

Sail On, Women!

by Jean Enriquez

“**T**here is life after prostitution.” This is what Belen Obeja, chairperson of Lawig Bubai (Visayan for “sail on, women”) says after escaping eight years of entrapment in the sex industry of Davao City, a tourist destination in the south of the Philippines.

Like the other women in Lawig Bubai, Belen never wanted to stay in prostitution. Thus, they don't see why some people are now talking about legalising it. The very reasons for the women's entry into commercial sex work show that it was not a matter of choice. About 70 percent of the members of Lawig Bubai were trafficked from the outskirts or neighboring provinces—Maco in Davao del Norte, Mati in Davao Oriental, Surigao and Cagayan de Oro. Most of them were recruited while looking for a job to feed their families. They were promised work as sales clerks, restaurant waitresses, or domestic helpers, but were brought instead to brothels or nightclubs and forced to service male customers. One or two were born into families where the mother or siblings were also in the trade.

For these women, perhaps the only thing worse than continuing in prostitution is the possibility that their children could one day suffer the same fate.

Violence is part of the business. Belen has been beaten up for insisting on a customer's use of a condom. Burning cigarettes have been pressed against her skin. She has been forced to perform sexual acts that were repugnant to her. Once, a customer got her very drunk and raped her. Verbal abuse is commonplace. Not a few women she knew ended up being killed by their customers.

Belen thinks the problem cannot be reduced to moral stigma, the argument of those who are proposing to “normalise” prostitution. It is the stigma that the proponents of legalisation seek to erase by asserting the “sex workers' rights.”

The women in Lawig Bubai cannot see the logic in that. “How can the stigma be erased that way? It will be there as long as men continue to buy women. The stigma is clear in the men who use the women in prostitution and the pimps who view women as ‘grocery items’ to be advertised and

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sold.” The existence of prostitution is rooted in the worldview that women are sexual commodities (or providers, if one invokes the women’s right to control her body) and that they are not full human beings. The very engagement of women in the trade actualises the ideology that women are providers of sex to men.

The violations of women’s rights within prostitution are innumerable. But beyond that, the violation is prostitution itself.

“We are viewed by men as sexual objects. How can the recognition of prostitution as work change this arrangement? When we are negotiating with the male customers, it is never a transaction between equals,” Belen says. “Even if we are accorded the right to set our own terms in providing sex, during actual negotiations, the fact remains that the relationship is between one who buys part of the woman (her person) and the buyer.” The reality is that, as a woman, she is deemed to be subordinate to the man who is buying her.

Further, whether the woman is utilised as a sexual tool, or as some argue, she is a sex provider, the relationship remains unequal because it is inherently exploitative. The man buys the woman (even granting, just part of herself) with a value. As Belen points out, “When you are sold or bought, you are not a human being anymore.”

The transaction between the male buyer and the woman takes place in a larger societal context of unequal status

between men and women. Such gender stratification permeates the economic, political, cultural, spiritual life of societies all over the world. The very nature of prostitution arises from the relations between the sexes within these spheres—as we clearly see when we analyse the feminisation of poverty, labour migration, unequal political participation, cultural pressures on the woman’s sexuality.

“What right to self-determination is exercised here when we are virtually pushed to the edge?,” argues Belen. “We cannot be blind to the reality that the greater majority of those entering prostitution are women. The very fact that society immediately consigns them to the sex trade after making them bear the brunt of the economic crisis is a denial of our right to determine our lives for ourselves.”

Women like Belen are not in prostitution because of an empowered choice, as if an enabling environment had been made available to them, or because the conditions of gender relations have changed so that one could say that the women are indeed making free sexual choices. The women are in prostitution because of the “fallacy of this choice,” the narrowness of options for women, may they be in the South or North. The system of prostitution is not simply determined by economic exigency, but as Belen puts it, “there are men who want to purchase women or more aptly, who demand female bodies. There are also those who profit from us.”

Let us look at the transac-

tion itself. The woman is bought for a value, which apparently is the only thing she is interested in. “It was the money that kept me coming back to prostitution. Whenever I got the opportunity to work as a cook, I would leave the club. But I always returned when my contract expired,” testifies Belen.

All the other women in Lawig Bubi say that they got into prostitution because of the money, and never because they liked the sex, much less the so-called “work” which subjects them to a whole range of oppressive conditions. How could they like the sex, if they do not even like the men who are invading their bodies? Belen recalls that “I would always take a bath every time I was used. Up to now that I have a partner, the habit has stuck with me. I did not like myself, I had to numb myself.” This is not a transaction the woman would even want to enter into, but they are forced into it by their need to survive. This is a clear transgression of women’s sexual rights.

Belen questions the assumptions of the drumbeaters of legalisation who claim that prostitution should be considered a legitimate form of work. “Why should it be the job of women to provide sex to men? Why are they arguing for the rights of prostitutes, when we do not even want to stay as such?”

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