

Innocent Victims and Immoral Women: Sex Workers in the Philippines through the Lens of Mainstream Media

Authors : Sharmila Parmanand

Abstract : This paper examines dominant media representations of prostitution in the Philippines and interrogates sex workers' interactions with the media establishment. This analysis of how sex workers are constituted in media, often as both innocent victims and immoral actors, contributes to an understanding of public discourse on sex work in the Philippines, where decriminalisation has recently been proposed and sex workers are currently classified as potential victims under anti-trafficking laws but also as criminals under the penal code. The first part is an analysis of media coverage of two prominent themes on prostitution: first, raid and rescue operations conducted by law enforcement; and second, prostitution on military bases and tourism hotspots. As a result of pressure from activists and international donors, these two themes often define the policy conversations on sex work in the Philippines. The discourses in written and televised news reports and documentaries from established local and international media sources that address these themes are explored through content analysis. Conclusions are drawn based on specific terms commonly used to refer to sex workers, how sex workers are seen as performing their cultural roles as mothers and wives, how sex work is depicted, associations made between sex work and public health, representations of clients and managers and 'rescuers' such as the police, anti-trafficking organisations, and faith-based groups, and which actors are presumed to be issue experts. Images of how prostitution is used as a metaphor for relations between the Philippines and foreign nations are also deconstructed, along with common tropes about developing world female subjects. In general, sex workers are simultaneously portrayed as bad mothers who endanger their family's morality but also as long-suffering victims who endure exploitation for the sake of their children. They are also depicted as unclean, drug-addicted threats to public health. Their managers and clients are portrayed as cold, abusive, and sometimes violent, and their rescuers as moral and altruistic agents who are essential for sex workers' rehabilitation and restoration as virtuous citizens. The second part explores sex workers' own perceptions of their interactions with media, through interviews with members of the Philippine Sex Workers Collective, a loose organisation of sex workers around the Philippines. They reveal that they are often excluded by media practitioners and that they do not feel that they have space for meaningful self-revelation about their work when they do engage with journalists, who seem to have an overt agenda of depicting them as either victims or women of loose morals. In their assessment, media narratives do not necessarily reflect their lived experiences, and in some cases, coverage of rescues and raid operations endangers their privacy and instrumentalises their suffering. Media representations of sex workers may produce subject positions such as 'victims' or 'criminals' and legitimize specific interventions while foreclosing other ways of thinking. Further, in light of media's power to reflect and shape public consciousness, it is a valuable academic and political project to examine whether sex workers are able to assert agency in determining how they are represented.

Keywords : discourse analysis, news media, sex work, trafficking

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