

# Virginity in the 90s

by Celeste Cinco



We've heard it all before: Virginity is the greatest gift a woman can give to her husband on their wedding night. Thus, a young woman is expected to keep herself chaste and pure while on the lookout for *the* man upon whom she will bestow her "greatest gift." That man, however, is expected to be learned in the ways of the world—enough to be able to provide for her, and enough to be able to introduce his bride to the joys of sex...

This is a cornerstone in the upbringing of most young women. Traditional Filipino family values and religious beliefs still frown upon premarital sex, especially when practiced by women. And there are many ways of making young women behave, ranging from putting guilt and the fear of God into their young minds to downright name-calling. Society has come up with words to describe women who have lost their virginity without the sacrament of marriage. Words exist in other languages like *slut*, *loose woman*, *easy lay* that negatively refer to unmarried nonvirgins. In the Philippines, *pokpok* refers to a young woman who engages in premarital sex; the adjective *laspag*, which means worn out, refers to the loss of her body's freshness after several sexual encounters. The

existence and continued use of such words is indicative of prevailing social attitudes regarding virginity and single young women: they go together like a horse and carriage.

## CONFLICTING PRESSURES

A study conducted by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) in 1994, the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YASF II), proved just how true this social notion of virginity still is. "In a way, it comes as a surprise, but a big relief, to know that today's young Filipinos still hold rather conservative attitudes towards virginity and premarital sex."<sup>1</sup>

According to the survey, 91.5 percent of 11,000 young people, aged 15–24 years old, still considered virginity an important virtue. On women engaging in premarital sex, only 7.6 percent of the female sample (and 18.4 percent of the males) approved. The study also showed how family, educational and social backgrounds affect the attitudes of young people toward premarital sex and virginity. Those who approved of premarital sex were the older respondents, those who attend nonsectarian schools, have active social lives, and live away from their parents. High approval rates were

also associated with lower socio-economic status and parents' bad marital relationship. "The fact remains that parents, family, peer groups, the school, the church and other youth-serving institutions are still the principal sources of guidance for young people. What they allow or forbid, what they teach, their presence, and their example, are still major influences in moulding sexual behavior, values and responsibility of the youth..."<sup>2</sup>

A similar study on young adolescent males was conducted in Thailand in 1997 but with different results<sup>3</sup>. A sample group of 4,789 male students (18–20 years old) from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Songkhla were surveyed by the Assumption College and the Foundation for Women. According to the survey, 72.1 percent of the male students said it was okay to have premarital sex with a regular partner; 44.9 percent agreed to casual sex

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with friends; and 34.6 percent approved of sex with someone they've just met. The results also showed that "three out of four (72.9 percent) sexually experienced male students have had premarital sex with their girlfriends and almost half (44.8 percent) have had casual sex with fellow students."<sup>4</sup>

What parents and the Thai Education Ministry found particularly alarming was that the results of the survey meant that young Thai women were having sex. Right after the results were publicized, the Deputy Education Minister called a management meeting to address the issue of returning young women "to the path of virtue."<sup>5</sup> Apparently, even strict moral codes and constant reminders from schools about the

virtue of virginity have not kept young Thai women from engaging in premarital sex.

This may be due to the fact that while traditional values exist, other factors influence the sexual behavior and attitudes of young women. One of these is the fact that we are in the age of sexual liberation, Madonna and MTV—where sex is an "in" thing.

Virginity is outdated and archaic—totally out of tune with the modern age. Virgins are missing out on the collective experience of truly modern women—those who know exactly what sex is like. Virgins are stereotyped as awkward, straitlaced, uptight prudes who are so lacking in sex appeal that no man would take them to bed. This image, teamed with peer pressure, adolescent curiosity and raging hormones, may be a stronger force against which traditional values may not be able to stand a chance.

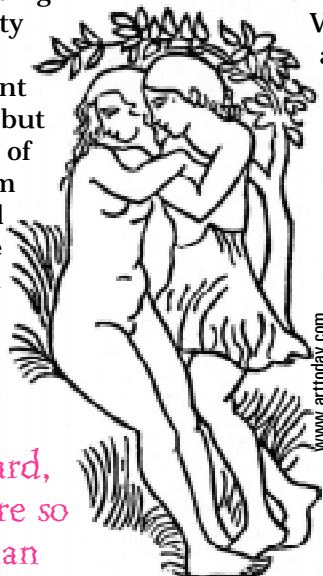
Conflicting pressures from different social institutions have trapped today's young woman in the middle. To keep or to lose her virginity? Either way, she becomes a stereotypical image: the loose nonvirgin or the old-fashioned virgin. Either way, she is judged.

That is, of course, if she chooses to subject herself to the dualistic/binary definitions of and distinctions between young women.

#### REDEFINING VIRGINITY

Five young Filipino women in their early twenties were interviewed for this article. All of them come from similar backgrounds: middle class, college-educated, employed, and with active social lives. Of the five, two are currently involved in steady relationships. Three of them attended Catholic high schools. Four studied at the University of the Philippines; the other one attended Miriam College (a Catholic school).

They were first asked to define "virginity." All agreed that it is the "biological state of sexual inexperience." No mention was made of hymenal virginity. These young women know that the hymen can be broken through activi-



**VIRGINITY:** Mental or physical, it is more an obsession created by and for the use of men than an actual feminine state of being. (Adelaida R. Del Castillo 1978, 144) Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992.*

ties not related to sex such as biking, exercising and other common sports. T.H. and S.M. believe that penile penetration isn't a prerequisite for losing virginity. "Sexual experience" refers to knowledge of sex with or without a partner, with or without penetration.

However, J.C. believes that virginity can be "a state of consciousness whereby a person does not engage in habitual or numerous sexual activity with the opposite sex or the same sex, or involve oneself in habitual masturbation." According to her, even someone who has had sexual experience can regain her virginity, that is, put herself in a "state of virginity" by choosing to be celibate for a long period of time. S.M. and T.H. agree that virginity is more a state of mind than of body.

A similar concept is being supported by the True Love Waits (TLW) movement in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Started in 1993 by a Baptist ministry in Nashville, it is a national abstinence movement wherein teenagers pledge to keep their virginity until they are married. The movement is open to "recycled" or "secondary" virgins—those who have had sexual encounters but have decided to abstain from sex for the duration of their singlehood. During a big rally held in Washington, D.C. in February 1996, one of the more popular T-shirt slogans was "I Miss My Virginity," worn by "secondary" virgins.

The women spoke of alternatives to traditional definitions of virginity (i.e., hymenal integrity). That one can reclaim her virginity is a concept foreign to most people. It implies a view of virginity that is beyond the biological and is primarily psychological. It also means that whether a woman is a virgin or not is primarily up to her.

#### DEFYING VIRGINITY

The next question that the young women were asked was the importance of virginity. A woman's marriageability is the core reason for keeping her virginity. "For a chauvinist former classmate of mine, a woman should remain a



To these young women, virginity is just a biological state of sexual inexperience

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virgin because it is her 'gift' to him as a husband," J.C. said. C.L. stated that for society, "the loss of virginity is a major point off a woman's marriageability score card. Let's face it, women are usually bred for marriage. Most of

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us have been raised believing that marriage will complete us, that fulfillment comes with marriage. And most men still want to marry virgins."

According to T.H., historically, virginity was given importance because a woman's value was equated with it. "In ancient times, women were thought of as property, and thus the men wanted to be the only 'owners' of their wives. In a way, virginity was a commodity which women exchanged for the economic and social benefits their husbands had the power to give them."

J.C. reiterated that women were historically required to be virgins for matrimony to ensure the purity of a man's lineage—to ensure that the heirs to a man's property were truly his chil-

**SEXUAL LIBERATION:** "political opposition to restrictive sexual mores. Is ultimately on the premise that a gratifying sexual life is a human need whose denial causes unnecessary and unjustified suffering. (Ellen Willis, 1982, 10) Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary*, 1992

dren and not someone else's. She also refers to the idea of "*takot masingitan*," that is, the male fear of some other man having access to his wife.

Roman Catholic doctrine was another reason cited for the importance of virginity. J.C. said: "The Catholic Church teaches that both men and women should be virgins because sex should only be done only within the context of marriage and with the sole purpose of procreation. But the problem there is, virginity is identified biologically and for women this meant an intact hymen. Men having no hymens, they can get around this."

J.C. bluntly wrapped up the reasons why virginity is important to women: "In my opinion, many women struggle to keep their virginity so that: a) When they marry a chauvinist he wouldn't get pissed that he wasn't the first to have sex with her. b) There are men who still want virgins. c) The Catholic church exalts virgins who are good and pure. d) There is pressure from the Catholic church not to practice premarital sex, and people are made to feel guilty when they do it."

All five women, however, stressed that they don't agree with the reasons they just stated. All five made clear that they do not exactly adhere to the social and male reasons for a woman to keep her virginity. S.M. said, "Virginity does not matter; love and commitment do. Sex is a sacred act that must be shared with someone special. The issue is whether or not you want to have sex." For her part, L.M. thinks virginity is unimportant because "it does not change a woman as a person."



The author.

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#### DEFENDING VIRGINITY

It is possible for a young woman to keep her virginity and not give religious and traditional values as her reasons.

For these five young women, virginity is a choice. That is, they've been out in the world enough to know what to expect from sex. None of them suffer from an overabundance of the guilt complex. L.M., C.L., T.H. and S.M. all admit to not being prepared for pregnancy, but they are aware that there are contraceptives available should they decide to have sex. None of them have unreasonable fears of sex or of men. But they all choose to remain virgins—for now.

According to J.C.: "Being in a state of virginity since birth, I respect the choice of women like me. For one thing, this is our choice for the moment. In my case, it's not because I'm choosing between "pure and good" and "impure and bad." I'm just more comfortable having no sex life yet. If I haven't found anybody I'm comfortable to have sex with, why force me? In the same way that I don't like imposed virginity, I oppose the idea of imposed sexual activity for every person. In fact, for me being in a state of virginity could be an expression of my defiance of the mentality where guys equate their self-worth and maleness with the frequency with which they have sex."



We need not give in to contending social pressures on virginity.

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According to S.M., “There are other reasons why one decides to keep her virginity—avoidance of an unwanted pregnancy, if she’s not yet prepared for sex, if she hasn’t found someone

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she wants to have sex with, and also health reasons.” L.M. believes that emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, physical immaturity are the reasons why a woman should remain a virgin. “A woman should keep her virginity if she is not yet ready to have sex. Maybe you should also keep your virginity if you are not in love with your partner.”

“If a young woman is not prepared to have sex, then she shouldn’t,” C.L. said. “Readiness,” according to her, “may come in various forms—a wedding ring, commitment, the right partner or the plain old biological, sexual urges. For me, I have yet to find the man who deserves me—me, not my virginity!”

J.C. differentiates imposed virginity from the free decision to keep one’s virginity. “I do not consider it [imposed virginity] important, since it judges the value of persons on the basis of their sexual behavior. However, I believe that the state of virginity is also important for some people. Sometimes involving oneself in intense sexual activity with another person blinds us to that person’s faults, or makes us dependent.”

“Virginity can be a sign of a woman’s control over her body. It may mean that she’s not giving in to the pressure of sexual liberalism. She doesn’t have to be old fashioned or devoutly religious for her to decide to be a virgin,” C.L. said. However, T.H. believes that “for the decision to be truly an indication of a woman’s control over her body, she must make an informed choice. She must know what her reasons are.”

According to J.C., “It actually depends on why the decision was made in the first place. If a decision is made out of fear and insecurity I don’t think it is a sign of control over one’s body. Because fear and insecurity mean that external factors make you behave that way. *‘What will God think of me? What will people think of me?’* There is an interplay of cultural factors and power play because there is the fearful one and the one to be feared—society, God, etc. Follow-

ing this logic, it doesn’t necessarily mean either that when a woman sleeps around she has control over her body—she may be doing it out of peer pressure, out of fear of losing her boy friend, etc. The sign of true bodily control, I think, is freedom from fear. When we do things not because we ought to, but we really want to.”

#### **BREAKING THE MOULD**

Given the mixed and opposing signals regarding female virginity, these five young women prove that one need not give in to social pressure. For them, virginity is not an “either-or thing” (either conservative or liberal, either old-fashioned or modern).

By no means are their views mainstream or typical. They were very careful not to go into essentialist overgeneralizations about young women and virginity. They all reiterated that their reasons for remaining virgins are their own and that young women must be free to make their own decisions regarding their sexual behavior. They refused to pass judgement on anyone.

That these young women exist, that they think like they do, that they seem to have no trouble defining themselves and their choices regardless of social pressures, may mean that there are alternatives to the dualistic/binary distinctions between virgins and nonvirgins. These are alternatives that do not deem one choice better than the other, that do not judge.

For these five young women, all it took was to stretch their brains just a little. ♡

*Celeste Cinco is a young feminist and human rights activist who believes she has much to learn. At present, she is working as the project staff for the Asian Women’s Resource Exchange (AWORC).*

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