

### Real Feminism: When in Doubt, Listen to Women

Is there a way out of this seeming polarity in feminist body discourse that takes into account both similarities and differences in women's contexts? There is, when feminists listen carefully to a woman's lived experience. How do we really listen? We listen with deep compassion owing to our shared experience of suffering. And nothing can manifest this shared experience of suffering most acutely than the issues surrounding reproductive control, rights and freedom. In issues surrounding reproductive rights, matters of the womb often define women's status so that women who evade this destiny are often damned as both selfish and sinful.<sup>11</sup>

There is tension between a woman's story and the cultural, political, racial and social narratives that define her. This is most evident in abortion when a woman who opts for abortion is treated with derision and contempt. On the other hand, when she chooses to be pregnant despite pressures on her to limit her fecundity, a woman opens herself up to the same criticism.

#### *Listen to Filipinas: Abortion is a Desperate Decision*

An average of 400,000 clandestine abortions is recorded in the Philippines every year and 205 Filipinas die daily from unsafe abortions. Nine mothers die daily bearing children. One in every six pregnancies is aborted clandestinely. Infant mortality is 36 per 1,000 live births. Sixty percent of all pregnancies are considered high risk.<sup>12</sup> These data reveal just how dangerous pregnancy is to Filipino women. But the danger is not emphasized in mainstream media that prefer to focus on romanticized stereotypes of pregnant women who quiver with anticipation for the birth of their babies or of (very!) young mothers who derive ultimate happiness in seeing their children eat, play or sleep. These romantic stereotypes of the naturally caring woman are deeply entrenched in the cultural psyche of Filipinos. The discovery of an aborted fetus regularly makes news, with the reporters usually remarking just how helpless these little "angels" are and how callous and unfeeling their mothers are to abort them. The remarks are unsurprisingly derived from myths about abortion.

According to a study made by Corazon Raymundo et al<sup>13</sup>, it is commonly believed that only certain types of women undergo abortion—the loose in

<sup>11</sup> Porter, Elisabeth. "Abortion ethics: Rights and responsibilities," 66-76.

<sup>12</sup> Sy, MelClaire. "Abortion anyone" [article-online] available from <http://uw2.abs-cnnews.com/images/news/microsites/onddot/MelClaireSyAbortion01022003.htm>. Internet. Accessed: June 2006.

morals, prostitutes, women in the slums, and those engaged in clandestine sexual relationships. Abortion is sought primarily because of the stigma that an illegitimate child will bring to the pregnant woman and her family or because the single woman is not supposed to have a child. These are myths precisely because those that desired and availed of abortion services were women from all walks of life; and they were ordinary women who could be one's relatives, friends or neighbors. To abort a fetus is a decision made by women even if they are greatly aware that such an act is illegal or is heavily sanctioned both by state and society. What is indicative is how resolute they are in standing up for their choice even though they consult their partner/spouse, friends and family members about it.<sup>14</sup> A woman shares her life story in one of the interviews conducted by Women's Feature Service Philippines:

*I decided to abort my youngest child in 1995 when I was one month pregnant. I thought about it seriously. Even if I knew it was a sin, I had to do it because we were hard up. I thought that with four children, I might not be able to send another one to school, as they grow older. My work is very irregular in a promotion outfit. I got pregnant when my youngest and only girl was only six months old. My husband's salary as laborer was barely enough for us.*

*I approached a friend who referred me to a manghihilot (midwife). My husband and parents did not know about it. The hilot (massage) was very painful but I went through it for three days. Then I began to bleed. I was so weak because of the pain. I had to limit my laundry work as to avoid profuse bleeding. I also had to act as if I was not tired or feeling weak so that my husband would not notice. But after the abortion, I cried a lot and could not sleep.*

*My husband would definitely be against the abortion. He wants children. He loves his children. But I did not want any more children. Times were hard. After two weeks, my bleeding stopped. But even now, I continue to feel guilty. Until now, I ask for forgiveness from God. I feel remorseful, of course, because the baby was my own child, my own blood. But what I could do? We were financially hard up. We did not use any family planning method. I once tried the pill, but I*

<sup>13</sup> Raymundo, Corazon et al., *Unsafe Abortion In The Philippines: A Threat To Public Health*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.