *tarugo*, *kanyon* and all kinds of "nicknames."

The colorful vocabularies go beyond genitalia. Mercy Fabros, an early advocate of breastfeeding programs, told me many years ago about how she and her companions were conducting research on local breastfeeding practices. In a session with elderly women, she asked them about breastfeeding-related problems and local remedies.

The *lolas* said that an effective remedy for cracked nipples was "laway ng lawin" or the saliva of eagles, which shocked Mercy and her researchers.

"How," they asked, "do you obtain eagle's saliva?"

The Lolas laughed and replied, "You get it from your husband."

Such is the frankness, and humor, of discussions of sex and sexuality in the Philippines, entering our daily conversations, jokes, songs, and even dances.

Perhaps the most provocative of cultural expressions is the term "*luto ng Diyos*," God's cooking, used to refer to sex itself, the rationale being that only God could have concocted such sublime pleasure (*sarap* in Tagalog, *lami* in Cebuano and other Visayan languages). I will admit being shocked the first time I heard this some 20 years ago, seeing it almost as blasphemous. Looking back now, I'm shocked at how I could have felt that way when this term reflects a very positive view of sex, one that boldly plays on the sacred and the profane.

Note that I wasn't a young person 20 years ago; I was in fact close to 50 and yet I had never heard that term, showing how the middle- and upper-classes are sheltered from social realities.

The term "*luto ng Diyos*" came out of teaching an anthropology course called Sex and Culture at the University of the Philippines Diliman, which together with another course called "Exploring Gender and Sexuality" this time inter-disciplinary, occasionally invited controversy, using the same lines of (un)reasoning related to CSE: "You might incite young people to have sex when you talk about sex."

It was in one of the "Exploring Gender and Sexuality" classes that my co-teachers and I first learned about the "*hubad na Santo Niño*" (naked Santo Niño), submitted by a student. This hubad na Santo Niño is a *gayuma* or love charm sold together with *anting-anting* (talismans) in Quiapo. Men buy the gayuma and place it in their mouth when they are courting someone, emboldened by advice like that given to me by an older man, a politician's bodyguard, who I consulted after getting the hubad na Santo Nino: "*Kung sino ang binulungan mo, hindi siya makakahindi*" (Whoever you whisper [presumably sweet nothings] to, that person will not be able to say no.)

I use the hubad na Santo Niño in various classes, including in medical school, to ask students what it says about male sexuality and they are quick to see how it reflects insecurities, a lack of self-confidence. Their take-away is that serious interest in someone, with enough self-esteem, means dispensing with amulets and talismans.

I will say now this hubad na Santo Niño is the child Jesus with an erect penis. Again, is this blasphemous, or is it just a reflection of folk sexual culture with its playfulness, and its potential, as with "luto ng Diyos" as a pedagogical tool for CSE?

Still another argument against claims of a so-called conservative sexuality in the Philippines is the proliferation of supplements and drinks taken to enhance desirability, sexual performance, and sexuality in general. Think of skin whiteners,

aphrodisiacs and Freshman®, a "male intimacy wash" advertised with a tag line "*Isubo mo*".

Even products that seem devoid of sexuality are transformed, through advertising, to carry subliminal messages around gender and sexuality. Read the underlying messages for "vitality" in vitamins, and preparations that promote height, mainly for sons.

In recent years, there has been a growing market for sex gadgets, on the Internet and with actual "bricks-and-mortar" stores, often pop-ups in malls. Yet, these sexual aids are not new. For decades, vendors in Sta. Cruz and in Quiapo have been selling products like "pilik mata ng kambing" (goat's eyelashes) for sex. (I am sure about "decades" because my sister, who is now in her 60s, remembers seeing them as an adolescent, and thinking they were false eyelashes.) These "*pilik mata ng kambing*" have been phased out, replaced by silicone rings with names like "warrior", sold next to imitation Viagra® and sex gadgets, all from China.

More extreme, but also widespread and with a long history, are the use of penile enhancers. There are the *bolitas* or little balls – plastic and metal – inserted under the skin of the penis. Other enhancements done on the penis include piercings, and injections with silicone or Vaseline® to give an illusion of size. The term "cobra" for these silicone-enhanced penises is self-explanatory.

For the upper classes, there is an even wider array of cosmetic procedures for both men and women for every part of the body, including the genitals, all oriented toward enhancing desirability and sexual performance.

We over-privilege a "for adults only" world of sex and sexuality but do not prepare our young for that world. Moreover, even for adults, there remains widespread ignorance about sexual anatomy and physiology and, even more crucially, about sexuality. A simple but important example is the way "bastos" is used to focus on nudity, losing sight of the essence of the word,

which is disrespect. It is this disrespect that must be addressed in relation to sex and sexuality.

When we do talk about sex and sexuality, the discussions are marked by too many silences and omissions, leaving people, young or old, to fend for themselves, picking up information, and misinformation, from the streets and the Internet.

CSE can draw from culture, especially the wonderfully descriptive local vocabularies with its euphemisms, puns, metaphors for meaningful, maybe sometimes provocative, discussions. But culture must "dialogue" too with the needs of the times, challenging old norms, draw from the sciences for important information.

Culture must be seen as a wide domain. We might be missing out, for example, on CSE introduced through rituals of passage. The *pagtutuli* (circumcision) over-emphasizes the mistaken notion that the procedure will lead to a growth spurt. It is time to restore the original purpose of the ritual, which is to explain the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Young boys who have just had circumcision are warned that they should not allow women and girls to see their circumcised penis. To expose themselves to women and girls, they are told, will result in the penis becoming red and swollen, rather graphically described as "*mangangamatis*", becoming like a tomato.

We lose sight of the message embedded in the warning: you are no longer a boy and as a man, you can no longer expose your penis to women. Gone are the short pants.

There is a corresponding ritual of passage, sadly now rarely observed, for women, and this is the presentation, usually by the Lola (grandmother), of a camisa de banyo, to a girl who has reached menarche (first menstruation). The camisa de banyo, the older woman has to explain, is to be used when bathing, a symbol of the need now to be modest, and watchful about one's body. There are many messages, adjusted to our modern times, that can be used with such a gift.

A camisa de banyo, don't you think, beats all those other traditions associated with menarche: jumping over the stairs to shorten periods, or dubbing her face with a towel soaked in you-know-what, supposedly to prevent pimples.

We need to tap into culture for opportunities to do "sex talk", spread out across childhood. This is especially important for early childhood education, if our young are to learn to protect themselves. I gave one such talk to my son when he was five, almost spontaneously when, after helping him with his bath, I told him that he was old enough now to bathe on his own. I assured him I would help him when needed, for example adjusting the hot water, but for the most part, he would be on his own.

I explained that no one – myself, other relatives, the household help, neighbors and friends – had a right to touch his body without his consent. He listened intently as I talked more about protecting one's body, appropriate to a 5-year old.

Being an educator, I asked him at the end of my "lecture", what he had learned and he said, "No one has the right to touch my body."

"What if someone insists," I asked?

He paused then said, with full confidence, "I would tell that person, 'Marry me first.'"

My son is now almost 14 and I still go back to that story with him, sometimes just for a good laugh, but sometimes to update the life lessons there, with new contexts, especially the need for *him* to respect other people's bodies.

At his age, this message of respecting bodies is particularly important in relation to porn, which has become so easily accessible today, with voluminous smartphone files downloadable in malls.

One day, I asked him casually if he was watching porn and he was quick to say he had files in his cellphone. Instead

of scolding him, I sat down with him to play back some of the porn, where I pointed out that what was objectionable was not so much the naked bodies but the fantasies created, with women portrayed as wanting to be handled roughly, wanting to be harassed, and raped. In other words, we were talking more meaningfully about the need for respect.

There is so much that needs to be done to "deconstruct" social vocabularies and scripts, which are still largely anti-women. Catch our young, and ourselves, when we say "*lalake kasi*", "*babae kasi*", "*bading kasi*", "*tomboy kasi*" or, worse, "*babae ka lang*", "*bading ka lang*", "*tomboy ka lang*". Are we reinforcing stereotypes and discrimination? Are we limiting potentials and aspirations for young people when we say particular activities are only for boys, or for girls?

A culture-based CSE must address "bad words", "bad" never really being tackled. Explain what is so wrong with "*putang ina*" and related words like "*amputa*", which was found littered all over the Upsilon leaked blogs.

I always use two angles here. First, it is "*bastos*" simply because it so demeans people, but it is bastos many times over because it insults people by attacking their mothers. How would you feel, I ask, if your mother, your sister, is assaulted that way?

Second, and this is a more difficult but important argument to use: by using "*puta*" to insult someone, are we not also dehumanizing the "puta", women whose life circumstances may not always have allowed free choices? Moreover, I ask, isn't the puta more honorable selling her (or his, for the *puto*, who escapes the stigma) body to support herself and her family, than our politicians who sell the country down the river?

As norms change, so too the scripts. We have to be aware of young people's evolving scripts. In the 1990s, when I was doing research on young adult sexuality with the late Dr. Theresa Batangan we found "m.u." or "mutual understanding" meant that a couple was "on", and that the relationship was exclusive, no one else. In recent years, this has changed, m.u. still meaning

mutual understanding, still meaning a couple was "on", but the relationship is open.

We have seen "friends with benefits", a term borrowed from the United States to refer to two people having sex with each other, but not necessarily having emotional attachments. In recent years, this has become more "brutal": "MOMOL" or "*make out make out lang*" (and a variation "MOMO Extreme") is more explicit in saying there should be no emotional attachments.

Young people do analyze their relationships and I have had young people telling me that "*in MOMOL, parehong talo*" (both parties lose with MOMOL).

I have wondered if perhaps MOMOL first emerged with overseas Filipino workers who left a spouse or partner in the Philippines and who just want companionship, with sex, while overseas. By declaring that there should be no emotional relationships, it means they can go back home to their original partners.

All this may sound feckless but it may also be a reflection of the tough realities of working overseas, one which affects many Filipinos given the extent of our diaspora. Moreover, one has to ask, seriously, if the illusions of a problem-free MOMO Lang apply to both adults and adolescents. Ultimately, we see again how CSE must be a platform for discussing a basic issue: responsibility.

What matters then is creating safe spaces for people to talk, frankly, about these new configurations, and to relate these to gender power relations. Sexism must be challenged. "*Usapang lalake*" can be retooled. At the height of fraternity violence several years ago, a slogan was introduced by one of the universities:

> "*Ang totoong brod hindi nananakit sa kapwa brod*" (A true brod does not injure another brod).

Women's organizations have moved ahead more rapidly to retool culture. A good example was Gabriela's

materials many years ago with a catchy phrase: "*Hindi natural na magpapabugbog sa asawa*" (It is not natural to be beaten up by a spouse).

In many political rallies today, it has become common to hear women sternly lecturing politicians, including the president, about their anti-women language. Corazon "Dinky" Soliman, former Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and. Development, likes to remind audiences about the use of "*puki*" or vagina. "Do not forget", she sternly lectures, "that you, that all of us, came out of our mother's vagina", a way of discouraging curses using "puki" (especially the Ilokano *ukinam*).

Effective CSE must tackle, too, the use of sex and sexuality in the images in mass media and advertising. Young people in particular must be taught to analyze advertising, including its unrealistic aspirational messages, and its reinforcement of problematic sexual norms.

Take a simple "*walang iwanan*" in San Miguel® beer ads. The term may seem positive with its sense of group solidarity, through thick and thin. But in the context of drinking, "walang iwanan" takes off from machismo values. The subliminal message is "if you're a tunay na lalake, a real man, you will drink with us till you're drunk."

There have been many more ads for alcohol, with both explicit and subliminal messages, and advertising has been quicker than health organizations in tapping into culture. One popular saying that needs to be discussed as part of CSE is: "*kung may alak, may balak*" (where there is alcohol, there are "plans"), with women complaining that if they drink on a date, boyfriends automatically presume they want to have sex.

The quality of CSE will depend on how prepared our health professionals and educators are. Medical and allied health professional schools remain deficient when it comes to sexuality education, even for matters as basic as anatomy. In a recent research project I handled, looking into the clitoris in medical discourse, I examined eight obstetrics/gynecology textbooks

and only one (Pfaus, Flanagan-Cato and Blaustein 2015) had an accurate, up-to-date representation of the clitoris.

I teach a graduate course called "Health, Culture and Society" in Ateneo's Master of Business Management (MBA) – Health degree program and my students, all in medicine and health related fields, admit that sexuality education is weak in their training, aggravating the many gaps, among lay people, in their understanding of sexual health.

I mentioned earlier the silicone rings sold in Quiapo, which many of my physician students were not aware of. In contrast, the obstetrician/gynecologists always have stories of women patients who come to them with signs of vaginitis, and, with internal examination, the physicians end up fishing out fragments of these rings which break during intercourse and remain embedded inside the woman's genital tract.

Urologists, on the other hand, talk about having to treat infections among men with bolitas and other penile enhancements and complications from silicone and Vaseline injections into the penis.

Note that the penile enhancements might be inserted as early as adolescents, in a way becoming a second ritual of passage after circumcision.

For all the macho bragging and blustering among men about their sexuality, basic knowledge about their sexual anatomy and physiology can be quite deficient. On a personal note, when I recently had a bout of a urinary tract infection (UTIs) friends – both men and women – expressed surprise because people think UTIs only affect women. Moreover, closer friends began to tease me asking what I had done to get a UTI, confusing such infections with those that are sexually-transmitted (STIs).

Another important male sexuality issue is the prostate, its very existence not known to many men, including the need, for those over 40, to have regular check-ups to see if it is inflamed, a condition called Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy.

Gender enters the picture here with many Filipino men unwilling to have the check-up because it involves a procedure called Digital Rectal Examination or DRE. No high-tech here, the digital referring to the finger of the physician, inserted through the rectum to probe the prostate.

Here we have an excellent example of how CSE needs to explain the biomedical aspects, and to prepare men to handle their fragile masculinities as they are asked to bend over (*tuwad lang po*) for the procedure for a quick but apparently emasculating probe.

To summarize then, we see the various tasks needed to create a relevant and effective CSE through culture:

1. Integrate culture-based and scientifically sound information into educational materials for CSE, ranging from popular education (for example to be used by barangay health workers, civil society organizations). The clitoris not a button. Men have prostates and urinary tracts. Men and women have feelings and emotions.

2. Deconstruct sexual vocabularies and scripts, and reappropriate or retool old sexist scripts. For example, a T-shirt used several years ago by the UP LGBT organization Babaylan read: "*Bakla (tibo) ako, may problema ka ba?*" (I am bakla, any problems with that?)

Another example: captured on CCTV during one of the fraternity encounters in 2018 in UP Diliman were boys (not men) shouting at each other: "*Labas kayo mga bakla*" (Come out, you bakla") A counter-script could be: "*Hoy, wala kayong karapatang maging bakla!*" (Hey, you have no right to be bakla.)

A caveat here: the worst thing that can happen, especially in social media, is to stoop to the level of Internet trolls in belittling people.

3. Move away from sex education. We need CSE to address how sexuality relates to lives, and to people. We need

to move away from sex education with its boring, disembodied images of hanging uteri and fallopian tubes and invisible prostates and clitorises, and progress toward CSE, involving people interacting socially, and in networks.

Values is a much-abused word, often ending up to defend dysfunctional, even dangerous traditional norms. Instead, we need "values education" to be contextualized in society and culture, dealing with concrete issues. We need to talk about priorities, for example with younger people, talking about how their allowances might be more wisely used for real needs like nutritious food, rather than skin whiteners. Older people, too, need to see how meager budgets are squandered on supplements, cosmetic surgery, or *bolitas*.

All said, CSE is creating safe spaces for people to talk about nurturing values, of self-worth and self-awareness, as well as of respect, compassion and, lest we forget, love.

Notes

[1] Revised plenary paper read in the "Stand Up for CSE" conference organized by Likhaan with support from the UNFPA, 18 June 2019.

[2] Chancellor and Professor (Emeritus) of Anthropology, University of the Philippines Diliman.

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