

6. Thinking About Reproductive Justice in Contexts of Violence

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One cannot properly advocate for reproductive justice without considering its connection to sexual violence. I am not suggesting that only females are victims of this type of violence, but women and girls are disproportionately affected, with wide-ranging implications for their reproductive health. Sexual violence is something that traverses economic, social, racial, and ethnic divides, but we know that poorer women are at greater risk globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence against women as: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹ In addition, “intimate partner violence” is defined as violence by an intimate partner or ex-partner that results in psychological, sexual and/or physical harm. This includes all forms of physical aggression, sexual coercion, and various types of controlling behavior.² According to WHO, “sexual violence” refers to “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, . . . attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and other non-contact forms.”³

WHO data indicates that between 2000 and 2018, across 161 countries, almost one in three (30%) women were subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate or non-intimate partner or both. More than a

¹ World Health Organization (WHO), “Violence Against Women: Key Facts,” March 25, 2024, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women.

² World Health Organization (WHO), “Violence Against Women: Key Facts.”

³ World Health Organization (WHO), “Violence Against Women: Key Facts.”

quarter of females aged between fifteen and forty-nine years have endured physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner on at least one occasion in their life,⁴ and approximately 38% of all murders of women globally are committed by an intimate partner.⁵

Gender-based violence⁶ is exacerbated by several factors, including low levels of education, a history of family violence, substance abuse, and social attitudes that condone violence more generally. In addition, a woman's economic disempowerment can heighten her sexual vulnerability, for she may be less able to negotiate safe sex or refuse sex to her partner. Gender-based violence remains a largely invisible and unspoken reality in many communities.⁷ Cultural and religious norms often reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, and there is urgent need for religious leaders of all faiths to condemn gender-based violence. Moreover, some cultures place priority on family honour and sexual purity, beliefs used to justify violence towards women and control their sexual freedom. Societal norms that emphasize male sexual entitlement are deeply problematic here too and are usually accompanied by inadequate legal penalties for perpetrators of sexual violence.⁸ Unjust power dynamics within the sexual/marital relationship regularly lead to sexual abuse, but, ironically, these same power imbalances can be a reason why some women feel compelled to remain in abusive and dangerous relationships.⁹ Thus, intersectional understandings of, and

⁴ World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence Against Women: Key Facts."

⁵ World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence Against Women: Key Facts."

⁶ Gender-based violence can happen to someone of any gender, but typically women and girls experience violence on a more frequent and sustained scale. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term "gender-based violence" in relation to female victims of violence. On this point see WHO, "International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women," 2023, www.un.org/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day.

⁷ World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence Against Women: Key Facts."

⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence Against Women: Key Facts." See also the chapters in this volume by Virginia Saldanha, Mary Lilian Akhere Ehdiamhen, and Eric Genilo.

⁹ UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women" (2024), www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures.

responses to, sexual violence globally are urgently needed.¹⁰ Churches, political leaders, and a wide range of civil society organizations have a vital role to play here. But key to any response must be the creation of spaces where the lived experiences of women, especially those who are most marginalized, help shape policy in this field.¹¹

The health implications of a sexual attack are often devastating. Unintended pregnancies, serious gynaecological injury, and infection with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV are commonplace in the aftermath of such attacks. Moreover, physical violence during pregnancy increases the chance of miscarriage, stillbirth, or pre-term delivery. And of course, it is unsurprising that sexual attacks often leads to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, and suicide attempts among women and girls.¹²

Moreover, forced sexual encounters contribute to increase in occurrence of disease, especially STIs. For example, in 2021, 54% of all people living with HIV were women and girls. In that same year, approximately 4900 young women aged between fifteen and twenty-four years became infected with HIV every week. In sub-Saharan Africa, six in seven new HIV infections among people aged fifteen to nineteen years are among girls. And females aged fifteen to twenty-four years are twice as

¹⁰ Julie George, SSpS, "Intersectionality at the Heart of Oppression and Violence against Women in Law: Case Studies from India," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, special issue 1 (2023): 108–131.

¹¹ There is an awakening in the tradition of the importance of human experience as a source of moral wisdom. This is reflected in the new interest in the *sensus fidei* and synodality. If synodality is about *journeying together*, listening to those on the margins, then human experience becomes a vital font of morality. But we are only beginning to consider the implications of this for the whole area of sexuality. The International Theological Commission alludes to the role of human experience when it says: "This lack of reception [of official teaching] may indicate a weakness or a lack of faith on the part of the people of God. . . . But in some cases it may indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration to the experience and the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, or without sufficient consultation of the faithful by the magisterium." See International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 123.

¹² UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women."

likely to be HIV positive than men in the same age category. Women and girls accounted for 63% of all new HIV infections in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2021.¹³ These figures indicate a correlation between gender and HIV. In fact, a document from Concern Worldwide opens with the following statement: “40 years on, women and girls are the most impacted [by HIV/AIDS]—the face of HIV in 2021 is an adolescent girl.”¹⁴

Responses will therefore require multi-faceted strategies, able to address complex and inter-connected crises and ought to be founded on intersectional research, something especially needed in Catholic teaching. In addition, incorporating intersectional scholarship allows space for the voices of those most affected to be heard. The goal of achieving reproductive justice for women and girls, including tackling sexual violence, will be more effectively realized if we listen to the stories of survivors. Strategies aimed at securing better reproductive justice for females will need to be founded on sophisticated thinking that recognizes the nuances and the challenges involved and understands that reproductive justice is won in contexts of broader social, economic, and human rights gains.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, we consider how sexual violence is rooted in social narrative; next we explore the connection between institutional violence and reproductive health outcomes, taking Ireland as a case study; thirdly, we consider how virtue ethics—especially the virtues of resistance and resilience—might act as a valuable resource for the issues discussed here; and finally, some implications for Catholic teaching will be considered.

¹³ UN Women, “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women.”

¹⁴ Concern Worldwide, “Gender Inequality,” November 30, 2021, www.concern.net/news/gender-inequality-leaving-women-and-girls-more-vulnerable-hiv-and-aids. See also Melissa Browning, *Risky Marriage: HIV and Intimate Relationships in Tanzania* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013).

Sexual Violence and Sinful Social Narratives

How can we better promote the reproductive rights of women and work to improve reproductive health globally? Structural reform aimed at improving educational opportunities for girls is one crucial element. Evidence confirms that improved educational opportunities for girls is directly linked to family size. In other words, better-educated girls tend to have fewer children than those who leave formal education at a younger age. Moreover, structural reform that aims to economically empower women can improve sexual health and family well-being. The Grameen Banking system in Bangladesh provides a vivid illustration of the positive outcomes that can be achieved through improving women's economic freedoms, even in modest ways.¹⁵

But there is another dimension that must be addressed, and that is the way in which social narratives perpetuate injustices against females. If we wish to improve reproductive health then we must dismantle damaging narratives about women, their bodies, and their "function" in society. Thus, wider educational initiatives aimed at re-examining dominant social narratives and the values/virtues that underpin them are crucial. For as Christian ethicist Traci West puts it, "This broader collective pattern of intuitive knowledge reveals lessons about how moral harm is generated."¹⁶ Catholic feminist theologian Anne Patrick, who has written extensively about this, observes:

¹⁵ For more on this, see Aminur Rahman, *Women and Microcredit in Rural Bangladesh: An Anthropological Study of Grameen Bank Lending* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001). Also see the work of Amartya Sen, who examines the connections between women's economic empowerment and human capabilities, including his *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 45.

Narrative . . . plays a key educational role by communicating and reinforcing the values and virtues esteemed by a culture. Moreover, narrative also serves to criticize views of value and virtue once their favored status in a society is seen as ambiguous. The critical role of narrative, in fact, is an important part of the dynamics of change where value and virtue are concerned.¹⁷

Who decides which traits of character are important and why? We know that our ability to grow in virtue is influenced by the social groups to which we belong and by the stories and norms that underpin them.¹⁸ So, deciding which virtues are or are not desirable within a social group must be open to continued scrutiny. In the case of Catholic teaching, Patrick believes that a patriarchal paradigm has contributed to the marginalization of women, facilitating patterns of thinking and acting that are characterized by misogyny, sexism, and a general mistrust of the female sex. These ways of thinking then become enshrined in the structures, laws, and processes of the institution over time. For much of its tradition, the Catholic faith has provided narratives of exclusion rather than narratives that nourish, support, and encourage women, Patrick argues. She calls for an “egalitarian paradigm” which recognizes the radical equality of the sexes.¹⁹ Such a shift in emphasis would see control being replaced with respect for all human beings. It is a paradigm, she believes, that would allow us to see the value of the body and the humanity of women. Furthermore, like many scholars, Patrick says that sexuality and social justice are connected and

¹⁷ Anne Patrick, “Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue,” in *Virtue*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 79.

¹⁸ Patrick, “Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue,” 80.

¹⁹ See also Anne E. Patrick, “His Dogs More Than Us: Virtue in Situations of Conflict between Women Religious and Their Ecclesiastical Employers,” in *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women’s Church Vocations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and “Framework for Love: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Christian Vocation,” in *A Just and True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, SJ (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 303–337, 310–311 and 329.

that sexuality is not just a matter of personal virtue. In other words, the exercise of authentic moral agency is dependent on complex social, economic, and cultural factors. It is imperative, therefore, that this paradigm of equality would include a commitment to the wellbeing of oneself and others, as well as a commitment to establishing just social relations based on mutuality, respect, and equality.²⁰ Patrick believes that an egalitarian paradigm would also acknowledge the impact of long-established power imbalances within relationships, something that especially harms the dignity of women and places women and girls at risk of intimate violence.²¹ She calls for deeper understanding of how society, economics, and politics affects a person's freedom to make responsible choices and argues that special attention must be given to the impact of race, gender, and religion on moral agency.

Social narratives can provide motivation and inspiration, but malformed narratives can weaken our moral sensibilities to the extent that we may not even be able to properly see the moral parameters of a situation. By way of illustration, Patrick recounts the murder of a Catholic nun, Marie Clementine Anwarite, by soldiers during Zaire's civil war. Sr. Marie chose to be killed rather than surrender her virginity to her aggressors, and when putting forward the case for her canonization, Pope John Paul II praised the "primordial value accorded to virginity" that Sr. Marie displayed in the face of impending danger.²²

Among the many things revealed by this terrible incident is a lack of appreciation by John Paul II of the physical danger in which Sr. Marie found herself. Nor do we find any recognition of the fact that this sort of violence is visited upon millions of women daily. It was an opportunity missed. For it *was* an opportunity for the head of the Catholic Church to raise awareness of gender-based violence and to condemn it in the strongest

²⁰ Patrick, "Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue," 83.

²¹ Patrick, "Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue," 84.

²² Homily of Pope John Paul II, "Beatification of Marie Clementine Anwarite," August 15, 1985, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/homilies/1985/documents/hf_jpii_hom_19850815_beatificazione-kinshasa.html.

terms. It *was* an opportunity for a pope to stand firmly in solidarity with women across the world who routinely endure sexual violence. Instead, it appeared that the priority was to reinforce the “traditional feminine virtues” of obedience, docility, and submissiveness.²³ In addition, John Paul II forgave the man who murdered Sr. Marie, raising further concerns about a lack of understanding of gender-based violence among some leaders in the Church. In contexts where “feminine” virtues like submissiveness, meekness, or docility are prized and where virginity is considered more important than the life of a woman, one starts to see how malformed narratives can distort our moral sensibilities. As Patrick puts it:

What women in patriarchal society need are not exhortations to humility and self-sacrifice, or stories of saints who preferred death to rape. Women need instead new models for virtue and new stories that communicate them . . . [What are needed] are new narratives that go beyond criticism and theory to provide models that demonstrate—with a power scholarly prose can never attain—the goodness and beauty of lives governed by the egalitarian paradigm for virtue.²⁴

Social narrative and social sin are connected.²⁵ For social narratives legitimize our sense of self, they give meaning to our lives, and they shape our views of the world. But, of course, some narratives serve to undermine human dignity, and aid the construction of “structures of violence,”²⁶ or what we call “structural” or “social sin” in theological parlance. As we will see in the next section, this coming together of social narrative and social sin was evidenced in Ireland through the establishment of institutions that

²³ Patrick, “Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue,” 85.

²⁴ Patrick, “Narrative and the Social Dynamic of Virtue,” 91.

²⁵ See also Kathryn Lilla Cox, “Reproductive Injustice as Social Sin: Mapping Sin Discourse into Debates about Fertility Decisions,” in this volume.

²⁶ This phrase is borrowed from the work of Paul Farmer. See, “Women, Poverty, and AIDS,” in *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence*, ed. Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, and Janie Simmons (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2011), 26.

directly denied women many of their basic human rights, including their reproductive rights. Control of women's bodies was justified by narratives that blended Catholic moral norms with notions of nationalism and patriotism. But there are many other ways of identifying how structural violence affects women's reproductive health; unjust legal, religious, economic, or cultural structures increase the risk of disease and premature death among the poor, contribute to the economic and sexual exploitation of women and girls, and legitimize gender norms that do harm to women. Sinful structures are maintained by humans, so these structures need their "apologists," as Paul Farmer put it.²⁷ Structural sin also implies the existence of a *pervasive culture* that supports formal expressions of injustice. It refers to the creation of a culture, a way of seeing and living, that legitimizes the oppression of others.²⁸ It creates a kind of moral "disorientation" within us, as Anna Rowlands describes it.²⁹

What are the consequences for women's reproductive justice? In addition to physical and psychological harms, Black feminist theologian Traci West speaks of how women's "becoming"³⁰ is denied: "It should be apparent that when they are sexually violated women's well-being is denied, and, in the language of liberative Christian ethics, their 'personal and communal becoming' is thwarted. As their bodies are violated, their dignity and worth are demeaned on a personal level."³¹ West continues by explaining that they are further devalued on a communal level because of the "insufficient manner" in which their injury and victimization are taken seriously by society, Church, and state institutions.³² Thus, we need to

²⁷ Farmer, "Women, Poverty, and AIDS," 26.

²⁸ See for example, Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2021), chapter four in particular.

²⁹ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 85. For an excellent account of the application of "structural sin" to the migrant crisis, see Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), chapter 2.

³⁰ We return to this idea of "becoming" below.

³¹ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 51.

³² West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 51.

understand more fully the reasons why misogyny and sexism persist and how this militates against the dignity of women. One might ask whether Catholic magisterial teaching goes far enough in naming the structures of violence that place women in danger and deny them their reproductive rights.

If the institutional Church wishes to become a stronger advocate for women's rights, then it must begin by listening to the lived experiences of women. Traci West echoes this point. She argues that Christian theology must be shaped by the stories and struggles of women; the trauma as well as the joy faced by women ought to inform how we do and understand our theology. Part of what is needed, therefore, is an honest examination of existing practices and attitudes *within* Christian communities "that inhibit and assault the social and spiritual well-being of persons." In addition, she states that it is imperative to identify how these practices "should be transformed to provide or support socially just and spiritually nurturing relations among us."³³ But much more needs to be done here. West concludes:

Attention to how we generate public perceptions of the moral and spiritual worth of women in conjunction with public practices that sanction their sexual abuse, assault, and harassment is especially salient in developing social ethics [The] intimate, private aspects of women's selves are inescapably linked to public responses. . . . The subject of sexual violation and its attendant public practices, therefore, provides a useful and rigorous test of the extent to which human dignity is a genuine social value within our communities.³⁴

The task of critical, honest reflection, hopefully leading to positive social confrontation, is not a solitary one. Faith communities ought to support each other, *and* they must hold each other accountable. Many ecclesial communities and churches are only beginning this painful process. But for

³³ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 38.

³⁴ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 38.

West, this “ethical work requires a visceral recognition of the meaning of body invasion, body assault, and body-demeaning speech, for women and for the whole of society.”³⁵ Moreover, acquiring knowledge of these realities will mean going beyond rational categories and theological concepts; it will mean that we confront our personal biases and our malformed understandings of womanhood, victimization, and how we value human bodies. We will see below how this is especially true in the Irish context in the aftermath of institutional gendered violence towards women.

Although West calls for the strategic priority of women’s voices in theological ethics, she cautions against thinking of women’s voices in a singular way. To put it differently, including “women’s experiences” in our discourse is not enough. These voices need careful discernment, investigation, and articulation. Otherwise, we risk creating a different set of problems or new forms of discrimination. This is because “women” do not constitute a homogenous group. And we know that some women are the instigators of gender oppression. Therefore, inequalities within power relations, including those among women, must be carefully understood.³⁶

Sinful Social Narratives and Institutional Gendered Violence: Lessons from Ireland

In recent decades, Ireland has been coming to terms with its deeply troubling past. The extent of abuse perpetrated against women, children, and vulnerable adults by both church and state raises many ethical questions. It is an uncomfortable history that is only slowly being acknowledged. We know that social narrative played its part here too, a narrative that amalgamated Catholic identity with nationalism, and one which prized virtues of sexual purity, submissiveness, and obedience in women. In the case of Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby

³⁵ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 42.

³⁶ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 48–49.

homes,³⁷ both church and state colluded in the violation of women's basic rights. It was strengthened by a national narrative that suggested both church and state had the right to control of women's sexual and reproductive agency.³⁸ Scholars of law Claire Hamilton, Lynsey Black, and Sinéad Ring explain:

Anxious to create and preserve its identity as different to and better than the colonizer, the new Irish state inscribed a repressive Catholic gender order on the bodies and lives of women and girls. It did so by using the network of massive Victorian institutions run by Catholic religious orders which had provided basic levels of relief to the poor in the wake of the famines of the 19th century.”³⁹

³⁷ For more on these institutions see Clara Fisher, “Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland,” *Signs* 41, no.4 (2016): 821–843. These institutions were named after Mary Magdalene and the Biblical misinterpretation which depicted her as a whore, sex worker, and fallen woman. Importantly, Fisher notes that these types of institutions were not peculiar to Ireland, although they flourished in Ireland in the twentieth century at a time when other countries were beginning to dismantle these asylums. “Often called Magdalen laundries because the women were put to work washing clothes, by the early twentieth century there were at least twenty-three such institutions and, unlike in earlier times, they seemed to be more preoccupied with ‘wayward daughters’ and unmarried mothers than prostitutes,” according to Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 32. It is believed that approximately thirty thousand women were incarcerated in these institutions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Ireland.

³⁸ The Christian moral tradition acknowledges the fact that true moral agency can only be exercised in contexts of freedom and knowledge, and that a variety of factors can impact both. See Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 75, where he describes freedom and knowledge as “two indispensable conditions of being a moral subject,” and claims that “freedom is so central to the moral life that without it we cannot properly speak of being moral persons at all.” Today we have a more acute awareness of the numerous cultural, societal, intergenerational factors that can limit freedom and diminish moral culpability.

³⁹ Claire Hamilton, Lynsey Black, Sinéad Ring, “Historical Gendered Institutional Violence: A Research Agenda for Criminologists,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 39, no. 1 (2023): 20.

Following independence, the Irish Free State, later to become the Irish Republic, relied on Catholic-run institutions for the policing of gender norms. Women who were forced into these laundries and homes were stigmatized: they were “fallen” women who not only violated Catholic moral teaching but also betrayed the nationalistic vision of a pure Ireland. These women became a source of free labor, providing considerable economic benefits for both church and state. Reasons for incarceration were broad, ranging from being in an “unsuitable” relationship, being considered too attractive, being a victim of a sexual attack, or being involved in sex work. Catholic authorities also incarcerated women who were deemed to be a burden on their families, or who were thought *likely* to become sexually promiscuous.⁴⁰ “Suspect women” were sometimes placed in laundries even though they had not transgressed any sexual moral codes at all. This included women with mental health issues, poor women, girls growing up in broken families, and so forth. As Lynsey Black explains:

Early in the life of the new state, sexual immorality had been identified as a threat to the nation. This ‘threat’ was especially located within the bodies of young women of the working and labouring classes. . . . [M]arginalised women and families experienced significant state and Church intervention, particularly in matters of morality and sex. While the sanctity of the family was respected, for lone women who posed a threat to this, there was no such protection.⁴¹

It is important to say that Magdalene Laundries were highly visible throughout Ireland and were an integrated, crucial part of the Irish economy. People knew of their existence. Moreover, most women and

⁴⁰ On this see also Hamilton, Black, and Ring, “Historical Gendered Institutional Violence,” 17–37.

⁴¹ Lynsey Black, *Gender and Punishment in Ireland: Women, Murder and the Death Penalty, 1922–64* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2022), 2, doi.org/10.7765/9781526145291.

girls were incarcerated with the cooperation of family members and the broader community. The social norms of the time, and the Catholic/nationalistic narratives that bolstered them, meant that a significant portion of the population were compliant when it came to the running of these institutions. As Black puts it, societal attitudes facilitated these injustices, especially paternalistic attitudes towards women: “Paternalism imagined women as childlike, inferior in rationality and lacking the capacity for full citizenship. This was particularly so for younger unmarried women who became pregnant.”⁴² In fact, Black goes further and argues that the incarceration of so many women in Ireland during this period demonstrated the highly conditional nature of “citizenship,” not to mention the limited concept of reproductive rights and freedoms.⁴³

So, if social virtue and social narrative depend on compliance from a significant portion of the population, what role do women play as oppressors of other women? As mentioned, one disturbing feature of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries and Mother and Baby Homes was the extent to which society—including other women—cooperated in the incarceration of these vulnerable women and girls. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, the ways in which women do harm to other women, often in ways that impact of their reproductive and sexual rights.

Women contribute to, and collude in, structures that are oppressive others for several reasons. Fear of violence can lead some to remain silent in the face of injustice. Others internalize so-called “feminine virtues” such as obedience and submission, which further adds to a culture of silence. And some women exploit others for profit, for example in the human trafficking and sex industries. Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes explores how women and girls at times contribute to their own oppression.⁴⁴ She

⁴² Black, *Gender and Punishment in Ireland*, 42.

⁴³ Black, *Gender and Punishment in Ireland*, 42.

⁴⁴ Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Women/Girls as Oppressors: The Cycle of Oppressor-Internalized Oppression,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 269–279.

explains that for females living in patriarchal contexts, a cycle of injustice is generated; women are oppressed, and because of this oppression become the oppressor of other females.⁴⁵ Hopelessness, despair, powerlessness, poverty, and marginalization contribute to circumstances in which women either remain silent in the face of oppression or participate in the sinful structures that cause their oppression in the first place.⁴⁶ To illustrate the point, Daniels-Sykes mentions how women are often involved in the organization of human trafficking, in facilitating female genital mutilation, and in the bullying of other females. "In order to transform this cycle of oppressor-internalized oppression, the persons involved must understand that a glimpse of the living God requires a profound rebirth."⁴⁷

Daniels-Sykes draws on the work of Paulo Freire and Elizabeth A. Johnson, noting that, for Johnson, acquiring the dispositions and traits that will halt the oppressor-internalized oppression cycle is vital. For Freire, we must "unlearn" and dismantle the cycle of oppressor-internalized oppression if we are to build relationships of mutuality, respect, and love. Redemption of the oppressor is as important as freeing the oppressed, and for Daniels-Sykes, this must include the conversion of female oppressors.⁴⁸

Resisting social sin requires inner transformation; it requires a new way of seeing and interacting. Paul Wadell describes injustice as a failure of moral imagination, and our efforts to *reimagine* a more just world will inevitably require a radical and unsettling change in attitude.⁴⁹ This is especially crucial where the oppression of women is caused by women oppressors. Virtue ethics, with its attention on moral growth, the formation of character, and personal conversion has a vital contribution to make here. As Daniels-Sykes and Wadell observe, the achievement of sexual wellbeing and the establishment of just sexual relationships depends

⁴⁵ Daniels-Sykes, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Women/Girls as Oppressors," 269.

⁴⁶ Daniels-Sykes, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Women/Girls as Oppressors," 270.

⁴⁷ Daniels-Sykes, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Women/Girls as Oppressors," 270.

⁴⁸ Daniels-Sykes, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Women/Girls as Oppressors," 276.

⁴⁹ Paul J. Wadell, "Reimagining the World: Justice," in Curran and Fullam, *Virtue*, 189.

on profound personal conversion as much as reform of sinful social structures.

The Virtues of Resistance and Resilience

There exists the moral responsibility to resist unjust social structures to help create better communities. It is vital, therefore, for individuals and groups to cultivate a critical consciousness, since it is through this awareness that we can critique the values and practices of our own culture. Furthermore, a critical consciousness empowers oppressed groups to see that injustice can be transformed and overcome. The virtue of resistance helps contest unjust power relations, so for Kochurani Abraham, this virtue becomes an integral part of any “ethic for change.”⁵⁰

Let us consider the ways a virtue of resistance might positively address the question of reproductive justice. Abraham explores how this virtue might be applied to women’s rights in India. In a culture where modesty and submission in females is glorified, people are nevertheless daring to resist norms that threaten their dignity. “Thanks to the political underpinnings of the feminist movement, women are finding ways and means to give vent to their anger at whatever is distorting their human dignity.”⁵¹ The situation in India is exacerbated by cultural norms that prioritize “feminine virtues” such as submission, self-sacrifice, and passivity, while social narratives reinforce the notion that preservation of the family is primarily a woman’s responsibility.⁵² These stereotypes heighten female vulnerability since they make women feel less able to speak

⁵⁰ Kochurani Abraham, “Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics,” in Hogan and Orobator, *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics*, 105.

⁵¹ Abraham, “Resistance,” 98. See also Virginia Saldanha, “Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Gender and Reproductive Injustice and their Impact on Women’s Agency in India,” 391–410 in this volume.

⁵² Stephanie Ann Y. Puen expresses similar concerns about the messages that form women in Filipino culture. See Puen’s “Considerations for a Comprehensive Sex Education Grounded in Catholic Social Teaching for Reproductive Justice in the Philippines.”

out for fear of familial breakup. The cost of this to women is seen in many ways; for some, it is utter helplessness in the face of violence, for others it is an increasing vulnerability to violence within the “feminine space” of the home.⁵³

But through the virtue of resistance, women can reclaim their agency, their subjectivity, and their sense of self, Abraham argues. It is through the virtue of resistance that power relations are critiqued and even dismantled. Abraham believes that in order to challenge sinful attitudes and structures we must first develop “a critical consciousness.” Forming this critical consciousness would help women see that oppression is not final, that resistance offers hope, and that current injustices can be overcome. I would argue that this critical consciousness needs to be cultivated by Church leadership also and that the Magisterium’s teaching on the family ought to more clearly take account of the injustices endured by women and girls across the world. Narratives of domination need to be unmasked and rejected. And as already mentioned, women’s voices must be heard and their experiences taken seriously if we are to enrich our understanding of how best to live in right relationship with each other.

The virtue of resistance is a crucial step towards sexual self-care, but resisting unjust sexual norms can be both difficult and dangerous. Prudence helps determine if, and when, resistance is called for.⁵⁴ The precarity of a woman’s situation may make it unwise, indeed dangerous, to challenge societal norms. Although we bear a responsibility to create more just communities conducive to the flourishing of all peoples, we have a duty of self-care also. The virtue of resistance, accompanied by courage and prudence, plays a key role in positive social transformation, but one must also be cognizant of the precarious lives of many women. In these circumstances, resistance may need to be entrusted to others. Still, this

⁵³ Abraham, “Resistance,” 99.

⁵⁴ In Catholic virtue ethics, prudence is the ability to apply right reason to action. Aquinas developed what Aristotle had previously described as practical wisdom. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 57, a. 5. See also Stephen J. Pope, “Overview of the Ethics of Aquinas,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 34.

virtue remains a critical tool for social change, especially for those most affected by injustice. It requires the courage to defy established systems of oppression and challenge patterns of domination and control. And although this brings with it enormous risk, we see women resisting deep-rooted injustice in creative, sustained ways across the world.⁵⁵

Others like Nuala Kenny prefers to speak of the virtue of resilience. “The promotion of resilience is crucial in responding to trauma and abuse and healing from it. The word’s origins are in the Latin *resilire*, meaning ‘to recoil or spring back.’ In psychology it has come to mean the ability to respond effectively to and cope with trauma, adversity, and failure. It is never returning to normal but a positive adaptation resulting in an ongoing protective capability.”⁵⁶ Writing about clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, Kenny calls for both a recognition of the harms done and a need to tackle the systemic and cultural causes of abuse. The latter will require confronting cultural norms and narratives that encourage various forms of violence. She calls for a deeper understanding of human vulnerability, arguing that this is crucial for the prevention of sexual violence in particular and helps foster resilience in the face of harm.⁵⁷ Vulnerability is part of our common embodied existence, she tells us, but also belongs to each unique and personal situation. However, Kenny warns against thinking of vulnerability in paternalistic or oppressive terms, for we risk stigmatizing the person or group when we do so: “There are strong ethical implications of vulnerability. It can be patronizing and paternalistic or unifying and socially transformative. Acknowledging

⁵⁵ For more on this point, see Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Cooperation with Evil Reconsidered: The Moral Duty of Resistance,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2017): 96–120.

⁵⁶ Nuala Kenny, “Clergy Sexual Abuse, Trauma-Informed Theology, and the Promotion of Resilience,” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Child Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan SJ, and Hans Zollner, SJ (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 373.

⁵⁷ Kenny, “Clergy Sexual Abuse,” 364.

mutual vulnerability allows us to be aware of others and their dignity and capabilities.”⁵⁸

Constructing ethical responses that promote autonomy and resilience helps individuals and communities overcome a sense of powerlessness and loss of agency in the aftermath of violence.⁵⁹ Importantly for Kenny, recovery from trauma requires accompaniment, which in turn depends on “truth-telling and wound healing.” As Christians, we take hope, strength, and courage from the belief that “the Resurrection demonstrates the ultimate resilience after trauma,” as Kenny puts it.⁶⁰

In a way, this leads us back to an earlier point by West, namely the notion of *becoming*. If we think of this idea alongside resistance and resilience, we find in Kenny and West’s work a hopeful view of what the future might hold for women’s sexual and reproductive lives. Seen through a Christian lens, an “ethic of becoming” is future-orientated while simultaneously grounded in a critique of present realities. West writes:

Becoming reflects hope about solidarity that should inform (*become* a part of) our communal relations . . . [It] also depicts a process of struggle upon which this hopeful vision depends. It describes an ethic that is not concerned with achieving a finite goal or with a place that one aspires to reach in order to be finished with certain ethical problems. Instead, hope for ethical relationships is only found in one’s participation in the process of becoming a more compassionate society, in confronting the multiple patterns of denial, devaluation, and abuse or assaults like those produced in the sexual violation of poor women sex workers.⁶¹

As West understands it, *becoming* is an unfinished task. An ethic of becoming forces us to ask, what are we becoming and why? For our practices reveal to the world the nature of our moral commitments. They

⁵⁸ Kenny, “Clergy Sexual Abuse,” 366.

⁵⁹ Kenny, “Clergy Sexual Abuse,” 366.

⁶⁰ Kenny, “Clergy Sexual Abuse,” 370.

⁶¹ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 52.

make known our stance towards others. In the context of this chapter, we can say that our practices are a reflection of how committed we are to the dignity of women. Our concern for women's reproductive agency must be accompanied by critical self-reflection and accountability when norms are violated. West believes that "A liberative Christian social ethic ... ignites a commitment to find ideas for resisting societal practices that violate bodies, devalue worth and dignity, and treat dismissively the gifts, hopes, and struggles of peoples."⁶² Among other things, such an ethic must include the scrutiny of institutions, including religious institutions; seeking out, and hearing from, those who dwell on the margins; and developing methods of strategic resistance.⁶³ This idea of becoming, and the liberative Christian social ethic that West refers to, also points to deep theological truths that guide and sustain our efforts in this life. Becoming captures a vision of the person as always imperfect, journeying towards betterment, and in need of God's mercy. It suggests that the human condition is fragile and that moral growth is gradual. It reminds us that discipleship is dynamic and ongoing, always working (becoming) towards the building up of God's Kingdom in the here and now.

Implications for Catholic Teaching

What, then, are the implications for magisterial teaching regarding women's reproductive rights? Most Catholic ethicists today recognize the need for balanced, informed dialogue about the complex realities of reproductive health and sexuality. None of this is at the expense of the rich tradition that sustains and guides Catholic ethical discourse, but intersectional and inclusive research is vitally important here. For these reasons, I argue that Church leadership ought to address the complexity of reproductive health in a more nuanced and integrated way. The many dimensions of women's reproductive rights need careful attention,

⁶² West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 69.

⁶³ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 69.

underpinned by an understanding of how this question is tied to other human rights and social justice issues affecting women. Singular approaches will not yield hopeful answers for the millions of women and girls who find themselves in dangerous or crisis situations.

Poverty, lack of education, and social and cultural marginalization are leading causes of women's sexual and reproductive disempowerment. In addition, gender-based violence is not just a serious violation of human rights; it increases crisis situations in the lives of women and girls. Thus, to think of reproductive justice in singular terms fails to acknowledge the complicated nature of human relationships or the ways in which our socio-economic and cultural contexts often shape the decision-making of women. Securing greater empowerment and agency for females is a critical step towards reproductive justice, but this cannot be done without addressing the structures of violence that oppress women and girls globally.

And yet this is a weakness of magisterial teaching. Commonly, issues of reproductive health are dealt with in ways that fail to recognize the difficult realities of many women's lives. Church teaching ought to name more explicitly the underlying injustices that affect the health and wellbeing of women. Instead, discussions about the empowerment of women are regularly met with suspicion and mistrust and unfairly equated with a pro-choice agenda. Moreover, magisterial teaching would benefit from greater inclusion of intersectional thinking in the area of reproductive justice. Above all, the voices and experiences of women need to be heard, especially in teaching that details the most intimate concerns of women's lives. Finally, the dangers faced by females *within* the family present challenges for Church teaching on marriage. Does Catholic teaching offer any hope to women in abusive relationships or to women and girls who are forced into (often early) marriage? Would it not be a more credible witness to the Gospel if magisterial teaching were as renowned for its condemnation of child marriage and gender-based violence as it is for its opposition to artificial contraception?

Confronting Harmful Gender-Stereotypes

The Church must renounce harmful gender-stereotypes if it is to promote reproductive justice. The reliance on limiting gender stereotypes that we find in magisterial teaching endanger the health and security of women in some contexts. For example, an emphasis on caregiving as a feminine quality might reduce women's agency and freedom, especially if caregiving is not a free choice but something imposed through social or religious expectation. In many cultures, caregiving is thought of almost exclusively as a feminine virtue and can serve to reduce women's freedoms outside the home.

A criticism of Pope Francis's teaching to date has been his failure to address the question of women's agency in a detailed way. It is disappointing to see that, like his predecessors, he falls back on romanticized notions of womanhood. Lisa Sowle Cahill says that in Pope Francis's documents "women's agency is essentialized, romanticized, politically subordinated, or entirely neglected."⁶⁴ And Kristin Heyer argues that although the teaching of Francis shows development, "there remains anxiety about the weakening of sexual differences, maternal presence, and mothers' self-sacrificial responsibilities."⁶⁵

The way magisterial teaching discusses women is problematic, and even dangerous. For ideals of womanhood that emphasize self-sacrifice within the home can create contexts of danger for millions of women globally. What is needed from Church leadership is strong, clear condemnation of sexism and misogyny in all its forms, as well as a commitment to hear the voices of women and learn from their experiences. In addition, it is important to confront malformed notions of masculinity that place females at risk of violence.

⁶⁴ Cited in Kristin Heyer, "Walls in the Heart: Social Sin and *Fratelli tutti*," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 19, no. 1 (2022): 37–38.

⁶⁵ Heyer, "Walls in the Heart," 38.

Re-thinking Culture, Consent, and Agency

Catholic teaching must also consider more deeply the ways in which culture, consent, and agency impact the sexual and reproductive agency of women. Karen Peterson-Iyer explores the idea of agency in the context of the hookup culture in America, teen sexting, sex trafficking, and the commercial sex industry.⁶⁶ Although writing mostly from the American (and Western) context, her work raises vital questions that extend to other geo-political locations and is a valuable resource for the purposes of this chapter. For Peterson-Iyer, hyper-individualism, freedom of choice, and agency are regularly cited in defense of the hookup culture, so any critique must also include the broader socio-cultural attitudes and assumptions that underpin it. Importantly, she explains how hyper-masculinity, the objectification of women's bodies, a lack of self-care for one's own body or the bodies of others, create damaging sexual expectations among people. Peterson-Iyer contends that the hookup culture must be confronted through an emphasis on *authentic* human agency. Here too, we see how damaging expectations contribute to malformed ideas of agency and freedom; instead of liberating women, they create expectations that increase personal risk for females. She argues that what is needed is a "holistic understanding of human flourishing animated by the demands of justice."⁶⁷

Consent, of course, is complicated, and can be compromised in several ways. Poor communication, fear of violence, intoxication, peer pressure, and gendered cultural expectations serve to diminish consent. Moreover, cultural expectations that discourage women from expressing true agency are highly problematic.⁶⁸ The human subject, and her agency, must contend with the tensions that broader culture brings. Our sense of "self"

⁶⁶ See Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), in particular chapter 3.

⁶⁷ Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*, 56.

⁶⁸ Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*, 63–64.

is conditioned by a host of factors that converge to shape and form us, including societal narratives.

One area that Peterson-Iyer is particularly critical of is the growing cultural narrative around hyper-masculinity. We have seen above how restrictive gender norms harm the wellbeing of women. Interestingly, Peterson-Iyer notes that a 2016 meta-review of seventy-eight studies on masculinity and mental health concluded that men who place value on power, strength, and dominance over women are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as depression and anxiety and have body image difficulties, and are likely to suffer from substance abuse.⁶⁹ Thus, social narratives contribute to harmful messages for men as well as women. The virtues of self-care, resistance, and resilience are as important to cultivate among men as among women.

We perhaps think of agency and consent as something relatively straightforward, and yet our ability to exercise authentic agency is influenced by many things. Much of this chapter has focused on the ways poorer women are disempowered through poverty and harmful gender norms and the impact that these have on their reproductive well-being. Discourse around sexual and reproductive rights must be nuanced, informed, and above all compassionate if we are to effect positive change. Echoing an earlier point, Michelle Becka explains that “while respect for relational and vulnerable autonomy of the human person has become a nucleus of theological ethics more recently, it is still given too little consideration in the church’s debate about sexual violence.”⁷⁰ Drawing from the work of Hille Haker, Judith Butler and others, Becka discusses the notion of “vulnerable agency,” an idea that reminds us that autonomy and agency coexist with vulnerability and relationality.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*, 69.

⁷⁰ Michelle Becka, “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, 11.

⁷¹ Becka, “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” 12. See also James F. Keenan, SJ, “Vulnerability,” in *The Moral Life: Eight Lectures* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 19–37.

Vulnerable agency can be understood in three interconnected ways. The first is ontological vulnerability, whereby human beings by their very nature are “touchable by others and open to the world.”⁷² It refers to the human condition of being receptive to others, being open to the world and relationships, and allowing ourselves to accept the risk that this entails. The second dimension that Becka highlights is moral vulnerability. This refers to our susceptibility to be harmed by someone else and recognizes the fragility of human interactions. “The subject is at the same time a free agent *and* vulnerable. Because the self-determination and agency that constitutes the human being is always at risk, it requires special protection.”⁷³ This brings us to the third dimension of vulnerable agency, namely structural vulnerability. It is what Judith Butler describes as “precarity” and refers to the “situations and structures in which people lack security and social freedom [that] other groups have.”⁷⁴

We know that our understanding of human flourishing is historically and culturally situated and therefore in need of constant, robust scrutiny. As Becka and others demonstrate, our understanding of agency, freedom, and consent must also include recognition of human fragility, including the vulnerability and precarity that connects us all.⁷⁵ Peterson-Iyer argues that any sexual ethic interested in fostering genuine sexual agency and promoting human flourishing must encourage environments conducive to mature sexual discourse and true sexual self-knowledge. In other words, what is needed are supportive contexts in which integration of the sexual into our overall identity can be achieved, encouraging an ethic of care for both the individual and those with whom we share our intimate lives. An ethic that takes seriously sexual and reproductive agency “will actively call people to consider their values, their histories, and their emotions as they make sexual choices, being honest with themselves about their fears,

⁷² Becka, “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” 15.

⁷³ Becka, “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” 15.

⁷⁴ Becka, “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” 15.

⁷⁵ For more on this see James Keenan, “The World at Risk: Vulnerability, Precarity, and Connectedness,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2020): 132–149.

desires, and goals. . . . A Christian ethic will seek to articulate and promote what might count as supportive, safe contexts for sex—contexts that foster human wholeness and therefore emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

This chapter began with sobering statistics from the WHO that demonstrate the stark realities of gender-based violence and its devastating consequences for women and their reproductive agency. The Irish context provided a vivid illustration of how social and religious narrative can become intertwined with institutions that oppress females and deny them their fundamental rights. Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes serve as a reminder of the Catholic Church’s collusion in violence against women. The virtues of resistance and resilience are needed precisely because of the social sins that continue to oppress females today, both within society and within Church institutions. Resisting patriarchal norms is critical for women’s reproductive agency; new ways forward must be rooted in justice and reflect the lived experiences of women.

Moreover, Catholic discourse on women’s reproductive rights ought to be conducted with compassion and gentleness rather than seen as a weapon to crush and control women’s bodies. Magisterial teaching would be strengthened if it more deeply incorporated the complexities of reproductive justice, learning from the testimonies of women. Intersectional scholarship provides a valuable resource for Church teaching, something which could enrich its approach to these matters. As every chapter within this volume details, reproductive justice is connected to a host of other justice issues. If we are committed to the flourishing of all human beings and to the protection of human dignity, the bodily integrity and reproductive wellbeing of women must be an integral part of such a

⁷⁶ Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*, 75.

commitment. This will require sophisticated thinking as well as efforts to dismantle the harmful structures and damaging narratives that oppress women. It will also require us to appreciate the precarity and vulnerability that accompanies reproductive agency in a more thoughtful way. And above all, it will require patience and understanding as we journey with others towards responsible, just moral decision-making.



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