

# Uncoerced Cybersex by Low-Income Women Using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Nathalie A. Verceles

## Abstract

Given the dearth of above-subsistence economic opportunities in the Philippines, low-income women have turned to cybersex as a form of employment. The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to urban and rural poor areas, and their accessibility, have made this possible.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have entered the development discourse in the form of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D). Using Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and the Liberal Feminist perspective, this paper presents the polemical possibility of considering uncoerced cybersex by low-income women as a case of Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D). This is of course an *ex post facto* application, as there would be no purposive or planned ICT4D project for the purpose of promoting commercial cybersex.

In this paper, "uncoerced cybersex" is simply contradistinguished from cybersex that is performed as a result of "pressure, threats, intimidation, domination, or control" ("coerce," n.d.) by family members or other parties. It does not negate the structural inequalities of gender, class, race, and other intersectional identities that drive poor Filipino women into cybersex. At the same time, it recognizes that alternatives do exist, even if they are not as financially rewarding as cybersex, and millions of low-income women in other forms informal economy employment in the Philippines are testaments to this. The research subject chose cybersex over these alternatives.

## Introduction

The “free and open Web,” or the Internet, became accessible to Filipinos over 20 years ago on March 29, 1994 (Guerrero, 2014). The Internet has “forever changed how we communicate, consume media, do commerce, and access information—essentially, how we live our lives” (Guerrero, 2014). At the same time, the Internet has been inculcated in providing another avenue for the exploitation of women, in this case, the sexual oppression and abuse of Filipino women through cybersex.

The cybersex phenomenon in the Philippines may be seen as the result of the confluence of 1) the availability of “digital technology” and ICTs including the Internet, and 2) Filipino women, through decades of overseas migration, being recognized as providers of “a range of affective, care and/or ‘servile’ labor ... in the neoliberal global market” (Cruz and Sajo, n.d.). Similarly, Matthews’ (2010) “Asian Cam Models: Digital Virtual Virgin Prostitutes?” locates cybersex within the context of “a capitalist market economy where Filipino women serve both as workers and commodities” and “the Internet’s globalizing role in tapping the resources of the Philippines” (Quintillan, 2010, p. 86).

News of cybersex den raids abound, such as those recently conducted in Iloilo, Cavite, Taguig, Navotas, and Bulacan (Locsin, 2014a; Locsin, 2014b; Mediana, 2014; Rendon, 2014; Bernal, 2014; Malabanan, 2014). National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) agents or police officers caught women performing “lewd” acts in front of a web camera, some of whom are minors coerced into cybersex.

There are varying views on cybersex, viz. as a crime, as a form of violence against women (VAW), and as a product of free choice.

*Cybersex as a crime* is instantiated by Republic Act 10175 “An Act Defining Cybercrime, Providing for the Prevention,

Investigation, Suppression, and the Imposition of Penalties Therefore and for Other Purposes" or "The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 (CPACT)," which was signed into law on September 12, 2012. Under this law, cybersex is a Punishable Act (Chapter II), a Cybercrime Offense (Section 4), and a Content-related Offense (C). Persons found guilty of engaging in cybersex are to be imposed *prison mayor*, fined from between P200,000 to P1 million, or both.

From the perspective of *cybersex as a form of VAW*, cybersex is deleterious not only to the women who are "directly (e.g., via trafficking in women) or indirectly (e.g., through the systematic economic disadvantage of women) forced into cyber prostitution, but all females' (Hughes, 1997, in Doring, 2000: 15). The "ubiquitous availability of females" engaged in cybersex, as facilitated by ICTs, serves to reinforce to all men, customers or not, the perception "that women are sexually available to them" (Doring, 2000: 15). Doring (2000) opines that from the perspective of VAW, "physical distance and the computer-mediatedness of the exchange do not make cybersex safe sex, on the contrary, computer-mediated communication increases the opportunity to take advantage of women and to market them, and thus manifests the gender hierarchy" (p. 15).

Buttersworth (1996, as cited in Doring, 2000: 15) asserted that "any technology which promises to lead to an expansion of the sex industry cannot be safe for women." ICTs "facilitate the sexual exploitation of women and girls locally, nationally and transnationally ... because they enable people to easily buy, sell and exchange millions of images and videos of sexual exploitation of women and children" (Hughes, 2002: 129). Among the technologies for sexual exploitation that Hughes (2002) mentioned is live video chat.

*Cybersex as the product of free choice*, on the other hand, "idealizes women's control and choice in heterosexual (online) interactions" (Doring, 2000: 19). This would fall

under the perspective of sexual rights as "the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to," among others, "choose their partner, decide to be sexually active or not" and engage in "consensual sexual relations" ("sexual rights," n.d.). Soto (n.d.: 19) called attention to the rise in cybersex in the Philippines and averred that these "may not necessarily constitute acts of VAW" because they are conducted by "two consenting parties."

Because this research was accomplished with only one research subject as a data source, who as previously mentioned is a deviant sample, her reflections on cybersex may be exclusive. Any possible generalizability is limited to how cybersex is conducted as a business.

The following are the key concepts of the research:

### *Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D)*

ICT4D "refers to the ways that information and communication technologies can be mobilized in support of development goals, particularly those relating to social, political and economic development" (Association for Progressive Communications, n.d.). According to Butt and Sarker (2009: 3-4), the ICT4D field "includes a vast variety of projects with many different aims" and the objective is "to keep the people-centered view of development at the center of the analysis." Further, there is a push for a more "responsive approach in ICT4D," one in which "the sociocultural development of peoples in their cultural environment will be given serious consideration as an opportunity for thinking about the future possibilities of ICTs" and which understands "what ICTs represent or mean for users and the way this fits into the larger context of their aspirations" (Butt and Sarker, 2009: 5).

## *Cybersex*

Cybersex is "any sexual activity, display, or discussion engaged in by means of a computer" ("cybersex," n.d.). In Republic Act 10175, cybersex is defined as "the willfull engagement, maintenance, control, or operation, directly or indirectly, of any lascivious exhibition of sexual organs or sexual activity, with the aid of a computer system, for a favor or consideration." It is the latter definition that is used in this study.

## Methodology

This study utilized feminist research tenets. It is founded on the perspectives and experiences of a woman research participant (Brayton, 1997). During the in-depth interview, a conscious effort was made by the researcher to equalize the relationship with the research subject, acknowledging that the former is the authority of her own experiences (Brayton, 1997) who is engaged in challenging and changing the circumstances of her oppression (Ralph, 1998 in Brayton, 1997). It was also recognized that the researcher's own persuasions influence the research (Harding, 1987 in Brayton, 1997). Finally, the study is impelled by the political intent of addressing social inequality (Brayton, 1997).

Feminist research is most suited to exploring the experiences of a woman involved in cybersex because the sensitivity of the subject matter demands feminist sensibilities. It locates the woman at the center of the study as a subject rather than the object of the research. The woman is respected as the expert of her own life—feminist research privileges her lived experiences and shifts in consciousness as she herself perceives and expresses them. It recognizes and values her agency and capacity to analyze her situation and effect any transformation she deems imperative in her life. As a feminist research, this paper is about women and by

women, with the research subject and the researcher aiming for a broader and more sensitive understanding of cybersex and the women engaged in it.

Given the difficulty of finding a woman involved in cybersex who is willing to be interviewed, this paper is based on a single in-depth interview, with the research subject selected by purposive sampling. Inadvertently and serendipitously, what was supposed to be a typical case of a woman in an urban poor community who is into cybersex turned out to be a deviant case of one who identifies herself as feminist.

To better understand the phenomenon of cybersex and to set the context for the discussion on "freedoms,"<sup>1</sup> the data includes the various aspects of the operations of the cybersex business and the "innovations" that its workers have resorted to in order to increase their incomes. These are essential because the extreme secrecy and privacy surrounding cybersex have led to a lack of general knowledge about how it is carried out.

The data is presented following the actual flow of the in-depth interview so as to convey the mood and tone of the proceedings. The researcher is of the view that this scheme, particularly in the section on the personal reflections of the research subject, best captures the nuances of the subject's views of cybersex and her ongoing internal conflict. These are manifest in the iterations of certain themes such as the economic benefits and relative ease of cybersex, its inappropriateness as a form of work, its effects on the perception of self, and the desire to exit from it. The analysis was confined to the portions directly related to "freedoms" and is accomplished within the purview of the selected theoretical frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> The expansion of choices, the freedom to do or to be, to live the life one values or has reason to value (Sen, 1999).

## Theoretical Frameworks

This paper utilizes two closely related theoretical frameworks because of their shared emphasis on freedom and choice, and the avoidance of normative prescriptions on what constitutes these freedoms and choices.

### *The Capabilities Approach*

When Amartya Sen (1999) declared that “development is freedom,” freedom was presented as “the central value in development” (Gasper and van Staveren, 2005). The “expansion of freedom is viewed...both as the primary end and as the principal means of development” (Sen, 1999: xii). Sen (1999) put forward a notion of development that is focused on the “process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy,” thereby drawing attention “to the ends that make development important” (Sen, 1999: 3).

Poverty, for Sen (1999: 87), is “the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely lowness of incomes,” the “capabilities” of a person being “the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value.” Well-being and quality of life are evaluated on the basis of “functionings” (“components or aspects of how a person lives ... the set of such functionings making up a person’s life”) and the “capability set” (“the set of alternative functionings that she could attain ... the alternative lives open to her, the extent of her freedoms”) (Gasper and van Staveren, 2005: 142–3). For Sen, “capabilities” are “the particular attainable functionings” (Gasper and van Staveren, 2005: 143).

### *Liberal Feminism*

Liberal feminism has its roots in liberalism, where the notion of liberty or freedom is central. Jaggar (1983: 174) opined that:

The notion of liberty is liberalism's distinctive contribution to political theory and the political value that gave the tradition its name. It means freedom from interference either by other individuals or by the state. Liberty is thought to guarantee individual autonomy, the right of each individual to establish her or his own interpretation of truth and of morality, uncoerced by established authority. Liberty is also thought to guarantee individuals the right to pursue their own interests or self-fulfillment, as they define their interests and understand their fulfillment.

The implication of valuing liberty is the circumscribing of state power to the public realm (Jaggard, 1983). Certain areas of the private realm are sacrosanct ("the right to privacy")—the state is expected not to intrude in these areas and to protect these from intrusion by others (Jaggard, 1983: 174). Jaggard (1983: 174) pointed out "the protected areas ... identified by specific civil liberties; ... freedom of expression ... and freedom of assembly" (p. 174).

Jaggard (1983: 174) contended that the proponents of liberalism do not make:

any substantive claims about the nature of the good life or human happiness or fulfillment ... individuals are entitled to set their own ends and, so long as they do not violate the rights of others, there are in principle no limits to what they might want to do or believe they ought to do.

Liberals "are committed to the belief that individuals are fulfilled whenever they are doing what they have decided freely to do, however unpleasant, degrading or wrong this may appear to someone else" (Jaggard, 1983: 174). Personal freedom, thus, is "the right to determine certain social states irrespective of what others think or want" (Peters, 2005: 22).



Liberal feminists "see no reason to limit sexual activity to procreation;" it "can be used to conceive children, to obtain pleasure or to make money" and there is "no basis for claiming that any of these uses in itself is wrong, unnatural or perverse" (Jaggar, 1983: 180). Jaggar (1983: 180) added that "particular sexual practices and sexual activity in general are valuable only insofar as individuals define them as good or wish to engage in them."

For liberal feminists, sexual activity as a private matter has a proviso: it must not "infringe on the rights of others" (Jaggar, 1983: 180). They are against "rape, even within marriage, since this is an obvious case of sexual coercion" and "sexual activities involving children, on the grounds that children are not yet able to give an informed and rational consent to their sexual participation" (Jaggar, 1983: 180).

While "prostitution has always been a major target of feminist attack," for liberal feminists, "women can be seen as having made a free choice to enter prostitution only when they have been given the opportunity to develop their rational faculties, when they are not perceived and taught to perceive themselves primarily as sexual objects and when they have equal opportunities to enter other kinds of employment" (Jaggar, 1983: 180-1).

## Research Findings

### *The Research Subject*

The research subject is Lorraine,<sup>2</sup> thirty-four years old, female, from an urban poor area in Caloocan City, Philippines. She finished two years of college in a private non-sectarian co-educational school. She lives with her parents and is not the family's breadwinner, though she contributes to the household expenses. Her father is a construction

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<sup>2</sup> The names used in this paper are not the real names of those referred to.

worker and her mother is a homemaker. She works for a women's organization as a volunteer community organizer.

Lorraine has been engaging in cybersex since the year 2000. She started out in cybersex dens in Las Piñas, Cavite, and Parañaque in Metro Manila. From 2007 up to the present, she has been working sporadically in a cybersex den operated by Vivian, a relative, in Caloocan. According to Lorraine, the term for women such as herself who are found in this form of employment is "cybergirl."

### *The Cybersex Business*

To engage in the cybersex business, the material requirements are a personal computer (PC), a webcam, a modem, and an internet connection. A microphone is not necessary, as conversations with the clients can be conducted using a keyboard. Vivian, who also used to work in a cybersex den, owns the equipment and is the one who has a HookMe.com<sup>3</sup> account. She learned how to operate her own business by studying a previous employer's practices. In addition to Lorraine, four of Vivian's sisters work with her, and she earns a 30 per cent commission from all their transactions.

HookMe.com is an adult for-members-only website that offers live video chat among other services for a fee. Filipinos based in the Philippines cannot access the live video chat feature of this website, unlike LiveLotus,<sup>4</sup> another popular website (operators of cybersex dens who use this website are often raided). To open a HookMe account as a "seller," one has to submit scanned identification documents such as a passport and driver's license. Upon completion of the accreditation procedure, a Payoneer MasterCard prepaid reloadable debit card is issued and mailed by HookMe to the account holder.

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<sup>3</sup> The name of the real website has been changed.

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The Payoneer card allows the holder "to buy goods and services or withdraw money anywhere in the world where MasterCard debit cards are accepted ... including websites, automated teller machines (ATMs) and shops" ("Payoneer," n.d.). Payoneer cards are not credit cards and holders can only spend to the extent of the value loaded onto the card ("Payoneer," n.d.). Vivian withdraws the payments made by HookMe through Payoneer from ATMs in pesos.

Lorraine has her own identification (ID) in HookMe, although all payments are made to Vivian's account. Customers likewise need an account and an ID to enter the site. To use the live video chat feature, they must first purchase HookMe credit, the currency used on the site. Clients are billed \$1.98 per minute. Lorraine estimates that for a thirty minute transaction (\$59.40), one third of this, or approximately \$20, goes to the cybergirl. HookMe is said to offer the best deal for cybergirls, vis-à-vis other similar sites.

There are several categories to choose from on HookMe, e.g., boys, girls, gays and lesbians, transsexuals, mothers, elderly, pregnant women. When a seller creates an ID, s/he has to state which category s/he wants to be marketed under. Lorraine, although a lesbian, categorized herself as female. The use of animals and children is not allowed on HookMe.

The HookMe screen shows the cybergirl's daily statistics (stats): how many customers she has received, the total time spent with customers, and how much she has earned. The cybergirl also sees what time the customer entered her room, his running time, and whether he is a regular or VIP customer. There is also information on where the customer is from and his marital status, if revealed by the customer.

HookMe has a feature for the cybergirls called "bonanza."<sup>5</sup> A cybergirl becomes eligible for this when she has

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<sup>5</sup> This is not the actual name of the feature.

reached a certain number of total hours logged with customers within the day. Lorraine is unaware of the exact number of hours required to reach this—she only tracks number of points on her stats. During bonanza time, HookMe no longer gets a percentage of the cybergirl's profits; all income from this point onwards during the day accrues to her entirely. Lorraine claimed that it is difficult, but not impossible, to reach the requirement for "bonanza."

HookMe privileges its customers. They can demand a reversal of payment if a cybergirl's performance is unsatisfactory, and a cybergirl's account can be blocked for a month based on customer complaints.

### *How a Cybergirl Gets a Client*

Photographs of the cybergirls available for a live video chat can be found on HookMe. Cybergirls upload several pictures of themselves. These are carefully done, according to Lorraine: "It's like selling yourself, you have to contort your body so you will look hot."<sup>6</sup> These pictures have to be updated monthly, sometimes earlier, if customers are scarce.

Cybergirls merely wait for customers to visit their "rooms." They can do household chores or sleep while waiting, as they are notified by a sound when there is an invite. Two video chat rooms of two cybergirls may be open at a single time in one PC (they are "minimized" on the screen), and when a notification goes on, they check which girl is being requested. If the customer is a VIP, the sound notification is different, which leads to some excitement. VIPs are the more valued customers because they have unlimited credit. When Lorraine misses a client's invitation because she was asleep, for instance, she can email him and ask him to return to her room.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the research subject have been translated to English from the original Tagalog.

### *Where the Customers Come from*

The customers are from outside the Philippines. When the cybergirls ask where they're from, many do not hesitate to reply. The customers are mostly from Canada and the US, but there are also clients from India, Italy, Japan, the UK, Germany, Italy, and other European countries. There are no customers from China. They are multi-racial—white, black, Asian, some are Filipino-American.

### *How a Transaction Begins*

"Hello, welcome to my room, baby," Lorraine types, after she accepts the visitor. ("They are all 'baby,' 'honey,' sometimes you get confused which term you use for a particular customer.") "Make me hot, make me come" is the common request from clients. Lorraine, regularly, is asked to go totally nude.

"They are weird and crazy," she describes the customers. They are not timid with their requests because they pay for the service. Lorraine normally sits on a chair and manipulates the camera to show them what they want to see; she said that customers must see what they want clearly. It is necessary to use a webcam that is manipulable, not stationary. Sometimes she is positioned on the floor or on the bed—her body has to be flexible, she has been asked to do a forward roll and other stunts.

There are requests to wear "costumes"—something see-through, t-back underwear, a wet t-shirt (for which Lorraine is asked to pour water on herself). The customers wait while she puts on the costume, which is welcome because it prolongs the transaction time. Some requests require the use of a dildo, others the presence of another girl. Customers ask, "Who's the girl with you?" when they sense the presence of another person in the room. They ask one girl to remove the other's underwear, for both to flirt with them, or even to just talk to each other.

There are also requests to smoke cigarettes one after another ("until I get dizzy"), to eat while chatting, to crack an egg on her head, to eat her nails, to bathe, and to urinate. Lorraine has been asked by a customer to defecate—she apologized and said that she is unable to do this. She also cheats when she can. She calls another person to pour water on her to make it appear that she is urinating, or she uses liquid soap as a ruse to mimic women's secretions during sex. Some customers are the ones who put on a show, which Lorraine prefers because all she has to do is watch and dole out positive comments such as "You did a great job!" or "Nice performance!." Other customers enjoy it when Lorraine just laughs and laughs at them. Lorraine's performances require a lot of acting, including using different voices when requested.

The requests are diverse and unpredictable. Watching men pleasure themselves is common, although there are those who do not have or use their own webcams (or microphones).

There are instances when other customers arrive while another is being attended to, and a queue forms. When Lorraine accepts a second customer while another is being served, she serves both simultaneously without either being aware. They may begin to suspect this upon noticing that she is performing an act that was not requested. The customer is then dropped with regret for the lost income.

In response to the query of whether she ever had "pleasant" transactions, Lorraine said these were the instances when the customers did not ask for a show, but were satisfied with chatting for an hour. These usually happen only with her regular customers who want to help her with her stats (that is, earnings). On the other hand, the most unpleasant experiences were requests for her to defecate or to use a dildo, even if these make for longer transactions.

Lorraine used to cheat by going to the toilet to prolong the transaction but this is no longer possible because of the threat that her account can be frozen. This can only be done with regular customers.

The amount of a customer's credit is visible on the screen. Ordinarily, he would have from \$20 to \$30, and when this is consumed, he is immediately cut off from the live video chat. Some purchase more credits and return. The cybergirls aim to prolong transactions by engaging customers in a conversation or by devising other ways to keep them interested.

Some clients enter a room for just one minute, particularly when they are about to climax. She types a line and then they disappear. Others stay for an hour; encounters such as this are the most tiring.

### *Number of Customers*

Because she is no longer a full-time cybergirl, it is difficult for Lorraine to estimate the average number of clients she serves when she works or how much she makes on average in a month. On HookMe, this would also depend on how many visitors go to her room.

Lorraine used to have thirty regular customers and is still in touch with a customer whom she met when she started out. When asked to estimate the total number of unique customers she has served since she started working in the business, she said it would be no less than a thousand.

### *Using Yahoo Messenger (YM)*

Lorraine and the other cybergirls have found a way to circumvent HookMe. They ask customers to meet them on YM instead. YM is preferred because the entire amount of the transaction goes to the cybergirl. The customer pays

through Western Union—he gives his name and the control number of the remittance—and the cybergirl checks the Western Union website to see if the payment has gone through. Lorraine gives her real name because she uses an authentic ID to claim the payment at a local Western Union branch.

Aside from meeting regular clients on YM, Lorraine also targets men in chat rooms. It is not difficult to find customers on YM. Lorraine would enter particular chat rooms—e.g., forty-five and up, romance, sports—though she averred one can find customers in practically any chat room. She would choose someone randomly and buzz him. The transactions vary, depending on what Lorraine and the customer agree upon, and it transpires along the lines of her offering for instance “I’ll make (sic) you three shows, send me \$200 (or \$100)” and she would give three “shows” on three consecutive days. There is no cheating on her part because this is a potential customer who can be cultivated.

### *What Cybergirls Also Do*

Vivian’s fiancé is a Filipino-American whom she met on HookMe. Prior to her engagement, several foreigners have come to the Philippines to meet up with Vivian. She obtains substantial financial support from several of her customers on a regular basis. A portion of this is used to pay the rent of the townhouse which they use as the place of business, and the amount Vivian used as initial investment in her cybersex enterprise was also from clients. Even her sister was able to set up an internet café with the capital she acquired from her online business.

Lorraine has lied countless times to customers. She has told them she needs money because she is sick, or has no money to buy food. She has asked them to help her pay her electric or water bill, even if the money is not used for these purposes. She concocts other stories about financial need,



which the customers automatically believe. One of her relatives pretended she needed money for a caregiving course, which led to monthly support from a customer.

Cybergirls also use cybersex to search for potential foreign husbands. Lorraine knows several cybergirls who have succeeded. Additionally, the financial rewards are so attractive that another relative has approached her to ask if she could help her thirteen year old daughter enter the trade. She found this distasteful and pointedly asked the mother why she couldn't be the one to go into the business, under the mothers' category.

### *Cultivating Customers*

Lorraine said she is not required to strip all the time, especially with the regulars. Some of them don't ask for a show. She would occasionally send these customers an email invite to visit her room. With them, she can simply chat and share stories. She pointed out that you have to make an effort to take care of the kinder customers and flatter them.

Lorraine has clients on YM who have asked her to stop working as a cybergirl and have said they will just support her by sending her money. While some of the customers are very kind, Lorraine said that she is not interested in forming relationships with them. She does not really feel disposed towards working as a cybergirl; she currently goes online only when she has a problem with her finances. In these cases, she leaves a meet-up message for customers on YM or Skype.

### *Her Status as a Cybergirl*

When Lorraine started working as a full-time cybergirl in 2000, she said it was a job. Now she no longer considers it as such. From 2007, she has worked as a cybergirl irregularly. After being in the business for twelve years, she has

lost interest. She goes online only when she is need of money. From a month ago when she started to work on the paper requirements for her application to work abroad, she has been scarce online.

Lorraine lets others use her HookMe ID to keep her room active and asks them to change the photographs on display. She receives payments for this.

### *How She Became a Cybergirl and Her Initial Experiences*

Lorraine was recruited into cybersex by a friend and neighbor whom she has known since childhood, who herself was recruited by another friend. She wondered why this friend always had money and what she did for a living. She then learned the kind of trade she was in and, later, decided to join her. Lorraine stopped going to college then because she started to enjoy earning her own income.

From 2000–2003, Lorraine worked in a cybersex den in Las Piñas with nineteen other women. They were installed in a large house where meals were provided for free. The den operator/owner did not live with the cybergirls and visited only when it was time to pay their salaries. There was no need for constant monitoring—the cybergirls knew that their income depended on how much work they put in, and that there was always a threat of being evicted if they did not perform. The owner would not continue to house and feed the unproductive ones.

The cybergirls were not allowed to leave except during their day off, which was a once a month, overnight break. This was fine with them as they wanted to maximize their earnings by attending to as many customers as possible. As new faces, there were numerous video chat invitations and they did not want to let these opportunities pass. In a month, the cybergirls could earn up to \$620. During the lean peri-

ods, they would get from between \$143 to \$167 per month. The sharing was 70–30, with 30 per cent going to the cybersex den operator.

The den in Las Piñas was raided by law enforcement officers in 2003 when one of the former employees reported the Canadian owner. In 2004, Lorraine transferred to another employer in Cavite where she stayed for a few months. She later moved to one in Parañaque, where she stayed for a year.

If there were several cybergirls in one house, they had to share the computers and schedule their use. There was no privacy at all: Lorraine revealed that she has seen everything, and the acts performed have become normal. If the transaction involved the use of microphones, they had to make sure that the customer did not hear anything in the background, as there are those who are particular about privacy.

The girls were able to sleep when there were no customers, except when the boss was around. There were more customers at night, and on Fridays, though there were days when there were hardly any customers, such as Sundays. The boss set quotas of, say, thirty customers in a day, or \$50. This was difficult to earn, according to Lorraine, and was a form of harassment.

Lorraine's relative, Vivian, set up shop in 2007. She now has a thriving home-based business, with first, Lorraine and two sisters involved as cybergirls, then later her oldest and youngest sisters joined them. Another recruit is set to work for her as well.

Lorraine shared that it is not always easy to save the income earned from cybersex. For as long as one holds a lot of money on a daily basis, and knows that one can always make money, one does not think of saving. She and her partner have a savings account, and whenever Lorraine makes a deposit, the latter asks her if she worked as a

cybergirl to earn that money. She tells the partner that the money was her fee for a training she conducted. It is easy for the girlfriend to believe that Lorraine is not a cybergirl because she is a lesbian.

## The Research Subject's Reflections about Cybersex

### *Why She Became Involved in Cybersex*

Lorraine posited that she turned to cybersex because she was attracted by the financial benefits, and the relative ease of making money. She added, however, that it has led to a negative perception of oneself.

When Lorraine was recruited, she was shocked by what she was expected to do. She thought all she had to do was to video chat on YM but she found out she had to strip and would be paid for it. She decided to throw caution to the wind and take the job. She said that when one starts to hold relatively large amounts of money, one no longer hesitates. She told her parents she worked in a factory—if her father found out, he would beat her.

She used to rationalize the work, just to make it palatable: "The job is nothing, the customers cannot touch me, it is better than working in a club as a sex worker." Additionally, the customers do not know her, and there is no danger of running into them.

### *Her Negative Views on Cybersex*

Upon deeper exploration of her personal feelings about cybersex, Lorraine cited two specific instances that others narrated to her, and which made her eschew it. The first was when another relative, who is also a cybergirl working under the "mothers" category, was asked by a customer to include her daughter in the show and to undress her. The

second was when yet another relative was asked to make her baby cry continuously, to cover the baby's mouth, and then to make the baby laugh. These unusual fetishes are too much for her, and she finds it most offensive when men use children for sexual gratification.

It came to a point when Lorraine asked herself whether this is what she had become, whether this is the job that she wanted. When she started her work of organizing women in 2005 and became a feminist, the contradiction and disconnect between her feminist advocacy and her work as a cybergirl became apparent:

There are times when I do some introspection and think, what is this I'm doing to myself? When I watch my relatives perform, I ask myself, is that what I am? We are all in one room naked, it has become normal.

Even in the beginning, before she became a feminist, Lorraine had negative views about being a cybergirl: "I felt that I was really being degraded as a person." It was all done for the money, "The money is so easy, if I didn't do this job, I wouldn't have any." Lorraine opines that it isn't difficult if one doesn't give it much thought: "For practical people who do not want to struggle and who are lazy, this is the job."

Lorraine conveyed that she is tired of working as a cybergirl, she wants to leave this form of employment and focus on other things such as working overseas. She thinks about the job as being "dirty." She has lost interest in it.

She disclosed that the work made her think of how lowly she must perceive herself, even if others were unaware of what she does for a living. She reiterated that she has asked herself if this is the only job she wants, even if money is easy to come by, if this is the only option, and she has wondered what will happen to her when she grows old. She also knows that such kind of work offers no job security.

*The Secrecy Surrounding Her Being a Cybergirl*

Lorraine knows almost all of the cybergirls in her community. Apart from them and one good friend who works with her in community organizing, nobody else knows that Lorraine is a cybergirl. Even her girlfriend does not know, though she is aware that Lorraine's relatives are engaged in this trade and has warned her not to join them. She is ashamed to tell others because she thinks they will not understand. She fears that she will be judged. She keeps it a secret from her best friend or her girlfriend because she is afraid they might distance themselves from her because her job is dishonorable.

At this point of the conversation, Lorraine became emotional:

I am crying because of the extreme secrecy of my work. I am a very private person, and I look for people who will understand me. I have not been able to talk to anyone about this since I started in 2000. When I am with my relatives, the sense is that what we are doing is normal, we don't talk about our feelings, nobody opens up.

She added:

Everything changed when I was conscientized. I would be in the streets shouting and shouting about our advocacies, when all along I was hiding something. This is the greatest secret I keep, from my siblings and my mother.

*On No Longer Wanting to Engage in Cybersex, but Still Practising It*

Lorraine has learned to compartmentalize this part of her life, though she feels guilt whenever she thinks about her partner who is unaware that she is in this line of work. She reiterated that she stopped being active as a cybergirl

when the operations moved to Caloocan. She would go online only sporadically, when she wanted to, or when she was bored. Her being part of a women's organization was a big factor. All of a sudden, her mindset changed, she no longer wanted to be a cybergirl.

Her working irregularly as a cybergirl has led her to ask herself why she still does it when she no longer likes the job. This question has a strong impact on her, she tells herself she is stupid. When she asks herself why she persists, even sporadically, it is still about the money.

### *The Positive and Negative Effects of Being a Cybergirl*

For Lorraine, one positive effect of her work as a cybergirl is the income it provides. It allows her to help her parents financially, to go where she wants to go like bar-hopping, or spending time with her friends. It is easier than having to apply for a job. There is also the sense of freedom from being able to do what she wants. However it is the money that remains paramount, in spite of how she feels about the job, and the absence of attraction towards any of her customers.

The "negative" is framed in terms of loss of dignity:

I see myself as lowly. I tell my cybergirl relative, "What you're doing is disgusting" and she throws the same remark back to me. I lose my dignity. One factor that made me shun this work is the thought that I will look at myself two years hence and ask if this is the only job I have, if there is no other job I can experience.

### *Empowerment*

Lorraine derives economic empowerment from cybersex. There is also the sense of freedom of being able to do what

she wants though this would be followed by questions of why and what her aims are.

Lorraine claims that the job is so easy, it's simply taking off your clothes. In one day, you can ask a customer for \$250. All you have to do is take care of them, and after one or two weeks, sometimes they themselves are the ones who offer to help. You fool around with them, you just use them.

Again the conflict resurfaces: "I think to myself, I'm such a pig. I am educated, why am I here talking to stupid people?" She admits though that there are interesting people she has met on YM whom she requests to just talk to her and not to ask her to perform.

### *Not a Victim*

Lorraine recalled the discussions she has participated in, which reflect a lack of understanding of cybersex:

Especially when the subject on the field is cybersex, the information that others give is wrong. I think to myself, "I'm not like that, what you are saying is incorrect." They discuss the topic: "How can we fight the worsening phenomenon of cybersex?" They ask, "Don't these women know any other job?" and say, "They are degrading themselves." The cybergirls are called "sex workers." Why are the women being judged? Don't they know what these women feel when they put on a show? All they do is pass judgment. They just want to put a stop to cybersex because they believe it degrades women. They ask why there are so many women involved in this, because it is booming. They say these women should be conscientized, that there should be efforts to locate the women in this form of employment.

She does not feel like a victim. She doesn't pity herself, and asks what it is that she is really doing to herself, even if it's undesirable. Yes, she is hard on herself sometimes, even if she really does not want to do the job, she must do it



because of financial need. She derives her income from it. Also, she is not affecting the women's organization.

Lorraine asks "What is it about the job? So what if they find out that a woman is a cybergirl, is she ruined, is she no longer a complete person?" She stated emphatically that when she leaves her place of work, her real self emerges. The person in front of the camera is not her.

She admits she is conflicted. Yes, she describes herself as a feminist but she condones the women who are in this job and by recruiting others, she acts like a pimp. She tells herself she's crazy for living a double life.

She divulged that if she did not become a feminist, she might be more immersed in cybersex, but she still would have eventually tired of it.

## Discussion of Findings

Lorraine's perceptions on cybersex are informed by the mainstream views of prostitution—i.e., it is wrong, licentious, vulgar, depraved, disgraceful, and degrading. Additionally, as a worker for a woman's organization, her persuasions have been framed within the VAW perspective, which links the vulnerability of the female sex to domination and exploitation to the pervasiveness and obstinacy of patriarchal culture. Women in cybersex, independent of whether they entered out of their own volition or were trafficked, are seen as victims/survivors of the gender-based violence that is endemic in a society where women are systematically discriminated against, exploited, marginalized, oppressed and subordinated.

Lorraine's exposition makes it apparent that her primary motive for engaging in cybersex is financial in nature. The decision to do so is a product of rational choice and is uncoerced by others, made on the basis of weighing the pros and cons of this work, with the "pro" of the financial

rewards clearly outweighing any of the “cons”—loss of dignity and self-respect, secrecy from those closest to her, and internal conflict. Lorraine has had some college education, from which we may conclude that she “has been given the opportunity to develop her rational faculties” (Jaggar, 1983: 180–1). She also identifies as a feminist, which may mean that she does “not perceive...herself primarily as a sexual object” (Jaggar, 1983: 180–1). The availability and use of ICTs makes cybersex more acceptable to the worker, and the decision of practicing it an easier one—there is no physical contact with the customer which impersonalizes the sexual acts, the customer’s location is remote, payment is immediate and assured, it can be performed in the privacy of one’s room, or the work can be accomplished in the presence of others performing the same or similar acts which serves to normalize it and endow one with the sense that one is neither alone nor deviant. These facilitate detachment and protection from what may be considered the adverse physical and psychological effects of actual, as opposed to virtual, prostitution.

Lorraine’s conflicts and negotiations with herself with respect to continuing to engage in cybersex, despite its reduced frequency, are manifest in her reflections. Notwithstanding her conscientization into the mainstream feminist views of cybersex and her personal realizations, that she persists on engaging in this form of work is again the product of rational and uncoerced choice. It is freely-chosen, even if the decision is one that may be regarded as constrained given the paucity of viable economic alternatives. Nonetheless, alternatives do exist, even if they are not as financially rewarding as cybersex, and millions of low-income women in other forms informal sector employment in the Philippines are testaments to this.

The free, rational, and uncoerced nature of the choice of low-income woman like Lorraine to engage in cybersex forms the crux of the contentious assertion that it may be a

considered a case of ICT4D. The development (the "D" in ICT4D) framework used in this paper is Sen's (1999) conception of development as freedom—the expansion of choices, the freedom of individuals to do or to be, and to live the life that s/he values or has reason to value. Development is "the capability to achieve valued ends" (Sen, 1999, in Gasper and van Staveren, 2005: 139) as identified and appraised by the individuals themselves. In relation to ICTs and uncoerced cybersex, development is having the capability to use ICTs in order to earn an income in the manner one chooses.

ICTs take cybersex to an entirely different level—performed in real time, remotely and impersonally, with guaranteed payment. They obviate many of the undesirable aspects of actual prostitution such as physical contact and the risk of physical violence, sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), and unwanted pregnancies; emotional effects such as humiliation, stress, trauma, and anguish from the real performance of sex acts; and the non-payment of fees. ICTs expedite contracting with customers literally on a 24/7 basis, and for the woman engaged in independent cybersex, they allow control over where, when, and how often she wants to work. If she is not pleased with a customer, she has the option to simply drop him. In the case study above, ICTs also allow women who practice cybersex to ask for money from regular customers without having to perform any sexual acts. Further, as Lorraine articulated, it is not really a difficult job, and it pays well. ICTs make cybersex an attractive and tempting choice.

Sen (1999) provides no normative prescriptions as to the form individual choices should take, leaving them entirely up to the individual to discern. In facilitating cybersex, ICTs expand the choices of low-income women—if they value income and the ease of earning it, and if they have no qualms, or are able to manage any qualms about engaging in virtual prostitution, cybersex becomes an option. ICTs

endow them with the freedom to engage in cybersex, if they so desire. It expands their capability set—what they can attain, the possibilities of “alternative lives” open to them, and the range of their freedoms (Gasper and van Staveren, 2005: 142). In Lorraine’s case, ICTs have promoted her sense of agency, and her capacity to earn an income, which in turn has enabled her to contribute to the family expenses, to spend on herself and on recreation, which are themselves freedoms.

The issue of the well-being of women engaged in cybersex may come to the fore: how can cybersex be considered developmental to women who are plagued by the burden of its contradictions, who feel that its performance is an affront to their dignity? The term “well-being” is used here in its subjective sense, and refers to “self reported happiness and life satisfaction” (Conceição & Bandura, n.d.: 5). McGillivray and Clarke (2006: 4, in Conceição & Bandura, n.d.: 5) view subjective well-being as one that that “involves a multidimensional evaluation of life, including cognitive judgments of life satisfaction and affective evaluations of emotions and moods.”

Sen “rejects the exclusive focus on well-being...in particular, he suggests that beyond information on well-being, information on people’s agency should also be taken into account” (Sen, 1985, in Peter, 2005: 19). Sen considers “agency as the ability to set and pursue one’s own goals and interests, of which the pursuit of one’s well-being may be only one” (Peter, 2005: 19). Indeed, in the case of cybersex, the ability to set and pursue the goal and interest of making easy money and the imperativeness of earning an income are privileged over and above how the means to achieve this may impinge on one’s subjective well-being.

Sen makes a fundamental difference between viewing “a person as an agent and ... as a ‘patient’—who does or does not have well-being” (Sen, 1995: 103, in Peter, 2005:

19). The person's actions become central: "how she acts or refuses to act, and her motives for choosing one action over another" (Peter, 2005: 19). A consideration of agency requires the "taking note of his or her aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and—in a broad sense—the person's conception of the good" (Sen, 1985: 203, in Peter, 2005: 19-20). Focusing on agency "as one of the constitutive features of the person also strengthens the role of freedom in social evaluation" (Peter, 2005: 20)—"what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (Sen, 1985: 203 in Peter, 2005: 20).

Lorraine's agency is concretely exercised in her involvement in cybersex. The act itself is a product of her deliberations and negotiations with herself. This dynamic is found in Lorraine's reflections. She acknowledges the economic empowerment that can be realized from cybersex and the sense of freedom she derives from the exercise of her agency through participation in it. At the same time, she interrogates what her aims are, and vacillates between on the one hand, how the work is degrading, and on the other, how it does not touch the core of her being and how the person in front of the camera is not who she really is. The importance Lorraine attributes to her agency highlights the significance of the freedom aspect of development, or what is made attainable for her, because it has become possible for her to reach what she decides to act on. Under the framework of ICT4D, where development is Sen's "freedom," ICTs have led to the expansion of her choices/capability set or what she is free to do in pursuit of what she deems valuable, in her case attaining economic empowerment using her agency to engage in cybersex.

The liberals' and liberal feminists' conception of liberty/freedom—"the right to pursue their own interests or self-fulfillment, as they define their interests and understand their fulfillment," (Jaggar, 1983: 174)—mirrors Sen's (1999).

Additionally, for liberals, there are no restrictions to what a person can do for as long as it does not tread on the rights of others (Jaggar, 1983). (In uncoerced cybersex, the cybersex transaction is fully consensual between the parties involved.) What others think or want is of no consequence (Peter, 2005). Liberal feminist freedoms extend to sexual activity for money and no value judgments can be justifiably imputed to this, as long they are not the consequence of coercion and do not involve children (Jaggar, 1983). Its value is derived from the fact that the person wishes to engage in this (Jaggar, 1984).

The liberal feminists' conception of freedom dovetailing with Sen's implies that the proposal of regarding cybersex as a case of ICT4D will not provoke the wholesale antagonism of all feminists. Indeed, if Lorraine were instead conscientized into this feminist stream, she would not be beleaguered by the specious contradictions arising from being a feminist engaged in cybersex. There is no inherent incongruity between feminism and prostitution, and feminists themselves are divided on this.

The research subject is already a feminist drawn to the mainstream movement's convictions regarding prostitution, whether actual or virtual. The continuance of her participation in cybersex is illustrative of the limits of conscientization and the overriding compulsion to pursue freedoms made available, especially if it is impelled by financial expediency.

Recognizing development as freedom requires respect for the choices that individuals make, irrespective of one's personal beliefs and values, for as long they do not infringe on the rights of others. It necessitates deference to the freedom of individuals to determine what is in their best interests, and to chart and follow their own paths.

## Conclusion

The vast majority of our poor are women because of their specific vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are attributed to systemic gender and class asymmetries—in wealth, income, power, decision-making, access to and control over economic and social resources, and in the division of labor. These vulnerabilities, further, are manifested in women's economic locations in productive work brought about by neoliberal globalization—in labor-intensive export industries, in casual/temporary, contractual, part-time, subcontracted, informal, or overseas employment—locales that are characterized by insecure work, low wages, poor working conditions, and limited or no social security.

If there were not a scarcity of quality employment in the Philippines, there would most likely be no low-income women migrating as overseas foreign workers and laboring in what are called dirty, demeaning, and dangerous jobs, no women opting for marriage migration, no women eking out a living in both the formal or informal sectors amid poor and exploitative working conditions, and no women grudgingly using their bodies as prostituted women.

Uncoerced cybersex as facilitated by ICTs has attendant challenges. Doring (2000) pointed out that the easy accessibility of females engaged in cybersex reinforces the perception of all "women as sexually available" (p. 15), which does not assist the feminist project of eliminating women's exploitation and oppression. There is the view that all cybersex that is performed because of financial necessity is coerced, even if indirectly. On a more personal level, a woman practicing cybersex may be subjected to the psychological turmoil arising from the ambivalence of earning a significant income with relative ease, but through what may be considered dishonorable and disgraceful means. There is also the possibility that the videos of women performing sexual acts would have been saved in customers'

hard drives, resulting in their "digital permanence" (Hue, 2013) which may be of future consequence to the woman engaged in cybersex.

We could perhaps bemoan that the expansion of freedoms for low-income women has come in the form of cybersex facilitated by ICTs, but given the deficiency of agreeable alternatives, the choice they make to take it up must be upheld and respected. At the same time, we recognize that deliberate and planned ICT4D strategies that are responsive to the actual needs, aspirations, and priorities of low-income women have the potential to expand their freedoms in ways that will not be contentious.

The women engaged in uncoerced cybersex have access to ICTs, the skills needed to use or to learn how to use them, and the free choice of whether or not to enter into this form of employment. Nonetheless, we affirm that they are a cohort that faces constrained choices and the deprivation of capabilities. Thus, this research does not veer from the call of gender and development advocates for the transformation of the unequal gender, class, and race structures that buttress, maintain, and reproduce women's subordination (Connelly, Li, MacDonald, and Parpart, 2000: 62).

It is hoped that the findings and analyses of this research will stimulate a more expansive discussion of both development and ICT4D, predicated on the social, economic, political, and cultural realities that low-income women face on a daily basis, and which impinge on their decision-making, exercise of agency, empowerment, and quality of life. The research also invokes the use of a non-judgmental and compassionate lens from which to view low-income women engaged in actual or virtual prostitution.



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