


Article

The Intersection of Gender-Based Violence and Vulnerance in Pastoral Care

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Abstract: This paper examines several aspects of vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience in pastoral care, with a focus on women in the Roman Catholic Church. It critiques gendered ideologies and the intersection of gender-based violence and systemic risks in pastoral care settings. Through doctrinal analysis and lived experiences, it argues pastoral care settings with their systemic vulnerances and asymmetries enable abuse, often by clerics. The concept of “vulnerance” sheds light on power dynamics, emphasizing the importance of trauma-sensitive pastoral care with high professional standards to foster resilience among victims.

Keywords: vulnerability; vulnerance; sexual and spiritual abuse; pastoral care; abuse of adults; clergy abuse

1. Introduction

Examining pastoral care through a gender lens brings to light the gender dynamics inscribed in the bodies and identities of people and societies. This includes gendered issues of vulnerability and vulnerance, the question of resilience, and the link between ecclesial and socioanthropological concepts of gender. In secular society, processes of deconstructing gender stereotypes can be clearly observed; gender studies, as well as public sociocultural discourses on the de-essentialization of gender concepts, have become an integral part of secular societies in the Global North.¹ In the context of the Roman Catholic Church, however, the view on women, especially from the perspective of the Roman Magisterium, is still essentialist and associated with explicit gendered attributions, such as motherhood and care tasks. “The magisterium reserves the right to develop a ‘theology of the woman’ and to decide from there how far it should be integrated into its own patriarchal order and hierarchy” (Leimgruber and Werner 2021, p. 24). This has implications for the involvement of women in pastoral care and for thinking about vulnerability in this area. This text explores the links between vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience in relation to pastoral care settings, with a particular focus on the involvement of women in these settings. This is because recent abuse research on the vulnerability of pastoral care relationships has made it clear that pastoral care is not a helping, harmless context, per se; on the contrary, studies show that it is a primary site of abuse (cf. Leimgruber and Werner 2021; Dreßing 2018, p. 7). The first section of this article looks at one aspect of the magisterial “doctrine of the woman”, which has particular vulnerability implications. The second section looks at pastoral care as a site of abuse. The third section is devoted to pastoral relationships in which there is inequality between the parties involved and in which women often encounter male perpetrators, especially priests.² A fourth section will address the vulnerability of pastoral care settings, which has an enormous impact on all those involved, and, finally, this article will raise the question of (prevented) resilience in relation to pastoral care.

2. Ideological Production of Vulnerability: Women in the Church and Pastoral Care

Historically (up to the Second Vatican Council) and with only a few exceptions, women were excluded from professional pastoral roles within the Roman Catholic Church; only



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priests were considered pastoral workers and counsellors. This has changed. Since at least the 1970s women are no longer exclusively the “recipients” of pastoral care, but in many places are themselves fulltime pastoral workers, for example, as pastoral counsellors or spiritual advisers. Women are also influencing pastoral care in other areas of church practice: in diocesan pastoral care offices, in religious congregations, or in universities working on the theology and practice of pastoral care.

2.1. Roman Catholic Theology of “The Woman”

The magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church emphasizes its own anthropology and theology of the woman (always in the singular) (cf. [Anuth 2022](#); [Werner 2021](#)). Pope Francis (in direct continuity with his two predecessors) speaks of the nature of women and the “service and charisms that are proper to women” ([Pope Francis 2020a](#), art. 102). In numerous texts and homilies of the Pope, women are given essential characteristics of serving (e.g., supporting, caring) and are portrayed as particularly suited to social, reproductive, and emotional activities because of their gender:

“The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood. I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because ‘the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace’ [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 295.] and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.” ([Pope Francis 2013](#), art. 103).

Motherhood and related attributes such as tenderness and nurturing, are situated as central determinants of female existence: “Certainly, ‘a society without mothers would be dehumanized, for mothers are always, even in the worst of times, witnesses to tenderness, dedication and moral strength.[. . .]’ (Catechesis (7 January 2015): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 7–8 January 2015, p. 8).” ([Pope Francis 2016](#), art. 174; see also [Pope Francis 2020b](#), art. 276ff).

2.2. Misogyny of Acknowledgment

This association of biologically determined essence with moral obligation, of the “anthropology of female receiving” and “female morality of giving” ([Hahn 2020](#), p. 11), is highly problematic in terms of its social effects as well as its theological justification. Drawing on Kate Mann’s theses (cf. [Manne 2019](#)), Judith Hahn calls this system the “misogyny of acknowledgment” ([Hahn 2020](#), 11; cf. also [Keul 2020b](#)). This is due to the fact that acknowledgment is tied to women’s morally ‘correct’ actions and the fulfillment of ‘specifically female tasks and duties’. Women are praised in (the Catholic sexist) theory as maternal (care)givers, and recognized in social practice only as long as they act in a way that is expected of them by virtue of their “feminine genius”. This anthropology is not God-given but rather a biologically based category disguised to cement the clericalist and patriarchal distribution of power and gender roles in the church. In fact, the anthropology of the naturally giving woman has a social impact on women’s lived relations and self-identity. It provides the stereotypes, convictions, and (moral) values by which women and their behavior are measured. These stereotypes, convictions, and values exist as “hidden patterns” ([Haslbeck et al. 2022](#)) and are active in all areas of church practice in which women act in different roles, including pastoral care. It is a direct consequence of the Catholic, essentialist gender regime that gender-specific vulnerabilities are produced (this process may be called “vulnerabilisation”, [Keul 2020a](#)), which are reflected in numerous structures of discrimination, processes of marginalization, and experiences of oppression, including physical and sexual violence: “For generations, committed Catholic women have

experienced a massive degree of neglect, humiliation and marginalization in their church.” (Bucher 2021, p. 19). This is also possible because women are idealized as those who must always put their own needs behind those of others (cf. Pope Francis 2016, art. 174). Many women report that they are expected to accept suffering, devotion, and pain *because they were women* (i.e., Hoff 2020), thereby establishing the essentialism of this theological discourse.

2.3. Gender Based Violence and Misogyny in Pastoral Care

It can be inferred that the Church’s doctrine generates ideological vulnerabilities, which consequently lead to tangible violations against women within the practical domains of Church activities. Looking at the specific field of pastoral care, similar issues arise regarding women who provide counselling and those who seek it.

Regarding the female professional workers in the church, they are affected by gender-specific forms of discrimination and violence and are confronted with a variety of misogynistic degradations, mostly performed by priests or clergy leaders. There are a number of sexist ‘everyday humiliations’ that female pastoral workers experience in their professional practice (e.g., Mindel 2020; Nagel and Lürbke 2023). Hanna Obst describes these humiliations and gender-specific defamatory behavior she experienced during her own training as a female counsellor (Obst 2020). She concludes that “the idea that a man, just because he is a priest, knows that a woman cannot be a good pastoral counsellor because she does not like spiritual exercises in total silence, is absolutely inappropriate” (Obst 2020, p. 143).

Regarding the women who seek counselling and help from pastors and then experience abuse in the pastoral relationship, gender-specific factors also play an important role. Only in recent years adults have been publicly recognized as victims of sexual and spiritual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church (at least in Western Europe), although the issue has been prominent in the USA since the turn of the century (i.e., Chibnall et al. 1998; Fortune and Poling 1994/2004) and in parts of the women’s orders as early as 1994 (Maura O’Donohue: Reisinger 2021). The fact that there is gender-specific violence and sexual abuse of women in the church can no longer be denied. The German Catholic Church has integrated the varied experiences of women into its reform efforts, which it has been pursuing for several years. As part of the so-called Synodal Path,³ a separate forum “Women in ministries and offices in the Church” was formed. Its texts focus on pastoral care as a central field of action in church practice. In the context of the question of women and pastoral care, one aspect stands out. The Foundational Text describes “clerical and sexual abuse as well as sexual and sexualized violence against women and girls” and warns of a “potential danger in pastoral care and the celebration of the sacraments” (Synodal Path 2022, p. 3):

“Acts of pastoral care and the celebration of the sacraments, as forms of human communication, are always sensual, for example when it comes to the laying on of hands, anointing, distribution of Eucharistic gifts, and gestures of blessing. These acts are beneficial, but they also constitute a potential danger. Spiritual and sexual abuse frequently happens in the context of sacramental celebrations, or in other pastoral care situations, because they involve a complex relationship of power and dependence, and this is rooted in the professional role of the pastoral worker. Such constellations pose the risk of favoring physical, emotional, spiritual or psychological assault and manipulation. The fact that girls and women predominantly encounter male pastoral workers in most pastoral situations is a challenging issue against the background of these experiences. Especially the official ministry reserved for men in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation was abused despite significant threat of punishment; for this reason the confessional became a place of horror for large numbers of girls and women. Stories from affected women reveal the extent to which their faith was damaged by the abuse that they suffered. Every further liturgical celebration can then have a retraumatizing effect. The victims are thus denied an important source of resilience.” (Synodal Path 2022, p. 4)

Drawing from this excerpt of the Synodal Path Foundational Text, which garnered approval from 91.92 % of all Synod Assembly members in September 2022, the following

sections explain in more detail the links between vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience according to women in the field of pastoral care.

3. Pastoral Care as a ‘Crime Scene’

“Three-quarters of the victims were in a clerical or pastoral relationship with the accused” (Dreßing 2018, p. 7), writes the German MHG study⁴ on sexual abuse of minors, referring to the “bright field” (that means the known cases explicitly recorded in the files; German: “Hellfeld”) investigated within the framework of its research design (file-based study on minors affected and clerical perpetrators).⁵ Expanding beyond this, an examination of first-person narratives and victim testimonies from adults, indicating the needs for a more extensive quantitative and qualitative investigation, further validates this observation: Cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by pastoral counsellors, predominantly priests, often occur within the framework of pastoral care, which therefore becomes a “crime scene” of sexual abuse and gender-based violence.

3.1. Abuse in Contexts of Pastoral Care

Within pastoral care contexts, perpetrators often employ grooming strategies, establishing manipulative and exploitative relationships that can endure for years, all while ensuring the secrecy of their actions. For instance, in the case of Momo Eiche, the perpetrator immediately emphasized secrecy after the initial assault: “This is our secret” (Eiche 2020, p. 59). Sexual abuse frequently occurs within specific pastoral settings, such as immediately following a counseling session or within the confines of the confessional. This underscores the role of spiritual abuse as a precursor, accomplice, facilitator, or subsequent validator of sexual abuse within the church, particularly within pastoral and spiritual care settings.

It is worth noting again that the text from the Synodal Path emphasizes the inherent gender-specific factors prominently and for the first time in the history of the German Catholic Church: “girls and women predominantly encounter male pastoral workers in most pastoral situations (. . .) the confessional became a place of horror for large numbers of girls and women.” (Synodal Path 2022, p. 4) De Lassus further observes the predominance of male clergy involvement, questioning whether this is due to the danger posed by the superior position of priests or simply because spiritual guidance is primarily administered by them: “Priests are involved in 95% of cases: Is this high percentage really due to a particular danger that the priest has because of his superior position, or is it rather due to the fact that spiritual guidance is mainly practiced by priests?” (de Lassus 2022, p. 258).

3.2. Gender Data Gap in Cases of Sexual Abuse in the Church

Most of the abuse reports published by German (arch)dioceses to date depict adult women as victims of spiritual and sexual abuse within the context of pastoral care, a trend that aligns with international research findings. However, due to the age of the victims being adults, these cases are often not given further consideration. For instance, the diocese of Hildesheim’s report details a case where a priest “massively sexually harassed the wife of his sexton and [allegedly] tried to kiss her”, with the report adding: “The harassment of an adult woman (...) [is] not within the remit of the expert group” (Niewisch-Lennartz et al. 2021).

This disregard for adult women as victims of abuse within the church contributes to a significant gender data gap in data collection and, therefore, in our understanding of these cases (Leimgruber 2023, p. 194). Not only is there a lack of data on abuse against women, but existing data are often inadequate or not categorized as abuse. This stems from the complexity of proper documentation procedures. Therefore, even if there is no “evidence” of multiple cases of abuse against adult women in the archives, it does not necessarily mean that the abuse does not exist; rather, it may indicate that the acts often were not recognized as abuse and, thus, were not documented (Reisinger 2023, p. 98). Furthermore, we need precise methodological tools in order to be able to better study the file situation and understand the women’s “silence” (Hürten 2024). This underscores the

need for thorough scrutiny when interpreting reports and studies on abuse. The gender data gap in the context of abuse and its handling contribute to a significant vulnerability among women.

3.3. *At the Center: Pastoral Care Relationships*

The Diocese of Osnabrück's interim report of September 2022 states: "In 2014, another woman reported to the then abuse commissioner of the diocese of Osnabrück. She stated that [the later vicar general; U.L.] Heitmeyer had had a two-year sexual relationship with her in the 1970s, which had resulted from spiritual counselling. The woman described Heitmeyer's behavior as manipulative; it was not a relationship at an equal level" (Schmiesing et al. 2022, p. 50). This example shows a typical situation that applies equally to adults and minors. The MHG study points out that the vulnerability of the victims is countered by an enormous violation power (later on defined as "vulnerance"; Keul 2020a, 2021a; Leimgruber 2022) on the part of the perpetrators. The MHG study mentions, for example, forms of clericalism in a closed system as risk factors, and notes that a pastoral situation means "maximum authority and power" for the perpetrators with "minimal external control" at the same time (Dreßing 2018, p. 265) that easily makes it a potential 'crime scene' for sexual abuse, perpetrated by pastoral caregivers. However, it would be too simple to reduce the situation to the individual level, which would mean a 'powerful', 'strong' perpetrator against a 'powerless', 'weak', 'easily vulnerable' victim. "As a pastor (...) one is not per se harmless and as a pastor (...) one is also not invulnerable" (Sautermeister 2021, p. 92). Nor is it simply the case that the counselees in pastoral care are generally vulnerable, weak, and can "quickly become victims of violence" (Keul 2021a, p. 62). Vulnerability in pastoral care and its correlation with gendered factors are far more complex, as shown in the following sectors.

4. Complex Asymmetries in Pastoral Care Relationships

Such complex relationships can be observed in pastoral care relationships in particular. Power and dependency relationships are at work here, which must be viewed in personal and systemic terms, and there is also personal and structural vulnerance (Leimgruber 2022).

4.1. *Asymmetry Aspects*

Particular attention should be paid to gender factors that are very powerful. Women find themselves in a double asymmetry, as women and laypeople in contrast to men and clergy. Other factors, such as education and age differences, must also be taken into account, as male perpetrators are often much older than their female victims, and priests often have an advantage over women in terms of knowledge and education, which is also determined by clerical status. The asymmetry between clergy and nonclergy has been described in research as a massive potential risk of abuse. The "clergy power" (de Weger and Death 2017, p. 139) is a systemic factor (see also Dreßing 2018, p. 13). McPhillips and McEwan understand clericalism as a complex system of unequal distribution of power and describe it as "sexual economy" (McPhillips and McEwan 2022): "The sexual economy of clericalism can be described as a system of both symbolic and real exchange based on unequal power relations between nuns and children, nuns and lay people, nuns and priests and between each other, which produces harmful forms of behavior when the principles of clericalism are dominant. It is a sexual economy because it is primarily employed in managing the circulation of power between genders with the goal of maintaining the authority, legitimacy and superiority of the priesthood above all other forms of subjectivity. It is maintained through the imposition and practice of canon law and heterodox discourse that washes through the institutions, cultural practices and histories of Catholicism." (McPhillips and McEwan 2022, p. 145). If we add to this the fact that women are essentialistically defined by the Roman Catholic Magisterium, with their own feminine dignity, their own "genius", and their own mission in the world, equal to men and yet different (Heimerl 2015; Anuth 2022), the risk of women being abused multiplies: Violence against women does not

suddenly erupt. It grows on the fertile ground of gender-specific behavioral norms. The hitherto widespread reasons for the “abusive behavior of priests” must necessarily be extended to include the “risk factor of masculinity” (Moser 2010, p. 200; Leimgruber 2021) and the vulnerability factor of femininity as operational in Catholic theology and social practice. The role of a powerful gender anthropology as a subtext of abuse in the church is particularly significant in pastoral care. The complexity within pastoral care contexts should not be simplified either in practice or in theological reflection, but it should be clear: a pastoral care relationship is never a relationship on equal foot (cf. for an example: Langberg 2020, p. 25). For a long time, this has not been visible and acknowledged and implemented in pastoral settings by those responsible in the church.

4.2. Institutional Guidelines

Only a few ecclesial institutions have issued guidelines in which the asymmetries in pastoral care are taken into account in the treatment of abuse. The example of the Swiss Bishops’ Conference from 2002 should be mentioned, which (for the first time in Europe) makes it clear that “[t]he pastoral relationship is a relationship between two people of unequal ‘strength’” (Swiss Bishops’ Conference/Schweizer Bischofskonferenz 2002). An example from the field of religious orders demonstrates how in the early 2000s, a group of religious superiors in Papua New Guinea produced a document “Right Relationships in Spiritual Ministry: Guidelines for the Promotion of Responsible Sexual Behavior” in order to counter the mass sexual abuse of women religious by priests (Heidemanns 2004, p. 36). However, it must be noted that there were hardly any other acknowledgements worldwide.

Little attention has been paid to the systemic dangers of pastoral care, which are amplified by gender stereotypes. On the contrary, pastoral care in the church has been (and continues to be) described in a one-sided way as ‘healing closeness’, sometimes naively, sometimes idyllically, and mostly without naming the ambiguities, without clear sensitivity to the power dynamics that inevitably operate in these relationships. In pastoral care, however, effective consent to sexual acts is excluded a priori because of the inherent asymmetrical relationship between the counsellor and the counselee. This was also stated in a letter from the German bishops in 2022, 20 years after the Swiss Bishops’ Conference:

“It should be remembered that in a pastoral relationship exercised professionally or with an episcopal mission, sexual contact can never be described as consensual and can never be tolerated. This is because, like other professional educational, medical or therapeutic relationships, the pastoral relationship involves an imbalance of power and thus a dependency, in which the counselor is given authority, skills and competence to help the person seeking pastoral care. Even if the [German; U.L.] Criminal Code (...) does not mention the pastoral relationship in the list of professional counselling, treatment or care relationships in which sexual acts are punishable, the exploitation of a pastoral relationship for assaults up to and including sexual abuse is punishable and must be reported to the competent public prosecutor’s office as well as within the church.” (Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference/Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2022, p. 47f).

5. Risks in the Pastoral Care Setting due to Vulnerability and Vulnerance

What does the fact that at least three-quarters of all cases of abuse occurred or were initiated in the context of pastoral care mean for pastoral care theory, especially in relation to issues of vulnerability? What does it mean that women are “particularly vulnerable” (Synodal Path)?

5.1. Abuse in Theories of Pastoral Care

If one reads the numerous texts with the hermeneutics of experiences of violence and abuse as well as gender-specific questions, as mentioned above, one thing becomes clear: violence or abuse, especially against adult women, is hardly ever addressed in official statements and scientific texts. Due to their design—mostly children, adolescents, and

adults in need of protection and help—the previous diocesan abuse reports as well as the MHG study exclude those adults who were not in a narrow legal sense in need of protection and help at the time of the abuse. The issue of abuse and gender vulnerability in the context of pastoral care is also not mentioned in many textbooks or diocesan websites. To this day, only a few practical theological publications treat it explicitly as a separate chapter (i.e., [Morgenthaler 2009](#)). Although dangers are mentioned in some writings, they tend to be of secondary importance. Abuse and violence do not seem to be a general theme, but, rather, a specific one, which is dealt with mainly in publications dealing with this topic. Stahl writes in his book “Traumasensible Seelsorge” (“Trauma Sensitive Pastoral Care”): “Church congregations or institutions and Christian families are not places free of abuse, nor are pastoral workers beyond the categories of victim and perpetrator. Pastoral workers have been, and may continue to be, victims or perpetrators of violence in their social environment.” ([Stahl 2019](#), p. 271). However, a major deficiency is the lack of broader scientific research on gender-specific risks in pastoral care contexts.

5.2. Focus on Vulnerabilities

The debate on abuse tends to focus exclusively on the vulnerability of victims. There are numerous cases in which the obvious personal vulnerability of those subject to abuse (e.g., pretraumatization) was integrated into the perpetrators’ actions and exploited for their own benefit or pleasure: “... it was actually the case that he used the first trauma caused by my brother like a ‘nose ring’ with which he pulled me behind him”, says Edith Schwarzländer, a victim of sexual abuse ([Schwarzländer 2020](#), p. 171). Accordingly, prevention has often focused on potential victims, e.g., by trying to make them strong and resilient. But focusing mainly on the vulnerability of the victims harbors the danger of a reversal blame. It includes the simplifying conclusion that if the victims were more resilient and less vulnerable, there would be less abuse, or, if abuse does actually take place, the victims have not ‘worked hard enough’ on their resilience. Some researchers have pointed out the ambiguous situation of pastoral workers, for example, Langberg states that ministry can be “a dangerous place for pastors and hence for their sheep” ([Langberg 2020](#), p. 131; see also [Sautermeister 2021](#)). Nor is it simply the case that the people accompanied in pastoral care are, in general, particularly vulnerable, “always weak and quick to become victims of violence” ([Keul 2021a](#), p. 62). It soon becomes clear that the prevailing juxtaposition in pastoral care between the vulnerable or needy person being accompanied and the reliable, strong pastoral caregiver does not go far enough.

Meanwhile, vulnerability is a key concept in the analysis of abuse ([Gilson 2021](#); [Bahne 2021](#); [Cahill 2021](#); [Keul 2022](#)). For vulnerability researcher Keul, the contrast between vulnerability, weakness, insecurity, and passivity, on the one hand, and security, reliability, resilience, and strength, on the other, is far too simplistic ([Keul 2020b](#)). The Australian researchers de Weger and Death distinguish between “positional and personal vulnerabilities” ([de Weger and Death 2017](#), p. 139). Positional vulnerability refers to the position of victims in society, influenced by gender, or the position of parishioners as those seeking pastoral care from a priest, while personal vulnerability refers to, for example, previously experienced trauma or stressful life situations of the individual. De Weger and Death emphasize that “clergy sexual misconduct against adults (CSMAA) within [...] the Roman Catholic Church [...] does not occur because there is a vulnerable adult but, rather, because there is an abusive cleric willing to misuse their powers to abuse adult vulnerabilities” ([de Weger and Death 2017](#), p. 129). They consistently demand that not only the personal vulnerabilities (cf. the talk of “people in need of protection and help”), but also the pastoral power relations, should be included. This is the only way to place responsibility where it lies: with the perpetrators.

5.3. Vulnerance as Individual and Systemic Factor

In order to capture these interdependent potentials for abuse, the term *vulnerance* has been used in the vulnerability discourse for several years ([Keul 2021b](#)). While vulnerability

refers to the susceptibility of individuals, groups, or systems (i.e., personal and positional) and, thus, expresses a more passive component, vulnerance refers to the active capacity to injure. Vulnerance “concerns the personal-existential level (confessor, pastor), but also the institutional, systemic level (church, institution, religious community, family)” (Karl 2021, p. 172). Vulnerability and vulnerance are not mutually exclusive polarities. Consequently, people in pastoral care are both vulnerable and vulnerant in different ways. Keul emphasizes the complexity of the power effects of vulnerability and empowerment (cf. Keul 2021a, p. 65). Especially, pastoral relationships are highly susceptible to abuse, and pastoral care is not in itself harmless, healing, and helpful: the asymmetry that characterizes it creates the before-mentioned structural vulnerance (Leimgruber 2022). It is not only in the specific person of the priest/counsellor that there is a power to hurt others in pastoral care, but also in the church as an institution and in the pastoral situation itself. It is the complexity of these three realities intersecting that creates vulnerance and vulnerability. Pastoral care is a relationship between two unequal people in a system that has its own unequal power factors. Perpetrators can then exploit the vulnerance of the pastoral care situation, i.e., in case of confessions, clerics can exploit the gendered expectations of ‘good Catholic women’. The caring nature and behavior expected of women, their ‘maternal nature’ which places the needs of others before their own, is linked to the systemic distribution of power in pastoral situations and is instrumentalized by perpetrators for abuse. Vulnerability and vulnerance are not only personally but also culturally and systemically complex. This complexity, with its individual, sociocultural, gender, but also theological and institutional, aspects and interdependencies, needs to be taken into account in pastoral care and in the formation of pastoral workers. The vulnerability of the persons involved is not simply a characteristic that is attached to someone and can be categorized independently of the situation in which they find themselves and the other people with whom they interact. Pastoral care and its forms of social interaction reveal the power to hurt, which makes certain forms of abuse easier for pastoral workers. This power to hurt is inextricable because it is inherent in the specific setting. It must be integrated theologically and institutionally into the discourse on abuse. Only then can the complex juxtaposition of the vulnerable (usually female) victim, on the one hand, and the violent (male) perpetrator, on the other, be overcome (cf. Hallay-Witte 2020, pp. 77ff). Prevention is not simply about identifying the vulnerability of those involved and paternalistically “protecting” them from abuse. As necessary as the protection of particularly vulnerable people is, it is too short-sighted in terms of the pastoral system. What is needed is the recognition of systemic vulnerance, i.e., the qualification of an act as abuse on the basis of the situation and its inherent vulnerance and no longer on the basis of the (personal) vulnerability of the victim, because “[v]ictims are not guilty!” (Fernández 2022, p. 427).

6. Resilience and Pastoral Care

The text from the German Synodal Path cited above sheds light on another critical aspect: while pastoral care can serve as a source of resilience, it can also strip individuals of this vital resource due to experiences of abuse and violence. Many survivors report struggling to attend church services or engage in pastoral care after experiencing abuse, which triggers past traumatic events and hinders their participation. As Saskia Lang, a survivor of rape during her marriage preparation, expresses, “It is almost impossible for me to attend a church service because words are said all the time that trigger me and take me back to abusive situations. I still don’t feel comfortable as a woman.” (Lang 2020, p. 117). Victims often report experiencing additional trauma and retraumatization, often due to a lack of sensitivity or awareness on the part of pastoral workers. As stated in the Synodal Path: “Every further liturgical celebration can then have a retraumatizing effect. The victims are thus denied an important source of resilience.” (Synodal Path 2022, p. 4).

6.1. Trauma-Sensitivity

It is imperative to acknowledge that many individuals within pastoral and spiritual care contexts have experienced violence and are highly likely to be traumatized. This includes survivors of abuse within the church as well as those who have suffered abuse in other settings, typically within their families. Pastoral workers must recognize that survivors of abuse are not isolated cases but integral members of congregations, associations, and religious communities. Therefore, there is an urgent need for pastoral workers to have training in trauma competence and sensitivity linked to the interconnectedness of personal and systemic vulnerability and vulnerance. As Pflaum emphasizes, “[m]any victims of abuse seek healing in the church, even though they were abused in the church. This sounds very strange to outsiders. But many, not all, continue to seek a home, support, meaning and also justice in the church and hope for repentance and purification of the church! To achieve this, the church, pastoral care and theology must become trauma-sensitive!” (Pflaum 2021, p. 29).

This call for trauma sensitivity is reflected in practical theology in certain contexts (Kerstner et al. 2016; Pflaum 2021; Stahl 2019). According to practical theologian Kohler-Spiegel, “Working in a trauma-sensitive way therefore means working in such a way that all people, with and without trauma experiences, have their place and their voice. At the same time, in the context of church work, there must be an awareness that representatives of the church and church structures have themselves been perpetrators of violence, physically, psychologically, spiritually and mentally. That is why a trauma-sensitive attitude and trauma-sensitive work seem to me to be so indispensable, especially in the church context.” (Kohler-Spiegel 2022).

6.2. Professional Standards

Recognizing and integrating these differences, as pastoral counselors, demands a high level of spirituality and professionalism and, of course, it requires good training opportunities. This raises questions about the quality of pastoral care and the qualifications of pastoral workers, aiming to establish and maintain quality standards. “The fact that girls and women predominantly encounter male pastoral workers in most pastoral situations”, as highlighted in the text of the Synodal Path, as well as the fact, that “women are underrepresented in positions of responsibility in many church contexts, especially in pastoral care” (Synodal Path 2022, pp. 4–5), must be included in this complexity.

Trauma-sensitive, professionally trained counselors not only engage with individuals with a high degree of attention and self-reflection but also consider gender-specific contexts and discrimination dynamics. Ideally, the church should increase the number of professionally-trained female counselors and ensure that all counselors, regardless of gender, receive professional and trauma, as well as gender-sensitive, training to address gender-specific issues. Theological discourse and pastoral practice must also reflect on the power dynamics and abuse potential within pastoral settings concerning gender constellations, both formally and materially. This institutional, ecclesial, and theological phenomenon directly impacts the experiences of countless individuals. Therefore, one of the most pressing tasks for church leaders is to foster resilience among survivors by engaging with them openly, believing their accounts, and encouraging them to share their stories while being cognizant of gender stereotypes and complex vulnerability/vulnerance dynamics. It is just as important for the church to transform its gender theologies that relegate women to a passive caring role, where they will typically be victims. Therefore, overhauling this ideology is really a fundamental and urgent task.

A professional understanding of pastoral care entails recognizing the ambiguity inherent in pastoral care contexts and providing support to individuals within this awareness, respecting their autonomy and self-determination, critically examining one’s own theological beliefs and biases, and refraining from imposing personal ideals onto others. Quality standards in pastoral care are compromised when pastoral workers fail to acknowledge their own vulnerability and vulnerance, and when they fail to respect the existing vul-

nerability and self-determination of individuals spiritually, sexually, emotionally, and psychologically. Sensitively conducted professional pastoral care supports individuals, regardless of their brokenness and need for assistance, in their ability to live fully, acts with unconditional respect for their conscience and autonomy, and accompanies them in their God-given freedom.

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Notes

- ¹ This article deals primarily with the difficulties of gender-specific aspects with regard to cis women. It should be clear that gender-specific discrimination also affects and hurts people with nonbinary sexual identities, due to the church's strictly binary view. However, this would have to be considered separately, as there is no separate Catholic doctrine as in the case of the anthropology of "women".
- ² This does not mean that women are not perpetrators. Abuse occurs wherever relationships of power and dependency exist and are exploited. Female perpetrators are known to research, for example, from religious communities where women have committed both spiritual and sexual abuse in the context of pastoral relationships with women. Here, however, the issue of gendered vulnerabilities and vulnerances arises in its own way and should be dealt with separately elsewhere.
- ³ The "Synodal Path" was a consequence of the discovery of massive cases of abuse in the Catholic Church and it aimed at Church reforms concerning, for example, the power of the clergy, the women's role in the Catholic Church, and aspects of Catholic sexual morality. It took place from 2020 to 2023. Accessed on 20 June 2024: <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english>.
- ⁴ The so-called MHG study (see Drefßing 2018; Dressing et al. 2021) explores the extent of sexual abuse of minors by members of the Catholic Church in Germany. It was the first comprehensive study to examine this extent in a European country.
- ⁵ Even though this text mainly refers to German-speaking countries, it is a worldwide phenomenon.

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