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Resistance

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On January 12th, 2022, Ashling Murphy went for a run along the Grand Canal near Tullamore, Co. Offaly. She was 23 years of age, and was beginning her career as a primary school teacher. She went jogging in the afternoon, in an area normally populated by walkers, runners, and dog-lovers. At 4pm Ashling was murdered. Her violent killing sparked outrage across Ireland. Tens of thousands of people held vigils in the days following. Her murder gained international media coverage, and as disbelief turned to anger, people marched in the streets of both Ireland and England to protest against rising levels of gender-based violence.

One year on, where are we now?

Vigils and protests are valuable ways of expressing solidarity, and can act as a mechanism for personal and/or national catharsis. But long after the protests cease and the vigil candles burn out, violence towards women continues to be a systemic problem in Ireland. Thus, the challenges of sustaining public discussion on gender-based violence *and* of ensuring the protection of women through necessary legal, social, and cultural reforms remain urgent.

The violence visited upon Ashling is not unique to Ireland, of course. Women across the world face danger, discrimination, and death on a daily basis. In some cases, their lack of social, economic, and cultural freedom places them at heightened risk of physical and/or sexual abuse. But gender-based violence is increasing, and women from any socio-economic background can find themselves facing violence at some stage in their lives.

A report by Women's Aid in 2020 stated that one in five young women in Ireland have been subjected to intimate relationship abuse, and that 51% of young women affected had experienced this abuse before the age of 18 years. The vast majority of these women also experienced emotional abuse. Statistics on rates of femicide globally reveal an even more disturbing situation: 137 women are

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murdered every day by someone in their family. This equates to over 50,000 women dying at the hands of a family member each year. And in Ireland since 1996, 249 women have died in violent circumstances. Of these, 63% were killed in their own homes, 55% were killed by a partner or ex-partner, and almost nine in ten women knew their killer.¹

Profound change needs to happen, including a re-examination of prevailing social narratives and the value system that underpins them. For example, when a high-profile case comes to public attention it is not uncommon for women to be told not to go running in parks by themselves, or to wear a rape alarm, or to carry pepper spray. And more often still, in cases of rape or sexual assault, a woman's choice of clothing might be questioned, or her decision to walk home by herself criticized. The burden of blame too often falls on the victims of sexual attacks, creating a clear, and unfair message: *women* must change *their* behaviour in order to keep themselves safe; *women* must not take risks (even if that is simply going for a run in the middle of the day). In other words, *women* must alter *their* lifestyles to avoid harm. It is time for a new narrative, one that places appropriate pressure on *men* to change their attitudes and actions also.

ACKNOWLEDGING GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence and sexual exploitation are complex issues. There are a myriad of factors driving these realities, and what follows is merely a brief consideration of some aspects of the problem.² At the heart of gender-based violence is a failure to see women as equals, to recognize their dignity, and to acknowledge their rights. Misogyny and sexism drive discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls, which in turn enable unjust structures and attitudes to be normalized within our communities. Religions have been among the worst offenders in this respect.

Sexism is not always revealed through violence. It is seen also where women are paid less than men to perform the same work; it is revealed through the so-called “glass ceiling”, whereby women face additional (often invisible) obstacles to promotion. It emerges more explicitly through the sexual harassment of women in the workplace, or through the tokenism that is not uncommon when

1 <https://www.womensaid.ie/about/policy/natintstats.html>

2 There are several aspects of this question that are beyond the scope of this article. I do not address the correlation between violence towards women and war, for example, nor deal with human trafficking for the sex industry, nor examine in depth the relationship between poverty and sexual exploitation. Instead, I wish to concentrate on the attitudes and value systems that place woman at risk of physical and sexual harm.

it comes to the composition of committees, boards, and working groups in professional settings. How many times have we heard of a female colleague's inclusion on a board framed in terms of "gender balance requirements"?

This sends out a clear message: that women's work, intelligence, skill, and commitment count for less, and that women are not valued in the same way as men. This can be enormously damaging to the self-esteem and morale of women. But, of course, misogyny and sexism emerge in more dangerous ways too. Physical and sexual violence towards women is increasing across the world, and as Ashling Murphy's murder demonstrates, Ireland is no exception.

The question of violence towards women has been raised by Antonio Autiero and James Keenan in December's issue of this journal. In their provocative article, Autiero and Keenan remind us of the all-too-common nature of this problem: "Gruesome life stories about many women arise because they cross paths with men who compromise their own roles as fathers, husbands, and companions. These stories arise from different eras and take place in different places and cultures, with sometimes similar, sometimes diversified variables".³

In recent times, we have gained a better understanding of the underlying causes of violence, thanks in no small part to insights from the social sciences and gender studies. Studies on masculinity are also deepening our knowledge, as well as helping us "to draw the masculine away from the toxic cravings of domination. At stake is the awareness of all the cultural weight and the multitudinous encrustations that have generated a distorted vision of the relationship between genders and of the awareness of roles based on dominance".⁴ Autiero and Keenan say too that religions have been at fault, often endorsing already deeply engrained gender stereotypes that emphasized the dominance of the male. It is crucial that moral, systematic, and sacramental theology acknowledge their culpability, and that Church leadership becomes more vocal in condemning violence towards women.⁵ Indeed, one might ask to what extent magisterial teaching on sexuality and marriage places women at risk, especially when it is misused to keep women in abusive marriages, and misinterpreted to legitimize men's dominance of women within the home. Everyone in positions of authority, but especially male leaders, must recognize the systemic nature of violence against women and girls globally. And it is even more vital for Church leaders to take a strong, unequivocal stance

3 Antonio Autiero, James F. Keenan, "Vulnerability V. Dominance: Questions about the 'Father'", *The Furrow*, vol.73 (12), December 2022, 673.

4 *Ibid.*, 674.

5 *Ibid.*, 675.

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against gender-based violence, and for magisterial teaching to address *more directly* the daily realities of danger faced by females around the world.

VIRTUE, AGENCY, AND EMPOWERMENT

Gender-based violence is only one manifestation of a deeper problem about contemporary attitudes to sex and sexuality. To understand the sexual mores of any time, and the virtues that undergird sexual values, one must examine the social narratives that shape moral formation. As Anne Patrick explains, “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”.⁶ So how do social narratives contribute to the “distorted vision of relationship” that Autiero and Keenan referred to? And how might this lead to the idealization of certain traits of character that in the long term are harmful to the person and to his/her flourishing?

The sexual and economic liberation of women has been a welcome development in the main, even if the economic and educational empowerment of poorer women remains an ongoing task globally. A woman’s sexual agency is often hailed as a positive thing; indeed, one only need think back to Ireland’s treatment of women throughout the twentieth century to see why women’s sexual and reproductive agency might be considered so important. But do we need a more nuanced reflection on sexual agency, and what might that mean for certain sexual values that are commonly heralded as liberating?

An excellent analysis of this is found in the work of American theologian Karen Peterson-Iyer. In her recent book, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics*,⁷ she critiques the hook-up culture in the United States, access to pornography among young people, teen “sexting”, and the commercial sex industry. These social trends are the result – in part, at least – of what she calls “hyper-individualism”, the unqualified defense of freedom of choice, and the claims of individual agency. In particular, the hookup culture prevalent in most university settings has arisen from a conviction that college “is a time for unbridled fun, experimentation, and unequivocal

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

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

self-focus”.⁸ But, of course, one must recognize the broader socio-cultural attitudes and assumptions that underpin this practice, including hyper-masculinity, the objectification of women’s bodies, and a lack of regard for one’s own body or the bodies of others. Peterson-Iyer argues that this often creates damaging sexual expectations among people, especially young people. She calls for a more holistic understanding of human flourishing, one grounded in the demands of justice and concern for self-care.⁹

Linked to sexual agency, the issue of *consent* has become a prominent feature of sexual discourse in recent times. But Peterson-Iyer warns that consent can often be compromised by a multitude of factors. Intoxication, peer pressure, fear, or gendered cultural expectations regularly prevent women from expressing their sexual agency in specific situations: “... individual subjectivity itself always stands in dynamic tension with the broader cultural discourses that shape and form us”. She continues: “agency itself is murky and intertwined with complexities of power, desire, and individual choice”.¹⁰ In other words, consent and sexual agency can only be properly realized in contexts of freedom, mutuality, and equality. Limiting and often toxic views of gender, coupled with unjust gender-based expectations, are contributing to growing levels of violence towards women. Gender is “performative”, as Peterson-Iyer puts it, since we act in ways that have been culturally formed around us.

Our understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman is rooted in the communities, religions, and cultures to which we belong.¹¹ Like Autiero and Keenan, Peterson-Iyer makes the important observation that our toxic narratives, our malformed stories of power and dominance damage men as well as women: “... hyper-masculinity not only harms the women who it objectifies; it also harms the men – straight or queer – who are straightjacketed by its expectations ... a 2016 meta-review of seventy-eight studies on masculinity and mental health concluded that men who place value on having power over women are more likely to suffer from depression, body image issues, substance abuse, and other psychiatric challenges”.¹²

It is therefore not surprising that James Keenan has argued for a *virtue ethics* approach to sexual morality, key to which is the virtue of self-care. The virtue of self-care “invites us to be patient with ourselves as we are with others ... [it] invites us to see sexuality and sexual relationships as goods to be pursued but precisely

8 Ibid., 55.

9 Ibid., 56.

10 Ibid., 63-5.

11 Ibid., 66.

12 Ibid., 69.

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within a virtuous context”.¹³ Emotional integrity is critical here. For Peterson-Iyer, it is constitutive of human flourishing, since it requires all aspects of our personhood to be integrated into our self, including our sexual desires and acts. Emotional integrity also includes recognizing the fragility that is an integral part of human relationships. She argues that any ethic interested in fostering genuine sexual agency and promoting human flourishing must encourage an environment conducive to mature sexual discourse and true sexual self-knowledge. 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 sexual lives.

An ethic that takes seriously sexual 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, 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”.¹⁴

THE VIRTUE OF RESISTANCE

Given the level of violence towards women, and the gender norms that legitimize this violence, some scholars have turned their attention to the role *resistance* plays in social reform. Can the virtue of resistance play a part in turning the tide of gender-based violence? Recent protests in Iran highlighting the excessive powers of the so-called “morality police” provide a good example of how individuals and groups can resist oppression. In contexts where women are expected to be submissive and sexually inexperienced, challenging gender norms can be both difficult and dangerous. This is why some scholars have coined the phrase “*burdened virtues*”.¹⁵ For the virtues displayed are on the one hand morally praiseworthy traits, while also potentially damaging to the well-being of the bearer. Oppositional anger might be considered a “burdened virtue”.

Kochurani Abraham explores what a “virtue of resistance” might look like in the context of violence against women in India. She notes that even in cultures where modesty and submission in women are glorified people are nevertheless daring to resist norms that limit their integrity. “Thanks to the political underpinnings

13 James F. Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics”, in Charles E. Curran & Lisa A. Fullam (eds.), *Virtue*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 132.

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

15 Daniel Daly, “Virtue”, in Tobias Winright (ed.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics*, (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 69.

of the feminist movement, women are finding ways and means to give vent to their anger at whatever is distorting their human dignity”.¹⁶ 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. These stereotypes heighten female vulnerability since they reduce agency and make women feel less able to speak out for fear of familial breakup. “The price that many Indian women pay for being ‘virtuous’ comes in different measures. While for some it is utter helplessness before violence, for others it is an increasing vulnerability to exploitation within the ‘feminine space’ of the household”.¹⁷

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 dismantled, and relations of domination are revealed. In so doing it becomes vital for an “*ethic for change*”. She writes:

Resistance can also be termed a ‘feminine virtue’, in line with the redefinition of virtue as ‘justice, fidelity, and self-care’ – where *justice* implies setting right gender relations in an egalitarian way; *fidelity* means being faithful to the truth of who a woman is as a human person; and *self-care* entails women becoming responsible to care for their own health and growth in all dimensions, resisting the ‘feminist virtue’ of being only for others. This cannot be universalized once and for all, but needs to evolve corresponding to the particularities of women in the different contexts.¹⁸

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, violence, and discrimination are *not* final, that resistance offers hope, and that current injustices can be overcome.

I would argue that this critical consciousness needs to be cultivated among Church leadership also, and that magisterial teaching on the family ought to more clearly reflect the profound injustices endured by women and girls globally. Furthermore, women’s voices must be heard and their experiences taken seriously if we are to further our understanding of how best to live in right relationship with each other and with God.

16 Kochurani Abraham, “Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics”, in Linda Hogan, A.E. Orobator (eds.), *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 98.

17 Ibid., 99.

18 Ibid., 106.

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CONCLUSION

Resisting destructive sexual paradigms ought to be part of broader efforts towards gender equality, but resistance is not always easy and can come at considerable risk to the individual. It presupposes a skill in identifying destructive narratives, a skill that cannot be taken for granted and is easily lost. Tackling gender-based violence will require concerted effort across multiple sectors of society as well as personal growth and *metanoia*. We each must do what we can to challenge unjust discrimination, to foster life-enhancing narratives, and to imagine new horizons of possibility. As Keenan says, the job of ethicists is clear: we must examine contemporary society with a critical gaze, discerning “whether existing anthropologies and the corresponding constellations of virtues inhibit or liberate members of our global community” and “make politically possible the actual new self-understanding and self-realization”.¹⁹

19 Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics”, 123-4.

Listening as Spiritual Hospitality. To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even dare to be silent with you.

— HENRI NOUWEN, *Bread for the Journey*.