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Violence Against Migrant Filipino Women in Australia:
Making Men's Behavior Visible

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Abstract

This paper argues that we need to look at how men discursively construct and treat their partners to understand why violence occurs in intimate relationships between Australian men and Filipino women. Comparing the behavior of two groups of non-Filipino men in their intimate relationships with Filipino women puts the focus on men and makes their behavior visible. The men in the first group were in relationships with Filipino women who were killed or have disappeared in Australia. The men's biographies are drawn from interviews with their partner's family members and friends. The second group of men, with whom I conducted interviews and ethnographic research, are married to Filipino women. Domestic violence is a feature of some of the relationships because the two groups of men differ markedly in their constructions and treatment of their female partners. The men in the first group believed and acted in ways which suggested these women were their 'property', that they 'owned' the women, that the women did not have any rights. Exploring the dynamics of these different relationships, I demolish several myths about Filipino women and their non-Filipino partners, as well as the violence Filipino women experience. Additional narratives of Filipino women are woven through my analysis.

Introduction

Commentary about violence against Filipino women in popular circulation typically depicts Filipino women in intercultural relationships in Australia as potential victims of violence while their male partners are frequently described as hopeless losers and abusers. Factors such as ethnicity,

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migration, and age disparities are commonly offered as explanations for the abuse. It is often assumed the women experience violence because they are "mail order brides" (see Saroca 2002; Cunneen & Stubbs 1997) who used Australian men as passports to Australia. This is a racist and sexist discourse which turns on the notion of opportunistic gold-diggers or submissive women who will do anything for a better life in Australia. It misrepresents violence as the women's own fault and shifts the burden of responsibility from the perpetrator onto the victim. As the Women's Coalition Against Family Violence (1994) points out in relation to domestic homicide, such victim-blaming discourse obscures the context of the homicide and the power relationship between killer and victim. While migratory processes, in particular, exacerbate the vulnerability of Filipino women to abuse, they cannot explain the actual violence. Violence does not occur because women migrate from the Philippines. To say otherwise is to suggest there is something inherently problematic about Filipino women and the relationships they form with non-Filipino men. It presents a distorted image of marriage between Filipino women and non-Filipinos as inevitably involving violence. Moreover, it obscures the fact that male abuse of female partners is a feature of a significant proportion of all relationships in Australia, regardless of the women's ethnicity.

This paper argues that to understand why violence occurs in such relationships, we need to look at how men behave toward their partners. Comparing the behavior of two groups of non-Filipino men in their intimate relationships with Filipino women puts the focus on men and makes their behavior visible. The men in the first group, Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki, were in relationships with Filipino women who were killed or have disappeared in Australia. These men's biographies are drawn from interviews with their partner's family members and friends: Gene Bongcodin's friends, Sixta and Baby; Rosalina Canonizado's mother, Ester, and her sister, Ella; Elma Young's relations and nursing colleagues, Jo and Ady; and Annabel Strzelecki's friends, Olive and Charles. The second group of men, Philip, Nevil and Ross, with whom I conducted interviews and ethnographic research, are married to Filipino women. Additional narratives of these men's partners are woven through my analysis.

A common factor in all these relationships is marriage to a Filipino woman and her migration to Australia. If we accept commonsense notions that the women's ethnicity and migration are the cause of abuse, how then do we explain why violence is not present in both sets of relationships? This paper demonstrates that domestic violence is not a feature of all of the relationships because the two groups of men differ markedly in their constructions and treatment of their female partners. They construct self, partner and their relationships in different ways and act accordingly. Exploring the dynamics of these different relationships, I demolish several myths about Filipino women and their non-Filipino partners, as well as the violence Filipino women experience.

It is a fundamental assumption of this paper that violence has a materiality and is also constructed and made meaningful in discourse. Relations of violence, including the (male) control exercised over Filipino women's bodies, are tangible and dangerously real, as evidenced by the emotional and physical pain of abused women. However, the material or real world can only be accessed by means of discourses, which constitute the object of knowledge (Hennessy 1993: 75). It is in discourse that subjects constitute themselves or are constituted as particular kinds of people (Foucault 1978a). For Michel Foucault[1] (1972: 129; 1978b: 14-15), discourses are formations of power and knowledge which constrain and enable what can be meaningfully spoken, thought and written about people, objects and practices in specific historical periods. The material and the discursive are linked together within the power/knowledge nexus of discourse. The ways men discursively construct themselves, their partners and relationships shape, and are in turn shaped by, how they behave in these intimate relations.

The Men and Women

The first group of men consists of Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki. Charles Schembri was introduced to Generosa (Gene) Bongcodin in the Philippines in 1981. After marrying and migrating to Australia, Gene left the marital relationship several times because of

Schembri's physical and emotional abuse. Schembri was granted custody of their child and the couple divorced in 1984. On 9 July 1989, Schembri strangled Gene to death when she visited his residence for an access visit with their daughter. His lawyers argued provocation and he pleaded guilty to manslaughter. On 9 July 1990, Charles Schembri was sentenced to eight years imprisonment to serve a minimum of five and half years. He was released on 11 July 1993.

Thomas Keir was introduced to Rosalina Canonizado[2] at a family wedding while she was visiting relations in Sydney and they married in 1989. A few weeks before meeting Rosalina, Keir's wife, Jean Strachan Keir, also a Filipina, disappeared leaving behind a young son. On 13 April 1991, Rosalina Canonizado was strangled with a lamp cord and then set on fire. Thomas Keir was charged with her murder but he was found not guilty. In 1991, while Thomas Keir was in prison awaiting trial for Rosalina's murder, the police found fragments of human bone under his house. These were sent to the USA for DNA testing. On 17 September 1999, Thomas Keir was found guilty of Jean Keir's murder (see Wall 2000: 1-3; Hunt & Stubbs 1999: 18). Keir was sentenced to 24 years imprisonment comprising a minimum term of 18 years and an additional term of six years (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir* 2000: 11). The NSW Criminal Court of Appeal quashed Keir's conviction on the grounds that Justice Adams misdirected the jury regarding the DNA evidence (see *KASAMA* 2002). A new trial again found Keir guilty of Jean's murder. However, this second conviction was later quashed and a retrial ordered due to concerns about how the trial was conducted. In his second retrial, Keir was found guilty and on 13 December 2004 he was sentenced to 22 years imprisonment.

Paul Young met Elma Albarracin while she was visiting her sister in Queensland. They married in July 1982 and had a daughter. On 20 February 1994, Paul Young beat and then strangled Elma to death. She was five months pregnant. On 18 February 1995, Young was found guilty of manslaughter. He claimed he had an 'out of body experience' during Elma's killing (see Distor 1995a: 1-2; 1995b: 1-2). Paul Young was sentenced to ten years imprisonment but served only four years and seven months.

Wlodzimierz 'Jim' Strzelecki found Annabel Sabellano's details in a newspaper advertisement and they began corresponding. They married in 1989 when Annabel was 19 and Jim Strzelecki was 63. A situation in which a 63 year old man can go to the Philippines and marry a 19 year old woman indicates a profound imbalance of power based on sexism, racism, and class. On 6 June 1998, Annabel Strzelecki disappeared from her home leaving behind her two young children. Jim Strzelecki told police four different stories about Annabel's disappearance. In one story, he claimed she left in the middle of the night in the company of a Filipina and a man. Sometime during the weekend of 17–18 June 2000, Jim Strzelecki committed suicide in his home.

The men in the second group are Philip, Nevil and Ross. Philip and Lynn met through a newspaper advertisement. Lyn was a single mother struggling to raise a child on her own. She arrived in Australia on a fiancée visa in 1985 and has had two more children with Philip. Nevil was divorced and May was a widow when they were introduced by a mutual friend over the telephone. They married in 1998. Ross and Ilda got together in an Internet introduction agency in 2003. They have a young child and Ilda is again pregnant. Ross has a child from a previous marriage. Philip and Lynn and Ross and Ilda are around the same ages. There is an 18 year age gap between Nevil and May.

Institutionalized Violence Against Women

The deaths of Gene, Rosalina and Elma and Annabel's disappearance need to be situated within the context of institutionalized violence against women in Australia. I refer here specifically to what is commonly known as domestic violence. Domestic violence takes place in the context of a current or former intimate relationship. It can be defined as the abuse, coercion and control of one or more persons over others and includes physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse, financial deprivation, social isolation and control of movement (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 1-2). The main perpetrators of domestic violence are men while women and children constitute the majority of their victims

(Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 33; Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 2, 37). This is not to suggest all men are violent and women are not, or that every victim is a woman (see Hooks 1984: 118). As Hooks (1984: 118) argues, such a sexist stereotype obscures the extent to which women also act violently. Women are more likely to be assaulted and/or killed by their male partners or ex-partners. Such violence is an exercise of power and control and must be understood in terms of the inequitable distribution of social, economic and political resources between men and women (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 23, 37). Women's lack of economic and social power is an important reason why they remain in abusive situations (O'Donnell & Saville 1982: 52). Domestic violence is the most under-reported crime in Australia and domestic homicides constitute the largest single category of homicides (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 1, 2). Significantly, a history of domestic violence often precedes a domestic homicide (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 29; Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 3).

Women's experiences of domestic violence are shaped in different ways by other dimensions of their social identities, such as race, ethnicity, class and age (Radford, et al. 1996: 1-6; Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce 1994: 2; Crenshaw 1991: 1245). Although domestic violence cuts across all social groups, its cultural meanings will often vary (Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce 1994: 120). As Easteal (1996: 10) found in her research, it is likely to be hidden among immigrant women who need to send financial support to families in their country of origin or feel pressured to remain in abusive relationships. Sponsored women in particular are likely to be vulnerable to abuse as they are often dependent on their partners for their immigrant status (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 33). Inequalities of power structure such relationships before marriage, during the immigration process and everyday living in Australia and compound the women's difficulties in seeking protection (Woelz-Stirling *et al.* 1998: 296). Non-recognition of overseas qualifications exacerbates the isolation and financial dependence of some migrant women (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 39; Easteal 1996: 9). These factors

need to be considered when examining domestic violence against Filipino women in Australia.

Particular attitudes, cultural practices and structural inequalities support men's violence towards women. In Australia, dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity constitute women as dependents and property of men, as bought through men's breadwinning (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 35; Pettman 1992: 69). In dominant family ideology, women are nurturing, caring and 'naturally' responsible for their family's happiness and well-being (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 35). This ideology is particularly powerful when combined with victim blaming, the idea that a woman deserved or provoked violence (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 52); for example, that she was a 'mail order bride'. Many women experience shame and embarrassment about being victims of violence and will often keep silent about their partner's abuse as they may feel they are a failure if they tell others about it (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994: 35, 38-39, 52). Family ideology combined with inequalities based on race and class is a powerful factor in keeping women in violent relationships. Fear of male retribution has a power of its own.

According to Cunneen and Stubbs (1997: 31), Filipino women in Australia are almost six times more likely to be victims of homicide than other Australian women, aside from indigenous women. They argue many of the killings are extreme examples of domination that have been mediated by racialized and sexualized representations of Filipino women as submissive and sexually compliant, as 'perfect marriage partners' (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 113-114). This male fantasy incorporates exotic sex, the promise of a relationship with a traditional woman whose goal is to serve her husband, sexual compliance and love that transcends age differences (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997:110-113). Violence is contextualized in terms of men's attempts to live out such fantasized relationships and the women's refusal to comply (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 113). While the violence can be understood as male violence against women, the relationship between Australian men and *what they understand* to be Filipino women is a fundamental factor in the abuse (Cunneen & Stubbs 1997: 119). This can most

clearly be seen in the cases of Charles Schembri and Jim Strzelecki. As this article will demonstrate, these men constructed their wives in particular ways and then resorted to violence when the women did not live up to their expectations.

Constructions of Self, Partner and Relationship

The ways we make sense of ourselves—our subjectivity—and our lives, including our intimate relationships, are constructed in a whole range of discursive practices, which are constant sites of struggle over meaning (Weedon 1987: 21). The meanings produced and circulated through forms of language, such as words, images and discourse (see Hall 1997: 1, 5; Lidchi 1997: 153), the ways we represent ourselves and others, shape, and are in turn shaped by, how we act in any given situation. Although differing in individual perceptions of self and partner, the men within each group share commonalities in the meanings they gave their intimate relationships with Filipino women.

Examining the interaction between Philip, Nevil and Ross and their partners, a picture emerges of relationships characterized by mutual respect and cultural sensitivity. This is not to suggest these men are 'perfect' husbands or to romanticize their marriages. The men construct themselves as partners in their relationship rather than in terms of a discourse of male superiority and female submission. Philip, Nevil and Ross admire their partners. They see their wives as people with needs and desires and take an interest in the women's well-being. Describing Ilda, Ross remarks with enthusiasm and admiration:

> She's [a] very intelligent, very ambitious and experienced business woman ... Very well educated. Same thing like me, I think, fairly easy going. Loves kids ... We're thinking very similar in our ideas and goals in life ... I do like everything about her ... she's smart, she's funny, fairly easy going. Also far more organized than me (Ross, Sydney, 2005).

Recognising her hard work of mothering and the isolation women with young babies often experience, Ross encourages Ilda to '... get out

and [s]ocialize ... so she won't be bored at home'. Philip supports Lynn in her educational pursuits and quest for self-fulfillment:

> [S]he's gone back to get educated ... and I feel that she's just starting to blossom as a person ... I'm sort of supporting her more now with her studies .... We tend to be reaching out toward each other, a bit more sophisticated, a bit more enlightened ... (Philip, South Australia, 2004).

Philip feels an immense sense of pride in Lynn and her accomplishments. He explained that Lynn had a high profile in their community and was involved in a Filipino dance troop that performed at various cultural events all over the region. In addition he said:

> Lynn's been involved with the school fetes ... cooking and that and then they wanted her to keep doing it when the kids went to high school ... and she's a ... contact person and she's really got a bit of a name for organizing stuff. So if you want things done you need to come to my wife ... (Philip, South Australia, 2004).

For Nevil, May's happiness is vital and he sees her freedom to make choices as central:

> Nevil: [M]y main aim in life is to keep her happy ... I don't live for anything else now but for May ... [S]he's learned to drive and she's got all this freedom ... If she wants to stop here with me that's one thing, but if she'd prefer to be Filipino and speak Filipino language in the Philippines, well that's good for her ... (South Australia, 2005).

The respect Philip, Nevil and Ross have for their partners extends to an appreciation of Filipino cultural values, practices and activities. The men show an interest not only in the woman but also her country of origin. Philip and Nevil comment:

> I like the culture cause they've got the family thing that I didn't really have ... They have a ... big family tradition ... they don't have much money but they stick together (Philip, South Australia 2005).

> Once you marry a Filipina, you marry the whole of the Philippines. And I rather like that. [T]there are some people here that I know that just won't let their wives join that group. But I've never had any trouble ... it's always been a pleasure to go ... the Filipino parties, I like them (Nevil, 2004, South Australia).

Ross is keen to learn the Filipino language and wants both his son and daughter to develop an appreciation for Filipino culture and for Ilda's family in the Philippines:

> I want to learn Tagalog and Visaya ... I'd also like to teach [my son] Tagalog ... I'd like to take [my son] there one day ... I'm sure he'd enjoy it. [My daughter] of course, she's got to see her family. Don't want her to lose contact with them ... For [my son] it's exposure to a different culture ... So it might give him a bit of tolerance and understanding (Ross, Sydney, 2005).

On the other hand, Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki constituted their partners as their 'property'. They claimed 'ownership' of the women and could thus, so they thought, do what they liked with them. The men saw themselves as 'masters' whose authority could not be challenged. They did not consider their marriages as a partnership but, rather, as an arrangement in which their wives were expected to be submissive and to serve them without question. Ultimately, the women were expendable.

In Charles Schembri's and Jim Strzelecki's cases, these misogynist views of women were intertwined with a racist discourse. Both men had sought submissive wives from the Philippines they thought they could control and dominate. There was an assumption that Gene and Annabel should be grateful for being able to come to Australia and were expected to act accordingly. During his trial, stereotypes of Filipino women were used to bolster Charles Schembri's assertion that Gene Bongcodin had exploited him, and the court uncritically accepted this racist and sexist explanation for his killing her (Saroca 2002; Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994:112). Charles Schembri portrayed himself as a hapless victim who went to the Philippines in search of love, while Gene was recast as an exotic, predatory gold-digger who used him as a passport to

Australia (see Saroca 2002; Cunneen & Stubbs 1997). Drawing on Charles Schembri's story, Justice Vincent's sentencing comments at Schembri's trial illustrate these constructions:

> Your wife, you claim, had been more interested in securing money for her apparently impoverished family and a passport to this country than she was in the development and maintenance of a marital relationship with you. This may well be the case. In expressing myself as I have done on this aspect, I do not wish to convey any impression of disapproval or moral judgment concerning her conduct ... The desire to escape from a life of uncertainty to one of relative security and affluence would be understandable in the circumstances ... I have no reason to doubt that you tried your best to make this unlikely alliance work, but ... the barriers between you appear to have been insurmountable. You wanted to establish for yourself what might be regarded as a stereotypical relationship with your wife and family. She, it would appear, grasped at the opportunity of securing freedom in a new country (*R v Schembri* 1990: 50-51).

Jim Strzelecki was a serial sponsor and had been corresponding with several Filipino women before he chose Annabel. For Strzelecki, Filipino women were things or goods he could choose amongst and then abuse:

> [H]e brought out another Filipino woman and she was in her fifties. And she was out here on a fiancee visa for ... six months ... she went back to the Philippines and there was an agreement that he would go back and marry her and bring her out here ... Then he changed his mind about it ... he had her believing that he was going to marry her and bring her out. And he went across and he'd been writing to these other Filipino girls and he arranged to marry this younger one (Charles, August 1999).

Marriage as a Partnership

For Philip, Nevil and Ross, marriage is a partnership. Although arguments and disagreements do arise, especially regarding the practical details of everyday familial life, such as domestic labor, finances and child-raising, which are sources of conflict in the institution of marriage in general,

these marital relations are characterized by friendship and support. The men behave in ways which show they value their partner as a person and they respect the women's rights to make decisions about matters that concern them. Moreover, the marriages are spaces in which women assert themselves and men listen. Lynn, May and Ilda are vocal and direct in letting their husbands know if they dislike anything the man has said or done. For example, May informed Nevil early in their marriage that she would not accept any unfair treatment:

[W]hen I first came here [h]e was a little bit sharp ... he always count 'I help your parents ... I help your children'. And I said 'don't count on that ... because I am working here and I'm working hard ... So he's a bit changed .... Before he wants to be a bit of bossy-bossy, and I said 'don't do that to me' (South Australia, 2004).

These women and their relationships with their husbands undermine the stereotype of submissive Filipino women. The couples engage in joint activities that they both enjoy. Ross explains that he and Ilda have a similar interest in going out as a family unit:

> I like going out looking at different and new places and stuff. Have the day taking [my son, daughter and Ilda] out. Family outings ... even if it's just with me and Ilda. That's one thing that Ilda likes too, just getting out and exploring around a bit (Sydney, 2005)

While the couples do things together, the men also recognize the women's needs to have their own space and their rights to freedom of movement. For Lynn and May, this includes trips back to the Philippines without their husbands. May is currently in the Philippines on a three month vacation.

Philip, Nevil and Ross appreciate the significance of family and friends to their wives. Nevil's approach to May's distress at her separation from her adult children in the Philippines provides a good example. May told me she:

> ... always cry before and my husband used to ... let me go to visit some of my friends, so we can chat a bit so I could talk ...

> about my children in the Philippines ... if he feels I'm lonely, he drives me around and ... If I'm really very homesick [he says] 'you ring up your parents, you ring up your children' ... Up to now he's very still supportive (South Australia).

The men actively assist the women to sustain familial relationships, and their partner's family and friends have become an important part of the men's lives as well. Philip, Lynn and their children visit Lynn's aunt in Melbourne and they have returned to the Philippines several times, as has May. Ilda and Ross are in regular contact with Ilda's family in the Philippines through telephone and Internet technologies, such as email, chat and web cam. Philip sponsored Lynn's nephew for a holiday in Australia and Nevil assisted May's daughter to migrate to Australia because:

> May didn't want Rose to be stuck there because she's her youngest daughter and wasn't married, or didn't have any ties there and would rather come here (South Australia 2004).

Each couple sends financial and other material support to the woman's family in the Philippines. In assisting their wives in this way, Philip, Nevil and Ross are actively involved in sustaining the women's familial ties. Sending money to family in the Philippines is part of a strong cultural tradition of family obligation, support and reciprocity (*katungkulan*). It strengthens ties of kinship and establishes one's place in the family (Saroca 2002: 191). Through their support, the men contribute to the well-being of their wives.

In addition, Philip, Nevil and Ross encourage their wives to mix with other Filipinos. Ross felt meeting other Filipino women both offline and online in *Kasal*, a moderated forum and website that offers support and information for 'Fil-west' couples, would help Ilda overcome her loneliness and boredom:

> Ross told me to get into some Filipino group ... I just get here and be with Ross and ... Ross said 'you'll get bored darl. Go and have a look in *Kasal*' (Sydney, 2005).

Lynn, May and Ilda, and often their husbands, regularly have get-togethers with other Filipino women where they eat Filipino food and

talk their own languages. Philip, in particular, is very involved in his wife's networks of Filipino friends. For example, he was a visible presence in Lynn's Filipino dance troop and when they practiced or performed, Philip would transport dancers and equipment and help set up the venue:

> We had a dancing group and Lynn was the secretary of that and I used to run them around a bit. And I got them their finance ... cause I was involved with the cultural people here. So I helped set them up and I was a *de facto* chairman for a while (South Australia, 2004)

Furthermore, Philip actively intervenes when he feels the male partners of Filipino women are abusive or potentially violent. For instance, Philip and Lynn helped a Filipino woman and her sister escape from a domestic violence situation. They felt that the husband's abusiveness had gone on for too long and he was not prepared to change his behavior. With the assistance of a Filipina crisis worker, Philip and Lynn relocated the two women to another area. Lynn spoke about how Philip educates other men about the unacceptability of male violence and the strategies he uses to police men's behavior:

> Philip ... was actually the spokesman to the guys on what is actually going on ... I just stay on this side of the group [with the women]. He explains it to the guys. [We work as a team] ... Even with the trafficking [seminar], he was there ... He's interested to know what's going on ... And if he knew that somebody was treating these girls bad ... he would just step in ' ... you don't have to do that, you can't treat people like that'. [Philip] just wants to let him know that you can't do things like that ... That somebody was there watching them ... (South Australia, 2004).

Philip gives more detail on how he polices other men through a screening process.

> [G]uys that come asking questions specifically about how they're gonna get a partner or they want to know more about the Philippines ... you tend to sort them out a bit ... and it's just a general screening process and lets say you sum somebody up as

> one of the guys who is a bit ...., you give them a run down and you can actually make it rather difficult, you can put them off ... Usually you just say ' ... there's a really good social thing here. [T]he women] tend to get to know each other and they tend to hang out together'. And that puts them off (Philip, South Australia, 2004).

In looking at the ways Philip, Nevil and Ross behave in their intimate relationships, it is necessary to talk with those centrally concerned, their wives. I asked Lynn, May and Ilda what marriage to these men means for them. How does each woman experience her relationship with her husband? Do the women see their marriage as a partnership? Are the men's declarations of respect, fairness and support for their wives valid? Lynn, Ilda and May's assessments of their husbands and their own satisfaction with marital life resonate with the men's accounts:

> [Marrying Ross] was like this is what I got for what happened to me before [with my abusive ex-boyfriend in the Philippines]. He's really nice and I can't ask for anything more. I'm lucky. Maybe he's a gift for what I've been through [with my ex boyfriend]. He told me, 'I love you too much to get cranky'. So he never had any argument until now. Sometimes I get bored and I say 'do you want to fight?' (laughter) ... I never had a fight with Ross ... We always ended up agree [ing] (Ilda, Sydney, 2005).
>
> I'm ... happily married ... I found a man who love me, really deeply the way I am. Being a single mother in the Philippines, we had a tradition way back if you're a single mother you are just ... different ... second-hand (laughs) ... Philip accepted me the way I am, and he loves me the way I am, and I love him for doing that for me ... He's always there ... I believe that husband and wife really support and help each other in any way ... [S]ince we married we always work together ... we always support each other ... He's a gentle and caring man (Lynn, South Australia, 2004).
>
> Nevil is a ... really very good man. He help me financially with my children because he promised to support my eldest with her study ... He also gives some money for my children to do a little bit of business. He's very understanding. He's generous but a little bit tight with money ... (May, South Australia, 2004).

Abuse of Male Power and Control

In contrast, Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki believed and acted in ways which suggested their partners were their 'property', that they 'owned' the women, that the women did not have any rights. They had in common a strong belief they did not have to be accountable for their behavior or treatment of their partners or ex-partners. These relationships were characterized by abuse of male power and control. They were regimes of terror. The women were subjected to many different types of abuse, including racist violence. Central here were the psychological abuse, mind games and emotional put-downs, which were intended to destroy the women's self-esteem, self-confidence and identities. The men isolated their wives from networks of family and friends so they could gain more control.

Charles Schembri was abusive and possessive. According to Gene's friends, Sixta and Baby, Schembri used physical, verbal and emotional violence to control Gene's life during their marriage and long after their divorce:

> I learned from the sister-in-law that even after one year of marriage Charles already grabbed her ... even before she had the baby ... Charlie was stalking her ... He was threatening her. That's why she let the baby go to him ... [H]e capitalized on the daughter to sort of spy on her (Sixta, August, 1999).
>
> [T]here's quite a lot of violence in the relationship. A lot of threatening ... that's why she left the relationship ... she wasn't able to fight it to the extent that she gave the custody to the husband because that threat is just so enormous ... [T]hrough friends she mentioned those violence and her fear of what her husband's capable of doing ... There were threats involved for her not to get the child (Baby, August, 1999).

Schembri threatened to kill Gene and their daughter if she tried to take their child. Gene agreed to leave the child with Schembri because she was afraid. She had every reason to believe his threats. Racism was central to Schembri's abuse. It can be seen in the way he actively sought a 'traditional' Filipino woman who he expected to serve him and how he con-

structed Gene before her death and at his trial as a gold-digging opportunist who used him as a passport to Australia. Gene's migration to Australia, behavior and cultural practices did not cause her death. As Cunneen and Stubbs (1997:113) contend, Charles Schembri killed Gene Bongcodin when she refused to comply with his attempts to live out a fantasized relationship with a 'perfect partner'.

Rosalina Canonizado felt suffocated because of Thomas Keir's possessiveness and jealousy. As Rosalina's mother, Ester, and sister, Ella explain, Keir's need to control her extended to isolating Rosalina from her family:

Ester: Because she was not allowed to ... visit our relatives very often, she got lonely. She can't go anywhere she wants unless she's with Tom ... That's why our other relatives were saying 'oh Rosalie, we have not been seeing you so much ...

Ella: It's like she was in hiding. Because prior to her marriage, [she] had a very good relationship with our relatives there ... [S]ince she got married ... she's not allowed to go alone ...

Ester: [S]he's not free to visit them anytime she wants (January, 2000).

Thomas Keir was even jealous of Rosalina's relationship with her father, Roberto, and his possessiveness extended to dictating what she could wear:

Ella: Tom ... was very possessive ... [T]here was a time when my papa ... visited them ... And my sister was wearing ... shorts ... Tom covered her legs ... maybe he thought that my father is looking at my sister's legs ... [I]n one of my relative's place that they went swimming, he doesn't want my sister to wear bathing suits. He just wants her to be in ... long shorts.

Ester: He always says, 'don't wear shorts' (January, 2000).

Justice Adams' comments at Thomas Keir's sentencing for Jean Keir's murder are worth looking at here. Justice Adams notes that Keir was extremely jealous of Jean's relationships even with male members of her own family (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir*, 2000: 1). He goes on to state:

> ... the prisoner's arrogant, controlling behavior in respect of his wife, demonstrated from time to time by his manhandling of her, his concealment of her contraceptive pills and his threats of murder, showed that he considered her as his property to be dealt with as he thought it right ... I have no doubt that he believed he had the right to violently punish his wife for not only defying but also for trying to leave him ... (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir* 2000: 8-9).

Elma Young suffered years of physical, verbal and emotional abuse at the hands of Paul Young and his violence isolated her socially from her family and friends. Elma's relations and nursing colleagues, Jo and Ady, spoke about this abuse:

Jo: [I]t was very miserable her life in Australia after her marriage ... he was violent to her. I'd try and encourage her to go and see the doctor and take restraining orders out ... then she stopped talking about it till later on.

Ady: She always put a really good face on ... [I]t was only later when everybody sort of talked about it that we realized the full extent of it all because she tried to cover it up ... [H]e was telling us ... how well thought of he was ... because he was a policeman. And we went off ... saying ... 'he's well thought of because his wife is a nurse and she's lovely'. And he took all of that on himself and he took away even her reason to be proud ... It was really hard to visit when you feel all these undercurrents and ... negativity ... so we found ourselves not having as much to do with her.

Jo: ... [W]e let go of her because she wasn't prepared to leave him or do anything about it ... take him to

> the police ... can understand her reasons for not doing so now.
>
> Ady: ... [S]he had taken out a warrant against him but was afraid to have it served because it would have to be served from his police station ... she was just so afraid of the power that he had (July, 1999).

Elma tried hard to keep her marriage together until she could no longer deal with the escalating violence. By then, she feared for her life and was too afraid to take action.

Jo describes the cruelty of Paul Young's abuse in the home and the devious strategies he devised to conceal his violence from outsiders:

> [S]he would tell me that he would hit her ... she eventually did take her bruises to the doctor and she told him that she had reported his violence to the doctor ... [A]fter that ... he changed his tactics and instead of hitting her and bruising her he would squeeze her so that she couldn't breathe ... that left no marks ... [I]n the middle of the night he'd get dressed in dark clothes and ... pretend he was an intruder and stand behind doors and flash out ... [I]t was a systematic harassment and stalking of her (July, 1999).

Annabel Strzelecki's friends, Charles and Olive, witnessed incidents of violence she experienced at the hands of her husband, and Annabel also discussed her marital relations with these particular friends. While Annabel saw her marriage as a chance to have happiness in a loving family, Jim Strzelecki's idea of marriage was a wife who would obey him absolutely and attend to his every need. Charles made this clear:

> ... restricted life Annabel got out here. It was very restricted doing everything ... She had to conform to his beliefs and his ways ... It was quite obvious she never had any say in anything (August, 1999).

For example, Jim Strzelecki believed that television and telephone sets emitted poisonous rays and he refused to have these appliances in the house. He thus denied Annabel and their children access to modes of communication that most Australians take for granted.

Violence was a large part of Annabel Strzelecki's life with Jim Strzelecki. He was cruel and domineering. He tried to control Annabel's every move and Annabel's suffering was enormous. Charles and Olive provide a graphic example of Jim's cruelty:

Charles: He would expect her ... to walk into Clare and walk back out again ... and they'd walk from the caravan park to Clare which is ... three, four kilometers.

Olive: With a baby.

Charles: On a ... very hot day ... I offered them a lift and he said no.

Olive: 'I will take you ... to the shop and I'll go back and pick her up' I said to Charles. So I went back, offered a ride ... she wanted to but the husband said, 'no, we have to go Annabel. We are walking'. And I said, 'it's not you I am asking. It's the baby I am concerned of'. But 'no you cannot' (August, 1999).

His need to exercise control included dictating the food Annabel could eat:

> [H]e wanted Annabel to eat what he eats. Not the Filipino food. He always check on Annabel's food. 'You eat this because this is good for you'. So they keep on boiling lentils and no meat ... There are other Filipina girls in Riverton and they asked her to dine with them for lunch ... and Annabel ordered something, and Jim keeps on telling her 'that is pork Annabel. You are not eating pork'. She said, 'no I did not order that pork' ... And then they had a fight again ... I ask her one time to come around because I know she likes fish ... [S]he was very happy with that one whole fish ... But when she gets home he would again question her ' what did you eat there Annabel?' And she became very unhappy of that (Olive, August, 1999).

Further, Jim Strzelecki dominated Annabel's interactions with their children. He did not allow her to make important decisions regarding them. According to Olive, Jim "... never give her freedom to choose.

Never give her freedom to decide for her children." His cruel treatment of their children and refusal to permit Annabel a say in their upbringing was a source of conflict in their marriage. Strzelecki saw any challenge to the harsh rules he imposed on his family as a threat to his authority, as Olive indicates:

> She tries to avoid argument all the time ... she prefers to be quiet. But then as the children were growing older and needing more, like playing outside with other children ... attending parties also of other children so they can enjoy their young-hood, and playing with toys ... he disliked it ... Annabel told me that 'oh it's [my daughter's] birthday yesterday' ... So I bought some books ... and a teddy bear ... And I gave two dollars each also and [Annabel's children] were so happy. And Annabel was happy. After that I could see Annabel always was very unhappy. And they had an argument ... And one day [Jim] came to see me ... he said '... I don't want you to give any gifts to my children ... I will be the one to choose the books that my children will read ... don't try to destroy my marriage' (August, 1999).

As part of his violent regime, Jim Strzelecki subjected his wife to social and emotional abuse. He made Annabel constantly accountable for her movements and tried to isolate her from friends. Strzelecki played psychological mind-games in his attempts to confine Annabel in their house He went to extreme lengths to make Annabel feel guilty for wanting contact with other people:

Charles: Another time she came here ... and Jim walked in the back door ... he said ... 'I wanna be with you. I might die any minute and I want you to be there when I die'. No reason in the wide, wide world why he should die but this is the things he use to say.

Olive: Yeah because she asks permission to go out. And he said okay. But after that, when she gets home, they fight. He will disagree again of that ...

Charles: [H]e ... collapsed one night on the floor ... after a while he just jumped up. He'd only feigned it. What he wanted to do was to find out Annabel's reaction

> if it was for real life, just what she'd do. This is the type of thing he would do (August 1999).

Charles Schembri, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki also exercised control over women through their children. The tyranny of these men extended to the women's children and this abuse was meant to keep the women 'in line'. Even before their mother's death, the children of Gene, Elma and Annabel were subjected to what Irwin and Wilkinson (1997: 17) refer to as a '... reign of terror ...' living in a domestic violence environment.[3] Ady highlights the traumatic effect on Elma's daughter of living with her father's violence:

> [Y]ou can't live in that sort of household when you are a young impressionable two, three, four and five year old and come out at the other end unscathed ... And apart from that [Elma's daughter] wasn't little. You can't live in that environment and be an immature child ... She'd experienced things that an adult shouldn't experience. So she couldn't then revert and go back to being a little girl because that wasn't possible (July 1999).

Part of the women's hesitation to escape violence was their love and protection of their children. They did not want to leave without their children. Jim Strzelecki used the children as a way of controlling Annabel's behavior and movements, of keeping her 'in place'. An incident that occurred not long before her disappearance illustrates:

> Charles: Annabel wanted to go back to visit the Philippines. And he would let her go initially but she had to leave the two children behind. This is ... an insurance ...
>
> Olive: ... [Annabel's mother] ... advised her ... not to leave ... the kids because of his ... relationship with his children [from the previous marriage]. So Annabel was very ... determined to take the two kids ... she even went to this Australian friend to help her file an application for a passport for the little girl (August 1999).

Annabel Strzelecki's stand against her husband was unsuccessful. She disappeared before she could take her children back to see their relations

in the Philippines. Charles Schembri used their child to control Gene and, in the end, to lure Gene to her death.

The violence intensified as Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki attempted to maintain control in their relationships. In different ways, Gene, Rosalina, Elma and Annabel were trying to escape intolerable situations, struggling to do something about the oppression they experienced at the hands of their abusers. As the women attempted to become more assertive, the men became more abusive. For example, despite her husband's abuse, Annabel established a wide network of friends and this contact gave her the courage to challenge his authority in an attempt to improve her life and the lives of her children. Jim Strzelecki became increasingly violent in his attempts to maintain his control over Annabel:

> Charles: He couldn't make friends and he more or less wouldn't let her have friends ... this is probably her downfall when she started seeing a little bit more to life than what she'd been putting up with ... And probably you could see it towards the finish that she was very happy about fitting in with other Filipinos, and other people ... which in turn gave her more confidence to more or less stand up to him a little bit ... [T]his is getting to him ... he had the idea that people were trying to influence her through her making friends, and particularly Olive (August 1999).

Annabel disappeared when she "started seeing a little bit more to life." She had failed to live up to Strzelecki's sexist and racist idea of a "perfect partner" The Women's Coalition Against Family Violence (1994:23) notes that:

> Men's violence towards women and children is a considered exercise of power aimed at maintaining control over them. When a man who is violent towards his partner and children has his control over them challenged, he will often inflict more violence to 'teach them a lesson', to remind them 'who is boss' and to intimidate and force them to comply with his wishes. The ultimate expression of this desire to control is the act of murder.

Similarly, Polk (1994: 28, 56) points out that often men use murder as a form of control to ensure possession of 'their' woman.

Conclusion

Comparing the behavior of two groups of non-Filipino men in their intimate relationships with Filipino women has disrupted notions that the women's ethnicity and migration are the cause of violence. Not all the partners of these men were victims of domestic violence. Violence is not present in both sets of relationships because the two groups of men differ markedly in their constructions and treatment of their female partners. They construct self, partner and their relationships in different ways and act accordingly. For Philip, Nevil and Ross, marriage is a partnership and their marital relationships are characterized by mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, friendship and support. In contrast, Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki believed and acted in ways which suggested their partners were their 'property', that they 'owned' the women. These relationships were regimes of terror that intensified as abusive men attempted to maintain control over the women's lives and destroy their self-confidence and identity. When these women attempted to resist male domination, the violence intensified.

Exploring the dynamics of these different relationships, this article has put the focus on violent men and made their abuse visible. In the process, I have challenged several myths about Filipino women and their non-Filipino partners, as well as the violence Filipino women experience. Firstly, it is not necessarily the case that because a Filipino woman is in a relationship with a non-Filipino man she will become a victim of violence. The problem of domestic violence is not the arrival of Filipino women in Australia but abuse of (male) power and control. The ways couples meet, similarly, cannot explain violence. Philip and Lynn, and Ilda and Ross came together through some form of commercial introduction, what is derogatorily called the "mail order bride" business. A woman's perceived status as a so called "mail order bride" is commonly seen as the cause of abuse. Yet, Lynn and Ilda have enriching marital relationships. Likewise,

age is also an inadequate explanation for violence. Although there is an 18-year age gap between Nevil and May, violence is not a feature of their relationship. Young men as well as older men are capable of brutalizing their female partners. It is not how people meet, or even age, but rather how they conduct their relationships that is important here. Violence is likely to occur where men have particular beliefs about women, like those of Charles Schembri, Thomas Keir, Paul Young and Jim Strzelecki. Secondly, not all non-Filipino men in relationships with Filipino women are violent. To argue thus is to malign men like Philip, Nevil and Ross and invalidate the experiences of their partners.

Notes

1. Although Foucault has provided feminists with a useful framework for analysing aspects of women's oppression, there are problematic facets of his concepts of discourse and power. Foucault failed to address the gender, race and class configurations of power on the body. He neglects the fact that power is often patriarchal, it inscribes male and female bodies in quite specific ways with different consequences, and the subjugation of women's bodies has been a primary target (Spivak 1988; Diamond & Quinby 1988: xiv; Grosz 1990:107; Ramazanoðlu 1993:10). For Foucault, discourse is anti-hierarchical. As Hennessy (1993:43) points out, the ubiquity of power makes it impossible to explain the political force of particular discourses over others and so precludes an understanding of the hierarchical relations among discourses. Weedon (1987:35, 110) argues that not all discourses possess the social power that comes from a secure institutional site, and discourses within fields such as the law or the family do not manifest equal power. Foucault's focus on institutions in particular local formations cannot explain the systemic operations of power, such as patriarchy, racism and capitalism, or elucidate the relations between such global arrangements and the local practices that sustain them (Hennessy 1993:19-21).

2. Rosalina's family name of Canonizado is used out of respect for the wishes of her mother, Ester Canonizado, who does not want her daughter to be remembered in her married name of Keir.

3. For a discussion on domestic violence and children see Partnerships Against Domestic Violence 1999:13-16; 2001:23-26; Domestic Violence Resource Centre, nd:1-4.

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