

## MESSAGE ATTENDANTS: MAINSTREAM OR DEVIANT?

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When I was first asked to speak about some of the research I had done on the women workers in Manila's ubiquitous massage clinics, I was told that my subject would fall under the loose classification of "deviant behavior." This rather startled me: I had never considered any of the young women I had interviewed and observed for so long as "deviants." Nevertheless, I decided it might be worthwhile to approach my subject from this very viewpoint — that is to say, by asking whether in fact it is reasonable to think of these workers as deviants. So that is the task I will take.

Since I am not a sociologist by profession, I do not know what is the official definition of "deviance," if there is one I would suppose, however, that a "deviant" is simply one whose values, interests, orientations, patterns of thought, or outward modes of behavior, are greatly at variance with those of the majority. Thus because our society is at least outwardly committed to maintaining a strong sense of sexual polarity, with women who are very feminine and men who are "tunay na lalaki," we consider homosexuals "deviant." In places where the sexual polarity has been minimized or obscured, homosexuality is tolerated more easily. That is to say, things are relative.

And since one can deviate in as many ways as most of us conform, the particular individual may show some deviance and some conformity. The thief, for instance, apparently refuses to recognize what is in this society the almost sacred right of private ownership. Yet he clearly shares the social value bestowed on *money* — he's not some kind of crazy idealist who doesn't even want to get rich. And *that* is to say, things are not absolute.

I am not sure, though, whether any group of workers should be considered "deviant" simply because of the particular job they hold. Job choosing is, after all, never an absolutely free choice, although it is freer at the top of the economic scale than it is at the bottom. The rich and the educated can choose jobs on the basis of interest, professional status, working conditions, etc. But as we go down the economic scale, economic considerations become more and more compelling. The scions of really rich families can afford to be artists, for instance, and "express themselves," whether or not the job pays: someone else takes care of the bills. Similarly, people with enough formal education to get teaching jobs in the better-paying schools can indulge in a sort of intellectual snobbery and "above-it-all" attitude, or they can feel morally superior to, say, businessmen: these teachers may not earn so much as businessmen, but they don't starve either. The lower level civil service eligible can't be quite so choosy; he may take a hot, crowded office, miles from his home, for a few pesos more than the salary offered near by. Lower still are day laborers who will take any job, whether or not it offends their self-respect. The prostitute, of course, trades off everything else — status, moral and religious sanctions, pleasant working conditions, etc. — for the money she can earn.

So it's all a matter of balance. People take what they can get, and weigh the shortcomings of any job against its advantages. And for the massage attendant, there are, doubtless, advantages. She works all day in a nice, cool, dark, air-conditioned place, in a relatively calm atmosphere and even "live-in."

But on the surface at least, the disadvantages seem to carry more weight. The work is hard. The beds the customers lie on are low, so that the attendants have to work in a stooped-over position, and they have to apply a certain amount of force to give a good massage. Consequently, their backs, arms, hands, and even legs, are tired after a one hour massage. A popular attendant may do seven or eight massages in one day. In addition to this purely physical strain, many of the women said that they also found it tiring to remain constantly on the alert against customers' advances. (Rarely are these really welcomed.)

Also the fact that part of the job is to entertain the customer, to be charming and feminine, interested and supportive, is an added strain. Worker relations are also upset by the fact that the work is competitive with the favor of men being all important. Customers enjoy having regular attendants, but sometimes they get tired of one and choose another, or the regular is busy and the substitute comes to be preferred, and in either case a quarrel will follow. It really is difficult for women in such a situation to develop friendships, and for the most part they do not.

The biggest disadvantage of massage as a career, however, must be stated in terms of "morality" or "cultural acceptance." The idea of a single young woman massaging nude men definitely goes against the cultural grain in a society that has been socialized in a way that is particularly repressive of sexual freedom. It is no doubt this moral objection that leads some of us to call massage attendants "deviants." This moral attitude, however, gets to be a double disadvantage to the women engaged in this particular profession. First of all the women are generally required to do some things that they do not want to do, and in doing these things, they risk losing their own self-respect. Second, they must put up with the low regard that the rest of the society has for them, and with the inevitable customer advances that come because of this low regard.

Girls who are new on the job are usually quite timid and shy, conscious of the fact that the men they are massaging are nude, and that

in most places they must massage penises. Most of the girls say they were very frightened at first; one said she cried. Some of the provincianas simply can't take it, and leave after two or three days. But the girls do offer each other encouragement, and the receptionist usually tries to make sure that the first few customers are people she knows will not give the girl trouble.

But they learn soon — if they do not know before they are hired — that many customers expect "extra services" like "sensation" or "lollipop." (Sensation, in fact, is standard procedure in most places, although the girl will usually ask the customer if he wants it.) They also learn that giving these services brings bigger tips. Most of the girls say they do not engage in sexual intercourse in the massage cubicles, and the managers say they fire girls caught in such activities. But customers are unanimous in saying it does happen, although other forms of sexual activity probably are engaged in more often.

This is not to say that the massage business is a front for prostitution. Girls are not hired specifically for sexual activity, and the manager does not get a cut of any extra money that a girl may make in this way. (Occasionally a manager may make a deal with two or three girls whereby he sends them customers who are interested in specified services, at specific prices. In such a case, the manager gets a cut, but this is rare.) Most of the activity that goes on, then, is free-lance and as a matter of fact not very business-like. Only rarely does a girl specify the finances involved in advance; usually it is just a little "trying to make the customer happy" and hoping for a bigger tip. If the man is young and attractive, the attendant may not care whether she makes any extra money.

Although these women were all pleasant during interviews, and many of them were willing to talk about themselves, there is a deep streak of defensiveness in them. They know that many people think they are really prostitutes, and that most wives do not like their husbands to go for massages. Many feel that even the customers look down on them. A pretty, charming, young woman said that some

of her younger customers, rich teenagers from Manila's "better families," look at her with such scorn that she feels "very small."

These women justify their work in a variety of ways, usually saying that their detractors are "ignorant." Most deny that they themselves engage in sexual activity, but none deny that others do. They all agree that "it's up to the attendant." And there are in fact some attendants — a physical therapist, for instance — who have gained a good solid reputation and a following for nothing but massage. At any rate, most feel that even if they give "sensation," it is an honest deal for money which they need and part of the job. Thus if anyone is immoral, it is the customer, who comes there explicitly for illicit activity. Simone de Beauvoir (1952) says that prostitutes share this feeling that business is business and outside the realm of morality; thus the financial aspect of the deal purifies it.

And yet few have enough confidence in their trade to tell their families about it. Many who are the sole support of their families have led their parents to believe that they are secretaries. Some have told brothers, sisters, and boyfriends. One young woman said her family knew, but her boyfriend, who was then abroad, did not know and will never be told. This woman sees the job as temporary to help put herself through school; she plans to be out of it by the time her boyfriend returns. Two attendants whose mothers are provincial teachers live in fear that their communities find out and their mothers' reputations shattered.

The very helpful supervisor of the Ginza, who acts as "mother confessor" to her workers, says that the "personal problem" that crops up most often is the hysterics which come when the families find out where their daughters work. This is solved at the Ginza by inviting the parents in to look around the place, and perhaps to have a massage (presumably without "sensation") to allay their fears. The supervisor herself seems to have complete confidence in the respectability of the enterprise, and she is a convincing spokeswoman. Yet the attendants remain apologetic about their work.

Of course it is the money that draws women into this job. Attendants who were asked how they felt about their job invariably said either "I don't like it but I need the money" or "I like it; it pays well." Attendants seem to average between six and seven hundred pesos a month, although two difficulties come up when one tries to say anything more precise; both the number of customers and the size of tips seem to be grossly overestimated by the management and somewhat underestimated by the attendants. The attendant gets either ₱3 or ₱3.50 from the management for each service, depending on whether she has to pay for the oil and lotion herself. (Rates may have gone up in the last year or so, along with general inflation, and with increases in what the customer pays.) The attendant may have only two or three customers a day or she may on occasion have seven or eight. The old Maharlika, one of the few establishments in which records of how many customers each attendant had were kept, considered a monthly average of 3.5 customers a day adequate. A woman with a much higher average would be "promoted:" that is, moved to the V.I.P. section where the service is more private, the commission ₱6, and tips substantially bigger. An attendant whose monthly average was below 3.5 was dismissed from Maharlika. None of the other establishments, however, dismiss workers for lack of customers; they are just supposed to "take the hint" and leave quietly when they fail to attract customers. But some no doubt continue to "hang on" with as few as two customers a day.

Tips are even harder to estimate accurately. The estimates of the managers seem to be wildly inflated (₱20-₱50) and the attendants are very reluctant to talk about the matter at all. Some of the better workers in the better places occasionally receive substantial tips from Manila's elite: one thousand pesos, or an expensive piece of jewelry. But gifts such as these naturally come only from regular customers who feel that they are favored, and who have some special relationship with the attendant. Attendants are usually instructed not to tell each other about the tips they receive and they always hedged at the question during interviews when

other workers were present. One customer said it would be insane to tip more than ₱5 for a ₱15 service, another thinks the average tip is from ₱3 to ₱5. This was confirmed by one attendant who *would* talk, and who added: "May araw na wala, may araw na malaki. Hindi araw-araw pasko."

If an attendant averages four customers a day and is paid ₱3 for each by the management and gets another ₱3 from each in tips, she will make ₱24 a day. If she works six days a week, or twenty-five days a month, her monthly income will be approximately ₱600. This is probably the minimal amount that an attendant would earn. She does not have to spend as much on herself in terms of clothing and hair-styling as a night club hostess does, but she does spend money on uniforms. She has free lodging if she "lives in," but that means she must buy all her meals from neighboring food stalls, and she probably spends at least ₱300 in this way.

These salaries are rather big for unskilled workers — although they can hardly be considered *living* wages — but they are subject to two further limitations. First, like all casual workers, these women earn nothing when they don't work. It is the same old problem of the *cargadores* and the *batilyos*: no work, no money, and there is often not enough work to go around. At the moment this is not too great a problem in massage: it is 1976 and the massage boom is only three years old. It may last forever, or it may be a fad. I have a feeling it is already wearing thin, but this is pure speculation.

There is also the feel that massage attendants have a very short working life. By the time they are thirty, they are has-beens, without retirement benefits. So they are pretty much in the position of movie stars and models, who have to "make hay while the sun shines," and when considered in these terms, their pay is clearly inadequate.

These women workers must also put up with all the legal disadvantages of casual laborers, such as long, unrestricted working hours and a complete lack of employee benefits.

In most places the attendants are expected to be present for twelve hours a day. If they come late or are habitually absent, they may lose their jobs, even though they are not paid by the hour but by the "service." They may sit idly for several hours each day, during which time they earn nothing.

Until recently none of these attendants were covered by SSS, on the grounds that they, like their sisters in nightclubs, were not actually employees, but rather women who were plying their own trade in someone else's building. Even now the workers in many places are not covered by SSS, and the likelihood of coverage goes down with the respectability of the establishment.

As long as these women did not have the legal status of employees, nothing in *The Woman and Child Labor Law* (R.A. No. 679, amended by R.A. No. 1131 and 6237) applied to them: they were not exempted from night work, and they had no maternity benefits. Neither could they guard themselves against being discharged for marriage, pregnancy, or demanding fair treatment.

However on March 14, 1973, with the promulgation of Presidential Decree 148, *The Woman and Child Labor Law* was extended to cover these women specifically:

#### Section 3: Additional Coverage

Any woman who is permitted or suffered to work with or without compensation in any night clubs, cocktail lounges, bars, massage clinics, or in any similar places, shall be considered as employees of such establishments for purposes of this and other existing labor and social legislation.

The intent of the law is clear: these women are employees and therefore must be given all the benefits stipulated under law, including maternity leaves, SSS coverage, and exemption from night work. And since the decree was promulgated several years ago, sporadic newspaper articles have announced that this is indeed the case, that the women are now treated as employees under the law, and that their problems are over.

And yet there has been at least one court case since then (Capitol Bar and Night Club

Association, Inc. vs. The Secretary of Labor, January 31, 1974) in which a decision was handed down in support of the status quo. That is to say, the Court of Appeals decided that night club hostesses are *not* employees, despite the absolute clarity of the Presidential Decree, and that they therefore do not have employee rights. The court also pointed out that in the "compassionate New Society," which aims at full employment, it would be cruel to restrict women to working only in the non-lucrative hours of the early evening. Besides, says the decision, these women are bringing a lot of tourists into the country.<sup>1</sup>

This case involves hostesses instead of message attendants, but it does bring into question just how much difference the Presidential Decree really made. In fact, women workers in message clinics are still being deprived of their rights: they work after 10:00 o'clock at night, many of them are not covered by SSS, and none of them receive either sick pay or paid maternity leaves. Supervisors explain that this is simply because the girls are paid on a commission basis, and while they are given leave both for sickness (usually V.D.) and maternity (beyond the sixth month), they cannot earn commissions if they don't work. But Section 8 (a) of the law provides that every woman be given six weeks maternity leave "with full pay based on her regular or average weekly wages."

Officials of the Labor Department apologetically explain that there has been a moratorium on inspection lately by order of the government, and at any rate only twenty five message clinics are registered with the Department of Labor, so it is still absolutely impossible to enforce the law or the Presidential Decree.

Who are the women who take on these jobs? In the occasional news articles written about them, they emerge as rather shadowy figures — as women with secret lives, women who go to school in the daytime and mix with other students as if they were "normal," or women who support two or three illegitimate children. They are a difficult group to generalize about, first because they are not a homogeneous group, any more than message clinics

are all alike in "class." Second, because of status considerations we have already discussed, attendants sometimes feel defensive, especially about their personal lives. I have two main sources of information about these women: one, I have a group of questionnaires answered by one hundred message workers in various clinics in Manila, Quezon City, and Makati. I also have notes on seventeen unstructured, in-depth interviews with message attendants, ex-attendants, receptionists, managers, etc., and less extensive notes on fifty or so briefer interviews carried out in the course of the research. I personally put more faith in what I learned from the interviews than in the information yielded by the questionnaires, for reasons which I am sure are all too familiar to sociologists.

First of all, message attendants are young. The median age of the sample that answered the questionnaire was 23. The average was 23-1/2. A group of message clinic operators who met with representatives from the Department of Labor in 1974 reported that the age of attendants ranged from 20 to 40,<sup>2</sup> and literally this is true: the oldest attendant in the Manila area at that time, registered at the Quezon City License Bureau as being 39 years old, was working at the Crown. But the managers say they prefer to hire women in their early twenties, and would never hire anyone over thirty. The extremely practical business manager of the old Maharlika tried to institute a policy of firing women automatically on their 30th birthdays, "like the airlines do," but the owner wisely talked him out of the idea. However, he says the company policy of dismissing attendants who fall below the monthly average of 3.5 customers daily accomplishes the same purpose!

Marital status is somewhat more difficult to determine. Attendants may tell customers that they are separated and supporting several children to get bigger tips. Or they may say that they are single for the same reason. In interviews, some admitted that their marital status depends as much on who is asking as on the facts. But none of them ever say they are married and living with their husbands, even if that is the case.

Of the 100 attendants who answered the questionnaire, 50 were single, 23 were married, 8 were widowed, and 19 were separated. Census figures for the total female work force show only 8.8 percent widowed and separated combined, 43.8 percent single, and 47.4 percent married. Some of the ways in which the attendants' pattern differs from the over-all pattern are due to the nature of the job: first, since attendants must be young, they are somewhat less likely to be married than the older people in the work force. Second, men do not usually want their "private property" to become public, and so few husbands would allow their wives to seek such employment. Thus the percentage of married attendants is low.

Still, the percentage of attendants who are separated or widowed is surprisingly high in relation to the figures for the total work force. Perhaps there are so many attendants in this category simply because there are so few married women, for the reasons indicated above, and because the job is one that might prove extra distasteful to single, virginal young women.

An even more startling difference from the general pattern is to be found in the number of attendants who claim to be heads of families. The figure for the over-all female work force is 9 percent which gives a certain credence to the common belief that women do not really need jobs, or that they are frequently willing to work for very low wages, because their earnings are only supplementary to the family income. But of the 100 massage attendants questioned, 42 claimed to be the heads of families, supporting from two to 12 people.

One interesting bit of information on family status emerged quite unexpectedly. The attendants were not asked whether their parents were still living, but they were asked their parents' occupations, and a large number responded by saying they were dead: 17 reported that their fathers were dead, five said that their mothers were dead, and five who said that both parents were deceased. Since no specific question was asked about this matter, these statistics should

not be taken as complete. But it may be that young women from families where one or both of the parents are deceased, as well as from marriages of their own that have been broken, are more likely to enter such jobs. Sociologists do tell us that it is women from unstable or broken families who are most likely to enter fringe occupations like prostitution.

At any rate, massage attendants are generally an impressive group. They are much simpler than their sisters who work as night-club hostesses: they wear uniforms, and very little make-up, so that they are fresh-faced and quite charming. They are friendly, extremely poised, and completely at ease in talking to customers or even researchers of either sex. They may giggle and joke a bit with male customers, but their conversational ability is certainly not limited to this sort of banter. Many of them could pass for U.P. students.

These women seem to come from solid middle class families: they are the daughters of teachers, soldiers, policemen, dressmakers, government clerks, electricians. Most of their parents have some education; the 100 questionnaires yielded 19 fathers and 19 mothers who had finished high school and 19 more fathers and 20 more mothers who had gone on to finish college.

The attendants themselves show an even higher level of education, with 47 high school graduates, 16 college graduates, 32 some college, and only five some elementary. Of the 32 who had some college education, 16 were "in college" at the time of the survey. But although public opinion has it that many attendants are students, it seems more likely that they are temporary college drop-outs, who may never go back. Eight of those who said they were "still studying" were in fact not enrolled for that semester. Work in a massage clinic would be lucrative for a student, but it would also be extremely taxing: a twelve hour work day, from noon to midnight, is difficult to combine with attending classes and studying.

Another way of suggesting the social status of these women is by mentioning other types of jobs they have had. Of the 100 attendants

who answered questionnaires, 49 either said they had never had another job, or did not answer the question on former jobs. But of the 41 who had worked before, a surprising number were involved in "white collar" jobs: seven had been secretaries, six receptionists, six clerks, four cashiers, three office workers, and one Xerox-machine operator. There were also five beauticians, five salesgirls, four factory workers, three promo-girls, two dressmakers, one waitress, and one maid.

So far I have spoken about the job of the massage attendant and the women who do the job. On the basis of this information, one may perhaps wonder *why* these generally impressive women work at this generally degrading job. It does not add up. This is because we have not yet seen the massage phenomenon against the background of the society — specifically the economic society — in which it exists. In writing about prostitution, Simone de Beauvoir (1952) points out that the question is not *why* women enter such a profession, but *why not*:

The truth is that in a world where misery and unemployment prevail, there will be people to enter any profession that is open; as long as a police force and prostitution exist, there will be policemen and prostitutes, more especially as these occupations pay better than many others. It is pure hypocrisy to wonder at the supply that masculine demand stimulates; that is simply the action of an elementary and universal economic process.

All societies (with one or two notable exceptions in modern times) have prostitutes. But not all societies have massage attendants, so we might ask why we do. We can only speculate; no survey can prove anything in this area. But two rather general ideas come to my mind, and I would like to share them with you. First, it is clear that massage can only exist in a very unequal economic situation in which some people can afford to throw away more on entertainment or leisure of the sort than other people earn. Most customers, say receptionists, are "regulars" who come three or four times a week. If they spend no more than ₱20 each time, which is highly unlikely anyway, they put down ₱320 a month for massage — roughly the total pay of

the minimum wage worker. While much of the population can hardly scrape together enough money for rice, the elite are spending thousands on this non-essential service. An estimated ₱80,000 a day, or nearly two and one half million pesos a month is spent in massage clinics. (This was estimated by figuring that there are at least 700 massage cubicles in the country, that each services 8 customers a day, and that each customer pays ₱15.)

The second tendency of the economy that is typified by the massage boom is that towards conspicuous consumption and lack of social unity which is said to stem from the colonial situation. Renato Constantino (1968) says it best when he describes the Philippines as a "Society Without Purpose".

What are we today? We are a nation of consumers; we are a people whose sense of purpose has been distorted by the dream of acquiring more and more of the "goodies" of life, of owning most of the things that proliferate in the world of commodities. We are a people who have been made to believe that these are the real goals of life and we therefore devote all our energies to the acquisition of more consumer goods. This has led us to pursue our lives in an individualistic manner without taking into consideration the good of the whole. These material goals induce a competitive struggle for status, for new forms of proprietorship, and for purely sensual pleasures . . .

Where does our surplus go? It is absorbed by wasteful consumption and non-productive investment, by foreign remittances, and by government misspending. In the realm of consumption we find ubiquitous evidences of luxurious tastes. Of course this mode of consumption is prevalent only among a limited class although members of the low-income group participate once in a while in these spending orgies . . . In fact, what is the bulk of our economic activity? The sales effort and catering enterprises that sell entertainment and other forms of luxury whose main market is the foreign community and the wealthy among us. To continue this form of enterprise is to delude ourselves and to sidetrack our own development. Because they are the frills of a developed society these products may be the goals of the future; they certainly should not be the obsession of the present.

Constantino wrote these words in 1968, but the trends seem to be continuing. We are

making economic progress, yes — great strides forward — but we seem to be striding in a very strange direction, and one which I feel is particularly harmful to the interests of the women of this country. Our development has been highlighted by, for instance, the drive to attract tourists, using massage attendants and night-club hostesses as come-ons. The circus to end all circuses, at least before we outdid even ourselves in the “Thrilla in Manila,” was the Miss Universe contest. The most popular form of night-club act these days seems to consist of young women parading about in their sleeping clothes. Thus our present socioeconomic direction seems to be not only elitist, but sexist as well.

So one of the basic “givens” that the individual choosing a job must take into consideration is this: our society is willing to pay relatively high salaries to young women who engage in totally unproductive labor and function as sex symbols and ego builders for the elite. We are willing to pay our teachers, nurses, and secretaries considerably less for their labor, and yet they have put large amounts of time, effort and money into training for their jobs. There is no other job available to the high school graduate that will pay even half of what a massage attendant earns. Maids earn ₱60 a month, factory workers and bus conductresses about ₱300, sales ladies and waitresses ₱8 a day, or ₱240 a month, receptionists, clerks, promogirls, etc. about ₱350. We put our money where our values are.

So we go back to the problem of whether the women who work in massage clinics are deviants. I hope by this time the answer to the question is obvious. *Customers* may be deviant, or perhaps the whole society is deviant,

but the women involved are making a most rational adjustment to the circumstances they find themselves in. They live in a society in which money-making is valued above all else, and in which women can best make money by functioning as sex objects. When we look askance at them for moral reasons, we are being hypocrites; they are actually in the mainstream of our present society.

### Notes

At the time she read this paper Susan Evangelista was with the Department of English, Ateneo de Manila University.

1. Decision handed down by the Court of Appeals, Special Division of Five Justices, in *Capital Bar and Night-Club Association, Inc. vs. The Secretary of Labor*, January 31, 1974.

2. See *Summary of Information on Massage Clinics*, Report to the Director, Bureau of Women and Minors, March 1974.

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