

## SEXUAL IDENTITIES AND SELF-IMAGES OF WOMAN-LOVING WOMEN\*

### Exploring Lesbian Lives in the Philippines

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This is an exploratory study on sexual identities and self-images of woman-loving women, the term used in this study to refer to woman engaged in same sex relationships. The word homosexual was avoided because of the opposition of many lesbian-feminists to its "sexist and male-defined context." The label gay was also not used because the term has come increasingly to denote male homosexuality.

The term lesbian would have been the closest. But it has been claimed by the more politicized lesbian-feminists. During the First National Lesbian Rights Conference in December 1996, a whole afternoon was devoted to resolving the issue of labels. Many of the women do not identify themselves as lesbians. In fact, some of the participants reject the label lesbian and prefer other labels.

The women coming from different contexts prefer other labels to refer to their sexual identity as women who love women. The labels include *tomboy*, *parda*, *pars*, *magic*, *lulu*, *badjao*, etc. Participants, especially the stereotypically feminine-looking, see themselves as women or as heterosexuals. They point in-

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stead to their partner/lover as the lesbian, magic, or pars. On the other hand, many butch-looking women do not consider the femme-looking ones as lesbians. The acceptance or rejection of the label lesbian reflects the specific or subjective understandings of the sexual identities of those classified as such.

Against this backdrop, the term “woman-loving women” is used in this study because it is considered more neutral and inclusive by several lesbian groups. Its use is therefore deemed more “politically correct” at a time when a label acceptable to most lesbian groups is still being evolved.

It is interesting to note that there is no equivalent term for the label lesbian in our Filipino languages. This does not mean, however, that the phenomenon is non-existent in Filipino society. Rather, the absence of an equivalent term may indicate the stigma attached to lesbianism.

Woman-loving women have varied conceptions of themselves. They are thus constituted by different sexual identities. Some identify themselves as males having female bodies. Others view themselves as females. Women who identify themselves as females have varied conceptions of the women with whom they have intimate sexual relationships. Some look at their partner/s as “men except biologically.” Others identify themselves as female having relations with a *tomboy*, “magic” or pars (*asawa ng tomboy*). A few identify themselves simply as women who are in a relationship with another woman.

Sexual identities are largely self-determined. The women, through their articulations, showed how they formed their varied conceptions of themselves, thus, the different sexual identities. These identities although self-determined are formed within the context of a society wherein relationships are constructed within the prevailing heterosexual norm. This may also be the reason why the different sexual

identities still follow the dichotomy between males and females.

The concept “*sexual identities*” is used to emphasize the sexual-emotional ties between two women or the desire to be in an intimate relationship. To my mind, this is a significant characteristic that distinguishes woman-loving women from heterosexual women. The use of the term *sexual identities*, however, should not be reduced to its genital sense. It should not be taken to mean that the identities of the women is defined by the fact that they prefer to have sex with a woman/women. Women experience their sexuality as all encompassing, which includes the physical, emotional, erotic, psychological, social, and ethical issues.

Women-loving women are considered deviants, thus, the internalization of the sexual norms in the self-image of woman-loving women is extremely important. The concept of self-image has psychological undertones which this thesis did not look into. The thesis merely explored the social constructions of sexual identities and self-images of the women. Self-image was operationalized in terms of the women’s perceptions of themselves as either male or female and as sinful or not.

Woman-loving women have diverse self-defined sexual identifications, different ways of living out their sexual identities, and varying processes of identity-formation. The difference in the ages of coming-out or self-disclosure greatly affects the socialization process, the formation and adoption of a particular woman-loving woman identity. These identities in turn have differential impacts on the respondents’ intimate relationships.

The study proceeded in several phases: the first phase mapped-out the subcultures of woman-loving women. A major problem that had to be addressed in this phase was the identification and selection of resource persons. The delicate

nature of the topic and peculiar characteristics of the resource persons prevented me from relying on conventional sampling methodologies.

Woman-loving women do not have a group identity from birth. Moreover, sexual preference or identity is not always visible to others. Consequently, it was very difficult to identify and locate them, especially the stereotypically feminine-looking woman-loving women. For closeted and selectively out-lesbians, their fear of heterosexual hostility and the possible negative consequences of disclosure made it difficult for them to agree to be resource persons in this study.

My being a lesbian was an important advantage in many respects. First, it helped convince the women to agree to participate in this study. Second, my being lesbian also facilitated the data gathering since the resource persons were more open and willing to discuss sensitive topics such as sexual practices, a topic that they would not readily discuss with an "outsider." Third, I believe that my being lesbian and my experiences in lesbian organizing and advocacy work is of great use in understanding the nuances of the data. I would like to think my interpretations were enriched by my background.

In locating my resource persons, I employed the snowball technique of purposeful sampling. My network of lesbian-feminists introduced me to their friends and contacts who in turn referred me to other woman-loving women. I employed the strategies of contact-building and networking among organized lesbian-feminists and woman-loving women involved in the women's movement. These organized woman-loving women are more accessible and more articulate and open about their sexuality on account of their experiences in the popular movement. However, these organized lesbians, especially those from the women's movement constitute only

a small sector of woman-loving women and that the mainstream woman loving women's i.e., *tomboys*, *dykes*, *pars*, are still the majority.

I wanted to capture the broadest spectrum of lesbian existence in the Philippine context. I attempted to include a greater number of woman-loving women from different backgrounds — organizations (organized vis-a-vis unorganized), class, age groupings, educational attainment and occupations, geographical locations, subcultures, and ideological perspectives. For various reasons some of the identified possible resource persons did not agree to participate in the study. Twenty woman-loving women from Davao and Metro Manila participated in the study.

I entered friendship cliques, established contacts with women in factories believed to have a great concentration of woman-loving women workers such as the Export Processing Zone in Baguio City and a garments factory in Bicutan.

I also visited places known to be frequented by woman-loving women. I went to the few bars and discos known to be lesbian hangouts. These lesbian spaces, however, are frequented by woman-loving women who are selectively out-lesbian predominantly of middle and upper-class background. For many of them, sexuality is very private, and, therefore, should not be discussed in public. They, therefore, would not allow themselves to be "objects" of study.

Given this framework, they do not see the need and value of such a research. Perhaps, this is because of their upper-class background: they have more means to claim private spaces to express their sexuality more freely. This economic power is precisely that which enables them to afford and claim lesbian spaces such as the bars and discos that they frequent. This very same situation of economic privilege, however, becomes a source of problem in relation to issues of invisibility

vis-a-vis coming-out. Many woman-loving women of middle- and upper-class origin are said to be more closeted since they have a lot to lose in terms of class and heterosexual privileges. All these factors prevented them from agreeing to participate in this study.

The study proceeded by looking at the concrete experiences of woman-loving women, from which insights were derived using interactionist and feminist perspectives. The final thesis write-up provides an account and analysis of the personal narratives of women in woman-loving woman relationships organized along the following topics: (1) realization and formations of a woman-loving woman sexual identity — age at which the women became aware/realized their woman-identified sexuality, factors that are considered indicative of a woman-loving woman sexual identity such as childhood cross-gender behavior, the process the women had to go through in fostering a woman-loving woman sexual identity; (2) difficulties encountered in forming and asserting their sexual identities — experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, violence, and other forms of lesbophobia and attempts to reform oneself by engaging in a heterosexual relationship; (3) modes of disclosure and circumstances that led to the disclosure; (4) their coping strategies; (5) preference for labels to refer to their sexuality and the implications of these labels on sexual identities; (6) self-identifications and self-images as either male and female, and self-images as sinful or not; and (7) sexual identifications and implications on intimate relationships specifically on the pattern of sexual practice.

Aside from in-depth interviews, other primary and secondary materials were utilized. Lesbian couples were interviewed from one and a half to three hours. My involvement in the First Philippine National Lesbian Rights Conference

in 1996 (FNLRC '96) further enriched my knowledge and experience. The discussions and heated debates during the conference proper as well as the informal sessions outside the conference were very significant. I also feel privileged that in the course of doing lesbian organizing and advocacy work in the last 6 years, I have been provided ample opportunities to participate in informal sharing sessions with many lesbian organizations and individuals, both local and foreign. These sessions provided me with valuable insights that are useful not only in the accomplishment of this thesis project, but more importantly, they provided me with valuable insights applicable to my personal life. In the course of doing this study, meeting and getting to know the women and exchanging our herstories, and forming friendships with them are among my very precious experiences.

Lesbophobia is a belief system that justifies discrimination based on sexual identity. It can either be internalized or externally encountered. The negative reactions experienced by the women include the following: (a) discouraged by parents in forging woman-loving woman sexuality; (b) being convinced or forced by parents to conform to traditional female role and to the heterosexist norm in relationship; (c) threat or actual use of violence to control lesbian/woman-loving women; (d) ostracism; (e) disowned by family; (f) discrimination in spheres of life such as in the workplace; (g) receiving insulting remarks; and (h) accused of immorality and abnormality.

The resource persons who have very limited exposure to feminist literature and who are not connected to the feminist movement are predominantly the ones who identify as male, who experience alienation from their female bodies and genital organs. They are also the women who are not very comfortable with their sexuality. They see themselves as sinful

and have guilt feelings related to their sexual identification and sexual practice.

In comparison, the resource persons who have links with women's groups or involved in the feminist movement and exposed to feminist literature and with a supportive lesbian/gay community are those who have high self-esteem, are those who do not experience alienation from their female bodies, and who do not consider themselves sinful and are more comfortable with their woman-loving woman/lesbian sexual identity. For some of these women, it is in feminism that they found a positive valuation of their persons and their sexual identity.

This thesis is deemed significant because it challenges dominant and firmly entrenched theories on many concepts/topics such as family, sexuality, gender relations, forms of deviant behavior. It also poses questions related to religion and moral/ethical issues related to sexuality and lesbophobia. This study is politically important for it challenges societal norms and perceptions on lifestyles, relationships, and forms of intimacies.

The significance of this study lies in its being the first academic exploration of lesbianism in the Philippines based on relatively reliable inside information. This is a pioneering, albeit modest attempt to explore woman-loving women from the point of view of insiders.