Feminism and Forgiveness:

How Catholic Women Respond to Gender-Based Microaggressions

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Abstract/Introduction

Gender-based microaggressions, or subtle forms of sexism made manifest in everyday life, build up over time into a source of trauma. Continued exposure to microaggressions has the potential not only to cause psychological and physiological deterioration, but also to disrupt an individual's moral (and perhaps spiritual) understanding of the world. No matter the nature of the trauma, faith often plays some role in the process of responding, restoring, and healing. Existing research on Christian targets of gender-based discrimination points to forgiveness as a recurring psychological and spiritual dilemma. However, in-depth examinations of forgiveness, especially as understood through the lens of gender, are scarce. In response to this knowledge gap, this study examines how Christian- more specifically, Catholic- women relate to the concept of forgiveness in the wake of gendered microaggressions.

This project consisted of in-depth, structured interviews with eight women who identify as having experienced gender-based interpersonal discrimination. Examples of this discrimination include (but are not limited to) sexist jokes, inappropriate comments about one's body/appearance, and verbal harassment. Other conditions for participation included a minimum age of 18 years, as well as either past or present identification with the Catholic faith. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and involve questions about how the individual's faith has informed their understanding of forgiveness, and consequently, their psychosocial response to microaggressions. My goal is to learn how these individuals' faith has informed their lived understanding of microaggressions and forgiveness. Examining how Catholic interpretations of forgiveness impact women experiencing gendered microaggressions is an important step towards understanding the nuances of faith as an avenue of restoration and healing.

Literature Review

While social work literature has not yet grappled with the relationships between faith, microaggressions, and forgiveness, the nature and consequences of social microaggressions are well-documented. In his seminal work on microaggressions, Sue defines microaggressions and emphasizes the psychological and physical exhaustion that stem from accumulated exposure (2010). Exposure to microaggressions has a "weathering" effect on physical and mental health, contributing to conditions including coronary heart disease, elevated stress hormones, and depression. Microaggressions can also hinder/distract cognitive processes and self-image and can lead to behavioral responses including hypervigilance and resulting fatigue (Sue, 2010). Since the publication of Sue's work, researchers have conducted a meta-analysis of twenty-one studies on the relationship between gender discrimination and health. Expanding on Sue's definition, these authors identify undervaluation and discriminatory treatment as psychological antagonists (Torre-Perez et al., 2022). Examining existing literature, Torre-Perez and colleagues found that "the most frequent [consequence of gender discrimination] was poor mental health... measured with a validated scale of anxiety or depression in four of the studies." (2022, p. 6) Clearly, sexist microaggressions are relevant in the study of mental and physical well-being.

With regards to the other dimensions of this project, researchers in psychology and pastoral counseling have made significant contributions to understandings of faith and forgiveness. In their study of the relationship between forgiveness and health in Christian women, Quenstedt-Moe and Popkess offer a foundational definition of forgiveness: "an intrapersonal experience that includes the release of negative feelings, behaviors, and beliefs towards a person who has unjustly violated another's moral rules" (2014, p.205). They emphasize that forgiveness does not involve "condoning, reconciling, [or] excusing" (p.206). While the authors do not directly connect the impacts of forgiveness on microaggression-related

stress, they do identify forgiveness as a protective health factor against stress caused by interpersonal conflict. They offer up forgiveness as a potential mental health treatment in the wake of interpersonal harm; in a preliminary study, forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression and anger, as well as with better perceptions of mental and physical health (Quenstedt-Moe & Popkess, 2014).

With regards to faith and forgiveness, Romero and Mitchell present a positive statistical correlation between religiousness and affective forgiveness amongst Roman Catholic women. They explain that "Because of the strong emphasis on unconditional forgiveness in Roman Catholic theology, these participants may have been particularly forgiving" (Romero and Mitchell, 2008, p.60). In other words, Romero and Mitchell propose that living within the Catholic faith might make one more inclined to forgive. The authors did not examine the difference between Catholic men and women, but given the strong gender roles that pervade the faith, there might also be a difference in how men and women interpret religious forgiveness. Broadly speaking, existing literature has examined microaggressions, gender, faith, and forgiveness in various pairings, but I could not find any studies that examined the intersection of all these factors. This study begins to address that gap.

Participants: Background and Demographics

I conducted interviews with eight women between the ages of 19 and 28. Seven of the study participants were currently enrolled in undergraduate or graduate school at a mid-sized Catholic university in the Midwest. The eighth participant was a recent graduate of the same university. All eight participants identified as white and as native U.S. citizens, with English being their first language. Recruitment occurred through several channels within the university. Drawing on my contacts in the School of Social Work, Dr. Vigen's contacts in the Department of

Theology, and the Gannon Scholars alumni network, I asked faculty members to share a digital

recruitment poster with their classes. Participants were not to receive class credit for participating

in the study, although they were financially compensated via gift card for their time. I advertised

the study under the tagline, "Study Opportunity: Gender-Based Microaggressions Through a

Catholic Lens." Prospective interviewees contacted me via email, and I met with the first eight

participants to contact me. All responses were assigned pseudonyms to protect privacy and

confidentiality.

      All participants initially encountered the Catholic faith through their families of origin.

Although their level of religiosity varied between parents, all the families emphasized religious

participation and sacramental life. Generally, parents prioritized faith throughout early and

middle childhood, with church attendance declining around the end of middle school or

beginning of high school. This decline corresponded with participants having "completed" their

sacramental life after being confirmed, as well as scheduling conflicts with increasing

extracurricular involvement. Each participant emphasized the importance of sacraments to their

family; all had been baptized and completed their First Communion, First Reconciliation, and

Confirmation. The process of religious education varied; five of the participants attended

Catholic primary school and four attended Catholic high school. The remaining participants

attended local public schools (three for primary school and four for secondary school). Those of

the participants who attended public schools attended religious education classes or Sunday

school up until the time of their Confirmation.

      At the time of their interviews, participants had varying relationships to the Catholic

faith. Two participants, Isabel and Caroline, definitively self-identified as Catholic. Another

three participants (Adalee, Jesse, and Katrina) identified as Catholic but only conditionally.

These women described themselves as "culturally Catholic" or "lapsed Catholics;" the core sentiment was that they still participated in some holidays and traditions with family, but no longer practiced the faith by themselves. Jesse expressed lingering feelings of "things I should do," a social pressure to take part in faith rituals like the Ash Wednesday mass. The remaining three participants (Marina, Alice, and Eleanor) distinguished themselves from the Catholic Church entirely, due to ideological critiques. Alice and Eleanor gained a sense of institutional injustice around race and gender that repelled them from the faith. None of the participants reported becoming more religious as they grew older. Regardless of current religious identity, all participants reported Catholicism having some influence on their upbringing. Some of this influence was moral, such as early guidance around trying to be a good person and an overarching sense of "Catholic guilt." From the standpoint of cultural learning, many participants described Catholicism as having eclipsed other worldviews early in their lives. In the most extreme case, Adalee did not know other religions existed until high school. Overall, participants felt a connection to the Catholic faith either through practice, heritage, or both.

Note on Project Development/IRB Involvement

The final execution of this project differed substantially from the original proposal. In the original IRB proposal for this project, I had intended to study to relationship between forgiveness, Catholicism, and gender-based violence. Specifically, gender-based violence includes domestic and sexual violence against femme identifying or presenting individuals. However, members of the institutional review board at Loyola University Chicago expressed concern that as an undergraduate social work student under the supervision of a theology professor, I might not be equipped to handle any potential emotional distress participants might experience. We considered several workarounds to this issue. Initially, IRB members proposed

that I partner with a licensed clinical social worker or counselor to oversee the interviews; however, I was concerned that adding more people into an interview situation might make it more challenging for participants to share already sensitive information. I proposed the alternative solution of discussing gender-based microaggressions. My reasoning was that sexist microaggressions are closely related to (and arguably a form of) gender-based violence but may be less emotionally risky for research participants to explore. Hence, I refocused the literature review and interview questions on gender-based microaggressions. After resubmitting an edited proposal, Loyola's IRB approved moving forward with the project.

Results Part 1: Exploring Forgiveness

Participant Definitions (Emphasis Added)

"I think it means that *you accept that [someone] hurt you and you recognize that their actions don't necessarily reflect their inner thoughts and feelings about you-* those actions could have been motivated by a bunch of different things... but you *care enough about your relationship with that person to acknowledge it and not let it destroy things."* -Adalee

"I feel like to be able to fully forgive someone, you have to not think about the situation as much anymore... *if you fully forgive someone, you don't really associate the situation with that person anymore- like, it's in the past.* Even if it takes a long time, it's really beneficial to get it all out so that *you don't feel like you're harboring any feelings, or like, things that have been left unsaid."* -Jesse

"I would say forgiveness is the *thoughtful decision to let go of a past thing that happened and releasing any ill feelings toward it.* Just letting the past be the past, and not carrying a grudge or anything like that... For me, *asking for forgiveness is a conscious thought that I want to make amends."* -Isabel

"I guess I would define [forgiveness] as *moving past the negatives, or the wrongs that someone or maybe some groups of people have done, and I guess meeting them with compassion and understanding...* I definitely need time to process on my own when major things happen. I think that's part of my process: *taking a step back and reflecting."* -Katrina

"How I see forgiveness is, it's kind of a lot for yourself- like, I give forgiveness because I want to move on... *I like the idea of forgiveness as a gift to yourself;* I like that it's self-fulfillment in a sense for me." -Marina

"I would define [forgiveness] as *being accepting of a person's mistakes or mishaps and sort of empathetically and deeply understanding that they are a human too,* and that they are not

perfect, and we can't always uphold people to this unrealistic standard that they're always going to do the things that we need or want them to do... *it's very intentional, it's difficult, and it takes a lot of empathy* and understanding." -Alice

"I think forgiveness is *a process, a long period of reflection* and trying to understand the other person... *it's about understanding and feeling the empathy* and then, in this process of reflection, hoping to gain some clarity as to how I can *rebuild a relationship and trust with the person.*" -Caroline

"I think it's the idea that, you know, harm has been done and we're acknowledging that. It's the *person who created the harm and the person who was harmed coming together and deciding to acknowledge the harm but also deciding to move on in a way that's healthy* for both of them." -Eleanor

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Whether participants were at home, in church, or at school, each woman reported learning about forgiveness at some point growing up. There were two major conceptualizations of forgiveness; first, the idea of forgiveness directly from God, and second, the idea of interpersonal forgiveness. Regarding the prior statement, participants learned that God and Jesus offered unconditional forgiveness. This message came through stories about Jesus forgiving others, but mostly through the sacramental experience of confession. The participants were made aware that "your sins can be forgiven if you go to reconciliation with your parents." Sometimes, this seemed arbitrary or confusing to participants, especially when one woman was given ten Our Father's as penance for being mean to her younger brother. There was an emphasis on apologizing, confessing, and seeking forgiveness. Only one participant mentioned forgiveness as a conditional possibility- she said that homosexuality and abortion were mentioned amongst adults in her church as unforgivable/mortal sins. For the most part, however, women learned that God's forgiveness was unconditional and available to anyone who confessed their sins. As Marina explained, "Because I grew up Catholic, I immediately assume that God forgives and Jesus forgives."

Lessons about God's forgiveness also carried over into interpersonal relationships, which tended to be modeled at home. Participants described their earliest experiences with forgiveness being in sibling relationships, peer relationships, or in one case, in parental disagreements. Forgiveness was not conditional; it was something that happened after any conflict. Caroline shared that, "I learned that after arguments, you have to forgive someone, even if they were wrong. That really stuck into my brain." Parents emphasized verbal expressions of seeking and giving forgiveness, and forgiveness became a ritualized component of interpersonal conflict. Participants repeatedly used the words "should," "supposed to," or "have to" when describing forgiveness, emphasizing its compulsory nature. Interestingly, definitions of forgiveness were more procedural than conceptual. "No matter what," explained one woman, "you always forgive." One participant experienced trepidation about forgiveness because of her parents' divorce, in which her mother was denied an annulment and effectively rejected from the church. While her mother did not make a big deal of this to Eleanor, she withdrew from religious participation and her daughter was aware that "the church basically said [the divorce] was mom's fault- not a lot of forgiveness there." This inflexibility contributed to the participant feeling distinctly differentiated from Catholicism as she grew up.

By the time of the interviews, participants had "grown up" considerably, and their definitions of forgiveness had grown with them. While early religious experiences played a formative role, interpersonal experiences significantly contributed to the women's adult definitions of forgiveness. Many participants expressed surprise when I asked them for an outright definition of forgiveness; although it had been an integral part of their lives, most had never been offered or articulated a definition. Instead, they had been raised with forgiveness as a behavior- the act of saying, "it's okay, don't worry about it." As participants worked to articulate

what forgiveness meant to them, some core themes emerged. Women characterized both an individual, psychological process and an interpersonal, social response. Both processes were oriented towards the idea of "letting go." Participants described letting go as a desirable outcome because it meant they no longer had to dwell on a hurtful/negative experience, and were able to release difficult emotions. It is also worthwhile to note that participants frequently used the words "process," "decision," and "reflection." These descriptions indicate a time-oriented phenomenon. Participants frequently needed a period of reflection/prayer/action/rest before they could "let go" of their grudges.

Other prerequisites for forgiveness included an open acknowledgment of hurt and establishing the difference between a person and their actions. Several participants identified the acknowledgement of harm as essential for forgiveness. This applied to internal processes (one has to accept that what happened was wrong) and to interpersonal interactions. Once an individual recognized the wrongness of the microaggression, they felt a need to make sense of the incident by rationalizing sexist behavior. This is notably different from acceptance; instead, rationalizing involved contextualizing and understanding the incident. Closely linked to rationalization, participants including Alice and Adalee separated the offense from the offender (in other words, the idea that someone can do a bad thing without being a bad person). Jesse factored in age, impressionability, and environment as possible reasons for someone to commit a microaggression. In her example, she could forgive a young child for his offense because he was simply imitating his father in a developmentally normal way. Adalee's general attitude was not to take things personally; the person committing a microaggression could be going through any number of difficult life experiences that contributed to their actions.

Also important to the definition of forgiveness was the character of the relationship between the individual and perpetrator. Some microaggressions were committed by strangers or others with whom it would be unwise to process the offense with. For instance, Adalee wouldn't want to go back and talk it out with a man who sexually harassed her on the train. Other microaggressions, like the sexist jokes Katrina heard at work, offered an opportunity for parties to come together and resolve a conflict. Even in situations when restorative conversations are possible, participants knew that they could not change the viewpoints/prejudices/behaviors of the offender, so most focused on forgiveness as an internal process. When microaggressions occurred in the context of a close relationship, participants were more likely to value forgiveness as a way of repairing a valued relationship. Adalee and Caroline explicitly mentioned rebuilding trust in relationships. Choosing forgiveness and working through the issue with another person was a way of showing that you valued your relationship with them. Jesse emphasized the importance of moving past grudges for healthy relationships (ie, with her boyfriend). Other times, forgiveness and letting go of grudges was an act of self-love. Marina described forgiveness as a gift to herself; several participants mentioned how exhausting it can feel to be angry, and choosing forgiveness is a way of lightening that burden.

Results Part 2: Forgiveness in the Context of Microaggressions

Reported Microaggression	Underlying Threats/Implication
Sexual Harassment (man masturbating on the train/following participant)	Viewing women as sexual objects. Refusal to respect safe boundaries.
School Policies (not allowing girls at a Catholic school to wear pants, despite cold weather)	Valuing traditional gender roles over comfort, safety, and practicality. Lack of respect for girls' opinions.
Stalking Incident (threats of rape from a middle school acquaintance with minimal response from authorities)	Viewing women as sexual objects; the normalization of rape culture and "boys will be boys" ideology.
Overall Sense of Objectification (not being able to trust any man's intentions)	Viewing women as sexual objects; denying respect for safe boundaries.

Sexist Jokes (inappropriate comments in a male-dominated workplace)	Lack of respect for women's work/abilities; objectifying women by appearance.
Lowered Social/Academic Status (dismissal of an all-women's institution of higher education)	Lack of respect for women's work and abilities; Implication that women exist for the purpose of heterosexual marriage.
Sports Policies (girls not being allowed to get adequate physical activity during sports practices)	Lack of respect for women's work and abilities; lack of respect for young women's input and opinions.
Commentary on Appearance (hall monitors, grandfather, and father commenting on makeup and clothing)	Objectifying women by appearance; assigning value based on the male gaze.
Misogynistic Stereotypes (belief that women are worse drivers than men)	Lack of respect for women's work and abilities.
Gendered Household Roles (women being expected to prepare food and clean up at household gatherings)	Forcing women into servile/domestic roles; creating a hierarchical household.
Reproductive Education (lack of proper sex education for young women)	Shame around female sexuality and desire.
Workplace Stereotypes (assumption that male coworkers are in managerial roles)	Disrespect for women's work and abilities.
Catcalling (adult men yelling at middle school aged girl)	Sexual objectification of women; use of social power over vulnerable people.
Stalking Incident (harassment by high school acquaintance after asking out the participant)	Sexual objectification of women; denial of safety and boundaries.

Common themes in the women's descriptions of microaggressions included sexual objectification, gender stereotyping, and lack of respect for women's work or abilities (see table above for specific examples). In many ways, women's theoretical definitions of forgiveness aligned with their "real life" responses. For example, participants differentiated between forgiveness as an internal or interpersonal process. Depending on whether the interaction occurred with a stranger or a loved one, the response was different. Forgiving a stranger was focused on internal emotions and imagined empathy, while forgiving a loved one required conversation and interpersonal reconciliation. Because this type of forgiveness entailed more effort, participants described evaluating whether forgiveness was "worth it" to preserve a relationship. Adalee explained the dual purpose of forgiveness; either "you care enough about your relationship... not to let it destroy the relationship," or "forgiveness can also be for your

own emotional and mental health." Once again, the difference between a bad action and a bad person was also important. Single actions were identified as the easiest to forgive. One participant explicitly mentioned a person's worldview as distinct from their actions, but the rest of participants seemed to identify microaggressions as coming from a place of internal sexism. Participants who viewed actions as a reflection of personal character frequently mentioned that change was essential to forgiveness.

The coexisting desires for change and forgiveness were important for women to maintain their values of equity and feminism. All eight participants self-identified as feminists without prompting during the interviews. They expressed concern that by forgiving microaggressions, they were tacitly approving acts of sexism. One participant said, "There's this voice in the back of my head saying, *why are you [forgiving] this; you can't justify something like that.* So, I feel like a bad feminist." In accordance with their values, participants expressed a desire for change and education on behalf of the perpetrators. They said forgiveness would be easier if there was an opportunity to see the person learn why their actions were harmful and change those actions in the future. Change was a common prerequisite in interpersonal reconciliation, but not in situations involving one-off interactions with strangers. One interesting result of this desire for change was a unique relationship to structural injustice and sexism. Participants had an acute awareness of structural injustice, especially with regards to the Catholic Church. Cognitively, there was greater difficulty conceptualizing a whole institution or having empathy for an institution. There was also an attention to the magnitude of harm being done by individuals versus institutions. Of the Catholic Church, Alice explained, "they create harm for so many groups of people. Maybe I would feel different if [they were] making strides toward correcting the injustices they've done, but they refuse... so I don't find it as forgivable."

Across the women's experiences, forgiveness did not necessarily come easily or at all. Because many participants experienced forgiveness as socially compulsory, women were inclined to nominally forgive while questioning whether they had truly forgiven on an emotional level. Several participants described feeling residual anger, and one person struggled with the difference between acceptance and forgiveness. Furthering this difficulty, participants identified pressure to forgive even when it was difficult and perhaps before they were ready. One woman described this, saying "I feel like I'm supposed to forgive, but it's a little harder to get to the actual forgiving and let go entirely. Those experiences [with sexism] have made me who I am." Another participant identified cultural shame around feeling anger, especially towards her mother, and described forgiveness as a necessity; "forgiveness had to happen, and it has." When asked about the proper "Catholic answer" to sexist microaggressions, participants emphasized forgiveness as a universal positive. No matter the situation, forgiveness of sins was a given as the proper Catholic response. Forgiveness was universally positive, but was described with different processes, intentions, and impacts.

One issue I had been particularly curious about was how participants "should" respond to sexism and microaggressions considering their faith background. These responses are closely related to the idea of "biblical womanhood" and a universalized Catholic way of being. Surprisingly, some participants cut off the question from the start. Two women felt strongly that Catholicism wouldn't acknowledge sexism as an offense to begin with, so it is impossible to have a Catholic response to sexist microaggressions. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there was potential for a progressive response. Only one participant pointed this out, but she suggested forgiveness could combine acceptance of the person while also educating and changing behavior. This participant took a social-justice informed perspective, saying that while Catholics might

generally be too quick to forgive sexism, "there is also the idea that we are all God's people, and hopefully we can build a more inclusive Catholic space where men and women can be seen as equals." The more moderate response argued that forgiveness happens through internal processes (prayer, reflection, and patience) rather than confrontation or justice. From participants who offered this moderate interpretation of Catholic doctrine, the emphasis was on how the individual relates to the world, rather than how their forgiveness would create change in the offender.

Above all else, participants understood forgiveness through the Gospel of Matthew 5:38-40. The oft-quoted passage reads, "ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth/ But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (King James Bible, Matt. 5:38-39). While their worldviews differed extensively, every single woman interviewed brought up the phrase "turn the other cheek" without prompting from the interviewer. For instance, one participant explained feeling a pressure from the "turn the other cheek sort of thing. Like, if something happens to you, you're supposed to forgive and do all these things and keep in mind how the person will feel." Generally, this phrase was interpreted as a blanket mandate for acceptance, non-resistance, and forgiveness. While the purpose of this project is not to provide an extensive theological analysis, it is worthwhile here to briefly mention the work of scholar Walter Wink, who writes on the implications of "turning the other cheek" for nonviolent resistance. Wink argues that turning the left cheek to one's oppressor was an act of resistance, a cultural way of establishing one's place as a social equal (1987). I will not argue whether Wink is right or wrong, but rather wish to bring in an alternative perspective that "turning the other cheek" may not be all about passivity and non-resistance.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Since the publication of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, social work

researchers and practitioners have contextualized individuals within their cultural and social

environment (2005). For individuals who grew up within religious institutions, faith and faith

upbringing may have a significant impact on their psychosocial development. Further, the

intersection of gender and faith identities may impact development, life experiences, and

interpersonal relationships. Understanding the crucial role of social identities, it is clinically

relevant to reflect on how gender and faith influence our clients' lives. As social and

psychological researchers generate new data regarding the mental and physical health impact of

microaggressions, it becomes especially important to examine how clients make meaning of

these interactions. Women-identified clients are likely to experience sexist microaggressions at

some point in their daily lives, and this inevitably seeps into the therapeutic environment.

Additionally, the concept of forgiveness is closely related to boundaries (see Alice's interview)

and the treatment women choose to accept from the world. Deconstructing forgiveness and

creating individual definitions can build self-awareness and intentionality around boundaries.

While this research does not offer a practice model or specific recommendations, hopefully it

will inspire social work clinicians to ask new questions about how clients integrate gender and

religious faith into their perspective on social (in)justice.

Questions for Future Research

A major limitation of this study is its scale; with such a small sample, it would be

unrealistic to extrapolate "what it's like" to be a woman raised in the Catholic faith. With this

study, I simply intend to highlight the experiences of several women and initiate a discussion

about how Catholic womanhood influences perspectives on microaggressions and forgiveness.

Thus, an obvious follow-up to this research would be to create a larger qualitative study in the

hope of producing more generalizable results. However, a stance of cultural humility demands that no matter how many perspectives researchers accumulate, social workers in the field approach each new client with an open mind and a readiness to have their assumptions challenged. Instead of trying to define the experience of Catholic girlhood and womanhood, I hope that this research opens new ways of looking at resilience and the pursuit of social justice. I have noted some of the core questions that emerged for me during this project.

Do similar feelings about microaggressions carry over to more "serious" transgressions? All eight participants spoke about being able to mentally justify the actions of others as a core part of forgiveness. However, several women mentioned "unforgivable" acts, most often rape. With an eye towards the project's original focus, would participants have been able to justify and forgive more overt gender-based violence?

Can forgiveness mitigate the physical/mental health impacts of discrimination? Data indicates that discrimination, including microaggressions, has a "weathering" effect on physical and mental health. Participants frequently described forgiveness as an act to support their own mental health, or as "lifting a weight" of anger. From a quantitative perspective, what impact does the forgiveness of microaggressions have on health?

What role does forgiveness play for women who are actively working for social justice? Participants frequently expressed tension between acceptance and change. Several women identified the attempt to learn from or change one's behavior as a prerequisite to offering forgiveness; for them, an apology needed to be accompanied by action. Especially when it came to family members, though, women like Katrina and Marina characterized forgiveness as an acceptance of a person's flaws, even with the knowledge that they might not change. For women who are actively pursuing social change, do these definitions of forgiveness hold true?

Conclusion

When I set out to begin this work, I was curious about potential social and cultural pressures that might urge Catholic women to forgive acts of violence against themselves. As a person raised female in the Catholic Church, I was inclined to equate forgiveness and passivity, inequality and acceptance. The eight women I spoke with during this project validated and challenged aspects of that viewpoint. As exhibited by the fact that many participants had left the Church due to value conflicts, some saw Catholic forgiveness as protecting or even advocating for acts of misogyny. At the same time, other participants who identified strongly as feminists did not necessarily see Catholic forgiveness as incompatible with justice. Whether forgiveness was compatible with a feminist identity depended largely on the definition of forgiveness itself. Passive forgiveness (that is, forgiveness without confrontation, education, or change) was acceptable when active interaction would have been dangerous or impossible. In these instances, forgiveness was useful as an act of self-care, reducing the burden of bias and discrimination. When possible, though, many participants advocated for a more active form of forgiveness, which demanded dialogue, understanding, and change on behalf of the perpetrator. Although this may not have been the way in which women originally learned forgiveness, they viewed it as potentially compatible with a socially just Catholic orientation.

Throughout our conversations, I was also struck by the way women constructed injustice on a spectrum from actions to individuals to systems. Individual actions, if not associated with a person's core beliefs or moral worth, were the most forgivable. However (and this was an area of significant disagreement between participants), actions may or may not have reflected on a person's true character. Participants differentiated between ignorant mistakes (forgivable under the condition that they be educated and corrected) and broader internal misogyny. In the latter

case, where there was little hope for education or change, some participants chose to forgive out of exasperation, while others found the unwillingness to change unacceptable. The broadest (and perhaps least forgivable) type of offense was structural injustice. The Catholic Church itself frequently came up as an example of a sexist institution with a history of doing harm to large swaths of people. In this instance, participants often felt that their personal values as feminists demanded change over forgiveness, even when change was difficult. At the same time, they identified holding anger as an exhausting experience- one which forgiveness could ease during the arduous process of change. I believe this duality (forgiveness as an act of preservation or an agent of change) is at the core of all of these conversations. When women from Catholic backgrounds value both forgiveness and change, how can the two coexist? The answer to that question will be essential to feminist social justice movements going forward.

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