

Abortion in the time of social media

Fritz Rodriguez

“I had an abortion.”

This message was followed by three grey dots, floating about in a speech bubble.

The first of the three dots was of a darker shade compared to the other two. Quickly, that color transferred to the second dot, then the third, then back to the first. This went on and on for several minutes.

I watched the dots in silence, anticipating a long paragraph to pop out next. But the paragraph never came and the dancing dots vanished into the whiteness of Facebook Messenger.

My friend was still online, I can see the green dot next to her face, but she stopped typing.

Hushed tones

It happened two days ago in her apartment.

She was alone.

Flat against her bed, she inserted some pills inside of her. She waited for the pills to dissolve and seep into her skin.

She barely got any sleep that night. The following morning, she did the same thing.

It was a long painful day. Throughout it all, she had her phone in hand. She stared at her Internet search history.

She googled: signs of pregnancy, where to get abortion in Manila, Filipino women who had an abortion.

With one click, she deleted her month-long history.

She purchased the pills a week ago. She learned about it through online forums, where other young Filipina women discuss abortion-related logistics anonymously.

This led her to Quiapo, a long way from home.

“What should I do now,” she asked me. And now she was the one seeing the dancing dots on her screen.

I have encountered this question many times before – from teenagers, middle-aged mothers, and women who are in their 20s just like me.

Such questions were often spoken in whispers.

Eyes closed

When I was still working as a journalist, I tried my best to make these women’s stories known and understood. Their stories were complemented by those of development workers and advocates who are fighting a long and arduous battle towards legalizing abortion in the Philippines.

Our shared goal was to amplify women’s voices, educate the public, and clear misconceptions among policymakers.

Unfortunately, our stories were mostly met with anger, insult, ill-informed and unsolicited advice.

Comment sections on my articles were flooded with words like immoral, sinful, evil, and selfish.

“Don’t take it too personally, Filipinos just aren’t ready for this topic,” I was told by friends. But I did take it personally, I took it to heart. I was angry and disappointed by how gravely misinformed Filipinos are about abortion.

I was disgusted at how much hate Filipinos can generate against women. And how some of us choose to be blinded by faith, letting religion reign over science and human rights.

The reality is that abortion is happening in the Philippines, and thousands of women are dying precisely because abortion is illegal in this country. Many of us choose to ignore this truth.

Women

If we had legal abortion, the procedure could be carried out safely – under the right conditions; by medical professionals; with proper funding, tools, and medicine; and most importantly, without fear, stigma, or shame.

In many countries around the world, abortion is safe and legal. Women have the freedom to decide, to choose, and to have accessible options when it comes to their bodies, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

We are so quick to blame women for having an abortion without even listening to their stories.

Each of them have their own reasons for wanting to terminate their pregnancy. And no one, not even the government or the church, should be making decisions for them.

Some doctors – despite being obliged under Philippine laws to provide post-abortion care – discriminate women who need help after experiencing complications related to a botched abortion. At worst, some are denied treatment, becoming yet another statistic in our country's ever increasing number of deaths linked to illegal abortion.

“I don't want to return to my OB-Gyne, she'll judge me,” my friend said, explaining how she lied to her doctor about having a miscarriage instead of an abortion – in fear of being reported to the police.

I reached out to my trusted sources from SRHR circles for help. I knew my friend will be in good hands.

We found out that my friend could have suffered from septic shock. Abortion is safe, but my friend's method was not.

My friend could have died.

She is not alone.

As long as abortion remains illegal in the Philippines, several women will suffer in silence. As long as we lack sex education and an effectively implemented reproductive health law, many women and men will continue to experience unwanted pregnancies.

As long as we keep our minds shut, we will always have a negative perception of abortion.

As long as we keep mum, nothing will change.