

A Tale of Three Women: Framing as a Patriarchal Practice in the News Coverage of Women in Distress

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Abstract

Women in situations of distress receive a disproportionate amount of news coverage. As survivors (or perpetrators) of crime, violence, or natural disasters, they are naturally “newsworthy”—a newsroom term for the subjective lens with which truth-tellers define and select their news frames. These frames, which govern the identification and coverage of what is “newsworthy,” box women into specific, patriarchal roles. Women who do not fall within the traditional feminine archetypes are labeled as dissidents or insurgents, and are excluded, dismissed, rejected, or worse persecuted, until the news recasts them into more familiar molds. This is exemplified in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer’s* news coverage of Mary Jane Veloso, a Filipina convicted of drug trafficking in Indonesia and sentenced to death in 2010. An examination of the *Inquirer’s* coverage of the Veloso case unearthed the gender biases that are inherent in the subjective rules that govern the patterns of selection and depiction in mainstream newsrooms.

Keywords: framing, women, news, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Mary Jane Veloso

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All media have an ideological function, and, hand in hand with other social and cultural institutions, reflect, reinforce, and mediate existing power relations and ideas. The news, in particular, under the cloak of accuracy, fairness, and objectivity, is in the privileged position of suggesting what messages are important to society at any given time, as well as depicting these messages within the dominant paradigm of the patriarchal ruling class.

The news, and the ways in which it is presented, affects the public's understanding of events and issues (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Lee et al., 2008), by influencing "the importance individuals attach to particular beliefs" (Nelson & Oxley, 1999, p. 1041). This power is called framing, which Robert Entman (1993) defines as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality (to) make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52).

Because it can shape social meanings, how the news treats gender, therefore, can foster patterns of discrimination and oppression, and so embed them in people's daily lives that they become accepted as natural.

Women in situations of distress have always received a disproportionate amount of news coverage (Sommers, 2016; Ali, 2014; Alat, 2006; Meyers, 1997). Whether these women are survivors (or perpetrators) of crime, violence, or natural disasters, they become natural fodder for news outlets, which find them to be natural subjects of "newsworthiness"—a newsroom term for the subjective lens with which truth-tellers define and select their news frames.

This paper attempts to look at how the mass media, specifically the news, covers women in distressful situations. It proceeds from the assumption that the news frames that govern the identification and coverage of what is "newsworthy" box women in specific, patriarchal roles. This study also posits that women who do not fall within the traditional feminine archetypes are labeled as dissidents or insurgents, and are excluded, dismissed, rejected, or worse persecuted, until the news recasts them into more familiar molds.

The author focused on the news coverage of the Mary Jane Veloso case, and specifically at the online news articles of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* as text, to unearth the gender biases that are inherent in the subjective rules that govern the patterns of selection and depiction in mainstream newsrooms. Veloso is a Filipina migrant worker who was arrested and sentenced to death in Indonesia in 2010 for possession of 2.6 kilograms of heroin. After five years in prison, her execution was about to be carried out, until she was granted a reprieve on April 29, 2015.

Framing women in distress

Social realities and events are usually much nuanced phenomena that are difficult to capture in all their complexity and context. Journalists, constrained by news space and airtime, their perception of audience aptitude, and their own competence, need to simplify and whittle the facts down into recognizable plots and characterizations in the guise of complete and objective depictions of phenomena. Andrea Lawlor and Erin Tolley (2017) also noted that the economic setup in the news business encourages the production of the type of stories that appeal to the broadest number of consumers, and this, in turn, emphasizes narratives that are easily portrayed, easy to understand, and which follow conventional explanations. And since the media do not exist in a vacuum, they situate these stories within the dominant social norms and cultures, presenting them in ways that best resonate with their intended audiences (Fleras, 2012; Tolley, 2016; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Entman (2004) suggests that individuals use ‘schemas’ (internal, cognitive frames) to process the external frames that news media use, and that the more the schemas correspond with the external frames, the more likely individuals are to accept the frames unquestioningly. At the societal level, Entman noted that the media frames that most resound with the dominant culture will find the greatest social acceptance. Thus, he suggests that “reporters readily construct associations in the news matching the public’s habits of thinking” (Entman, 1993, p. 52) because journalists are likely to share these habitual schemas and are validated for using these frames (Tromble & Meffert, 2016).

Thus, newsrooms compose a news story within a familiar frame of meaning that the audience already understands, in the process including certain aspects of a story while excluding others, and thus proposing an evaluative paradigm for the audience (Baran & Davis, 2011). To Entman (1993), frames become embedded within a text and thus influence thinking.

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. (p. 52)

Rebekah Tromble and Michael Meffert (2016) pointed out that

various journalistic norms and routines lead journalists to gravitate toward frames with particular characteristics. In an effort to attract media consumers, journalists prioritize emotional, conflictual, or human interest—in

short, dramatic—frames. In addition, journalists frequently attempt to show “objectivity” by choosing frames that oppose, or “balance” one another (p. 5082).

“Framing the News” (1998), a study of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates, looked at the news frames used in the front pages of seven US newspapers for two months. They found that:

The press shows a decided tendency to present the news through a combative lens. Three narrative frames—conflict, winners and losers and revealing wrongdoing—accounted for 30% of all stories, twice the number of straight news accounts. The penchant for framing stories around these combative elements is even more pronounced at the top of the front page and is truer still when it comes to describing the actions or statements of government officials. (para 8)

News framing is not an objective, value-free process but is contextualized within the dominant political-economic hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies of newsrooms. When it comes to reporting on women, Karen Ross (2013) expounds:

The constructed nature of the news ensures that journalists, either wittingly or otherwise, persistently use a narrow range of ‘frames’ which stereotype women ... over time and across continents, women are rendered almost invisible in mainstream news discourse and, when they do appear are seldom granted autonomy but instead are more usually framed as victims, trophy wives, or girlfriends. (p. 90)

Framing is a normal part of the storytelling process in newsrooms, but it needs to be problematized because it is

a result of a newsroom culture which continuously reproduces itself ... manifesting as a repressive structure of newstink which locks its practitioners (both women and men) into stereotypical modes of reporting which masquerade as ‘neutral’ news values, but which perpetuate a male-ordered environment which is often hostile to women. (Ross, 2013, p. 89)

The 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project conducted in 114 countries to explore patterns of gender representation in the news, found that women

made up only 24% of the persons heard, read about, or seen in newspaper, television, and radio news, exactly as they did in 2010, and that they are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims (Macharia, 2015). In Africa, the Gender and Media Baseline Study of 12 countries in the region found that “women are grossly under-represented and misrepresented both in the newsrooms and editorial content [and that] there are still cases of blatantly sexist reporting that portrays women as objects and temptresses” (Genderlinks, 2013, p. 7). In the Middle East, Dafna Lemish (2000) found that the “whore” motif was the one frame most frequently used in reporting crimes against women. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry’s (2007) work on news framing of women soldiers found them portrayed as “either mothers, monsters or whores” (p. 11). A study on women in sports found that news media often frame female athletes as sex objects, are more likely to delve into their personal lives, and minimize their accomplishments and skill by regularly comparing them to men (Hardin et al., 2007). Research on the intersectionalities between gender, media, and crime found media overrepresentation of women as victims (Benedict, 1993; Sommers, 2016).

Race also functions as a frame in whether and how women in distress receive news coverage. The “missing pretty girl syndrome,” “damsel in distress syndrome” or “missing white woman syndrome” refers to the “extensive media coverage received by young, white, attractive, preferably rich females who go missing” (Iaccino, 2014, para. 1). Researchers have pointed to the disproportionate amount of news coverage these women receive (Sommers, 2016), and the widespread and systemic race and gender disparities in the amount of media coverage dedicated to these abducted or missing women (Hinkle, 2014; Ridley, 2007). Missing people who do not fit this category often receive a smaller amount of coverage, or none at all. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) found that black and Latina missing or murdered women seldom appeared on network crime shows, and also that those who did were far less likely to be described as beautiful than white women. In Canada, non-white women who go missing receive 27 times less coverage than white women, and receive less impassioned and less detailed headlines, articles, and images (Jeanis & Powers, 2017).

It is a fact that a white and pretty young girl or woman who goes missing will inevitably sell more newspapers; the missing female will fit the criteria of an innocent princess whose unjust distress must be stopped. Meanwhile, hundreds of non-white women and children who go missing every year will inevitably be forgotten. (Iaccino, 2014, paras. 14-15)

Women survivors of natural calamities are also presented within patriarchal frames (Akhter, 1992; Ali, 2010; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Danner & Walsh, 1999; Hartley, 1992). A study of the visual representations of the 2010 floods in Pakistan showed that women were shown as helpless victims in order to arouse sympathy among readers and donors, inspiring them to give immediate moral and material help (Ali, 2014). This type of coverage has not only exploited the politics of sympathy but has also endorsed gender stereotypes.

The news depictions of women and violence are sobering. Women are framed as somehow culpable for the crimes committed against them (Chesney-Lind & Chagnon, 2016; Driver, 2017), and violence against women as largely the problem of marginalized classes, rather than one that affects all social classes (Chesney-Lind & Chagnon, 2016; Durham, 2016). Meghan Sobel (2016) analyzed 15 years of news coverage of women trafficking in five English-language Thai newspapers and found a focus on female victims, official sources and crime frames, with a lack of discussion of risk factors, solutions, and high-profile criminals. Meanwhile, Johnston and Friedman (2009) identified the dominant news frames used in US major newspapers to cover sex trafficking of women as crime (37%) and politics or legislation (26%). In the Philippines, Sylvia Estrada Claudio (2002) studied how women were presented in 70 tabloid news reports dealing with cases of rape. She concluded that the frame “assigned to the rape survivor is that of the aggrieved, distraught, and pitiful casualty of male sexual violence” (p. 9) and how she is “young, beautiful and innocent before [the rape], devastated thereafter” (p. 10). Claudio explains that

Rape is constructed as a violent act of pathological men against women, with the males as a lusting predator and the female as helpless victim who loses everything (dignity, honor, humanity) in the course of her misfortune. (p. 19)

In turn, Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) identified media portrayals of women and crime as following three narratives: the mothers, or women who are fulfilling their biological destinies; monsters, or women who are pathologically damaged and therefore drawn to violence; and whores, or women whose violence is inspired by sexual dependence and depravity (p. 12).

News frames can ascribe and prescribe certain roles for their subjects, especially women. This paper looks at what roles these are and interrogates whether they bind women into specific representations. Ross (2013) says,

What an analysis of women's representation in news demonstrates, incontrovertibly, is that the media's framing (in every sense of the word) of women in highly restricted and mostly negative ways is not simply the consequence of the idiosyncrasies of this newspaper or that TV channel or that radio station but rather is a *global* phenomenon which has endured over time and across media formats, and continues to do so... And the ways in which the media continue to contribute to this circulation of passive and victimized femininity is through the repetitive framing of woman as victim, woman as object, woman as body. These frames are routinized and normalized, endlessly recycled to protect a male-ordered status quo. (p. 119)

The author believes that journalists draw on familiar narrative techniques to write news articles, and newsrooms expect them to write grounded stories with easily identifiable characters. In doing so, they reify traditional representations of women. This paper looks at the framing of three women in the singular case of Mary Jane Veloso by a national and popular online news site. It hopes to shed light on the types of frames typically employed in the coverage of women in distressful situations, and surface issues on how newsrooms perpetuate stereotypes in their everyday coverage of women.

Women in distress

For purposes of this paper, the author uses the definition of Women in Especially Difficult Circumstances (WEDC) laid out in Section 30 of the Philippine Magna Carta of Women's Rights as the paradigm in analyzing the news coverage of women in distress.

Section 30. Women in Especially Difficult Circumstances.
- For purposes of this Act, "Women in Especially Difficult Circumstances" (WEDC) shall refer to victims and survivors of sexual and physical abuse, illegal recruitment, prostitution, trafficking, armed conflict, women in detention, victims and survivors of rape and incest, and such other related circumstances which have incapacitated them functionally. (Republic Act 9710, 2009)

The Mary Jane Veloso case hogged the headlines in the national press in March until May of 2015. Veloso was apprehended at the Audisucipto International Airport in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on April 25, 2010, for possession of 2.6 kilograms of heroin. She was sentenced to death by

firing squad six months after her arrest. Veloso was granted a reprieve at the 11th hour on April 29, 2015, five years after her ordeal began. The Philippine press documented every detail of her experience, especially as her execution drew near, with stories, photos, and videos in the print, broadcast and online media, coverage which Luis Teodoro (2015) later described as “biased, sensationalized, tasteless” (headline). Veloso tried to improve her and her family’s lives as a migrant worker, one of the more than 1.8 million Filipinos who leave each year for work (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2018), and one of some 1.9 million domestic workers spread all over the world (International Labour Organisation, 2018). She is also one of the 7,055 Filipinos detained outside of the country as of June 2018 (DFA, 2018). Thus, Veloso’s situation “evokes memories of numerous other Filipino domestic workers who have been accused of crimes they did not commit and imprisoned or executed depending on the laws of their host country” (Lacsamana, 2016, p. 86).

Aside from Veloso, two other women featured prominently in the news accounts: Maria Kristina Sergio, her suspected trafficker, and Celia Veloso, her mother. This case is an instance where three women in distress became the sole and intensive focus of news coverage for a prolonged period and provides the opportunity to use a gender lens to analyze how the news framed them and their experiences. The articles from a major Philippine online truth-teller, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, were used as the text for this study. The *Inquirer* is one of the most widely read news outlets in the Philippines and is currently the most privileged and preeminent storyteller in the country (Reyes, et al, 2012). In its April 29, 2015 issue, headlined “Death Came Before Dawn,” now deleted and rewritten as “Veloso execution stopped” (Corrales & Calleja, 2015), the *Inquirer* erroneously announced that Veloso had already been executed (Dean & Thackray, 2015; Teodoro, 2015). The newspaper issued a front page statement the next day, April 30, headlined “Deep Regrets, But Happy, Grateful,” (now also deleted) where it acknowledged its error and apologized to the Veloso family for the aggravation it had caused them.

The author used the search terms “Mary Jane Veloso” in the news archives of www.inquirer.net, which yielded 106 articles. The author did not include opinion pieces in the study.

Mary Jane Veloso: The Damsel in Distress

Sarah Stillman (2007) argues that news stories about women take advantage of the classic trope of “damsels in distress,” in which a helpless girl or woman must be saved by a man. The damsel in distress frame was used as a major news frame with which the press portrayed Mary Jane Veloso. The

distressed damsel, characterized as a poor, helpless, passive, powerless, and naïve woman in need of male intervention to overcome her situation, thus became the primary lens with which audiences perceived Veloso.

This news frame is apparent in the words used to describe her. The use of the term “human trafficking victim” or “victim” (Calleja, 2015a; Calleja, 2015c; Corrales, 2015c; Hegina, 2015b; Hegina, 2015f; Hegina, 2015i; Sabillo, 2015) instead of the more active terms “survivor” or “overseas Filipino worker,” portrays Veloso as a helpless woman unable to surmount her own troubles through her own agency. The reports instead focused on the hopelessness of her fate, needing no less than a “miracle,” (Calleja, 2015c; Esplanada, et al, 2015; Hegina, 2015h; Roque, 2015) as manifested in the April 7, 2015 headline, “Filipina maid’s family prays for divine, gov’t intervention” (Galang & Calleja, 2015).

The damsel in distress frame is also exemplified by the repeated references that “Veloso was a victim of human trafficking and drug syndicates” (Calleja, 2015b, para. 3) and “a victim of manipulation and deception” (Torres-Tupas, 2015b, para. 1) who had “no recourse but to follow” her alleged recruiter (Torres-Tupas, 2015b, para. 6).

Veloso’s victimization, with her actions and destiny largely determined and manipulated by others, is continuously reinforced. One report stated that Veloso previously worked as a domestic worker in Dubai, who “fled Dubai when an employer tried to rape her” (Roque, 2015, para. 10). She was then “convinced by a friend in a nearby town to work in Malaysia,” with said friend “help(ing) her secure travel papers and a ticket so she could fly there as a tourist” (Roque, 2015, para. 11). The said friend also “bought her many items, including a huge traveling bag, for her trip” (Roque, 2015, para 14) with said bag being used to conceal the drugs that would lead to her arrest and conviction. Note how the active verbs in the statements are all attributed to Veloso’s “friend,” while the only active verb referred to her “escaping” a distressing situation.

Veloso was also portrayed as unwitting and ignorant, since she “did not know her bag contained heroin wrapped in aluminum foil” (Calleja, 2015a, para. 18). She also “unknowingly smuggled in Indonesia 2.6 kilograms of heroin through her luggage” (Calleja, 2015b, para. 6).

The word “duped” was also frequently used to describe her (Dizon, 2015; Calleja, 2015d; Torres-Tupas, 2015a; Yap, 2015) with the *Inquirer* reporting that “Sergio had duped her into being an unwitting drug mule” (Gamil, 2015, para. 7).

Her innocence and naivete were also emphasized in descriptions that she “did not finish high school” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 15), and thus was easily “lured to travel to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by Sergio who had

promised her a job” (Calleja, 2015b, para. 5) which made her “vulnerable to human traffickers” (Hegina, 2015f, para. 6). No other persons in the news narrative had their academic credentials examined like Veloso’s.

Thus Mary Jane was the pathetic woman who was victimized by forces she did not understand:

Not fluent in English and limited in formal education, Mary Jane was swept up in a flood of circumstances that resulted in her conviction: she had no legal counsel for most of the process, she did not understand most of the proceedings, and her family received death threats from the drug syndicate, warning them not to go to the media or seek help. (Hegina, 2015f, para. 7)

And because of her helplessness, “the domestic helper was not able to defend herself when she was arrested” (Hegina, 2015g, para. 7).

Veloso was scheduled to be executed with nine other drug traffickers, all male. However, media portrayals of these men differed vastly from hers. While Veloso was frequently referred to as a “drug mule,” her fellow prisoners were said to be “drug couriers,” “foreign drug convicts,” (Corrales & Calleja, 2015; Torres-Tupas, 2015d; Tulfo, 2015) or “death row convicts” (Calleja, 2015d). This gender binary is also exemplified by articles stating that Veloso was “caught carrying heroin” (Galang & Calleja, 2015; Roque, 2015) while the men were called “ringleaders” (Galang & Calleja, 2015) and “members of a drug trafficking gang” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 24) who were “sentenced to death for trying to smuggle heroin out of Indonesia” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 24).

The media’s focus on Veloso as a woman and mother is revealed by the *Inquirer’s* automatic description of her as a 30-year old mother of two children (Avendano & Sauler, 2015; Calleja, 2015a; Calleja, 2015b; Hegina, 2015a; Hegina, 2015c; Hegina 2015e; Hegina 2015i; Santos, 2015a) and “Veloso, a single mother of two” (“Pacquiao in Indonesia to Visit Mary Jane Friday,” 2015, para. 5). There were also numerous news features on her meetings with and last words to her sons (Calleja, 2015c; Hegina, 2015c; “Mary Jane Veloso: ‘If God wants me to live, I’ll live,’” 2015). None of the other characters in the coverage, such as her suspected recruiter or fellow convicts, referenced their civil status so comprehensively or at all.

The damsel in distress frame continues with the frequent use of the emotionally-laden words “save” (Calleja, 2015d; Galang & Calleja, 2015; Hegina, 2015f) and “appeal” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015; Corrales, 2015c; Santos, 2015b) when referring to the efforts to provide legal and diplomatic interventions to halt Veloso’s execution. The *Inquirer’s* headlines, such as

“Aquino in last-ditch effort to save Mary Jane Veloso” on April 28 (Dizon, 2015) and “UP boosts clamor to save Mary Jane Veloso” on April 17 (Gamil, 2015), and the accompanying texts (Galang & Calleja, 2015; Santos, 2015b) reflect this need for an outside power to intervene on her behalf. This power took the form of government and divine interventions “for the deliverance of Mary Jane from execution” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 1).

The helpless and pathetic nature of Mary Jane was further boosted by the *Inquirer’s* consistent use of the term “humanitarian visit” (Galang & Calleja, 2015) when referring to the official visits paid by embassy and diplomatic officials to her in prison.

In contrast, the male convicts on death row along with Mary Jane Veloso have “lodged Supreme Court appeals” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 26), are “filing judicial reviews of their cases” (Avendano & Sauler, 2015, para. 6), have “pleas for presidential clemency” (Galang & Calleja, 2015, para. 25) and are “requesting reviews of their sentences” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015, para. 20).

Throughout the entire coverage, Mary Jane Veloso was figuratively a silenced character. Her imprisonment and the lack of access to her meant that all her actions and statements were filtered through others. This muting also took a literal turn in the news when the *Inquirer* frequently referred to her not being provided with a capable translator during her first trial (Ager, 2015; “Indonesian Court Rejects Death Row Filipina’s Appeal,” 2015).

As the day of her scheduled execution on April 28 drew near, the *Inquirer’s* coverage focused on Veloso’s martyrdom and long suffering. She was portrayed as “calm and composed” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015; Calleja, 2015c; Corrales, 2015e) as she met her family for the last time, and even performed the traditional maternal and nurturing role of providing comfort by “tell(ing) her family not to feel sad and buoy(ing) their spirits” (Calleja, 2015c; Corrales, 2015e, para. 4), and “keeping a brave front to help her family accept the situation” (Avendano & Sauler, 2015, para. 12).

The martyrdom angle was further boosted by articles that portrayed Veloso without an ounce of vengefulness toward her traffickers, looking to higher powers for justice. True to popular depictions of women as nonviolent and peace-loving, she did not even directly refer to their criminal acts, “she hoped the people who ruined her life would be bothered by their conscience” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015, para. 31). She also told the “people who were responsible for her predicament” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015, para. 32) that “I still pray to God that you be forgiven” (Avendano & Andrade, 2015, para. 33).

While everyone around her was actively working to get an official clemency, Veloso’s passive endurance of her inevitable “doom” (Corrales,

2015e, para. 1) was emphasized, as, despite her “continued suffering on death row” (Corrales, 2015b, para 4) she had “accept(ed) death as her fate” (Calleja, 2015a; “Mary Jane Veloso Excited to Wear her Funeral Dress for Mother’s Day,” 2015). The *Inquirer* also noted that “Veloso has made known her last two wishes: to see her family before she’s executed and to have her body sent back to the Philippines” (Avendano & Sauler, 2015, para. 9) because “maybe the Lord wants me to be with him now” (Avendano & Sauler, 2015, para. 11).

The sexualization of Maria Kristina Sergio

Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) describe the whore narrative in the news as “public and publicized stories [that] emphasize the singularity and sexual depravity of women” (p. 1). In the “whore” frame, the woman is frequently portrayed as

... a she-devil, ... an example of all that is rotten in the female sex. This Medusa draws together the many forms of female perversion: a woman whose sexuality is debauched and foul, pornographic and bisexual; a woman who knows none of the fine and noble instincts when it comes to men and children; a woman who lies and deceives, manipulates and corrupts. A woman who is clever and powerful. This is a woman who is far deadlier than the male, in fact not a woman at all. (Kennedy, 1992, p. 240)

In contrast to the coverage of Mary Jane Veloso, accused trafficker Maria Kristina Sergio’s personal life was frequently presented, but through the sexual reference of her having a “live-in partner” (Aurelio, et al, 2015; De Lara, 2015; Mangunay & Quismundo, 2015; Torres-Tupas, 2015b; “Mary Jane Veloso Recruiters Surrender to Police,” 2015; “Penalize Recruiter, Veloso Kin Urge,” 2015; “Veloso Recruiter Seeks Police Protection,” 2015) Julius Lacanilao, who is also her coaccused.

She was also presented as a very active agent, as compared to Veloso’s passive portrayal, as exemplified by accounts such as “relatives and supporters of death convict Mary Jane Veloso want the government to go after the woman who took her to Malaysia to work there” (“Penalize Recruiter, Veloso Kin Urge,” 2015, para. 1) and “reports that tagged her as the recruiter of Veloso and the one who allegedly facilitated her subsequent entry to Indonesia” (“Penalize Recruiter, Veloso Kin Urge,” 2015, para. 2).

The *Inquirer* framed Sergio as a feisty character who vehemently denied all allegations against her. The April 29, 2015 story noted how “she maintains

that she does not know anything about the bag [Mary Jane] was talking about or anything about the drugs” (De Lara, 2015, para. 19).

The *Inquirer* also consistently noted that Sergio did not surrender, but “went voluntarily to the police” (De Jesus, 2015; De Lara, 2015; Roque & Galang, 2015) or “turned herself in to the police” (Hegina, 2015d; Roque & Galang, 2015). It is noticeable how the following accounts gave agency to Sergio: “Maria Kristina P. Sergio alias Mary Christine Gules Pasadilla surfaced at the Nueva Ecija Police on the same day Veloso was scheduled for execution” (Torres-Tupas, 2015c, para. 2); “Veloso was spared after a woman who allegedly recruited her to act as a drug courier gave herself up to the police in the Philippines” (Corrales & Calleja, 2015, para. 4); and “Sergio, the suspected recruiter of Mary Jane Veloso, appeared at the Nueva Ecija provincial police office” (Roque & Galang, 2015, para. 1).

In fact, Sergio even took steps to protect her person, which was something that the media never reported that Veloso had done. As an example, in the April 29, 2015 story, she demanded protection from law enforcers.

Maria Cristina (*sic*) Sergio, the alleged recruiter of Mary Jane Veloso, is seeking police protection, claiming she had been receiving death threats on her cell phone and Facebook account... “I want to clarify that my live-in partner and I did not surrender. My plea for protective custody was for our protection from those who said they would harm us.” (“Veloso Recruiter Seeks Police Protection,” 2015, paras. 1, 4)

She was also portrayed to have a thorough understanding of her rights and demanded them from the State. Sergio said “she had not received a copy of the charges and nobody had asked her to give a statement of the case” (Roque & Galang, 2015, para. 10). She claimed:

I am not a criminal ... If they want to take me and investigate me, I am willing to do that, but please provide me with a lawyer to assist me. I would rather be investigated in the headquarters of the Philippine National Police... I want Persida Rueda-Acosta of the Public Attorney’s Office to assist me. (Roque & Galang, 2015. Paras. 11-12)

Sergio may be said to be presented outside of the traditional gender stereotype. In fact, the *Inquirer* portrayed her to be strong, aware of her rights, outspoken, and demanding. However, her status as an autonomous actor is downplayed by the sexual discourse used to describe her role, as

evidenced by the consistent mentions of her having a live-in partner (who remains mysteriously behind the scenes in the news coverage).

Celia Veloso as the rebel

A rebel “transgresses against received beliefs or accepted norms” (Dyson, 2005, p. 47), even through unsavory or politically incorrect means. They

... embody efforts to explore the experiences and identities of the marginal classes who are usually kept – because of class status, lack of power, gender and sexual orientation – from being visible in stereotypical representations. (Dyson, 2005, p. 48)

The news coverage of the gutsy mother of Mary Jane Veloso, Celia, deserves special consideration due to the huge fallout she received in the mainstream media when she became vocal regarding her criticisms of government handling of her daughter’s case. In the May 1, 2015 story, the *Inquirer* reported that “Veloso’s mother Celia in a press briefing in Quezon City slammed the government for taking the credit on the last-minute reprieve granted by the Indonesian government to her daughter” (Corrales, 2015d, para. 2). The headline for the May 2 story read, “Velosos home with KO punch at Aquino” (Sauler & Dizon, 2015).

She minced no words in her quotes, asking for accountability from the government of then President Benigno Aquino III. In the May 1 story headlined “Veloso mom denies gov’t role in Mary Jane’s execution reprieve,” the *Inquirer* quoted her as saying:

Now that we’re back in the Philippines, the government has a lot to account to us ... They said that it was through their efforts that my daughter was given a reprieve. That’s not true. Until now, they’re making a fool of us... The DFA tried to keep us away from the media. We had a hard time. We wanted to talk to the media but we’re not allowed. We wanted to thank the President of Indonesia but we couldn’t do it.” (Corrales, 2015d, paras. 3-4, 6, 8)

The moment these comments appeared in the news, there was a maelstrom of negative comments, also duly covered by the *Inquirer*. Celia and her family were called “ungrateful” in social media and the press. The *Inquirer* also reported on the trends set by Twitter hashtags #ItuloyAngBitay, #IsamaSiNanay, #BitayinNaYan, and #FiringSquadforCeliaVeloso (“Netizens Tag Veloso Family Ungrateful for Slamming Aquino Gov’t,” 2015; “Netizens: #Firing squad for Celia Veloso,” 2015), reporting that “The

Veloso family's utter lack of appreciation for government efforts to save their kin from execution in Indonesia triggered the Twitter storm..." ("Netizens: #Firing squad for Celia Veloso," 2015, headline). Further exacerbating the public's antagonism, the *Inquirer* also published headlines such as, "Veloso manipulators should replace her in execution island, says solon" (Yap, 2015), explaining that "Celia's statements against the President and the government triggered the indignation among netizens who called her an 'ingrate'" (Calleja & Dizon, 2015, para. 8).

Soon the *Inquirer* reframed Celia Veloso and attributed her comments, not to her own discernment, "but to the 'manipulation' of 'militants'" (Calleja & Dizon, 2015; "Netizens Tag Veloso Family Ungrateful for Slamming Aquino Gov't.," 2015). Again, in this case, the outspoken mother was positioned in the role of the 'victim' of leftist groups.

In fact, news coverage after Celia Veloso's comments became more sympathetic to the state. "Despite her attitude, I have some compassion for Mary Jane Veloso's mom. Under extreme stress, she was victimized by the militants" ("Netizens Tag Veloso Family Ungrateful for Slamming Aquino Gov't.," 2015, para. 10), the *Inquirer* reported a palace official as saying. The framing of a compassionate government continued: "Despite the allegations of Mary Jane Veloso's family, the Department of Foreign Affairs said it would continue to extend assistance to the Filipina death convict and her family" (Corrales, 2015a, para. 1).

Because a critical, outspoken woman represents an antitype to the damsel in distress, the media had to reframe Celia Veloso as another victim (of the manipulations of activist groups), or force her to recapitulate her biting statements, so that she can be recast into the more familiar frame of the grieving mother.

On May 3, 2015, the *Inquirer* ran the headline, "Veloso's mother begs for understanding" (Sauler, 2015). Thus did it deprive Celia Veloso of her own agency in her personal experience of her child's plight.

Conclusion

In the course of reporting on complex issues, the press routinely uses news frames in order to simplify events and provide a cognitive guide by which audiences can understand the stories. Among their arsenal of tools, journalists use preexisting and recognizable narrative codes as news frames, and these frames have to resonate with audiences to be successful.

The Mary Jane Veloso news coverage provides an opportunity to analyze how the press presents characters in easily identifiable frames, and how these frames can confine women into traditional roles instead of fleshing out their stories, identities, and motivations. A look at the news reports covering the

case from a major online news site, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, shows that Mary Jane Veloso and Maria Kristina Sergio were consistently positioned as binaries in the common archetypes of damsel in distress and whore. This type of reporting upholds the dominant discourses about how women (and men) behave, whilst the consistent use of patriarchal frames help to influence hegemonic understandings of issues and actors.

However, this study also looks at how the press reports on contentious, antitype women who occupy unfamiliar and nontraditional positions, thus shifting the balance of power in the narratives and shaking the dominant and patriarchal paradigms of audiences. This is evident in the coverage of Celia Veloso's tirades against the state and explains the subsequent national anger directed at her, which the press fanned with sensational reporting.

The news media's symbolic power to shape how people see, think about, and act in the world can normalize social divisions and legitimize existing social relations, including unequal gender relations. Thus, the press plays a fundamental role in how women's status and gender inequalities are perceived, understood, and either reinforced or changed. This suggests that the news media should be an example of gender equality, representing women as diverse, active agents in their selection and representation of social reality, and in the process provide their coverage with the texture, nuance and richness that diverse perspectives can bring.

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