

Gender And Power

This article by Phyllis Willerscheidt with Timoth Kelly, John Lundin and Marilyn Peterson, members of the ISTI Board, is the third in a series of edited reports from the ISTI Discovery Conferences.

Power is a basic fabric of society and is possessed in varying degrees by social actors in diverse social categories. Power becomes abusive and exploitative only when independence and individuality of one person or group of people becomes so dominant that freedom for the other is compromised.

Women and children have often been on the abusive side of power. Some causes that are often referred to are: the greater physical strength that men tend to have the imbalance of power between men and women resulting from social structures and historical practices in regard to finances, education, roles of authority and decision making; the abuse of power by men and the failure of cultural pressures to prevent such abuse; and a distorted view of sexuality and the objectification of the female.

Max Weber (Essays in Sociology, 1946) defined power as the likelihood a person may achieve personal ends despite possible resistance from others. Since this definition views power as potentially coercive, Weber also considered ways in which power can be achieved through justice. Authority, he contended, is power which people determine to be legitimate rather than coercive. As a group, women are at a distinct disadvantage when considering both power and authority.

Several factors act as determinants of the amount of power a person holds or can use in his or her relations with others: status, resources, experience, and self-confidence. Males and females traditionally have had differing amounts of power at their disposal. By virtue of the male's greater ascribed status in society, men have more legitimate power (based on rank or position) than do women.

Cleric's Power - The Community View

"I can only speak in superlatives. He meant the world to me. I worshiped him. I would do anything he said because I trusted him implicitly. When I was with him, I felt like everything was going to be okay; he had a hot line to Jesus.

There was a kind of aura and mysticism about him. While others in the Church thought he was aloof, I felt I was let in to be the chosen. He was the center of my universe and my connection to God."

These words are the sentiments of a victim/survivor as she contemplates the power of the clergy person who sexually abused her. When asked to reflect on the concept of power, participants from the three ISTI Discovery Conferences expressed similar thoughts. Many saw religious authority as above reproach. "They speak for God and must be trusted." "They are the vicar of Christ." ...

In response to the question, 'What destructive attitudes about gender identity can be reinforced in seminary programs?' conference participants responded that male gender is dominant and women are dismissed, women are inferior and usable, women are not as competent as men because they express emotion, and since God is male, only males can be priests!

Expectations of the Clergy

Our experiences are deeply influenced by the expectations we bring to them. The wider the disparity the greater the impact and the damage. Everyone of the respondents, at some point, saw clergy as larger than life and capable of exercising great power, for good, over their entire experience. Respondents perceived the clergy like parents they trusted. When they became aware of being emotionally, spiritually or sexually exploited, they initially blamed themselves for breaking that trust. They "...made the person of the cloth stray." Often it was beyond their comprehension that someone 'synonymous with God' could be at fault. Typical comments included: "Showing the way of life," a "...trusted caretaker," has '...great power; the message carrier of ... truth/forgiveness/absolution,..the one who cleanses the soul," their "hero" and 'spiritual role model"; a "representative of God." Clergy represent organized religion, and lay persons have great difficulty in seeing them as ordinary people.

The Problem

No group functioning within the mainstream of the American religious experience espouses abuse by clergy. Each is, in her or his own mind and practice, doing the 'right thing'. Through their theological and cultural filters, whatever power differences others may perceive, are not seen as abuse or inequality, but how God intended relationships and religious organizations to be. Sensitivity to, and awareness of the abuse of power because of gender does not come quickly or easily.

A theology of women, if one has been articulated, becomes vulnerable to theological interpretations screened through historical and cultural traditions. Therefore, gender and power, or the abuse inherent through inequity of power, are not perceived as issues needing to be addressed. Gender issues are assumed to have been taken care of, when in fact, much needs to be done. The power (real and perceived) vested in clergy and religious institutions and the manner in which the power is employed are the issues.

Cleric's Power - The Clergyperson's View

While congregants and survivors are clear about the power of the clergy, many clergy themselves are either ambivalent or in denial about who they are. Indeed, the clergy's lack of acknowledgment and ownership for holding greater power in the relationship allows for the abuse of that power in the lives of others. As expressed in the following quote from a cleric, many clergy may want it both ways. They want the power to influence but not the constraints or limitations that the privilege of holding power imposes.

'What makes you an authority is the whole institutional role. On Sunday morning, you're the one who's up front, leads the service, and preaches the sermon. There's an automatic authority that comes with being a minister. I struggled and fought against that authority all the time I was in the ministry, but I wasn't very up-front about it. It would have been better if I had been. I didn't want the authority because of my own ideology that's reinforced in the Church as shared ministry. The other reason I didn't want it was because of my own psyche and underdog personality. Most of my life, I have run away from authority and wanted someone else to be responsible. A lot of the problem was that I didn't feel personally worthy to have any kind of authority. My approach to ministry was pretty passive. My approach to life was pretty passive. Preaching was an outlet for that. It was one place where I could let out some authority, one time when I could speak with some power and lead in some sense. That is part of the reason I went into the ministry. Even though I wanted the authority of preaching, I didn't want any of the rest of it. I wanted to be able to get up and speak on Sunday morning and tell people what they ought to hear but the rest of the time I wanted to be the normal Joe next door.

Clergy clearly have more power in the pastoral relationship than most of their congregants. Clergy, however, frequently negate the magnitude of that power and the responsibility that accompanies how it is used. Indeed, many clergy and the institutions they represent adopt a belief system that reduces the power differential between them and their congregants. Clergy can then blind

themselves to their impact with the following rationalizations: I'm just a vessel of the Lord. They're adults, they make their own decisions. Everyone can take care of themselves. For God's sake, I'm not going to inflate who I am.

Institutional View

The tendency for many clergy to separate themselves from the power they hold is reinforced by Christian Church philosophy. In "high church" institutions, the hierarchical arrangement of dominance and submission coupled with prescriptive behavior is viewed as ordained by God. The power held by the clergy, therefore, does not emanate from one's self but rather is part of a role as representative of God.

In 'low church' institutions, the concept of "shared power" is used to establish a non-hierarchical mutuality and partnership between clergy and their congregations. This ideology can make owning one's power dangerous if clergy fear they might set themselves apart as superior.

Gender and Power

Just as many clerics deny their power, many male clerics also deny the significance of their gender and its impact on parishioners. More specifically, in both Western and Eastern culture, the presence of patriarch or male superiority heightens further the authority of the male clergyman. When a male cleric speaks, he not only reflects the power from his role but that power is augmented because he is male and represents the word of God.

Institutional Religions and Power

While the influence and acceptance of male superiority reflects society's norms, the practices and values of religious establishments institutionalize that superiority. The refusal of the Catholic Church to allow women to become priests, for example, perpetuates the stereotype of women as lesser beings. This misogynist attitude is upheld by both mainline and fundamentalist religious groups: the Church of England refuses to ordain women, Orthodox Judaism will not allow women to become rabbis, the Mormon Church will not admit women as bishops, etc. When the religious hierarchy is comprised solely of men, it readily becomes a closed system; male privilege is reinforced and women, aside from their childbearing capacities, are the lesser of God's creatures. When religious institutions use biblical teachings to sanction the "rightness" or 'naturalness" of this arrangement (see Genesis 2; 1 Timothy 2:12-14; 1 Corinthians 11:8; and Ephesians 5:22-24), they enshrine male

heterosexual superiority as God's will in much the same way as male clergy sexual offenders use the authority of God to gain the cooperation of victims.

Denigration of Women

The perception of clergy as elevated, God as highest, and male as dominant is shared by both men and women. Indeed, women are societally conditioned to take direction from, defer to, and trust those in power. When the entire society rests on privileging men and colludes to keep women in their place or subservient to men, it is little wonder that female parishioners turn themselves over to the authority of male clerics and male clerics exploit the privilege of their position by using women sexually or otherwise. Peter Rutter reports in *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* (1986, p#20) that 96% of sexual exploitation by professionals occurs between a man in power and a woman under his care.

While gender inequality is seminal to the problem of sexual exploitation, we again need to look at how male clergy deny their power and privilege as male and sexual beings, and instead focus on the power of women as temptress. According to Rutter (1989, pp#66-70), nearly all men idealize and deify the power of the feminine. The sexual and seductive components of this attributed power can be intoxicating (as if men have no control and are, therefore, victims of seduction). Concomitantly, whatever ill fate, weakness, or pain befalls a man emanates from the dark powers of a woman. This belief is reinforced by the story of Eve who carries out the devil's wishes by tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Women's power, therefore, tends to be named by men- the power to define is an ultimate power. Moreover, that power is limited to and by their sexuality. Their elevation or devaluation rests on the expression of their sexuality: they are valued as mothers (the expression of sexuality for procreation) or virgins, while devalued (or negatively valued) for their ability to lead men astray.

These beliefs vilify women by making them responsible for what they do to men. As one participant in the ISTI conference remarked, "females know about males' sexual drives which are not controlled." This myth is also given credence in Orthodox Judaism which requires women not to sing in the presence of men because the sound of their voices will distract men from attending to their prayer life with God. Orthodox Jewish males also thank God, as part of their daily worship, for not making them women.

The denial of power is a fundamental precursor to the abuse of that power.. The power held by male clergy is increased by their gender and the political

reality of patriarchy. Rather than acknowledging the privilege of their gendered status and using that privilege responsibly, male clergy are vulnerable to assuming the privilege as God given and hold women responsible, instead, for the aberrant behavior of the clergy. The maligning of women for their gender reinforces their lesser status and, in effect, directs and warrants their treatment as objects.

The Impact of Abuse

Participants in the Discovery Conferences poignantly articulated distinct differences between clergy sexual abuse and the religious institutional response from abuse perpetrated by others. While similar to what occurs when a parent is the abuser, the impact is deep and far more disturbing. Victims described clergy sexual misconduct as "a complete assault of the human. Not only is there psychic, physical trauma, but also a murdering trauma of the spirit." They describe a greater level of shame because of the "nature of the perpetrator" and a greater loss of trust because "if clergy cannot be trusted, who can."

Betrayal was a common theme. As one participant said: "They have betrayed the-deepest levels because it involves a representative of God who is our protector. It was a spiritual seduction." In a similar way, the response of the Church is often devastating. "They wish I would go away. They listen with an ear to hear if there is a lawsuit present. They protect their pocket books and get lawyers." One was told "to tell others what happened would be a sin because it would bring shame on the Church." When abuse was reported, "they listened but didn't do anything."

Universally, the experience of abuse/exploitation has left a legacy of bitterness, a need to separate the institutional Church from spirituality, skepticism of clergy and disillusionment. Listen to the comments: "I didn't think God had time for me"; "the experience destroyed my childhood;" "I can be sarcastic about priests/clergy."

Recovery is seen as even more difficult. They expressed a sense of being "tainted" forever. "The path has more obstacles." Some go to the extremes and "hate God" or 'cling to the Church." One said, "spiritual life used to be as easy as breathing. Now it takes all my strength to approach God and pray." The Church, which was once a safe place for healing, is now the enemy. As one conference member so clearly stated: "Organized religion is for people who fear hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there."

Self-Reliance

"I have taught myself to see clergy as people and only people. They have a degree in theology as I have a degree in psychology. They are no closer to God than I am.' How do we help congregants come to this conclusion? What can clerics do to engender a belief system inside themselves and with their parishioners that supports this attitude?

Boundaries and Roles

Clergy and the people that make up the Church community need to understand the issue of boundaries and the importance of clarifying roles. Denominations need to be aware that the "boundarylessness" of the clergy person's role feeds the lack of differentiation and fusion that contributes to boundary violations. More specifically, the lack of role clarification blurs the distinction between home and work. For clergy, more than any other profession, work and family systems plug all too easily into one another and significant changes in either one may be quick to unbalance the other. Moreover, the daily multiplicity of dual relationships with congregants contributes significantly to that blurring.

The lack of role clarification produces confusion of ownership and accountability. Clergy frequently complain that they serve many masters. "Who owns me," some ask. "To whom do I belong, to whom am I obligated, to whom am I accountable? Who do I obey, and who do I have to make happy -- the congregation, the chairperson of the board, the vestry, or my denomination?"

The lack of role clarification produces an elusive derivation of power. Clergy can feel confused about where their power comes from, who legitimates them and gives them their rights. Does their power come from God in the form of their spirituality, from the congregation that pays them, from the bishop who ordained them, or from themselves?

The lack of role clarification allows seeing oneself as different, special, or unique. That belief is fed societally by the separation of Church and state. It allows for the promulgation of different rules. As one minister said, "I always felt as though somehow the Church was supposed to take care of us because we were clergy. I don't know where that came from or why but I figured that if I were looking for a job, I thought somehow the Church would guarantee me a position. I believed that I shouldn't be out there all by myself."

The lack of role clarification, therefore, fosters the freedom for clergy to make their own rules which can feed a grandiose self-image.

The lack of role clarification creates a vacuum. Clergy search for answers and greater sureness to reduce the ambiguity. When these are not present, they fill in the vacuum with ideals, norms, expectations, and images that don't necessarily have a basis in reality. These unrealistic images are supported by ordination vows which idealistically command the cleric to love and serve everyone, by theology that conveys to clergy pictures of themselves as nice, kind ' warm and generous, and by canon law, ancient law, and the Letter of Institution which suggest to clergy that they be all things to all people.

Filling in the vacuum with a high ideal can create two problems. First, it denies and distorts reality by setting up an expectation of perfection. Second, it creates a situation where the attempt to achieve that ideal denies limits.

For many clerics, therefore, doing their job means listening forever, caring means being available, and loving means being supportive. To carry out these requirements, clergy have to make themselves selfless so as not offend others. Doing the extraordinary becomes the only acceptable standard.

No limits allows congregants to violate the boundaries of clerics. No needs on the part of the clergy, in effect, produces the denial that allows the clergy to violate others. Indeed, when clergy people do not take care of their own needs, they broadcast them so that parishioners frequently take care of them. In one instance, a pastor told his congregation that he was giving up time with his family for Lent because he was so busy during that season doing extra things. Immediately everyone started taking care of him.

The lack of clarity about role breeds a vacuum filled with unrealistic self-expectations that puts the clergy "at risk" for boundary dilemmas and violations.

Boundaries and Self

The ability to draw boundaries which clarify and define roles begins with understanding their purpose. Boundaries define a sense of self. They define where you start and I end. They are a way of saying what is mine, what I will allow and will not support. Boundaries also establish a sense of personal privacy and space. They establish how we will connect with each other, the business of the relationship, and the norms that make the interaction safe.

For clergy, setting boundaries requires setting limits on themselves and others. Setting boundaries also requires clergy to take a stand. Setting boundaries also requires clergy to be directive. Setting boundaries further requires the awareness that setting them may provoke a crisis for the parishioner. The ability to set boundaries rests on the clergyperson's understanding of leadership as self-definition. Clergy who recognize that a lack of self-definition makes parishioners anxious will be less apt to place others inappropriately in charge of who they are.

To come to terms with their position of leadership, however, clergy must recognize and intentionally use the power they have. They will need to move toward rather than away from that power. They will need to make it a friend. They will need to work specifically with what it means to be a powerful person. If clergy can make a different decision about power, they will act differently in relationship to it. They will realize that owning their power is realizing the impact they have on others. They will realize that owning their power means recognizing how people react to them.

To understand the issues surrounding power and gender, it is necessary to look at the legitimate use of power and the effect it has on people in the ministerial role, as well as on the innocent or naive people they counsel. We as a society need to look at how the power base affects the genders; how male superiority and the role of institutions in the denigration of women shares some responsibility for this issue. Boundaries and role clarification, or lack thereof, require clarification and understanding. Empowering women, indeed, all members of God's family, to achieve their full potential as human beings in this world is the goal.

As shown by the Discovery Conferences, abuse and its impact is not the domain of a select few religious traditions and denominations in one corner of the country. Over a dozen different faith groups and denominations from twenty states participated. Each in its own way described clergy and religious institutions who, by virtue of their status, betrayed a sacred trust. Each, as part of the tapestry of the faithful, saw heroes worth emulating and elevating to a special place of trust and honor. Each is now on a journey to recapture its soul. PW