

Women at the Margins: Reality, Solidarity and Hope

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I am so grateful for the invitation from NBCW to speak with you all this evening. One of my roles is as chair of the trustees of Women@theWell. W@W is one of the member organisations of the Board and I think has been since its earliest days, since it was founded in 2007 by Sr Lynda Dearlove of the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy. I joined the team there in my voluntary trustee role a little under two and a half years ago.

I'm also a theologian and what I'm talking about this evening moves between these two areas of my work. I want to reflect with you on some of the circumstances that the women who come to W@W experience, and to do that in the light of what Catholic Social Teaching has to offer to diagnose and respond to those realities. It's important for me to say that W@W works with women who have or are experiencing sexual exploitation, or are facing sexual exploitation as a risk in their lives.

I won't be talking about that in terms of detailed narratives, but it's important to say that sexual exploitation is central to what I'm talking about this evening. So, please look after yourselves, step away if you need to, and if you are sharing your own insights and stories during our discussion, let's be mindful together of the need to look after each other.

To reflect on this topic I will work my way through three areas from my talk title: reality, solidarity and hope and in each category I want to draw on the expertise of my colleagues at W@W, and on my work in Catholic social teaching and theology more broadly.

Who are Women@theWell and who do W@W work with?

Women@theWell works out of a house still owned and shared by the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy for a peppercorn rent. None of the work we do would be possible without IOLM (and of course a range of other funders), and as you'll see on my slides, it was Sr Lynda Dearlove herself

who founded the charity. That house is just a street away from Kings Cross St Pancras, right in the heart of a radically unequal part of London.

We have enormous developments, new high rise flats, parks, shops, global companies with offices in the area, and we are just next to a whole cluster of universities like SOAS and UCL and science industries. But it's also an area with significant multiple metrics of deprivation and marginalisation. In that place we run a women-only, trauma-informed support centre, providing holistic services and exiting support from prostitution, trafficking and sexual exploitation. We also work pan-London, with projects of outreach across Camden and Islington in particular.

Our vision is of a society in which all women are empowered to achieve their full potential free from discrimination, abuse and neglect. You can already see the influence here of Catholic social teaching, with our emphasis on enabling the women who use our service to form their own ambitions and forge their own paths, free from exploitation and violence. CST and the charism of the Institute of our Lady of Mercy also continues to shape our values: Respect, Solidarity, Hope, and a relentless commitment to the full human dignity every woman.

Our mission is to work both at the level of immediate response to women who are experiencing sexual exploitation, and at the level of aiming at systemic change. There are three areas to our direct service provision with women: drop-in, outreach and one to one advocacy work. Our logic is that our on site drop-in (running 4 days a week, 50 weeks a year), and our outreach teams meetings with women on the streets and in the evenings is a way to build relationships, understand where women are facing risks and so when women wish to, draw them into the one to one advocacy work to support and accompany them in their journeys, and so reduce those risks and hopefully exit situations of sexual exploitation.

This work is where I want to focus for my talk this evening on women at the margins, and what that reality is like.

Reality: exploitation as a constellation of distorted relationships

The work I've just outlined means that W@W are working with women who are often coming to us with experiences of multiple vulnerabilities and deprivations – women whose housing is insecure and may perhaps be homeless, women with histories of abuse and family breakdown, women who have been in care, women with addiction challenges, women facing destitution, women with learning difficulties, and so on.

Our work aims to take these circumstances seriously as risk factors for sexual exploitation. The kinds of examples we encounter involve things like:

Women who are homeless – such women face particular vulnerabilities when rough sleeping such as exposure to violence or being pressured into exchanging sex for a place to sleep. This can be a hidden part of the narratives around homelessness and addiction: often key barriers to being able to exit situations of sexual violence and exploitation.

Cuckooing – this is where a supposed boyfriend or friend turns a woman's rented home or room into a site for criminal activity. For example, drug exchange, storing drugs. So these are not really relationships, they are exploitative arrangements, and create new and additional risks for the women involved. Sometimes the supposed boyfriend is involved in the sex trade, and is arranging clients.

Women in brothels – W@W's teams are sometimes asked to attend police raids to suspected brothels – which we only do when there is a clear agreement that we are not there to communicate for the police, and will have the opportunity to speak privately with the women to offer resources and exiting support. These will sometimes include women who has been trafficked to the UK, or in and between different parts of the UK

Street prostitution and so-called “sex work” – our outreach teams work in areas of the city where we know prostitution is being coordinated. Our teams meet and connect with women already experiencing sexual exploitation through these systems.

Women with no recourse to public funds – this includes women who are awaiting judgment on their claims to asylum, they can't access any benefits during that time which is often years long and they are not permitted to work. Without work, and on the very narrow stipend available to them, they are in highly vulnerable situations. This will sometimes include women who were trafficked to the UK (though this isn't a big % of who we work with; a great deal of those situations remain invisible because of online infrastructure being used. That's something we are trying to work on).

Lastly, then this is that **online landscape** that we are all situated in. There are any number of websites that work to connect men with so called “sex working” women, often then moving the coordination into private whatsapp channels. Such sites supposedly work to mitigate the risks of women who are being pimped out or who may be subject to violence in the course of these exchanges. Those mitigations aren't meaningful, and ultimately still enable those exchanges, missing the point that such exchanges are driven by distorted relationships in the first place. The online examples, paralleling some of the other examples above, are both brazen, in the

sense that that these are sites one can access with any smart phone, but it's also hidden, because the women being pimped through these systems are in flats right across the UK but moved frequently, with limited ways to be contacted and so are hard to reach for organisations like ours.

What characterises all of these circumstances is the profound marginalisation that these women are experiencing. This constellation of forms of sexual exploitation constitute exclusions and marginalisations of women in our communities right now. These are all scenarios that concretely prevent women from living full lives, both in the sense of potentially lacking meaningful necessities but also often blocking them from participating fully in their local communities, or building relationships with friends, neighbours, - a woman being cuckooed can't easily invite a neighbour in for a cup of tea, for example. I quote from a piece of research by Dr Pat Jones, commissioned by W@W, centring the voices and experiences of women whose lives have been affected by prostitution: "This is an exclusion of not being able to be visible in who you are and what is happening to you, and lacking any confidence that anyone will help."¹ Pat's report is actually titled *Invisible*, which emphasises this point very strongly. Pat speaks of the powerful image used by some of the women she conducted the research with of: 'being caught in a web, in all its sticky filaments, unable to get free'² (p. 14).

At the most basic level these women are being marginalised out of the central rhythms and relationships of daily life, kept distant even from *themselves*, from their hopes and their own desires. In fact, I want to draw on Pope Francis's work to describe everything I've outlined here through the lens of profoundly distorted relationship.

Francis's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* talks about the 'illusion of communication.' We are apparently better connected than we have ever been online, through whatsapp and so on, but this is not what the letter calls the 'slow and gradual cultivation of friendships' nor does it 'really build community' (FT 43). This is all part of Francis's broader critique of our contemporary society where he says we have 'ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity' (FT 33). Francis suggests that we are living in a time when our increasing failure to really encounter each other as neighbours is leaving us in a 'comfortable consumerist isolation' (FT 48).

¹ Pat Jones, *Invisible. Prostitution and the Lives of Women*. (Women@theWell, 2019-20), p.14. Accessible via: [News & Campaigns — Women At The Well](#)

² Ibid.

I want to connect that insight about broader social patterns with the kind of experiences the women who come to W@W have. These are relationships that are fundamentally commodified. The 'cool, comfortable and globalized indifference' (FT 30) that Francis speaks of is made manifest in the treatment of women as objects and tools. Where women are 'being used in a way that denies her dignity and personhood.'³ Where supposed relationships aren't even relationships but manipulation, such as in cuckooing scenarios. Pope Francis has called such worldviews 'pathological'.⁴

This reveals a commodification that is distinctively shaped by power over women. A report published now almost twenty years ago, which studied men who buy sex in east London made this clear in its title: "it's just like going to the supermarket."⁵

As *Fratelli Tutti* observes:

'the organization of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. We say one thing with words, but our decisions and reality tell another story. Indeed, "doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence, since they are frequently less able to defend their rights."' (FT 23)

These are the kinds of scenarios at play in situations of sexual exploitation, because the use of power is always already present to undermine the agency of the women involved. These are women who, because of those marginalising experiences, often have fractured relationships with family, and very difficult relationships with support services. They consequently have a lot of difficulty navigating systems that are there to support changing their own circumstances. Fundamentally they are facing a loss of self.

We might also add here, that this idea of so-called 'sex work' is situated not only on distorted relationships but on an impoverished idea of what work is, because work should also already be a relational category. In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis argued that 'Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves.' (LS

³ Ibid., p. 19. C.f. Hille Haker, Catholic Feminist Ethics Re-Considered. The case of sex-trafficking. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 43.2 (2015).

⁴ See the preface to Aldo Buonaiuto, *Donne crocifisse*, and discussed in this news article: [Pope Francis: Free women from the slavery of prostitution – Archdiocese of Malta](#) (accessed 27.11.25)

⁵ CWASU, London Metropolitan University for Safe Exit at Toynbee Hall, by Maddy Coy, Miranda Horvath, and Liz Kelly, *It's just like going to the supermarket. Men buying sex in East London* (2007).

125). In *Laudato Si'* Francis was concerned with our relationship with the created things of this world, but I suggest that may also indicate the social friendship that is the subject of *Fratelli Tutti*, where Francis writes:

'In a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one's daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people.' (FT 162)

Laudato Si earlier expand on that idea of growth in work:

'Work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God.' (LS 127)

Such a vision informs what W@W aims at with and for the women who come to us.

That vision turns me to the next theme of this talk which is solidarity. What I've done so far is a kind of diagnostic task, which is often what Catholic social teaching is called on to do. CST represents a gathered set of principles against which we can consider social phenomena and how we may wish to engage with and change them. Here that diagnosis is that the marginalisation of women today is particularly acute in circumstances of sexual exploitation, and the different forms that exploitation takes are a cluster or constellation of distorted and commodified exploitation, antithetical to what relationships and work should be for the flourishing of the whole human person.

Solidarity is the principle against we should measure our response.

Solidarity: we each inhabit that reality too

Let us start by taking a classic definition, from St John Paul II, where solidarity is the moral response to the reality of our interdependence as members of a community:

“When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a “virtue,” is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. This determination is based on the solid conviction that what is hindering full development is that desire for profit and that thirst for power”

Often the quotation cuts off that last sentence, but it’s of particular use for our discussion because solidarity is framed as the direct response to commodification and the distortion of relationships through power. Exactly characteristic of what the women coming to W@W are experiencing.

I’d argue then that when we talk about interdependence, when thinking of women’s treatment in wider society, it’s partly about our shared experience. I suspect we all have experiences of being women in public life, in the workplace, and so on, where we’ve felt exploitation at play, or have observed it in the cultural symbols all around us. Each of us is caught up in those systems of commodification and power. So we are all entangled in what St John Paul II called ‘structures of sin’ (SRS 38). I don’t want to equate different types of experience with the consequence of erasing the particular harms I’ve outlined today; our experiences won’t be identical. But I do want to make the point that the experiences of the women who come to women@thewell are often intense and complex, but they aren’t alien. There’s a continuum here of women’s experiences.

Solidarity with women whose lives are impacted by sexual exploitation might start with our sense of relatedness; a recognition of being like each other.

I think that this idea of an underlying attitude of recognition, of being like each other, perhaps even of social friendship is absolutely key for understanding Pope Francis’s writings.

In *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis’s last encyclical, he wrote that “In this “liquid” world of ours, we need to start speaking once more about the heart” (DN 9) and later: “the heart makes all authentic bonding possible, since a relationship not shaped by the heart is incapable of overcoming the fragmentation caused by individualism.” (DN 17)

We each of us gathered here aren't all going to be in a position necessarily to act ourselves in response to sexual exploitation, but we can attend to our own hearts. Even how we think and talk about these matters is part of how we respond well to them. I quote from Pat Jones's research again: 'it is a kind of solidarity to listen to [women's] voices and understand their reality; and to support the charities' work. It is an act of solidarity to review and revise our attitudes and commitments'⁶. I add that this may mean not being squeamish about the subject, or refusing to be complacent or self-protective and ignore the realities facing women today, or keeping our eyes and our hearts open for opportunities to support vulnerable women in our communities.

Crucial I think is to bear in mind that such encounters of solidarity, even if it's only hearing stories and listening to talks like this, are opportunities to be changed ourselves. As Pope Francis puts it in *Dilexit Nos*:

"In a word, if love reigns in our heart, we become, in a complete and luminous way, the persons we are meant to be, for every human being is created above all else for love. In the deepest fibre of our being, we were made to love and to be loved."

I suggest that this is all in keeping with the emphasis throughout Francis's papacy on encounter and relationship. In his document *Fratelli Tutti* this was expressed through the call to being a neighbour, 'being a neighbour lies in the habit of making oneself available'⁷ – making ourselves available to each other, open to encounter. Neighbouring is considered as a verb and as the fundamental motivation for daily action. Not for charity downward, but about forming new relationships through encounter and attention.

In *Fratelli Tutti* is this powerful passage:

"Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships, from the anxiety that prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy. Often nowadays we find neither the time nor the energy to stop and be kind to others..."

⁶ Jones, *Invisible*, p.24

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "The *Socius* and the Neighbor," in Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, edited by Charles A. Kelbey, (Northwestern University Press, 1965), 99. Cited here as a source that has influenced and is quoted in *Fratelli Tutti*.

...to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference. If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled. Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue. Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared.” (FT 224)

Whether we're in the position to act on situations of sexual exploitation, this outline is certainly something that we can take up in our daily lives. It's an openness that we can apply to all sorts of concrete circumstances in our different roles and places.

With that more hopeful note, let me turn to the closing theme of hope itself.

Hope: women in dire straits aren't problems to be solved

I turn here back to the work of Women@theWell, where the daily work is significantly about the heart, evoked in *Dilexit Nos*. It is also about the structures of commodification and abuse. In Pope Leo's newest document, taken up from Francis's unfinished project, and titled *Dilexi Te* (evoking that last encyclical) Pope Leo takes up the heart in terms of political and cultural structures too. He quotes Francis when he says that solidarity “also means fighting against the structural causes of poverty and inequality; of the lack of work, land and housing; and of the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its deepest sense, is a way of making history.”

W@W's work reflects these two Popes' attention to both heart and structure. The team aim to work from a basic bedrock of respect, being person-centred and trauma-informed.

The numbers of our most recent annual report (see figure 1) and its accounts of the team's work give a sense of the scale and character of the drop-in work in particular.⁸ Though even these numbers are already growing from the last recording point and if we continue at that rate the next report may bring those numbers up very sharply – reaching over 3000 individual visits to the drop in at the next count.

⁸ Women@theWell, *Annual Report 2024-5*. Available [News & Campaigns — Women At The Well](#)

There's food, but there's also showers, laundry, and many of our volunteers run activities like jewellery making, or share crossword puzzles with the women who come. The idea is to attend to the women who come as whole human persons – not just fulfilling essential requirements but responding to who they are.



Figure 1. W@W, *Annual Report 2024-5*, p. 10

In turn that means one to one work is driven by the areas that the women themselves want to consider with our support – so taking seriously their own hopes and priorities. It involves a personal accompaniment, what Pat Jones called ‘working in-between the women and the world of normality, building bridges and opening doors... visiting an exhibition, or taking a trip to the beach’⁹ – even coming along to appointments when the women are facing the ordeal of managing a bureaucracy they fear: court proceedings, housing association support, medical appointments. It’s not being a friend precisely, because professional boundaries that service users can rely on are important here, but it is kindness and it is solidarity.

W@W is also building its local relationships with its own neighbours – I mentioned our work with Camden and Islington to inform their research on what life for women on the streets is really like and make women visible in the situation of rough sleeping when their particular vulnerabilities can be overlooked. We draw other neighbours in too – students from local universities are among our volunteers, working alongside the Religious sisters of IOLM and other orders too. Corporate neighbours are preparing giftbags for the women at Christmas. One incredible friend of the organisation has shared a donation linked to her innovative idea about working with local restaurants to bring hot food back into the drop-in, which we ceased at the

⁹ Jones, *Invisible*, p. 14

turning point of the pandemic. All of this builds community as well as supporting individual women. One way I think about this is that institutions, like charities, like Churches, mediate human relationships¹⁰ – we are all brought closer together and into community through these kinds of connections.

One reason why we took hope as one of the values of W@W is that the crucial horizon to that work is the belief that things can be different, that things can be better. That's in terms of each individual woman we're working with, and the new and continuing relationships we're part of, and the larger systemic change we're working for.

The hope that I offer in conclusion is that women really are working hard to support each other in response to that diagnosis I gave of commodification and exploitation. I am sure that those gathered this evening are doing work like this, too, perhaps in relation to different urgent needs around us. That's a hopeful thing because it's not only about providing a service, but about enabling meaningful choices and stepping into authentic freedom. Such support employment this 'affirms that agency is possible and that other futures can be desired and constructed'¹¹. That is the crucial horizon of hope that solidarity can offer to all women at the margins.

¹⁰ See A. Daughton, Paul Ricoeur and *Fratelli Tutti*. Neighbor, People, Institution. *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*. 19.1: 71-88.

¹¹ Jones, *Invisible*, p.19.