

SEXUAL DILEMMAS AND MORAL REASONING

An Approach to Girls' Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure

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1. Introduction

An equally best and brilliant half of the humanity is conveniently forgotten, ignored, and neglected almost in every field of human sciences; indeed, their great legacy is missing in every sphere. Even though visibility of women has increased more than ever, the actual status of women in many parts of the world reveals instances of domestic and social violence and sexual abuse on young girls and women. Of course, working outside the confines of the home has modified, extended, and improved the lot of many women and their social image too. Even then, women are considered the 'weaker sex', which implies, in comparison to men, that they are not yet able to reach the higher stages of cognitive and moral development. To my mind, these conclusions have been evolved, as not only have the experiences of women not been listened to but also the very experiences have been disfigured, misrepresented, and misunderstood. Hence, the attitude towards them many a time runs the risk of becoming inhuman. A close reading of various unfortunate events that happen in the lives of women across the globe indicates that most of them result from a wrong perception of human sexuality and the nature of woman as a person.

The notable (but not dynamic enough to acknowledge the full dignity of women) teachings of Pope John Paul II have given some signs of hope in the arena of according respect to women for what they are. According to the Catholic Church, the crisis in sexuality today is that sexuality viewed as separate from a loving relationship,¹ which results in the breakdown of relationships and encompasses exploitation and abuse issues. This crisis calls us to reclaim the sacred ground of human sexuality. The Catholic Church through her attractive teachings continuously reminds us of the

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¹Kurian Kunnumpuram, "Collaboration of Men and Women," *Vidyajyothi* 69, 2 (February 2005), 123.

sacredness and wholeness of human sexuality. For example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and give life, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.”² Human sexuality, therefore, includes the wholeness of the human personality. Problems arise when we try to view its components separately. This, in fact, points to the importance and relevance of better insights in understanding human sexuality, especially of women. This, in turn, will help us to have mutual respect in the society and will enable girls to comprehend their own original experience and develop correct moral reasoning to help themselves.

2. Girls’ Sexual Dilemmas

Throughout history, a kind of anonymity has pervaded in the girls’ and women’s sexuality. From the beginning of psychoanalysis itself, the psychoanalysts, like Sigmund Freud (1905), framed female psychology as veiled in what is called an “impenetrable obscurity.”³ Freud tried to understand female sexual life but it continued to remain his “dark continent” (1926), a continent where he could not reach.⁴ Some other developmental psychologists, like D. L. Tolman, point out that the real discourse on the sexual desire of girls is missing in the way adolescent female sexuality is conceived and discussed by professionals, including teachers and administrators in schools.⁵ The studies found that girls’ sexuality was a topic of discussion, but overlooking the real nature and in a way discouraging their actual sexual exploration.

The usual discourses could be categorised, in general, as follows: (1) victimization, e.g., girls are taken advantage of by boys (2) the discourse of disease, e.g., girls need to avoid being infected by STD and AIDS, and

²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994, §2332.

³S. Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, 212.

⁴S. Freud, “Femininity” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 22, 114-116.

⁵D. L. Tolman, “Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality: Discerning Dilemmas of Desire” in *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance*, eds. C. Gilligan, A. G. Rogers, and D. L. Tolman, New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991, 58.

(3) the discourse of morality, e.g., girls need to behave in a moral fashion that does not include sexual activity, etc. That is, the actual literature on adolescent girls' sexuality is missing and, as Carol Gilligan, a world renowned social ethicist, points out, major developmental theories not only ignored girls' experience, but also silenced the true nature of their sexuality. Moral education in schools is mostly unaware of the absence of an acknowledgement of girls' *embodied sexual feelings*. Generally speaking, girls are told by parents and other adults that they are not supposed to speak about their love and sexuality, only because they are girls.

Deborah L. Tolman, a psychologist, fills this gap by focusing on girls' desires, rather than on the social ills they are usually quizzed on. In her book, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*, Tolman investigates how young women's first sexual experiences may be influenced by societal pressure to dissociate from their own bodies and desires. Tolman shows the alarming dangers – for individuals and society – when girls are afraid to take ownership of their sexuality. From Tolman's research we understand that young women nearly always found barriers to their experiences of desire. She argues that their stories show "how a patriarchal society tries to keep girls and women at bay by forcing or attempting to force, a wedge between their psyches and their bodies and how girls deal with these forces."⁶ In general, adolescence is a state of human existence where sexuality, identity, and relationship are heightened, although social taboos restrict girls in this period and they begin to be vulnerable by losing touch with their own thoughts and feelings. As many girls enter into womanhood or when their bodies take on women's contours, they begin to be seen as sexual, and sexuality becomes an aspect of adolescent girl's lives.⁷ The above research shows that female sexual orientations are different from that of male, which describes their experience of sexuality and their response to their own sexual desire.

Sexuality is central to what makes us human beings. At the same time, one must be aware of the fact that human sexuality encompasses more than the sexual act itself. Consequently, sexual ethics is concerned about more than specific norms for sexual behaviour. In fact, it is unfair,

⁶D. L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, 24.

⁷D. L. Tolman, "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles with Sexuality," *Gender and Society* 1 (September 1994), 324.

inaccurate, and ultimately unhelpful to talk as though female sexual development is only about learning to cope with male sexuality.⁸ In an essay, Deborah Tolman writes:

I realize that when girls know, experience, and speak about those fabulous feelings in their bodies, trouble follows for them and for their parents, teachers and therapists. Girls' sexual desire upsets people, because it challenges and might upset the cultural mandate which requires that girls (and women) not be connected to their bodies in general, and to their sexual hunger in particular. Girls' sexual desire is an interruption of the condoned version of what happens in girls' bodies. If girls know their desire, what else might they begin to know about themselves and their situation in the culture?⁹

What Tolman wants to affirm is that girls and women are socialized to dissociate their feelings from their sexual selves, which may lead them into abusive or merely unsatisfying lives. She also found out that women have trouble expressing themselves in our society. Therefore, she suggests that silence about the sexual desire of girls is as troublesome as talking about these feelings in open discussion, but without helping them to handle these feelings and desires.

One of the central sexual-dilemmas girls face at this age is that they are asked not to speak of and for themselves. Naturally, it leads to other dangers: feeling guilt and shame, a feeling of wonders and doubt, abusive sexual relations, a tendency to keep secrecy about their sexual feelings, etc. So, an opportunity to know themselves (in terms of what is truthful about them, the rightness and wrongness of their feelings, desires) so as to express themselves is desired. Carol Gilligan has brought out some reasonable studies in this regard. It is she who noticed a 'different voice', a voice which is missing in the human voice in the pervasive silence concerning women in the field of psychology and moral development. Gilligan's studies reveal that, for girls, the issues about sexuality are very much a part of their moral conflicts. At the adolescent period, Gilligan's sample girls expressed their great desire to speak about their sexuality.¹⁰

⁸S. Sheffer and J. Sturges, "Adolescent Girls and Sexual Desire," *Mothering* 50 (Fall 1997), 3.

⁹Tolman, "Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality," 67.

¹⁰C. Gilligan, J. M. Taylor, and M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 99.

They wanted to discuss their body changes, emotions, and sexual desires, with their mothers, teachers, or some significant adult woman, who could play a significant role in listening to these girls talking about their feelings. Gilligan affirms that through responsive listening to girls, women can help them towards a mature moral reasoning in the situations of their sexual dilemmas. Once girls understand their real experience and deliberate about their sexual dilemmas in a mature manner, they must be able to face their sexuality and deal with it responsibly.

Gilligan made a specific study in order to understand the interaction of moral principles and sexual behaviour. In her concerns for the moral development of girls, she points out that “it is necessary to see sexuality as an important area of moral choice in human life.”¹¹ That is, girls need to make a morally correct choice with regard to their sexuality. This points to the need for an education of correct moral reasoning in order to help girls learn the right way of handling these sexual dilemmas in their lives. Further, according to Gilligan, many girls experience a “crisis of connection,” a relational dilemma of how to be oneself and stay in relationship with others who may not want to know the truth of girls’ experiences. In such a situation, many girls have a tendency to silence their own thoughts and feelings for the sake of relationships. As a feminine tendency, girls form reasoning based on relationality, i.e., with an attitude of care and concern toward the other. However, they must be prudent to take the responsibility of themselves as that of neighbour or a mature way of self assertion before self-sacrifice.

3. Moral Reasoning and Moral Education

The form of reasoning is very important in dealing with moral choices and resolution of moral dilemmas. In order to do a correct moral reasoning, one must have rightly formed concepts and vision that can function as a frame of reference in critical situation. That is, first of all, girls must have right view about one’s own personhood and the world. This frame of reference enables them to make the right moral judgment which, in turn,

¹¹C. Gilligan, “Sexual Dilemmas at the High-School Level,” in *Sexuality and Human Values: The Personal Dimension of Human Experience* (98-110), ed. M. Calderone, New York: Association Press, 1974, 98. See also L. S. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996; reprint in 2000, 9.

enables them to take the responsibility to actualize it in concrete action. To be moral, girls must be able to control their feelings by reason.

From her research, Gilligan developed a model called “hierarchy of reasoning about sex,” which concerns “how adolescents think about sexual decisions and what values they take into consideration when deciding about sexual behaviour.”¹² The hierarchy of reasoning means that sex at the lower stages of moral development considers it as an instrument to exchange for pleasures without any notion of relationship. The individual developing towards the higher stages of moral reasoning, however, sees sex as an expression of love; in further higher stages sexual relationship is seen to be involving ethical deliberation in which partners deal with each other honestly and responsibly. Still in higher stages, sex must be seen as the gift of God which expresses love relationships, new life, and participation in the image of God. Gilligan proposed, from this study, that girls’ ways of dealing with sexual dilemmas is very much related to their growth in moral reasoning capacity. That is, development should lead girls to mature reasoning of the moral issues concerned with sex such as the value of life and love, the value of social welfare and responsibility, their obligation to parents and family within which the relevance of the concept of sex is perceptible. Otherwise girls may be led astray by false ideas and misconceptions and the ultimate outcome of it will be destruction of their own lives.

Education enables girls to engage in critical evaluation of sexually deviated programmes in the mass media or in their own social contexts, which, in turn, enables them develop right and healthy responses.¹³ According to Gilligan, the rightness and wrongness of sexual behaviour is drawn from the ethical principles concerning the relationship of human beings to one another in general.¹⁴ Then, the central dynamic of female

¹²K. H. Bollerud, S. B. Christopherson, and E. S. Frank, “Girls’ Sexual Choices: Looking for What is Right,” in *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, eds. C. Gilligan, N. P. Lyons and T. J. Hanmer, London: Harvard University Press, 1990, 275.

¹³J. M. Halstead and M. J. Reiss, *Values in Sex Education: From Principles to Practice*, London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003, 50.

¹⁴Gilligan, “Sexual Dilemmas at the High-School Level,” 102. See also Tolman, “Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality,” 56. Again, L. S. Cahill, the woman theologian, affirms that sex is inherently communal and relational. Sex or sexuality always points to human relationship. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 60.

sexuality is the relational context. Gilligan explains that when sexuality is evaluated in the frame of relationships, then sexual ethics comes to be seen as part of one’s general principles for dealing with other people. As a result, instead of asking if sex before marriage is right or wrong, one asks, “How can I relate to others in terms of their just rights and claims and in terms of their welfare?” Here we see that, along with the Catholic Church, Gilligan evaluates sexuality on the basis of human relationships, especially in making sexual choices in the context of love and care. This points to responsible handling of sexuality.

Due to their inner urge for connectedness/relationship girls are in need of help to develop self-assertion, so that they may learn to take more control over the direction of their lives.¹⁵ From an educational perspective, girls must be helped to have motivation which presupposes the necessary training for assertiveness, namely, in the “art of saying no,” at the right time. In this regard, some studies point to how girls especially should develop a stronger feeling of self-worth and become more assertive. Through moral education, girls must be provided with some practice in reasoning, presenting them with possible sexual dilemmas. These possible dilemmas may be, for example, the rightness or wrongness of premarital sex, the nature of sexual rights in marriage, the problem of a high-school girls’ pregnancy, and their responsibility to their parents and other relational crisis.

Studies concerning girls suggest that if they are helped to value themselves as sexual subjects, then they will make healthy decisions about their sexual behaviour and experiences.¹⁶ Girls need to be educated to acknowledge themselves as subjects with feelings, emotions, and embodied sexuality, and to realise that all sexual dilemmas result from an attempt to deal with the body as separate from the whole person.¹⁷ So,

¹⁵R. Burggraeve, “From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality: An Ethics of Growth as an Ethics of Mercy for Young People in this Era of AIDS,” in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/Aids Prevention*, ed. J. F. Keenan, New York/London: Continuum, 2000, 306.

¹⁶G. P. Schnier, “The Appeal to Experience,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. E. F. Rogers, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 25.

¹⁷In our society, if a woman’s body is seen as an object or as a property to be assessed by, and appropriated for the use of others, it comes to be experienced by the women herself as an object, as an alien body. This attitude denies women of their full human potential in a culture desirous of reducing women to sex. Again, in today’s so-

through an appropriate moral education, girls must be taught and trained to make moral reasoning about their sexuality in the context of subjective relationships, which embody mutual respect and acknowledgment. Such an education will also enable them to see that their bodies are not objects or the possessions of the other, and will help them resist exploitations such as rape, sexual violence, prostitution, pornography, and the denigrating forms of advertising.

Educational institutions often operate under the influence of a sex/gender system, by which women learners suffer from a male-dominated curricula, classroom conduct, and teacher-learner interactions.¹⁸ The Catholic Church reminds us that sex education must be an educational guidance in human love,¹⁹ and that this subject is different from other subjects taught in schools. It is about human relationships and, therefore, includes a central moral dimension. Girls, therefore, need to be provided with opportunities to know and understand their own experiences, feelings, their bodies, and sexual desires; they must also be enabled to acknowledge these experiences in their own voice. Inspired by Gilligan's "relational theory" of women's development, girls' moral education programmes need to be renewed and revamped. With Gilligan, I feel the urgency for the recovery of the authentic "voices" and the capacity to express them, as women's subordination is rooted in the silencing of their voices.²⁰ Above all, moral education should enable girls to be themselves by valuing and appreciating their own femininity.

Sometimes, the moral education has the common problem of just being caught up by moral reasoning. It is true that moral reasoning is an important component (the highest correlative factor leading to appropriate moral action) in the formation of the mature moral agent. However, educators must take care that their considerations should not stop with

called developed society, the bodies of women are often seen by the medical establishment, the media, and sex industry, in terms of their relationship to an appropriative masculinity. See P. Johnson, "Sexism," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 4, ed. R. Chadwick, London: Academic Press, 1998, 69.

¹⁸S. Collard and J. Stalker, "Women's Trouble: Women, Gender and the Learning Environment," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 50 (Summer 1991), 75-76.

¹⁹SCCE, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1983, §4.

²⁰M. A. Mahoney, "The Problem of Silence in Feminist Psychology," *Feminist Studies* 22, 3 (1996), 603.

moral reasoning alone. Instead, this reasoning has to enable the students, the moral agents, to engage in moral actions.²¹ That is, mature moral reasoning will lead to right decision and action, complemented by all the faculties of the person, rational, emotional, and affective. According to the Christian anthropological perspective, education must consider the totality of the person.

The methodology used for sexual education in schools needs to be integral and the educators should follow some essential criteria to make their instruction didactically valid.²² What I mean is that we should be more realistic concerning the problems and sexual dilemmas that girls face in their life situation today and embark on a new and meaningful sexual education. The sexual dimension of the person is not only an object to study or a behaviour to train, but also consists of problems to clarify and to resolve in a well determined existential context of individual and community life.²³ This dimension should permeate indirectly into all subjects taught in the schools, that students may be competent and enabled to make mature moral decisions, in the face of sexual dilemmas, by involving all their faculties: intelligence, will, feelings, and emotions.

4. Conclusion

In short, what is basically required is a change in our worldview, especially pertaining to the world of girls and women, which highlights their true feelings, knowledge, and experience. Sexual learning and sexual expression begin in the womb and continue till the tomb. In our traditional paradigm, sexual desire of girls and women were consistently silenced and they were just counted as object of pleasure for boys and men. In such a long-established tradition, if a girl were asked a question as to her subjective experience, about her knowledge as to how she feels, many a

²¹J. A. Freiberg, “Experiential Moral Learning,” in *Handbook of Moral Development: Models, Process, Techniques and Research*, ed. G. L. Sapp, Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1986, 186. This is also one of the critiques of Kohlberg, which says that his theory stopped at the high stages of moral reasoning without reaching necessarily into moral action.

²²R. Zavalloni and T. Fratini, *Educazione sessuale nella scuola*, Roma: Antonianum, 1974, 86.

²³L. Corrodine and C. Nanni, “Educazione Sessuale,” in *Dizionario di Scienze dell’Educazione*, eds. J. M. PELLEZO, C. Nanni, and G. Malizia, Roma: Università Pontificia Salesiana, Elle di ci, 1997, 365. See also E. Curtiss, “We Must Give Our Youth Moral Education,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 31 (3 August 1994), 3.

time, she replies from a position as the object of another's judgment; that is, she knows herself in the realm of "sex" as the object of male desire. This is a disintegration of a healthy notion of mind-body understanding, and is alienated from full personhood. For, part of her (or, their) being has been stolen by another. Thus, first of all girls must develop an esteemed vision of themselves, including their understanding of sexual pleasure, which is centred on a relational understanding of human persons who are treated as equals. Through moral education they must be taught what their sexual orientation is and how it is different from that of boys. Indeed, To make healthy decisions about their lives, girls need sensitive and truthful sexual education. They must also have good knowledge of their own feelings, embodied experience, and emotions to protect themselves maturely and to help other girls from their own real and lived knowledge.

Through right moral reasoning they must be corrected, so that they are able to know and acknowledge their sexuality as something within their own authority and embodied feelings. That is, they must know their own sexuality and sexual pleasure as something permeated in their own body and mind or their integrated self. Thus, they can grow in self-esteem and, finally, they will be enabled to take the right moral decision and to accept its responsibility. Likewise, the next generation can change the existing social system, gradually and spontaneously, so that they can live in this world as decent and dignified persons without risking and denying what is naturally given to them.