HIV in the time of ‘sexual liberation’

An exploratory study in Boracay Island, Philippines

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Chapter 1

HIV risk in the ‘general population’

HIV in Asia is slowly rising, mostly undetected. The HIV prevalence for the region is 0.1%, but because Asia’s populations are so large, this translates to a total of 7.2 million people who are living with HIV/AIDS. Some countries exhibit relatively low prevalence but have extremely high prevalence in small, isolated groups within their societies. In Myanmar, for example, the national HIV prevalence is 2%, but this masks the fact that with injecting drug-users and sex workers, prevalence has reached 60% and 40% respectively. Experts are afraid that because of the rife underreporting of HIV cases in the region, prevalence should be much higher (Bloom et al., 2004).

The Philippines seems to be lucky in getting away from the path of HIV within Asia. Although it is surrounded by countries like Thailand and Cambodia, which exhibit the highest prevalence in the region, the HIV prevalence in the Philippines is less than 0.01%. There have only been 2,073 HIV cases reported from 1984 until May of 2004 (DOH, 2004). But many experts are skeptical about this low number. The UNAIDS estimated in 2001 that there could be 9,400 HIV cases in the Philippines (UNAIDS, 2002). But so far, the HIV surveillance system of the country has not showed that.

HIV surveillance in the country is mainly based on a system that actively tests four social groups: female sex workers, men who have sex with men, injecting drug-users, and seafarers (DOH, 2003). These sectors of society are what epidemiology has categorized as ‘high-risk groups’ because they engage in particular behaviors, such as unprotected sex and injecting drug-use, which place them at increased risk for getting HIV. Hence, the majority of STD/HIV interventions in the country have been designed to target these four high-risk clusters of society, very few interventions reach people outside these groups.

However, what is odd about the design of HIV prevention in the Philippines is that it does not coincide with the facts. Out of the 2,073 reported HIV cases in the country, only 43% of them fall under one of the ‘high-risk groups’, namely seafarers
(37%) and entertainers\(^1\) (6%). The rest of the 57% of HIV positive cases come from the ‘general population’, or defined here as people who do not fall under any category of HIV ‘high-risk groups’. Those who came from the ‘general population’ were Overseas Filipino Workers (32%), domestic helpers (18%), local employees (10%) and nurses (5%) (DOH, 2004).

Mandatory testing for HIV is done among Overseas Filipino Workers and seafarers before they sign a contract, so many HIV positive cases have been captured that way. On the other hand, the National HIV/AIDS Sentinel Surveillance System has 10 surveillance sites that tests 300 individuals every six months who belong to the following ‘high-risk groups’: sex workers, injecting drug-users, and men who have sex with men (DOH, 2003). But only 6% of the total HIV cases have been captured through this active surveillance system. The rest of the HIV cases have been found through passive surveillance. In fact, out of all the full-blown AIDS cases reported, 260 (44%) of them were reported after the patients had already died from AIDS-related complications (DOH, 2004).

HIV in the Philippines has silently crept into the ‘general population’. There are other significant pathways where HIV is being transmitted in the Philippines that the current HIV/AIDS surveillance system fails to recognize. The past and current HIV/AIDS prevention programs have provided ‘high-risk groups’ with opportunities to protect themselves from getting sick. However, who is providing interventions to the ‘general population’, which has been shown to be equally (if not more) at risk for HIV?

Hence, this paper aims to look at HIV risk among people who make up the ‘general population’. Since the main route of HIV transmission in the Philippines is through heterosexual and homosexual sex, emphasis will be placed on sexual behaviors, as opposed to drug-use. I would like to understand what sexual behaviors are practiced among individuals whom public health has deemed as low risk for contracting HIV.

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\(^{1}\) Entertainers is another term for people working in the ‘entertainment’ or sex industry.
Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to understand the sexual behaviors of sexually-active Filipinos who do not fall under the epidemiological categories of high-risk groups for HIV. By studying the sexual behaviors of people within their local context, I hope to have an in-depth understanding of how and why some Filipinos engage in sexual behaviors that make them vulnerable to HIV.

A brief testimonial over the Internet led me to focus my research on the island of Boracay, a popular beach destination in the Southern Visayas region of the Philippines. The testimonial was written by a European who traveled around the Philippines to do scuba diving. He created a personal website of his trip, which was made ornate with pictures of ‘sexy’ Filipino women and detailed instructions on where and how to get sex in the different diving destinations of the country. However, what struck me was that he wrote how surprised (and delighted) he was that Boracay not only provided interesting diving sites, but that the Boracaynon women also offered ‘free sex’.

Further inquiry indicated that Boracay is unique because the Philippine government has actively tried to create and maintain a wholesome reputation for this island. They wanted to advertise Boracay as a ‘family resort’, distinct from other tourist destinations that have been linked with sex tourism. They claim that Boracay does not have a sex industry because prostitution is not tolerated. However, the study of Chant on Boracay indicates that prostitution does exist on the island, but also that other “local girls find foreign boyfriends on the island who ‘take care’ of them for their length of stay (1997:156).” Chant suggests that there is a significant amount of sexual interaction between local residents and foreign tourists in Boracay that occurs outside prostitution. If it is non-commercial sex, then it is probably happening within what was earlier defined as the ‘general population’.

Therefore, I decided to focus my research on the sexual behaviors of Boracaynon men and women who have non-commercial sex with foreign tourists. I wanted to know if their sexual behaviors made them vulnerable to contracting STDs and/or HIV. To achieve this, I had to answer some guide questions. What is the social, political, and cultural context that affects the sexual behaviors of people in Boracay? What types of
relationship are formed between local residents and foreign tourists, and their motivations for engaging in these relationships? What are their sexual practices? Lastly, how do sexually-active men and women in Boracay perceive sexual health, and what health services do they require?

How to study sexual behavior in Boracay

The research is intended to be an exploratory study of the sexual behaviors of men and women in Boracay. Not much is known about the sexual environment on the island, apart from some studies on sex tourism like Chant's work (see Chant, 1997). So, the methods used here are designed to capture the views and lived experiences of the local people, as well as the social, political, and cultural nuances of the place they move in.

The first method was the open-ended, in-depth interview. I used semi-structured questions to guide the general flow of the interview, but I also gave the interviewees a high degree of flexibility as to where he/she wanted to take the conversation. My interviewees included 7 men, 10 women, and a “lady-boy” (transvestite). All of them were Filipinos except for one European woman. They were all residents of Boracay whose occupations range from sex work to restaurant owner.

The second method I used was participant-observation, which is the primary research tool for anthropology. I lived in Boracay for two months, wherein I participated in the daily activities of the local residents. By doing so, it helped me experience a semblance of what the Boracaynons experience, a glimpse of the cultural context from the insider’s perspective. I hung out in places where locals and foreigners usually meet, such as the bars, discos and cafes. I worked as a bartender for two weeks to better understand the experience of sex workers and their clients. I tried to participate in activities that were more popular for residents than tourists like shopping for food in the wet market, or learning Tai Chi (Chinese martial arts). I also adopted a flirtatious behavior when the people around me did. However, I did not enter into any romantic or sexual relationship during my fieldwork as I felt it would have compromised my professionalism and ethics as a researcher.
Lastly, I deliberately hid the identities of my interviewees using fictitious names and personal characteristics so as to protect their confidentiality and prevent any discrimination against them that may result from this report.

**Experience of being a researcher**

There were some personal attributes of mine that I believe affected how people reacted to me as a researcher, particularly my ethnicity and social class.

I am Filipino in nationality, but Chinese by ethnicity, and so many Filipinos and foreigners mistook me for a foreigner. Many thought I was Korean because Koreans make up the largest tourist group on the island. Even after lengthy conversations with Filipinos in our native tongue, they would often say at the end: “Wow, for a Korean you speak Tagalog remarkably well.” It became clear to me after a week that I was generally regarded as a non-Filipino.

The advantage to looking foreign was that I witnessed first-hand how Filipinos behaved towards foreign tourists. There were times when I felt that Filipinos saw me primarily as a potential buyer of the goods they were selling. Local men were unmistakably more brazen to me as a quasi-Korean than if I was Filippina. For example, when I would be in a bathing suit, Filipino men would stare in such an obtrusive way that would have meant a slap from an average Filipino woman. Sometimes the men would say something sexually-charged in Tagalog thinking I wouldn’t understand, but once I answered back in our language, they usually ran away mortified. So, some local men behaved in a brasher manner with foreign women; their actions towards me as a quasi-Korean had stronger sexual undertones than if I looked more Filippino.

As for those who learned (and believed) I was Filipino, my being Chinese meant a different assumption, which was one that I belonged to the upper class of Philippine society. This is the stereotype of Chinese in the Philippines. In relevance to my research, this instantly established a power imbalance between me and the people I talked to. Some of them called me “ma’am” at the beginning and found it very difficult to call me by my first name. I felt I was constantly being tested whether I could be as ‘down to earth’ as
they wanted me to be. In many ways I succeeded in winning their respect and acceptance as an equal, although the latter is never really achieved.

So, the following chapters will look at the data I gathered, which revolve around three main themes: (1) the social environment in Boracay where sexual behaviors are played out; (2) the types of inter-racial relationships on the island and the motivations for them; and (3) the perceptions of locals about STDs and HIV, and their vulnerability to it.
Chapter 2

Boracay: ‘Fantasy Island’ for whom?

When I was first in Boracay Island in 1984, it was still like an untouched paradise. Your feet were met with the white, powdery sand that was warmed by the sun. The water was clear blue. Fishes swam near the short and nibbled at your toes. There were beautiful rock formations emerging from the water carved out by the wind and the waves. A legion of coconut trees stretched its trunks almost to meet the water. At night, sea turtles would lay their eggs on the beach, and ‘flying foxes’ would hover above your head.

In the early 1980’s, Boracay only had 3,000 inhabitants whose main sources of livelihood were selling fish and copra to the main island of Panay (Malay Municipal Office, 1996). Fishing slowly declined because of the destruction of coral reefs by cyanide and dynamite fishing, while the copra industry suffered from a sharp fall in market prices during that period. So according to past surveys, locals and researchers agree that “Boracay is better off with tourism than without it” (Trousdale, 1998: 7).

There are now 13,000 inhabitants and 340,000 annual tourists who come from the Philippines and other parts of the world. With more than 200 beach resorts and an endless array of restaurants that serve from Indian to Greek cuisine, Boracay has never been busier. Many commercial establishments, particularly dive shops, are owned by Koreans and Europeans who have taken Filipino business partners or Filipina wives to comply with local regulations. Koreans make up the biggest number of foreign tourists, next to Americans and Japanese. Among the Europeans, the British are the biggest, followed by the Germans, French and Swiss (Municipal Tourist Center, 2003).

Accessibility has been improved with daily flights from Manila, Cebu and Palawan to the main island of Panay, from where you take a 20-minute bangka-ride (local pump-boat) to the island of Boracay. Public infrastructure and facilities have improved along with commercial development on the island. However, there are still

\[\text{Flying foxes are bats with a face of a fox. It is distinct to the islands of Panay.}\]

\[\text{Copra is a raw material made from dried coconut hemp.}\]
much to be improved: unfinished roads, health services, and the establishment of a waste management system, are just some examples.

The development of Boracay as one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in the Philippines has led to many compromises. Turtles do not come to the main beach anymore. The ‘flying foxes’ have been declared an endangered species. The sand has turned from pristine white to off-white. Peace and tranquility, at least on the main beach, is a thing of the past. However, despite the effects of progress and development, Boracay has still maintained its charm and its claim as the ‘Paradise Island’ of the Philippines.

**Boracay as a ‘Fantasy Island’**

There are people who give Boracay a dual identity though. Apart from being a representation of ‘paradise’, it is also regarded as a haven for the ‘sexually free’. Boracay is seen by many Filipinos, especially the locals of the island, as a place where traditional sexual norms are less enforced. Pre-marital sex, for example, is not as stigmatized in Boracay as in other parts of the predominantly Catholic country. In some sense, indiscriminate sex with multiple partners is at the same time tolerated and celebrated by the local residents. Boracay is not just paradise for them; it is their ‘Fantasy Island’ as well.

"Sex happens a lot in Boracay," One of the locals told me: “This is a party island. If there is one thing that’s easiest here, it’s sex.” So sex happens between (and among) foreigners, Filipinos, tourists, locals, young and old. As for how young ‘young’ is, Kenny, a 28-year old resident, explains:

Just look at those teenage girls who are around 17 to 18 years old. They come to Boracay with their boyfriends, do you think nothing happens? In this millennium, the youth are really different. Even the 16-year olds tempt you. Sixteen! I’ve tried a 14-year old and I wasn’t even her first time.

One could not escape the suggestion of sex. It seemed to be everywhere: from friendly conversations, to the atmosphere of an establishment, a T-shirt emblem, or in the meaning of a stare. A 40-ish year old father, for example, was with his wife and three teenage daughters, but was sporting a t-shirt that said “Fed-Sex: Fast Delivery” (as a pun
on the courier company Fed-Ex). There was a restaurant named “Secxz in Boracay” and underneath its sign was a life-size wooden sculpture of a naked man and woman in an intimate embrace. Bars also played up the association of alcohol, fun and sex. One bar/club became famous for its drinking game called “Sex Shooters”, wherein you down fifteen shots of mixed cocktails all at once. However, what seemed the biggest sexual suggestion of all, the most conspicuous one, was the continuous parade of naked flesh.

People definitely showed a lot of skin in Boracay. Everywhere you turned there were cleavages, legs, muscles, and bronzed skin. The more suggestive parts were the ones covered: the bulge under the swim-trunks, the curve of the breasts, the indentations of the nipples, and the butt cheeks tightly outlined by the panties. There was a lot to stimulate the visual senses towards heightened sexual desire. In fact, I was getting more sexually-related gestures and comments when I was wearing a two-piece bikini than when I was just in T-shirt and shorts. The men were definitely attracted to something more than just the color and pattern of my swimsuit.

So there is high sexual energy on the island. What makes Boracay special though is that it allows people to turn this sexual energy into actual sexual acts. It provides a liminal space where sexual values and norms are temporarily suspended. I met Filipinos who lived in Manila, but come to the island to be sexually un-inhibited. The island for them is a vacation place from sexual constraints.

Leona is one such Filipina from Manila who goes to Boracay to have extramarital affairs. She is a fashion designer in her early twenties, married with one child, and has been visiting Boracay intermittently for many years. When I interviewed her, she had already been living in Boracay for three months on vacation. This is what she had to say about the role Boracay played in her life:

In Manila you can’t do the things that you can do here. Boracay is my fantasy island. The saying here is: Whatever happens in Boracay, stays in Boracay! You have freedom here. Whatever you do, whatever you wear, nobody will care. Unlike in Manila, if I started French-kissing someone, I would already be called a pok-pok [prostitute]. You are different when you are in Boracay. Anything goes. That’s why I want to live here... If I didn’t have to go home to my husband in Manila, I would live here. [...] I don’t have flings [sexual affairs] in Manila, but here I do!
For Leona, having extra-marital affairs in Manila is shameful because she has a concept that it is morally wrong and she does not want to be socially condemned for it. But in Boracay, Leona feels safe to openly engage in multiple sexual relationships even when people know about her marital status. She has faith that the people of Boracay will not morally judge her nor betray her secret. There is inter-dependency among people in Boracay to provide the social support that allows for sexual liberation, for the island to be maintained as a ‘sexual haven’. In reality, people do not forget their sexual values and norms when they are in Boracay, but because the environment allows for sexual licentiousness, then the moral restrictions on sexual behavior become less stringent.

However, the concept of Boracay as a ‘Fantasy Island’, where ‘anything goes’ as Leona said, is in fact just a concept. Moral judgment against ‘deviant’ sexual behavior still exists on the island, but it is more targeted towards particular individuals than others. Prostitution as a form of sexual behavior is highly stigmatized by the locals and prostitutes are morally judged. So there is a double standard as to who can be sexually promiscuous and who cannot. As tackled in the next section, Boracay is a ‘Fantasy Island’ for some, but for prostitutes it is not.

**Hostility towards prostitutes**

Sexual licentiousness is socially allowed for many people in Boracay, but among prostitutes it is not. The local government has tried to suppress the development of prostitution as an industry through local policies and police enforcement. Likewise, the local residents have expressed their intolerance of prostitution by means of socially excluding prostitutes.

*The face of the enemy*

Prostitutes who work in Boracay are not natives of the island; they were not born and raised there. They often come from other towns or cities in search of better financial opportunities. Some choose prostitution because they cannot find better-paying jobs on the island. Rachel, for example, is a gay teenager who ran away from her home in a
nearby province after graduating from high school. Upon arriving on the island, she made friends with other gay men who made a living out of prostitution. When Rachel could not find a job after several weeks, she decided to go into prostitution as well. On the other hand, other prostitutes who move to the island have previously worked as prostitutes before. Many of them reached Boracay for the first time because they were accompanying their foreign clients or boyfriends on a vacation. Some liked the island and decided to come back. This is the story of Cheryl, a 41-year old prostitute from Manila who migrated to Boracay twelve years ago and has survived working as a prostitute ever since.

I brought an American here before and then I liked it. It was beautiful so I decided to stay here. It’s also beautiful in Manila, but only if you have the money. Here it’s okay if you don’t have money. There will be a lot who will support you so can have something to eat and to drink.

Although life for Cheryl is better in Boracay in comparison with Manila, it is still a difficult life. Boracay has its high and low tourist seasons and during the low season, prostitutes can hardly get by. Such that Cheryl, at 41 years old, barely has money saved and continues to survive on subsistence living.

Government policies on prostitution

The seasonality of customers is not the only challenge that prostitutes face in Boracay, another obstacle is the police. The Philippine national government has been adamant about keeping the image of Boracay as a ‘family destination’ – distinct from other beach destinations that have developed reputations for sex tourism. A detachment of the Philippine National Police (PNP), together with the Island Tourism Administration, actively suppress the development of a sex industry on the island by monitoring bars for displays of nudity and warn establishments “to close down or to clean up” if in violation (Chant, 1997: 170). A few years back, a resort that housed some female prostitutes and their pimp was raided by the PNP. All of them were subsequently expelled from the island. That incident serves as a reminder that organized prostitution is
not tolerated by the local government. Most of the prostitutes that work on the island today are free-lance sex workers, or prostitutes who do not work for somebody else.

Because prostitution on the island is not organized, it is then difficult to implement health programs that target prostitutes because they are not easily identified, approached, nor assembled. In 2002, the Provincial Health Office of Aklan initiated an STD/HIV program in Boracay that specifically targeted prostitutes, or at least those who fit the common epidemiological definition of people who actively sell sexual favors for hard cash. The objective was to mandate them to undergo weekly health/STD check-ups at the Municipal Hospital, whereby they received health cards indicating if they were ‘clean’ (STD-free) or not. The health cards were often shown to the police and it was a way for prostitutes to protect themselves from further police harassment. According to Cheryl, a female sex worker, she appreciates the benefits of carrying a health card around:

> It’s better if you have a health card or ‘pink card’. You can get a [pap] smear in Kalibo. There’s no payment for the test. You won’t have trouble with the police because they want to know if you’re sick.

The STD/HIV program weakened after it was turned over to the local government. As will be discussed later on, the prostitutes stopped showing up for their weekly check-ups, which was the only event that seemed to bring prostitutes together as a quasi-homogenous group.

The local government is not interested to sustain any program that acknowledges the presence of prostitutes on the island. They are adamant about keeping Boracay a wholesome, family-friendly tourist destination. Moreover, it seems that the locals are happy about the government’s stand.

**Hostility from local residents**

The local residents share the government’s view that prostitution should not flourish on the island. Some regard prostitutes as bad for business, and others think it’s bad for Boracay’s image. The general view is that Boracay is better off without prostitutes.
I interviewed Gloria, a female in her early twenties who was born and raised in Boracay. She had clear resentment about the influx of prostitutes to the island because she believed it compromised the reputation of her home and her people:

The *pokpok* [prostitutes] usually come from other places. The image of Boracay is being ruined [by them]. If other people hear about Boracay, they look at it differently already. The only thing sexy about us [native-born] is that we dress sexy, but we’re not *pokpoks*. There hasn’t been a native Boracaynon who became a *hostess* [prostitute]. Normally, they are from Cebu and Manila. A lot of them come with their foreigners in tow.

Gloria not only sees prostitution as a threat to the island, but regards prostitutes as a threat to her own identity. She has a strong need to differentiate herself from ‘them’. Perhaps she has been mistaken as a prostitute before, but for whatever reason, it is evident that she has strong moral issues against prostitution.

For some bar, disco and restaurant owners, the presence of prostitutes threatens the reputation of their establishments. There has been a systematic attempt to oust prostitutes from the more popular bars because they tended to cause trouble, such as fighting among each other over clients. According to the owners, once customers experience violence in one place, they rarely go back. Marco, an owner of a popular bar on the island, elucidated on this point:

We try not to be friendly with them [prostitutes]. We don’t encourage them being here. The bartenders are not friendly with them because their heads get big. Like that one [pointing to a middle-aged female prostitute], she’s not right in the head. She took drugs before that’s why she’s that way. Many times she causes trouble. So we still serve them drinks, but we’re not friendly to them. [...] I don’t want my place to be the hangout of prostitutes and *baklas* [gay men]. It happened in many other bars that these working girls and *baklas* would cause trouble or fights when they were drunk. Bad for business. Like with *Zebra*, it was notorious for having working girls and *baklas* and would get rowdy. The owner got fed up with it and literally threw out these groups. He renovated the place and made it look nicer, but it never picked up.

The way bars or restaurants ‘discourage’ prostitutes can sometimes be rough.
I met Cheryl, a female prostitute, on the night when she felt ‘unjustly’ kicked out of a bar. Although she was visibly furious, you could feel a stronger sense of frustration that she was powerless to defend her own dignity.

*Pinagtripan ako* [I was harassed] last night. I asked the guard why he was getting mad at me for sitting on the counter when the customers were dancing on the tabletop. The guard took me by the arm and I told him “don’t do that to me”. He was nice to me before when he was still working at another bar, but now he’s an asshole. What did he eat last night! It also happened in that other discotheque. My Italian friend had a *despedida* [going-away party], and we all got drunk. I accidentally hit a glass and it broke. After that, I wasn’t allowed to enter there anymore. The guards really wouldn’t let us in. I hope they’re hit by karma. Their strictness is out of place.

I actually met the owner of the bar where Cheryl was first kicked out and he admitted to instructing all his staff to refrain from being friendly with prostitutes. He also ordered the guard to be extra unfriendly to prostitutes, to try to discourage them from entering the establishment. The guard was told to kick out any customer that is unruly, and according to them, it so happens that prostitutes are the most disruptive.

However, there are a few establishments who welcome prostitutes because of the clients they bring in. Especially during the low season, when sales are down, all paying customers are welcome no matter who they are. Tray, another restaurant owner, explains this to me but was clear about his own sentiments against prostitutes in his establishment:

Some places don’t discourage them. The working girls are promoted a bit by the management, especially when they’re not doing well. There are a lot of Korean clients. Sony’s movie bar is another one. From what I understand, they have no problems of working girls hanging there if it brings business. If we see ‘them’ here, we know. Although they bring in business, it really is not our scene. We’re not really too friendly with them. I don’t have any problem with them, but I don’t promote it.

There are many establishments that try to uphold a certain image. Tray’s restaurant, for example, caters to Philippine society’s upper class and the presence of prostitutes destroys its elite atmosphere. He said that if it was just possible, he would like
to ask the foreign men who are accompanied by prostitutes to leave, even if they bring in money.

The stereotypical sex tourist, characterized by the image of a ‘dirty old (white) man’, can be found on the island. However, there are other foreigners who come mainly for the beach and water sports like scuba diving. But the stigma of sex tourism in the Philippines influences how people judge foreigners who come to Boracay. The categories for foreigners are only two: sex tourists and non-sex tourists. This bias can be seen from the opinions of Tray, who compares foreigners in Boracay with foreigners in Puerto Galera, a scuba-diving destination that is notorious for sex tourism:

In Puerto Galera, the foreign men who go there are bald, overweight, very different from what we get in Boracay. Our [foreign] guys are not paying for ‘them’. They are young, half-decent, and not that old. In Puerto Galera, it is typical that the foreigners know what they want and what they’re doing; they have no qualms about it. What I can tell about the ones in Puerto Galera is that they are overweight and old. Usually in Boracay, men are younger in their twenties and thirties, although they’re not that great to look at. They’re here to have fun, not just to get women. If they don’t pick up girls, it’s not a big deal. They have no qualms about paying for the girls because they don’t pay much. Just to take a girl out in the countries where they’re from already costs $50-$100 on a date, here they don’t really care, there are no strings attached.

Of course, this is Tray’s perception of foreign tourists, which may or may not be true. Nevertheless, it captures the biases that Filipinos have of ‘whites’, prostitutes, or anybody who closely resembles images they have of the sex tourist industry. Although prostitution is not as rampant in Boracay compared to other tourist sites, the local residents are still affected by prostitution at different levels. Hence, the next sections look at how prostitution affects people in Boracay at a more personal level. In particular, how their experience of prostitution influences their own sexual behaviors.

**Personal experiences of prostitution**

Men and women in the Philippines experience prostitution differently. Many Filipino men, for example, are introduced to the sexual services of prostitutes during their teens as a rite of passage to adulthood. Women, on the other hand, are brought up to be
chaste and proper, held by the fear that if they deviate from these values, they will surely be likened to prostitutes.

There is a double standard on sexual behaviors that is strongly linked to prostitution. Men are allowed to engage in commercial sex, while the honor of women depends on how near or far their sexual behaviors resemble that found in the sex industry.

This is true for people in Boracay as well. More particularly for those who engage in intercultural relationships because of the stigma of sex tourism. So, this section looks at how men and women in Boracay experience prostitution or the concept of prostitution, and how this ultimately affects their sexual behavior.

*Men, prostitution, and sexual freedom*

Prostitution mainly revolves around female and gay prostitutes who service men. Men are often at the receiving end, the ones who hold the money and power that allows for sex to be purchased. Prostitution serves Filipino men in many ways, such as a rite of passage to adulthood, an outlet for their 'natural' sexual drive, and as a mirror to their masculine image.

Prostitution has been the route for many Filipino boys to pass from adolescence to adulthood, including the men I interviewed in Boracay. Many of them went to prostitutes with their fathers or male relatives when they were around 13 or 15 years old for the main goal of being devirginized. This practice carries little social stigma and is almost considered by many to be a requirement, a social norm.

Kenny, a 28-year old resident of Boracay, had his rite of passage in his hometown of Romblon at the age of 13. His story resembles that of many other men in Boracay. This he proudly recalls:

The first I time I had sex was with a 'paid girl'. I was with friends because it was easier. During those times, around first and second year high school, my other classmates were ignorant about sex. You were just 13 years old then. But I wasn’t because I saw a lot on TV. On my second year in HS, my friends and I planned to do this. We brought along an adult, my cousin who was 24...I felt like, hey man, I need to be 'baptized'! My cousin kept on saying it was great. So I saved my allowance. I asked so much extra money from my mom, with the pretense it was
for school expenses. At that time, you could get a *mestiza* (girl with mixed racial origins, e.g. Spanish) for around ₱500. That is good for two people already. We got three to four girls. We were even competing who would go first. The woman was young also, around 18. She will teach you how to perform because she knows you are a virgin.

The testimonial of Kenny illustrates how he has been enculturated to think that being devirginized by prostitutes is normal and morally acceptable. He regards prostitutes as sexual mentors; women who have taught him how to sexually perform. This gives us a glimpse of how institutionalized this ‘rite of passage’ is in Philippine culture when sex workers are actually accustomed in ways to devirginize little boys.

Some boys then become addicted to sexual pleasure and grow up believing that their sexual desires can always be fulfilled if they just went to a prostitute. Like in the case of Bata, a 25-year old resident of Boracay who, after experiencing sex for the first time with a prostitute, became addicted to their sexual services at the young age of 13.

It’s like you become addicted. *Ang sarap* [*It was pleasurable*]! I knew I had to save more money... “Hey boys, I have enough saved up, let’s go there.” Of course before it was still cheap.

Bata grew up seeking sexual pleasure from different women and still continues to do so. Because of how Philippine society has tolerated – or even encouraged him – to fulfill his sexual desires with prostitutes, he now believes that all men are socially permitted to indiscriminately act on their sexual impulses. He even believes that men are anatomically made to be more sexually active than women, as he describes:

You know what they say: we are like screwdrivers*. Anywhere you put us in, it’s okay, right? The screwdriver, if you put that in and turn it around, that’s his job. But with women, it can’t be done often. She’s not a screwdriver, is she? She’s different. She’s like electricity, she still needs an adaptor. [...] You know for me, I’m the type of person who really likes sex. I like sex because I like that tomorrow it will be a different woman or different next week. Then the next day it would be my *asawa* [wife/live-in]. Let’s say that my body already looks for it [sex]. It has already become a form of pleasure or addiction.

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*Although the analogy to the screwdriver is still confusing to me, what is important is that it was meaningful to Bata.*
Bata justifies his sexual activities by saying that his body is ‘addicted’ to sex, like saying he has no control over his sexual desires. You hear these statements a lot from men and women who believe that men naturally need sex, even among wives whose husbands are having extra-marital affairs. So, men are given much more license for sexual deviancy than women.

Women, on the other hand, are still expected to be like the Virgin Mary: pure, chaste, and with strong self-control. If they are not, then they are pokpoks, which means prostitute or prostitute-like. For men, women cannot be as sexually wild as them. It is not in women’s nature, to do so means that they are acting prostitute-like. Bata has his definition of pokpoks, which clearly illustrates the double morality in sex:

If I were a girl, I would naturally respond to the advances of different men but not all at the same time. The ones you call pok-pok, are the one with a continuous string of men in one day. One time, my friends and I went to swim and decided to sleep in a dark area by the beach. We were all men except for one girl. When we were all asleep, all our hands were moving around touching her body, all trying to be the first. Because she responded positively, she’s a pok-pok. [...] For me being a pok-pok is when a woman has many men all at the same time. With money or without, just as long as it’s all at the same time. Also switching from one man to the other. But if she switches men monthly, that’s natural. Or weekly. But just not daily.

One criterion to tell if the woman is a pokpok is if she changes men daily, at least according to Bata. Another method he has devised is particularly relevant to Boracay where there are many inter-racial relationships. Whenever Bata sees a Filipina with a foreign man, he instinctively assesses whether the woman is a prostitute or a genuine girlfriend. He does this by looking at the way the woman acts and how well she speaks English.

I look at the action and way of speaking. Even if she’s wearing a two-piece, she’s not necessarily a pok-pok [prostitute]. [...] There are women who are always wearing long (house) dresses, even with socks, but they are always with foreigners. Based on their appearance, you’ll think that she’s a paid woman. But I will first look at the actions of the woman, and then I wait for her to speak. A while ago there was a beautiful woman who was in a two-piece [bikini], I wanted
to tell her to wrap a towel around herself! The *kano* [American man] she was with was fat. I didn’t think she was a *pok-pok* [prostitute] because she spoke English so well. So it meant that their relationship was okay. There are other women [in similar relationships with foreigners] who say things like: “What kind of a *kano* is this! *Bwisit nanam ito* [How infuriating]!” But this couple was sweet. She was even singing to the American. Her English seemed like it was an educated one. You really wouldn’t think [she was a prostitute].

It seems that for Bata, women with foreign boyfriends are potential prostitutes by default, until he proves them not to be by deductive reasoning. For women with Filipino boyfriends, they are not *pokpoks* by default, but only when they become too sexually promiscuous. Either way, Bata uses his concept of what a prostitute is to morally judge if women belong to two main categories: prostitute-like or not.

This section illustrates how men in Boracay experience prostitution and how their ideals of women are pegged on their concept of prostitutes. Although men happily participate in prostitution and think it is generally good for them. The hypocrisy appears when they use the same activity of prostitution to represent what is supposedly dishonorable and debasing in women. So, this is the moral environment in which many women in Boracay find themselves in, particularly those who have foreign partners. So the next section looks at how women’s social image and sexual behavior are directly or indirectly influenced by prostitution.

*Women, prostitution, and honor*

Unlike men, the reputation of women in society is constantly affected by the concept of prostitution, whether or not they are directly involved in the sex industry. As mentioned in the previous section, there is social pressure for women to be chaste and sexually ‘contained’, lest they are likened to a prostitute. Especially in a place like Boracay, where the presence of foreigners makes it open to associations with sex tourism, women have to be constantly conscious about what kind of (sexual) image they show in public.

Gloria was born and raised in Boracay and since then has become a born-again Christian. Her experience of prostitution in Boracay is that she feels that the moral
repercussions of it encroach on her personal life. She feels constantly paranoid that she may be mistaken for a prostitute just by being in the same physical space with them. This fear of being likened to a prostitute is very real for Gloria and affects many aspects of her everyday life, which is illustrated in her testimonial below:

Compared to Caticlan, the natives here are *pakawala* [without values or discipline]. They are wearing two-piece swimsuits...I am a born-again so we can't drink or smoke, but I still go out with my friends when they go out. Sometimes we are surrounded by so many *kano* [American/foreign men] who keep on staring. There are so many *pokpoks*. I get scared that they will also think I am a *pokpok*. So one time I was forced to leave the table and dance...[Prostitution] is part of the [resort] job especially when you are assigned to a 24-hour shift. There was a Korean man who got a room for "short-time" with a *pokpok*, only for 2 hours. "How many are you," I asked. "We are just two," he answered. He asked me, "Do you want to join?" I told him that he could have her for himself. "Sorry, I'm not like that," I said.

I talked to several men and women who called themselves 'natives' of Boracay—those who were born and raised there. I had the impression that they were the most averse to the presence of prostitutes on the island because they felt that their reputations as a people and as individuals were directly threatened by it. Perhaps it is because female prostitutes come from neighboring towns and share the same facial and physical attributes as them. Or maybe it is because the sexy-ness of beach attire—what 'natives' wear normally—mimics the stereotypical outfits of prostitutes. Whatever the reason Gloria has for fearing the prostitute image, it is apparent that she has moral issues with prostitution. Moreover, being a born-again Christian, she goes further in believing that prostitution, or any sex outside the sanctity of marriage for that matter, is sinful.

However, Gloria lies at one end of the spectrum and at the opposite end are women who publicly 'promote' promiscuity. I use the word 'promote' because in many occasions, women in Boracay have tried to convince me to engage in a non-committal, one-night sexual encounter with a foreigner to experience how it is to be 'sexually liberated'. The women do not call themselves *pokpok*, unless they are talking about themselves in jest. Instead, they use the term 'sexually liberated', which emphasizes their conscious break from traditional sexual mores. Many engage in 'flings' or 'one-night stands', which are non-committal sexual encounters with new acquaintances that usually
lasts for a few hours (see the next chapter). By doing so, they are mimicking what men usually do: sex for the pleasure of sex. When I asked Leona, the girl from Manila who has been living in Boracay for several months, to describe her sexual encounters, she said:

Jojo, one of my foreigner flings, still writes me emails and calls me ‘Hon’. He considers me his ‘girlfriend’. But for me you can’t call what happened to us anything because it was just a one-night stand, but one name I could call him would be “sex-friend” [she laughs]!

However, despite the ‘sexual liberation’ these women exude, it is still apparent that they are conscious about being prostitute-like, and this is how they experience prostitution. For example, Leona openly talks about her sexual encounters and enjoys shocking people with her candidness. However, during the length of our interview, she never once mentioned the word ‘sex’ or other words synonymous to it. If she wanted to express the act of intercourse, rather than talking, she instead tapped her index finger on my hand or arm a few times imitating the movement of intercourse. It was interesting to see how she consistently avoided the words synonymous to sex, like she was trying to dilute the moral significance of sexual intercourse by not actualizing it in words. There was that reservation in her, which revealed a need to maintain some level of shyness about sex.

Venus is another Boracay resident who is known to have a preference for foreign men. In the three years that she has lived in Boracay, she has had many casual sexual relationships and a few serious ones. She calls herself ‘sexually liberated’ and is very comfortable discussing her sexual ideologies. However, upon talking to her more in-depth, it was evident that she was still much controlled by sexual mores. She carried insecurities about her sexual image, even if she acted indifferent to it. The following statements capture her concern about how society regarded her:

We would be walking and he’d hold my hand, and I’m like “shit, he’s holding my hand. What would people think? They would say, “There she goes again. She’s with another guy.” I knew a lot of people by then. [...] With Filipinos, they’re ashamed to go to the pharmacy to buy condoms. I mean I am too. I ask my guy friends to buy for me. I don’t know why. They know me and it’s a small island.
They'll say, "Ah that girl is buying." The mentality here is different and the locals are really locals. They would think that I was fucking around! I don’t want them to look at me that way too.

Venus is aware that although she chooses to be sexually promiscuous, she is opening herself up to social judgment. She takes some precautions like asking someone else to buy her sexual paraphernalia to protect her reputation. However, whatever the degree of sexual activity women in Boracay engage in, they are aware that being ‘sexually liberated’ entails the risk of being morally judged as a prostitute. This is how prostitution affects their sexual behavior.

Summary

So is Boracay really a ‘Fantasy Island’ where one can do anything he/she (sexually) desires? Indeed, there is a higher social tolerance for multi-partnered sex in Boracay than in many other areas in the Philippines. However, this tolerance is not extended to prostitutes or to women who resemble a prostitute-like behavior. The double morality in sexual behavior that exists in Philippine culture dictates that women should sexually restrain themselves. But we have seen that women in Boracay resist this double standard and try to be ‘sexually liberated’, just like men in Boracay are relatively sexually-free.

In Boracay though, there is an extra challenge for ‘sexually liberated’ women to try to get away from the prostitute image. Because of the presence of many foreign tourists, many women and men in Boracay engage in intercultural relationships. At the same time, the stigma of sex tourism is strong among Filipinos and foreigners, so that people are skeptical whether these inter-racial relationships are ‘genuine’ or prostitute-related.

The next chapter will look at how mixed relationships between Filipinos and foreign tourists can be problematic in Boracay. As we saw in this chapter, sexual behavior among women is linked to concepts of prostitution. In the following sections though, I will illustrate how inter-racial relationships are similarly associated to prostitution, but within the broader context of sex tourism.
Chapter 3

Inter-racial relationships in Boracay

Sexual relations between Boracaynon people and foreign tourists are rampant. The influx and outflow of foreign tourists allow local men and women to engage in sexual relationships with multiple foreign partners. Relationships are often casual and non-committal, which means that locals can change sexual partners as frequently as the tide comes to the Boracay shores. This is consistent with the image of Boracay as a 'Fantasy Island' where sex with multiple partners is socially allowed.

As shown from the previous chapter, 'sexual liberation' comes with its constraints, and in Boracay, it is the fear of being prostitute-like that restrains the sexual behavior of many women. However, when local men and women engage in sexual relationships with foreigners, it is not just the risk of being likened to a prostitute that they fear, but it is being associated to the wider realm of sex tourism that becomes more threatening.

In many tourist destinations in the Philippines, sex tourism is evident. Sex tourism is often characterized as organized prostitution that caters to foreign customers. A stereotypical representation of this is the old 'white' man traveling to Thailand and the Philippines to mainly buy sexual favors from the local female prostitutes. One can argue that sex tourism does not exist in Boracay because its local prostitution scene is hardly organized, let alone be called an industry that caters to foreigners. Nevertheless, Boracay is subject to many skeptics because it has one component that is closely linked with sex tourism: inter-racial relationships.

Nowadays, the concepts of sex tourism and prostitution are constantly being expanded by social scientists. For example, the strict definition of a 'prostitute' is a person that provides sex for money. But many scholars are now expanding the definition of a prostitute to include any person who 'transacts' sex for gifts or any kind of

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5 At least according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 6th edition.
material help, i.e. the opportunity to live abroad (see Hunter, 2002; Law, 2000; and Ratliff, 1999).

The impact of this trend of re-definitions is that it colors most inter-racial relationships with the shade of prostitution, including the ones in Boracay. As much as the people of Boracay are trying to collectively get away from the image of prostitution, the social scientists are transversely trying to associate the likes of them to sex tourism.

Therefore, I believe it is crucial to understand what kinds of inter-racial relationships develop between people in Boracay and foreign tourists. What are the motivations that push local people to engage in sexual encounters with foreigners and do these classify as ‘transactional’? By knowing what meanings Boracaynon people place on their sexual relationships with foreigners, I hope to support or attack the assumption that inter-racial relationships are inherently prostitute-based.

**Prostitute-related relationships**

Professional prostitution, wherein one sells sex for money, exists in Boracay as mentioned earlier. The prostitutes, who are mostly women and baklas (gay men/ transvestites), hop from one location to the other depending on where they are allowed to stay. Sexual encounters are often brief and non-committal, as illustrated in the story of Rachel. But there are instances wherein prostitutes and their clients transcend from the commercial relationship into one of romance, such as in the case of Cheryl.

*Rachel: Neophyte prostitute*

Four years ago, Rachel was a heterosexual man who fell in love with a woman, but after being rejected by this woman, she decided to transform himself into a transvestite. She ran away from home and moved to Boracay where she survives as a prostitute. She identifies himself as a ‘prostitute’ and her groups of friends as ‘working gays’. They charge foreign clients a ‘talent fee’ of around US$100, which she says is relatively high compared to Manila, but reasonable for a popular tourist site such as Boracay.
Her sexual encounters with foreigners all involved money, whether or not she had sexual intercourse with them. Being new to the island, she has had only three customers so far. The first one was a 32-year-old American who was very kind to her and she recalls him fondly:

He stayed on the island for one month, but it's a shame because we were only together for two weeks. But in those two weeks, we were together every night. He brought me to his resort. He was also paying me. When we eat he pays. I even accompanied him to the main island when he left. I cried a bit afterwards because I missed him, but he wasn't heartbroken. I liked him because he seemed like a real person.

Rachel's second foreign customer seemed to a neophyte to prostitution like him:

He cried afterwards. He felt guilty because he had a family. I said, 'Why are you crying when it's finished already. Don't think about it anymore, it's done.'

The most recent customer Rachel had been was a "white man who was fat and bald" who paid her to talk to him for eight hours. They did not have any sexual contact, but Rachel still got her 'talent fee'. Although she was not physically attracted to him, she was still hoping to meet him again because she appreciated their conversation.

Rachel admits that one of her dreams is to work abroad and hopes that she finds a foreigner who is willing to take her away. She has been actively applying to recruitment agencies to work abroad as an overseas worker, but because she is still a minor (17 years old), she has been constantly rejected. So now she just daydreams about earning big and going back to the Philippines a rich and 'changed man' (pun intended):

I want to work there then send money here so I can put up a business of a restaurant and hotel. That is my dream. When I come back I will have money. It won't be this hard anymore. Less problems. I will just manage my restaurant and hotel. When I come back, I will change myself already. I will make myself turn back into a man again. I want to have a family. I pity those who grow old without a family, it's so lonely. Who will take care of you? That's when I am able to save money from abroad. I will come back a man.
I hesitated on what to call Rachel earlier, a ‘he’ or a ‘she’, because her sexuality seems to be a very conscious decision on her part. She transformed herself from a man into a woman because she wanted to blackmail the woman she loved into loving her. At the same time, she plans to re-transform herself back to a man because she wants a family to take care of her someday. So sexuality for Rachel appears to be more functional than a sexual preference.

_Cheryl: Veteran prostitute_

Cheryl, on the other hand, has been a heterosexual female all throughout, and has been working as a prostitute for almost half her life. She migrated to Boracay fifteen years ago from Manila and has stayed on the island ever since. She survived on the island as a freelance sex worker, working independently as all the prostitutes in Boracay do. But for four years, she stopped working as a sex worker because she got romantically involved with a Norwegian tourist.

Cheryl said that they were both very much in love (and monogamous), so much so that the Norwegian wanted to marry her. But since she was previously married to a Filipino, to whom she had two children, she did not want—and legally could not—marry again. But despite this, the Norwegian stuck to her and brought her with him during his travels, including to his own country. Like she declined the offer to get married, she also turned down his offer to move to Norway. Common to the experiences of many Filipinos who travel out of the country for the first time, Cheryl encountered several challenges: cold climate, language barrier and loneliness.

I’ve always wanted to go abroad but I don’t want to live there though, it’s too cold. In Norway the cold is unbelievable. My ears and lips were numb. They made me drink something to make me warm. You can’t even dress sexy! [...] I stayed in Norway for two months, but his family didn’t know how to speak English so it was so difficult. I just looked stupid. I would just be staring into space. I didn’t have anyone to talk to. And they don’t understand you as well.

Cheryl can be considered a-typical for a Filipino prostitute because she refused all the offers that other prostitutes dream of: marriage to a foreigner and a chance to live
abroad. But Cheryl is still clear about what she wants out of her inter-racial relationship and that is financial stability. Because she became the girlfriend of the Norwegian, Cheryl expected some financial rewards in return. She received a monthly allowance of P3,000 (Eur 47), which she said she sent to her two children. At the end, although Cheryl had claimed that she loved her boyfriend, she ended their relationship because she was not getting the financial security that she expected:

He didn’t want to buy the land worth P57,000 [Eur 900] that I wanted. He gives me money everyday to spend, but I spend it because I send money home to my two children who stays with my mother. I wasn’t able to save money. He doesn’t give me big amounts of money. Like the land, or money to have a motor-cab made.

Although Cheryl looked sad about her lost love, it was apparent that to her, money and financial stability came above everything else.

For the cases of Cheryl and Rachel, it was clear that sex was ‘transacted’ for hard cash or for financial perks. They called themselves prostitutes and the people in Boracay recognized them as such. There was no conflict about their prostitute identity nor that their relationships were prostitute-based. But for other men and women, who do not belong in the prostitution profession, it is not clear-cut what is being transacted and if that constitutes getting associated to prostitution at all.

**Relationships for sexual pleasure**

Boracay is a place where many experience and practice some degree of sexual liberation. There are many locals who engage in casual, non-commercial, and non-committal sex with foreign tourists. The main reason is that they believe foreigners are better in sex than Filipinos. Likewise, many foreign male and female tourists are also open to non-commercial sexual encounters with locals of Boracay, as Maya, an Australian diver explains:
Backpackers too have flings. They're not really interested to have serial monogamous relationships. They buy plane tickets good for a year. They stay a few months and then they go home.

The majority of foreign tourists that Boracay attracts are not sex tourists, but those who go predominantly for the beach. This is supported by the testimonies of Cheryl, a veteran prostitute on the island, about men she hooks up with:

There are other customers who will only use you but will not pay. The Swiss, Japanese, Germans, Israeli and British, they’re like that. They will tell you, “I don’t pay for sex. I think you came with me because you liked me.” Nothing, even if you cry they won’t give you anything. 6

So, many locals hook up with foreign tourists for the physical pleasure of sex, and are initially averse to emotional involvement. Because of this, they tend to have multiple sexual partners. Although these relationships are sexually-gratifying in the short-run, it does have its complications. This and other aspects of these pleasure-based relationships will be further discussed in the following sections.

‘Flinging’

There are two main types of sexual relationships in Boracay that are based on sexual pleasure: (1) flings and (2) short-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. The most common type is the ‘fling’, or the act of ‘flinging’. It is characterized by a single sexual encounter that usually lasts for one night. After the initial sexual contact, there is no expectation from both sides that there will be other sexual encounters between them. They are not called ‘boyfriends’ or ‘girlfriends’ because there is no emotional commitment. Leona, a woman from Manila, calls her lovers ‘sex-friends’. Also, because of its non-committal nature, ‘flinging’ means you can have as many sexual partners as you please. Venus explains this further:

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6 One strategy of Cheryl to get customers is not to bring up the topic of payment until the clients ask. Because of this, many of her clients do not realize that she is a prostitute until she demands for payment afterwards.
A fling is not a serious relationship. No ‘don’t do this; don’t do that’ kinda thing. You’re just both there to be happy at the specific moment in time for conversation, whether there is sex, whatever. [...] There is no timeframe for a fling. You just have to deal with it. Go with the flow. If you’re both ready for a real relationship then that’s the time. [...] Flings make you feel good about yourself. I meet them here. Like one, he’s in Manila, but he’s physically with another girl. I don’t get jealous when it’s just a fling. But when you’re with a serious relationship with me, you better be serious with me. But if we’re flinging, then go ahead.

The next stage to the ‘fling’ is the short-term girlfriend/boyfriend relationship, whereby two people decide to be a monogamous couple during the foreigner’s length of stay. The purpose is to have fun, not to develop a relationship. The risk though of extending the ‘fling’ is that one or both partners may develop some emotional attachment to the other. Usually, when the foreigner leaves the island, it is unclear whether they should remain as a couple or not. The result is ambiguity and unmet expectations, which Bernadette, one of my interviewees describe:

The ‘short-term’ is characterized by ‘okay, that’s it’. He’ll pursue his traveling, until he meets another person and his feelings for you will die down. He’ll forget you until your communication end. Although he knows that you are waiting for him, he doesn’t tell you that you should break up. He just doesn’t email or call anymore. [...] They will make you hope and expect. Not like us where we leave it to fate. They don’t know until when your relationship will end. What’s painful is when they don’t say when they leave that that’s it. But some say goodbye, and that’s the end of the relationship.

So ‘flinging’ is only for those who can detach sexual pleasure from emotional attachment. Only if you can be physically intimate with someone on one day, and be unaffected when you see him/her with another lover the next, can you ‘fling’ correctly. ‘Flinging’ is the epitome of sex with no strings attached. Its uncomplicated arrangement makes it popular among locals and tourists who just want to have ‘fun’.

*It’s the size of the boat that makes the ocean rock!*

Whether it is true or not, many locals in Boracay claim that foreigners can give them better sexual gratification than Filipinos can. Some women say it’s the size of the penis;
some men say it’s because foreign women are wilder in bed. These perceptions (or
realizations), coupled with the curiosity to ‘taste’ something different, are what push most
locals to engage in ‘flings’ with foreign tourists.

Venus admits that she has a preference for foreign men, particularly Europeans.
Although she likes foreigners because of their culture and mannerisms (discussed in
another section), she equally appreciates their anatomy and sexual expertise as well.

I only had one *pinoy* [Filipino man] for the past five years and it was one of the
most horrible sex I’ve ever had! *Pinoy* in general are not endowed with a big one.
[...] I was already interested with Europeans...those blue eyes and blonde hair.
The amazing accent! [...] And a part from that, it’s the size of the boat that
matters! I mean with Europeans or foreigners in general. It’s the motion of the
ocean that rocks. I say the size of the boat makes the ocean rock. We always say
forget about the size, don’t believe that man. [...] But I’ve never had blacks. I’m
scared that I won’t be able to play the part because they’re very sexual and it’s
huge. Oh my God.

Leona is another enthusiast of the foreigner’s anatomy. She is married to a
Filipino and has one child, both of whom are in Manila. Although for the past several
months, Leona has been in Boracay secretly ‘flinging’.

I was so shocked! Derek’s penis was so long and this fat (she starts drawing a
penis on the table with her finger). It was huge! When we would...(she taps my
arm with her finger mimicking the movement of sex), Derek would keep on
talking to me. I told him to shut up and that we’ll talk when it was over. The sex
was so good, I didn’t want to chat! We made love for two hours.

It was refreshing to talk with women like Leona and Venus who were so candid
about their sexual preferences and behaviors. They made it seem that sex was a typical
dinner-table conversation and many times, it was the people who overheard us talking
who felt embarrassed.

The men I interviewed were also a delight to converse about sex with. They had
no qualms about sharing their sexual experiences to the last detail. They seemed very
proud discussing their sex lives, particularly about their encounters with foreign women.
They claim that there are many foreign women who are curious how a Filipino man
performs in bed. So they feel lucky when they get the chance to personally show foreigners the ‘Filipino’s touch’ - literally.

It is unmistakable that Kenny has a fetish for foreign women. He has been sexually-active since his prostitution experience at 13 years old, but mostly with Filipino women. Only when he moved to Boracay twelve years ago did he start appreciating the sexual nuances among women of different races.

The first time I hit on a foreigner I was so excited because that’s ‘white meat’! It’s ‘white meat’ man! I wanted to see how they were like because other people said they were delicious - anatomically delicious. [...] I’ve ‘tasted’ a Swedish, German, British, American, and Korean. I haven’t had a Japanese yet, nor a Chinese. What I want to try is a beautiful black woman. Their bodies are so beautiful and the way they move as well. That’s what I want to try if it’s okay. The Koreans are also okay, but they’re just too noisy in bed.

Similar to the experiences of Leona and Cheryl with foreign men, Kenny also regards foreign women as a notch higher than Filipinos in terms of sexual performance. He claims that Filipinas, or Asian women in general, are passive in bed. He prefers women who are wild.

The foreign women who come here have a lot of [sexual] experience. They can lead the man. If in like fifteen minutes you are dominant, the next fifteen minutes they are the one. They’re just not passively lying down with their legs spread apart. The ‘whites’ are not like that. So you’re not tired. You don’t have to tell them that it’s their turn. [...] With Koreans, they’re like Filipinas, who you still have to guide. The Korean I slept with only knew one position, which is to go on top. That’s it. She doesn’t have the sense to get wild in the room like being able to make out in the shower, on the floor, or at the terrace of the room. Or for example, the ‘whites’ like it when you come [ejaculate] in front of them, they don’t.

For Kenny, having casual, non-committal sex with foreign women is a win-win situation because he gets to taste ‘white meat’ and be able to fulfill his male sexual urges at the same time. Like the other male interviewees, Kenny believes that as a man, he needs sex, and it is just convenient that foreign women want sex. Even with Bata, a Filipino boatman who sometimes have sex with foreign tourists in the hopes of receiving ‘tips’ or money afterwards, says that tips are secondary to the necessity of sex:
There was one time there was no negotiation then afterwards she didn’t pay me anything. Even if she didn’t give me anything, it’s okay because I was able to ‘score’ [have sex]. That’s how men are, right?

So for men, sex with foreigners is not only pleasurable, but functional at the same time. And the local women have no reason to complain about how ‘the boat rocks their ocean’. Overall, the men and women of Boracay who engage in inter-racial relationships find sex with foreigners more pleasurable than with fellow-Filipinos.

The mating dance

How do you get to taste ‘white meat’, using the eloquent words of Kenny? According to the locals, seduction hinges on the foreigner’s perception of ‘exotic’ beauty. The more you look like a native to the island – dark-skinned, flat nose, black hair – the better your chances of having a fling with a foreigner. Then for others whose ‘exoticism’ is not enough, then there are other strategies that can be used to hook a foreigner.

Bernadette is 29 years old and is lucky enough to have very Filipino features, as she explains why this look is irresistible to foreign men:

The foreigners who come to Boracay hope they find a ‘real Filipina’. They don’t like women who are mixed. In general, they like you ‘pure’. Without the blood of the Italians, or whatever...I don’t know why. The foreigners say that if you’re pure, then they feel like they’re getting a more authentic experience.

The local men, on the other hand, play up the image of the ‘islander’: the bronze-skinned, muscular, longhaired native who rides bareback on a wild horse by the beach. Heinz was the most popular ‘islander’ in Boracay in the 1970’s, according to many local witnesses. He was the envy of many men, and the object of desire for many female, foreign backpackers. Now, at 60 years old, he reminisces about his golden days:

I have been on the island all my life. I was always the most uniquely dressed here, with dreadlocks and cool clothes. A lot of people thought I was from the Caribbean. They didn’t know that my clothes came from my girlfriends from
their travels. [...] I was also a musician back when there were only four bars/clubs on the island. I had a following of girls. So many girlfriends, an average of three 'white' girls in a month. I had a big body then, not like now that I got 'leaner' as I got older. I used to ride a horse on the beach before it was prohibited by the local government. Plus I was the first one on the island to do parao sailing. I had a lot of foreign friends, mostly divers. Many of them are still here.

The new generation of local males still uses this time-tested formula of looking like an 'islander', with some modifications. For example, instead of just using physical aesthetics, the contemporary local men are also learning to carry on intellectual conversations to increase their market value with foreign women. As Tony, a 28-year old resident of the island explains:

We know what's in, what's new. We, as brown persons, we are interested as to who those girls are with white skin and blonde hair. [...] Guys here cope up, since the girls are traveling a lot, you need to be able to talk about many things. Some normal Filipino men want to just grab her, but you actually need to sound interesting to her first. Need some mental attraction. [...] 'Whites' like thick lips... and brown people. All the Filipino actors are not good looking to them. I met someone from Germany and she liked my color. One time I pointed to a guy and asked her "How about that guy, is he good looking?" She said he was boring. "He's white!"

So, many locals are aware of what 'look' sells with foreigners. At the same time, they have strategies on how to help them seduce foreign women (as a back-up just in case their 'look' is not good enough). These strategies are passed down from the more-experienced to the neophytes. There is even a local bar that has been a popular hangout for the 'islanders', which serves as an informal 'fraternity house'. There 'islanders' would advise each other on strategies to hook a 'white' woman. Kenny, a member of this quasi-fraternity, recalls his days of tutelage:

At Congo-bongo, this is where you see the real native image. My hair was up to my waist before. We all wore tight pants. No t-shirt, no tank tops. Then every night we would have jamming. [...] When we start playing the percussions, the 'whites' would suddenly appear. Usually they were from England and Switzerland. They would sit down at the bar and stare at you. If you saw someone who was beautiful, you needed to immediately tell the other men, "Hey,

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7 Jamming is an impromptu session where musicians play without a set score.
that one’s mine." [...] There were techniques that were taught to me by those who were more experienced. They said, “Kenny, if you want na makayari ng puti [to hook up or to make havoc with a white woman], if they look at you, you have to look at them back. If you look at them twice, then approach her already. She’ll be yours.” So that is what stuck in my mind. I’ve been here for a long time already and at night that is your ambition.

When the ‘islanders’ do succeed in hooking up with foreign women, it is possible that they spend a lot of time together until the foreigner’s vacation in Boracay ends. According to some studies on ‘romance tourism’ in the Caribbean, ‘beach boys’ (or ‘islanders’ in the Boracay context) are said to exchange sexual favors primarily for gifts or material benefits, like a hot shower or a meal (Herold et al., 2001; Taylor, 2001). So, I asked the men about their practice of paying for dates.

The result showed that although most foreign women paid for the expenses, it was mostly out of practicality. The men were willing to pay if they could. For example, Tony is 28 years old and has been working hard in Boracay to build up his savings. He has had several sexual encounters with foreign women and most of them have ended up as short-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. In his financial situation, he cannot afford to pay for a succession of dates. So if he and his girlfriend want to see each other often, then the foreign women often needs to pay:

Ideally it’s KKB: kanya-kang bayad [pay for your own order]. But I came here to work; earn some money. They have to pay; they treat us. Sometimes they invite us, but we can’t go because the budget is tight. So they treat us. They would say: “Don’t think about the money, we like your company.”

Some local men try to pay, even if they really cannot afford to spend much. In Kenny’s case, he uses his creativity to stretch the little money he has on dates:

I pay. I bring them to Island Fever where the drinks are free. I take them out to eat pizzas where I’m given a discount, but not every night.

As illustrated, there are many ways to seduce a foreign tourist to have a fling with you. The men and women in Boracay are aware of these strategies and put them into good (and frequent) use.
There is a consequence to having too many ‘flings’ and that is you fail to develop serious relationships in the long run. I had a chance to interview two local males who, after having flings for most of their young lives, just dream to have ‘real’ relationships now that they are older.

Heinz is 60 years old and was born and raised on the island. He has experienced so many foreign women come in and out of his life in Boracay, yet he never once married. Now, his goal is to find a woman whom he can settle down with.

It’s hard to have a serious relationship here. If it’s just flings then there’s a lot here. Even now I see the young men do it but I don’t tell them anything. But your heart will always be broken. I’ve had many flings. You don’t let your heart in the relationship because you’ll just get hurt. It’s easy to have flings, because if the girl wants, then why not. I’m a man. My dream now is to just have peace of mind. I’m finished with having so many girlfriends. I just want anybody whom I can get along with for the rest of my life. It’s different when you are getting old. You look for something different. I want that both of us want the same things – it fits together. That is my dream now.

I see Heinz in bars every night. He is friendly and well liked by many local residents on the island, but often times I see him drinking alone. He still dresses groovy in his metallic jacket and baseball cap, goes around with a confident smile. But somehow you have a feeling that his golden days of being the most popular ‘islander’ in Boracay has passed him by with time.

Casey is another ‘islander’ who at 59 years old wants to find a serious relationship. He has had serious relationships with two Filipinas who gave him a child each. But because of family conflicts, he was never allowed to marry any of them. So he went to Boracay to rest from his heartaches in his early thirties and stayed on the island ever since. He had his string of foreign girlfriends, some flings, some serious. But now, like Heinz, he just wants to settle down.
Here on the island people come and go. You’re together for six months and suddenly they’re gone. You just cry. You call or write letters but the letters arrive in a month and you have to walk two km to retrieve it at the post office. It’s just hard on the island. I am afraid already. I am very careful with women because it’s a pain in the brain – and the heart. I don’t go for just sex anymore. I want it to have substance. Sometimes when the women want it, why not, it’s already there. I’ve had a lot of flings. You get lonely sometimes and it’s just nice to have somebody around. Especially now that I’m getting older, I would like to find someone I can be with for a long time. I’m through with flings. I want a serious relationship. But I’m happy with my life.

Learning about the lives of Heinz and Casey made me want to warn the younger Boracaynons about the risks of having too many casual, non-committal relationships with foreign tourists. But of course, I did not dare. The younger generation of Boracaynons had to find their own fates.

Pleasure-based relationships

The description of how men and women in Boracay engage in ‘flings’ for sexual pleasure shows that not all inter-racial relationships are ‘transactional’.

It is difficult to claim that ‘flings’ are transactional because of the following aspects. Firstly, ‘flings’ are based on a mutual understanding that what both parties expect is sexual pleasure and nothing more. There is no payment of any form, not even an expectation to be wined and dined the day later. It is a single sexual encounter of mutual consent, without commitment or emotional attachment. Power and economic differences between the local and the foreigner do not carry much weight. What is important is that both are capable (and willing) to sexually perform.

Pleasure-based relationships are fair for both locals and foreigners. There is no exploitation of the other. As long as both lovers receive sexual pleasure, reasonably close to what they expected, then ‘reciprocity’ has been achieved. The framework of ‘reciprocity’, created by Heino and Ojanlatva, can be helpful in seeing the non-exploitive nature of pleasure-based relationships. ‘Reciprocity’ is defined as:

An exchange of services which at its best functions as an unwritten contract, a mutual understanding regarding fairness of returned services, and a desire to
comply with this principle together with a loved one/lover. [...] Equal treatment of and balanced attitudes towards one another are present together with a just distribution of benefits and concessions or compromises (Heino and Ojanlatva, 2000: 169).

Based on this, if the local and the foreigner were gratified or content with their sexual experience, having fulfilled both their main expectations (pleasure), then the sexual encounter was also fair. If the couple decides to extend their ‘fling’ into a short-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, then it is mainly because they want to experience more sexual gratifications from each other. As Heino and Ojanlatva further illustrate:

Pleasurable sensations and feeling prior to or after orgasm(s) cover most of the period of love making process, and it is this form of enjoyment which will most likely influence as to how meaningful a person will later consider a given sexual activity, and consequently, how much time he/she wants to invest in it in the future (2000: 172).

Another argument for why ‘flings’ in Boracay are not inherently transactional is because the locals and foreigners involved do not have the desire to make their relationship look ‘genuine’ in the public’s view. Some social scientists believe that ‘transactional sex’ is characterized by women who move from the identity of a ‘prostitute’ to a ‘girlfriend’ so as to make their prostitute-based relationships less commercial or more ‘genuine’ in the eyes of society (Hunter, 2002; Law, 1997). On the contrary, locals who engage in ‘flings’ in Boracay (1) do not declare that they are in ‘love’ or that they have any intention for a more serious relationship either than a one-night stand; (2) their sexual ideology deviates from the traditional view that sex should be reserved for loving, committal relationships; and (3) they do not require their lovers (nor of themselves) to be monogamous.

Lastly, another tenet of the transactional sex concept is that relationships should be “underscored by the giving of gifts or cash” (Hunter, 2002: 100). Sexual pleasure, or orgasms, can hardly be made material. Since there is no payment or exchange of gifts in a ‘fling’, where then is the transaction?
Complicated relationships: Romance or transaction?

The last two sections illustrate that there are intercultural relationships in Boracay that are noticeably transactional and non-transactional (pleasure-based). However, the last type of intercultural relationship that the locals described, the long-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, blurs the line that delineates ‘genuine’ romance from transactional sex.

Technicalities of a ‘long-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship’

The long-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship is characterized by a couple deciding to develop a serious relationship with each other based on mutual affection and/or love. It resembles the ‘common’ romantic relationship, whereby the couple is each other’s love interest and the union is respected as it is in many relationships that happen all over the world (Ratliff, 1999:90). But due to the transient nature of tourists in Boracay, once the foreign partner goes back to his home country, the couple is forced to carry on a long-distance relationship, unless one of them decides to migrate to where the other one is. Bernadette, a 29-year old who has had experience with this type of relationship explains its technicalities:

Long term is when the guy meets and says that he likes you, but he will only stay in Boracay for one month. He will go to Thailand after Boracay. Until one month has passed, he realizes that he likes you, or loves you, as others call it. The foreigners, they don’t say ‘I love you’ to you. Never, never, never! They will only tell you that they like you. But they won’t say like “I’m in love with you” or “I love you now”. They’ll say, “Instead of Thailand, I’ll stay here.” So you’ll have an idea that this guy likes you. You’re together all the time. It’s your choice if you invite him to live in your place, or you move into his.

Unlike the short-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, this type of relationship is characterized by mutual commitment to each other even after the foreign tourist leaves Boracay. Couples attempt long-distance relationships through email, phone calls, and frequent trips, wherein the foreigner goes back to Boracay or the Boracaynon goes to where the foreigner is. Again, Bernadette explains how it works:
So you realize that he’s staying longer and he’ll finish his vacation days with you. He won’t go to Thailand or anywhere else anymore. He finishes his vacation with you. Afterwards, you keep in contact through email. If he continues to email, then you’ll know he’s still in love with you. But in emails, the men write differently. You can’t see what they’re up to. Sometimes if you notice that there aren’t feelings involved in his messages, then don’t hope anymore, that relationship is over. But if his feelings of love for you are still there, he will come back for you.

Often times, the strain of long-distance relationships is too much and many relationships end. Because of this, some locals have developed strategies to avoid getting emotionally hurt. Bernadette’s tactic is not to fully give of her emotions until she is convinced that the man is worth the risk:

You don’t give all of yourself in Boracay because this is a tourist area. That is the difference. Unlike in the city, if you meet your foreign boyfriend at work, at least he’s there in the same office. You know he has a contract for four years maybe. You have the time to develop the relationship. In Boracay it’s different. They are just here for a vacation. That’s why you can’t always give 100% of yourself. He’ll only receive 20% at the beginning. You just slowly increase the percentage of your emotional involvement upon seeing how okay the guy is. So you should lower the percentage from the start. That way you won’t get hurt that much.

The experience of locals is that intercultural relationships are difficult, unstable, and emotionally draining. Yet many are resilient to these ill-effects and still pursue new relationships with foreigners. Why?

It is evident from the interviews that the majority of people I talked to dream of having a long-term foreign partner, and eventually making a life together wherever that may be. The reasons why they prefer foreign partners vary: from having a liking to foreign culture and social proprieties, to seeing foreigners as a route out of the Philippines. This is where it becomes contentious. Some want to be with foreigners for love; some for money; some for both. Likewise, the degree of what they are willing to do to achieve these varies as well. In order to understand the complexities behind why locals seek foreign partners, we need to look at the lived experiences of locals engaged in these relationships. Hence, the following sections focus on the stories of three Boracaynons: Venus, Tony and Kenny.
Venus: Failed Romance

Venus has had many flings with foreigners in Boracay, and would actually prefer them to remain as flings so as not to complicate her life. She has been on her own from the age of 18, which explains her independent nature. Venus is elegant, carries herself with poise, and speaks English eloquently. She hangs out with the wealthier people of Boracay, many of whom are owners of commercial establishments — locals and foreigners alike. A lot of locals who knew of my research specifically suggested me to interview her because they knew Venus has had many inter-racial relationships. At the time of the interview, she had just recently ended a four-year relationship with a Dutch man, and was back to ‘flinging’.

She has a fetish for European men and is attracted to their looks and mentality. Because of her independent nature, she does not like how Filipino men are possessive and accusatory about her possibly fooling around. She said that European men are less narrow-minded, which she appreciates. She also believes that Europeans have a certain way of thinking about life that she positively relates to:

I love how Europeans think. I think it’s open, vast. I think they live a good life. They work so hard, they eat well, and they travel hard. I think life should be like that. You have your leisure time then work. They know how to see beauty in everything, in the simplest aspect of their lives. They’re big travelers so they’re very open-minded. Back in history, the first travelers were Europeans. They’ve always traveled all their lives. They’re very knowledgeable about the world. And honestly, they’re willing to adapt to another culture better than us. Like my ex-boyfriend, he was the one who showed me all around the island. He even brought me to Sagada.¹⁸

Venus prefers to have non-committal relationships with Europeans and engages in ‘flings’ for fun. You could tell she was serious because she exuded this self-confidence that she had the capacity to attract any foreigner she wanted. So, she has had mostly one-night stands and a few ‘superficial’ long-distance relationships. She had one relationship though that developed from a ‘fling’ to a long-term relationship.

¹⁸ Tourist area in the northern mountainous region of the Philippines.
It was my 4th month being here and I wasn't looking for love at all. I just wanted to have fun being a single girl on an island. A friend of mine said, "My boyfriend's best friend is coming in November. You just might want to meet him." I said, "Sure, why not, I'm up for anything." He came. I didn't find him cute at all at first. The third night, he invited me for some smokes [marijuana] in his house. So I said why not. So we had it going on [sex] and then after that day, I told him, that was it. We could do it again but nothing more than that. Because I wasn't up for a relationship at all.

He wanted a relationship. And I said no. but he was very persistent, and I thank God that he was. He made it possible by clinging on. After a month and a half, he said, "I think I'm starting to love you." It was nice because you know Pinoy [Filipinos] they always say I love you in the first date, but they don't really know. He said, "I want you to become my girlfriend. I'm starting to love you." I asked him, "Are you strong enough to be my man?" He said, "I think I am." And he's proven that throughout the entire relationship.

At the start, Venus did not want to engage in a long-distance relationship because from her experience, it never worked. So she told her boyfriend that she was not willing to wait for him. So instead of breaking the relationship, the Dutch asked her to go with him back to Holland so they could continue being together. Despite her independent nature, she allowed herself to be temporarily supported by her boyfriend in order to sustain their relationship, but also so for a chance to see Europe.

He said, "Why don't you come with me?" I said I didn't have enough money to go to Europe and to live there for four months. Look at what I'm doing here. At that time I was working in a cafe. I couldn't ask my mom for money because she'll want me to go home. So he still said, "Come with me." He brought me there for the main purpose that he didn't want to end it. He paid for everything. I was like, wow, this is okay. That's Europe eh. Nobody's going to fucking pay you for Europe. Not in their right minds, at least not somebody else apart from family. I said wow this guy must really love me, really, really like me.

Unlike most experiences of locals accompanying their partners abroad, Venus' experience was relatively positive. She did encounter the common challenges, such as not speaking the local language, isolation, and visa restrictions on being able to work, but she eventually overcame these.
I usually stayed at home. I felt depressed on the second month. On the first month it was okay because everything was new and it was first time in Europe, first time outside Philippines. Even the cobblestones were European. Everything was so different in Europe. First month I was curious, even the cows. I was like hey a real European cow. I've proven myself. Really, love knows no language. Believe me, the dad never spoke a word of English. First few times it was “Eat! Drink!” But at the end of four months, man, I tell you, they loved me. My boyfriend knew it. He was so happy that his parents learned to accept me.

Venus and her Dutch boyfriend continued to travel together. During high season they would go back to Boracay to rent out cottages to tourists, which would earn both of them money for their succeeding trips. She insisted on keeping her job in Boracay though, as she claims:

I was still working at the resort. I could not be the type just waiting home. I had to do my own thing. I can't just be dependent, like “Give me the money.”

Although they were getting very serious, Venus made it clear that she had no intention of getting married. Her parents separated when she was young, and since then she had been skeptical of marriage. She claims her boyfriend respected her wishes. Nonetheless, after four years of being together, they eventually separated. Venus ended the relationship because she ‘fell out of love’.

We drifted apart. We felt like we didn’t jive anymore. We gave it a chance. We fell out of love. I’ve always told myself the hardest thing that anybody could tell me was that I’ve fallen out of love with you. That's exactly what I told him the night we broke up. It had to come from me. That was the hardest thing you can tell somebody, like I’ve fallen out of love with you.

For Venus, romance is an important criterion to stay in a relationship with anyone, even with a European. She had the chance to indulge in as much wine and cheese as she wanted, live the European life she always dreamt of, if she had just stayed with her boyfriend. If Venus’ main objective for engaging in sexual relationship with a foreigner was to get out of the Philippines, then why did she dismiss a European lover just for the seemingly petty reason of not being in love? Surely the women involved in many of the studies on transactional sex would agree that Venus wasted several
opportunities': to be married to a foreigner, to live in Europe, to have an opportunity to earn in Euros, to have a mestizo child, and other 'material' benefits that supposedly push others to seek foreign partners.

The sarcastic tone is necessary to highlight the inaccuracy of some claims that sexual relationships between Western tourists and locals of developing countries are inherently transactional. By coloring every relationship as a deliberate act to amass 'material gain', one destroys the integrity of love and commitment, which relationships like Venus' are based on. In any relationship there will always be a continuous play of loss and gain for both parties involved. It is not always evident, even to the couple, who gains or loses more. It is also not clear in terms of what: material wealth, emotional stability, time, sexual pleasure, or idealism - how do you measure which is more precious? But looking at Venus' story, it is evident that the motivation for 'material gain' is not as significant to inter-racial relationships as it is often made out to be.

Tony: Hopeless romantic, hopelessly unfaithful

Tony is a 28-year old professional who has lived on the island for five years. He is a self-confident man, physically attractive and socially apt. He works hard and is well respected for his work ethics. He has a strong drive to improve his career and to increase his earning capacity. One of Tony's biggest aspirations is to work outside the Philippines, and he is aware that one route to achieving this is through a foreign girlfriend. But although Tony has had many opportunities to have serious relationships with foreign women - fifteen opportunities to be exact - he has one big weakness: infidelity.

There have been several foreign women who have come back to Boracay to make a romantic relationship with Tony work. It seems that finding a woman is not the problem for him, but it is finding the one whom he can fall in love with that seems the bigger task. He believes in romance and from his stories, although he does dream of working in another country, he will not go with just any girl who offers to take him.
I broke up with my first ‘white’ girlfriend because she was thinking of a serious relationship, I wasn’t. I couldn’t. Her father owns a big company so they were rich. Her father and I met in Boracay. First time I slept in their resort in the same room with her. Father said, “If you’re good to my daughter, I’m good to you.” But she was really jealous. She expected me to act like a robot; I should only be looking at her. She had a lot of insecurities. There was one time I was having lunch with her family, and there was a woman who passed by. Accidentally, I glanced at the woman, and then my GF suddenly slapped me in front of her family. I don’t let anyone do that to me so I said better to break up. She wanted to come back but I already met a German woman.

Tony had an Australian girlfriend who went to Boracay every three months to see him. She was working in Japan as an English teacher. Eventually, she invited Tony to move to Japan to be with her, which he did. But common to many experiences of locals abroad, Tony had a hard time adjusting to a different way of life.

I went with her to Thailand for a month and I experienced culture shock. Everything was pindot-pindot [“push-push”/digital]. She thought I was high-maintenance because I kept on complaining. There was no tabo [container to fetch water], it was all pindot-pindot. We had different expectations. I was complaining a lot, I was too young and not that exposed. So I went home. Our relationship was on and off. We made a decision to break up.

Later that year, Tony had another German girlfriend who was also wealthy. She wanted to get married with Tony and even bought him an engagement ring. Eventually she found out about Tony’s philandering when she was not on the island and decided to call off their relationship.

On her third trip we spent two weeks in Manila to apply for a fiancée visa for Germany. We planned to marry in October 2004. We traveled to Cebu and she bought an engagement ring but she was waiting for me to ask her to marry me. So the moment we both wore the ring, I said “Shit, grounded for life, grounded for life!” She didn’t like it when I said that. She said for me to stop complaining. We came back to Boracay and she sensed something was not right. One time she heard a local say “Who’s that girl with Tony again?” because I cheated on her three times. She asked if I was with anybody else. I said no. But they sense it even how much you cover your ass! She broke up with me. I still wanted for us to get back together but she did not want to. I cheated on her. I lied to her. I abuse women and I feel so bad about it.
Many of Tony's relationships end up this way because of his infidelity. He just cannot resist a sexual offer, especially from a foreign woman. He told me: “All the women in my life, it’s too much already. I don’t like myself anymore.” Since he mostly had ‘flings’, which had little emotional substance, he now wants to a serious relationship. He met an Australian a few months back whom he has fallen in love with.

This Australian in Romblon is the most beautiful woman in my life because of her heart and spirit. She helps a lot of Filipinos. But when we met she was with another Australian man. I didn’t want to make a move on her because I respected that she was with somebody else. I eventually found out she wasn’t committed to her BF. So it happened that we slept together, but without sex, just hugging and kissing. No oral sex either. [...] She is the first woman I ever used the term “make love” with because I respect her. It was already a month since we met that I have wanted to make love to her. I needed to know her first.

He had some ups and downs with this Australian, including an incident when they both thought they had STDs. They went for check-ups, which were negative. But because the woman found out about Tony’s previous sexual life, she broke up with him. He felt extraordinarily confused and rejected, since he said he did not have much experience of being in love.

The case of Tony shows that although locals have dreams of going abroad, it still is not enough reason to indiscriminately go with just anybody, even when given the chance to. Romance is still crucial. Tony still wishes to end up with someone he loves and who loves him back. So perhaps the opportunity to live abroad is not the main objective for a relationship, but a ‘bonus’ after finding romance first. The two forces: romance and transaction, are not mutually exclusive.

Kenny: They are so lucky

Kenny, my last example, feels he has not been lucky enough to be invited to leave the country by a foreign woman, like others have. He is also 28 years old and works in a resort. He has been living in Boracay for twelve years, but has had mostly ‘flings’ with foreign women, not serious relationships. But unlike the romanticism of Tony, Kenny
regards himself to be more pragmatic. He admits to being able to go with a foreign woman back to her country even if he does not have strong romantic feelings for her.

The girls get lucky sometimes because their dreams come true. They'll be brought out of the country by their foreign boyfriends. [...] I want to go as well. But I don't hunt. It's not that I go to every bar to look for white women, introduce myself and try to establish a relationship. That's just one of my aims — my desire to go out of the country. Whatever opportunity comes I'll grab it. Even if the opportunity comes that I have a European girlfriend who will be willing to take me to their place to settle down, of course I'll go with her for the main purpose of being practical. 'Practical' meaning I need a good life, which I can't find it here.

Kenny says that he will only marry a Filipino woman because he is in love with her, but the criteria does not apply to marrying a foreign woman. By saying this, Kenny is indirectly admitting to compromising his ideals (of love and marriage) to achieve a more ambitious dream of working abroad.

If you really want to stay there abroad, you don't have a choice. Your visa will only grant you a few months. If you're already there, why not just get married. You've got nothing to lose. You like her from the fact that she became your girlfriend. Even if you like her just a little bit, there's still that little bit. That's the whole reason why she became your girlfriend, right? If I couldn't find my significant-half here who is a Filipina, why not find her from other races. What if she's the one from the act that she is willing to take me to her place? You'll learn to be in love.

What makes many Filipinos, including Kenny, to dream of leaving the Philippines is this concept of 'abroad' being a land of opportunity where one can earn more money than if one stayed in the country. There is still a strong mentality of making your riches abroad, and coming back a more respected and wealthier man.

If you're working there, even if it's hard work, your salary is big. Here it's the opposite. People who work hard here earn small. Then the ones in offices earn big. It should be the other way around. So if I work, even if I kill myself from the hard work, it's okay because they'll compensate me well in return. So I will be able to save money. It's faster to save money there. Then you can send it to your family if you need to.
I asked Kenny about his strategies of looking for potential foreigners to ‘whisk him away’. Although he said that he did not actively ‘hunt’ for foreign women, it was evident that he had a semblance of a plan on how to get out of the island.

Actually, I don’t ask, I just wait. There hasn’t been a proposal so far. What if it’s the girl who asks: “You want to go with me? Go back to my place? Stay there? Settle down?” Of course I’ll say yes! But it hasn’t happened yet. But if somebody asks me those questions, of course I’ll say okay! […] I don’t have a tactic. When we talk, of course I ask her what interesting places she has in her country. I say it spontaneously. I would say, “So beautiful to see your place in reality.” So she thinks I am complementing her. I’ll tell her one of my dreams is to see her country. That’s my tactic: I show her my interest to go, but in a proper way.

In the case of Kenny, it seems that he regards the opportunity of going ‘abroad’ as a stronger motivation than attaining romance. It is more apparent in his story that he sees inter-racial relationships as potential mediums for transaction: his companionship in exchange for a chance to leave the Philippines. However, he also has not experienced a serious, romantic relationship with a foreigner yet. So, it is hard to predict that given the moment when he needs to make life-changing decisions, what he would actually do.

Summary

The sexual relationships that develop between local residents and foreign tourists in Boracay are not just another expression of prostitution or the sex tourism. Rather, it is mainly an expression of the ‘sexual liberation’ that many men and women practice on the island. The detailed descriptions of inter-racial relationships in this chapter illustrate that men and women in Boracay have varying reasons to engage in sexual relationships with foreign tourists, and they are not always because of money or material gain.

The most common motivation for inter-racial relationships on the island is sexual pleasure. The people who claim to practice ‘sexual liberation’ engage in casual, non-committal sexual encounters that they call ‘flings’. The main objective is to give and receive sexual gratification, and nothing more is expected. Some couples who start as ‘flings’ eventually do fall in love and develop serious romantic relationships.
Some local residents have goals in life that are connected with having a foreign partner, such as living abroad. Although it could be construed as an inter-racial relationship based on material gain, it is not clear-cut if it is so because other motivations such as romance and pleasure are involved as well. These different motivations are not mutually exclusive, they often overlap. So, to indiscriminately call most inter-racial relationships as ‘transactional’ is incorrect.

There is an urgency to show that casual, multi-partnered sex does not just happen within the confines of prostitution, it occurs among average men and women. The men and women in Boracay are not prostitutes; rather they are the general public. They engage in sexual relationships with foreigners not because of money, but because they seek sexual pleasure or romance. The ‘general population’ in Boracay is having casual, multi-partnered sex, which because it is often done without protection, places many of them at risk for HIV.

Until the professionals responsible for STD/HIV prevention in Boracay understand that sexual relations with foreigners does not only happen within the confines of prostitution, then the sexual health needs of many sexually-active Boracaynons will continue to be ignored.
Chapter 4

STDs/HIV on the ‘Fantasy Island’

The previous chapters have illustrated that there is a lot of casual, non-committal sexual activity occurring within Boracay, the so-called “Fantasy Island”. Commercial sexual encounters between prostitutes and their clients are one type of sexual activity. Another type is non-commercial sexual encounters between locals and foreigners. The social environment of Boracay provides relatively high tolerance for sex with multiple partners. So people tend to feel less moralized when they engage in sex with multiple partners – a practice that has been associated with increased risk for STD and HIV transmission.

Hence, one of the aims of this research is to understand the vulnerability of people in Boracay in terms of contracting STDs and HIV. To do so, it is crucial to analyze the sexual behavior of people within the Boracay context of transient tourists and ‘sexual liberation’. This chapter then focuses on tackling the following questions: How do people perceive the risk of STDs and HIV? How safe are their sexual practices? What is their understanding of STDs and HIV? Are there STD/HIV services? If yes, how do people use these services and to whom are they available? Hopefully, the results can help health professionals better understand how to address the sexual health needs of people in Boracay.

Perception of STD/HIV risk

After being on the island for a few weeks, and having had several conversations with locals, I realized that many Boracaynons talked openly about having sex, but rarely discussed how they had sex. It seemed they were uncomfortable talking about the possible health effects of engaging in unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners, as many of them did. Although Boracaynons had a basic concept of STDs, whereby they can contract diseases through sexual contact, it seemed like many of them did not feel that STDs posed an immediate threat to them, or Boracay in general. For example,
Kenny, the 28-year-old who works at a resort, said that the only time he and his male friends talk about STDs is when they are under the influence of alcohol and they talk about women and sex. Even then, his friends insist that having sex ‘skin-to-skin’ was more pleasurable than wearing a condom.

On the other side, there were a few who wanted me to start an STD/HIV campaign because they believed that most locals are indifferent to this threat. Some of the older residents said that it was about time people were ‘forced’ to face the sexual realities of the island. “There is so much ‘sex on the beach’,” said one British resident, “that my 2-year-old son is faced with it everyday, yet nobody pays attention to STD/HIV transmission.” There are those who know how easily sex is exchanged on the island and are surprised that many still choose not to wear condoms. As Venus says:

That’s so weird, especially living on this island. This is a party island and if there is one thing that is easiest here, it’s sex. I find it weird especially men not having [condoms]. Those men and women who travel alone, single, they’re bound to have sex everywhere. You don’t have a condom, are you mad?

Those who seemed more receptive to condom use were prostitutes. It appeared that condom use was a ‘standard-operating procedure’ among some of them. For example, Rachel, who calls herself a ‘gay prostitute’, told me that all the gay sex workers on the island used condoms with their clients. When I prodded her why she personally used condoms, all she answered was “of course, we all use it” and refused to explain anymore. This made me ask myself if Rachel was using a condom as a fad, or because she really understood the functionality of it. But some like Cheryl, a female prostitute, understand that condoms are crucial to keep them healthy especially in their line of work:

You need the condom for yourself. If not, you will be the one who’ll have difficulties. If you get sick, if you have money then it’s okay. But if you don’t, you’re dead.

Although, even if prostitutes like Cheryl prefer to use condoms, it is not always respected:
Some men are gentle and don’t get mad when you ask for a condom. But some of them say: “If you don’t have sex with me without a condom, you can go.” The others will really hurt and force you to have sex.

So, there is a basic concept of STDs among many locals. The Filipino term for STDs is tulo, which literally means “leak”. To call it tulo though is a misnomer because it suggests that all STDs have symptoms similar to a “leak”, or characterized by fluid discharge from the genitals. This is only true for some STDs, such as gonorrhea and non-gonococcal urethritis. So when people do not find the symptoms of a “leak” in their partners, they perceive it is safe to have unprotected sex.

Among the interviewees, there was basic knowledge of STDs. However, what varied was what degree they perceived this risk to be and what sexual activities they consequently engaged in.

Sexual practices

It was interesting to see how people had different sexual strategies on how to deal with the risk of contracting STDs/HIV. It seemed that much like how some Filipinos have been shown to self-medicate when they have tuberculosis (Nichter, 1994), these people similarly self-determined what sexual regimens worked to keep them protected from STDs - or other unwanted effects for that matter.

Condoms cannot protect from pregnancy

Venus and Kenny have a particular perception of what condoms are for. They rely on condoms to protect them from diseases, yet they do not trust it to prevent pregnancy. Apparently, they both see pregnancy to be as bad, or even worse, than contracting STDs.

In Venus’ example, she sees pregnancy as something that can limit her opportunities in life, more than a disease that can be temporarily cured:

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9 Gonorrhea and Non-gonococcal urethritis are the two most common STDs in Boracay, according to the Boracay Island Municipal Hospital STD records for 2002-2003.
Once you have it, like gonorrhea, it's easy to get it back. That's why I carry a condom with me all the time. Just in case, you'll never know. You can't be stupid. I can never take the fact when I was growing up and my friends say, "I got pregnant by a one-night stand." That ruins your whole life, your whole possibility. You know the questions of 'what if you didn't have that kid'. For me, why didn't you take the pill or whatever. A lot of girls don't take pills, ha. And they don't use condoms.

So to protect from both disease and pregnancy, Venus and her best friend have customized a full-proof plan for themselves:

Other people's mentality is bahala na [whatever happens]. Me and my best friend, I know she uses condoms, and she knows I use. For AIDS. For pregnancy we take pills also. We're very good at it. We sorted out that part already. It's better to be safe than pregnant.

Likewise, Kenny fears pregnancy as much as Venus. He believes in condoms protecting him from the 'pain in the stomach when one pees', the way he described STDs to his friends at the bar. But he is paranoid that condoms are not enough to prevent him from impregnating his lover. So as a countermeasure, Kenny has his own 'safe' sexual practice:

Me, after sex, I take it out. Even when I have a condom, I still withdraw. I'm always thinking that the condom has a hole or something. Pregnancy comes to mind all the time. Because if get her pregnant, then I have to marry her as well! So I take it out before I come and when sex is wild.

Both Kenny and Venus have some paranoia about the quality of condoms, particularly the local brands. Although Kenny is happy about the packaging, flavor, and thickness of his favorite local condom, he still has some reservations about its durability:

When I buy condoms from the pharmacy, I don't feel embarrassed because the way the condom is packaged, makes it look like I'm just buying candy. There are many flavors: banana, strawberry. [...] The thickness is also good, ultra thin, just like 'skin-to-skin'. Just as long as there is no factory defect. Just as long as it doesn't betray me, then I'm okay.

Venus also complains about the local condom, but it's more her distrust of
anything locally-made that is the predominant reason:

There are not a lot of brands here. There’s Reliance. But I don’t rely on Reliance. I wish they had more brands. I trust - like most of us - products that are made abroad.

Actually, the condoms that they are both referring to are imported and of higher factory-grade quality than other available condoms. However, it seems that Kenny and Venus are mistrustful of condoms, in general. So no matter how good the condom they have, they would probably still rely on their countermeasures against pregnancy.

*Oral sex as a replacement for condom*

I introduced Tony earlier as the 28 year-old who had trouble with fidelity. He has trouble keeping faithful because, as another weakness, he also cannot seem to say no to sexual offers. He has had fifteen relationships with foreign women since he moved to Boracay, and all of them were highly sexual. So sexual that Tony has grown tired of it:

One of my French girlfriends wanted me to have sex with two of her other friends at the same time – threesome! Although they were beautiful, I didn’t want it. It was too much, baboy na [I’m acting like a pig]. She was disappointed but I couldn’t take it anymore. All the women in my life are too much already. I don’t like myself anymore.

There is no doubt that Tony is acutely aware of the dangers he places upon himself when he has unprotected sex. He has had several occasions where he regretted not using a condom:

She told me, “come here.” I said to myself, “oh shit, she wants to do something.” I didn’t want it. We kissed and we did it because we liked each other. No condom. I panicked. “When will you learn?” She was still smiling and said that everything would be okay.

According to Tony, there are foreign women in Boracay who are comfortable, or actually prefer, having sex without condoms. He claims that many Western women have
'kits' that contain their pregnancy test strips and tampons from abroad. However, what is particular is that their ‘kit’ contains pregnancy test strips, but not contraceptives that would prevent the pregnancy in the first place. Perhaps the women expected that contraceptives would easily be accessible in Boracay, or that the men would carry them around. Well, for Tony’s case, although he keeps on regretting having unprotected sex, he still refuses to carry around condoms in his wallet.

So, because Tony is always caught unprepared without a condom, he has resorted to other sexual activities, which for him, functions to protect him from STDs as well:

We had oral sex; no intercourse. I didn’t want because we had no protection. She was happy because I was good. So the next day, I purposely didn’t bring condoms because I didn’t want to have intercourse, just oral sex.

Tony does not understand that he can also contract STDs through oral sex. But for him, oral sex is one strategy that allows him to still receive and give sexual pleasure, while keeping relatively safe.

Condom only at the start

Bernadette, is 29 years old with two children from a former European boyfriend. She only had two serious relationships with foreigners, and the rest of her sexual encounters in Boracay were flings. She realizes that most of her ‘flings’ only want sex so she always insists to use condoms:

I don’t agree if there is no condom. I don’t know them. Who knows how many girls they have been with? You have to protect yourself from sickness.

However, her condom use stops when her flings become a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship:

I use condoms but maybe, when we know each other well enough, I’ll just use ‘medicines’. 
"Medicines" is how Bernadette describes contraceptives, but from conversations outside our interview, it was apparent that she was averse to taking contraceptives because "they were too intrusive". So, the reason why she bore two children was because she insisted on using the calendar method that failed twice.

So, Bernadette’s perception of STDs is that of a symptomatic disease with visible signs. Once she concludes that her sexual partner is ‘clean’ then she feels comfortable not using protection. Unlike Venus and Kenny, her fear of pregnancy is not as strong, as she still continues to be averse to contraceptives.

It is important to know what local strategies individuals use to protect their sexual (and reproductive) health. Often times, people modify suggested methods according to how they perceive risks and benefits. So, it is not enough to know what methods they use, but one should learn how they use them.

**Bata: Homemade STD-regimen**

Bata is my participant who said he was addicted to sex. He calls his live-in partner **asawa**, which means wife, whom he has a two-year old son with. But Bata and his **asawa** have an ‘open relationship’, whereby they allow each other to have sexual intercourse with other people just as long as nobody gets pregnant, or gets somebody else pregnant. So, both of them admit to being sexually ‘promiscuous’.

Bata has already gotten two women pregnant because he refused to wear condoms. I asked him whether he was worried that he might have a third (unplanned) child and he answered:

No because I can control it. I really use withdrawal because I don’t like contraceptives. If we had to use, then like with my first **asawa** [wife/live-in], she used the pills. But they said that if you use withdrawal, **yung ulo ng lalaki mainit lagi** [the man will always be hot-headed]. You’ll always be impatient. It’s worse than having menstruation. It’s like you weren’t fulfilled.

With regard to getting sick, Bata has formulated a series of rationales and
concrete tactics to protect him from STDs and HIV. First rationale: foreign women are safe because:

Those girls, before they arrived here, they passed through a medical check-up. For example...with AIDS it's similar to SARS. With SARS, will they be able to come [into the Philippines] if they had SARS? Same for AIDS.

So, Bata relies on the effectiveness of the Philippine government to protect him from all diseases, including STDs and HIV. (To clarify, there are no such medical check-ups for incoming tourists for HIV). However, if some foreigners do get through the alleged scrutiny of the airport health officials, then Bata has a second line of defense:

With women, if we say she has tulo [STDs], there is a part of her body that we check. If you press on her lower abdomen, she will really retract from the pain. If they don’t cringe, they will shout aray [ouch]! I do that [test] all the time. But sometimes the women don’t cringe and they keep in the pain, so you can’t find out.

But Bata does not fully rely on the government and the ‘stomach-pressing’ method to keep him completely safe, so as a last line of defense, Bata insists on the benefits of a very long bath after sex:

We just have to be clean. Because the others, after they do it they don’t take a bath or wash. They just leave it overnight, they sleep like that. That’s why it like sticks on you. It’s already there in you. It stayed overnight inside your body...With one Amerasian girl, she had white spots near her thing and I knew she had tulo, but I went ahead with it anyway because I was embarrassed to stop. Afterwards I just took a bath really intensely.

It is evident that Bata believes that he is a self-sufficient STD-prevention machine without the need for modern contraceptives or STD diagnostic tests. With his unprotected sexual encounters with multiple partners, he sincerely believes that he is safe from STDs just as long as he strictly follows his ‘regimen’. It makes one curious how many ‘STD-regimens’ exist among locals in Boracay.
STD/HIV services, treatment and self-medication

People refrain from getting tested for STDs because having STDs is stigmatizing. People who are thought to need these tests are prostitutes and their clients, at least according to the STD/HIV campaigns in the Philippines. Although locals engage in more high-risk sexual behavior than some prostitutes on the island, i.e. regular unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners, there is still no personal sense that they too need to get tested. For example, when Venus and I were talking about STD/HIV prevention, she never once alluded to her circle of friends, but consistently focused on prostitutes:

I have a doctor friend on the island who says there's a lot of STD cases because there's a lot of foreigners on this island. These foreigners travel from Olongapo¹⁰ and they just want to have a good time. They're always out with the working girls. The disease goes around. Working girls get them. That's why they get check-ups every month. They're really made to have a check-up in one of the clinics here. That's what I heard.

So, it is not surprising that out of the eighteen people I interviewed in Boracay, only one had ever experienced taking an STD/HIV test and only because his foreign girlfriend developed STD-like symptoms.

Available services

On the island, the most comprehensive STD check-up can be done at the Boracay Island Municipal Hospital. They can perform standard diagnostic tests for most STDs, except HIV. Although when I interviewed the Chief of Hospital, he told me that they had screening packets for HIV, which they send to the main island for analysis. However, upon checking with the other hospital staff, they assured me that throughout the hospital’s history, they had never offered any such HIV-related service. This discrepancy in information helped me understand why many locals distrust the hospital. One local even described it as a place where you go in for a broken toe, but leave dead in a casket.

¹⁰ Olongapo is one of the biggest brothels located in Pampanga province. It used to cater to American soldiers when the American Navy Bases were still in the Philippines.
As mentioned earlier, there was an STD/HIV program established on the island two years back that targeted prostitutes and their clients\(^\text{11}\). They required prostitutes to have weekly STD check-ups and to carry health cards to show whether they were ‘clean’ or not. During the program’s inception in 2002, the hospital carried out 506 STD tests\(^\text{12}\). But because there was no follow-through, the program weakened. In 2003, the number of STD tests given dropped by almost half. This meant that on an island with 13,000 residents and 340,000 tourists, the hospital only did 278 STD tests for 2003 (Municipal Tourism Center, 2003). Nonetheless, the three most prevalent STDs for those two years were non-gonococcal urethritis, gonorrhea, and bacterial vaginosis, respectively (BIMH, 2003).

I visited the hospital on a Thursday, which I later found out was the designated day for prostitutes to have their weekly STD check-up. As I was interviewing the medical technologist, there were two young women who were waiting outside the office. Without me asking, the medical technologist volunteered the information that the women outside were prostitutes and were positive for STDs. The lack of confidentiality that the medical technologist offered her patients made me seriously question how they treated STD patients in the hospital. Did they also treat non-prostitutes the same way?

There are several private clinics around the island that provide STD diagnostic tests, but they are not as comprehensive as in the hospital. One of the clinics was just one small room with a bed and a desk, but it was located at the busiest market on the island. The doctor was very accommodating when I requested for some information about STDs. However, when she was tallying the number of STD cases they have had, she was simultaneously reciting the names of the patients and their diagnoses. There was no patient confidentiality whatsoever, and perhaps this lack of professionalism is one reason why STD sufferers opt not to seek medical help.

In general, apart from female prostitutes, most STD patients on the island were a mix of Filipino and foreign males. Perhaps it is because STD symptoms are often more evident with men than women.

\(^{11}\) Although the program was approved by the mayor’s office, the mayor himself continued to deny that prostitutes existed on the island. As one doctor described it: “the mayor doesn’t want to recognize we have prostitutes. They are like ostriches with their heads on the ground.”

\(^{12}\) This only describes the number of tests done. It is highly probable that individuals had repeat tests throughout the year.
Medicines to treat STDs are very expensive relative to the earning capacity of the average Boracaynon, which is around P4,650 (Eur 73) a month. The full treatment to cure non-gonococcal urethritis, the most prevalent STD on the island, is around 30% of the average monthly income. On the other hand, to cure gonorrhea, which is the second most prevalent STD, will require a Boracaynon to spend half of his monthly wage. This data partly explains why many islanders have drug-resistant STDs: they cannot afford to take the full-course of treatment every time they have an STD episode.

Many locals self-medicate when they have tulo (STDs). One doctor on the island told me her frustration:

There are so many who self-medicate. How do they know that it is tulo? The prescription didn’t even come from a doctor. When I ask them why they are buying those particular medicines, they always say that it’s not for them; someone else asked them to buy it. There was even one man who was just buying cough syrup and asked whether that would have an effect on doxycycline, an antibiotic for STDs. When I was asked him why he was taking doxycycline, he said he was asking for somebody else.

A study by Nichter (1994) about Tuberculosis (Tb) in the Philippines described how Filipinos shared their Tb drugs to people who manifested symptoms close to Tb, but had other respiratory tract infections. In Boracay – or perhaps in other parts of the Philippines as well - people are sharing prescriptions, knowledge, and/or actual STD medicines to people who are not medically diagnosed but only manifest symptoms of STDs. This practice should be addressed because it will lead to more drug- or multi-drug resistant diseases.

Over-all, STD services on the island need to be improved. There could be a more concerted effort to promote STD/HIV awareness to the general public and not only to sex workers. Given that sexual activity is high among locals and foreigners in Boracay, it is inescapable that many people will be in need of sexual health information and services.
Summary

People in Boracay are at risk for contracting STDs and HIV. Many locals perceive STDs and HIV as something that could happen, but would likely happen to others, particularly to prostitutes and their clients. Awareness about STDs and HIV is high, but knowledge about its etiology and routes of transmission is inadequate, and in many cases, grossly incorrect. People do not perceive that they are at immediate risk to contract a disease even if they have unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners. So, hopefully, when health professionals understand that Boracay is regarded by many as the ‘Fantasy Island’, whereby many men and women engage in high risk sexual behaviors, then perhaps sexual health programs can be adjusted accordingly.
Chapter 5

Is sexual liberation safe?

The men and women of Boracay have sexual behaviors that put them at risk for contracting HIV. They are not prostitutes, nor do they belong to the other predetermined ‘high-risk groups’ for HIV. They practice regular, unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners, and their understanding of STDs and HIV are riddled with myths and misconceptions. Yet, because they are not sex workers, health professionals do not think that these sexually-active members of the ‘general population’ are at risk for contracting HIV.

The current approach to preventing and controlling HIV is highly based on epidemiology. Through scientifically-sound studies, public health professionals have identified particular sectors in society where HIV+ cases cluster, namely those who practice unsafe sex and injecting drug use. Because of this, STD/HIV programs have been designed around these groups, but often only around these groups. Unfortunately, the sexual health needs of the ‘general population’ have been systematically glanced over.

This is the case in Boracay. The only efforts to educate Boracaynons about how to protect themselves from STDs and HIV have focused solely on sex workers. By choosing this approach, the Provincial Health Office and the Boracay Island Municipal Hospital have indirectly reinforced the popular misconception that HIV is a disease of the ‘socially-deviant’ people, namely the prostitutes on the island. So, local residents tend to believe that since they do not sell sex, they are not at immediate risk for contracting HIV. They have developed the idea that immoral sex (prostitution) is dangerous, and that socially acceptable sex is safe. The people fail to grasp that it is their own sexual behaviors, not the morality attached to it, that makes them vulnerable to HIV.

Moreover, Boracaynons are averse to anything that is linked to prostitution. The concept of selling sex, especially to foreign tourists, is so morally-charged that individual sexual behaviors are restrained by the fear of being ‘prostitute-like’. So, to acknowledge
that one is at risk for STDs and HIV and to seek medical help are unlikely among Boracaynons because it is too characteristic of prostitution.

Boracay is celebrated as the ‘Fantasy Island’ because it provides many Filipinos a space to be sexually liberated. Traditional sexual constraints are lifted in Boracay only because there is mutual understanding and inter-dependency to keep morality out of sexual behavior. However, as other people promote sex with multiple partners as a moral-free act of individual expression, the same sexual license is not extended to those who practice paid sex. Pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, and oral-anal-anything-in-between sex are all morally accepted in Boracay, but only when it is done freely.

This concept of ‘free sex’ is what conflicts with many theories in public health and social science. One assumption behind the medical construction of sexually-related ‘high-risk groups’ is that unprotected sex with multiple partners will only occur when there is monetary compensation involved. Why else would good, heterosexual, Christian Filipino men and women engage in such sexual licentiousness when everybody adheres to the traditional belief that sex is sacred to marriage? Likewise, some social scientists are convinced that sex between locals of developing countries and Western foreign tourists has to be transactional. In their eyes, relationships between people with such economic and power difference have to involve some exploitation for material gain. They too struggle to find the functional reason why sex is frequently exchanged in such a casual, emotionless, and material-free way. Perhaps they can find answers when they analyze the growing sexual liberation in societies today.

Sexual liberation is a social change that people in the health field have not fully grasped. People are having sex for many more reasons than was assumed: for love, for money, but also just for the physical pleasure of it. Unprotected sex with multiple partners does not just happen in the confines of ‘high-risk groups’, but it also occurs in what epidemiology distinguishes as the ‘general population’.

The sexually-active men and women in Boracay have no distinct pattern of behavior that sets them apart from the ‘general population’ of the island. They are the ‘general population’. They are not a readily distinguishable and homogenous group. They have diverse motivations; they engage in different forms of relationships; and they place different meanings to their sexual encounters. To categorize them as a ‘high-risk
group’ for HIV is to place the whole island on the same risk category. As one can see, the traditional approach to STD/HIV -- focusing on ‘high-risk groups’ -- is problematic in the local context of Boracay.

HIV/AIDS in the Philippines, and in Asia in general, is at an early stage and can still be managed. But HIV/AIDS programs need to adapt to social changes, especially with the growing sense of sexual liberation among the younger generations. There is more pre-marital sex happening within traditionally conservative societies. Also, since these sexual encounters often occur without protection and with multiple partners, then more people in the ‘general population’ are at risk for HIV than was estimated.

There are surely others like the Boracaynons of the Philippines, who are hidden in the ‘general population’ of other Asian societies that are systematically falling through the cracks of a narrow, public health HIV/AIDS approach.
“This is the image of someone who can get AIDS”
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