

Sexual Parity

by Mari Luz Quesada-Tiongson

Women are more than just breasts or wombs. We should look at her in the totality of her being and personhood.

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ne of the most significant contributions of the women's movements in enriching the human rights agenda is its vigilance in putting a balance between issues that affect the productive/public sphere—paid work, community and civil rights, welfare, governance, and the like—and issues that concern the often neglected reproductive/domestic sphere—the invisible one—where women are still traditionally relegated. Moreover, women have successfully redefined some previously held “private matters” as public issues.

Thus, violence against women (VAW), predominantly committed in the realm of the family, which is also the bastion of male violence, has now been forced into the global, national or community agenda. Marital rape, incest, forced pregnancy, abuse of women in intimate relations, and genital mutilation are but some of the experiences that women have named as VAW.

SEXUALITY: CORE OF THE ISSUE

Women assert that the denial of women's basic right to reproductive self-determination (RSD), a core element and guiding principle of

women's empowerment, underpins continued violence against women. RSD asserts the primacy of a woman's decision-making over matters related to her sexuality, fertility, and reproduction. RSD upholds her capacity to dream and aspire, to express herself freely, and to act on her own will. Because patriarchal values are deeply imbedded in the dominant culture and socialisation process, facets of her existence have been constructed to satisfy male needs and desires. Despite attempts by women's movements to alter sexist stereotypes in language, media, arts and education, images of women as sex objects, baby machines, domestic servants, and subordinates still proliferate—a reflection of a global psyché that props up men's self-serving interests.

That women have no control over their lives and bodies is most strikingly played out in the area of sexuality. The inequality of power between the sexes manifests itself clearly as women surrender their body to their male partners' desire and control. Men control when, how often, and how sexual intercourse is done. Sex as coitus has hindered women's spontaneous expression or freedom of desire. Women are not free to discover and feel, design new types of sexuality that celebrate the whole spectrum of female sexuality. Those who resort to orgasm from self-stimulation or masturbation, for instance, are labeled as sexually dysfunctional. A large number become victims of men's fantasies, libido, and sometimes, sexual violence. The heterosexual bias continues to marginalise women who opt for lesbian relationships and stigmatise those who choose not to engage in intimate relationships.

Sexuality, in the realm of reproductive self-determination, is closely tied to fertility. If women had real control over their lives and



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bodies, it might not be necessary to use mechanical birth control methods. Women could decide whether and when to engage in sexual intercourse with men. Women might choose other forms of sexual expression not involving coital penetration at all.

But meanwhile, a passive sexuality has emerged where women have been conditioned to regard sex in marriage as their duty while granting it as men's privilege. This has led women to take on an attitude of submissiveness. A cult of motherhood idealises women's sexlessness and their passion for mothering and other reproductive roles.

Denying women of their sexuality has stripped them of the power to make decisions regarding their choice of sexual partners, to negotiate with their partners the timing and nature of sexual activity, to

protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and disease, and least of all, to acknowledge their own sexual desire.

CHOICE OR CAPACITY TO DECIDE?

"The right to reproductive self-determination has often been interpreted as the right to choose, that is a reproductive choice. These terms however are not synonymous. On the contrary, they may create and have different implications. According to a study of WomanHealth Philippines, the more strategic question is not whether women have the right to choose but whether women have the capacity to decide."

Experience bears out that on a macro level, a woman's capacity to make decisions on sexuality, reproduction, fertility, sexuality is inextricably linked to the full exercise of her economic, social, and political rights. This requires economic and social enabling conditions such as education, food security,

gainful employment, disposable income, access to basic social services, an end to discrimination and violence against women. Clearly, this is not an agenda solely for the women's movement but for the broader social movements that are struggling for people-centered development.

On an individual level, the capacity to decide hinges on two basic conditions: first, that one is informed, and second that one has a sense of rights and self-worth. Consciousness-raising efforts along this direction by women's groups are commendable. However, advocates and activists note that realizing the second condition is an especially formidable task. For apart from the myriad social, cultural, and political forces that prevent women from defining and actualizing themselves, a major obstacle that should be addressed is the enemy within—a female psyche that has worked to the advantage of men, and to the detriment of women. Female sexuality in fact serves as a major barrier in fully realizing her personhood. Women do not only sleep with the enemy; the enemy is well-ensconced in her mind and heart!

ANTITHETICAL

Indeed, female sexual repression has hindered women from developing strong sexual identities. The lack of awareness of their own sexual selves has rendered women powerless to express their deepest sense of themselves—spiritually, emotionally and physically. Unable to express who they are sexually, women are not in control of the form their sexual responses take. They lack sexual parity—as evidenced by the abuse they suffer from their partners if they demand protection from unwanted pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases.

Not only has male sexuality defined and controlled women's sexuality, it has struck



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deep into her psyche, preventing her to break off from relationships that have turned sour, perverse or violent. Many women stay in these relationships because of their economic dependence on males. But there is a whole gamut of other barriers.

Foremost of these barriers is the ideal of romantic love, a powerful driving force for most women. This ideal portrays women as empty vessels whose emotional and sexual fulfillment comes through reflecting their male lovers' passion rather than their own. This ideal observes the need for women to develop strong sexual identities. In this ideal, men control sexual desires and choices in a romantic relationship. He chooses her, and in doing so, gives life to her sexual desires—desires that are hidden from her.

“Romance is deceiving because it privileges men's full development of his personhood. Romantic love encourages women to regard herself as an object of desire whose dignity and honor may be trampled upon through violence,” according to Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, a feminist health activist. But to expose romance as a subtle and civilised form of male conquest of women is tantamount to dealing a big blow on the sacredly held institutions of marriage and family. Such heresy!

Addressing the need to promote a self-affirming female sexuality cannot be removed from a condition where it is deeply embedded: a complex system of power, and social, political, and economic interests that serve men. Sexuality is not simply a private affair between two individuals, the personal is political.

The tragedy is that women, especially in the Third World, have learned to use sexual activities to acquire economic, political and even social power instead of working towards

social, cultural, political and economic emancipation. This has led to some women granting sexual favors to their husbands, lovers and bosses for some tangible gains or performing sexual services for profit or fame.

DECOLONISING OUR BODY, MIND AND HEART

As sexuality still generally remains to be a taboo subject, women should realise that the notion of sexuality as men's domain has engendered life-and-death issues such as VAW. Reclaiming women's sexuality may well be a key in combatting VAW. But this is not to put the burden solely on women; men must equally be put to task for their behaviour and its consequences. The assertion of a female sexuality is in fact a critique of the existing male sexuality. This necessitates the need for women to articulate a sexuality that is liberating and enriching, a sexuality that does not revolve on male sexuality. In this respect, lesbian groups have been bolder in asserting their rights and vision.

Education, economic autonomy, and elective pregnancy are but some of the prerequisites to gaining self-direction, self-reliance, and productivity. These will enable women to claim their right to own their body and take responsibility for it, make decisions about their lives, be free from domesticity and sexual violence.

One of the challenges in the advocacy for reproductive self-determination as a basic right of women is effecting a radical mindshift that shall enable women to see themselves as self-determining people, capable of coping with, resisting, shaping and changing their social conditions and oppressive life situation. Women need to consciously wrestle with a female psyche and sexuality built around the acceptance of male domination and male



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violence. Thus, in consciousness-raising work, we should aim at working towards developing self-worth and self-affirmation while disabusing women's minds of the notion that they are victims, a notion perpetuated by soap operas on radio and tele-vision as well as unwitting welfare groups.

For a start, women can begin to recognise her *self* in its various facets and dimensions, and put an end to self-effacement or denial so that we can revive our sensibilities—sensibilities that will make us see, feel, smell, hear, touch, think, and dream such and move us to transform into reality our vision of a truly fair and humane place to live in.

Then we can truly begin to have a life. ☺

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