

ABORTION STORIES

by Rina Jimenez David

SHE had just found out that she was pregnant with her seventh child. Her husband was a furniture maker who had been unemployed for some time, and she was having an increasingly difficult time scrounging for money to buy food for her family. "I didn't even have enough money to go to the hilot (a traditional healer who provided deep-massage abortion, among other health services)," she told me, and so she decided to abort the fetus herself.

"I heard about how other women would insert a piece of wire up their vagina to induce bleeding, and so one morning, when my husband was away and the children were in school, I took down part of the clothesline and, while squatting, I pushed the piece of wire up my vagina," she recalled. The pain was excruciating, she remembers, and, through her tears and sweat, she noticed that there was a statue of the Virgin Mary on an altar in front of where she was squatting. "Even as I was about to faint, I kept crying out in my head: 'Forgive me, please forgive me!'" She finally passed out from the pain, and when relatives found her, bleeding and unconscious, they rushed her to the hospital.

She managed to end that particular pregnancy but got pregnant two more times, bringing the total number of surviving children to eight.

When women tell me their stories of abortion, they do so with a bewildering mix of emotions. Some put on a brave front, recounting how they arrived at the decision and what steps they took after. Others pepper their tales with hints of remorse, guilt, and a sense of uneasiness. A few tell of “dreaming” about the children they aborted, while others profess to have put the matter behind them, arguing that they had made the right choice in favor of their surviving children.

What seems clear to me is that the women travel down a road of feelings and perceptions, starting from when they discover their unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, make the decision to terminate that pregnancy, and then cope with the consequences. No woman, at least judging from the stories I have heard, seems to have been unmoved or unchanged by the experience. The women continue to swing back and forth from certainty and conviction, to doubt and questioning.

But when abortion rights activists, on one hand, and the so-called “pro-lifers” on the other, begin arguing, they all start from a position of surety. Each side of the argument is firm in its moral certainty, its ideological line, each professing to champion the rights of women and of the “unborn.”

Many reproductive rights activists I work with in the Philippines feel that, given the legal status of abortion in the country and the largely negative public attitude towards it as expressed in public opinion polls, admitting any ambiguity in the “rightness” of their cause would mean creating cracks in the integrity of their arguments.

I was told at one public forum, when I brought up the issue of the women’s guilt and the fate of the fetus, that focusing attention on these would only “create” guilt among women who are conflicted enough as it is. It would also mean abandoning women’s rights in favor of the rights of the fetus, which, I am reminded, do not exist under Philippine law.

On the other hand, the anti-abortion lobby group, including the powerful and influential institutional Catholic Church, is certain that abortion is no less than murder of the unborn, condemning and criminalising not just the abortionists—doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacies, traditional healers, street vendors—but the women themselves, some of whom perform abortions on themselves.

Such arguments pit mothers against their own children, against fetuses who are linked to them in the most intimate connection possible, that of womb and umbilical cord, shared blood and nutrients, hormones and genetic traits. Pro-lifers talk as if it is possible to consider the fetus separately from its mother, granting the fetus rights that are paramount and distinct from the rights of the person whose life and womb give it shelter.

On the other hand, many reproductive rights advocates, believing, and rightly so, that a woman has absolute right and control over her own body, tend to ignore the emotional toll in the entire process of decision-making that takes place before, during, and after an abortion, including the necessary stage of grief at the loss of a life.

The situation is not helped any by the increasing reductionism employed in



A balancing act is often needed to weigh on the one hand, the dictum of religion through the pangs of conscience, and at the same time, the practical instinct to survive. Anxiety, guilt, vindication, and many other emotions make up the perennial ambivalence that undermines the full exercise of one’s reproductive rights.

Photo by Clarissa Aines, from the Women’s International Perspectives.

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defining life or when life begins. This was once thought (by St. Thomas Aquinas, for example) to occur only after the first trimester. Later, it was attached to a viable pregnancy (defined as the successful implantation of the fertilised ovum in the lining of the uterus), and thence, to fertilisation itself, and even to a woman's unfertilised ovum and to sperm, even before it departs the man's body!

Such new definitions – designed to attach the label of “abortifacient” to any drug or device that prevents implantation and fertilisation, from the IUD, to pills, to barrier methods including the condom – are not only deceptive and intellectually dishonest. They also trivialise the gravity of abortion, and of the situation of the women and fetuses whose twinned fates are at stake.

Certainly, ordinary women are themselves guilty, not of reductionism but of denial. A friend once confided that she was “disgusted” at the actions of a reproductive health group which had conducted a research study on women's perceptions of “when life began.” To many of the respondents, life began when they felt a “quickenings,” or movement of the fetus. The researchers, however, pointed out to them that scientifically, a viable pregnancy existed weeks before they could feel any movement. “Suddenly, the women's equanimity was shattered,” said my friend. “They had comforted themselves by thinking that ‘it was only blood’ that they were getting

rid of. But now, suddenly, they were overwhelmed by guilt.”

The issue of induced abortion – illegal in almost all cases, clandestine and largely unsafe in practice, shrouded in myths and moralistic arguments – has polarised Philippine society. Hence, ambivalence about it, especially on the part of women who undergo it, is almost a certainty. And yet, most public discussion of abortion almost never acknowledges this ambivalence. I think this is a disservice to the women, with even their advocates hesitant to listen or refer to the emotional complexity of their decisions and experience, and its consequences.

Perhaps, by acknowledging the moral and emotional ambivalence that attends abortion, we can in fact create a more sympathetic and honest response from the public on this issue. Or at least trigger more thoughtful consideration. Among the factors that repel otherwise rational and reasonable Filipinos in the abortion debate, to my mind, is the seeming smugness of abortion rights spokespeople, who appear to be blithely dismissing the loss of a life when abortion occurs.

It is a difficult balance to achieve, true. And the “party line” will be difficult to sell if we acknowledge the pain that survivors undergo. And yet, we must be willing to go down the same emotional road that women have traveled, a road they have traced as they tell their stories, a road down which they have provided a map to track their emotional journeys and moral signposts. ■

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