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## **Breaking the “Stained Glass Ceiling”: Understanding the Social, Structural, and Theological Barriers to the Participation and Engagement of Ordained Women within the Church of Ireland**

**ABSTRACT:** Based on mixed methods research conducted with a small sample (n= 50) of female ordinands within the Church of Ireland, this paper identifies a range of barriers to the participation and engagement of ordained women within the Church of Ireland. Informed by feminist theology and sociological theories of gender, power, and religion we argue that social, theological, and structural barriers such as attitudes and norms, social networks, patriarchal ideologies of faith, and theological belief systems work together in an interrelated system to sustain negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviour towards ordained women within the contemporary Church of Ireland. This research finds that 70 percent of women surveyed reported a negative experience within the Church that they attributed to their gender, whilst 62 percent felt that their experience of ordained ministry within the Church has been different to that of their male colleagues. Analysis of follow-up interviews identified three interlocking themes of difference which work to marginalise ordained women within their religious institution: the interpretation of theology, patriarchal social and ecclesiastical structures, and perceptions of motherhood.

**KEYWORDS:** Church of Ireland, gendered religion, ordained women, feminist theology, patriarchal Church structures, motherhood, female clergy.

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## *Introduction*

*'My ordained ministry has been rife with negative experiences that I put down to being a woman'. (Bethan)<sup>1</sup>*

In September 2020 the Church of Ireland (CoI) celebrated thirty years of ordaining women into the priesthood. However, according to 2021 figures only 65 of 257 active clergy in the CoI are female. There are also only four women at the higher levels of the Church; The Bishop of Meath and Kildare is the only female bishop out of 12, and the Dean of Cloyne is the only female Dean out of 27 Deans across the Church. The Archdeacon of Ossory and Leighlin and the Archdeacon of Armagh are the only female archdeacons out of 20. The Church of Ireland committed to ordaining women into the priesthood in 1990, yet there still seems to be a resounding lack of equality within the Church leading Green (2019, 10) to argue that we must acknowledge that female clergy are relatively few in number and may face structural and societal difficulties. Additionally, whilst there are 65 women ordained in the CoI, 31 percent of these female clergy are in non-stipendiary (NSM) roles,<sup>2</sup> compared to 9.5 percent of male clergy (Representative Body of the Church of Ireland 2020). Thus, gendered inequality within CoI ordination goes beyond representation as ordained women are also financially disadvantaged in comparison to male peers.

Churches do not exist in isolation and are 'affected by the wider contexts in which they find themselves' (Woodhead 2005, 54). Patterns of under-representation and under-remuneration of female leaders illustrate that the structural patterns of gendered prejudice and discrimination which exist within Irish society are also being reproduced within the Church of Ireland. Churches have the capacity to influence society and Church communities have an impact on norms, discourse, community, and policy. Thus, it becomes important to examine gendered disparities within the CoI to better understand the dialectic relationship between the Church and Irish society. Our mixed methods study asked what are the social, structural, and theological barriers to the engagement, participation and representation of ordained women in the CoI? This article articulates the key findings of that study by illustrating the cultural and structural barriers to full participation of ordained women in the CoI.

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<sup>1</sup> All names in this journal article are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and anonymity of participants, due to the small size and tight-knit nature of the community of the Church of Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Clergyperson who does not receive a stipend, the only income they receive from the Church are expenses. NSM= Non-Stipendiary Ministry.

In 1979 the first woman was ordained as a deacon,<sup>3</sup> but it wasn't until 1990 after it was approved by General Synod<sup>4</sup> that women were ordained into the priesthood. Unlike their Anglican counterparts in the Church of England who began the conversation surrounding women's ordained ministry in the early 20th century (McCready 2006, 371), the CoI as 'a body was not prepared to give women official status' (McCready 2006, 373). However, the Lambeth Conference in 1968 sparked debate surrounding female ordination and women priests in Anglicanism and thus official discussions surrounding the ordination of women in the CoI began. In 1973, the Anglican Consultative Commission requested the CoI's stance on the ordination of women. In June 1975 (21 months later) the CoI's House of Bishops<sup>5</sup> issued a reply stating they believed there 'were no theological objections to the ordination of women' (Church of Ireland 1975, 1). In 1976, there was the first official debate surrounding the topic at General Synod. This began a twelve year process leading to the formal ordination of women into the priesthood. Archbishop Donald Caird described this debate as the 'most important decision the General Synod ... has ever been called to make' (Church of Ireland 1989, 8). On one hand we can read this history as a slow but careful acceptance of the validity of female ordination - the CoI as far back as the 1970s confirmed that there were no theological justifications for the exclusion of women clergy. On the other, we can see that the debate and decision in the CoI was slow, and appears to have been prioritised only when the Anglican Church formally raised the issue.

### *Centring Power in Gendered Religion*

Woodhead (2012, 34) maintains that 'the sociology of religion has lagged behind many other fields in taking gender seriously', with sociological research on gender and Christianity being 'patchy and partial'. To understand the nature of power and inequality within gendered Christianity, we must examine the masculine bias in Christianity and Christianity as a patriarchal institution. Pauline theology and St. Paul the apostle's contradiction for egalitarianism 'elevates the male over the female, by organisational arrangements that make masculine domination a reality in Church life' (Woodhead 2004, 105). This is fundamental to contextualising the gendered nature of contemporary Christianity. In this context God is 'sometimes said to be sexless or "above gender"', however 'both the language and images used to depict Him are overwhelmingly masculine' (Woodhead 2004, 106). Thus, although the sacred construction

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<sup>3</sup> A deacon functions as an assistant to the incumbent of a parish.

<sup>4</sup> General Synod is a meeting of representatives of all dioceses in the CoI. The primary purpose of the Synod is to enact legislation for the whole CoI. (Church of Ireland, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> The House of Bishops is the group of the 10 diocesan bishops and two archbishops, which form one order (house) of Bishops.

of God is on the face of it, genderless, the gendered society we experience Christianity within makes sense of God through a gendered framework. In this respect, gender is simultaneously made invisible, yet continuously maintained by Christianity and its adherents. Ultimately, there is an incompatibility between Christianity and feminism, caused by indifference within Christianity (Woodhead 2004, 114-115)

Mikaelsson reasons that we can only understand religion if we can understand how divisions between men and women are sanctioned and demonstrated in the structures that religion has created (Mikaelsson 2004, 295). What marries gender and religion is the concept of power, both sacred and secular (Woodhead, 2012, 35). Patriarchal power, where male dominance over women is institutionalised within the wider society (Morgan 1999, 43) sustains patriarchal ideology within religion, which detaches women from forms of 'privilege, power and influence' (Mikaelsson 2004, 298). Thus 'religion can be integral to the existing gender order and can serve to reproduce and legitimate gender inequality for those who practice religion' (Woodhead 2012, 36). Male power serves as a mediating commonality between the secular world and the sacred, ensuring that gendered inequalities 'outside' of church, are not simply reproduced within church, but 'sacralised' (Woodhead 2012, 37). When religion is examined from a critical gender perspective, ideas surrounding the sacred are replaced by questions surrounding gendered power structures and oppressive discourse, and their relationship to the sacred (Mikaelsson 2004, 298). Thus, this paper seeks to make visible processes of power which are hidden within theological justifications for inequality.

### **Female Clergy in the Worldwide Anglican Church**

Previous research on the experiences of female clergy in Anglican spaces has confirmed that gendered differences are central. *Called to Serve: A Study of Clergy Careers, Clergy Wellness and Clergy Women* (Price et al. 2011, 30) concludes that there continue to be barriers for women 'simply getting a foot on the important early rung of the career ladder' in the [Episcopal] Church.<sup>6</sup> This qualitative research identified gendered differences in how men and women experience the relationship between home and church, and argues for its relevancy in understanding gendered inequalities within the Anglican Church.<sup>7</sup> They note 'the world of the parish and the internal workings of the family still present barriers to the advancement of woman clergy' (Price et al. 2011, 30), whilst also finding that male clergy view their

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<sup>6</sup> The Episcopal Church is based in the United States of America and is a member church of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

<sup>7</sup> Research conducted during 2006–2009, focusing on woman's ministry in the Episcopal Church.

homes as a place of solace within parish ministry, but female clergy do not. For female clergy:

The stresses involved in balancing work and family in a vocation that has many demands on the personal lives of clergy can have a negative effect on clergy wellness, particularly when there are children in the home (Price et al., 30).

These findings are a confirmation of other studies on Anglicanism, but are also reflective of research on other religious denominations. Nesbitt (1993, 2015), Sullins (2000), Adams (2007), and Schleifer and Miller (2017) have variously investigated if 'the stained glass ceiling [is] going or gone?', generally concluding that a 'persistent gender gap is still visible' (Nesbitt 2015) in a variety of denominations such as in the Anglican, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic churches. This branch of research identifies unequal opportunities for female clergy and cites organisational dynamics as significant to understanding these gendered differences in religious denominations (Sullins 2000). Adams (2007, 100) suggests that rather than the 'stained glass ceiling' being invisible, some religious organisations seek to highlight it, noting that some congregations may be 'actively projecting gender barriers within their organizations'. Nesbitt (2015) focuses specifically upon the Anglican Church, maintaining that gendered inequalities can be overcome by asking women about their real-life experiences and encouraging them to find allies in their vocation. Cultural adaptation is cited as an essential component to creating meaningful structural change, 'changing the structure without a parallel commitment to changing the ways of thinking and acting won't bring transformation and equality'.

Research from the Anglican communion in South Africa incorporates a 'feminist theoretical praxis' (Getman 2014, ii) to conclude that there are many restrictions in 'liturgical traditions and rituals [and] unless Churches are consciously inclusive, leadership far too often finds excuses for keeping people [women] out' (Getman 2014, 191). It is noted that working to transform the Church into a Church that is female inclusive is 'not a feminist project [but] it is a Christian project' (Getman 2014, 199). For Getman feminist theology *is* Christian theology. 'Ordained ministry is a form of participation in the life of the Church which is meaningful for those women who feel called to it' (Watson 2002, 115). Getman's (2014, 197) concept of a 'double vocation' is also useful, as it describes the dual obligation towards family and faith for female ordinands.<sup>8</sup>

In an Irish context, studies on Anglicanism and gender are less plentiful. *Called: Women in Ministry in Ireland 2017* discusses Christian faiths in which women have a role in ministry, of which the CoI is one. It is

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<sup>8</sup> This refers to the vocation that is ordination and the vocation that is motherhood, this means that there is a 'conscientious power sharing in the form of equal opportunity mothering and priesting' (Getman, 2014, 197)

difficult to identify findings that specifically illuminate the position of female ministers within the CoI within this work, but it is notable nonetheless given the paucity of research in this area in an Irish context. Significantly, Francis notes that ‘all of the women feel happy to be in Christian ministry and none expressed any regret about ministry as their life choice’ (Francis 2017, 5); however the majority of women who participated in this study also expressed that ‘there is a systematic sexism or misogyny in the Church’ (Francis 2017, 6). This duality of experience in being satisfied with ministry on one hand, whilst acknowledging inherent misogyny associated with that ministry, is also evident in the findings of our study. Green (2019) identifies financial disparities, gendered assumptions regarding caring, and unconscious bias against women as fundamental to explaining the experiences of women in the contemporary CoI.

In 2010, Canon Doris Clements presented research to the CoI General Synod. This research emerged from the Anglican Consultative Council Resolution 13.31.b ii which committed to encouraging member churches to achieve equal representation of women, and to work with their structures of governance to ensure this became a reality (Anglican Consultative Communion 2005, 1). Clements identified a severe lack of engagement of women on all levels of committees within the CoI. It was this research that led the CoI to commit to gender balance among future committees on a diocesan and national level. Whilst this progression was important for Canon Clements, she was very keen to reiterate that ‘we do not wish that women to be elected/appointed to committees for the sake of gender equality but for ability and sustainability’ (Clements 2010). As a result of this research in the triennium of 2014–2017, there were more women placed onto CoI Diocesan and Central Committees<sup>9</sup> and on General Synod, and a shift in membership on the General Synod was also evident.<sup>10</sup> However, despite initial positive changes within the Church resulting from this report, it should be noted that there has been little or no progress since then.

### *A Theology of Gender in the Church of Ireland*

The female body has long been central to justifications for gender difference within Christian theology. Ideas of bodily purity and cleanliness influenced Paul the apostle’s teachings and writings, during a time when women’s participation in religious worship was contingent on their reproductive

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of these committees are: Diocesan Synod, Diocesan Council, finance committees, Diocesan Glebes and property committees, Diocesan Boards of Education, members of General Synod, Diocesan Court, Board of Nominators, and Episcopal Nominators

<sup>10</sup> This shift in number in General Synod can be seen from triennial of 2014–2017 which had 40 percent Female Lay Members, up from 23 percent in 2006 - 2009 and 17 percent Female Clerical Members, up from 6 percent (International Anglican Women’s Network, 2019).

experiences. In the first century 'there was a significant amount of time when a woman could not participate in worship or even enter a place of worship because she was menstruating, lactating, or had given birth and this meant she was impure (Voung 2014, 241-242). Additionally, the historical role of women in the Church was defined by understandings that women were confined 'primarily to the domestic realm, with little access to any public life' (D'Angelo 1999, 204). This confinement meant that the major roles were usually taken by men and were given titles such as 'disciples, apostles, prophets, elders, overseers, deacons, evangelists and pastor-teachers' (Tucker 2014, 185).

The confinement of women to the private sphere, and restrictions on female access to religious spaces was further supported by Pauline theology, steeped in misogyny. Verses such as Ephesians 5:22,<sup>11</sup> Colossians 3:18,<sup>12</sup> Titus 2:3-5,<sup>13</sup> 1 Timothy 2:12<sup>14</sup> and 1 Corinthians 11:3.<sup>15</sup> stipulate that women should be silent and should not speak within places of worship, that women should be submissive to their husband, and the man is the head of the household much like Christ is the head of the church. Whilst restrictions based on bodily functions have disappeared and women's role in public life has increased, nonetheless Pauline theology is still used today and is central to discussion on a plethora of topics. The continued reference to Pauline theology legitimises the secondary position of women and has crystallised tribal, ritual prohibitions based on gender into an autorotative tradition. As this research identifies, Pauline theology is still in the 21st century used as a sacred framework to understand and encode gender within the Church of Ireland. Its lingering influence in the contemporary era underlines the strong role for theology as justification for social inequalities within the Church and the wider society. Thus, theology serves a social and cultural role within religious institutions, serving to uphold the social norms and values it seeks to maintain.

Feminist theology is used to understand the lived experience of women in a Christian context, and to expose the male-centred bias of classical theology as well as the male-centred bias in institutionalised Christianity (Trible 1983, 28). Feminist theology is the 'attempt to write theology on the bases of women's experience, and so in doing to reform the Christian tradition from within' (Woodhead 2004, 114). Gendered assumptions

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<sup>11</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

<sup>13</sup> Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

<sup>14</sup> I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

<sup>15</sup> But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ.

underpinning Pauline theology have been central to the social construction of womanhood and femininity in the Church of Ireland. This creates a need for a feminist critique of these assumptions, which provides space to interrogate the social consequences of patriarchal Christian theology.

Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether have 'aspired for women's equality in the Church and are acknowledged as pioneering feminist theologians who set the scene for the critique of Western traditional Christian theology' (Wood 2013, 85). Daly's feminist theological thought was based upon the call for Christianity to acknowledge the importance of striving for equality, because if it did not, it would appear as if Christianity was the enemy of societal progress (Daly 1985, 219). Though Daly turned away from institutionalised Christianity because she believed that Christianity was inherently patriarchal, many modern feminist theologians 'are unconsciously dependent upon her analyses and phrases' (Berry 1988, 213). Daly (1985, 65-66) maintained that the exclusion of women from Church hierarchies was linked to the idea of the divinity as male. She believed the practice of equating 'male sex with the divine' was leading to women being conditioned to believe that they had an 'irremediably inferior nature'. This, and some of her other radical views have led to 'disunity and separatism between women' (Wood 2013, xi), specifically women who are striving for equality within Christianity.

Nonetheless, Ruether notes that the religious experiences throughout history have been 'identified with and defined by men' (Trible 1983, 28). For Ruether, the goal of feminist theology is not to create a rhetoric of man-vs-woman or to diminish males, but 'rather a mutuality that allows us to affirm different ways of being' (Ruether 1993, 20). Ruether's theology can be summarised through asking 'can a male savior save women?' (Ruether 1993, 116), and by illustrating how problematic the symbol of Christ is for feminist theology. 'We might say that the maleness of Jesus has no ultimate significance. It has social symbolic significance in the framework of societies of patriarchal privilege' (Ruether 1993, 137). Ruether (1993, 12) believed that 'feminist theology draws on women's experience as a basic source as well as a criterion for truth'. Feminist theology draws upon the authentic female experience, which makes it useful to critique the established theology of the CoI, and aids in revealing the misogyny within a church which is based upon 'male experience rather than on a universal human experience' (Ruether 1993, 13).

### *Methods of this Study*

The research which informs this paper was conducted in the spring/summer of 2020. Originally designed to incorporate an ethnographic component that would have allowed for participant observation at church services and other meetings such as General Synod, the research design was adjusted as a result of a Covid-19 lockdown which

necessitated that all face-to-face components of data collection be removed. As a result, the study incorporated an online questionnaire with 50 respondents and seven follow-up online interviews which were in-depth and participant-led. The study surveyed ordained women in the Church of Ireland who were recruited via an email which was sent to all ordained women in the CoI.

The decision to incorporate a questionnaire in this project was influenced by Navarro-Rivera and Kosmin who argue that survey research in a religious context is an excellent opportunity to study a large number of individuals in a religious institution so as to better understand the opinion or beliefs in that population (Navarro-Rivera & Kosmin 2014, 396). Navarro-Rivera and Kosmin (2014, 397) also emphasize that surveys are useful for understanding religion from an institutional perspective because it creates a snapshot of the participating population at a particular point in time, which provides a sense of where that institution is at that moment. Given the nature of the research topic, an online questionnaire also allowed participants the opportunity to engage with research of this kind whilst also having the reassurance of remaining anonymous, even to the researcher.

Potential interviewees were identified during the questionnaire through the use of a closing question which asked if the respondent would like to participate in a follow-up interview. If respondents answered yes, there was a facility to provide their email address for follow-up. Seven interviewees were identified through this means.<sup>16</sup> The responses collected through the questionnaire were used to shape an interview guide before in-depth interviews began. Fieldwork and data analysis that engages with women should be achieved in ways which encourage 'women to regard me [the researcher] as a friend rather than purely as a data-gatherer' (Oakley 2004, 263). In light of the sensitive topics discussed by the interviewees of this study, such a strategy was essential. During the interview phase, efforts were made to ensure that interviewees maintained agency throughout the interview and its aftermath. Reflecting this, the interview guide served as a rough outline for discussion, but at all stages the discussion was primarily driven by the interviewees themselves. The interview phase followed strategies outlined by Sue Jones who argues that in-depth interviews can ensure that participants are seen 'not as organisms responding ... but as persons, who construct the meaning and significance of their realities' (Jones 2004, 257). Jones has also influenced the decision to use an interview guide rather than a more structured interview format. While the interviews were conducted online using Zoom, core principles of positive interviewing techniques as advocated by Jones (2004, 260) were applied throughout.

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<sup>16</sup> 52 percent of questionnaire respondents offered to participate in a follow-up interview but due to the constraints of the study, part of an MA in Social Justice and Public Policy, the interview sample had to remain small. However, the high numbers of survey respondents willing to participate bodes well for future research in this area, as it illustrates an engaged community who are committed to creating knowledge on these issues.

An important aspect of the methodology of this project relates to the positionality of the researchers. Purser was responsible for all data collection, and she undertook this research as an inside researcher as she is an active member of the CoI.<sup>17</sup> O' Brien worked with Purser on developing the themes generated in data analysis, and in advising Purser throughout the research project. O' Brien is an atheist who has previously researched another religion and who is sociologically interested in minority religious identities.<sup>18</sup> The differing positions of the two researchers in relation to the CoI resulted in fruitful conversations. Purser's deep insider knowledge of the religion assisted O' Brien to develop her own understanding of the intricacies of gender within the CoI, whilst O' Brien's outsider position allowed for the data to be considered from alternative perspectives that, we hope, improved the analysis. There are of course, benefits and drawbacks to being positioned as an insider, outsider, or insider-outsider when conducting a project such as this. For Purser as an insider, the advantages included ease of access to the field (Chavez 2008, 479) along with an expediency of building rapport with participants (Chavez, 2008, 481) which is often difficult for outsiders. It also allowed her to bring her own wealth of experience and knowledge particularly regarding the implicit and unwritten cultural norms that govern the everyday workings of the Church that an outsider may not have known. Purser's role in this research also created 'richness in the interpretation of the data in light of [her] deep knowledge of the social, political, and historical context' (Ross 2017, 327) of the CoI that would have not been possible had she not been an insider. O' Brien's role as an outsider created a space of accountability for the research which in turn mitigated some of the complications that come with insider research. One such complication in this case related to Purser's loyalty towards the religion she so greatly appreciates on one hand, coupled with her desire to articulate the structural inequalities which the participants had taken the time to discuss with her, on the other. The combination of insider and outsider positions has inched us closer to a 'distinct, neutral, and balanced point of view' (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, 2) whilst still recognising that objectivity and neutrality can never be fully achieved. In this respect, we acknowledge that the analysis of the data is a reflection of our positions and experiences.

The following sections of this paper outline and analyse key findings from the study, and their significance for the Church of Ireland and its members. We have identified three inter-related themes as being of

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<sup>17</sup> While Purser's work was done as an insider it is important to note that this research was done in the context of a partial insider because while she has an active role, longstanding history, and familial ties to the Church of Ireland she is not ordained, which means there is 'a degree of distance or detachment from the community' she is researching (Chavez, 2008, 475).

<sup>18</sup> O' Brien has engaged in ethnographic research with two Latter-day Saint (Mormon) congregations in Ireland and published on themes of minority identities, gender, and digital religion in Mormonism. See O' Brien 2019, 2020, 2022, and Halford & O' Brien 2020.

relevance; the role of theology, the role of social and ecclesiastical structures, and perceptions of motherhood.

### *Theology*

*'In terms of theology we have to learn the fact that certain people don't think we should be doing this job.'* (Kate)

It is apparent that, despite agreement within the CoI that it is theologically sound for women to be ordained and to become bishops, conceptions of headship in Christian theology continue to influence how women experience their role with the Church. It is important to note here that it is not the theology itself but rather it is others' *interpretation* of the theology surrounding women in leadership which sustains barriers to full participation. This interpretation refers specifically to Pauline theology, where Paul addresses specific gender roles in the leadership of the Christian Church. This theology is written in a time when the major roles in the Church were usually taken by men and given titles such as 'disciples, apostles, prophets, elders, ... deacons, evangelists and pastor' (Tucker 2014, 185) but this was in the context of a society in which men were assumed 'as superior to women' (Hysten 2014, 39). These verses were also written within the context where women 'spent their lives living under the authority of either their father or their husband' (D'Angelo 1999, 204.) Women in this context also spent their lives as unequal citizens and there were 'limitations based on gender' (Reis 2014, 410) that inequality was a consistency in the Church, in the law, and in public policies. In the first century there were specific gender roles that women were expected to fall into but 21st century Ireland, as a society, has moved beyond this and so has the Anglican Church for the most part.

These theological justifications for the exclusion of women come from both men and women. They come from laity within the Church as well as ordained womens' male colleagues. One woman explained that she grew up with the perspective that women should not be at the head of the Church, and how it was not theologically acceptable. She articulated the struggle of her vocation: spending significant time studying scripture until she was comfortable that her vocation wasn't going against scripture:

You do get comments from some people who think it is theologically wrong for women to be in ministry and they will make it known that they think what you're doing is wrong, which is really hard when you're struggling with doing something yourself but you are trying to be obedient to the call of God and it is ripping you apart. But I was happy and found peace with the fact that God does call women and he does call them into leadership and that I was not doing anything that was going against what was

written in scripture, which was very important for me. ... when I got to that place of absolutely knowing that a: that God was calling me and b: I could justify it theologically from scripture then I was happy to go forward for ordination (Kaya).

A common occurrence for ordained women is a negative response from laity and their own congregations such as the experiences of Ciara who stated that 'six people left the parish before I was instituted'. Similarly, Kaya mentioned that 'a family left after I arrived', whilst Jessica told us 'one man left once it was announced I would be coming to the parish'. Other women report that members of the congregation have refused to engage with them once they took on their position within the parish; 'a parishioner refused me entry into their home as they disapproved for ordained women' (Emily). Yvette told us 'a member of the congregation refuses to receive communion from me because I am a women', an experience in which she was not alone. 'I've had instances for people making a point of refusing to take communion from a female' (Ailine). Yet another participant said 'I was told when choosing ordination – did I not know men only should lead and should never be accountable to a woman' (Becky). Harriet was told that the CoI 'certainly did not need any more keen, or middle-aged women in the ministry of the CoI and [that] the Church should concentrate on recruiting and ordaining young men'. These findings indicate that significant work needs to be done by Church leaders at parochial and national level to change the Church culture that allows these attitudes to fester.

Discrimination based upon theological justifications is not solely found amongst laity. Amongst clergy, the same pattern exists. Lucy relayed a time in the CoI Theological Institute where she had male students and curates not attending the eucharist because she was the celebrant. The reasoning behind their lack of attendance was because they did not believe that the ordination of women was justified theologically. This is not the only instance of this type of interaction, on another occasion the male ordinands in the Theological College made it known to their fellow student, who was a female, that they did not believe that women should be ordained because, they maintained, it is not biblical (Becky).

It was reported in interviews that Church leaders have admitted they did not agree with the ordination of women. For example Carlee stated that she believed that her path to ordination was made more lengthy compared to the men in her diocese who were going through the same process, because her bishop openly admitted that he has reservations regarding the ordination of women. Kaya also mentioned in passing that while she was serving in her previous parish she was aware that she was 'serving under a bishop who may not be fully committed to women and would have reservations regarding women and ordained ministry'.

The very fact that Kaya only mentioned this in passing as part of a wider conversation, illustrates how attitudes such as these are a normalised aspect of life as an ordained woman in Church. With beliefs against the

ordination of women so widespread amongst both laity and clergy in the CoI how can women engage, participate, and represent in a Church where not everyone accepts that they have the ordained right to do so? Schüssler Fiorenza believes that there are also social issues that stem from the use of theology to ensure the subordination of women. Examples of these issues are 'political discrimination, economic exploitation, social inequality and secondary statuses in Churches' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1982, 134) Many of the social issues discussed by Schüssler Fiorenza are also issues that the participants of this study mentioned. The following section outlines some of the structural effects of this interpretation of theology.

### *Patriarchal, Social and Ecclesiastical Structures*

*'Some clergy have patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes and can treat women as second class citizen.'* (Sydney)

The CoI is not just a hierarchical institution, but also a patriarchal institution where the majority of those in leadership positions are men. There is one female bishop out of twelve, one female dean out of 27, and two female archdeacons out of 20. When participants were asked about what they believed to be the reasoning behind this, many responded with answers similar to the examples provided here; 'decisions are made by male Bishops' (Sophie) and 'the Church is still seen as a bastion for male leadership' (Laura). Others such as Laila maintain that those who are part of the appointment process are biased or prefer male attributes when it comes to these roles. Harriet said that she believes there is a 'complicit agreement among male clergy, especially some Bishops, to lower the number of women clergy serving in their diocese'. Another participant posed the question as to whether or not the men in the higher levels in the Church 'think outside of themselves?' (Brooke). These are strong accusations, and these statements can be analysed in two ways. The first is that these participants are correct in their accusations, and there is indeed a covert plan to keep female clergy numbers low, especially at the higher levels in the Church. The second is that there is no such plan, but their experiences and observations of gender within the CoI have been so poor that it leads them to think this is possible. Either explanation indicates significant problems regarding the position of ordained women in the Church.

When answering why they thought there were clear gender differences in representation at higher levels of the Church, respondents referred to the patriarchal structures of the Church and its relationship to Church culture. 68 percent of questionnaire respondents either implied or directly identified that the 'main decision-makers are male' (Caroline), that within the CoI 'men promote men' (Megan), and do not look beyond other men within the context of appointments or nominations. This issue can be

summarised by the idea that it is 'mainly men are electing such positions meaning they are more likely to choose other men' (Kaya). They said 'it's a vicious cycle where the lack of female priests on committees prevents the appointment of ordained women to higher office' (Gwen), and 'because all the names put forward for higher level positions are men' (Megan). Abbie argues that 'the Church exhausts the names of men before the name of a woman comes up for higher level positions'. Notably, Abbie holds a high-level position within CoI leadership, meaning that she has first-hand experience of decision-making processes.

Networking within a patriarchal institution was also cited by participants as a gendered experience in the CoI. Phrases used to describe exclusive networks in the Church were 'a gentlemen invitation-only club' (Samantha), 'an old boys' network' (Laila and Laura), and a 'boys club' (Leona). Some women were frustrated by these networks because they believed that these spaces are used for decision-making with the result that that decisions made outside of these networks are a mere formality of what has already been discussed behind closed doors (Yvette). Others reported feeling envious that men are given these networking opportunities because there is 'no network for women' (Samantha). There seems to be a perception within the CoI that when women clergy meet it is pastoral and social, whereas when male clergy meet it is about networking. Women such as Eva and Beatrice argued that there are presumptions that women 'are mainly concerned with pastoral care and being there for people rather than moving up the hierarchical scale of the Church'. Some women also believe that these networks make being a clergywoman more isolating, as male colleagues tend to stick together due to the relationships formed in these male-only spaces (Leona). Lucy articulated that 'male clergy in the Church of Ireland seem to pigeonhole women in ministry into "softer" roles, and favour men over women when appointing to other roles'. Women are expected to focus on roles that are more typically feminine in groups such as the 'Mothers' Union and the Girls Friendly Society' (Samantha). The presumption that women prefer to take on roles that revolve around pastoral care rather than pursuing leadership roles affects female enthusiasm for leadership positions because 'why would women want to be involved in leadership roles when there are people in the Church who still think their job should be more focused on pastoral care because they believe that is a woman's role' (Lorraine).

Research participants argue that 'the bias against women' (Harriet) within the CoI is real, and affects many of the experiences described above. This bias creates and sustains participation barriers for women in all aspects of ordained life, and seems endemic throughout the Church regardless of the level of ministry. Women have been 'overlooked for a position on an occasion because of being female' (Ciarra) and were not chosen for a position even when they were 'far superior in every way to the other candidates' (Lucy). Eliza describes this environment as leaving 'women [having] little room to breathe, or to simply be themselves'. These findings reinforce

Francis who demonstrated that the majority of women who engage in the CoI believe 'there is systematic sexism or misogyny in the Church' (Francis 2017, 6). The women of this study report 'it's as if we aren't capable of doing as good a job as a man, and aren't capable of leading a parish and making those decisions, and chairing a vestry meeting' (Lucy).

Gender bias leads to discrimination, and this is evident here. Women are 'patronised in meetings' (Rose) and feel 'as if their contributions often go unheard, ... [as] they are often talked over/across at meetings' (Megan). It was also noted that the people who talk over them, often then go on to take credit for their ideas (Laura). Leona argues that 'some clergy do not give [women] the same status as leaders as is given to other males' (Leona), and Jo noted that women in ministry are challenged by others more frequently and more strongly on all issues when compared to male colleagues. Women are made to feel as though they aren't taken as seriously as their male colleagues would be in certain situations; 'if a man gets upset, something must be very wrong, but if a woman gets upset she's just being an emotional woman' (Kaya).

This perspective reveals how gendered perceptions lead to differential treatment and was used by several women in this study. Abbie, Paige, and Faye all described variations of it in explaining why they often feel they are treated differently to male counterparts in the same roles. Kate who is a Rector, related an incident where a member of her congregation was disrespectful to her and she was told 'he treats you differently from our last Rector, ... because you're a woman'. Some respondents spoke of being bullied by male colleagues which was often was not addressed by the Church appropriately. Alex brought her experiences of bullying to the attention of her superiors in her diocese, but was dismissed very quickly. She was told not to worry about the issue because the accused was known in the diocese for not agreeing with the ordination of women, and that nothing could be done. Jo felt 'discarded' by senior members of the Church when she came forward with accusations of bullying because she said, they were protecting 'other males'. Perhaps most concerningly, this research finds reports of sexual harassment and assault within the CoI. Megan referred to 'sexual harassment by parishioners which was not adequately followed up, which left me feeling side-lined by the Church hierarchy'. Laura spoke of a time when she was 'groped' in the vestry of the church in which she was an incumbent. Millie spoke of 'unwanted male attention', whilst Samantha has experienced 'sexist and inappropriate comments and gestures from male clergy' including comments on physical appearance and dress.

In sum, this study finds that within the CoI 'it is hard for women to be taken seriously, because they are a woman' (Carlee). Patriarchal attitudes within the religious institution manifest into harmful cultural practices that are used to support injustice towards women (Wood 2019, 13). This is very much the case in the CoI. The Church, like all organisations, exists in relationship with the wider society and in an Irish context the Church

reflects society (Kenny 2006, 180). Ireland, like many countries, remains patriarchal in spite of significant progress with regard to gender inequalities and undoubtedly this affects some of the findings offered here. However in recent years gender equality has been espoused as an explicit goal in many arenas of the Irish public sphere, and it is clear that gender inequality has entered mainstream Irish discussion in ways unimaginable in previous times. In contrast, the participants of this research maintain that gender equality is not a goal of the CoI. In this respect, the CoI is a reflection of gendered inequalities within the wider society but is also increasingly set apart from the wider society, through its inability to work proactively towards the eradication of such inequalities.

### *Perceptions and Experiences of Motherhood*

*'Women have overcome a lot of hurdles and for me personally it was motherhood and family, in a way that never occurs to a man.'* (Abbie)

Clergywomen in the CoI report a Church culture which supports the presupposition that through the biological reality of being female all women have a capacity for motherhood. Participants overwhelmingly reported that women in the Church are seen through a lens of presumed motherhood. This lens applies to all women regardless of current parental status, even child-free women are perceived in this way. This lens has coloured women's experience in the Church, as women are being viewed primarily as mothers or potential mothers and not as clergy or human beings. The category of 'woman' is equated to 'parent' in the CoI in a way that the category of 'man' is not. Of course, not all women are mothers and not all women can be, or want to be, mothers. Those women face their own struggles in such an environment, as they navigate a culture which defines them through a role they do not hold, and may never hold.

Some women divulged that they 'could not do [the] job if [they were] a mother' (Kaya) because they felt that ordained ministry is 'stressful enough for a single woman' (Emily). One woman told her story of when 'a parochial nominator,<sup>19</sup> on working out that [she] had recently married, told [her] that [she] would be having children in the short term, and ended the phone call' (Ciara). This is a significant, because this woman's potential nomination for a position was scuppered due to the parochial nominator's own attitudes about womanhood, marriage, and parenting. This incident illustrates how those gendered assumptions are affecting the Church at a structural level. If women are being excluded from roles because of

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<sup>19</sup>A parochial nominator is a member of the Board of Nominators, whose purpose is to fill a vacant parish [a parish without an incumbent] (Church of Ireland 2019, 4).

assumptions such as these they will not have the opportunity to participate or represent others.

For those women who *are* parents, their status as a mother should not affect how they are perceived in Church, but this is not the case. The work of women in the Church is shaped by perceptions and assumptions of their parenting role in a way that men's work in the CoI is not. Many women reported that they felt burdened by the responsibilities invoked through the 'double vocation' (Getman 2014, 197). Of those surveyed, 62 percent of respondents were mothers, and it was acknowledged by these women that perceptions of motherhood within the Church is a barrier to full participation. This is due to the difficulty of juggling motherhood and being ordained including 'antisocial hours' (Kaya) and long working days. Amber, who has experienced life as a clergywoman both before and during motherhood said:

Women with young families might think twice before entering ministry as demands on time are very onerous and not conducive to family life, 6 days a week working before any emergencies is very difficult when raising a family.

Other women report that while the Church has been ordaining women for almost 30 years, it 'has failed to consider the biological reality of being a woman and everything else that goes along with that biological reality'. (Sydney). Thus, we begin to see contradictions in the cultural perceptions of motherhood emerging. On one hand, the Church bases its cultural assumptions about women and parenting on biological differences between men and women. On the other hand, the biological realities of female parenting such as pregnancy and breastfeeding are not managed or accommodated in ways that support mothers in leadership positions. 'As someone who had spent my pregnancy preparing to breastfeed, I soon realised shortly after giving birth that this would not be an option for me because me and my child could not be accommodated in church spaces' (Bonnie).

Mothers face problems that stem from raising children while pursuing their vocation; many mothers maintain that they had to wait until their children had grown up before they could begin exploring their vocation to be ordained, others studied part-time due to 'childcare and domestic responsibilities' (Leona). Others took the NSM route to ensure that there wasn't a significant change in their children's lives or because they 'are not prepared to accept the great cost of being apart from their families' (Becky). Mothering also shapes progression opportunities. Abbie the senior leader amongst our respondents, stated that 'women overcome a lot of hurdles, and for [her] personally, it was motherhood and family' with regard to career progression (Abbie). She noted that this was an experience that never occurred to her male colleagues illustrating that even at the highest levels of the Church, parenting shapes ministry differently for

women and men, with the result that promotion is more arduous for women. However those at the beginning of their ministry also cite gendered difficulties, indicating that these problems are present from the lowest to highest levels of Church ministry. Ailene tells us that if a mother attends training within the Church of Ireland Theological Institute it is very 'difficult' because 'ordination training was not planned with mothers in mind' (Carlee). After formal training is complete problems persist in the realities of working as a curate. Megan recalled her struggle to find a curacy because she was a mother and once she 'mentioned [her] young family every door closed and [she] was told to never mention [her] family in an interview again'.

Barriers caused by perceptions and experiences of motherhood are not exclusive to the CoI. They are social barriers which manifest across society because there is a narrative that frames motherhood and career as competition ideologies (Leamaster & Subramaniam 2015, 783). Differences also 'exist in the extent to which men and women experience what is usually called 'work-family conflict' (Price et al. 2011, 5). This conflict between work and family is particularly strong for women because they experience competing devotions, their 'devotion to work and devotion to family' (Blair-Loy 2001, 688). The competition between devotions leads to conflict between being the ideal worker (as defined within a patriarchal society which places particular value and status on men's work) and the norms of female devotion to family (again sustained through patriarchal systems) (Price et al. 2011, 5). This gendered understanding of parenting and work which exists outside the Church in many organisations and across society, is also sustained within the CoI. Thus, in order to effect change, it becomes important for the Church to firstly recognise its own vulnerabilities to pre-existing gendered patterns which exist 'outside' of the Church.

It is evident that women in CoI ordained ministry are experiencing the struggle of a double vocation. There is a social expectation that 'mothering and ministry each require one hundred percent attention and twenty-four hours a day/seven days a week availability' (Moore 2008, 5). This leads to the presumptions that motherhood and ordained ministry are incompatible. The majority of mothers in our research believe that many in the CoI have absorbed these beliefs, particularly men. Yet, mothers have an important contribution to make as ordained individuals, not least in how they bring additional life experiences to their ministry which supports their congregation. If the barriers to their participation are so great that they are removed or remove themselves from active ministry, then it is the CoI and its members who will lose out.

### *Conclusion*

The accounts reported in this paper are not an exhaustive list but merely provide a selection of examples of the experiences of the participants of this research. The experiences they report illuminate why there is a lack of engagement, participation, and representation of ordained women within

the Church of Ireland. Despite the small sample, these responses indicate a serious underlying problem with gender in the CoI which is not appropriately managed at a leadership level, and is instead being reproduced and maintained within the culture of the Church. These findings highlight the difficulties facing the CoI in tackling institutionalised gender bias and discrimination, as it is built into both the structure and the culture of the Church and operates at all levels in the Church. The research demonstrates that despite the passage of thirty years since the introduction of female ordination, the CoI is not doing enough to ensure ordination is accessible to women who feel called to a life of ordained ministry, nor is it committed to supporting the ministry of ordained women by proactively working to challenge the complex culture of gender inequality which appears endemic in the Church.

On the basis of the experiences reported in this research, we make the following suggestions for policy reform within the CoI to support greater gender equality. First, the lack of female representation at the highest levels of leadership functions at both a symbolic and practical level to deter women from participation and engagement. It is necessary for the CoI to ensure that female participation at the highest levels is increased in order to address inequalities experienced at lower levels of the Church. We acknowledge that gender quotas were not generally positively received amongst the women of this research because gender quotas may 'compromise the calling of God' (Kaya). Nonetheless, a limited-term quota for the House of Bishops could be a compromise approach *if* arranged as a short-term measure of perhaps ten years in efforts to adapt the culture of leadership within the CoI in the short term. Second, we suggest the appointment of a male and female Diocesan Director of Ordinands.<sup>20</sup> In 2021 only two of the 12 directors of ordinands are female. A gender-balanced system of ordinands would provide a solution to some of the problems cited in this research. Third, we suggest a reform of the incumbent appointment process. Interview practices within the CoI appear to be unlike that of the 'outside world' where interviews are conducted with the guidance of policies and procedures, and where every applicant is asked the same questions to ensure consistency, fairness and transparency (Commission for Public Service Appointments, 2017, 4). Despite nominators voting on the candidate whom they believe to be the best suited the final decision to appoint lies with the diocesan Bishop who may choose not to follow through with that appointment. Similarly, appointment of Priests in Charge also rests with the Bishop. On the basis of this, we suggest that the CoI undertakes a full examination and reform of decision-making and interview processes regarding appointment procedures. We would

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<sup>20</sup> A director of ordinands oversees and advises during the discernment process regarding ordination.

also suggest that consideration be given to the establishment of a common CoI-wide maternity leave policy.

The women who participated in this research are committed Christians, devoted in their faith and practice. They love their Church, and the people in it. They have proven themselves to be working to create a more loving Church, and a Church that supports everyone to be fully included. It is important that their engagement with this research be viewed in this light. With the support of structural and cultural change these women would be facilitated to continue to be advocates for their Church and to have their experiences centred, rather than marginalised. It is our hope that this research will help to bring this reality closer.

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