



Putting **You** in **Your** Place: Culture and the **Filipino** **Lesbian**

by Angie S. Umbac

At an early age, both girls and boys are keenly conscious of the fact that, in our society, being male means being privileged.¹

The above statement, a generalisation based on studies involving Filipino children, is a simplistic look into the difference between the sexes in a society where women are limited by societal expectations. It speaks of how children observe inequality, and the preferred status that men have over women.

Lesbians as women also suffer from this unequal treatment. Failure to comply with societal expectations can give rise to a two-tiered discrimination directed against lesbians: firstly, as women in a male-centric society, and, secondly, as homosexuals in a heterosexist society.

In its research *Unmasked: Faces of Discrimination Against Lesbians in the Philippines*² published in December 2004, the Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LeAP!), Inc. discussed discrimination against Filipino lesbians as ranging from

inapparent to blatant, with the inapparent discrimination being the more common form. This form is often unrecognisable, and may even seem well-meaning and innocent. Sometimes, it may be in the form of a bias that may not be seen as being linked to lesbianism.

An example of this bias is the use of common terms like “third sex” to describe members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Many believe that “third sex” is the accepted term but, in fact, it derogates both women and the LGBT community because it speaks of a hierarchy. The term continues to be used in the Philippines, and is a major focus of dialogues between activists and those in the media and entertainment industries.

Unmasked also noted instances wherein to distinguish lesbians from heterosexual

women, the latter are identified as “normal,” “females,” “*tunay na babae*” (real woman), and “*tutoong babae*” (also real woman). Lesbians are subjected to catcalls and are told, “*Maghanap kayo ng tunay na lalaki*” (find yourself a real man). These terms and language only highlight the perception that in Philippine society, women are seen in relation to men. Sufficiency in womanhood necessitates sexual interaction with men, a role that lesbians do not perform.

Lesbians in the Philippines are aware of the societal perception that they are drunks and gamblers. Among the traits linked to them are being

that lesbians, who are seen to be straying from traditional norms, suffer from discrimination—more prevalently from family members, and in the workplace as well.

The documentation included three instances of physical abuse committed by family members against lesbians. In all these instances, the perpetrators were the lesbians’ mothers. In Philippine culture, the mothers’ role as disciplinarians is clearly established. Corporeal punishment is as an accepted tool for shaping children’s character, and correcting undesirable conduct.

A common form of discrimination against lesbians is the refusal of their family members to acknowledge them. Parents would request a lesbian daughter to “try to act normal.” They would explain their daughter’s being unmarried as being career-driven. The lesbian daughter would be asked by the parents to stay away from places frequented by family friends or from appearing publicly with her lesbian partner. In one documented case in *Unmasked*, a mother refused her daughter’s request for medical intervention. The mother did this to prevent her daughter’s lesbianism from being known in their community. When lesbianism is established as a source of shame for family members, lesbians themselves would practice self-policing to protect themselves and their families. Eventually, some lesbians also resort to denying (and stifling) their own lesbianism, leading to internalised homophobia.

It is internalised homophobia or unacceptance of lesbianism in others and in oneself that lowers a lesbian’s sense

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nonmonogamous, emotionally unstable, and violent. Yet even though these negative images cut across different groups in society and are not prevalent among lesbians, many lesbians are still prejudged. A number of lesbians have admitted that they are motivated to work harder and succeed in life so that they may rise above society’s assigned image of them.

Deviating from traditional norms does not translate into inefficiency, unreliability, and inability to be productive members of society. However, *Unmasked* has documented

of self-worth and drives her to commit violence against other lesbians. This is a phenomenon that the Philippines shares with other countries where lesbians are seen and treated with contempt.

In the workplace, issues of lesbianism are not openly discussed. For some lesbians, access to employment may be denied by employers who express a

what would be the Philippines, bearing both the Sword of Conquest and the Cross of Faith. The influence of 300 years of Spanish rule cannot be denied. In present-day Philippine society, the Catholic influence has transcended the religious and is now deeply imbedded in the cultural.

Most Filipinos (including lesbians) are Roman Catholics. But many lesbians suffer from religious guilt when they believe that their sexuality makes them unworthy. There is a constant internal struggle between two important components of the being, making it difficult for lesbians to obtain a healthy self-esteem. *Unmasked* tells of how this is responsible for several suicide attempts by Roman Catholic lesbians.

Lesbians are not immune to sexual violence. When committed against lesbians, the violence is more invasive as it reminds them of the power that men continue to wield over them. Because it subjects them to humiliation, and, in some cases, even ridicule from callous medical practitioners and law enforcement officers, many lesbians do not report such an attack. Unfortunately, in the Philippines, rape is still believed to be a “cure” for lesbianism, sometimes even instigated by family members. Knowing that as women they are prone to sexual violence, even the mere threat of its infliction is a form of control over lesbians.

Many of the instances of discrimination documented in *Unmasked* are private in nature. However, in determining which government agencies may provide victims with assistance, it was shown that

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preference for “females,” and who fail to recognize that lesbians, too, are females. In addition, general company policies of “immorality,” or even the dress code—which addresses the wearing of slacks and shirts and having short hair—are selectively used to keep lesbians in check when already in employment. Though cross-dressing is tolerated, the dress code is conveniently invoked to get at lesbians who refuse to toe the line. Another insidious form of discrimination is when the employer, knowing that the lesbian employee is subjected to negative treatment and harassment by her co-workers, fails or refuses to protect her, until she is forced to leave and look for other employment elsewhere.

One unique feature of Philippine culture is the influence of the Roman Catholic church that condemns homosexual conduct and considers it a sin. In the 16th century, the Spaniards came to colonise

there is a reluctance to address discrimination, rationalised as prioritisation, or lack of budgetary allotment. To this day, in the Philippine Congress, the anti-discrimination bill that seeks to guarantee protection of the rights of LGBT persons to education, employment, housing, and access to public services, among other rights, has not yet been passed into law. At the State level, discrimination of lesbians still fails to set off any alarm.

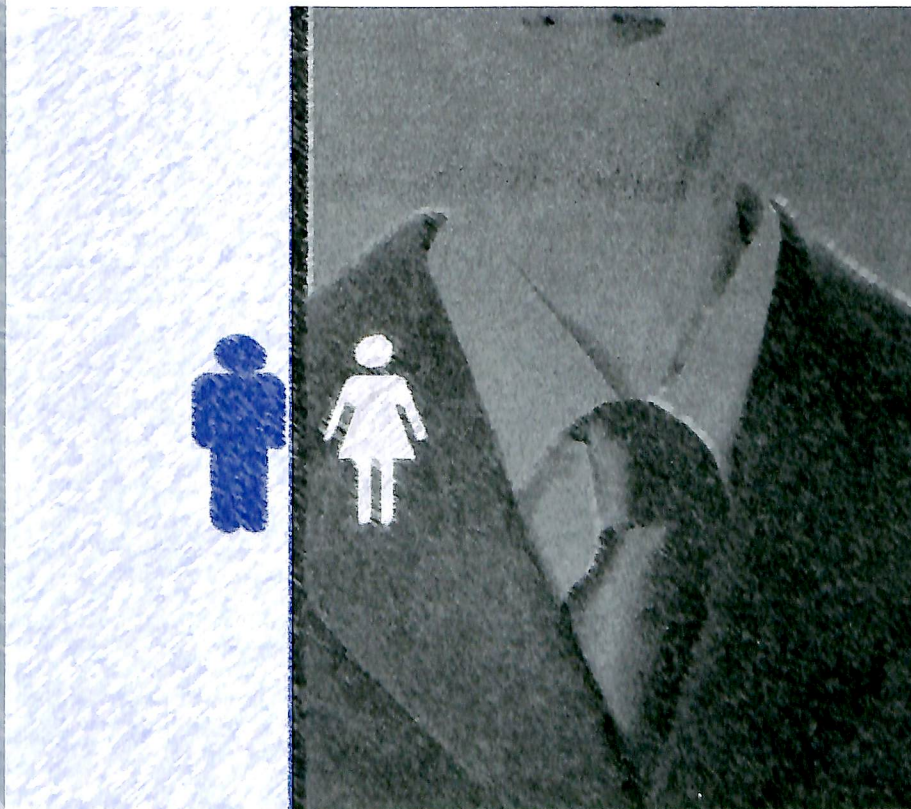
Beyond its commitments in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and the “International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights,” the Philippine government needs to take a more active role in fighting discrimination against lesbians. The Philippine culture being what it is, it is then up to the State to promote ways by which affected citizens are protected. In her report to the UN Commission on

Human Rights, dated April 10, 2002, Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, said:

Gender-based violence is also related to the social construct of what it means to be either male or female. When a person deviates from what is considered normal behaviour, they are targeted for violence. This is particularly acute when combined with discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or change of gender identity. Violence against sexual minorities is on the increase, and it is important that we take up the challenge of what may be called the “last frontier of human rights.”

It is in the State’s interest to protect lesbians who are as much a part of national development as any other citizen. Unfortunately, the lack of state-mandated protection seems to indicate an implied condonation of the discrimination.

While culture remains a volatile arena, and, at present, helps perpetuate discrimination, it can be a powerful agent of change that must be looked into by activists. It must however be admitted that ending discrimination can work only with the changing of present attitudes towards women, thus calling for the integration of lesbian concerns into the agenda of the women’s movement. The Roman Catholic church, which is the predominant religious influence in the Philippines, cannot be relied on to help bring change. It is clear from the pronouncements of Pope Benedict XVI that there will be no major change in



policy directions of the Church hierarchy. The maintenance of the status quo would only mean the continued subjugation of women and LGBT persons.

Discrimination can end when people are made aware of everyone's right to equality, and that difference in treatment of the LGBT persons violates basic human rights. A solution may be found through the use of education. Young Filipino children are taught to discriminate when they are taught societal expectations by their parents. This is continued in the schools, and further developed through images provided by media. Change can

take place through the positive intervention of these institutions of socialisation.

We look to a day when lesbians are no longer expected to "know their place" and to conform to standards that are set by others. We look to a time when lesbians can find their place under terms that are fair, acceptable, and, more importantly, self-determined.

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Endnotes

1 *Liwag, E.; de la Cruz, A.; Macapagal, E.; & Ateneo Wellness Center. (1999). How We Raise Our Daughters and Sons: Child Rearing and Gender Socialization in the Philippines. UNICEF Evaluation and Research Database (ERD).*

2 *Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LeAP!), Inc. (2004). Unmasked: Faces of Discrimination against Lesbians in the Philippines. Manila: LeAP!, Inc.*