

“The Little Birds of Prey”: Two Faces of the Prostituted Filipino Girl Child*

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They succeeded in raping me and even insulted me... My first experience with a customer was really frightening and painful. My genitals were lacerated and I froze...” narrates fifteen-year-old Luisa*, a prostituted girl child working in Cebu City, in one of the case studies documented by an organization working with prostituted children in sex tourism. Luisa later continues, “During my first few months in this trade, I was really upset. But now I am more or less used to it although I still cry every morning ...”

“Why are we the ones being pinned down by the barangay and police officers? What about our partners—the men who use us?” asks thirteen-year-old Aida*, a child who stalks the streets of Davao City to, allegedly, engage in “free sex”, during a forum on the *buntog* phenomenon.” Her “skin head”—style short hair barely masks the once shaven head that bore a badge of dishonour, a lesson, announced the responsible and (respectable) barangay captain for her and other similar girls for violating the curfew and for engaging in “immoral activities.”

How did Luisa end up in something she obviously does not enjoy in doing? And what made Aida risk punishment when a child her age was supposed to be in the safe confines of home at night? The stories of Luisa and Aida are but two stories of an alarming growing number of prostituted Filipino girl children. Luisa is in the sex trade because it was the only way to survive. As for Aida, the social development community in Davao City is still in a quandary as to how they should interpret her situation. It is currently looking into the factors surrounding the phenomenon of “free sex” among minors. Meanwhile, the larger community is loudly condemning girls like her or their families to the fires of hell.

Are the two girls’ situations entirely different? Or are they in fact related aspects, like two fangs of a growing monster that has started to devour the young population, particularly the girl children of the Philippine society?

Prostituted Girl Children in Cebu City

They have divided my land and cast lots for my people, and traded boys for prostitute, and sold girls for wine and drunk it down.--- Joel 3:1-3

Luisa is among the estimated 50, 000 to 60, 000 prostituted Filipino children under the age of 18 (ECPAT, 1991). In Cebu City alone, child prostitution is visibly reaching appalling proportions. Because the girls are considered “cheaper”, “exotic”, “virginal;” and relatively “free” from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), they are especially sought after by foreigners in commercial sex tours.

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The phenomenon of child prostitution in Cebu must be seen in the context of young Filipinos who generally start working at an early age, combining domestic chores with paid or unpaid labour and

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schooling. Over 400,000 children live and work away from their homes and their parents (National Statistics Office). Most of these children, whose age range from 13 to 17, are either migrants or runaways in search of better opportunities in the city. Those who end up in prostitution usually lived through traumatic experiences, many of which were forms of sexual abuse. Rape or incest in the hands of the father, a brother, an uncle or a friend are their usual stories, apart from boyfriends who abandon them after having “satiated” their sexual urge. Luisa, whose mother became a prostitute herself after being separated from her abusive and alcoholic husband, was deceived by a friend of her close friend into entering the trade she shunned. But she has not found a way out because of very limited options.

Prostituted children in Cebu are generally of three types: Pick-up girls, *casa* girls and bar girls. Most of these girls get the smallest share from their incomes. At the *casa*, for example, for a total fee of 800 pesos (for a three-day stint), 600 will be shared by the *casa* owner and the pimp, and the remaining 200 goes to the girl. From this amount, the *casa* owner deducts all the girls’ expenses incurred, regardless of who did the purchasing, usually the owner (ECPAT, Phil).

The “Buntog” Phenomenon in Davao City

“(It is) so widespread that if it were a disease, it might as well be declared (as) an epidemic.” This is how one non-governmental organization describes “free sex” among high school and late grade school youth in its exploratory study on the level of HIV/AIDS awareness among students of three private colleges in Davao City.

Aida is identified with this growing trend of minors who have, because of their deviant sexual behavior, acquired the label “*buntog*”. “*Buntog*” is the local dialect’s name for a wild nocturnal quail that habitually flits from one nest to the other and lays its eggs in them. But it also has been used to informally but pejoratively differentiate a certain group from other deviant groups, as the *buntog* type are not in the strictest sense street children nor engaged in commercial sex or prostitution, although they can interface into any of these types. Observers claim that these are teenage or child members of gangs from urban poor communities engaged in indiscriminate sexual activities for free or sometimes for a minimal fee. Other sources indicate that this random sex trend is also existent among more affluent communities, and to a lesser extent, rural families, although *buntog* is invariably, perhaps discriminately, applied to those from urban poor communities alone.

In one study of the phenomenon in urban poor communities, it was revealed that these minors whose ages range from nine to eighteen, usually have definite hang outs by day and by night. At daytime, they linger around seaport premises, small-time bakeries or canteens, or abandoned premises. By nightfall, at around 8:00 to 10:00, they begin to prowl in cheap disco houses, benefit dances or during *fiestas*. It is said that their usual activities include drinking sprees, smoking or pot sessions, substance or drug abuse and as night wears on, the eventual group sex, which does not necessarily require a “committed” relationship. But in separate interviews, the young girls involved revealed that, although they do change boyfriends “as often as they change clothes”, they do not engage in multiple sex at one time.

The phenomenon is related to the prevalence of street gangs in urban communities. Virtually every public high school in the city has members in such gangs, although many of them are dropouts.

Belonging to a gang gives its members a feeling of security and a sense of “protection” from other gangs, basic needs their families cannot seem to meet.

All of them come from broken homes or dysfunctional families, whose parents are hooked to gambling and drinking, or who subject them to physical abuse. Many of their fathers have abandoned them, leaving them with their mothers who spend most of the time eking out a living or who has a live-in partner. Many of these girls have also been sexually abused by a family member. All these push the children to seek emotional and material alternatives, which are immediately available, and gangs become handy surrogate families. Because of fear or non-interest in returning home, the young people sleep together with their gang mates at night, where the warmth of human touch is gladly obliged them.

Depraved or Deprived?

The “human touch” and attention the so-called *buntog* seem to hunger for may stem from either experiences of depravement or deprivation or both. Indeed, most of them have been deprived of a parent’s loving touch, and for many, the only striking experience of touch is battering. And many of the girls’ only experience of “sexuality”, if it could be called that, are incest or rape. Barely aware that these are grave violations of their rights (that are only now severely punishable by law), these girls enter random and shallow sexual relationships, the only way her own family experience has taught her, or because they feel much too debased to do otherwise. Several *buntog* girls describe themselves thus: “nothing could be dirtier.”

Here lies the downside to gang bonding. In all likelihood, the “warm touch” degenerates into indiscriminate sexual activities. And although belonging to a gang gives the members a sense of “power”, they also use this to try to coerce other children into joining them or simply to bully them. All gang leaders or “kings”, as they are called in the dialect, are boys who have had similar dysfunctional family backgrounds. It is said that when some of these “kings” initiate sex, everyone follows, or else will be punished. New members are forcibly initiated through violent or sexual rites. Members conform to such “rules” in exchange for care and protection.

Sexual favors for a minimal fee occur when the need for money arises: the individual’s (for a free meal or new pair of pants, etc.) or the gang’s. Pimping is usually done by another member of the gang (who usually gets the bigger share). Men from all walks of life comprise their costumers: tricycle drivers, fish ball vendors, jeepney and taxi drivers, merchants, “men in tinted cars”, rich elderly businessmen. It is not uncommon for a rape to transpire, whether in the hands of “boyfriends” or in the hands of “costumers.” In Cebu, prostituted girl children are sold like wares in sex tours for foreigners, most of whom are Europeans (Germans, British, Swedish, French), apart from Americans and Japanese men.

These trends are alarming and phenomenal by Filipino standards, given a culture that strongly pays lip service to religious or conservative values in sexual morality and puts premium on close family ties.

Raising the Alarm

There are other reasons other than the breakdown of moral values for the community to be alarmed about the plight of girls like Aida and Luisa. Commercial sex workers are getting younger and younger, and being so puts them more at risk of contracting the uncontrolled scourge of HIV-AIDS. Many girls have tested

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positive for sexually transmitted disease (STD) by a simple procedure applied on them by local community workers: painful tummies when pressed. As reported by a center actively involved with girl children in Davao City, out of a total of 26 girls in their care, only four have tested negative for STD.

According to medical experts, minors are more at risk for STD and HIV-AIDS infection because of lack of knowledge or complete ignorance of safe sex and their delicate biological make-up. Girls have thinner vaginal linings, hence are prone to lacerations, and thereby making them highly susceptible to any sex-related viral infection.

Unwanted pregnancies and its concomitant problems pose another grave health risk for the girls. The following statistics speak for themselves: The incidence of adolescent pregnancy in the country has remained at 40 %, an undetermined percentage of which was the result of sexual abuse (Institute for Social Studies and Action, 1993). About 21 % of the total estimated illegitimate births occur among mothers in the 15-19 age group, and 53% among the 20-24 age group (Raymundo, National Demographic Study). The percentage of teenage Filipino girls who had induced abortion, 16.5 % is greater than those who had normal delivery, 11.5%, and spontaneous abortion, 6.2 %.

Among prostituted girls in Cebu city, drug use is practically unavoidable, as a way of emboldening” them in their required “performance” and also as an escape route from the social stigma.

Oftentimes, the girls are subjected by sadistic customers (drunkards and drug addicts) to physical abuse or are forced to perform perverse sexual acts before having sex. But even if they wanted to quit the trade, they could not do so, fearing for their lives. In one sense, this means economic insecurity posed by the absence of alternative sources of income. But in a very real way, this fear is founded on the fact that the girls are also manhandled by their pimps if they refuse to go out with customers. Their being minors makes them all the more defenseless against those who take advantage of them.

Stigmatisation for Girls Only

It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck. Truly it would be better for him than to cause one of these little ones to stumble and fall. —Luke 17:2

And as though STD, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies were the only risks involved, these girls have to contend with gender-based stigmatisation. The question Aida raised about why it is the girls, and not the men who use them, who are considered immoral “law offenders” is as valid a question as why the men entrusted to care for or protect them are in fact the first ones who violate them.

In current preliminary studies on the trend of free sex among the youth in Davao City, responses to questions about the *buntog* phenomenon have more and more been exclusively associated with the girls. Only to a lesser extent is the term *buntog* applied to boys and only if these engage the same sex in the sexual act (“men/boys who use boys “). 50% of these minors are both girls and boys but when asked who the *buntogs* are, answers invariably point to “girls who are flirtatious”, “girls who like to engage in sex”, or “girls who are cheap.”

Immorality in this regard applies only to the female gender, and such behavior is decried or frowned upon by the society that bred it in the first place. Philippine society has very little or no sympathy for a girl who

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gets pregnant, even from their parents, because she brought unto herself and the family “shame” and therefore “deserve” being despised. Immoral behavior in girls is condemned as deviant,. But the same behavior, even worse ones, is practically ignored when it involves boys. It even merits approval from the society or dismissed as but a rite of passage to “manhood” or simple “masculinity”. Hence, boys grow up internalizing this.

A Dutch researcher who closely studied the subject on *Deviant Behavior of Philippine Girls* for her thesis categorized the girls who have been loosely tagged as *buntogs* into three general types, and in doing so debunks earlier misconceptions about these girls. The thesis pointed out that not all these girls belong to the urban poor, not all girls operate in groups or gangs, not all of them smoke or drink or use drugs and not all girls engage in sex, only in flirtation. But girls are the ones targeted for rehabilitation, sex education and contraception.

For more seasons than one, there is an urgent need to stem this tide, this vicious cycle that threatens to swallow up young Filipino girls alive. The issue is a tough one, considering that this girls have often been betrayed by the very men whom they are supposed to feel safest with.

In The Hands of Men Sworn to Protect Them

*You snakes and sons of snakes, how do you expect to escape from being condemned to hell? ---
Matthew 23:33*

“This is a hand,” Aida explains the drawing she made to one of the group therapy facilitators of the sympathetic center. She, along with other girls like her, were encouraged to art-out their feelings about the situation they found themselves mired in. (Only in the center were they able to learn how to write their names.) “Does the hand symbolize something?”, she is gently asked. She answers, “Yes. It is the hand is it?” the counselor pressed. My father’s.”

For some reason, the answer did not surprise the facilitator but she is deeply disturbed just the same. She was hoping, perhaps, that the hand was “a symbol of nurturing” or “the hand that guides her” or at least symbolized a wish for both. Perhaps Aida meant the latter after all. But how many girls like her have been betrayed by those sworn to guide and protect her?

Having “escaped” from beatings by their fathers and even mothers or from an incestuous relationship at home, then having joined gangs that “protect” them for a price, the “*buntog*” girls are considered fair game by men who claim to “protect” them by hauling them off to prison at curfew time where they are caught at any time of the day, because according to the authorities, they, like garbage, “pollute the streets” (Davao City is ranked the second cleanest city in the Philippines). During a forum on the *buntog* phenomenon, the girl children complained about the following forms of abuse in the hands of male authorities:

- 1) Physical and psychological abuse in the hands of civilian volunteers, policemen, the local barangay tanod, and ironically, members of the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children; and
- 2) Attempted rape and acts of lasciviousness perpetrated by policemen. Some of those caught are even threatened with death, in order to teach other “dirty” children a lesson and to “arrest” the tide of “filth.”

The Pharisees in Jesus' time, who wanted to show Him their "respect" by offering to stone the prostituted women to death, are echoes in these supposedly enlightened times.

Girls like Luisa have the same stories to tell. Perpetrators of incest and rape in Cebu City are the father, uncle or brother; others include friends or strangers. When police authorities decide to implement the "law" against prostitution, it is often the women and the girls who are rounded off to prison, not the ones who prey them: the "customers" who seek their services, the pimps and club or brothel owners. Bars or brothels are simply closed down, if ever. In many instances, Girls are forced to perform sexual services for them for free. To resist means to jeopardize their release from jail.

Poverty of the Land, Poverty of the Mind and Spirit

*... In return for your abominable idols and for slaughter of the children.
... I will gather all those lovers to whom you made advances
... I will gather them from all quarters against you:
I will strip you naked against them, and they shall see your whole nakedness.
I will put you on trial for adultery and murder, and
I will charge you with bloodshed in jealousy and fury.
Then I will hand you over to them.
... They will burn down your houses and execute judgment to you,
in the presence of many women
I will put an end to your prostitution and you shall never again give a fee to your lovers.
Ezekiel 16:36-39'*

Conditions of deprivation rob most Filipino children of a normal childhood. Early in life (ages 5-14), 5-7 million out of 28.4 million children and youth find themselves in the workplace instead of school or enjoying their formative years in order to become healthy citizens in the future. 3.9 million of this figure are found in rural areas.

The workplace does not encourage "healthy child's work" but inhuman conditions of child labor. As one child-based NGO in Davao City declared, "Where the work ethics is distorted, child's work becomes child labor", which means that it cannot be called healthy child work. It continues: "where child work has become a burden for a child at the expense of his/her other needs like rest, education, nurturance and play, the child's development is severely stunted..." (*Bata Balita*, KCCFI). The situation of Filipino children does not speak well of a government that rushed to be among the first signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a pledge to ensure its children's rights to protection, survival, participation and full development.

The appalling stories of children in extremely difficult circumstances in the Philippines are many, running the entire gamut of children caught in situations of armed conflict, displaced and severely impoverished indigenous children, street children being preyed on by crime syndicates or "lawful" authorities, victims of physical and sexual violence, children bonded or exploited in labor, etc. Prostituted children come from many of these ranks. The stories of Luisa and Aida illustrate the worst possible kind of viciousness heaped on children, a viciousness that has become germane to the economic, sociocultural and political issues prevailing in the country.

Chronic Poverty

Immediate blame can be pinned on chronic poverty, as prostitution has become a vital survival formula for women of poor countries like the Philippines. Mostly coming from poor, uneducated, large families who cannot afford individual rooms, girl children afforded less chances of charting a better life for themselves. As one study on prostituted children in Cebu put in: “They are either abused or totally ignored, betrothed early in their teens to a farm boy renting a piece of land, perpetuating generations of poor landless tillers who would sooner or later yearn the actual look for a place under the sweltering heat of the city sun ...” (ECPAT, Phil). When daughters aspire for a future but end up in prostitution, “parents either take the money and look other way or blame them for their misfortune”, a punishment from God.

The study continues: “The influx of the poor into cities to try their luck in the ‘booming city’, the stiff competitions for jobs, the sheer weight of survival push the others in this game of chance to seek lucrative but illegal activities like drug pushing or prostitution, while the losers end up vending, begging or stealing. The most vulnerable and disadvantaged among those who do not find work are the women and children.”

Skewed Development Framework

The phenomenon of child prostitution must be seen in the light of the Philippine State’s skewed development framework and short-sighted economic policies that disregard the spiritual and cultural dimensions of national life. Moral values and human dignity are impertinent questions in the mad rush to gain profit. The same study, on child prostitution in Cebu states that the government, since time immemorial, “... has tried to solve the country’s economic problems through the twin package of attracting foreign investors and boosting tourism, rather than address the lopsided apportioning of social wealth, an overbearing foreign policy, especially US and Japanese interest, and systematic raids on government coffers by officials who run their offices like their own little business ...” (ECPAT, Phil)

In this age of globalization where only nations with capital and economic power stand to gain, the social stakes have only gone higher. Developing countries like the Philippines blindly go after the almighty dollar needed for development and remain its mercy, as shown in the present economic crisis, risking bankruptcy in accepting high interests foreign loads. By the end of the present Ramos administration’s term, our foreign debt is projected to have reached a mean PhP 1.8 trillion, no thanks to the doubling of the government’s borrowing since 1992. This means Filipinos, including children, will soon owe PhP 25,000 each from its government’s foreign debtors. (PDI, March 2, 1998)

Because of its aggressive promotion strategies, tourism has become one of the country’s top four foreign exchange earners. But the social costs are high, as even the Department of Tourism (DOT) has indicated that, “in the cities, the indirect interaction manifest primarily in sex tourism and its consequences in terms of

- 1) the spread of disease and related health care costs,
- 2) movement of young women from the provinces seeking the money sex tourism in the large cities, and
- 3) breakdown of traditional communities.”

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On the same breath, however, the DOT also talks of “special interests” and “mass market approach.” “Mass market” is open to everyone including pedophiles who engage in their own brand of “special interests” tourism, and sex motivated tourists, who in avoidance of the AIDS virus, seek out child partners in what a study terms “sexual fantasy lands” (ECPAT, Phil) like Manila and Cebu (and soon Davao?) in the Philippines, Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Pattaya in Thailand, Bali Island of Indonesia, and Che-ju island of Korea.

It is valid question whether Davao is the next city to watch, as the DOT, in partnership with a Malaysian firm, Ekran Berhad, is turning the once-sleepy island of Samal into a tourist hub. Already, the island is abuzz about materialistic but naïve islanders losing their lands to the firm for a give away price, unfulfilled promises of jobs and resettlement, and even rumors about missing individuals, especially virgin children who have been purportedly sacrificed like lambs, a grisly practice that supposedly brings in “good luck”

Commercialism

If poverty is at one end of the economic spectrum, commercialism is at the other end. The unbridled drive for profit, particularly in the country’s tourism industry that entices sex tourist from Japan and western countries to sample “fresh young flesh” – away from the praying eyes of their wives and local gossips who might damage their prestigious positions – that ultimately devours the children alive. Big profiteers like transnational travel agencies, hotel and air transportation have a stake in sex tourism.

The tourists industry’s components of entertainment, rest and recreation have contributed to the commodification of women and girls as part of their package. State rulers sell not only cheap labor, cheap raw materials, the natural beauty of the land, but also the bodies of their own women and children. But it is only Asia women were and girls are prostituted in the name of tourism, another dualistic form of north-south relations. Asian women are cheaply priced due to their so-called subservience and readiness to receive “crumbs” for their services. Tourism sadly points again to the parallel of the ravaging of the land and its ecological systems and of its women. What used to be regarded as sacred are now readily available for the taking.

This “money is everything”: ideology has engendered a new kind of prostitution: that of the collective spirit of the nation. With the globalization trend and its trade liberalization policies, our nation as well as other developing but dependent ones, is turning into one in search of immediate gratification and personal convenience at all costs, more interested in “having” rather than “being”.

The immediately discerning socio-cultural cause that breeds and reinforces the phenomenon of buntog and child prostitution is in itself a confluence of factors.

Moral Breakdown in Society

“Poverty of the land engenders poverty of the mind and spirit.” (Dr. Estefania Aldaba-Lim) Indeed, Philippines society, if we were to go by the twin trends of child prostitution and the buntog phenomenon, plus other forms of deviancy like drug addiction and alcoholism, is teetering towards a major moral breakdown (if it already hasn’t). Forcing, manipulating or luring children into the flesh trade and thereby victimizing them as contemporary slaves into one of the worst forms of immorality perpetrated against the human race.

But dysfunctional families are the result of a dysfunctional society. Uncaring parents, recruiters, brothel owners, pimps, and sex syndicates are mainly to be blamed, but they are by-products of the society. What kind of society is this that engendered them?

Again, the escalation of child prostitution is a concrete manifestation of the accompanying moral problems of underdeveloped countries struggling towards industrialization and economic development pursued in a manner inimical to the genuine socio-cultural upliftment of its people.

But the social costs of these economic gains are high, especially for women and girl children. Not only are young girls ticked, coerced and then sold for sex; they ultimately accept their fate if only to survive. The sad part is that, after all what they have gone through, prostituted children easily internalize society's depiction of them as "dirty" and therefore are undeserving of society's care. This self-abasement seals the monstrosity of their fate, pushing them further into the world of prostitution.

Perhaps the words Hilda, a prostituted woman (hostess), in an issue of *Ang Makatao* (The Humanitarian) way back in 1981, still put it best:

It might be a better alternative to work as a hostess or a prostitute, than do nothing at all, in order to survive. For after all, it is not the way most people live – by using another for one's own advantage? If customers think they are using us, we can also say we are using them. We are living in a society where life is a series of manipulations. What is said to think about is that we – the poor, the hostess – are more manipulated and despised. What is sadder still is that you – the professionals, intellectuals, and students – do not seem to realize that you are part of the game. And the saddest thing is that those who are in the real manipulators are oftentimes the most respected in society”

Sexualism and Double Standard Morality

Child prostitution is basically a moral issue, but whose morality must we put in question? For as long as our development model remains this way, morality will be narrowly defined within dominant class' terms, making their victims look like the ones who are immoral, and they, made look like saviors who have done the victims a favor. Sex tourism, though officially frowned upon, continues to proliferate. Yet, commercial sex workers have been arbitrarily rounded up and put behind bars in a bid to arrest the proliferation of prostitution, which of course does not at all get to the root cause of why people turn to prostitution.

One may decry that both man and woman, prostituted woman and male customer – or adulterous man and his mistress – who committed the same "sin" – should be "stoned to death" or claim that "if men can do it, so can women". But the issue is more than just matters of sinfulness or sexual liberation of both sexes. Philippine society has long tolerated a double-standard morality for sexual behavior that imposes more stringent "virtues" of virginity and passivity on women on one extreme. And yet boys supposedly need initiation into sex before marriage, as a "normal" part of their rites of passage into manhood.

Double standard morality is also at the bottom of the tendency of society (including children who have been interviewed in a study of the buntog phenomenon), to immediately pin the blame on the mother's

neglect of her maternal responsibilities, secondary only to the father who abandoned his family in the first place.

All these typical of the dichotomy paradigm of universal relations which translates differences in race, class, age, species and sex into relationships of inequities, where one is dominant or superior, and the other, subordinate or inferior.

The Filipino Family in Crisis

The traditionally close-knit, caring and hospitable Filipino family is said to be in the state of crisis, as parental neglect and/or moral breakdown seem to be the immediate reasons behind the buntog problem. But traditional parenting has also tended to be authoritarian. The extreme end of this “power over” type of relationship between parents and children is when children are subjected to verbal abuse and physical abuse; in this extreme, it is the daughters who sometimes get to experience a worse, nay, warped form of parental abuse: incest. These are the daughters who end up seeking a false sense of belonging in “protective” but violent-prone gangs or prostitutions.

In Aida’s young mind, it is her parents who failed her. Not the pimping “friend” who extracts her puny earnings, not the carefree boyfriend who leaves her for another, not her occasional perverted “customer”, nor her gang mates who seduced her into plunging into delinquency.

In a famous tourist spot called Pagsanjan in Luzon, known to be a haven of pedophiles, is said that some parents, because of the combined lure of commercialism and survival, are the very ones who pimp their children.

Indeed, “poverty of the mind, in the name of tourism and almighty dollar, forces children into prostitution. Poverty of the spirit destroys the will of the family to stay together. Poverty of esteem and opportunity prevents parents from being able to defend their young.” (Dr. Estefania Aldaba – Lim)

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure and the need for acceptance, abetted by the apparent “attention deficit” from the child’s primary group, the family, is specially factored in the buntog phenomenon issue.

Liberal values on morality or the lack of it among peer groups, e.g. gangs, is interpreted by social analyst as one of the effects of the rapid westernization of traditional culture, which in return is an indirect cause of the foreign market-led economic “development” scheme and/or brought about by increasing western influence.

Licentious Media

Licentious popular media also reinforces, and can be said to be the direct cause of the erosion of national values which has resulted in children prostituting themselves, whether as buntog “seeking attention” in immoral acts or as an unwitting fodder to the mill of prostitution. Movies capitalize on sex and violence in order to rake in huge profits. The proliferation of pornographic magazines and video shows at an

affordable price right within the neighborhood have made their mark on the impressionable psyches of the young, especially in those who lack proper guidance from their immediate family members.

This has been confirmed in a study wherein young buntog boys sheepishly admitted that “curiosity” after watching free or cheap lewd video shows, reinforced by cajoling from other boys in their peer group made the “experiment” with sex with willing members of the opposite or even of the same sex who are among the buntog.

Subliminal messages in commercials depicting woman as “bonus” to or being sold with the product or stereotyping them as sex-starved in commercials as well as shows, have fuelled their sexual curiosity. There are instances, though, wherein boys are forced into such acts, with either sex due to their peer’s or gang leader’s pressure.

It is interesting to note that the general feeling among these boys after “enjoying the act”, is a sense of guilt and shame. This is especially true when the act involved another boy, which to them, is “sinful”. A few of them were even close to tears while revealing this information. Somehow, some amount of morality, perhaps a basic sense of decency, has still managed to stay in the boys’ consciousness. But local media has only worsened the stigmatization of buntog children by irresponsible reporting, insensitive handling, name calling, rash judgments, obscuring the real conditions of the children involved, particularly the girls.

Weak Educational System

“Poverty of education and the lack of relevant training brings humiliating unemployment to the poorest of the poor” (Dr. Estefania Aldaba-Lim) the breakdown of moral values in the Philippine society is as much a statement of failure of the family as it is our educational system.

Philippine education in general has joined the bandwagon of commercialization, making it increasingly prohibitive. When accessed, however, education has also been found wanting. For one, open and healthy information is still subsumed in rote learning and irrelevant academics. The Philippine educational system needs to reexamine itself as to its role in shaping today’s youth within a holistic and long-term perspective.

Lackadaisical Law Enforcement

“Prostitution thrives on social ills that begins with rupture of family ties and end with the impotence of the State to protect the children and redeem the victims,” concludes the study on child prostitution in Cebu.

Some inroads into legislation protecting women and children victims of sexual abuse and violence, though imperfect, have been achieved as a result of the arduous advocacy and lobbying of women advocates in the Philippines. But enforcement of such laws among prostituted women victims is another story, because of the still prevailing double standards in all levels of society.

On the whole, Philippine laws still mirror the elitists and sexist culture of society, where only the small criminals get jailed. The political will to penalize big time syndicates and personalities in drug dealing, embezzlement, possession of firearms, prostitution, etc. has been dismally lackadaisical.

The Loosening Influence of the Church

*I tell you this: tax-gatherers and prostitutes are entering
The kingdom of God ahead you.
For when John came to show the right way to live,
You did not believe him;
But the tax gathers and prostitutes did;
And even when you had seen that,
You did not change your minds and believe him.
Mathew 21:32*

As one Filipino education analyst said, the “loosening influence” of the church is one major cause of moral breakdown among Filipinos (Dr. Amado Dizon). Indeed, the seduction of media has proven to be more potent than the moral hold of the church.

But if there is anything the church lacks, it is not morality. As a matter of fact, we have received a lot, if not overdose, of moralizing from the church. So much has been said about the right of the unborn child in the largely Roman Catholic church in the Philippines, but we still have to witness the same fervors advocating the rights of the child born into this kind of society, to live a fully developed life. Child prostitution is the single most powerful and disturbing index of how sick a society can get. So much has been said about the acceptable way to control childbirth, but the Bride of Christ has yet to address the high incidence of maternal and infant mortality rates due to preventable causes.

It is said that the church as a whole has forgotten her prophetic heritage. The church would agree that their mission to empower the powerless, maimed, sick, blind, poor, and unclean. Does she believe that Jesus' attitudes and relationships with powerless women were not only meaningful in themselves, but are normative and prophetic for us today? Can she transcend her tendency to arbitrarily pass righteousness judgment and oftentimes irrelevant and superficial teachings on human sexuality, which in effect, shun “immoral” people like prostituted women, gays, etc.? Many powerfully written pastoral letters have already been passed about the plight of human rights (violations), the economy and ecology. Is the Philippine church finally ready to make its position known on issues affecting women?

If it has to be relevant to the youth of today, the church needs to rethink, to expand perhaps, its moral paradigm on sexuality to make it more relevant and holistic, which entails making a strong statement, and acting upon, the economic, political and socio-cultural root causes of malaise infecting the development of the youth. It has exerted moral influence on the State, but it is not quite credible by its own acts of omission. The church also needs to re-examine her role in strengthening the role of the family, by addressing the need for just relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children.

All these need soul-searching into the kind of morality it has been preaching, the kind of religion for spirituality for that matter, it has been trying to promote among her flock. There is also a need for us, Christians, to redefine our concept of morality, what is “moral” and “immoral” given a specific context – with eyes that are non-judgmental and not myopic, the way Christ did. How can we refrain from condoning a wrong without condemning its victims?

Jesus Christ has consistently referred to children as those who belong to heaven and who bear the face of God. The suffering of girl children like Luisa and Aida cries out to the heavens for justice and compassion. Ours is choice to heed or to stifle these cries.