

The double bind: Women, honour and sexuality in contemporary Ireland

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Tom Inglis

University College Dublin, Ireland

Carol MacKeogh

Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Irish women are caught in contradictory sexual discourses which create a cultural double bind. The legacy of Catholic Church teaching, in which the sexual honour of women revolves around their innocence and subservience, still lingers. This is gradually being replaced by media messages and images which portray women as sexually equal and independent. However, the media also portray sexually independent women as a threat to sexual moral order. The double bind reproduces double standards. The cultural contradictions in the way women are portrayed are revealed in an analysis of the reporting of events surrounding a court case involving the sexual assault of a woman. This analysis is put within the context of media reporting of other cases of sexually transgressive women.

Keywords

culture, honour, Ireland, media, sexuality, women

In December 2009, 50 people, mainly middle-aged and elderly men, queued up in a single file in a courtroom in Tralee, Co. Kerry. They had travelled there from Listowel, another town a short distance away. They had come to shake the hand of Danny Foley, a 35-year-old man who, two weeks previously, had been convicted of sexually assaulting a woman. She looked on in the courtroom as the 50 people, some of whom were in tears, shook Foley's hand (*The Irish Times*, 19 December 2009).

Corresponding author:

Carol MacKeogh, Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Email: carol.mackeogh@iadt.ie

After the display of respect and sympathy, the judge, who had not witnessed this scene, sentenced Foley to seven years in prison. Foley had denied the charge. He was a doorman in a night club in Tralee. He had claimed that on the night of the attack, he had gone out to go to the toilet and that he had come across the victim beside a waste bin. He told gardaí (police) who arrived on the scene and found him crouching over the victim: 'I came around here for a slash and I saw yer wan lying on the ground.... No one arrived. I tried to get her standing' (*The Sunday Independent*, 20 December 2009). However, during the trial, CCTV footage had shown Foley carrying the victim out of the nightclub and across the car park. After sentencing, the victim left the court under garda escort.

One of the people who had been in the queue that day was Fr Seán Sheehy. He had provided the court with a character reference for Foley, describing him as 'having the highest respect for women' (*The Irish Times*, 19 December 2009). He was also reported as saying that Foley did not have an abusive bone in his body (*The Irish Independent*, 18 December 2009). Fr Sheehy reportedly described the sentence given to Foley as 'very harsh' (*The Irish Independent*, 18 December 2009). He went on national radio to defend his actions. Claire Byrne, the host who interviewed Fr Sheehy on the radio programme, reported him as saying that all that was wrong in the case was that Foley and his victim had engaged in a sexual act outside of marriage and that that behaviour was immoral.¹ The following day, the Bishop of Kerry issued a statement dissociating himself and the diocese from Fr Sheehy's actions. The next day, he accepted Fr Sheehy's resignation.

The fiancée of Danny Foley, Michelle O'Sullivan, and his brother Tim also went on national radio to defend him. Foley's fiancée rejected the evidence and said: 'I know that Danny Foley is not capable of the things he has been accused of.' She said that he 'could hold his head high' and that as far as she was concerned 'he has done nothing wrong'. His brother Tim insisted that the CCTV footage showed 'two people walking arm in arm, kissing and cuddling out the back of the nightclub'. He claimed that the 'extraordinary stories of him dragging her out the back of the nightclub' were 'totally untrue, totally fabricated and just an absolute disgrace'. A reporter from *The Irish Times* went to Listowel in the days following the court case. She encountered about 20 people, all female between 20 and 50 years of age. 'Not one I speak to has anything but sympathy for Foley.... Several of them say they know Foley.... "He's a very nice fellow, and everyone knows him"' (*The Irish Times*, 19 December 2009). It was reported that there was a 'Danny Foley is Innocent' page set up on Facebook in which a woman poster claimed 'that girl is a slut and may she rot in hell 4 [sic] the lies she has told' (*The Irish Independent*, 19 December 2009). In the aftermath of the court case, the victim said that she faced hostility in Listowel. 'I can't walk down the street because it's such a small town. People are staring at me, throwing dirty looks at me. I was refused service in a local shop' (*The Sunday Independent*, 20 December 2010).

Ordinarily, a sexual assault case would only receive passing attention in the national media. However, the demonstration of support for Foley, in particular the intervention of Fr Sheehy, revealed a fissure in Irish society and brought the case centre stage. While they did report on it, the national media were very critical of the positive local support for Foley and, as we will examine in this article, regarded it as a 'throwback' to an older Ireland of patriarchy and parish politics. It could be argued that this case was simply an aberration, an isolated incident from rural Ireland that reveals little about contemporary

attitudes to sexuality, the sexual rights of women, sexual violence and the double standards for men and women. However, we argue that the case offers a number of clues which, when analysed forensically, illuminate the complexity of a wider social whole (Inglis, 2010). It reveals how honour, particularly family honour, is still an important feature of Irish social life. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms, family honour is part of a traditional rural habitus. It has a different logic from the cosmopolitanism of the media. It is a principle which is often beyond question and therefore may not be easily rationalized or explained to those outside the habitus; to those, for example, in occupations such as the journalism in which, by and large, there is a very different habitus. And yet, we would argue, that one of the tasks of the media is to help develop an understanding of why people do the things they do, the logic of their practice.

The role of the media is key to this case. In reporting, commenting on and analysing the events, the media adopted a global cosmopolitan disposition which, instead of trying to capture the logic and meaning of what had happened, of how sexual honour operates in rural Irish society, played the role of being the social conscience of Irish society, and castigated the locals for being backward. In doing so, the media were, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolically violent (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The discourse used by commentators and reporters in the Irish media, particularly in relation to the involvement of the clergy and the local people, was not just judgemental, it created a moral panic. The high moral ground discourse of the media can be read as a condemnation of the locals for not having a global cosmopolitan attitude to sex. And yet, we shall argue that while the media advocate a more liberal sexual order and have exposed the double standards of the Catholic Church, they themselves have their own double standards. They operate within a discourse and habitus that constitute women as being sexually sophisticated and alluring but, at the same time, run stories that blame over-sexed women for the breakdown in sexual moral order.

The case, then, reveals the disjuncture between local rural and urban cosmopolitan culture (Inglis, 2008). It reveals how honour in a small Irish town is enmeshed in sexual honour and how the strategies of creating and maintaining sexual honour are different for men and women (Campbell, 1965; Delaney, 1987; Schneider, 1971). More importantly, and this is significant in that it was overlooked by most reporters and commentators, the case shows how there is still in Ireland, a double bind for women, particularly young mothers, when it comes to sex. It is demanded that they be sexually alluring and erotic but, when boundaries are transgressed and abuse and violence occurs, they are often blamed. This double bind can be linked to a number of factors. While there are indications that class may play a role, we concentrate in this article on a long-term historical process of social change and the shift in the balance of power between the media and the Catholic Church. However, it has been an uneven process and the Listowel case is evidence of ongoing clashes between the increasing sexualization of Irish society and the continuing legacy of the Church's attitude to women and sex. Although the media may strive to be objective and impartial, they too are enmeshed in this process of change. Their tendency to rush to judgement and to condemn the locals, but to fail to reflect on their role in the case and the logic of their own practice, demands more analysis. We argue that there is a need to critique and analyse the part the media play in the cultural field and any attempts made by them to become the social conscience of Irish society.

Our study of the case entails two strands. Initially, we look at aspects of the media coverage, in particular the strategies used to create a narrative of cultural divide. We explore the representation of the case in the media and see this process as one of ‘putting into concrete form (that is different signifiers) an abstract ideological concept’ which is ‘organized and regulated across different media and within different discourses (O’Sullivan et al., 1983). While not designed as a comprehensive discourse analysis, we do explore how language use and journalistic devices can naturalize dominant discourses, making what is culturally arbitrary appear to be beyond question or debate (van Dijk, 1993, 1997). Our emphasis is on newspaper coverage and, while different newspapers (local, national, broadsheets, etc.) varied in terms of perspectives, the meta-narrative that we discuss in this article was broadly similar across the media. Given the local show of support for Foley, it might have been expected that the local media would follow a different line than the national media. However, the key local paper, *The Kerryman*, appears weekly on a Wednesday. The edition following the court scene was almost a week later and the reports and comment pieces generally adopted similar discourses to those in the national media. In analysing the coverage we provide a ‘preferred’ reading of the media response (Fiske, 1987: 64), though clearly actual readings would vary depending on ‘the delicate and situated’ interpretations of varied audiences (Lull, 1990:29). We then explore the cultural phenomena underpinning the case and, using theorists such as Bourdieu, we interpret the case in relation to different honour systems, focusing in particular, on the role of sexual honour. We then trace the development of a gendered double bind both in religious and media discourses. This analysis is sociologically ‘forensic’, not in the sense of exploring the minute details of the case, but in looking for clues as to how the case helps reveal the double standards not just in Irish sexuality but in the way the Irish media cover sexual issues. The objective in this methodology is to use sociological theory and concepts, along with text-based analysis, to uncover aspects of a case that could reveal the wider social and cultural whole of which it is part (Inglis, 2010). Our analysis is deductive – the aim is to capture an elusive discourse emerging between the lines of the media messages and then to link this in historically with previous cases so that a wider pattern is revealed.

Media response

The media had little or no sympathy or support for Danny Foley and his family and heaped scorn on the people who demonstrated their support for him in court. The headline in the report in *The Irish Independent* (19 December 2009) was ‘Shame on jackasses who treated attacker as victim’. In *The Sunday Independent* (20 January 2009), there was a detailed analysis under the heading ‘Listowel scandal smells of older, shameful Ireland’. The headline in an article on the case in *The Evening Herald* (18 December 2009) was ‘What signal did these ignorant Neanderthals send?’ The content of these articles reflected the headlines. There were references to the ‘50 fatheads’ and their ‘barbarous behaviour’, and they were described as a ‘throwback community, one which respects neither women nor the law’ (*The Irish Independent*, 19 December 2009).

Following theorists of discourse analysis such as van Dijk (1993, 1997), we can identify two key strategies used by the media to distance themselves, and by implication

us the readers, from the 'outgroup' that dishonoured cosmopolitan Ireland. At a level of surface structure, simple word selection or lexical style can create dichotomies with the use of terms such as 'Neanderthal' and 'barbarous' to describe the 'outgroup', implying distance from the civilized and more sophisticated sensitivities of the reader. As van Dijk argues, the choice of words 'may signal vast underlying complexes of contextual significance' (1993: 106). The 'outgroup' are so despicable that any term can be used – even slang terms such as 'fathead' and 'jackass' – as the group is beyond common decency. Presumption also underpins some of the lexical style. References to history and the past – the 'throwback' and 'older shameful Ireland' – imply a common view of that past as one of dishonour and disgrace. Again, the discourse interpellates the audience, forcing a cultural division between the assumed reader and the 'outgroup'. Van Dijk points out that 'discourse may be seen as a semantic iceberg, of which only a few meanings are expressed "on the surface"' (1993: 109). A second strategy used by the media to depict the 'outgroup' as alien is to manage the reader's perspective as distinct from that of the 'outgroup'. Using quotations and vox pops to convey the 'outgroup's' point of view acts both as an expression of 'distance' but also one of 'doubt' (1993: 108). There is no attempt to interpret or understand the views expressed by the locals – they are placed in quotations in order to clearly distinguish them from the voice of the reporter and to imply that the local voice is a strange one that needs to be quoted verbatim. The strategies used by the media in depicting the story show that not only did they fail to explore what lay behind the expression of support for a local criminal, but also they created a cultural chasm between their supposed rational and enlightened readers and the local 'outgroup' who spoke a language that could not even be interpreted.

In sum, the media construed the demonstration of public support for Danny Foley as a source of national shame and disgrace. The reaction of many local people could be read as defence, sympathy and support for a well-liked man from a well-known family whose private and public honour was besmirched by a lower-status working-class woman who, as a single mother of a young baby boy, went out to nightclubs on her own, and had little private or public honour. On the other hand, the reaction of some of the media could be read in terms of local people dishonouring the modern, cosmopolitan image of Ireland. Whereas the local people could be seen as attempting to defend family honour from the behaviour of a dishonourable woman and, subsequently, following attacks within the media, the honour of the community, the media could be seen as defending the reputation of Irish people from the behaviour of non-cosmopolitans embedded in local culture.

Honour

There are plenty of clues that suggest that much of this case revolves around honour and shame. Honour can be understood as the respect bestowed on an individual by members of society (Bourdieu, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1965). It is an image as well as feeling of pride that individuals have of themselves that comes from others (Bourdieu, 1965: 211). But it is objective and social. It is a form of symbolic capital that, like other forms of capital, is accumulated over time. It legitimates other forms of capital that the individual has accumulated (Bourdieu, 1986, 2000: 166).

We can identify two sources of honour (Stewart, 1994: 59). People can be honoured for what they have achieved, or because of their family background, religion, occupational position or social status. Honour is not given or static. It can easily be lost and so has to be continually earned. It is the respect that comes from living up to an honour code (Appiah, 2010: 175). Whatever honour people have achieved can be lost by not fulfilling the honour code. The problem, as Appiah (2010) points out, is that honour codes have different implications and requirements for different individuals, for example, men and women in relation to sex. The other problem is that honour codes change over time. What was once honourable, such as duelling, foot-binding in China or slavery can not only go out of date but can become a source of shame. What Appiah (2010: 199–204) identifies is that the code of sexual honour in rural Pakistan at the beginning of this century is not only different for men and women and between members of different tribes, it is also very different from the codes of honour in the West and the different demands and expectations of men and women (Wouters, 2004). Peristiany (1965: 11) argues that ‘honour and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office.’ This is something that the Irish media did not recognize let alone value.

To understand the reason why 50 people, mostly middle-aged and elderly men from the locality in which Danny Foley lived, went up to shake his hand and embrace him in court, we have to understand the code of honour and, in particular, sexual honour. As a local from the area explained to a reporter from *The Irish Times* (19 December 2009): ‘They were neighbours; they felt he was an honest kind of guy.’ To understand why Fr Sheehy wrote a character reference for Foley and stood in line to shake his hand publicly, it is necessary to understand his position, and role of providing pastoral care. He reportedly said on radio that he had supported Foley because he felt for him: ‘it is a horrible situation to be in the dock as a prisoner, just sitting with his prison officers. From a purely pastoral standpoint, I would do that with anybody’ (*The Sunday Independent*, 20 December 2009). He said that he would have shaken the hand of the victim if he had known her. On the other hand, he knew the Foley family intimately and called at their home regularly. He was reported as saying that while he did not organize the demonstration of support, Danny Foley’s mother had asked him to go up to him in the court and say hello (*The Sunday Independent*, 20 December 2009). Tim Foley reportedly said that Fr Sheehy was known to the family as ‘Seano’. ‘He is not our parish priest. He is our friend. He knows Danny extremely well and they are good friends.’ Tim Foley confirmed that besides himself and his sister, the people who had queued up in court were mainly nieces and nephews (*The Sunday Independent*, 20 December 2009). The queue to embrace and shake the hand of Danny Foley was then not just a public display to honour him personally, it was also a display of the honour of the Foley family. It was more than a show of compassion. It was a deliberate, strategic act to maintain their public honour and social position in the neighbourhood. It was a way of protecting the value of their symbolic capital. As an employee of the local hotel put it to *The Irish Times* (19 December 2009): ‘The way I look at it, if Dan Foley was one of your relatives or friends, sure you’d have to support him really, wouldn’t you? ... I’d do the same myself.’

There are clues from the reports of the Listowel case that reveal how family honour is interwoven with private sexual honour and social status. The way the family and neighbours of Danny Foley stood by him and honoured him, despite the shame of having been convicted of serious sexual assault, is an indication of how local honour codes, while they often work in tandem with wider national and global codes, can operate within a different logic. The disgrace of being convicted of a crime by the state can be strategically offset by a local demonstration of support. In some respects, such demonstrations serve to undermine the moral if not the legal authority of the court

As evidenced from an earlier court case, which also caused a furore at the time, a woman's honour is very closely tied to her perceived sexual morals. In 1982, also in Tralee, Joanne Hayes, was being examined and cross-examined during a public tribunal of investigation into the death of two newborn babies. Despite the evidence, the police maintained during a subsequent Public Inquiry into the events, that she had become pregnant with twins through having sex with two different men within 48 hours (what became known as the superfecundation thesis). It emerged during the tribunal that, in order to substantiate their 'superfecundation' thesis, the legal teams for the gardaí tried to establish that Joanne Hayes was a calculating, lying, devious, sexually voracious woman who already had one child 'out of wedlock' and had been having an affair with at least one other man in her area besides her lover Jeremiah Locke. It was argued that in her liaison with her lover she was the dominant controlling force (Inglis, 2003).

In the Listowel case these elements of the double bind were not spelt out as clearly but the similarities are striking. As a single mother, the victim may have broken the local sexual honour code by going to the night club and behaving in a sexually adventurous manner. By drinking alcohol, she may have broken the code by putting herself in the position of not being able to refuse the honourable and rightful advances of men like Danny Foley (Appiah, 2010: 142). In pursuing the case in court, while gaining the honour and respect of cosmopolitan Irish, as discussed below, she was challenging the public honour of the Foley family. This may help explain the lack of sympathy the victim appears to have received from the local women. It may be that for them the public honour of a well-known family outweighed the issue of sexual violence and double standards. The word and honour of a man from a well-respected bourgeois family were more significant than those of a single mother living in an estate in the town.

Church and media

To understand the habitus that maintains the double bind in Ireland and how it structures attitudes and practices in relation to sexual honour, it is necessary to understand its long-term historical development and the shift in the balance of power between the Catholic Church and the media in the cultural field (Inglis, 2000).

In the heyday of the Church's monopoly over morality and sexuality, the deployment of sexuality, in Ireland as elsewhere, revolved around sexually promiscuous women who were seen as a threat to family and community, a silencing of sex particularly among children and adolescents, the promotion of unrestricted fertility and the castigation of any form of sex that took place outside of marriage as deviant. During this time sex was

deeply repressed, desire was strictly governed and the sexual purity of women was the hallmark of the moral health of the nation. Dignity, honour and respect, the essential ingredients of symbolic capital, were attained by adopting postures and gestures and, generally, ways of self-presentation that generated signals of piety, humility, chastity, devotion and subservience (Inglis, 2006). Women who broke the mould, who became too self-oriented, self-expressive and self-indulgent, who threatened the sanctity of marriage and family, became subject to the supervisory gaze and disciplinary strategies and tactics of priests, teachers and other women.

Gradually, particularly with the rise in the influence of the media and the opening of Ireland to global cultural flows, these strategies began to be replaced by the 'sexualisation of romance and the eroticisation of sex' (Seidman, 1991: 4; Wouters, 2004). During the last half of the 20th century, there was a radical departure from the Church's discourse of self-denial and penance in which sex had to be repressed, and a move towards a discourse of self-indulgence and pleasure in which there is an obligation for sex to be fulfilled (Inglis, 1998: 70–89). It was in this process that there was a rupture in the discourse of what constituted a good woman: a move from a traditional Catholic *illusio* of being fecund without being sexual, to a contemporary *illusio* of being sexual without being fecund, or from being innocent and pure about sex, to being knowledgeable and skilled at being sexual (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 116). Irish women, then, are caught between two normative discourses: on the one hand, a liberal-individual, cosmopolitan discourse in which they can be sexually active and, on the other, a conservative, fundamentalist discourse in which they cannot. This links into a double standard when it comes to sex. It is only women who can lose sexual honour and disgrace a family, community or nation. If women pursue sexual longings and desires in the same way as men, they are in danger, as in the Listowel case, of being designated and labelled 'sluts'. We argue that the Listowel case reveals the ongoing legacy of a deeply ingrained Catholic disposition towards women and sexuality in which women were responsible for the sexual honour of the family, community and nation. We do not argue that the Irish sexual habitus and practices are unique, but rather that the legacy of Catholic dispositions about sex seems to have reached deeper and lasted longer in Ireland than elsewhere in the West (Inglis, 2005). It is this double bind, and the double standards to which it gives rise, which is central to the symbolic domination of women (Bourdieu, 2001).

However, as Foucault (1973) reminds us, the shift between discourses is never smooth and clean, it is full of discontinuities. It is because discourses structure spaces, and because habituses are ingrained in thought and embodied in practice, that traditional, conservative, fundamentalist ways of thinking about women and sexuality, continue to manifest themselves in Ireland. The Listowel case is one in a long line of cases in which the media work between the two discourses, sometimes suggesting that the attitude to women's sexuality is outdated but at other times seeing women's sexuality as a cause for concern.

Double bind – media role

The reaction by elements of the news media in condemning the support given to Foley in the Listowel case should not be seen as a general support for women's sexual freedom.

Relative to other institutions such as the Church, the media have acted as a force for sexual liberation. But we argue that the media have also instigated their own more subtle codes and boundaries.

The media have an ambiguous attitude to sex and sexual morality. Sex is used to sell. In factual media this can entail sensational headlines with accompanying stories that reflect deeply conservative attitudes to gender roles. For example, while sexual elements are often emphasized in the reporting of female crime, this is underpinned by shock that women, who are expected to be tender and caring, could commit such crimes (Black, 2009). As Gordon and Black argue (2010: 26), female criminals are depicted as 'doubly deviant'; deviant in terms of the law but also in terms of gender norms. On the other hand, in fictional media sex often operates as a symbol for modernity. Sex and sexuality are integral to media codes and conventions, with sexual ineptitude often used as shorthand for a nerdish character while sexual ease is key to the construction of heroic qualities (MacKeogh, 2005). But there is a tradition in the media that female sexuality should remain coy and demure, that it is primarily, as Berger has pointed out, for the male gaze (1973). It is evident that the moral order underpinning factual and fictional gender roles in the media incorporates sexuality in ambivalent and contradictory narratives.

Women, then, are caught again in a cultural double bind. There is a modern cosmopolitan liberal view, reflected in elements of the media, that women have the same sexual rights as men, and similar sexual urges and desires. Not only are they depicted as sexually alive and active but are increasingly represented in media narratives as the initiators of physical intimacy (MacKeogh, 2005: 47). Nevertheless, while they may have sexual longings they are rarely depicted as being as lustful and rapacious as men, without inviting moral disdain (MacKeogh, 2005). Initiating sexual activity as a form of bonding may be allowed, but to initiate it purely for pleasure would be beyond the limits of standard media discourses and would be depicted as predatory. Further, we can read many media stories about women's sexuality as expressing concerns, sometimes creating moral panics, about women being too sexual.

In as much as there was a willingness to castigate the attitudes of local men (and some women) in Listowel as unrepresentative and dysfunctional to the project of the nation, there has been a way of thinking, inherited in its present form from Catholic Church teaching but still propagated by the media, in which women are blamed for sexual transgressions and any breakdown in sexual mores. Following a brief examination of some of those cases, we suggest that this continuing disciplining of women's sexuality by the media may be a legacy of a religious habitus but may have found a new rationale. Two possibilities that would warrant further study would be that the new regime may be based more on concern about youth sexualization, or that it may link in with ethnic differentiation and fears of fundamentalist ideologies.

Over-sexed women and motherhood

While the shift in discursive power from the Church to the media was a protracted process at multiple cultural levels, a number of key events, similar to the Listowel case in terms of symbolic import, can be explored. These reveal not just the changing balances of power but also the development of the media's coding of sexual behaviour.

The Catholic Church's governance of women's sexuality lasted well into the 1980s. During this decade there were, at a macro level, a series of struggles to prevent women attaining control of their fertility. There was continued opposition by the Catholic Church and other interest groups to the growing liberalization of the sale of contraceptives. In 1983, the state, responding to pressure from pro-life interest groups, held a referendum to decide whether abortion, which was already illegal, should be made unconstitutional. The referendum was passed by a two to one majority.

At the same time, at a micro level, there were two high-profile cases in which women's sexuality became the subject of media coverage and public debate. Eileen Flynn was a school teacher in the Holy Faith convent school in New Ross in Co. Wexford. She had an affair with Richie Roche, a local politician, whose wife had left him. In 1981, Flynn became pregnant. Sr Anna Power, the manager of the Holy Faith schools in Ireland suggested that she find alternative employment and that she go to England to have her baby. Flynn refused. In August 1982, Flynn was dismissed. The main problem was not so much that she was pregnant outside of marriage, but that she made no attempt to conceal it. Sr Anna told the Employment Appeals Tribunal, to which Flynn had made an appeal, that 'she just flaunted it and did not hide it or redeem herself' (*The Irish Times*, 20 September 2008). Again, honour was at issue. The Tribunal dismissed her appeal. Flynn then took the school to court. In his judgment, Judge Noel Ryan of the Circuit Court, noted that times were changing in Ireland but not with regard to some things.

In other places women are being condemned to death for this sort of offence. They are not Christians in the Far East. I do not agree with this, of course. Here people take a very serious view of this, and it is idle to shut one's eyes to it. (*The Irish Times*, 5 July 1984)

This case, along with the other high-profile Kerry babies case mentioned above, entailed battles between, on the one hand the educational and judicial institutions, embodying church teaching, and the media exposé of the power they wield against the individual. But, yet again, we see that the media are not always righteous champions of the individual. The selling power of women's sexuality and crime, whether the victim or the perpetrator, is evidenced in the case of Catherine Nevin who was convicted of the murder of her husband Tom in 2000. The couple owned a well-known pub on the main Dublin to Wexford road. She was found guilty of procuring, over a seven-year period, three different men to stage a fake robbery of the pub late one night and for her husband to be shot during the raid. One of the men eventually committed the murder.

Her trial became a national spectacle. The reports in the newspapers, particularly the tabloids, became so lurid, that the judge conducting the trial instituted a ban on the media giving any description of Catherine Nevin's dress and demeanour in court. She was portrayed as a sex-obsessed *femme fatale* who lured men into her pub. It was claimed that she had her womb removed before she was married so she would not age prematurely, and that she had an operation – it was suggested that she had her clitoris pierced with a metal stud – to enhance her sexual pleasure (O'Connor, 2000: 25). During her trial it was alleged that she had been having affairs with, among others, both the local District Court Judge and Police Inspector. One newspaper report claimed that

she had been promiscuous from a young age and referred to her as the ‘Curragh Carpet’ (Walsh, 2000: 31). As Dermot Walsh, Professor of Law in the University of Limerick noted:

A woman bears life, protects life and here we have this turned on its head. The media fed the primeval fears that lurked behind this scenario. Better still if you can tie sex into it, then you are into titillation. (quoted in Walsh, 2000: 201)

What all these women had in common was that not only were they portrayed as sexually voracious but they were also either childless wives or unwed mothers. They were depicted as having profaned the sacredness of Irish motherhood. In doing this it was intimated that they had violated not just the teachings of the Church, but the honour of the nation. However, it was not just the Church that railed against these women. It was often the media. There may be more coverage of sex in the media but, as mentioned earlier, the rupture from Catholic teaching is only partial – the media continue to maintain a double standard with relatively conservative role models for women (MacKeogh, 2005). Moreover, in giving extensive coverage to these cases the media reproduced the dominant Catholic narrative that women are vulnerable and more easily contaminated by sex, and that they are then more likely to contaminate social order.

Reporting the fall-out – teenage sex

The double standard of the Irish media is reflected in the moral panic they activate around the over-sexualization of young people, a population that has traditionally been viewed as particularly vulnerable (Barker and Petley, 2001; Buckingham, 1993; MacKeogh, 2002). While the media rejected the sexual repression encouraged by the Church, the encouragement of sexual fulfilment, particularly by young women, was depicted as opening a potential floodgate that was producing a new variety of social dysfunctions and individual pathologies.

During the summer of 1999, *The Irish Times* ran a major story about ‘Our children and their sex games’. It revolved around the evidence that emerged from a rape case that was being held in the Central Criminal Court. The evidence from the alleged victim described the regular scenes that took place two summers previously when up to 40 teenagers met up in a local park to drink and have sex. The newspaper reported the alleged victim’s evidence. She said that, having arrived at the scene, there was a lot of drinking and talking and ‘meeting’ – where a girl and a boy would go into the bushes together. She testified: ‘I was “meeting” for a while by kissing at first but then it went a bit further and I gave him oral sex.’ She admitted that she had initiated the oral sex. She said that her female friends had been talking about oral sex and she wanted to experiment and be able to talk about it as well.

The girl alleged that when she went back a second boy asked her to go back into the bushes which she did. She agreed and ‘got down on her knees for the second time that evening’. But when he asked for intercourse, she declined and it was then she alleged he raped her. The jury unanimously acquitted the boy.

The reporter then talked to social workers, members of the gardaí and teenagers themselves. They all admitted that the descriptions that had come out in court were happening all over Dublin. She wrote:

Teenagers, for the most part, seemed startled at the naivety of the question. Oral sex, i.e., ‘blow jobs’, is, by all accounts, the stuff of everyday conversation. ‘You will be asked “Do you spit, swallow or gargle?” or “Do you go down on a first date?”’ said one teenager with a resigned shrug. ‘A lot of it goes on, and we all know girls who do it.’ (*The Irish Times*, 17 July 1999)

The reporter said that many people she spoke to ‘flail out at the way very young girls comport themselves, criticizing their skimpy clothes, sexual posturing and predatory ways, and just stop short of saying the unsayable, that “they’re asking for it”’. She was eager to point out that these young teenage women were caught in a discourse and practice of double standards, of boys wanting to be perceived as ‘macho’, ‘cool’ studs and girls, seeking love and attention, complying with their wishes. Again, while we need to be wary of reading media representations as windows on to actual practices, they do play a key role in circulating discourses that strongly infer the existence of such practices.

A return to fundamentalism

As much as there is expression within the media of a fear of what happens when young women become too liberated and sexualized, there is also an expression of fear about any return to religious fundamentalism and the repression of sex. While the media have manifested society’s double standards for women, the Church has also been revealed as operating its own double standards for priests. Since the 1990s, there have been numerous reports and stories in the media of what happened as a result of the Catholic Church’s attitude to sex. To begin with, these focused on stories of bishops and priests raping and abusing children, but soon they moved to the sexual abuse of children in industrial and reformatory schools (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010). It was the media who broke all these stories, reporting incidents and practices among Catholic clergy that, ten years previously, would have been beyond the realm of thought; forms of sexuality that could not be countenanced, let alone reported. Instead of being seen as paragons of sexual virtue, priests, nuns and brothers began to be seen as paragons of sexual repression. The new-found freedom of the media enabled the development of a revisionist history of sex and the emergence of a liberal-individual, secular, cosmopolitan attitude to sex. There was a reversal of roles. Instead of ‘loose’ women, particularly mothers, being blamed by the Church for the sexual ills of the nation, it was increasingly the teachings of the Church and the way they were implemented by the clergy which were to blame (Inglis, 1997).

The public display of sex has combined with a new exuberance and self-confidence in being sexual and performing erotically. The global flow of media has created the illusion that to be sexy is central to being free, healthy and happy. The health of the nation is no longer represented by the image of shy, demure, awkward, easily embarrassed young women (Inglis, 2005). The health of the nation is now more attached to strong, confident, attractive, glamorous women. Within this process of change, the notion of Irish women returning to the body image of the chaste colleen became increasingly repulsive. It used

to be that when Irish women were in public view, particularly when going to church, they were expected to cover their heads with headscarves or mantillas. Women who embodied these practices were seen as virtuous, were honoured and respected, and attained high positions in the social fields of family and community in which they mainly operated. These practices were central to the attaining of honour.

The covering up of the body has now become as problematic as its uncovering was 50 years ago. To be seen to deny sex, to keep it hidden, has slowly become the new social pathology. It suggests a social and personal disorder. This can be related to the public concerns, expressed by politicians and amplified by the media, of women wearing hijabs in public (*The Irish Times*, 14 June 2008) and the deep-seated anxieties about ethnic purity.

Conclusion

While a forensic examination of the media treatment of events of cultural significance may not help to reveal the facts pertaining to these cases, they can help to elucidate some of the complex social forces and discourses that bring them to prominence and frame their significance for society. The Listowel case helps illuminate the discontinuities and contradictions about women and sexuality that exist in contemporary Ireland. The victim in the case was caught between two habituses and two discourses. In a traditional, conservative, fundamentalist discourse, as a mother of a young child, she should be shy, demure and defensive about her sexuality. The embodiment of a habitus structured by this discourse would be central to attaining private honour. However, it may well be that, within this discourse, any private honour she had was jeopardized by leaving her home without a man and perhaps then behaving like a man. However, within a liberal-individual, cosmopolitan discourse she would be expected, and have the right to go out on her own and fulfil herself sexually. The case reveals the cultural double bind around sexuality for Irish women, and the double standards of honour and morality to which it gives rise.

The case also illuminates the shift in the balance of power between the Catholic Church and the media, particularly in relation to sexuality. The extensive coverage of the Irish media and its derogatory comments about the role of the priest was obviously a key factor in forcing his resignation. However, as well as subverting the role of the Catholic Church as the social conscience of Irish society, the media also denounced the practice of local people defending family honour.

The story of the role of the media in Irish sexual morality is far from straightforward. Behind the façade of progressive liberal-individual attitudes to sexual fulfilment, the media maintain strong conservative views about sexuality, reproducing traditional attitudes about the gendered nature of sexual roles. Within a broader, long-term historical perspective, the 'sexualization' of women, and indeed men, cannot be seen simply as a liberating process. Increasingly freed from the strictures of the Catholic Church, Irish people may now be submitting more to being disciplined by the media. Of course, the media do not operate in a vacuum. They link in with, activate and respond to pleasures and anxieties that circulate in society. But the particular ways that sexual practices are depicted and amplified create discourses that may not have done much to question or alter the double sexual standards between men and women.

Note

1. See: <http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/2387/59>

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