

## **THEOLOGY AND TECHNOLOGY Working to End Gender-Based Violence**

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### **Abstract**

Gender-based violence is among the greatest challenges in the world. Theologians and ethicists need to be more involved in promoting the rights of women and working to eradicate this evil. There are a number of ways technology can support the efforts of these theologians. Although innovators and entrepreneurs have, in the past, created applications that can be used to protect women, these advances do not address the root causes of this violence. This article suggests that theologians and innovators work together to address the cultural norms that have allowed this type of violence to escalate all over the world. Theologians can use Catholic Social Thought and other important church teachings to affirm the inherent dignity of women. In order to spread this message and find greater support, they can seek new partnerships with technology. Although technology and theology seem like unlikely partners, they can work together to develop new strategies that protect women and build a better future.

**Keywords:** Catholic Social Thought, Gender-based violence, Human Dignity, Latin America, Technology, Violence against Women

### **1. Introduction**

One of the most pressing challenges for ethicists today is how to address widespread violence against women. Throughout the world,

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violence against women has become a major problem. The theological community must be more engaged with the realities of this violence and needs to identify concrete ways to both support women and create safer environments. Although there is not always a clear connection between the work of theologians and those creating new types of technology, both of these communities can work together to contribute to ending violence against women around the world.

Sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Latin America all have staggering numbers of incidences of violence against women. We can identify this type of violence as “gender-based violence.” Gender-based violence is defined as violence that is perpetrated against an individual because of his or her gender. Although there are cases of violence being perpetrated against men because of their gender, the majority of cases illustrate violence enacted against women because they are women, by men. When we talk about gender-based violence, we can say that women are the victims of physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, and domestic violence. Culturally, men have been conditioned through a variety of social evils and systematic injustices to assume that women are “less than,” and that it is acceptable therefore for women to be the recipients of violence. This is a major problem throughout the world, but technology can play an important role in helping to keep women safe.

## 2. Helpful Apps

In many start-up communities, innovators and entrepreneurs are aware of the dangers women face, and they want to help. As a result of a greater awareness of gender-based violence and a hope to support women, new applications (apps) are being designed specifically with the idea of keeping women safe. In India, there were a number of cases where women reported being assaulted and raped by Uber drivers. (Uber is an alternative taxi service that allows users to call for a driver and pay the driver using an app on their smartphones.) In the aftermath of a particularly public case in 2014, tech entrepreneur Deepak Ravindran wanted to determine how an app he had designed could protect women.<sup>1</sup> He worked with his app, Lookup, which had previously been an app that allowed customers to send messages to retail stores and restaurants, in order to help women access police more quickly if they were being assaulted. The

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<sup>1</sup>Esha Chhabra, “Can Apps Keep Women Safe in India?” *Forbes*, December 31, 2014, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/eshachhabra/2014/12/31/can-apps-keep-women-safe-in-india/>.

app is location-based and after Ravindran redesigned it, it now also allows users to contact police immediately if they are in danger. Police can respond more quickly and can instantly know where the victim is located. It also lets the victim send pictures to the police. As a result of this app, police in various parts of India are working on developing their own "S.O.S." apps where women can contact them directly if they require police assistance.

Another innovator in the Netherlands, Herman Veenstra, has developed a different kind of technology that can help women who are in danger.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, Veenstra heard about how numerous attacks on women in India were and he, too, was inspired to do something about it. He wanted his field, technology, to be able to contribute in a more substantial way to eradicating violence against women. He worked with a team of engineers to develop a special bracelet, called "Safelet" that women wear daily. The Safelet can send out a signal to those whom a woman has designated to be in her "Guardian network" if she is in danger. The bracelet gets synched with an app on a woman's smartphone or tablet and she can designate who needs to be alerted if she is in trouble. She invites friends, family members, and even local police authorities to receive an alert if she needs help. Then, if a woman does face a violent attacker, she can press the two buttons on the side of the bracelet and her "Guardian network" will receive an alert as well as her location. This is not an ideal solution, but it is another way that the technological world is contributing to the safety of women.

American innovator Yasmine Mustafa also saw the ways in which women were being victimized around the world and knew that she could do something to make women feel safer.<sup>3</sup> She, like Veenstra, developed a type of wearable technology after she heard stories of assaults on women in South America and a young woman in her own Philadelphia neighbourhood was raped. Mustafa's wearable device, called "Athena," is a small, wearable, quarter-sized button that, when pushed, will sound an alarm and give off a flashing light. It will also send a text-alert to designated recipients with the location of the woman wearing it. Mustafa created this product to help women feel

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<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Hiscott, "Are Wearables the Answer to Women's Safety?" *The Daily Dot*, July 17, 2014, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/wearables-keep-women-safe/>.

<sup>3</sup>Lauren Hertzler, "Wearable Tech Attack Deterrent Product Aptly Named after Katy Perry Song," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, August 4, 2014, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/news/2014/08/04/wearable-tech-product-named-after-katy-perry-song.html>.

safer in their communities and to have an impact on the larger world. Her company, ROAR for Good, donates a percentage of its sales to education and awareness campaigns that focus on protecting women.

### 3. Limits of Technology

These three products offer concrete examples of ways that innovators and entrepreneurs are working to end violence against women. Technology, when harnessed properly, can contribute to solving particular problems. There are, however, also significant limits to this type of technology. For example, all three of these products require a smartphone in order to make them fully functional. The apps that provide location information are only available to women who have smartphones that are also constantly locating them. However, many of the women in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America who are victims of violence do not possess smartphones and would be unable, therefore to access this helpful technology. Many women throughout the world do have access to computers, tablets, and smartphones, but certainly not those who are the poorest and who have already been marginalized and victimized by unjust structures. When thinking about creating technology to support women, we need to be able to consider technology that is accessible to those who need it most. Those who are developing these kinds of devices have the right idea, but perhaps they need a fuller picture of the struggles women face in order to determine what would help women most. Although it is helpful to have this kind of technology available, we also need to be able to address some of the root causes of violence against women.

### 4. Causes of Violence in Latin America

Women in Latin America are frequently the targets of gender-based violence. Although there are many different types of violence, violence against women in Latin America has become associated with femicide, or the systematic killing of women by men because of their gender. Femicide has been major concern in Mexico, especially in Ciudad Juárez, in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and more recently in El Salvador. Members of the technological community, as well as the theological community need to play a more active role in undoing the systematic violence women in these countries face.

In Latin America, the culture created by the prevalence of maquiladoras (or factories), as well as machismo<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup>“Machismo” is a term used to describe cultural expectations of masculinity. Authors from the *Journal of International Women's Studies* say that “the extreme form

marianismo,<sup>5</sup> contribute to a general disrespect for women and a sense that women's lives are less valuable. Women are forced to work in maquiladoras in places like Ciudad Juárez for long hours and for very little pay. The maquiladoras are located on the outskirts of the city and women who are travelling there to work either by bus or on foot, are especially vulnerable to attackers. The managers who run the maquiladoras have not taken any steps to protect vulnerable women nor have women's voices been more fully incorporated into the leadership of maquiladoras. While women are participating in work that inhibits them and does not allow them to grow intellectually, managers and owners of major corporations often see them as nothing more than disposable pieces on a conveyor belt. Women become the mass produced products that they are working to craft. Many women need jobs at maquiladoras since, even though these jobs do not pay well or provide necessary benefits, they do offer women some income. This income can make the difference between a family's ability to eat well or not, and it can symbolize the only shred of independence a woman has been able to gain. The women who work at these factories, however, are not valued for their independent contributions and they are barely acknowledged. If one woman disappears or suffers a violent attack, there are many other women who can easily replace her. In this respect, women are seen as less than fully human. This type of lifestyle is not in accordance with a rich understanding of human dignity. Many women throughout Asia have also faced working conditions similar to those in maquiladoras.

The dual cultures of machismo and marianismo throughout Latin America also lead to violence against women. Machismo refers to a general attitude of "manliness" that includes misogyny and a domination of women. A culture of machismo has permeated Latin America and created norms whereby men assume that they are more

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[of machismo] is manifested as hate and extreme physical and psychological violence against women and it has been reported in a number of Latin American countries to differing degrees by the United Nations' specialist on violence against women." Karen Englander, Carmen Yáñez and Xochitl Barney, "Doing Science within a Culture of Machismo and Marianismo," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13, 3 (2012) 68.

<sup>5</sup>Karen Englander, Carmen Yáñez and Xochitl Barney in their piece, "Doing Science within a Culture of Machismo and Marianismo" say that that idea of marianismo is derived from the fact that the ideal Mexican woman is a mother who should be a source of boundless love and self-sacrifice. They say that the "maternal ideal is justified because women are 'spiritually and morally superior to men', so they should be 'self-negating and martyrs for their children'" (69).

powerful than women. Men have been socialized to consider themselves the superior gender. Machismo has become part of life in Latin America and many men do not recognize it as being problematic; it is just the way things are. While men in Latin America need to prove their manhood by asserting their power, women are subsequently frequently expected to be meek and submissive. A culture of marianismo accompanies the dominant machismo. Marianismo refers to adopting a posture that resembles the Blessed Virgin Mary for women. This type of attitude encourages women to be meek, obedient, and subservient, especially to their husbands and other authoritative men. The dual problem of men being especially misogynistic and women being submissive leads to skewed societal roles and norms. As these attitudes have become more and more ingrained in society, they have become harder to undo. It has become more commonplace for men to be violent or even just patronizing towards women. These conditions also prohibit women from thriving and from asserting their own power.

The cultural norms created by a maquiladora-based society, as well as dominant machismo and marianismo lead to a general complacency when it comes to gender-based violence. When these norms become the script for a community, the issues they cause become harder to address. Violence against women has become an everyday occurrence throughout the world, but especially in Latin America. Femicide in Latin America is marked by the fact that it includes the notion of killing with impunity. Perpetrators in Latin America are quite literally getting away with murder because no one is taking the time to investigate these killings. Frequently, it is suggested to the families of women who have disappeared that perhaps the victim ran away or perhaps she was involved in something that prompted her killing, like dangerous partying, prostitution or drug dealing. The message behind these suggestions is that authorities do not think that a woman's murder is worth investigating. The dignity of women is not fully acknowledged and those in positions of power have not done enough to investigate these crimes.

## **5. Theological Teachings**

In order to truly support women, it is not enough to develop new technology that might help them if they happen to be attacked and happen to have available technology, and can access it quickly and easily enough. Instead, we need to think about how to re-shape

society and re-form it in a way that recognizes the human dignity of each person. Theologians need to be actively engaged in this work. The theological community also needs to speak out more regularly in order to support women who are victims of gender-based violence. As theologians and ethicists we have a responsibility to work towards the fullest understanding of God's kingdom. This means an inclusive understanding of the human race that strives towards peace and dignity for all. Unfortunately, for too many women, this is not their reality. Those who have created technology used to help women in the event of an attack are doing important work, but we need to think about how to address some of the root causes of this violence in order to ensure that women are recognized as fully human.

In order to think about undoing the harm of cultural norms that have established women as second-class citizens, we can think about how to speak to communities as a whole. It is possible for theologians to use theological teachings in order to highlight the importance of valuing the human person. Theologians argue that each person is worthy of respect and dignity, but they need to be more vocal in order to support women and change the way society views them. Theologians and ethicists can look to several teachings of the Catholic Church to support the dignity of women.

For example, *imago Dei*, which is a central Christian teaching, asserts that humans have been created in the image of God, which directly connects to the work of supporting women. Women, having been created in the image of God, should not have to suffer violence, humiliation, and degradation. *Imago Dei* endows women, who have been victims of oppression, with the knowledge of God's love and special relationship with humans. This relationship means that humans are worthy of the inherent dignity with which they were born. The dignity of women is violated through gender-based violence and it is becoming far too prevalent. *Imago Dei* teaches that gender-based violence and feminicide are unacceptable.

The theological notion of dignity is also present in many papal encyclicals as well as in letters from American bishops. The dignity of the human person, and especially women, helps to define God's relationship to humans and the Church. Catholic Social Teaching upholds human dignity and strives to identify ways to support all humans. For example, *Gaudium et Spes* says:

[W]hatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the

integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator.<sup>6</sup>

Through this exhortation, we can see the importance of human dignity for both men and women in the teachings of the Church. Violence against women insults their human dignity and poisons society.

The United States Catholic Bishops also affirmed the dignity of all human life when they wrote their powerful letter about economic inequality in 1986. In “Economic Justice for All,” the bishops wrote about the relationships humans are expected to have with one another in order to promote a healthy economy. Their letter states:

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth — the sacredness — of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God.<sup>7</sup>

The bishops reaffirm the truth of Catholic Social Teaching and highlight the fact that human dignity is at the core of understanding what the Church says about human life. The Catholic Church asserts that all humans are sacred and they are of God. Women therefore, do not deserve to be violated and treated as disposable objects. Catholic Social Teaching affirms that they are much more than this.

The teachings of *imago Dei* and human dignity illustrate the ways in which theologians can think about protecting women in the face of gender-based violence. We can see another example of how theology

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<sup>6</sup>Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 27, accessed February 24, 2016. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>7</sup>United States Catholic Bishops, “Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy,” 1986, paragraph 28.

speaks to gender-based violence not through the violence itself, but through the sacramental nature of the responses to this violence. Sacramentality refers to the visible signs of God's invisible grace in the world. Women working together toward justice and liberation, and against forces that perpetuate feminicide, illuminate a real image of God's invisible grace. Scholar Susan A. Ross has also noticed the sacramentality of women's activism. She has said that "women's actions, while not explicitly or officially sacramental, nevertheless have a powerful sacramental quality that could and should inform our thinking and practice of sacraments."<sup>8</sup> Theologically, we can look at the responses to gender-based violence of activism and community-building as sacramental. Women who work collaboratively are engaging in a sacramental type of theology.

In addition to thinking about the sacramental nature of women's activism, theologians can also think about the need to eradicate violence against women as a way of working towards the common good. Philosopher John Rawls outlines the common good as the aim of a government that is working toward "maintaining conditions and achieving objectives that are similarly to everyone's advantage."<sup>9</sup> Theologians need to strive for the common good in order to ensure that the rights of all members of society are respected. Catholic Social Thought teaches that the common good includes justice for all. In his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI states, "To desire the common good and to strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity... The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them."<sup>10</sup> In order to create a society that respects the rights of women, we need to continue to work for the common good.

The common good will not be attained if unjust structures contribute to threatening the safety of significant parts of our societies. Feminicide often means that women are being killed before they have had an opportunity to fully flourish. When women's lives are cut short, we in society lose out on the contributions that they would have made to the greater world and therefore, we fail to achieve the common good. The basic standards of living are not met

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<sup>8</sup>Susan A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacrament, and Justice*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2006, 1.

<sup>9</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971, 233.

<sup>10</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 7, accessed February 24, 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).

when feminicide threatens women. We need to work harder to establish a common minimum of flourishing in order to talk seriously about the common good.

Unfortunately, a world where violence against women is the norm is still incredibly far from achieving the common good. Theologians can think more deeply about how to share the message of Catholic Social Teaching and especially benefits of working towards the common good. The common good is not necessarily a theological concept, but as a philosophical idea, it can appeal to those who might not be as familiar with theology. The notion of basic flourishing for all human can make sense to almost anyone. By discussing the common good, theologians can amplify their use of Catholic Social Thought in order to reach out to those in communities where violence against women is particularly prevalent.

Important theological teachings affirm the idea of protecting women and ending gender-based violence throughout the world. It is not enough, however, to address violence as it is happening. Instead, we need to understand the causes of violence and work to change societal attitudes in order to prevent violence in the future. In Latin America, violence against women is frequently the result of deeply embedded ideas that have been passed along from one generation to the next. In order to end these cycles of violence, theologians can participate in these efforts to eradicate violence by discussing the theological ideas of *imago Dei*, human dignity, the sacramental nature of human life, and the common good.

## **6. Technology's Contribution**

Technological developments can play an important role in these efforts. Although the relationship between technology and theology is not necessarily obvious, technology has helped bring theologians from around the world closer together. Important networks and alliances have emerged as a result of the "connected" nature of scholars. Many theologians post ideas and articles to their social network profiles. Twitter, facebook, and individual blogs have helped theologians exchange ideas, debate important concepts, and develop their professional voices. Collaborative blogs and online magazines with multiple authors and editors have provided theologians with access to publishing opportunities as well as ways to create professional partnerships. Technology has played an important role for professional theologians by creating all of these opportunities. The world is much smaller now than it was twenty years ago, thanks to

technological advances. As usual, however, we need to consider who is being left out of these partnerships when we use technology as a way to create stronger networks and alliances.

Despite the fact that not everyone has access to the same kinds of technology, theologians can leverage modern technology in order to support them in their work. Technological advances allow theologians to spread ideas more quickly and generate discussion. If we want theologians to more comprehensively contribute to changing cultural attitudes about men and women in order to end violence against women, all available forms of technology will need to be utilized.

Theologians can begin to shift cultural attitudes by participating in grassroots campaigns and getting involved in local communities. Throughout Latin America, faith-based women's groups are participating in protests to end gender-based violence. This kind of activism aligns with Church teachings that focus on human dignity and the common good. Theologians participating in this type of activism are engaging in trying to shift cultural norms and working toward the greater good. Technology can also contribute to the empowerment of these women's groups and this type of activism.

First of all, technology can be used to help bring a community together. If a local leader is organizing a meeting or calling for support of a particular cause, technology can play a role in spreading the news of this meeting, creating posters and flyers, or developing an image that a group can rally behind. Social networks allow people to be in touch with one another rapidly and they let leaders spread details about important events to large groups of people. Other kinds of technology can be used to create dramatic videos with important messages that can be shared all over the world. Powerful images can sometimes motivate people to act in ways that words never will. Technological advances let people create websites that outline their ideas and create petitions that others can sign and share among their colleagues and throughout the world. In the last few years, we have seen the importance of ideas, videos, and images going "viral." If something strikes enough people in just the right way, technology allows a groundswell of support to give it significant momentum.

As far as violence against women is concerned, there have been important videos, images, petitions, and news items about the horrors of gender-based violence and femicide, but we need more. Not enough people know about the rising numbers of female victims

of violence, and technology can help violence against women become a greater priority for those who are in positions of power. Theologians as well as politicians and legislators need to talk about violence against women more regularly and they need to distribute the facts to their audiences as often as they can. Theologians, teachers, and pastoral workers in particular need to be involved in education campaigns and programs for young children so that there is a general understanding of women's dignity and respect for all life from an early age. Technology can help theologians produce the teaching resources that will be most effective.

## **7. Conclusion**

The relationship between theology and technology is complicated. From a theological perspective, technology is an important teaching instrument. It provides us with opportunities to promote the causes theologians and ethicists care about most deeply. For example, violence against women around the world needs to be addressed. Theologians, politicians, legislators, journalists, academics, and innovators should all be more involved in the fight to end gender-based violence. In order to truly address this problem, these communities need to change the way women are viewed in the world and the way that cultural norms have developed. In order to do this, society must acknowledge the full humanity and dignity of all women. Catholic Social Teaching affirms that women have been created in the image of God and strives to protect the lives of women as sacred. Technology can help theologians get this message across and can be utilized by those in positions of power to spread their message.

We must, however, always be mindful of those who do not have access to the kinds of technology we are supporting and think about creative ways to include those who are on the margins. In order to participate in the Kingdom of God, we need to strive to create a society where the common good is the norm and justice prevails. Although theologians and technical innovators may not be the most likely partners, they can work together to raise awareness of issues that matter most and they can creatively work to undo the wrongs that social sin has created.

Violence against women is an issue that needs to be addressed by all sectors of society. There are many who have made important contributions to this work and who have joined in the struggle to end violence, but there is still much to be done. Some in the fields of

technology, computer programming and engineering have discovered various points of entry where their work can make a significant difference. We see this in the production of protective apps, new software, and protective clothing. Theologians, and those from other fields, must also discover where our voices on this matter can be heard.

Theologians need to be actively involved in the work of ending violence against women through our writing, our speaking, and our teaching. We can utilize the power of technology to aid us in this struggle and we can creatively find ways to work together. In many ways, technology has helped to bring communities together and has given us opportunities to create important networks and alliances. We share news more rapidly and we are more aware of what is happening all over the world than ever before. Technology has given us the tools to share important messages and teach others about the varied realities of other peoples' lives. When used to help people in the right ways, technology can be a powerful tool. Theologians can utilize technology in practical ways to support our continuing work of ending violence against women.