

## **“The Condition of the Post-Colonial Philippine Woman in Exercising Free Will”**

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### ***I. INTRODUCTION***

Free will is defined in many ways by various philosophers and individuals. However, a standard definition—which shall also be the definition followed by this paper—is that it is the ability to decide between various options without being forced and without any external influence.<sup>1</sup> There are multiple discourses or beliefs concerning free will, and one of these is that each person’s ability to exercise their free will differs from one another. This paper agrees with this belief and shall provide support to this mainly by looking into the women of post-colonial societies such as the Philippines. It can be said that the exercise of free will of the women of post-colonial Philippines is constricted, and this is because of the elements introduced by the colonial forces from the past. Connected with this is Edward Said’s claim that “post-colonial” is not a “post”; despite colonialism’s formal end, it continues to react with the former colony.<sup>2</sup>

There are thinkers who share the same belief that each person’s exercise of free will is different from one another, even precisely when it comes to women in post-colonial contexts. Among these thinkers are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar and feminist critic, and Frantz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean psychoanalyst and political philosopher. Spivak, mainly in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, highlights that Western impositions and the legacy of colonialism continue to shape how women of post-colonial societies exercise their free will and autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy O’Connor and Christopher Franklin, “Free Will,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, November 3, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/>.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 27 (1988): 42–58, <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf>

Meanwhile, Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, although not directly pertaining to women, states that the colonized subject internalizes the changes brought by colonizers and that this persists until the post-colonial society, thus limiting the said society's ability to exercise their free will.<sup>4</sup>

## ***II. THE COLONIAL LEGACY AND THE FREE WILL OF POST-COLONIAL PHILIPPINE WOMEN***

It can be realized in the history of the Philippines that during the stay of colonial forces in the said country, various implementations were placed. Changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes were prevalent. Filipino citizens during this time were forced to follow the demands of their colonial masters, and because of these, the exercise of free will of the natives became *limited*. Here, the constriction or limit in the exercise of free will is the inverse of “fully exercising free will” —by fully, meaning, there is a highlight in the necessity of demonstrating a thorough commitment to making intended, informed, and independent decisions and deeds that are authentic to oneself. As the exercise of free will is limited, then those mentioned are absent.

As the Japanese forces left the Philippines and America finally granted the Philippines independence, the newly free nation continued to try to build but also reclaim its own faithful identity gradually. Some of the old customs and beliefs ushered in by the foreign occupants were replaced with what was thought or hoped to be more “Filipino.” However, there are still these lasting changes or implementations—concepts, ideals, and systems—brought about by the foreign occupation in the country. A part of the cluster of these implementations is the introduction of new beliefs and policies, and the Philippines' colonial legacy, which is defined as

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<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; repr., London: Pluto Press, 1986),  
[https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon\\_Frantz\\_Black\\_Skin\\_White\\_Masks\\_1986.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon_Frantz_Black_Skin_White_Masks_1986.pdf).

the long-lasting effects of colonialism on the former colony, can be traced back to these new beliefs and policies introduced during the period when the country was colonized. The things introduced during such era continue to exist even in the modern times and also lead to the constriction in the exercise of free will, *especially among women today*. Thus, it could be said that the colonial legacy in the Philippines continues to contribute to the constriction in the exercise of free will, especially among women of the post-colonial Philippines. These have shaped and continue to shape the numerous lives of Filipinos in the past and present.

### ***A. The Introduction of New Beliefs***

During the Spanish Colonization of the Philippines that started in 1565 and lasted until 1898, the introduction of new beliefs was primarily pushed by the Catholic Church, which not only had a significant role in the religious and political sectors of the Philippines during such time but also had control in shaping the sociocultural sector of the country.<sup>5</sup> The Church led teachings that brought and imposed a set of gender roles in society that proved to be starkly different from the ones the natives were accustomed to.

During the pre-colonial period of the Philippines, females were free to do and think as they pleased; if they wanted to meaningfully contribute more to society, they could do so. An example of this is the *Babaylan* or *Catalonan*, an influential position held by women during the pre-colonial days where they served as priestesses, healers, and even leaders in the spiritual and cultural lives of the people then.<sup>6</sup> This system changed when the archipelago became subjected to

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<sup>5</sup> “Catholicism in the Philippines: History, Tradition, and Influence,” Secret PH Philippines Tourism, April 27, 2023, <https://secret-ph.com/catholicism-in-the-philippines-history-tradition-and-influence>.

<sup>6</sup> Ana Maria Theresa Labrador, “Babaylan in Philippine Communities: Liminality, Myth and Inspiration,” in *Animism in the Arts of Southeast Asia*, ed. Victoria Scott (SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, 2020).

colonization and when the colonizers provided the citizens with a new view towards the roles of women. Women were no longer allowed to take on what could be referred to as “serious jobs,” which included positions in the government and those in fields such as medicine, business, and higher education. They were instead made to stay at home and serve their family. In addition, with the help of the Church, the concept of the patriarchy—a cluster of social relations between men and women that manifests male dominance over women in the public and private spheres<sup>7</sup>—emerged and became prevalent. Essentially, the Catholic Church promoted male authority in religion, the family, and society.

Meanwhile, during the American colonization of the Philippines, although women were now allowed to pursue higher education and work during this time, only a small portion of the female population was able to do so due to the continuity of social prejudice towards women that drove most of them into traditional roles and the large number of conservative households that still believed and prioritized the education of boys and not girls.<sup>8</sup> It also cannot be said that the beliefs brought by the Spanish colonization regarding patriarchy dissolved when the United States of America and Japan took control of the Philippines. These ideas continued into the later colonial era since there were also individuals from the newer foreign forces who believed in them.

With all the colonial changes, gender oppression was enforced, prompting gender expectations and stereotypes to persist, even until the present day. This further becomes the case as the Philippines today remains a predominantly Catholic country, with a vast majority of Filipinos clinging to the beliefs introduced by the institution many years ago.

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<sup>7</sup> Abeda Sultana, “Patriarchy and Women’s Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis,” *Arts Faculty Journal* 4 (December 13, 2012): 1–18.

<sup>8</sup> Xuan Hiep Tran et al., “WOMEN EDUCATION IN THE COLONIAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF THE PHILIPPINES,” *Psychology and Education Journal* 58, no. 1 (January 15, 2021): 5213–21, <https://doi.org/10.17762/pae.v58i1.2076>.

Gender stereotypes refer to the act of ascribing a specific characteristic or role to a person only because of and based on that person's gender. They become harmful when they limit one's capability to develop their abilities as well as create choices about their lives.<sup>9</sup> Due to such gender stereotypes in modern Philippine society, Filipino women find it challenging to fully exercise their free will. They find their exercise of free will constricted, and this can be seen in different phenomena, such as those happening in the workplace.

Women in post-colonial Philippines involuntarily meet fewer opportunities for career advancement due to gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes and biases keep companies from hiring women, and this is one of the reasons as to why the difference in the labor force participation rate between men and women in the Philippines is significant, with only 34.5% for women and 54.8% for men in 2020.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, gender stereotypes pose as obstacles to women from being promoted to top positions at work.<sup>11</sup> There are still many workplaces that hold a low view towards women, thus preferring to hire men instead. This discrimination women face in the workplace drives them to find other ways to earn the money they shall use in their everyday lives. Sometimes, due to the immense difficulty some of them face, they are forced to resort to entering jobs (e.g., jobs related to prostitution) they would not usually choose if they were presented with other opportunities. This instance depicts how the woman who enters this work finds her exercise of free will constricted, even if, for others, it may seem as if the woman exercised her free will fully. For some, it would be rather difficult to ignore the feeling that the

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Gender Stereotyping," UN Human Rights Office, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/gender-stereotyping>.

<sup>10</sup> "WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE: PAVING A BETTER LANDSCAPE IN THE LABOR FORCE," National Economic and Development Authority, March 31, 2023, <https://neda.gov.ph/women-in-the-workplace-paving-a-better-landscape-in-the-labor-force/>.

<sup>11</sup> Naznin Tabassum and Bhabani Shankar Nayak, "Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Women's Career Progressions from a Managerial Perspective," *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review* 10, no. 2 (February 10, 2021): 192–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277975220975513>.

woman was genuinely able to exercise her free will fully. After all, she had the chance to decide which course of action to take: to not have any source of income or to enter jobs related to prostitution for income. However, can the first option really be called an option? The first option would entail that the woman remains unemployed, continuing to face difficulty in being accepted in the workplace. This would be a challenging situation for the woman, particularly now that the day-to-day living expenses continue to rise. Meanwhile, selecting the second option entails receiving the money needed for such expenses, unlike the first option. So, even if it would appear like she absolutely, fully exercised her free will, this is not the case as she was forced to choose the second option, to partake in the mentioned job even if she would not have normally or truly wanted to.

In addition to these, the gender expectations that stemmed from colonial ideas continue to become more prominent in today's society, and such expectations once again constrict the exercise of the free will of post-colonial Philippines women. Other members of modern Philippine society still ensure—even demand—that the behavior of women today aligns with the colonial and patriarchal values from before. Women today are still expected to fit a certain picture of “femininity,” wherein they must be polite, modest, gentle, and the like.

Due to the continuous attempts of these members of society to control the behavior of women, women are forced to conform, further constraining the exercise of their free will. For example, instead of pursuing her dream or career, the woman is pressured to listen to society and take on the role of being a full-time homemaker. Most of the time, in this age, women are expected to set aside their aspirations in order to prioritize serving their husbands and families, just like how women were tasked to look after their families during the colonial era of the Philippines. Because of the pressure faced in regard to this, the woman reluctantly allows herself

to be guided by the dictations of society whenever she creates decisions and actions. Thus, she is no longer able to exercise her free will fully; the woman finds it even more challenging to break away from the commands of the people around her. Furthermore, due to fear of challenging the patriarchal norms, or the instilled mindset that their voices would not be heard, post-colonial women of the Philippines simply comply and keep their silence.

### ***B. The Introduction of New Policies***

Along with the introduction of new beliefs, the introduction of new policies also occurred during the colonial era of the Philippines. During the Spanish colonization, the Spanish Civil Code went into force and was extended to Spain's colonies: Puerto Rico, the Islands of Cuba, and the Philippines.<sup>12</sup> This Civil Code contained various laws and policies that were required to be followed by the people in the respective areas. Of course, this Civil Code carried new policies for the colonies, and these policies could be considered as having exhibited patriarchal values. Policies found in the Spanish Civil Code, such as those under *Section Fourth: Rights and Obligations Between Husband and Wife*, only allowed women to acquire property and enter contracts with the consent and power of their husbands.<sup>13</sup> It solely depended on the husband if the woman should be granted such privileges.

In modern-day Philippines, the Spanish Civil Code itself has already been replaced with a different code or set of laws.<sup>14</sup> However, even if this is the case, it can be realized that the laws

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<sup>12</sup> The Judicial Academy of the Philippines, "Seminar-Workshop on the Modernization of Private Law," Philippine Judicial Academy, 2023, <https://philja.judiciary.gov.ph/CALESA2023/resources.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Stevens Walton and Néstor Ponce de León, eds., *The Spanish Civil Code: In Force in Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines*, Internet Archive (1899; Havana: La Propaganda Literaria Printing House), accessed November 25, 2024, <https://archive.org/details/spanishcivilcode00spairich/page/n8/mode/1up>.

<sup>14</sup> Tamar Ezer et al., "Protecting Women's Human Rights: A Case Study in the Philippines," *Human Rights Brief* 18, no. 3 (2011),

created after the colonial era continue to be modeled after the laws bound to the Civil Code. Because of this, traces of the previous colonial power's ideals are found to be engraved in the country's new policies, leading to the continuity of the previous colonial master's influence on the nation's politics, as well as on the political representation of women, consequently continuing to reduce women's capacities. In addition, the new code, which replaced the Spanish Civil Code, failed to address anti-women bias in marriage and family relations. Due to this, women remain to be on an unequal status to men in this regard, with women still being denied equal property rights. Women's inaccessibility to owning properties for themselves makes it more challenging for them to completely attain economic independence and guaranteed stability, which could further result in the limitation in the exercise of their free will. This may force women to make decisions that do not align with their honest desires. An example of this circles back to the example from earlier, when women resort to taking up forms of work they would not choose if presented with other choices. Another instance is when women, in order to be "secure" in this time when living in the Philippines proves to be tougher due to heightened expenditures and demands, give in to entering relationships even if such an act is not really a part of their personal desires.

Women are also affected due to the mentioned policies and are still on an unequal status to men since they continue to be denied parental authority. This constricts the woman's exercise of free will on things related to making decisions for and raising her children. Furthermore, the enshrined attitudes and values of the Civil Code, such as that the woman or wife is subordinate to the man or husband, continue to linger in present Philippine society. This inevitably strengthens

gender disparities and limits women to freely express their thoughts and forge as well as act on their own choices.

Aside from what has been discussed, it is also noteworthy to graze upon other systems, such as capitalism, and how it has affected the exercise of free will of post-colonial Philippine women. The rise of capitalism, which was also brought by foreign forces, led to class division in Philippine society during the colonial era of the country.<sup>15</sup> This class division then led to the sexual division of labor, the gender subordination of women, and finally to the change in women's exercise of free will. Due to capitalism, women face a dilemma wherein, if they are able to secure professional work, they are still expected to juggle this along with household chores, while men are not. On the other side, women are also somehow expected to prioritize household work more, even if, in the eyes of a still large number of Filipino individuals, it is not as "important" as paid work. Here, even if the woman could achieve or become two things instead of one, a professional and a mother, she becomes forced to drop one for the other. The woman is torn and is coerced to pick a side even if she does not want to, exhibiting how her exercise of free will becomes constricted. In addition, one may realize that when taking all of what has been mentioned into consideration, from participating in her professional work and housework, women are considered overexploited as compared to men, who are "supposedly" the ones who shall earn and manage the family's finances.

The discourse of separation between the types of work stated illustrates a living social system tied with the sexual division of labor that prompts an assignment of specific tasks between men and women. This assignment about which work is more important and which of

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<sup>15</sup> Luz Lopez Rodriguez, "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination in the Philippines," *Review of Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (1990), <https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/rws/article/download/3248/3046/>.

these works are for men and women only drives inequality between men and women and affects women in their exercise of free will.

### ***III. POSSIBLE COUNTERARGUMENTS***

In connection to all of what has been stated, possible counterarguments may arise. One such thing is that people may inquire about women in higher positions in today's Philippines. Others may claim that due to their positions, these women are able to exercise their free will fully, without the constrictions brought about by colonial legacy. They may state that this situation goes against the belief that post-colonial Filipino women are affected in terms of their exercise of free will.

In response to this, it is important first to note that a number of women in high positions today were already provided with the power to fully exercise their free will and do the things they wish to do. Such power may have come from men themselves who have held such power for some time already, and this power or privilege was given by them to women, may it be due to familial ties, mutual friends, or other exclusive connections. However, there are instances wherein this is not always the case; these instances happen to be the exception rather than the rule. The mentioned power can come directly from the woman's hard work to gain that status as this is also highly possible. This is apparent in self-made Filipino women, such as the founder of National Bookstore, Maria Socorro "Nanay Coring" Ramos, and the founder and creative director of Zarah Juan Brand, Zarah Juan. These are only two of the other Filipino women who come from humble backgrounds, and as seen in them, the mentioned power clearly could come from the woman's own perseverance in order to be in such positions. Nevertheless, with the current situation in post-colonial Philippines regarding the treatment of women, the woman may

not have fully exercised their free will in the process of gaining such power. The woman may have been forced to steer towards a different direction or may have been forced to partake in something they would not have opted for, with many women in fame and money as primary examples of this situation occurring.

Now, with all that has been said, it could be noticed how it is the common Filipino woman—by common, meaning someone who does not necessarily hold a significant socio-economic status—who is the one that could be found to be mainly affected by the colonial legacy due to the lack of power or “higher ground,” which further limits their options and constricts their exercise of free will. The colonial legacy in this regard mainly exploits and negatively impacts women who remain poor, powerless, and disadvantaged in the present society.

However, there is a need to stress that women, even if already in positions of power, may find their exercise of free will constricted. Power does not always guarantee freedom to do what one pleases. Women may have been handed or have earned the position, but still, their effectiveness may be challenged due to structural and cultural barriers established initially by the colonial powers from the past that can be clearly seen in the current Philippine setting. Women in power continue to be looked down upon by individuals in society who could be in positions of power as well or not. An example of such is in the previous Philippine government elections, with then-presidential aspirant Leni Robredo, who was rather qualified for the position, being unable to perform her plans for the country if ever she became president due to the negative and false perception of people towards her and her gender. Another example could be seen in women in high positions in the business world, who still find it difficult to exercise their free will fully in terms of carrying out their authority and making changes or decisions for the business because of

the existing patriarchal attitudes. These events can align with existentialist philosopher and feminist Simone De Beauvoir's ideas in her work *The Second Sex*. In this work, she also goes into how there is a possibility that the woman may be in a high position and may attain or hold formal authority. However, she may lack actual agency because of gender bias and other systemic inequalities present in society.<sup>16</sup>

After everything that was laid out, it is evident that post-colonial Philippine women, regardless of their status in society, face instances wherein their exercise of free will becomes constricted due to what has been brought years back by the colonizers.

Apart from what has been raised, and although not necessarily a direct counterargument, there exists another issue in relation to this subject matter. It is interesting to note that there are thinkers or people and their works that undermine the idea that colonial legacies or a country's colonial past affects a woman's exercise of free will. For example, historian Niall Ferguson, in his works, one being *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, has downplayed the negative colonial legacy or the lasting negative influences of colonialism that continue to impact many post-colonial societies, as well as women, in their exercising of free will and rights.<sup>17</sup> The notion that colonialism did not leave a lasting impact on the previously colonized state and its members is inaccurate, and its inaccuracy could be proven or demonstrated by the situations explored above or throughout the entirety of this paper.

This downplaying of negative colonial legacies is a dangerous matter. These instances are somewhat alarming, as they tend to overlook what has made today's society the way it is. In addition, these instances may water down the clear issue that Philippine society faces today

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<sup>16</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (1949; repr., London: Letter from Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd., 1953), <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Simone-de-Beauvoir-The-Second-Sex-Jonathan-Cape-1956.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (Allen Lane, 2003).

regarding the exercise of free will by Filipino women, and watering down or disregarding the issue would only lead to its perpetuation.

#### ***IV. WOMEN'S EXERCISE OF FREE WILL IN POST-COLONIAL PHILIPPINES VS. IN OTHER COUNTRIES***

It can be said that there is a difference in the exercise of free will for post-colonial societies as compared to non-colonized societies. Echoing the earlier discussion, the exercise of free will of women from post-colonial societies such as the Philippines tends to be constricted as they experienced colonial subjugation that impacted their beliefs towards various things. Such beliefs and ideals can be far different from the ones they had prior to colonization, making it challenging for women to reconcile with them. Moreover, post-colonial societies often feel pressured to follow their colonizers—their ways and systems. It is fascinating how this is evident notably in the current Philippine context, as opposed to the other previously colonized societies, which have long abandoned or, at present, have reached extensive progress in abandoning the ideas brought by and the desire to follow the ways of their former colonial masters.

On the contrary, a significant number of women from other countries, especially non-colonized ones, do not have to grapple with different cultures; they are not confused about which one is to be followed. These individuals may experience fewer external pressures to follow the beliefs and systems of outside countries, allowing them to navigate cultural changes more independently, unlike those who were previously colonized. Their beliefs are oftentimes solely theirs—some of their beliefs from back then stay true for them until now. For the other beliefs which were swept with changes, then it is highly likely that they created or adapted those changes naturally, or that these were not usually externally imposed. This could be the reason

why they come to terms with said changes easily. Such scenarios are evident in countries like Japan that were not colonized but adapted Western cultural beliefs and ideas, from education, clothing, to social and legal systems, while also maintaining their traditional identities.<sup>18</sup> Another example is Thailand that, in their process of modernization, interacted with the West, adapted Western influences into their societal context, and made use of both Western models and native practices.<sup>19</sup>

Women from non-colonized societies may still experience challenges in the exercise of their free will, and can still be impacted by other countries. However, colonization often gives another layer of complexity in the dealing with hybrid identities and inequalities specifically brought by the act, subsequently making the exercise of free will of women from post-colonial societies also more complex and challenging. Essentially, the historical factor plays a significant role in shaping free will and the exercise of free will for these groups of people.

## ***V. CONCLUSION***

This paper has gone through various real-life, physical phenomena that the women of post-colonial Philippines experience. Such phenomena can be seen to remain linked to the beliefs and policies that were introduced by the previous colonial masters, even if it has been over 78 years already since the country became free and amidst the efforts of trying to break free from outside nations' systems. The continuity of having these beliefs and policies live within and control society in modern-day Philippines only contributes to the continuity as well of the post-colonial Philippine women's constricted exercise of free will.

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Min Li, "Chapter 6 Thailand's Successful Diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century," in *Asian Culture, Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, Volume II*, ed. C.X. George Wei (Brill, 2022), 141–54.

The discussion regarding this is important as it highlights the vitality of taking action regarding this issue. Furthermore, although this issue has been circulating for a long time already, there is still a chance for this to end and there is still a capacity for each Filipino woman to exercise her free will fully. However, when such a thing is to happen is still unknown and up to these individuals themselves. It is essential for the people to take action regarding this matter as soon as possible, may it be in ways such as by fostering the general public's critical thinking skills and autonomy of thought or other helpful courses of action, since the exercise of free will—full and no longer constricted—can translate into further progress, fairness, and growth within the country.

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