

8. On Threats to Women's Flourishing

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Note from the Co-Editors: In this first roundtable, we asked participants to respond to the questions: "What are the threats to women's dignity and moral agency in your context? Is reproductive justice a helpful framework for addressing those threats?" Authors from the Philippines, United States of America, and Nigeria responded by noting different threats to women's flourishing, and some of the possible ways that a framework of reproductive justice can provide meaningful categories for social action.

Stephanie Ann Puen (Philippines)

In September 2023, the Senate Committee on Women, Children, Family Relations, and Gender Equality in the Philippines approved "a consolidated measure that provides for absolute divorce based on various grounds, including five years of separation, whether continuous or broken, and the commission of the crime of rape before or after marriage."¹ Journalists noted that the bill faced an uphill battle because of the role of religious leaders in the Philippines.² Discussion of legal divorce in the Philippines comes a decade or so after the signing of the reproductive health bill into law in 2012, which was also fraught with controversy in a country where the Catholic church is still a strong institution, especially in

¹ Cecille Suerte Felipe, "Divorce Bill An Uphill Battle – Tulfo," *Philippine Star*, September 25, 2023, www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/09/25/2298815/divorce-bill-uphill-battle-tulfo.

² Felipe, "Divorce Bill An Uphill Battle – Tulfo." The state does recognize and allow Islamic law and its provisions for divorce to apply to Muslims within the country.

the more rural areas outside of the metropolitan cities.³ Leaders of the Catholic church in the Philippines fought fiercely to keep this prohibition of legal divorce in place, as there was a feeling that the church lost power and influence when the reproductive health bill was signed into law. They feared the same result if divorce were to be declared a legal right for Catholics.⁴

The concern with divorce and reproductive health is connected and stems from the injustice Filipino women face in marriage and the family. Husbands often force wives to have sex in marriage, claiming there is no such thing as rape in marriage, as marriage entitles the man to sex. When the woman becomes pregnant and has children, the man is not really expected to care for them, and often the woman is left to care for their children. Should the man leave for someone else, laws that require fathers to support their biological children are not strictly enforced, if enforced at all, and women are left to be solo parents in a country where dual incomes are needed to survive. In Filipino culture, men can also have several mistresses and sire children with them, with this phenomenon being seen as a sign of virility and a badge of honor, whereas women are still seen as “sluts” or “whores” if they are found to have had multiple partners. The opposition to divorce and reproductive health and contraception measures has contributed to the growing number of “illegitimate” children in the country, who have no stable home or care and who are shamed for their “illegitimate” status. Women thus become reduced to objects, essentialized to particular gender roles as mothers or mistresses, and

³ Michael Lipka, “5 Facts About Catholicism in the Philippines,” *Pew Research Center*, January 9, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/01/09/5-facts-about-catholicism-in-the-philippines/.

⁴ The only countries in the world in which divorce is illegal are the Philippines and the Vatican City State. See Rowalt Alibudbud, Alexander Smith, Michael Liebreinz, and Janet M. Arnado, “Reframing Divorce as a Mental Health Policy Issue in the Philippines,” *The Lancet* 11, no. 4 (2024): [doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(24\)00002-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(24)00002-6).

unjustly treated, especially when they deviate from these roles. Women are not regarded as human persons with inherent God-given dignity.⁵

Reproductive justice as a framework is helpful in that it can clarify further what justice can and should look like in the reproductive health law and the proposed divorce bill. Reproductive justice goes beyond consent and individual agents' choices and rights because it includes the structural factors that affect issues of sex, gender, marriage, and reproductive health.⁶ In the Philippines, where relationality and community are important, reproductive justice can be a more welcome framework to use as it highlights the relationships of the people, particularly women, and what is needed to care for their well-being.

A justice-based framework is superior to a legalistic framework because it can help flesh out the guidelines of divorce in the country while still being sensitive to the concerns of Filipino culture. If we review the grounds for divorce in the proposed bill—physical violence against a spouse or child, imprisonment of a spouse for more than six years, abandonment for more than a year, sexual infidelity or perversion, bigamy, homosexuality, or drug addiction—we will see that these grounds reflect a desire to address cases of injustice within family relationships. Analysts explain that a “cooling off period” is built in to the proposal which says that, except in cases that involve violence against women or children, the court would not be allowed to take any action for six months after the initial filing.⁷ The bill also obliges the court to “take steps toward the reconciliation of the spouses” before granting the final decree.⁸ Most importantly, the bill

⁵ For a provocative analysis of gender-based violence and the question of women's humanity, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

⁶ Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 56.

⁷ Tom Hundley and Ana P. Santos, “The Last Country in the World Where Divorce is Illegal,” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2015, foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/19/the-last-country-in-the-world-where-divorce-is-illegal-philippines-catholic-church/.

⁸ Hundley and Santos, “The Last Country in the World Where Divorce is Illegal.”

provides guidelines for the division of assets, child support, and payment of damages to “the innocent spouse.”⁹

As for the reproductive health law, reproductive justice is a good framework for a comprehensive sex education, as comprehensive sex education is part of the reproductive health law but has not been as well-implemented.¹⁰ Reproductive justice can be the foundation of an age-appropriate comprehensive sex education that is not just about consenting to sex, but also helping people be responsible by learning the implications of engaging in sex, pregnancy, contraception, and marriage and its impact on one's reproductive and overall health and relationships, as well as its relationship to other social issues such as poverty. Attention to the flourishing of women and children in the Philippines remains an important priority for people of faith; while certainly this is a complex issue, a lens of reproductive justice can help Catholic leaders see that a prohibition of legal divorce can create suffering for women and children.

Karen Peterson-Iyer (USA)

As Stephanie Ann Puen highlights in the context of the Philippines, feminist ethical scholarship (and indeed any good ethical scholarship) must not ignore the concrete structural power dynamics of a given practice. In other words, it is not enough to promote certain practices (marriage, childbearing, and so forth) in the abstract, apart from the concrete struggles and injustices such women face in the real world. For in that real world, sexual double standards prevail, responsibility for caregiving tends to fall to women, and women are frequently the recipients of unwanted sexual attention or of sexual violence—both at home and in the workplace. Reproductive justice, then, must attend to these real

⁹ Hundley and Santos, “The Last Country in the World Where Divorce is Illegal.”

¹⁰ For elaboration, see Stephanie Ann Puen, “Considerations for a Comprehensive Sex Education Grounded in Catholic Social Thought for Reproductive Justice in the Philippines,” 237–256, in this volume.

struggles and challenges that women face in order to attain (or even to move in the direction of) genuine reproductive flourishing. Moreover, approaches to envisioning women's well-being must take account of those women in their concrete, relational—that is, their REAL—contexts.

For women (and girls) who labor in agricultural contexts in the US,¹¹ it is simply not enough to ensure access to reproductive health care, envisioned only or even primarily as accessible abortion. This may be one piece of the puzzle, but it is only one piece—and a piece that comes rather late in the game. These women deserve a full-throttle affirmation of their dignity and moral agency from the start, one that addresses them honestly and squarely in the midst of their relational complexity and concrete struggles.

Women—particularly younger women—who work on most farms frequently struggle to care for their born children, to feed and clothe them, to keep them safely sheltered and educated, and to ensure that they can play and grow. This constitutes a major set of hurdles to familial well-being. Moreover, the low wages and grinding poverty, the substandard and notoriously unsafe housing, and the disproportionate exposure to pesticides constitute massive challenges to these women's dignity, agency, and ability to care for their families. To make matters worse, illiteracy and innumeracy, the well-grounded fear of encountering the US immigration system, and a general lack of access to reliable transportation make it difficult for such women to access the social supports necessary to bolster their dignity and agency. Finally, a reasonable fear of violence—both at home and in the fields—leads many women to endure injustice and maltreatment at additional levels, all in the name of supporting their families.

What these women need are approaches to health and well-being that bolster their ability to protect and care for themselves and their (born) children. They need access to culturally competent medical care such that they genuinely understand their own health situation and experience an

¹¹ For elaboration, see Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Reproductive Justice and Agricultural Labor Migrants," 257–289, in this volume.

authentic sense of empowerment vis-à-vis their choices and their rights. They need to be empowered, by way of interactions *within their own communities*, that help them to shore up their social, legal, and educational options and opportunities. They need safe and affordable housing and childcare, and they need nearby high-quality educational opportunities for their children. They need to know that they may work safely in the fields and live safely in their homes, free from the dangers of domestic violence and sexual abuse that currently haunt them in both places. They need the US government not only to fortify these various social and legal supports; they need it to *reform the broken immigration system*—replacing it with meaningful immigration reform that includes pathways to citizenship for women and their children and spouses. Such changes themselves must be accompanied by efforts (on the part of individuals, religious communities, and governments) to confront and reject the xenophobia that characterizes far too much of immigrant experiences today.

All of these changes can rightly be addressed within the framework of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice, by offering a social and structural approach to analyzing human struggle, begins to take seriously the concrete struggles and genuine relationships of migrant women who labor in America's fields. In this way it represents a compelling conceptual tool for bolstering their flourishing, their agency, and ultimately their human dignity.

Mary Doyle Roche (USA)

As Stephanie Ann Puen and Karen Peterson Iyer have highlighted in this exchange, women's dignity and agency are deeply entwined in a complex web of social determinants. Even when women's dignity and agency might be protected technically, as when laws recognize their basic political rights, they are frequently denied the goods that they require to meaningfully exercise those rights. In the US context, as I suspect in other parts of the world, the denial of those goods has been deliberately and systematically

orchestrated in ways that benefit white supremacist patriarchy.¹² Even the measured progress of civil rights movements for people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and migrants is being met with what scholar Terry Smith and journalist Wesley Lowery have described as “whitelash.”¹³ Fear has rallied proponents of white supremacist patriarchy and white Christian nationalism in the US, giving them an outsized voice in electoral politics that has resulted in the steady erosion of rights that include access to reproductive healthcare and the vote.

The particular slice of US culture in which I place myself each day is a small, liberal arts, Catholic and Jesuit college in the northeast. I am particularly attuned to and worried about how the education of young people can honor dignity and advance agency or undermine it. The 2022 Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is an assault on women's dignity, rights, and agency. The movement for reproductive justice has made this clear and has also moved the conversation beyond access to abortion services to include the real ability to have children and raise them in a just and healthy world. Women's agency rests on *both* immunity from undue interference on the part of governments and other institutions *and* positive claims for basic needs like healthcare, housing and nutrition, education, a livelihood, and security.

Whitelash has also taken the form of school curricular changes, book challenges, and book bans. In the US, the American Library Association's list of frequently banned and challenged books includes books that feature LGBTQIA+ experiences, sexual content, as well as the struggles and achievements of Black people and other minoritized groups. Many of these

¹² On this point, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2017); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Anchor, 2006); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

¹³ Terry Smith, *Whitelash: Unmasking White Grievance at the Ballot Box* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Wesley Lowery, *American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2023).

books look squarely at racism, sexism, homophobia, and abuse from the “coming of age” vantage point.¹⁴ It is already the case that many young people lack access to adequate sex education, and young people in Catholic and other religiously sponsored schools may be at a particular disadvantage in this regard.¹⁵ Not only is some basic scientific and historical information kept from them or misrepresented, the banning of books can leave them without stories to help them make sense of their sexual lives, gender identities, and intimate relationships. Such censoring is proposed in the guise of protecting children, but these efforts will, in the end, undermine their development and agency, leaving them more vulnerable to harm.¹⁶ Book banning can stifle the kind of imagination that reproductive justice requires for biological and social reproduction. Such censoring ignores the value of embodied experiences, the lessons of history, and ways of knowing passed on among indigenous peoples and marginalized communities. This white supremacist and white nationalist project to circumscribe access to experience, science, history, and imagination thwarts the dignity and agency of women, girls, LGBTQIA+ persons, and people of color. The reproductive justice framework and movement provides the intersectional analysis needed to unmask the intentions of book banners. Reproductive justice advocates reach back into the past and look ahead to the future in a kind of intergenerational solidarity that honors dignity, agency, and interdependence.

¹⁴ American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, “Banned and Challenged Books: 2023,” www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10.

¹⁵ For further elaboration, see Stephanie Ann Puen, “Considerations for a Comprehensive Sex Education Grounded in Catholic Social Thought for Reproductive Justice in the Philippines,” in this volume.

¹⁶ Some feminist scholars are concerned, for example, that many young people learn about sex and sexuality from pornography, which contains scripts of violence and can undermine a sexual ethics rooted in intimacy and mutual well-being. See, for example, Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 68, 86–88; Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2011).

Emily Reimer-Barry (USA)

I will take as my starting point what Karen Peterson-Iyer describes as the “concrete structural power dynamics” that undermine reproductive justice in my context. I live in California, one of the epicenters of mass incarceration in the United States.¹⁷ Mass incarceration refers to a network of policing, prosecution, incarceration, surveillance, debt, and social control that reproduces social inequalities.¹⁸ The challenges faced by incarcerated women are different than the ones faced by incarcerated men. A gendered analysis can prove especially fruitful because it enables us to see how women's experiences of sexual abuse, pregnancy loss, and motherhood are criminalized in US society, especially for poor women and women of color.

First, we must look at the prison pipeline for women and girls. It is not the case that all incarcerated women have been convicted of violent crimes. The cash bail system in the US criminalizes poverty because people who cannot afford to pay bail face detention while they await trial. 60 percent of women in local-jurisdiction jails are in pre-trial detention because they cannot afford bail. Research by the Prison Policy Initiative found that the typical bail amounts to a full year's income for women, and many find that even though they are the primary caregivers of children, they are stuck in jail awaiting trial. 58 percent of all women in US prisons are mothers, as are 80 percent of women in jails.¹⁹ Most of these women are incarcerated for

¹⁷ Christopher Kaiser-Nyman, Michelle Parris, and Brandon Sixto, “California: The State of Incarceration,” Vera Institute of Justice (2023): www.vera.org/california-state-of-incarceration/. Vera is an organization dedicated to end overcriminalization and mass incarceration of people of color, immigrants, and people experiencing poverty. See “About Us,” www.vera.org/who-we-are/about-us.

¹⁸ See Institute to End Mass Incarceration, “What We Mean by Mass Incarceration,” 2024, endmassincarceration.org/what-is-mass-incarceration/. See also Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Wendy Sawyer and Wanda Bertram, “Prisons and Jails Will Separate Millions of Mothers from their Children in 2022,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, May 4, 2022, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/04/mothers_day/.

drug and property offenses.²⁰ But an alarming number of women and girls encounter the criminal justice system for other reasons. In Ohio, thirty-three-year old Brittany Watts was charged with abuse of a corpse after she miscarried at twenty-one weeks of pregnancy.²¹ In Connecticut, Sanna Dilawar, mother of an eleven-week old daughter, was arrested when she reported her husband's domestic abuse.²² In Missouri, a judge sentenced Tamarae LaRue, a single mother, to jail for fifteen days when her kindergartner missed fourteen days of school.²³ In what researchers call a "perverse twist of justice," many girls who experience sexual abuse are routed into the juvenile justice system because of their victimization.²⁴ Children previously incarcerated within the juvenile justice system can violate their probation for infractions such as failing to make their bed or missing curfew.²⁵ Under fetal personhood laws, pregnant women who are

²⁰ To learn more about a faith-based organization working to address the criminalization of Black motherhood, see the work of Dr. Nikia Smith Roberts at Abolitionist Sanctuary, www.abolitionistsanctuary.org/.

²¹ Julie Carr Smyth, "A Black Woman Was Criminally Charged After a Miscarriage," *AP News*, December 16, 2023, apnews.com/article/ohio-miscarriage-prosecution-brittany-watts-b8090abfb5994b8a23457b80cf3f27ce.

²² Sarah Smith, "In Connecticut, Calling for Help Carries Risk for Domestic Violence Victims," *CT Mirror*, February 19, 2017, ctmirror.org/2017/02/19/in-connecticut-calling-for-help-carries-risks-for-domestic-violence-victims/.

²³ Donna St. George, "Some Parents Are Prosecuted or Fined When Children Miss School," *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/01/02/student-absenteeism-schools-parents-prosecuted/. See also the scholarship of Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins School of Education.

²⁴ Malika Saada Saar, Rebecca Epstein, Lindsay Rosenthal, and Yasmin Vafa, "The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls Story," Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2023, <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Sexual-Abuse-To-Prison-Pipeline-The-Girls%E2%80%99Story.pdf>.

²⁵ Hannah Levintova, "Thousands of Girls Are Locked Up for Talking Back or Staying Out Late," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2016, www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/09/girls-juvenile-justice-status-offenses/. Levintova explains that gendered discrepancies were present in the earliest laws about juvenile justice in the US. For example, the first juvenile court, established in 1899, included "frequent attendance at saloons and pool halls" and "the use of indecent language" as actionable offenses. In the 1930s, young girls could be prosecuted in

addicts have been prosecuted instead of given the help they need to address their substance abuse.²⁶ Asylum seekers also experience confinement when they are placed in detention centers as they await their hearing date. 67 percent of detainees held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers have no criminal record.²⁷

In jails, detention centers, and prisons, women experience dehumanizing and violent conditions. In 2023, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation logged more than eight hundred complaints of staff sexual abuse, but most advocates believe this to be a significant undercount.²⁸ Women report widespread sexual abuse as an ordinary aspect of confinement. Human rights abuses also include family separation policies,²⁹ coerced sterilizations of immigrant women,³⁰ the shackling of pregnant and laboring women,³¹ and the withholding of sanitary napkins from menstruating women.³² These violations of

juvenile court for being “in danger of becoming morally depraved.” See also the analysis in this volume by Suzanne Mulligan regarding the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland.

²⁶ Michelle Goodwin, *Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²⁷ TRAC Immigration, “ICE Detainees,” January 13, 2024, trac.syr.edu/immigration/detention/stats/pop_agen_table.html.

²⁸ Sam Levin, “The Women Trapped in Prison with Abusive Guards,” *The Guardian*, October 29, 2023, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/29/womens-prison-guards-sexual-abuse. See also Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: OneWorld, 2015).

²⁹ Over four thousand children were separated from their parents during the Trump Administration. See Caitlin Dickerson, “We Need to Take Away Children,” *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2022, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/09/trump-administration-family-separation-policy-immigration/670604/.

³⁰ Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide, “Testimony of Whistleblower Dawn Wooten,” September 14, 2020, projectsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OIG-ICDC-Complaint-1.pdf.

³¹ Equal Justice Initiative, “Shackling of Pregnant Women in Jails and Prisons Continues,” January 29, 2020, eji.org/news/shackling-of-pregnant-women-in-jails-and-prisons-continues/.

³² Gabrielle A. Perry, “In Prison, Having Your Period Can Put Your Life In Danger,” *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/25/prison-period-danger-health-risks-sexual-abuse/.

maternal rights, consent, bodily integrity, and human dignity persist because of the ways that incarcerated women experience disempowerment *as women* within the criminal justice system.

Incarceration does not just impact the person who is sent to jail or prison. Incarceration reverberates into the lives of their loved ones.³³ Children whose parents are incarcerated experience disruptions in their everyday lives, including transitions to living with grandparents, friends, or in foster care, which sometimes necessitates a transition to a new school environment, social stigma, and elevated levels of anxiety, loneliness, anger, and depression.³⁴ Some states ban voting rights or food assistance for formerly incarcerated individuals.³⁵ When mothers are prevented from accessing food assistance programs, their children suffer.³⁶

Reproductive justice is a social justice framework that seeks to raise awareness about the unjust social conditions that pregnant and parenting women experience. The human rights abuses that women and girls experience in jails, prisons, detention centers, and juvenile justice facilities undermine reproductive justice. If we are to respond adequately to the systemic failures of the US criminal justice system, we must do so with keen awareness of the ways that racism and misogyny continue to operate within the carceral system. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has offered their own version of a “distinctively Catholic” approach to crime and punishment within the US, affirming the human

³³ Brian Elderbroom, Laura Bennett, Shanna Gong, Felicity Rose, and Zoë Towns, “Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America’s Families,” *Fwd.us*, everysecond.fwd.us/downloads/everysecond.fwd.us.pdf.

³⁴ Emily Widra, “New Data: People with Incarcerated Loved Ones Have Shorter Life Expectancies and Poorer Health,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 12, 2021, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/07/12/family-incarceration/.

³⁵ Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon and Robert Stewart, “Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights,” *The Sentencing Project*, October 25, 2022, www.sentencingproject.org/reports/locked-out-2022-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights/.

³⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, “Alabama in Minority of States that Ban Food Stamps for People Convicted of Drug Offenses,” *Equal Justice Initiative*, December 27, 2013, eji.org/news/alabama-bans-food-stamps-for-people-with-drug-convictions/.

dignity of incarcerated persons and demanding the just treatment of immigrants.³⁷ Unfortunately, the bishops' so called "pro-life" agenda has focused entirely on the criminalization of abortion and not squarely enough on actual programs of support for women and children, including those who face incarceration. Catholic leaders have much to learn from a reproductive justice framework that attends to the intersectional realities of women's and girls' lives in the US today.

Mary Lilian Akhere Ehidihamhen (Nigeria)

Women and girls in Nigeria face reproductive injustice in many ways. They face sexual violence, an overburdened healthcare system that cannot provide for their health care needs, employment discrimination and workplace harassment, female genital cutting,³⁸ and child marriage.³⁹ Unfortunately, even though the purpose of the law is to protect the vulnerable and create safe communities, Nigerian laws often fail to protect Nigerian women.⁴⁰ In Northeast Nigeria, the Boko Haram conflict is particularly devastating for women and girls.⁴¹

³⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000).

³⁸ Virginia Braun, "Female Genital Cutting around the Globe: A Matter of Reproductive Justice," in *Reproductive Justice: A Global Concern*, ed. Joan C. Chrisler (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 29–55, 30–31.

³⁹ By some estimates, twelve percent of girls in Nigeria are married before the age of fifteen, and thirty percent are married before the age of eighteen. See Girls Not Brides, "Nigeria," www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/nigeria/. See also Odunola D. Oladejo, "A Reproductive Justice Approach to Understanding Yoruba Women's Experiences with Early Marriage and Bride Price in Nigeria" (Oregon: Unpublished Master Thesis, Oregon State University, 2020), 24.

⁴⁰ Sylvia Tamale, "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (2014): 150–177, 158.

⁴¹ Center for Reproductive Rights, "The Center Releases New Report on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Nigerian Conflict Zones," reproductiverights.org/the-center-releases-new-report-on-sexual-and-reproductive-rights-in-nigerian-conflict-zones/.

I found what Stephanie Ann Puen describes as the injustice Filipino women face in marriage and the family very similar to the situation of women in Nigeria. She asserts that “husbands often force wives to have sex in marriage, claiming there is no such thing as rape in marriage as marriage entitles the man to sex.” Further, Puen explains that when a woman becomes pregnant and has children, the man is not really expected to care for them, and often, the woman is left to care for their children. The double standards that Puen points out regarding a man’s cultural acceptance of multiple sexual partners and a woman’s loss of social status if she has more than one partner is also true in my country. Nigeria is a society that is still very patriarchal, and women have less access to resources, which makes childcare very difficult. In the Philippines as well as in Nigeria, patriarchal cultural norms diminish women’s freedom and moral agency. In such a context, the framework of reproductive justice is an important corrective to patriarchy. We can also clearly see the need for Relationship Sex Education (RSE) in a Nigerian context, so women can understand their inherent dignity and can practice voicing their needs to their partners. As Puen and Emily Reimer-Barry have already highlighted, reproductive justice is not restricted only to abortion but includes a comprehensive Relationship Sex Education (RSE). RSE could be of great support to women and men. As a Nigerian residing in the UK, I have the opportunity of delivering RSE curriculum to secondary school students, especially young girls. The aim is for students to understand the importance of communication—especially what healthy intimacy and relationship entail—and so develop a healthy agency rooted in interdependence. However, in Nigeria, RSE is not yet present in the secondary school curriculum. In my experience, I see RSE as an interesting pathway that could support women and girls. Including it in the secondary school curriculum would be an effective strategy for promoting reproductive justice because it can help young women to understand their inherent dignity. Given the many cultural messages that undermine girls’ dignity today, such a step would be welcome.

Emily Reimer-Barry (USA)

As I reflect on my colleagues' contributions, I am struck by the shared concerns expressed by Stephanie Puen, Mary Lilian Akhere Ehidihamhen, and Mary Doyle Roche regarding age-appropriate sex education. While my context differs in some respects (I teach undergraduate students at a Catholic university in southern California), I see how my students struggle to make sense of the cultural scripts of college life as they are also asking themselves important questions about their faith, values, identity, and choices. Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan, in their book *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*, suggest that educators seek out more opportunities to help young people think about their "sexual projects" (the reasons why someone seeks a particular sexual encounter) and how they cultivate "sexual citizenship" (which acknowledges not only one's own but also one's partner's right to sexual self-determination). Hirsch and Khan explain that we have "allowed social conditions to persist in which many young people come of age without a language to talk about their sexual desires, overcome with shame, unaccustomed to considering how their relative social power may silence a peer, highly attentive to their personal wants but deaf to those of others, or socialized to feel unable to tell someone 'no' or to give a clear and unambiguous 'yes.'"⁴² This confusion that young people experience is rooted in cultural taboos and structures of injustice, but those too can change for the better, if we have the willpower to contribute to that change. Like Mary Lilian Akhere Ehidihamhen's approach, Hirsch and Khan explain that "schools should consider sex education as a critical part of their educational mission."⁴³

One of the data points that will be different in the US context in contrast to the Philippines and Nigeria is the reality of delayed marriage as a trend that seems to have staying power. In the US, on average, men first

⁴² Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan, *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* (New York: Norton, 2020), 255.

⁴³ Hirsch and Khan, *Sexual Citizens*, 266.

marry when they are thirty years old and women when they are twenty-five.⁴⁴ On the whole, many of my students are very comfortable admitting that they are not ready for marriage, but they are ready to explore sexual encounters. Faith communities rarely offer honest and compassionate spaces for students to discern and explore these lived experiences. I'm persuaded that Hirsch and Khan are right in that we need to be able to create spaces in which undergraduate students can consider the personal and ethical ramifications of sexual encounters and do so in a context of growth and learning.⁴⁵ I find Mary Lilian's description of Relationship Sex Education a wonderful starting point for communities of faith to meet the needs of young people.

As an educator, I am sometimes on the front lines of responding to student disclosures of sexual assault, but even more often, I accompany students as they are thinking through their personal values and considering the kinds of sexual practices that reflect their values. This is holy work and yet can be confusing, given the many mixed messages that our students receive from culture, church, home, and friend groups.

This roundtable discussion of wide-ranging issues and threats to women's flourishing opens up spaces for scholars and students to reflect on the social conditions that undermine the dignity of women and children around the world. We do not have tidy solutions, nor would such solutions be possible. Instead, this discussion can challenge each of us—from wherever we locate ourselves—to reflect on the realities of injustice around us and to commit to working in solidarity to address those realities.



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⁴⁴ Hirsch and Khan, *Sexual Citizens*, xvii.

⁴⁵ See also Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*, 161–169.

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people's needs and bringing them into dialogue with academics in an interdisciplinary manner.