

**Maria Clara, Manila Girl & the *other* Mary.
Premarital Sex in the Catholic Philippines:
Constructions of Seduction**

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How do young women in the Catholic Philippines make sense of their premarital sexual experiences, and why is first-sex often described as "forced" ? Based on ethnographic research conducted in the semi-urban town of Kalibo, I present narratives which highlight women's dilemma: to follow the body-silent (their own unvoiced desires) or the body-social (hegemonic gender norms). Structuring women's choices are three types of femininity models: Maria Clara, the Manila Girl, and the other Mary. I demonstrate how, despite yearnings for modernity, traditional postulates inform women's decision-making. I also explore how the disavowal of desire is crafted to counter negative evaluation, but how this same tactic, used to protect a women's reputation, leaves her greatly vulnerable to sexual health risks.

When Gemma was 22, she worked in Manila, held a clerical position and lived in a dormitory that had a liberal curfew of midnight. She rarely thought of her family back in Kalibo, and she enjoyed an urban lifestyle, though she prayed regularly with rosaries and had strong convictions about God. Gemma had never had a serious boyfriend, nor let any of her suitors do more than kiss her.

Then Gemma met Noel. Noel was very *gwapo* (handsome) and considerate, a year younger than herself, and from a middle class family like her own. At first Gemma considered him *barkada lang* (a friend only). However, their friendship developed over the months of June to September. One night Noel asked, "Are we going to do this ? Go on as friends, or be a couple ?"

"OK", Gemma simply replied.

Due to work and study commitments, Gemma and Noel didn't see each other very often. But they did create time to spend together on Saturday and Sunday. Noel would pick up Gemma from her dormitory, from where they would either go to the mall to window shop, watch a

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movie or stroll, or sit side-by-side at a bar, sharing a few bottles of beer. After this, Noel would escort Gemma home.

Three months after deciding to be a couple, Gemma and Noel had their first kiss inside a movie house. Gemma described it as *"sloppy, because we can't move !"* Smiling, she explained, *"It was our first time for everything."*

Kissing would always take place in the movie house or on the stairs of the dormitory, where darkness hid their movements.

Soon after, Noel's hands began pressing against Gemma's breasts, with "petting-petting" following suit.

"At first, the rule was no below the belt", Gemma explained. *"And how could we do it anyway ?"* given the movie house, stairs, and her twelve o'clock curfew.

"Did you feel desire ?" I asked her.

"The desire at first was out of curiosity... and then it felt good, so sometimes I thought about it, and I can't wait to see him... I imagined being with him, what would happen... although I was nervous also because of the conservative side of me—my family values always surface."

I nodded, because now, as a close friend of Gemma's, I knew this to be true: her dual nature of curious adventurer—*Manila Girl*—as well as dutiful, Catholic daughter, like *Maria Clara*.

Weeks later everything changed.

They had been strolling and, as was their habit, had gone out for drinks. At the bar, Noel asked to see Gemma's watch. He slipped it off her wrist and tucked it into his pocket. Time lapsed. *"He got my watch, so of course I cannot say, 'It's almost twelve o'clock now, so you have to drop me home'"*, Gemma explained. *"Then I find out it's after twelve already, so the dorm already closed, and then he asked me if—you know, I was really innocent at the time—he asked me if we can stay together, but my interpretation is to go and sleep, literally together."*

Gemma said that she didn't expect anything to happen by joining Noel in the motel close by. But, in the room the two began "below the belt petting".

"How did you feel ?" I asked her.

"Nervous. The face of my mum is crowding my mind."

Gemma was afraid of embodying behavior of the *other Mary*, the sexual deviant.

Noel began trying to make love to Gemma, to enter her body.

"It hurt, when he tried, it didn't happen. I'm crying. I was not relaxed. He said, 'OK, I'm not going to force you. Just hug me, it's no problem.'"

The next weekend Gemma and Noel found themselves at the same bar. Again Noel slipped the watch off Gemma's wrist and tucked it into his pocket. Before too long it was past midnight and Gemma was once more "stranded". They went back to the same motel and tried to make love

again, yet nothing happened. "I was a bit shy, quite embarrassed, I felt pity¹ for him and then we tried again..." explained Gemma. "I thought to myself, I have to do this soon, because I was embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?"

"Because he was so ecstatic about it."

The following week, after Noel slipped Gemma's watch into his pocket, "the real thing happened".

"I cried a lot. Not just out of guilt, but pain. When he entered, I cry, I even scratch. I kept saying, 'No it hurts', so he just ended up masturbating in the bathroom. The next day, it was really hurting—I didn't even go into the office.² Noel was very worried."

"And how did you feel?"

"He was happy because he got me, all virgin and everything. In a way I felt guilty, yes... guilt to my family, but I love him... so it's OK."

In the following few months, the young couple had sex five more times. After the third time, Gemma began to feel sensations of pleasure. Like almost all of the respondents with whom I spoke, the same form of contraception was used: "He told me he knows how to withdraw."

Sudden news came: Noel would soon be moving to join relatives in the UK, where he could search for better work opportunities.

And then he was gone, as though he had never been there at all.

After enduring long heartbreak, Gemma returned to Kalibo to live with her family. She is now in love with a married man with whom she developed a relationship through texting.³ Gemma feels great confusion about this relationship as well as great sorrow at being nearly 30 years of age and husbandless.

From this case study we are privy to the sequencing of a young woman's thoughts as she transgresses the cultural code of chastity and lets her body and heart guide her. Gemma's story illustrates women's willingness to defer to men's assertion that they are in control of contraception, and hence the practice of unsafe sex. The importance of nonverbal cues of acquiescence is also highlighted. After the first watch incident, Gemma certainly knew what the removal of the watch signified. Speaking to the ambivalence, contradiction and dangers

¹ In the Philippines "pity" is often used as a reason to accept a suitor as a boyfriend—or in cases such as this, to "surrender" to men's desires.

² Common in women's stories of first sex are accounts of severe physical pain, whereby regular work and/or activities the next day are conceived of as impossible.

³ For further discussions about the role of the cell phone in modern-day Philippines see: Ellwood-Clayton (2003, 2005, 2006).

associated with premarital sex in the Catholic Philippines, Gemma's tale demonstrates how young women are positioned within complex and oftentimes, competing desires. Herein, I further examine how young women construct premarital sexual experiences away from self-accountability, thereby threatening their well-being and sexual health. Particular attention will be paid to the phenomenon of first-sex as "forced."

Writings on many cultures have focused on marriage as a defining moment in women's lives. White (1992: 98), for example, argues that marriage is "the turning point in a woman's life, the major rite of passage, on which all her fortunes depend." My fieldwork, however—conducted over the years of 2001 to 2003 in Kalibo, a semi-urban town situated on Panay Island, the central Philippines—points to first/premarital sex as perhaps more significant in terms of women's life path.

The outcome of premarital sex has multiple potential manifestations in a Filipina's life. Premarital sex can result in relatively happy or unhappy marriages; separation and heartbreak; (unwanted or early) pregnancy; social and personal stigma; and possible health risks of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. As such, identifying both the macro and micro factors which contextualize young women's early sexual decision-making has important value.

In trying to better understand how young Filipinas navigate in a shifting world where alliances to tradition and a call to the future seem to hold equal sway, I employ a classificatory schema of *Maria Clara*, *Manila Girl* and *Other Mary* gender models. I argue that women in Kalibo negotiate between two bodies serving different interests, the body silent—their own desires, sexual health, and curiosities—and the body social: handmaiden to wider femininity norms.

Before turning to women's telling of their experiences of premarital sex, I first discuss my methodological and theoretical underpinnings, give a brief overview of the sexual health vulnerability of Filipino youth, and situate chastity in the Filipino landscape.

place & method

Just after September 11 my Filipina research assistant and I moved into a large apartment in the town of Kalibo, population 63,000. Kalibo is situated close to the popular tourist destination, Boracay. Kalibo has a bustling town centre and its streets are filled with uniformed students, trikes, churches, fruit stands, office workers, beggars, bars, internet cafes and yapping packs of skinny dogs.

To gain an in-depth understanding of young women's lives (aged 15-29) from varying socio-economic groups, I applied standard anthropological methodologies. This included participant observation (being in and belonging to social activities), focus group discussions (sharing ideas in groups), surveys (gathering quantitative data) and, once authentic relationships had been formed, in-depth interviewing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty young women with a median age of 21 years old. Eighty-six percent of interviewees were Roman Catholic (corresponding to the 90% of total residents in Kalibo)⁴ and approximately one-quarter were married, the remainder single. I

⁴ Non-Catholic respondents included a small number of Muslim participants, and a few members of Jehovah's Witness and the Christian *Aglipay Church*.

chose to focus on the heterosexual experience and collected data from women with varying degrees of sexual exposure, ranging from women who had never been kissed, to women with casual boyfriend experience, and those who were married, or had live-in partners. I also conducted approximately thirty interviews with community players, including health practitioners, religious heads, social commentators and artists.⁵

How was I able to get young women to talk to me about something as private as sex? What was the entry point into such a sensitive area? And how was I viewed by respondents?

By living in the local community and by being in an age category similar to my participants, many of the "research subjects" became my friends. I worked to slowly build rapport with each woman or, in other cases, my research assistants did so. Usually relationships began with small talk, followed by regular visits, outings together, the sharing of feelings and eventual developing of care for one another. The nature of our friendships allowed for the mutual sharing of intimate narratives regarding love, sex and relationships. What I asked of them, I was happy to share myself, and I did. The promise of confidentiality and, I believe, the safe opportunity to disclose their secrets to a woman outside their social group, was a cathartic and maybe liberating experience for some.

As for how I was regarded by respondents, I am not entirely sure. I think that for many I symbolized the *Manila Girl* side of themselves or, their imaginings. That I was in the country alone meant I was independent; doing a job I liked, thus professional; living in the apartment that I did have and having employees, moneyed; dressing stylishly, sophisticated; and that I was single but enamored with love itself meant I was like many of them. Such gifts—insights, lessons, experiences—the women of Kalibo gave me. Research participants often acted as companions, frequently as close friends, and always as teachers. For that I have great gratitude.

maria clara, manila girl, & the other mary

Throughout this article I apply the notion of *script* from Gagnon's and Simon's (1984, 1986, 1987) work on sexual scripts. Culturally determined sex scripts offer guidance to social actors, such as how operating syntax relates to language. Exposure to scripts tutors community members about which situations are erotic, as well as when, where, why and with whom. Operating interpersonally and intra-psychically, sex scripts teach social actors how to decipher what they are feeling, how to manage their desires and, how to interpret results (Suggs and Miracle 1993: 171). As well as designating what is sexually acceptable, scripts also cast specific forms of behaviour taboo. It is important to note that adolescence is a critical time to appropriate cultural scripts and that the nature of scripting is highly gendered (Simon & Gagnon, 1987).

In many societies local demarcations exist to determine whether a woman is essentially "good" or "bad". Often such evaluation is based upon a woman's *perceived* sexual behavior.⁶ Law (2000: 126)

⁵ Data were also informed by young men's experiences and analysis of popular culture (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and film).

⁶ For contemporary cross-cultural examples see: in Lombok, Bennett (2002a; 2002b); in Bali, Jennaway (2002: 85-87); among Hmong youth in Australia, Liamputtong (2002: 251-125); in Bangladesh, Rozario (2002: 45).

argues that in the Philippines, Catholicism mediates the subject positions of women through binary codes of Madonna versus whore, demonstrating how religious creeds provide an edifice of national ideologies and sexualities.

According to Law (2001: 234) the Catholic labelling of women as whores or Madonnas plays an important role in defining, identifying, or being "the *other* Mary". I would contend that this term—deriving from gender ideologies based on Spanish-influenced postulates of honour and shame—not only encompasses the commercial sex worker, but also the perceived casual sex-seeker, the unwed mother, the raped woman, the separated woman, and to a lesser extent, the mistress. Indeed, prior to becoming a sex worker, women often experience one or more of these roles (Chat & McIlwaine, 1995; Hilsdon, 2003; Pollock & Sturdevant, 1992).

One of the most important concepts here concerns "othering", whereby larger ideological structures endorse women's separation from each other through the mechanism of stigmatization. As Ramazanoglu (1989: 153) states, "Religious ideas, practices and institutions actively, though in contradictory ways, shape women's lives, identities, and sense of worth, and so legitimate and accentuate divisions between women." In the Philippines, division rests upon glorified notions of the Virgin Mary contrasted to the morally bankrupt, deprived *other* Mary. We see examples of this in the ways in which sex workers are alienated as a distinctly foreign femininity.

Discussing stereotypes about Filipina sex workers and their marginalization from mainstream society, Pollock & Sturdevant (1992: 41) write: "The stereotype, most importantly, makes it hard for women to leave the industry, as they know that the image of the 'sinful' woman will continue to hound them even after they leave that work." Rejected from the "respectable world", the only inevitability is that the sex worker will be perceived irrefutably as the Other (ibid: 316-317).

In another study about sex work in the Philippines, Chant and McIlwaine (1995: 254) argue that "a far-reaching implication of sex work is the distance it sets up between one group of women and the rest of the female populace." Moreover, they assert: "In attempt to dissociate themselves from sex workers, most women, as we have seen, not only dress demurely to be considered 'respectable' [e.g. long sleeves and hems], but must refrain from smoking, drinking alcohol or changing boyfriends on a regular basis as well." Thus the freedom of women in mainstream society is curtailed so as to "distinguish themselves from their 'fallen' counterparts" (ibid: 253-255).

During fieldwork, my interviewees spoke about women of "good virtue" embodying *Maria Clara* femininity. Celebrated in Jose Rizal's renowned literary work *Noli Me Tangere* (1912), the character of Maria Clara has come to be symbolic of the virtues and nobility of Filipina women. Ideal femininity was conceptualized by Rizal as a "demure, self-effacing beauty whose place was on the pedestal of male honour" (Yoder, 2003).

Consensus is found among researches about meanings of the commonly termed, "Maria Clara syndrome". Tan *et al.* (2001: 104) describe it as a stereotyped female persona of "modesty, docility, and submissiveness". Torres (2002: 33) depicts it as "subterfuge and the repression of feelings of physical attraction towards a man, which was the social prescription in 19th century Philippines." Blanc-Szanton (1990: 368) characterizes Maria Clara as "pure, virginal, and grand ladies". And Church (1986: 6) avers that Maria Clara qualities such as being reserved, soft, yielding and loyal are the ego-ideal for women, as are women who are "maternal, actively supportive and

permissive with husbands" considered superlative. Being sexually circumspect underlies all descriptions of Maria Clara.

Women in Kalibo apply notions of being "conservative", "traditional", or "like Maria Clara" in their descriptions of ideal feminine behaviour, as contrasted to those who are sexually available. Such dualistic coding, however, is rigid, not allowing women to negotiate between the two, nor illustrative of the greater variation upon which women nominally traverse. And so a third category, arising from my ethnographic data, is given to women who are situated ambivalently between these extremes. I call her the *Manila Girl*.

Embodying notions of sophistication and modernity, the Manila Girl competes with traditional dichotomies of Maria Clara and *other* Mary archetypes. The Manila girl depicts women who are to varying degrees "liberal", as contrasted to "province girls", who are considered naïve and lacking in taste. The Manila Girl is somewhat urbane (ideologically or physically). She explores (her feelings, her body). She is exposed to western media and popular culture—film, songs, fashion—and this influences her fantasy life. If economically viable, it also influences her consumption habits, whereby she will shop, desiring icons of urban middle-class modernity (Hills, 1998). The Manila Girl experiments; bends rules; often, is educated. To gain freedom from the conservative eyes of family members, the Manila Girl sometimes lies. She flirts (using cyber means). She has large dreams.

Interestingly, Johnson's (1996: 102) analysis of gay (male) beauty contestants in the Southern Philippines draws parallels to my classificatory schema. Some contestants, Johnson reports, identified themselves with "a shy, quiet, self-effacing image of femininity, defined primarily in terms of motherhood and domesticity"—I would argue, the Maria Clara model. Others Johnson found projected themselves as "progressive, educated, independent, glamorous, sophisticated, cosmopolitan women": a quintessential description of the Manila Girl.

Anne-Marie Hilsdon (2003: 20), too, in her study of young Muslim Maranao Filipinas, discovered that, while attempting to adhere to traditional sexual prescriptions, young women also sought different ways of being modern. Hilsdon explores how women's everyday lives are becoming "part of the global system of exchange commodities", particularly through communication technologies, such as overseas soap operas (ibid: 21).

The Manila Girl is a nebulous category, by no means complete or unchanging. She expands and then shrinks, pushes forward and then retreats. Situated ambivalently among contradictions, the Manila Girl gives credence both to traditionalism (Maria Clara virtue), but also positions herself as forward thinking and cosmopolitan. With her mobile phone in one hand and her rosary in the other, she aligns herself to the global Other.⁷

In the Philippines, as in many parts of the world, the global cultural Other is often conceptualized in terms of America (Johnson 1996: 91). Cannell (1995) uses the notion of *imagined America* in her examination of popular culture in Bicol, the lowland Philippines. Discussing colonial mentality, Cannell (1995: 225) argues that Bicolanos

⁷ For a similar discussion see Mary Beth Mills (1998) regarding Thai women and modernity.

...think about the Philippines with reference to somewhere else. Usually, that somewhere is America, and usually the comparisons stress that the "outside" or distant place—the imagined America—is a place of power, wealth, cleanliness, beauty, glamour, and enjoyment.

Conceptually, this is terrain where the Manila Girl positions herself. Yet, although her outlook may be progressive, when it comes to sexuality, notions of honour and shame rarely escape her.

Due to the strong Spanish presence in the Philippines throughout the colonial period, it is hardly surprising that Pitt-Rivers' (1966) account of honour and shame in the Andalusian region and Gutierrez's (1991) account of sexuality in New Mexico, also colonised by the Spanish, are not dissimilar to Filipino findings (see Hilsdon, 2003, for example). In each setting, themes of female sexual purity opposed to male sexual potency abound: men as defenders of honour versus women as conservators of purity. Gutierrez writes: "Men could win and enhance their honour through action, but a woman's virtue is not something that could be won, only maintained or lost (1991: 213). This perception holds true in the modern day Philippines whereby a woman's honour is directly related to her perceived sexual conduct.

Indeed, the power of reputation—essentially public perception about an individual's measure to social ideals—and the workings of gossip, cannot be underplayed in Filipinas' lives. Kalibo is unlike Manila: there are few geographical spaces that provide anonymity. What is done in public, can readily be retold to one's peers or family members. This leads women to become acutely sensitive to the pressures of public opinion and fearful about exposing themselves to criticism. Aware that their public actions, if at all inadmissible, will likely surface through word of mouth, many young women curtail their behaviour in order to protect their reputation. Others, despite sexual surveillance through the practice of chaperonage, are able to circumvent rules through private activities, constructing double lives whereby they present themselves as a Maria Clara in public, whilst embodying Manila Girl or the *other* Mary in praxis.

filipino youth & sexual health vulnerability

Young Filipinas are situated in a country characterised by social conservatism. The Catholic Church condemns the "three Ps": premarital sex, promiscuity and prostitution (Law, 1999: 235). Religious morality and governmental orthodoxy enforce policy against adolescent access to reproductive and sexual health services, contraception, and in some cases, sexual education and counselling (UN/CPA, 1999: 42; Law, 1999). Parental discussion about sexual health is uncommon and there is a dearth of useful information disseminated in school settings (see Perez *et al.*, 1997).

The combination of a growing population of youth, delayed age at marriage and earlier sexual maturity⁸ has led to an increased number of young people engaging in premarital sexual activity without adequate knowledge about avoiding pregnancies and STIs (UN/CPA, 1999; Gastardo-Conaco *et al.*, 2003; Lee, 2002; Tan *et al.*, 2001; Young Adults Fertility Survey [YAFSS II], 1994). Low use and lack of access to contraception, particularly condoms, has resulted in large numbers of unplanned pregnancies, illegal abortions, and rising cases of STIs, including HIV/AIDS

⁸ Research indicates that the mean age of sexual debut in the Philippines is 16.8 for men and 18.4 for women (Raymundo *et al.*, 1999).

(UN/CPA, 1999: 42-43).⁹ These combined factors illuminate the gap between youth practice and youth knowledge, a gap that decreases young peoples' ability to negotiate safer sex, structuring them vulnerable.

Women are especially susceptible to different forms of harm, including unwanted pregnancy (early pregnancy elevates risks to mother and child), unsafe abortion, and cultural stigma associated with sexual activity among unmarried women. The emotional, economic and educational consequences in each of these circumstances are considerable (UN/CPA, 1999: 42).

situating chastity

That female chastity prior to marriage has high cultural value in the Filipino setting is hardly a new proposition, nor a surprising finding given the country's Catholic legacy. While conducting fieldwork I found a local periodical magazine, *Aklan Collegian* (March 2002: 8), which highlighted readers' opinions about premarital sex, revealing colourful naivety and neat allegiance to stereotypes:

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|---|---|
| <p><i>I do not agree with premarital sex because we live in a Catholic country and it violates God's law. It also causes population explosion.</i> (Welsie)</p> | <p><i>No ! Because virginity is very important for us, girls. Premarital sex is a sin.</i> (Sprinkle)</p> |
| <p><i>It depends. If the girl is very attractive, then I'll do it.</i> (Cute)</p> | <p><i>Premarital sex is unholy and is a mortal sin. We Filipinos are known as conservatives.</i> (Mylene)</p> |

Despite young Filipinas' experience of modernity—higher levels of education, increasing urban exposure, expanding technological resources, and access to western media, marriage is a major site of sexual regulation, revealing the importance of female virginity. Virginity at marriage is akin to women's moral worth and bound to concepts of wholeness. As one respondent, a 25 year old college student, said:

⁹ Unplanned pregnancies are a continuing health issue in the Philippines (UNCPA, 1999; Lee, 2002). In the YAFSS II survey, 36% of the married women reported that they conceived prior to marriage (Raymundo *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, in 2003, the National Commission on Population (POPCOM, 2003) reported that 1 out of 3 young women aged 15 to 19 experience unintentional pregnancies. According to another study, teenage pregnancies account for 30% of births among females of reproductive age, 17% of induced abortion cases, and three out of four maternal deaths (Singh and Cabigon, 1997: 1). Although a predominantly Catholic country, it has been estimated that 20-30 per 1,000 women aged 15-49 in the Philippines have had an abortion. However, strong public opinion against abortion exists and it is illegal, and consequently access to safe abortion is difficult (Singh and Cabigon, 1997: 13). Findings from 1985-1999 point to a maternal mortality ratio of 170 per 100,000 live births (see United Nations Development Programme: UNDP, 2002).

Virginity is like a mirror. If a girl breaks a mirror, she can put the pieces back together, but the mirror won't ever be the same again because of the cracks. A woman who loses her virginity may get her act together and behave as a good girl should, but she will never be able to erase the fact she's been with a man. It's like a bottle-cap seal. Some labels read: *Don't use if seal is broken*. Women consider themselves contaminated once a man touches them. They think they should marry the guy they lost their virginity to, the one that broke their seal.

Research respondents conceptualised virginity predominantly in relation to *the male*: specifically in regard to potential intimate relationships with a future husband and in terms of their ongoing relationship with God. By possessing virgin status, women have a greater likelihood of attracting high calibre suitors and are considered above moral reprimand. Freed from "a sexual past", respondents believed that they would be able to negate future marital conflict and the potentiality of their husbands justifying sex outside of marriage based on their wives having been "promiscuous", and thus impure.

The most common idiom used by respondents when discussing virginity was that *it is the best gift you can give your husband*. Essentially, their celibacy acts both as a gift and as a long term investment. Like a moral dowry, women viewed the act of waiting and then granting their husband permission to enter their bodies as a sacred gift. Mauss (1969) wrote of social life as ongoing exchanges involving material and symbolic commodities, which ultimately through reciprocity binds parties or individuals together. Virginity, then—embodied as an unbroken hymen and representative of morality—can be viewed as a symbolic commodity: a bargaining point and form of social capital, with high "sexual exchange value" (Bourdieu, 1984).

Another strong rationale for remaining a virgin prior to marriage was framed in terms of acquiescence to God, as well as Catholic ideals of purity and bodily control. Pia (age 25, young professional) commented:

Women should have self-discipline, self-control, and fear of the Lord, and they should stand firmly for their principles. It's an honour that you present yourself to God as a virgin. You are chaste when you face the altar, because if not, you can never wear a white bridal gown.

Traditionally, once a woman has had sex, even if it is in the form of rape, she becomes an undesirable candidate for marriage. The Filipino saying, "Wherever you fall down, that's where you get down", means that the man who has sex with you is the only man who will marry you (Sturdevant & Stoltzfus, 1992: 137).

male sexual debut

Cultural discrepancy is found when comparing local ideologies regarding male and female virginity, particularly in terms of active/passive sex scripts. Sexual double standards have a stronghold over local sexualities, with men generally being celebrated for sexual pursuits (Sturdevant & Stoltzfus 1992).¹⁰ Extensive male sexual experience is not regarded as detrimental

¹⁰ This phenomenon is reflected in numerous cross-cultural settings; for contemporary discussions, see, for example, Bennett (2002a, 2002b) in the Indonesian setting, and Fongkaew (2002) in Northern Thailand.

to character, as many men do frequent commercial sex-sites (Lee, 2002; Tan *et al.*, 2001; Raymundo *et al.*, 1999: 84). Findings from Lee's Manila-based study succinctly illuminate this.

Lee (2002) points to the salience of group pressure in the context of male sexual debut.¹¹ Often, more sexually experienced men lead their virgin counterparts to sites where commercial sex is available. Half of the students in Lee's study, "together with a friend or peer group, had first gone drinking, gone to a party, or had watched an x-rated video, and then visited a sauna bath, night club or brothel" for first coitus (*ibid.*: 138). Friends or male elders (uncles or grandfathers) employed commercial sex workers, offering them to the sexual novice as a *gift* [my emphasis].

For men, first-time sex is perceived as a rite of passage, from adolescence to adulthood. Colloquially it is referred to as sexual baptism (Lee, 2002; Tan *et al.*, 2001). Speaking to this, one of my respondents, Sami, commented:

In some cases fathers take their sons to brothels to lose their virginity. To some Filipinos, being a virgin is a sign of a lack of masculinity, a source of embarrassment. My brother, for instance, is still a virgin at age twenty-three, and only his closest friends know. He hides the fact that he is a virgin to some of his friends for fear that they might think of him as *mahina* (weakling) or *bakla* (homosexual). He has remained a virgin because he wants to lose his virginity to someone he really loves.

Although this highlights how reverse scripts of the body-social operate for men (male virginity as embarrassment), we are also reminded through Sami's brother's atypical desire to "wait for love" that such dichotomies are fluid and individuals differ from their cultural constitutions. Nevertheless, as Lee contends, by losing one's virginity, men are able to assert their masculinity and uphold prevailing machismo norms (Lee, 2002: 138).

Let us return to the gendered relationship between virginity and the notion of gift. A woman's virgin body is given as a gift to her husband, whilst a woman's dissident body (the commercial sex worker, the *other* Mary) is given as a gift to the sexual novice. Thus, both the inexperienced man and his experienced counterpart receive women's bodies as gifts. Revealing underlying patriarchal structures, the only character-ensuing stigma is the virgin woman and the commercial sex worker, not the man whose body she adjoins. Moreover, it is not uncommon for women to marry men they have gifted their bodies to and for them to become situated with husbands who, ironically, utilize other women's bodies, either through commercial, casual or more committed arrangements (eg. mistresses). Women's bodies—almost interchangeable—become the gift that keeps on giving. Similarly, discussing sex work in the Philippines, Chant and McIlwaine (1995: 254) write:

One of the most significant outcomes of an entertainment infrastructure is its reinforcement of the notion that women are objects for the sexual gratification of men. Another is its explicit condoning of sexual double standards whereby men have the right to buy sex, while having wives who remain faithful. The latter not only strengthens the polarization of women into "virgins" or "Madonnas", on one

¹¹ The median age of sexual debut for both students and slum dwellers in Lee's (2002) study was age 17.

hand, and "whores" on the other, but also places women in the humiliating and powerless position of having their status determined by the nature of their sexual relationship with men. The pragmatic (and legally endorsed) availability of commercial sex work[ers] for men also means that wives have little chance of preventing their husband from engaging in this activity, let alone of responding with behavior of a similar nature.

woman as gatekeeper, man as explorer

The missing discourse of female desire among (young) women is central to understanding their sexual decision-making (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994). Sex scripts allot different degrees of sexual agency to women and men. If the Filipino man is celebrated as a sexual explorer, the Filipina is taught to curtail male desire. Manifested are strong sex scripts of male persistence and female resistance. According to respondents, virginity "is the one thing men are after from us, you shouldn't lose it." Moreover, retreat from sexual advance is considered "a test for women of their strength, of how to control their urges."

This sentiment is echoed in the theoretical work of Carole Vance (1984). Vance asserts that in order to curb male sexual impulse, self control, diligence and watchfulness become culturally constructed female virtues (ibid: 2, 4-5): women become the "moral custodians of male behaviour" (ibid: 4). In contrast, female pleasure—passion, sexual abandonment and impulsiveness—occupies a diminishing public space and guilty private place (ibid: 3, 7). Here, where pleasure and guilt merge and the public and the private divide, we find murky terrain and its nebulous occupants: Maria Clara, Manila Girl and the *other* Mary.

Women in Kalibo are positioned as gatekeepers. They must control themselves, their bodies, their curiosities, and their desires whilst asserting scripts of chastity and passionlessness: Maria Clara femininity. Unvoiced are women's urges, desires to experience the flow: the progression of intimacy. Women are taught to stay aware, not to close their eyes in a dark room with their lovers' arms around them, not to surrender to the moment. Yet, many do. And, in doing so, they become the Manila Girl or the *other* Mary, or something in between. To ward off negative self-evaluation, interviewees countered this script by constructing scenarios whereby their appointment as sexual vigilant is compromised, positioning them as unaccountable.

modern virgins: towards desire

There are numerous reasons why women in Kalibo guard their virginity. Chastity is upheld due to femininity norms, religious *morés*, in terms of gifting, or because of fears—namely, fears of becoming pregnant, gaining an unsavoury reputation, disappointing one's parents or receiving parents' ire. Yet despite such misgivings it is not uncommon for normative codes to be breached. Like elsewhere in the world, the name given to this contravention is "love".

While most respondents expressed strong views about remaining celibate prior to marriage, others spoke of exceptions whereby premarital sex was morally defensible. Premarital sex was considered sometimes pardonable if enacted in a committed relationship, that is, when two parties are in love, and there is a promise or assumption of marriage. This is not the case if the act occurs within the realm of casual desire, which is akin to prostitution.¹² Women who engage in sex without love are considered immoral and religiously bankrupt, the *other* Mary. Moreover, returning to the notion of pleasing men, premarital sex can be morally redeemed through male

¹² Mary Beth Mills (1998) reports similar conceptions in Thailand.

approval: that is *if* a woman's future husband "can accept her". This is perhaps a significant twist: a shift from societal definitions of the *other* Mary, to an individual male's definition.

Virginity is no big deal nowadays because it's really up to the man. Some men do not care if their wives-to-be are no longer virgins, as long as they love them. Before, it was really important to be a virgin, not anymore, as long as the guy likes the girl and is sincere (Trina, age 22, young professional).

Despite many interviewees claiming that Filipinas collectively "are becoming more liberal"—like Manila Girls—only a few held such sentiments themselves. One young interviewee said:

For me, it's not that important because I think you don't base a woman's worth by that piece of skin, the hymen. It's OK not to be a virgin, because we can still be loved and accepted. The Filipino culture dictates that when a lady gets married she should be a virgin, but this time it's no longer applicable to Filipina women... They give too much importance to their virginity. Virginity is not that necessary, but in the culture of the Philippines, it's very important.

This last comment is resonant for many young women in Kalibo: virginity, although not necessarily an imperative, possesses great social significance. Many respondents experienced tension between *morés* of the body-social versus desires of the body -silent, friction between the Maria Clara and Manila Girl sides of themselves. How does one reconcile personal views that do not fit with social norms? One way to reconcile this is to create simultaneous public and private identities, whereby women can assert Maria Clara behaviour when in public, whilst experimenting with their desires within the context of secrecy. However, the consequences of doing so in terms of sexual health and silence of disclosure are far-reaching.

Respondents sought to explain which factors influenced premarital sexual activity. Besides love, the choice to have premarital sex was commonly linked to women's low self esteem:

It's so different nowadays. The women have little regard for themselves. When they have boyfriends, it's just OK for them to have sex. They give little regard to their dignity. Some women don't care about themselves, they don't even think about their future (Mikalela, age 18, college student).

Engaging in premarital sex was also said to be influenced by the effects of alcohol, or to a lesser extent, drug use:

We have a neighbour and she is more liberal than other teenagers. She's had sex and she has friends who drink, smoke, and even do drugs. I know that 'coz because her house is very near from ours and I heard from the gossip. If they had taken drugs, then they also want to experience it [have sex]. They can't do it when they are in a normal condition so they drink liquor, take drugs (Rita, age 22, service industry).

Many respondents considered premarital sex as a trend. It was seen as operating as a consequence of peer pressure in the context of "modern times" and of disintegrating parental governance.

Throughout fieldwork, it was not uncommon to encounter the articulation of Filipinos having adopted American culture, or, in other cases, Spanish culture. Respondents would often refer to Spanish culture as influencing Filipino sentiment (emotional, passionate, jealous), while American culture affected sexual activity, resulting in Filipinas becoming more modern, and hence, sexually active.

We have adopted the culture of the Americans. In America, a girl should have lost her virginity by the age of eighteen. I have friends in Manila who are between ages of fourteen and sixteen who are no longer virgins (Issa, age 23, service industry).

Manila Girl attitudes amongst Filipinas were believed to occur explicitly in response to exposure to western media. Another respondent discusses:

It's different now. Maybe because they [women] are influenced by the things that they watch on TV which are already modern things. People have a more liberal attitude about sex, and the media, even the advertisements, have a mix of sex or pornography. The protagonists in movies and *telenovelas* do it, and it's OK. Some advertisements are sexually suggestive. *Cosmopolitan* and *FHM* sell like hotcakes. The media says premarital sex is OK.

Many interviewees framed premarital sexual activity in the light of the disintegrating family. The decline of traditional parenting was linked explicitly to economic imperatives: financial vulnerability of caretakers translated to sacrifice of parental supervision (see also Raymundo *et al.*, 1999: 12, 18).

Filipino youth are characterised by high social and geographic mobility in terms of living arrangements and exposure to urban environments (Raymundo *et al.*, 1999: 18). Prior to marriage, many young people transfer among households, experiencing non-familial living arrangements for some duration of their youth, eg. a dormitory or boarding house (*ibid.*: 11, 18). According to Young Adults Fertility Survey II (1999: 18), young single women particularly experience high rural-to-urban migration. Young people who pursue education or work opportunities in capital cities are commonly considered more liberal than their provincial counterparts and less likely to adhere to normative sex scripts:

Before, mostly girls were afraid. Now the new generation is not afraid of their parents. They just do whatever they want to do. Parents are not so strict nowadays. There's more *gimik* [fun activities] today, that's why sex is very rampant. Because parents are less strict, and they are busier than ever; both the father and the mother work, so child rearing is in school, in church. Parents can't supervise their children. And there are a lot of bars nowadays, nightlife. Some youth nowadays are not really dependent on their parents. They live away from their parents (Sugar, age 20, college student).

Indeed, moving to geographical places which provide variations of lifestyle, increasing nightlife options, lack of supervision and higher anonymity, increases young women's freedom from the body-social and the underworld of gossip. These combined factors endorse nominally taboo behaviour: experimentation with the Manila Girl ethos.

Mary Beth Mills, in her study of Thai modernity (1998: 302), found that women who had migrated to urban centers had a degree of autonomy over their actions hitherto unavailable to their mothers and grandmothers. City living and city wages allotted young women new forms of self-expression and new ways to explore themselves as modern. However, despite such freedoms, Mills found that women's urban autonomy was compromised due to emotional ties to the rural home and broader cultural ideologies. Similar tensions arise in the Filipino setting, found in the contradictory voices of Maria Clara, Manila Girl and the *other* Mary.

lived experiences of premarital sex: gateway to divergent futures

The following narratives, based on interviews, depict informants' experiences of premarital sex. They illustrate that, although normative sex scripts exist, women's experiences are nevertheless plural and diverse. Participants who engaged in premarital sex came from different economic brackets, had different levels of education, degrees of urban exposure, and differed in their church-going behaviour; as did they have diverse experiences with men. Perhaps the only shared demographic variable was that all women were of Catholic denomination. In the case studies which follow, I position women's experiences under the banner of premarital sex outcomes: union, separation leading to sexual exploration, and single mothering.

Of the respondents who were asked directly if they had experienced premarital sex, over half disclosed such an experience. Sexual exploration often led to penetrational intercourse and first intercourse to ongoing sexual encounters. Of the participants who had already kissed a man, half went on to engage in premarital sex, evidencing that once desires become embodied, further sexual explorations nominally ensue. No respondent experienced first sex leading to total termination of sexual activity. Breaching the initial code of chastity—Maria Clara virtue—inevitably resulted in further premarital sexual activity with the same or a different partner. This, I would argue, is because women already had lost that which was most important. They were already "tainted".

All respondents relied on traditional means of contraception: coitus interruptus. Of the respondents who engaged in premarital sex, almost half became pregnant, a few directly after first sex.¹³ This unambiguously reflects national health discourses, directly influenced by Catholic ideology, whereby contraception is not considered necessary for unmarried men and women or married couples without children. It also reflects national rates of low condom use which many researchers attribute to machismo cultural norms (Tan, 1999; Tan *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, from a woman's perspective, condom use interferes with the future-orientated view of a sexual partner, with condoms signifying a lack of fidelity and intruding into intimate settings as decidedly unromantic (Worth, 1996: 129).

Most respondents who engaged in premarital sex subsequently formed a union with their sexual partner, either through formal marriage or "live-in"/de facto arrangements. This occurred whether or not the woman had become pregnant.

¹³ Although pregnancy is a common outcome of premarital sex, birthing and motherhood are not explicit foci of this paper due to space limitations. Premarital sex can also result in potential hazardous termination. However, since none of my respondents disclosed such an experience, I do not focus here on this aspect of women's lives.

Among women's decisions to form a union with their sexual partner, a recurrent theme emerged: picking a marriage partner, since the woman had already lost her virginity to him. "Because I thought, since he was the first [to have sex with her], then he should be the last", said Hannah. Another young woman avers: "I chose him to marry because he was my first; it's absurd to find anyone else." In such cases, premarital sex emerges as a strategy that sometimes leads to successful intimate relationships (eg. see Karen's case below). However, it can also result in the establishment of relatively unhappy marriages, where women find themselves with husbands who are prone to "vices"—gambling, womanizing, drinking or violence (eg. see Kim's story below). But because divorce in the Philippines is not legal, these hapless women cannot legally separate from their husband. To a lesser degree, premarital pregnancy resulted in single mothering, through abandonment or in preference to being with the father of the child (eg. Mizzare's case).

Situated between the majority of women who formed a union with their sexual partner and the minority—women assuming the role of single mothers—is "the sexual explorer": women who separate from their initial sexual partner only to establish new sexual relationships (see Bourby's case). Unprotected by the union of marriage, most sexual explorers frame their experiences as shameful and work to keep their transgressions hidden from public evaluation by the body-social. Duality of embodiments results in a secret, double life.

The schism between the expected behaviour of maintaining celibacy and praxis—surrendering to desires—often leads women to experience a change of self-identity. Crossing the threshold of morality causes many to align them self with the *other* Mary. A small number, if able to accept their actions in a somewhat positive light, adopt a self-concept of the Manila Girl.

Unfortunately, due the workings of gossip, and the practice of stigmatization, women rarely disclose their sexual experiences to one another or seek counsel from health centres. As poignantly voiced by Vance (1984: 5): "*Transgressing gender raises the spectre of separation from other women—both the mother and literal and metaphorical sisters—leaving one isolated and vulnerable to attack*" [my emphasis].

Two prevailing themes structured young women's accounts of premarital sex. These were: (1) framing of scenario(s) under conditions in which women do not consider themselves responsible; and (2) surrender to sexual intercourse within the context of romantic love.

dangers of iconic love

Interwoven within rationales for first/premarital sex were discourses of love. In the Philippines, women generally experience their sexual debut with men they love in the context of (presumed) towards-marriage arrangements (Tan *et al.*, 2001). The Young Adults Fertility Survey II supports this finding, noting that 85% of young women experienced first premarital sex with their boyfriends (Raymundo *et al.*, 1999: 34).

Sex becomes a battlefield whereby a woman's love is tested. For example, many of Nellie's (age 22) boyfriends tried to "convince" her to have sex. "Yeah, they said, '*If you love me, you have to prove it.*' (Laughs). '*If you love me, then show it to me.*'" Discussing this with other interviewees, they commented: "Oh, that's the *most* common excuse for men—prove your love!" This also mirrors Lee's (2002: 137) findings, who notes: "There is respect when the man acknowledges the woman's refusal and stops insisting on 'getting it.' In many instances, though, the woman is likely to give in." Resurfacing are gendered scripts of male activity—"getting it"—versus female passivity—

"giving in." Respect for women is demonstrated through men's retreat from further intimacies, while respect is appropriated to women by their negation of desires.

Echoed in the Australian setting, Rosenthal *et al.* (1998: 36) and Kirkman *et al.* (1998) discuss how ideologies of love influence young women's sexual behaviour. Given that societal proscriptions deem the expression of young women's sexual desire inappropriate, young women thus use love to justify their sexual praxis: rationalising their sexual experiences under the banner of love seeking.

Similarly, Worth (1996: 126) argues that women's sexual decision-making is often based on "their belief in, search for, and vulnerability to romantic love."¹⁴ Discussing iconic love, she writes:

Although gender roles have been slowly changing, the ideal of romantic love remains a powerful icon for most women. This ideal is dangerous because it obscures the need for women to develop a strong sexual identity. Traditionally, it has portrayed women as empty vessels whose emotional and sexual fulfillment comes through reflecting their male lovers' passion rather than their own. It is the male lover who is in control of sexual desire and choices in the romantic love scenario. He chooses her, and in doing so, gives life to her sexual desires—desires that are hidden from her (ibid: 128).

Worth concludes that: "Unable to express who they are sexually, women are not in control of the form their sexual responses take" (ibid). This concept is illuminated in women's telling of their experiences of premarital sex.

karen

Karen is an attractive 26 year old married mother of four who works as a manicurist in Kalibo. She met her husband in high school during citizen army training; he was a drummer and a year older than she. At 17, Karen and her boyfriend became intimate. They had sex only once without a condom. This resulted in pregnancy:

Only one time and I was fertile. That's why I didn't finish school. This happened because we often saw each other; we got so involved that we often forgot about our studies. I forgot about everything... I really regret it.

The couple decided to marry, and did so at the local chapel. "To be married in church is enough for me. I didn't want us to live together as husband and wife without God's blessing", Karen explained. Karen's husband quit school and became a carpenter. Karen now practices family planning (birth control pills). When asked if she was content with her life, Karen said,

I'm contented. I'm married and bore children and our dreams are fulfilled one at a time. My husband doesn't fling to others. Unlike other married men, who have illicit affairs with other girls, when my husband goes out, he comes home on time.

¹⁴ Worth's (1996) work is based on ethnographic research of American women's sexualities during methadone treatment.

kim

Kim is 18, married, with a two year-old son. She lives in the squatter's compound of Kalibo with her husband and twelve others (in-laws). Although Kim finished high school, she is unemployed. Her father works abroad in the Persian Gulf.

Before meeting her husband, Kim had three other relationships, none involving sexual intercourse.

Kim married a former schoolmate. He is a bus driver, prone to "vices" (drugs, spending money). He sometimes hits her, although she was reluctant to discuss this. Kim said that she chose her husband to marry because he took her virginity: "When we had been together for a long time... when I was nearly drunk, we did it." Asked if she was conscious, Kim replied: "Maybe conscious, but drunk." Although no form of contraception was used, Kim and her partner did not conceive prior to marriage. Discussing her relationship, Kim said:

His earnings are just good enough for his vices. Because, when your pocket is empty, both of you tend to be hot-tempered which results in quarrels. This also may be the cause of blaming each other on where the money goes. When he drinks, he bugs me... That's the only thing that I want to get rid of. He's hardworking, but when his friends come, they have vices. Sometimes he spends his salary on vices.

Karen (the first example) highlights women placing high value in marriage and reproduction, pregnancy resulting in school cessation, and notions of "forgetting" in the context of premarital sex. Both Karen and Kim had sex without contraception, with men who they loved and, subsequently married. The question begs to be asked: in general, how much does women marrying their premarital sexual partner relate to retaining Maria Clara identity (interpersonally and socially) versus actual desires to wed?

Being drunk at first-sex (Kim: "when I was nearly drunk, we did it") was also demonstrated. Indeed, the causal link between drinking and premarital sex is well documented (eg. Fergusson and Lynskey, 1996). Tan *et al.* (2001: 106) point to the correlation between alcohol intake and sexual risks among young Filipinos: that loss of individual control leads to high risk behaviour. I would argue that the excuse provided by inebriation allows women to distance themselves from Maria Clara rules of embodiment. More than the alcohol in their bodies, it is the pretence of drunkenness that grants women license to experiment.

bourby

Bourby (age 21) works in the service industry. She had an Australian fiancé, who she met on the Internet. While I was conducting fieldwork, Bourby's fiancé came to Kalibo to meet her for the first time. He stayed with her family for one month. During this time, Bourby asked me if she could use my apartment to have some time alone with him. Uncomfortable, I decided to say no. However, it appears the two managed to find some privacy:

Have you had sex before ?

"I have. Just once, it's him, my fiancé."

Did you use contraception ?

"We just did it only once, so we didn't use...."

Were you worried ?

"Yeah (laughs), I was. I'm so scared. I'm just shy and he's so supportive with me."

After her fiancé left, Bourby entered into a second sexual relationship whilst pretending to be faithful to her Australian fiancé abroad. That she had already breached Maria Clara ideals granted Bourby justification to embody the role of sexual explorer. For women who have already transgressed local constructions of desirability (women as untainted, innocent), premarital sex, if not resulting in marriage, often leads women to create dual identities and venture towards further risky sexual relationships.

consent, coercion & forced sex

Examining premarital sex raises questions about power, the relationship of consent and coercion and how these inform or subvert women's employment of agency. Jafar (2003) discusses the importance of differentiating between wanted sexual attention—consensual relationships—and unwanted sexual attention: harassment.¹⁵ All respondents (besides an incest survivor) experienced first sex as consensual. However, interviewees often described first-coitus as being "forced" upon them. This did not imply rape, assault, exploitation or harm, but rather referred to notions of persuasion: *male* persuasion of a female partner to increase the range of sexual exploration.¹⁶ Although pressure was sometimes involved, it was not usually experienced as coercive in the negative. As Hoffman (1984: 124) asserts, consent can suggest "an element of passivity, a *willingness*, an agreement to accept the invitations of another" [emphasis in the original]. Highlighting these themes I turn to my research assistant's (Leticia) interview with Abby (age 22, service industry).

abby

Did any of your boyfriends convince you to have sex ?

"There is someone, but I don't like to. I'll give everything, but with limitation: 'Until here only, here.'"

Just above the belt ?

"Yes, above the belt only, but with limitation, I'll give everything except one thing, of course. I have limitations, above [the belt] only."

Until where ?

"Belt."

In the waist ?

"Yes, in the waist."

¹⁵ Discussing sexual relationships between college faculty and students, Jafar (2003) argues that definitions of harassment are so encompassing that they are in danger of becoming egregious.

¹⁶ Investigating courtship, marriage and motherhood among Hmong, Southeast Asian refugees living in Melbourne, Liamputtong (2002) reflects on "love play" which precipitates marriage and often includes sexual intercourse. She discusses how young women are taught not to express their sexual desire openly and should instead resist overtures and assume roles of reluctance. Liamputtong (2002: 257) asserts that they "are instructed to be shy and avoid shame by not initiating and acting upon their desire openly". Ahearn (2001) similarly deals with themes of consent, coercion and agency in terms of courtship and desire in Nepal. During elopement, men play the role of persuader, while women are constructed as passive recipients of men's requests, upholding gender ideologies that support the denial of female desire.

So what did you do when your boyfriend convinced you to...?

"I don't know, but I want also to experience how it feels, but I don't like [it]."

You want to experience but you don't like, why?

"I don't like."

You don't like the guy or you are you afraid?

"I love him, but I am afraid to do it. First, I don't like, but I want to try. I want to experience that thing called sex. Then after one month, he took everything (laughs). I don't like, but he forced me."

He has taken it?

"Yes, but he forced me to do it, but I don't like to. Then, I gave in after one month."

This small excerpt offers important clues to understanding embodied intimacy among young lovers. The gendered nature of sexual scripting is illuminated: men *convince* women to engage in sexual activity whilst women *grant* certain physical transgressions that are perceived to be "given" as a "gift". Women determine sexual access and establish sexual limitations, eg. "above the belt only". (Here we return to issues of bodily control, women as gatekeeper.) The man, aware of these limitations, may attempt to surpass them. Some level of verbal or nonverbal negotiation occurs as he passes each mark and works to move on to the next.

Abby spent one month deflecting her boyfriend's sexual advances, while he spent the same time trying to persuade her to accept them. Prior to first sex, she was ambivalent about sexual initiation: "I don't like [it] but I want to try. I want to experience that thing called sex." When sexual intercourse did occur, Abby vehemently described it as being unwanted and "forced". Leticia's language also supports the gendered nature of first sex, as demonstrated by her asking Abby, "He has *taken* it?" Abby's response is important: "Yes, but he forced me to do it, but I don't like to. Then, I gave in after one month." Within the same statement, about the same event, Abby makes a paradoxical claim: she "gave in" to sex, but was also forced, signifying passivity. By adopting this stance Abby is able to reduce accountability for her actions: to retain psychological closeness to Maria Clara identity.

The interview continues:

What happened next?

"He took everything. First try was very painful."

Painful?

"Yes, actually I have a fever on the next day. He used me. He can't penetrate, so he told me to be easy—"

To relax?

"Yes, to relax, because he can manage it. And we did it. I was very exhausted and had a fever. It happened again next month. We did it once a month, once a month only."

How many months did you do it? How many times?

"Since the beginning...? Maybe 13 times."

Here we see an example of male culpability, eg. "he used me", and the complex relationship between consent and coercion, as demonstrated in Abby's account of how she tried to relax, and the recurrent "forced" sex. Moreover, if Abby did not desire sex, why did she choose to repeat the act thirteen times? Perhaps an unspoken contract developed between them, illuminating other aspects of physical and emotional intimacy besides penetration that women enjoy.

Discussing sexuality, Gallop (1997: 38) argues there is an assumption that: "women do not know what we [women] want, that someone else, in a position of greater power, knows better." However, by being persuaded, by choosing to consent to premarital sex, are women also embracing agency? Addressing the transformative potential of consent, Hoffman (1984: 124-25) argues:

...consent, although the relatively passive moment of a relationship with another, is never a fatalistic acceptance of what "is". To consent is also to transform, for in "consenting", the individual enters into a relationship and by participating in such a relationship, social reality becomes something *other* than what it would have been, had the act of consent not occurred.

The strategy of women negating personal accountability for premarital sexual activity may also be an example of women harnessing agency. The pretence of forced sex distances women from being defined (by the self and others) as the *other* Mary. Positioning events this way protects women's "social body" and reduces loss of self-esteem and the degree of guilt women *ecru* when countering the Maria Clara ethos. However, negating accountability has the opposite effect in the domain of sexual health (the body silent): an area where embracement of personal agency would be the most useful.

The last outcome of premarital sex, and the least likely to occur, is single mothering through abandonment or "choice". With pregnancy, the consequence of women's sexual decision-making bares witness and hence receives judgment from the social, public arena. Often alongside premarital pregnancy comes a change of self-identity, not only from young-woman to new-mother, but the conceptualization of oneself as the *other* Mary: a failure in reaching local gender ideals and offender of religious codes. Many women work to hide their pregnancy from the community, employing different means of social camouflage. Commonly, pregnancy leads women to feel great disappointment about their situation; cessation (or interruption) of schooling; and experiences of stigma attached to unwed motherhood. As does *tsismis* (gossip) relentlessly resurface whenever women step out of proscribed bounds, rearing its head as a dangerous and hurtful device. Discussing lone parenthood, often leading Filipinas to sex work, Chant and McIlwaine (1995: 250) write:

...few other jobs provide women sufficient income to raise their children alone, but, as mentioned earlier, considerable stigmatization surrounds single mothers: if women are treated as social outcasts because of lone parent status, then little may be lost if they move into sex work. Embedded in this is the fact that unmarried mothers are visible to the rest of society as having lost their virginity—in deed, many women are unfortunate enough to get pregnant during their first sexual encounter. Given widespread condemnation of pre-marital sex among peers, family and prospective marriage partners, it is not surprising that single motherhood's powerful associations with lost virginity and sexual licentiousness result in situations where shame and ostracism make this group (and even their childless counterparts who have "transgressed" before marriage as well) feel they have little to lose by selling their bodies. This is especially tragic given that so many Filipino sex workers appear to experience "deflowering" as a result of rape or incest and not through their own volition.

crystal

Crystal is 23 and comes from a middle class family. She is a nurse and single mother of a four-year old son. Schooled partly in Manila, Crystal worked for some time as a nurse in the nearby city of Iloilo. She now lives in Kalibo with her natal family. Her son resides in Iloilo and is looked after by Crystal's *tita* (aunt).¹⁷ She attends church twice a week, enjoys an active social life and visits her son regularly.

Crystal has had only one boyfriend, a relationship she hid from her family. When she was 17, he convinced her to have sex. No contraception was used. Prompted by Leticia in an interview, Crystal recalls the decisions that she made upon learning that she had become pregnant:

"I refused to marry at that time because I was only 18 years old and I believe I can handle being a single parent."

Why did it happen ? Did your boyfriend force you to do it ?

"Yes, I was drunk at the time. He was my boyfriend for almost two years."

Did he take responsibility ?

"Yep. He asked for my hand and my parents' consent, but I refused. My parents accepted my decision. I was forced then to stop schooling and continue only after I gave birth to my son. I love him, but I'm not ready yet to settle down."

Returning to alcohol use as part of first-sex justification, Crystal's experience also reflects agency. Crystal was not passive on deciding upon her options or facing her future. As brave heroine, she challenged traditional postulates and embraced single mothering as choice, thereby countering norms of the body social and embracing the Manila Girl ethos.

concluding remarks: bodies of risk, bodies at harm

Women's non-accountable behaviour leads to serious sexual health risks with major consequences for public health. Unsafe sex, unplanned pregnancies, STI transmission, including HIV/AIDS and social stigma, are possible outcomes for the young sexually active woman. Not one respondent explicitly addressed the notion of risk in their conceptions of sexuality. However, they did allude to dangers of the body social—and to a much lesser extent, the body silent. In Tan *et al.*'s (2002: 110) conclusion about Filipino youth, they state:

Risks do not just have social contexts; they are social in nature. We see, repeatedly, the main concerns are not biomedical, eg. STDs or pregnancies; rather, the social consequences of having STDs or being pregnant."

Indeed biomedical consequences associated with premarital sex tend to be secondary to the omnipotent threat of shame incurred by the individual and family unit, demonstrating how the body social clashes, and ultimately overrides, the body silent.

Sexual risks for women are directly linked to ideologies of love (Kirkman *et al.*, 1998; Rosenthal *et al.*, 1998; Tan *et al.*, 2001; Worth, 1996). As Worth (1996: 129-130) contends, "only when we ask what love has to do with sexual choices and behavior—when we approach behavioural change with a new sense of awareness of the full complexity of women's lives—will we understand sexual risk taking."

¹⁷ It is not uncommon for parents or extended family of young working mothers to take on temporary primary care of their offspring. As Crystal's parents are both working, the aunt provides this "service".

Within the women's narratives there was a striking absence of dialogue about safe sex. That negotiating safe sex is culturally incongruous to Maria Clara norms of femininity means that women defer to boyfriends, and later to husbands, in their sexual decision-making. Condom use among lovers is not common. Besides not complementing machismo norms, condoms are thought to oppose discourses of partnered love. Condoms do not belong to the Filipino script, and certainly not to the Filipino woman's script. The question of how we can counteract conceptions that women who are willing premarital sexual actors are deviant, is nothing but daunting. Culturally, as it stands now, for safe sex to happen, women have to full-heartedly embrace an *other* Mary identity—an act, almost none are willing to do, save a few who have already "lost everything", ie. their honour. Bridging the distance between women who conform to hegemonic femininity and those who are "fallen" requires local education, transparency of patriarchal double standards, and the questioning of religious rhetoric—hardly an expected outcome considering the country's socio-economic and historical milieu.

Clifford Geertz (1980: 4) wrote that sex is a "cultural activity sustaining a biological process." Sex is cultural, because the rules which govern its enactment, the meanings inscribed by a given society's members, and the array of associated consequences, reflect wider historic, economic, religious, and gender systems.

I demonstrated the far-reaching consequences of merging non-contracepting bodies in terms of women's life paths. In the context of committed love relationships, women gamble in their debut of first sex, repeatedly framing their lived experiences in terms of non-accountability: complex dialectics of love, guilt, forgetting, surrender, coercion and intoxication.

The rhetoric of female disavowal of desire is crafted to counter negative evaluation from the body social. It allows women to reconcile private practice in premarital relations with normative ideals. Women forget when they are about to have first-sex, are inebriated, or are forced into participating. Analysis of women's first sex as seduction—surrender to sexual intimacy due to male persuasion rather than their own desire—reveals the salience of sex scripts and demonstrates how performance or theatre is involved in sexual negotiations and exploration. By positioning sex in such a way, women are granted psychological distance from deifying chastity norms of Maria Clara femininity, but they are left vulnerable to serious sexual health risks.

The majority of the data herein provides little insight into women's sexual desire. Does forced or unaccountable sex reinforce women's powerlessness? It may well do so, yet it also suggests that by actively inverting desires to safeguard their reputation, women are not necessarily powerless objects, but perhaps ingenuous subjects. Nonetheless, women's manoeuvring within and against the constraints they face are individual experiences which, as a whole, serve to reproduce rather than challenge inequitable structures. In women's desire to retain Maria Clara self-concepts, they ultimately perpetuate the ideological conditions of their oppression.

Women in the Catholic Philippines stand on unstable ground, which shifts between the old and the new. As philosopher Marshall Berman (1982: 15) writes:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know,

everything we are.... it pours us into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.

Filipinas engage in premarital sex, mostly irrespective of whether they align themselves with Maria Clara or Manila Girl archetypes. A Manila Girl may give greater question to the importance of premarital virginity, but she is no more likely to embody transgressions than her Maria Clara counterpoint. In contrast, the *other* Mary is defined explicitly because of sexually taboo behaviour. It is assumed that she is sexually "deviant", and this makes it easier for her to be so. In the future we can foresee more women positioning themselves with a Manila Girl ideology—and, perhaps, practice: moving toward creating a discourse of female desire. However, to expect the practice to incorporate safe sex is highly unrealistic.

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