

“Girl, Bi, Bakla, Tomboy”: The Intersectionality of Sexuality, Gender, and Class in Urban Poor Contexts

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Intersectionality as a theoretical framework argues for the need to account for people’s multiple and intersecting social identities in understanding experiences of discrimination. We looked at the intersection of sexuality, gender, and class in shaping the particularity of Filipino urban poor lesbian women’s and gay men’s experiences of discrimination. Using four case narratives, we examined the experiences of a bisexual (masculine gay man), *bakla* (feminine gay man), *tomboy* (masculine lesbian woman), and *girl* (feminine lesbian woman) in urban poor contexts. Unique themes include: how gender, sexuality, and class identities intersect and fuse in the *bakla* and *tomboy* identities to create a distinct form of social inequality that constructs these identities as forms of moral degradation; how non-normative gender expressions trigger overt discrimination; how lesbian and gay identities and relationships are invisibilized; and how providing for the family can facilitate acceptance given the strong adherence to heteronormative gender roles embedded in the context of urban poverty.

Keywords: intersectionality, discrimination, class, gender, sexuality

Discrimination towards lesbian women and gay men, also referred to as sexual prejudice or heterosexism, continue to persist globally (UN, 2012). Though discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been often treated as a homogenous experience, studies have

increasingly unpacked the unique experience of discrimination among multiply marginalized groups of lesbian women and gay men (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). In particular, studies in North American contexts have shown how sexual orientation intersects with gender and race to create compounded layers of discrimination (Bowleg, 2008; Bowleg, 2013). Little research however has been done in Asian contexts where the meaning of sexuality and gender may vary given that social identities are constructed in their specific cultural and historical contexts (Bowleg, 2013). Furthermore, there is scant research on how sexual orientation intersects with socioeconomic class, which may be more salient in contexts where poverty is widespread (McGarrity, 2014). Hence, this study contributes to understanding discrimination towards urban poor lesbian women and gay men by exploring the intersection of sexuality, gender, and class. Using an intersectionality framework, we explored experiences of discrimination from four case narratives of a bisexual, *bakla*, tomboy, and *girl* from urban poor contexts in the Philippines.

Discrimination Towards Lesbian Women and Gay Men

Despite shifts towards greater acceptance, lesbian women and gay men in the US continue to be widely stigmatized (Herek & McLemore, 2013). A review of the literature from North American contexts showed that experiences of prejudice toward lesbian women and gay men are likely to endure despite changes in public policies towards legal recognition of same-sex relations and equality for sexual minorities (Herek & McLemore, 2013). In the Philippines, the situation is made complex by the co-existence of policies that promote and policies that deny lesbian and gay rights (UNDP & USAID, 2014). While cultural and social attitudes reflect increasing acceptance, Filipino lesbian women and gay men continue to experience discrimination and violence (UNDP & USAID, 2014).

While race or ethnic identity may be salient in North American contexts, researchers have argued for the need to study Asian contexts given the salience and meaning of identities are context-specific (Bowleg, 2013; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Researchers have highlighted the need to address the intersection of lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities with socioeconomic status (Gamarel, et al., 2012; McGarrity, 2014). One study on the intersection of race and class found that socioeconomic position was primary in the experience of discrimination of gay and bisexual men (Gamarel, et al., 2012). A review of past studies highlighted how LGB people from lower socioeconomic status (SES) experience greater vulnerability and distress (McGarrity, 2014). This review identified the uniqueness of the experience of vulnerability from the intersection of sexuality and class such as the consequence of gender role nonconformity and disclosure. Passing as a heterosexual masculine man can be an act of survival for working class GB men while coming out can lead to more harm for LGB individuals in the context of poverty.

In the Philippines, socioeconomic status or class is made salient by the widespread prevalence of poverty, with 25.8% of Filipinos in poverty and 10.5% in extreme or subsistence poverty (PSA, 2015). A large percentage of poor Filipinos live in Metro Manila in urban poor settlements or informal settler communities (Racelis & Aguirre, 2005). Attempts have been made to argue for the interconnection of poverty and sexuality (Jolly, 2010). For instance, economic systems are said to be heteronormative with people of non-conforming gender and sexuality (e.g., butch lesbian women) deemed unfit to work. Poverty also intersects with sexuality when LGBT individuals face greater risk of rejection from family members when they are unable to earn income. A Philippine study supports this assertion as social protection policies were found to be heteronormative, preventing access to resources to LBT-headed households (GALANG, 2013).

A seminal study of queer people in the context of poverty in urban Philippines by Thoreson (2011) showed how sexuality and gender expression shape the experience of material poverty and employment. Following a capabilities approach, this study showed how queerness intersected with poverty to shape not only material poverty but a range of capabilities such as agency, security, dignity, and meaning in life. In terms of employment, low-income LGBT people faced discrimination in jobs deemed inappropriate for them or sought low-paying jobs that are typecasted for them. Low-income LGBT people struggled to provide not only for themselves but for their families, with the ability to earn functioning as a currency to gain family acceptance.

In addition, low-income LGBT people felt that they contributed to their households not only with their income but also through chores and other non-monetary means. In terms of safety and security, low-income LGBT people reported experiencing harassment in the streets while a number experienced graver forms of assault including rape and attempted murder. Despite experiencing discrimination and violence, they felt safe in their own communities where people knew them. Thoreson further noted that queer populations in the Philippines are particularly vulnerable to harassment because of their visible “transgressive gender expression” (p. 503).

The present study seeks to contribute an intersectional framework to understand experiences of discrimination of Filipino lesbian women and gay men in urban poor contexts. In particular, we look at the intersection of sexuality, gender, and class in four case narratives of a bisexual, *bakla*, *tomboy*, and *girl* identity. We explore their subjective experiences in-depth to derive insights as to the intersecting structures of social inequalities or oppression that shape these experiences.

Philippine Cultural Context

Unlike Western social constructions that separate the categories of gender (e.g., masculinity, femininity) and sexual orientation (homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality) the local social construction of gender and sexuality is fused or conflated (Tan, 1995, 1998; Ofreneo, 2000, 2003). Tan (1998) argued that Philippine culture has no term for sexuality, which he contends is a largely western construct. There are no local terms for the categories of sexual orientation (Tan, 1995). Rather, the construction of sexuality is merged with or embedded in the language of gender (Ofreneo, 2000, 2003).

The local term most widely used to refer to a gay man is *bakla*, the contraction of the words *babae* (female/woman) and *lalaki* (male/man), implying that homosexuality is tied to femininity (Tan, 1995). Tan (1995) has explained how the concept of effeminacy dominates Philippine public discourse on homosexuality. The term *bakla* lumps together gay men and transgender women. On the other hand, the term most commonly used to refer to a lesbian woman is *tomboy* (Josef, 1997, 1999). Similar to the word *bakla*, *tomboy* fuses sexuality and

gender as it refers primarily to the expression of masculinity. *Tomboy* lumps together lesbian women and transgendered or transsexual men. With the accommodation of western knowledge, local terms such as *bakla* and *tomboy* co-exist with the western words lesbian, gay, and transgender in Philippine public discourse.

Class further complicates the unique construction of gender and sexuality in the Philippines. According to Tan (1995a), *bakla* historically represented low-income effeminate gay men, or the stereotypical *parlorista* (gay men who work in beauty parlors). Gay men from middle- and high-income groups traditionally remained “discreet,” that is, masculine in gender expression (Tan, 1995b). While *parlorista* gay men (parlor gay) identified as “*bakla*”, discreet or straight-acting gay men identified as “bisexual” even if they only engaged in sex with men (HAIN, 2013). As such, the spectrum of *bakla*/gay identities as part of the umbrella term “men who have sex with men” or MSM cut across a range of masculinities or gender role expressions (HAIN, 2013). On the other hand, the *tomboy* represented low-income masculine lesbian women, or the butch lesbian who stereotypically worked as a security guard (Josef, 1997, 1999). *Tomboys* were regarded as different from lesbian women who are feminine in gender expression (Josef, 1997, 1999). The local term that is sometimes used to refer to the feminine lesbian woman is *girl*, signifying that she is stereotypically feminine.

There is no clear delineation in the usage of the local terms *bakla*, *tomboy*, bisexual, and *girl* vis-à-vis the western terms lesbian, gay, and transgender. These local and western constructions co-exist in shaping the subjectivities of Filipinos who identify as lesbian, gay, *bakla*, *tomboy*, *girl*, and bisexual. A recent study on Filipino gay and transgender identities showed how *bakla* refer to parlor-based gay men as well as transgender women (Canoy, 2015). Looking at cultural and classed discourses of intimacy, this same study found how the *bakla* needed to pay for intimacy with men, making same-sex relationships transactional. Working-class *bakla* culture was separate and distant from the culture of middle-class gay men.

Problem

In this study, we ask, “How do the intersections of sexuality,

gender, and class shape the experiences of discrimination of urban poor Filipino lesbian women and gay men?" We use intersectionality as a framework to explore four case narratives of *bakla* (feminine gay man), bisexual (masculine gay man), *tomboy* (masculine lesbian woman), and *girl* (feminine lesbian woman) identities in a Filipino urban poor context.

Intersectionality as Framework

Studies on discrimination towards lesbian women and gay men have predominantly treated sexual orientation as a singular and unitary identity (Parent et al., 2013). This is based on the conceptualization of social identity as independent and unidimensional, rather than multiple and intersectional (Bowleg, 2008). Although not intersectional in their framework, there have been empirical studies that have looked at the experience of discrimination of multiply marginalized groups, e.g., Black lesbian women and Black gay and bisexual men (Bowleg, 2008; Bowleg, 2013).

Intersectionality as an alternative framework to understand discrimination originated from the work of black feminists in the US. Crenshaw (1989) argued for the need to go beyond a single-axis or a single-issue understanding of oppression, i.e., patriarchy or racism, and account for the intersecting axes of oppression as experienced by black women. She highlighted the need to acknowledge the compounded experience of multiple marginalization for people disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, age, or disability. Collins (1990) further contended that experiences of discrimination are not additive, rather, distinct experiences of discrimination are created by interlocking systems of oppression, e.g., sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism, thereby forming a matrix of domination that structures power and inequality.

To understand the experience of discrimination of an urban poor lesbian woman, for example, would mean understanding how her social identities of being a woman (gender), of being a lesbian (sexuality), and being urban poor (class) intersect to create a qualitatively distinct experience. A person's social location based on one's intersecting social identities becomes the center of attention in research (Shields,

2008). These social identities are said to “interact to form qualitatively different meanings and experiences” (Warner, 2008, p. 454). The goal of research then is to capture the ways by which these intersecting identities shape experiences, a goal that is most compatible with qualitative research methodologies (Bowleg, 2013; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008).

Intersectionality approaches have increasingly been used to conceptualize and analyze sexuality (e.g., lesbian, gay, or bisexual), gender (e.g. man, woman), and race/ ethnicity (e.g. African-American, Asian-American) (Parent et al., 2013). For instance, a qualitative study on intersectional microaggressions found unique themes such as social constructions unique to specific groups (e.g., women of color as exotic, men of color as criminal) and gender-based stereotypes of lesbian women and gay men (e.g., lesbian women as masculine, gay men as feminine) (Nadal et al., 2015). A study on Black gay and bisexual men revealed the primacy of race in their daily experience of discrimination and that acting masculine allowed them to avoid discrimination (Bowleg, 2013). A study on Asian-American lesbian and bisexual women found that living as lesbian or bisexual in an Asian-American cultural context meant experiencing pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, intolerance for sexual minority status, difficulty with disclosure, and conflict with parents and families (Sung, Szymanski, & Henrichs-Beck, 2015).

Intersectionality asserts that the multiple and interdependent identities experienced at an individual level reflect systems of inequality at the structural level (Bowleg, 2013; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). This implies that an urban poor lesbian woman’s personal experience of discrimination is not only a subjective experience but a representation of a system of inequality at the societal level. As such, “intersectionality theory emphasizes the importance of understanding identity within a social structural context. That is, rather than being a collection of personality traits or individualized experiences, identity is informed by institutional, political, and societal structures” (Warner, 2008, p. 459). Personal experiences of discrimination are understood from the particular social meanings of identities in a given historical and cultural context and from the specific social processes that create inequalities in this context.

METHOD

Intersectional studies vary in methodology, with some arguing for and utilizing a quantitative design (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016), a qualitative design (Bowleg et al., 2015), and a mixed method design (Canoy, 2015; Bowleg & Bauer, 2016). For this study, we employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with four participants. In particular, we utilized a case study approach in order to explore the particularity in meaning of each individual narrative. Qualitative research methodologies allow for the sensitive investigation of the nuanced meaning and experience of discrimination for ordinary people who live the intersections of structural inequalities (Bowleg, 2013; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008). Warner (2008) further asserts the value of case studies in understanding identity as a process that emerges in social interactions in specific spaces and moments. By giving special attention to moment-by-moment experiences, we sought to explore how intersectionality is qualitatively manifested in specific instances of discrimination as lived and embodied by each individual case. While intersectional studies do not necessarily warrant a large sample, we acknowledge the limitations of a case study approach which is discussed further in the discussion.

Participants

The participants met the following criteria for inclusion: (1) they came from a community that belonged to the lower socioeconomic classes D and E based on the ABCDE classification of class, which characterize such communities with dilapidated and makeshift houses cramped in slum areas (Racelis, 2005); (2) they identified as male or female, following their assigned sex at birth; (3) they engaged in gay or lesbian relationships; and (4) they disclosed experiences of discrimination. Participants were purposively selected to represent the intersection of gender (i.e., masculine, feminine) and sexuality (i.e., gay, lesbian) in an urban poor setting.

This study utilized the label that the participants used to self-identify, an identity further elaborated in their narratives. Kulet self-identifies as bisexual. He is masculine in gender expression and

gay in sexual orientation. His use of bisexual is similar to how some Filipino men who have sex with men or MSM use the label bisexual to set themselves apart from the feminine gay or *bakla*. In his context, a gay identity is equivalent to being *bakla*. Kulet has had relationships with both men and women but reports only being attracted to men. His relationship with a woman was a way to hide his sexuality from his family. DD self-identifies as *bakla*. She is feminine in gender expression and gay in sexual orientation. She only has relationships with men. Julie self-identifies as *tomboy*. She is masculine in gender expression and lesbian in sexual orientation. She only has relationships with women. Khaye self-identifies as *girl*, which is commonly used to refer to the feminine partner of a tomboy. She is feminine in gender expression and lesbian in sexual orientation. While she has had relationships with both men and women, she reports only wanting to be with butch lesbian women. Her relationship with a man was borne out of the social pressure to marry.

Instrument

The interview guide focused on eliciting the intersection of identities of the participants, their experiences of discrimination, and how they understood these experiences in light of their intersecting identities. It included questions about their sexuality, relationships, gender roles and expectations; life in an urban poor community and their interactions with people; and experiences of discrimination and how they coped with these.

Procedure

The participants were recruited through the gatekeepers of each urban poor community or the *barangay* officials. The interview was conducted in the most conducive area or establishment near the participant's place of residence. We first presented the consent form and briefed each participant about the study. After the participant gave informed consent, we proceeded with the interview proper. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the interview were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read several times to derive an overall sense of the data before analysis. Lines pertinent to establishing a participant's identities and intersection of identities and lines recounting experiences of discrimination were extracted from the raw data. The forms of discrimination were analyzed in terms of how the participants understood and experienced the unique intersection of gender, sexuality, and class. Following Warner (2008) and Shields (2008), we interpreted the data in terms of how the social construction of intersecting identities shaped the participants' experiences, with particular attention to references made to social structures. Checking for validity involved constantly referring back to the transcript to ensure consistency with the participants' narratives, sensitivity to their unique contexts, and resonance of the data with the interpretation.

RESULTS

To illustrate how the intersection of social identities shapes the experience of discrimination among urban poor Filipino lesbian women and gay men, we present four case narratives: Kulet, the masculine gay man or bisexual; DD, the feminine gay man or *bakla*; Julie, the masculine lesbian woman or *tomboy*; and Khaye, the feminine lesbian woman or girl. From their personal narratives, we drew out how interlocking systems of oppression experienced as identities create their distinct experiences of discrimination. We then derived the social constructions of gender, sexuality, and class uniquely embedded in a Filipino cultural context.

Kulet, the Masculine Gay Man or Bisexual

At the time of the interview, Kulet was a 38-year old call center agent living alone in a boarding house in San Andres, Malate, Manila. Being the eldest capable son among his five siblings, Kulet assumed the breadwinner role early in life. Kulet, a native of Zamboanga City, would send a part of his monthly wage to his mother and siblings back

home. His gender appearance was masculine. He spoke with a soft voice, kept his hair short, and preferred wearing t-shirts with shorts or pants.

He has had several relationships with men. Some he met in bars, thrift shops, and in his neighborhood. These relationships with men were mostly short-lived, although he had a long-term relationship with a man for five years. He has also had relationships with women to hide his sexuality from his family. He said:

Actually, masasabi ko siyang forced relationship. Kasi hindi ko siya ginusto. Kasi gusto ng father ko nga maging ganap akong tunay na lalake. Na talagang ayoko. Ang gusto ko kung ano ako, yun ako. (Actually, I can call it forced relationship. Because I never really liked her. Because my father really wanted me to be a real man. Which I really did not want to be. I want to be who I really am.)

He engaged in relationships with women in order to please his father's wish for him to be a straight man. He referred to himself as "bisexual" to mean that he was a masculine man who liked men. Having relationships with women combined with his masculine gender expression projected an identity of a heterosexual Kulet. The women he had relationships with were not aware of his sexual orientation but would later realize that he was gay.

Kulet, with his masculine and heteronormative gender performance, was able to pass as a heterosexual man, fulfilling the expectations of his parents. For Kulet, doing this protected his family's dignity and reputation in the community. As Kulet narrated:

...parang kahihyan sa part ng papa ko tsaka ng mama ko. Kasi nga parang nakakababa ng pagkatao nila na may anak silang ganun so tinatago ko na lang yun. (...it's a source of shame for my father and my mother. It's like lowering their dignity to have a son who is like that [gay] so I just hide it.)

In the above quote, Kulet referred to himself as "like that" (gay), reflecting how he could not express his gay identity to his family. To be gay was a cause of shame (*kahihyan*) not only to himself but to his family. By successfully hiding his sexuality, Kulet was able to protect

himself and his family from discrimination from neighbors or people in his community. However, he would experience discrimination from both his family and friends who knew of his sexual orientation. To reduce the discrimination he felt at home, Kulet used his earning potential to gain acceptance. He explained this in the quote below:

Kaya kong patunayan na kahit ganito ako, katanggap-tanggap ako. May pakinabang ako. Pwede niyo kong tanggapin kung ano ako, dahil may pakinabang ako sa pamilya. (I can prove that I am worthy of acceptance. I have a purpose. You can accept me for who I am because I contribute to my family.)

Knowing that his parents could not accept his sexuality, Kulet compensated through his capacity to provide. Because his family could depend on him for financial support, his gay identity became less of a concern to them. In the context of poverty, Kulet's ability to earn for the family made a significant impact to relieving their economic hardship.

As such, Kulet was very careful to maintain his ability to provide. Not only did earning lead to acceptance, it also alleviated his family's condition. This was why he would get distressed when teased about being gay or *bakla* at work as he feared losing his job. He recalled how concerned he would get when his female friends would tease him for being gay. As he explained:

Ayoko yung binibiro ako kasi naapektuhan yung trabaho ko. Kasi may binubuhay ako... wala ka rin masasandalan. (I don't like being teased because it affects my work. I have people to support... I have no one to lean on.)

Because his friends knew he liked men, they often insinuated that he was also feminine or *bakla*. His friends would often mock the *bakla* manner which he found offensive as he felt it lowered his dignity as a masculine gay man and could affect his reputation at work. The threat of losing his work compounded to Kulet's distress as a gay son trying to prove his worth by providing for his family. Kulet recalled a time when his father threatened to remove his support for his schooling if he did not change his sexual orientation:

So sabi kasi ng papa ko, hindi niya ako pag-aaralin, hindi niya

ako ipapasok sa college kung hindi ko babaguhin ang sarili ko.
(So my father said he won't support my schooling or send me to college if I don't change myself.)

With his father's threat, Kulet hid his same-sex orientation. By engaging in relationships with women, he was able to present a heterosexual identity. To be gay meant losing support for his education, which would push him further into poverty.

Tanggap ka bilang kaibigan...Pero hindi lang yung [buong] pagkatao. (You are accepted as a friend but not really your [whole] identity as a person.)

This quote was how Kulet summed up his unique experience of discrimination as a masculine gay man or bisexual. With his masculine and heterosexual gender performance, he was able to pass as a heterosexual man. As such, he did not experience overt discrimination from people in his community. He hid his true sexual identity and maintained his masculinity to avoid discrimination. But with people who knew that he was gay, Kulet would experience rejection and ridicule. Fulfilling the breadwinner role as the gay son was his way of gaining acceptance from his family while being masculine was his way of demanding respect from peers.

DD, the Feminine Gay Man or Bakla

DD, at the time of the interview, was 34 years old. Sporting a long ponytail and lipstick, he wore a white shirt, jeans, and flip-flops. He lived in an informal settler community in Quezon City where makeshift houses are built wall-to-wall using materials ranging from light plywood to hard concrete. The community is near a creek that often caused floods and posed a threat to the residents' health.

DD has worked as a hairdresser and a street vendor, selling snacks on sidewalks. He made sure to always save all his earnings to feed his siblings who will not eat if he did not earn enough. DD shared that he experienced discomfort with his physical appearance, especially with his male anatomical features, in his childhood. He self-identified as *lalaki* and as *bakla*. He has had several relationships with men, mostly

lasting for a couple of months, the longest for two years.

DD recounted experiencing discrimination from both his family and people in his community. These experiences of discrimination emerged from the unique intersection of being feminine and being gay fused in the *bakla* identity, a local construction of gender and sexuality common in communities belonging to the low socioeconomic class.

People from DD's community expected him, as male, to be masculine. He recounted instances of experiencing public ridicule for being feminine:

Nandyang 'yung tatawagin kang bakla kasi 'di daw nila maintindihan kung babae o lalaki...Sisigawan kang bakla, parang bastos. (They would call me 'bakla' because they said they don't understand if I'm a woman or a man...People would shout 'bakla' at me, it's rude.)

DD acknowledged his femininity, as he kept his hair long and his lips colored. He also spoke in a soft, high-pitched voice. The dissonance between traditional gender expectations and DD's gender expression would trigger public ridicule. Men would often shout "*bakla*" at him. In this context, *bakla* took on a derogatory form.

DD recognized that in his urban poor community, being *bakla* was perceived as abnormal and lewd. As *bakla*, people would demean him and characterize him as indecent as shown in the quote below:

Kasi ano para sa kanila, hindi kami normal. 'Yung tingin nila, 'pag nakipagrelasyon ka sa lalaki, nandun 'yung bintang mayron ka na raw kababuyan na ginagawa. Bastos. (Because for them, we're not normal. They think, if I engage in a relationship with a man, there's the accusation that I am engaging in indecent acts. Lewdness.)

The use of the word "*kababuyan*" which directly translates to "being like a pig" graphically represents the level of depravity accorded to being *bakla*. Not only was the *bakla* perceived as abnormal and perverted, people from DD's community also believed that the *bakla* could not experience true love. They would say that men who have relationships with the *bakla* were only after their money as DD explained:

Bakit nakikipagrelasyon ka sa lalaki? Peperahan ka lang. Isa lang naman kailangan sa'yo n'yan - pera. Sinasabi nila hindi ka naman daw mamahalin n'yan. (Some would say, 'Why do you engage in relationships with men? They're only after your money. They only want one thing - your money.' They tell me no man will truly love me.)

From the quote above, the *bakla* was socially constructed as only able to experience love and sex in exchange for money. This sentiment from DD's neighbors is their expressed invalidation of his capacity to be in a genuine relationship. In the context of poverty, money would be an even greater concern. As the breadwinner, DD was expected to provide for his family's basic needs such as food and his siblings' schooling. DD's family would warn him about spending money on men as shown in this excerpt:

'Yung sa pamilya ko 'yung kadalasan sinasabi nila: 'wag kang makipagrelasyon sa lalaki dahil lolokohin ka lang n'yan, gagamitin ka lang. (With my family, what they would often say is: 'don't engage in relationships with men because they will only deceive you, use you.')

DD faced pressure from his family to keep his income for their needs rather than letting money go to men he had relations with. In an urban poor context where there was limited spatial and financial mobility, DD often experienced this pressure from his family along with judgment by people in his community.

Repeated exposure to blatant discrimination necessitated that DD adapt by ignoring what people say. This was also his means to prevent discrimination from escalating to violence. As DD narrated:

'Di ko na sila pinapansin kasi ito nga ay ito nga ako, 'di ba? Kaya 'di ko na lang pinapansin para walang gulo. (I don't mind them because I am who I am, right? So I just ignore them so there will be no commotion.)

To further mitigate discrimination, DD would tone down his femininity, seeing that the *bakla*'s gender expression is what triggered public ridicule. DD explained:

‘Yung kailangan hindi mo pakita yung pagkatao mo. Wala kang gagawing masama na makita nila. Kailangan hindi mo sosobrahan yung pagkabading mo. (You need to conceal your identity. You cannot do anything improper that they might see. You need to tone down your femininity.)

DD referred to minimizing his “*pagkabading*” (or being *bakla*) to avoid discrimination. His mother also advised to avoid interacting with people who could never understand a *bakla* like him. DD recounted:

Sinasabi lang ng mama ko na ayusin ang sarili mo. ‘Wag ka nang makikiharap sa mga alam mong ‘di ka maiintindihan dahil nga sa pagkatao mo... sa bahay ka na lang. (My mother told me to fix myself [act decently]. Don’t interact with those you know won’t understand who you are because of your identity [bakla]... just stay in the house.)

In DD’s experience, a person with a *bakla* identity was often the object of ridicule. Unlike the bisexual or masculine gay man, the *bakla*’s feminine gender expression perceived as gender non-conforming in an urban poor setting made DD the object of discrimination. The perverse social construction of the *bakla* as abnormal, indecent, and lewd made DD fear violence. To prevent discrimination from escalating into violence, DD would minimize his femininity.

Julie, the Masculine Lesbian Woman or Tomboy

Julie was 25 years old during the time of the interview. She lives in the same informal settler community as DD. Julie narrated that she often just stayed at home to avoid dressing up as her mother made her wear blouses and fitted shirts. She insisted on wearing loose-fitting tops and shorts. Eventually, her family became used to her masculine gender expression. She said she started having crushes on girls in kindergarten. She had her first lesbian relationship during her freshman year in high school and through the years, her relationships with girls totalled to 15. These relationships often lasted for a few months, with her most serious relationship lasting two years. Julie self-identified as *tomboy*.

She previously worked as a lady guard in a private school in Pasay City. She left after a month because students consistently insulted her when they tried to leave school before dismissal time. She also worked at a call center but could not stay long as she found it difficult to breathe in an office filled with rubber-based furniture. At the time of the interview, Julie was unemployed and looking for a job.

As a *tomboy* in an urban poor community, Julie experienced discrimination from both her family and community. Julie narrated how her parents physically hurt her when they learned about her relationship with a girl:

Dati nung first year ako, nagka-girlfriend ako, noon niya nalaman. Nalaman ng nanay ko saka ng tatay ko. Binugbog... Pinaghampas-hampas ako ng walis tambo. (I had a girlfriend when I was in first year [high school], it was then when my parents found out. My mother found out and then my father. I was beaten up...I was hit several times with a broomstick.)

Her parents resorted to physically hurting her in the hopes of reverting her same-sex orientation. She further explained that her parents expected her, being the only daughter among five siblings, to find a husband who can provide for her and her parents. As a family that was barely able to meet their basic needs, Julie's parents saw it crucial that their only daughter find a husband who can help alleviate their economic condition. For Julie's parents, having a lesbian daughter meant staying poor.

Seeing that their daughter was masculine made them expect their daughter would now have to fulfill the role of a man and provide for her partner and her family: "...*nagka-girlfriend ako...galit na galit sila. Nag-iisang babae ako, sabay parang naging lalake ako.*" (When I had a girlfriend, they were furious. I was their only girl and I ended up becoming a guy.) In light of their poverty, Julie's parents could not accept that they instead will have to provide for Julie's future partner. Given the strong heteronormative expectation to marry a man who can provide, Julie's sexuality was equated to losing a potential provider for her family.

In her community, Julie would experience overt discrimination for being *tomboy*. Her visibly masculine appearance made her the target

of public ridicule. Julie reported that she was vulnerable to verbal harassment when walking around their neighborhood, especially if with her girlfriend. Julie narrated how people would derogatorily shout at her:

Ah, meron akong naririnig na... kapag nakalagpas ka na, sisigawan kang, 'Tomboy, tomboy!'. Kapag dumadayo ako sa isang lugar... Pero hindi naman po talaga maiiwasan iyon. (I would hear them... when I have passed them, they would shout at me, 'Tomboy, tomboy!' When I go to a place... But that can't really be helped.)

As shown in the quote above, Julie has learned to accept that she could not prevent public ridicule similar to what DD as *bakla* experienced. Julie knew that the dissonance between traditional gender expectations and her gender expression triggered discrimination. She felt she needed to conceal her masculinity to avoid being picked on. She made sense of this in the following quote:

Parang kung wala ka naman, kumbaga, yun nga tomboy ka, kung gusto mo respetuhin ka ng kapwa mo tao... kumbaga umayos ka. Kasi, 'yung iba, 'yung ibang tomboy na pasiga-siga, na hanggang sa mapagti-tripan. (If you're a tomboy and you want to be respected, you have to act properly. Other tomboys who act tough end up being picked on by others.)

While experiencing public ridicule for being *tomboy*, Julie also experienced sexual harassment for being female. The distinct meaning of sexual harassment in Julie's case was to make her feel that she was still a woman despite being *tomboy*. Like heterosexual women, men treated her as a sexual object. Men would tell her, "*Ang sexy mo pala. Ganda naman pala e.*" (You're sexy. And pretty after all.) They would ask her, "*Ba't ka nagpakalalaki? Ganda-ganda mo.*" (Why are you acting like a man? You're so pretty.) Some men would even hit on her or court her despite knowing she had a girlfriend. This reflected how people in her community dismissed her masculinity and same-sex orientation and asserted that as a woman, she should be feminine and heterosexual. The message for Julie was that her identity as *tomboy* was not being recognized.

In light of the blatant forms of discrimination she experienced from her family and her community, she has learned to accept the heteronormative duty imposed upon her, to marry a man and have a family. She said:

Kung may makilala man ako na matino-tino na... karapat-dapat talaga sa'kin. Bakit hindi, 'di ba? Nasa sa'kin naman talaga kung gugustuhin ko na talagang magbago e. (If I meet someone suitable...rightful for me. Why not, right? It depends on me really if I really want to change.)

Being unemployed and knowing the insecurity she has experienced at work, Julie was willing to deny her sexuality to improve her and her family's economic condition. To avoid public ridicule, Julie chose to minimize her masculinity. To avoid parental rejection, she chose to deny her sexuality. To be in a relationship with a man, despite being *tomboy*, would mean changing the reality of being poor.

Khaye, the Feminine Lesbian Woman or Girl

Khaye, 21 years old at the time of the interview, is a feminine lesbian woman living in an urban poor community along the coast of Laguna de Bay in Muntinlupa City. Khaye previously worked in a factory of a clothing label but eventually had to quit to take care of her stepmother's youngest child. At the time of the interview, she was unemployed.

She had her first relationship with a girl at twelve. She has had relationships with women and with men. At the time of the interview, her partner was a tomboy or butch lesbian woman. She referred to herself as a *girl*. She was still open to having a heterosexual relationship because of the social pressure to marry which is similar to what Julie experienced. Khaye recounted the attempts of her family to push her to engage in a relationship with other men but Khaye repeatedly refused: "*Gusto nila sakin lalaki talaga. Ayoko din talaga.*" (They really want a man for me. But I really don't.) She has found her relationships with butch lesbian women fulfilling. She said she only experiences respect, joy, and care in her relationships with butch lesbian women.

Khaye's experiences of discrimination were mostly based on

gossip about her lesbian relationships and the social construction attached to being a *girl* in a relationship with a tomboy. She recounted several instances when her male suitors were discouraged by their parents and siblings from being in a relationship with her. Because she has had relationships with tomboys, she was perceived negatively. She narrated:

‘Yung iba rin maano magsalita: ‘Dami-daming lalaki d’yan, tomboy pa aanuhin mo.’ Noon siyempre, nasasaktan ka kasi mas marunong pa sila sa’yo... Kasi ‘yung ibang lalaki d’yan tanggap ka nga, hindi ka naman tanggap ng magulang... Sa tomboy, kahit ano, tanggap ka lang. Paglalaban ka pa n’yan minsan e. E ‘yung lalaki, sunod-sunuran sa magulang. (Some have a lot to say: ‘There are so many guys out there, yet you chose a tomboy.’ Before, of course, I would feel hurt because they think they know better... Because some of the guys may accept you, but the parents won’t... With a tomboy, whatever you may be, you are accepted. They will fight for you even. But the guys, they succumb to their parents.)

Families of her male suitors expressed disapproval of a relationship they saw was primarily for Khaye and her family’s financial gain. In the context of urban poverty, marriage was a tool towards upward social and financial mobility, as was also seen in Julie’s case. Khaye recounted such an experience below:

Eh matapobre kasi ‘yung nanay. Tapos ‘yung mga kapatid sabi, ‘Hindi ko naman ‘yan gusto... Hiwalayan mo na ‘yan; peperahan ka lang niyan.’ Siyempre masasakit ‘yung sinasabi nila. Hihiwalayan mo na kaysa makarinig ka pa ng masasakit na salita. (The mother looks down on poor people. And the siblings said that I don’t really like their brother... They told him to leave me because I will only milk him of his money. Of course what they said were hurtful. So I would rather leave the relationship than hear those hurtful words.)

In the above extract, Khaye shared her experience of prejudice. As a woman from the low socioeconomic class, she was perceived as entertaining male suitors only for their money. Being poor and

being a woman, she was seen as dependent financially on men. These identities would further intersect with her sexuality as a girl who has relationships with tomboys. The unique intersection of class, gender, and sexuality in the experience of Khaye is vividly illustrated in the quote below:

Eh 'yung ibang mayayaman. Minsan sasabihin nila sa'yo: "Iskwater ka na nga, imbis na 'yung maykaya na ang patulan mo, ganyan pa pinatulan mo. (Some of those who are rich, sometimes they will tell you: 'You're a squatter already, instead of finding someone who has means, you chose to be with that [a tomboy].)

The use of "*ganyan pa*" (someone less), not naming the person as if a *tomboy* was an object, implied scorn towards a person of inferior status. The use of "*ganyan pa pinatulan mo*" (you chose to be with someone less) meant that Khaye had degraded herself by being with someone of even lower status than her. The line "*iskwater ka na nga... ganyan pa pinatulan mo*" would translate to "you're already in the slums... and yet you chose to lower yourself further by having a relationship with a tomboy".

Khaye's distinct experience of prejudice as a poor feminine lesbian woman in a relationship with a *tomboy* is further described graphically below:

Ay, minsan naririnig din namin. 'Iskwater na nga, tomboy pa'... kasi iniisip nila na 'pag tomboy karelasyon mo, nagalaw ka na, binaboy ka na. Kaya pagka, may nanliligaw sayong lalaki, sinisiraan ka na. (Sometimes we hear, she's not only with 'a squatter,'she's with 'a tomboy too'... because they think that if you're in a relationship with a tomboy, you're no longer a virgin, you're already defiled. So if a man courts you, they badmouth you already.)

The use of the line "*binaboy ka na*" which literally translates to "you have been made dirty like a pig" referred to how people in Khaye's community perceived sexual relations with a *tomboy* as a form of debasement. This made Khaye no longer desirable to a heterosexual man. She further explained the meaning of this prejudice:

Parang pagkatapos nilang lubusin 'yung kabanguhan mo. O, iiwanan ka na nila... Akala nila kasi 'yung mga tomboy, porke't tomboy, e ganun na 'yung mga ugali, ganon. 'Kala rin nila mga siga, mga manyak. E hindi rin naman. (It's like after they [tomboys] enjoy your freshness, they will leave you... They think tomboys, because they're tomboys, have such bad character. They also think tomboys are like bullies, are perverts, but they're not.)

The excerpt above shows how girls like Khaye who have sexual relations with tomboys were perceived as disgraced women.

Amidst all these prejudice, Khaye would experience sexual harassment from men who would taunt her to be with them instead. As she narrated:

Sasabihin n'yan, 'Ako na lang. Mas masarap naman ako d'yan e. Ano ba'ng nagustuhan mo d'yan? Wala namang ano [ari] 'yan e.' (Men would tell me: 'Be with me instead. I am better than that [tomboy]. What do you like about her anyway? She doesn't even have a penis.')

Men saw Khaye as a woman who should rightfully be with a man, and not with a tomboy. This reflected a social construction that sexual relations between two women cannot possibly be satisfying.

In her own family, Khaye also experienced prejudice towards having a *tomboy* partner. But the capacity of Khaye's partner to fulfill the expected masculine role of providing for the family enabled them to gain acceptance:

Kasi dati 'di siya tanggap ng nanay ko, pero nung naano niya na masipag naman, syempre nakakatulong naman, mauutusan, naano rin niya, na mapapakinabangan din naman. 'Di naman porket tomboy wala nang pakinabang, hindi magtatrabaho. Kasi 'yung iba diyang: 'tomboy, walang mahahanap na trabaho 'yan, kasi tomboy 'yan. (Before, my mother could not accept her, but when she saw that my partner is hardworking, helpful, and cooperative, she realized, that she can be useful. Just because she's a tomboy doesn't mean she's useless, or that she will not work. Because some people here say: 'a tomboy will not be able to get a job, because she's a tomboy.')

Given her family's financial situation, Khaye's mother was especially critical of her relationship with a *tomboy*. She, like other community members, considered *tomboys* less capable of getting a stable job compared to heterosexual men. But as the excerpt illustrates, Khaye's relationship with a *tomboy* was accepted after her *tomboy* partner demonstrated her capacity to help.

Khaye's narrative shows the distinctiveness of the experience of discrimination for an urban poor feminine lesbian woman who has a relationship with a *tomboy*. From being negatively perceived as a poor woman who only relates with men for money, to an informal settler who chooses to lower her social status by having relations with a *tomboy*, to being a disgrace and debasement for having sexual relations with a *tomboy*, Khaye would experience blatant discrimination in the form of public humiliation and sexual harassment. She would experience scorn from others and the lack of acceptance from her own family. Khaye's story shows the complexity of the local construction of gender and sexuality in an urban poor context and how this creates social inequality and the personal experience of prejudice.

DISCUSSION

The narratives of Kulet, DD, Julie, and Khaye present the unique dynamics of heterosexism in the Philippines as viewed from a gendered and heteronormative lens. The *bakla* and *tomboy* emerge as unique social identities that fuse gender, sexuality, and class making the meaning and experience of discrimination distinct from the prejudice directed to lesbian and gay identities. The debasement, degradation, and disgrace invoked in the *tomboy* and *bakla* make these identities perverted. But there is no word to construct such an "-ism". These classed, gendered, and sexual identities experienced as a singular identity are judged as morally offensive and equated to debauchery.

For the masculine gay man or bisexual, passing as heterosexual through his masculine gender performance becomes a way to avoid discrimination in the community. The ability to earn and consequently to provide becomes a way to gain acceptance from family. For the feminine lesbian woman or *girl*, having a relationship with a *tomboy*

makes her status even lower, as she is seen as degrading herself further. We also saw in these case narratives the strong adherence to heteronormative gender expectations, the valuing of the provider role, and the pressure to marry a man who will provide. These points, along with the limitations of the study, are discussed below.

The Provider, Heteronormativity, and Acceptance

In an urban poor context, a gay man's or lesbian woman's sexual orientation is accepted or tolerated by the family if they are able to support the family's financial needs. This support not only comes in the form of money, as with the case of DD and Kulet, but may also be through being useful in the home, as with the case of Khaye's *tomboy* partner. The opposite is true when one is unable to contribute financially, as in the case of Julie. This finding supports past studies that have shown how the financial support Filipino urban poor LGBT individuals give their families acts as a type of 'currency to buy acceptance' (Thoreson, 2011).

The importance of the provider role in an urban poor context is made evident in the strong heteronormative expectation to marry. Lesbian and gay relationships are understood from heteronormative standards with the male/masculine to act as provider and the female/feminine to marry a man who will act as provider. In the context of poverty, marriage becomes a means for social and economic mobility. Julie's case is most complex as she is expected to marry as female but also expected to provide as *tomboy*. The strong pressure to marry for upward mobility has even pushed Julie to deny her sexuality.

Bakla and Tomboy as Unique Isms

The *tomboy* and *bakla* are unique to the Philippine cultural context as these identities do not refer to a single social identity. The *tomboy* is a low-income masculine lesbian woman while the *bakla* is a low-income feminine gay man. Gender, sexuality, and class are fused as a single identity. Hence, the experience of discrimination is also unitary as their non-normative gender expression also signifies their non-normative sexuality in the context of the urban poor. The

heterosexism of the West does not correspond with the gendered and classed construction of heterosexism in this context.

The unique local construction of the *bakla* and *tomboy* make the experiences of discrimination blatant for DD and Julie. They constantly experience name-calling, gossip, and public ridicule triggered by their non-normative gender expression. Their gender performance makes the *bakla* and *tomboy* visible; hence, they are unable to escape the negative evaluation and discrimination from others. Similar to past studies, non-normative gender expression is central to the social construction of *bakla* and *tomboy* (Josef, 1997, 1999; Tan, 1995, 1998) which makes them particularly vulnerable to violence (Thoreson, 2011). This signifies how the *bakla* and *tomboy* identities cannot be equated with the lesbian and gay identities of the West. This also implies that lesbian and gay identities in a middle-class or upper-class context will be constructed differently.

Not only is the social construction of the *bakla* and *tomboy* negative, it is degrading and demeaning. To be *bakla* or *tomboy* is to be indecent and immoral. The reference to “*baboy*” (dirty like a pig) reflects the gravity of the offense equated to being *tomboy* and *bakla*. At the minimum, a relationship with a *bakla* or *tomboy* is not taken seriously. Similar to Canoy (2015), having relations with a *bakla* is seen as a monetary transaction, with the *bakla* paying for intimacy. A relationship with a *tomboy*, on the other hand, is seen as a form of degradation.

Invisibilized Identities

The *bakla* and *tomboy* are the dominant constructions of LGBT identities in the Philippines (Tan, 1995). Experiences of discrimination arise from the societal view that people must conform to the heteronormative standard of being *lalaki* and *babae*, else they be labeled as non-normative (i.e., *bakla* or *tomboy*). The *lalaki* is a heterosexual masculine man while the *babae* is a heterosexual feminine woman. This gender system can obscure the identity and the discrimination experienced by lesbian women and gay men who are not *bakla* or *tomboy*. Kulet as bisexual passes as heterosexual and consequently avoids discrimination. At the same time, his masculine

gender performance is perceived as inauthentic as a gay man must be *bakla*. Khaye as *girl* experiences sexual harassment directed to heterosexual women. Her identity label *girl* signifies the invisibility of the feminine lesbian woman in the context of the urban poor. Lesbian and gay relationships are likewise invisibilized as heteronormative norms are imposed on same-sex relationships. Relationships between two men and two women are rendered invisible (and unreal). And those that are visible must be enacted according to gender roles. This highlights the need to understand the construction of Filipino lesbian and gay relationships in the context of urban poverty.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has clear limitations in terms of design and methodology. The nature of case narratives allowed for an illustrative look of the participants' experiences of discrimination in the context of poverty. However, the limited number of participants does not fully reflect nor represent the complex experience of discrimination among Filipino urban poor LGB. We also recognize that the exploratory nature of the study also limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the narratives.

There are several suggested means to address these concerns in future research. First, engaging a broader number of participants can help create a clearer picture for each identified intersection. Future research can also include LGBT persons from other socioeconomic strata, looking at how their social status shapes their experience and capacity to address forms of discrimination. Lastly, including other markers of difference such as religion and location (e.g. urban and rural) can be considered to further enrich the analysis. Future research inquiry can also focus in unpacking gender labels, particularly those who do not identify as *bakla* or *tomboy*.

Summary

This study has illustrated how the intersection of gender, sexuality, and class shapes the experiences of discrimination of the *bakla*, *tomboy*, bisexual, and *girl*. It highlights unique themes such as providing for the family to gain acceptance, heteronormativity as tied to social and

economic mobility; the *bakla* and *tomboy* as simultaneously classed, gendered, and sexualized identities, as taking on a unique “-ism” that equates these identities as forms of moral degradation; and the invisibilized identities of lesbian women and gay men who conform to normative gender expressions. Intersectionality as a lens has shown the complexity of the experience and the distinctiveness of the realities of urban poor Filipino lesbian women and gay men.

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