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A. Faye London
afaye@sisterreach.org

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Those Girls: Categorization & Cold War Tactics

A. Faye London

I remember how I felt that day. I was angry, confused, and felt like I wanted to crawl out of my very skin. The day after I was raped, I felt like I no longer belonged in what had been my happy-go-lucky world. Before that day, I was just Faye—the girl who always sang solos at church and gospel songs in the school talent show. I was a good little girl—a church girl!—and everyone knew it.

Because I was a good girl (I could not even *begin* to conceive of myself as a woman, although the law said I was), I felt it would kill me to tell anyone what happened to me. My church upbringing had taught me, if nothing else, how to be a proper young lady. How could a proper young lady explain what she was doing at a boy's house at night with no parents present? How could she explain that she liked it when he kissed her, but couldn't stop him when he wanted to go further? Shouldn't a proper young lady have known where the line was and stopped him before he could no longer control himself or stop himself from hurting her? Was it even rape, since she had let him kiss her? The proper young lady who was there with me said it wasn't.

Before that day, I looked to the authority of the adults in and around my church for almost everything. This time, however, I couldn't. I had been in the wrong place—outside the realm of proper young ladies—and just like they warned me, something bad happened to me. This was what I was taught. My body was mine to protect and if it were to be damaged, the blame was all mine. Good little girls don't get hurt. Good little girls don't tease boys until they are out of control.

No one ever made the above statements directly. However, everything we were taught about social interaction with the opposite sex had a subtle way of giving the impression that girls were to play defense while boys were to play offense. Everything about a little girl—or an adult woman for that matter—was scrutinized in such a way as to measure the propriety of her dress, behavior, and/or carriage of herself. Men were just men. Boys were just boys. Sex belonged to men and boys, but its dangers and negative outcomes belonged solely to the women and girls. Besides these subtle hints, there was only silence about sex.

The story above is my call narrative. As uncomfortable as it is to read, it is the very reason why I felt called to ministry—to help women and girls receive a different message about their bodies than the one I received as a girl. I had no burning bush. It was the broken bodies of misused women and girls that called out to me, seeking a vessel to give voice to their grief. It was the boys and men who had been taught toxic lessons about the value of women's bodies that made me certain of the need of a new message—one that allowed women to be whole people and men to see in them the complete image of God. This experience is the reason why I fight daily for the lives of women in a war that many do not acknowledge even exists.

War on Women

People of faith confess a broad spectrum of beliefs about reproductive rights, health, and freedom. There is no single faith voice nor is there a singular system of values shared by all people of faith when it comes to women's bodies and reproduction. Because we each have our own genuine beliefs about what God desires for our lives, it is difficult to describe what is happening in our country today with women's healthcare and freedom in a way that will ring true for all people of faith. For people who believe that women should be

allowed the right to make private decisions about their medical treatment and reproductive lives, however, there is no question that there is currently a *war on women* in the United States.

In the last five years alone, states have adopted nearly three hundred new laws that restrict access to an array of family planning services in attempts to restrict access to abortion.¹ Attempts to defund and/or close the doors of abortion providers have impacted the availability of breast, cervical, and ovarian cancer screenings as well as access to prenatal care for many women across the country. By couching their arguments in personal sexual morality, opponents of women's rights and freedoms have made it difficult for many people of faith to see themselves as part of the conversation.

For many of us who are not directly impacted by the narrow debate on abortion, it is a challenge to even see a war being fought in and for our own lives. This is a particular strength of this war. It functions, in large part, by hiding in plain sight behind anti-abortion rhetoric—all the while tearing at the lives of women and girls from every conceivable angle. Women of faith who have never had or needed an abortion may not see themselves as impacted by this war. Many of us find ourselves conflicted if not outright appalled by the framing of these moves as a war on women as we have been taught that only *certain types* of women need the services in question.

We convinced ourselves that *those* women are not in our churches and communities. And if they are, our job is to teach them how to stop being those women. Unfortunately, we often attempt to do so by shaming them and preaching against them as enemies of faith and family. A narrow focus on abortion allows us to separate *good* women from *those* women and relieve ourselves of the responsibility to care for those women even as we proclaim to follow a Jesus who repeatedly showed himself loving to women *we* might identify as those women.

I contend that it is within the distinction of good women from those women that churches can most often find our own complicity—even secret agency—in the war on women. By erasing the particularities of lived experiences of women in favor of simplistic and inadequate categories, we limit the growth potential of our people and our own potential for truly Christ-like ministry.

Churches and the Cold War on Women

I shared the personal experience above in hopes of revealing the functioning of what I have come to call the *Cold War on Women*. So much attention is now focused on direct attacks on the rights of women in the political sphere that we forget to ask ourselves how we got here. Truthfully, the answers to that question are so numerous that it would take an entire issue just to scratch the surface. So, for the purposes of this piece, we will focus on the role of ideologies that are (or at least have historically been) common in most churches about sexuality, morality, and consequences.

As a 1970s baby and a 1980s kid, I have vivid Cold War memories. The threat of nuclear war—mass destruction—felt like an ever-present cloud hovering over all of my experiences. The Soviet Union was the Big Bad Wolf waiting to blow our house down so we were told that, as a country, we must remain ever vigilant and constantly devise new ways to protect ourselves.

Our strategies of self-protection brought with them more potential for violence as we raced to build bigger, more destructive weapons with which to defend ourselves from an enemy who was once our ally. We began to see enemies to our way of life everywhere—even within our own borders—so we increased our inner policing and hunted our own. The slightest deviation from “patriotic” behavior was labeled un-American and punished severely.

In the end, the precautions expected to bring a new peace actually brought a more insidious form of war. Instead of immediate harm to bodies and property, Cold War protections waged war on the minds of the people of both the United States and the USSR. Constant fear of destruction led to oppressive measures

1. Rachel Benson Gold and Elizabeth Nash, “Attacks on Abortion Rights Continued in 2015, Ensnaring Family Planning Funding and Fetal Tissue Research,” *RH Reality Check*, January 4, 2016, <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2016/01/04/attacks-abortion-rights-continued-2015-ensnaring-family-planning-funding-fetal-tissue-research/>.

often disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations in each country. This cold form of war laid the groundwork for more violence and open war under the guise of “preparation and protection.” It is only by the grace of God that we did not destroy ourselves with our so-called protections.

The ways in which we call upon women and girls to protect their bodies from invasion and encourage boys to attempt to conquer those same bodies while telling each that their sexual nature is sinful creates the same sort of tension as does a cold war. As long as no one transgresses the lines we draw in the sand, bodies are not immediately in danger, yet minds are constantly tortured into distorted wartime perspectives rooted in distrust and desires for domination. When we teach boys to be conquerors and girls to be simultaneously attractive to boys and off-limits to them, we set up a dangerously adversarial situation that puts both women’s bodies *and* survival at stake.

In male-dominated spaces like many churches, women are divided into loyal patriots (good women) who support the power structures and goals of the leadership and treasonous traitors (those women) whose lives do not conform to the expected trajectory for the lives of good women. This nonconformity can happen either willfully or by circumstance, but renders the woman an enemy in this cold war no matter which is the case. The more circumstances separate a woman’s lived experiences from the good woman expectation, the more likely she is to be labeled a traitor in the Cold War on Women.

In a society that hypersexualizes and over-criminalizes black and brown people, women of color are especially vulnerable to the dangers of this cold war. Women and girls of color are at the same risk of violation as are their white counterparts, but much less likely to be believed when they report because women of color are rarely seen as sexual victims. Having historically been blamed for their own sexual violations, unfortunately, women of color have learned even not to see themselves as victims of sexual violence unless they can prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that they are the perfect victims of a “real rape.”²⁷

If the cold war expects women in general to conform to an ideal, and women who cannot physically meet that ideal to at least be as close to perfect as possible while remaining silent about any violation, then what it requires of queer and gender-nonconforming women is to be invisible—to not exist. The Cold War on Women propaganda machine is invested deeply in forcing women into easy categories: good women and those women are to be quickly identified without nuance by markers like race, socioeconomic status, marital status, educational attainment, the circumstances under which their children were born, whether they desire marriage and a family or a career (or believe they should be able to have both), etc.

Queer and gender-nonconforming women by their very nature cannot be forced into any pre-existing, other-defined single frame. In churches where the Cold War on Women is alive and well, queer women and gender-nonconforming women are expected to take up no space as their authentic selves. If they are going to be present, they are expected to pass for heterosexual and not bring their whole selves into church. They can serve the church as long as they are willing to hide who they really are. This is no longer true of all church spaces, but still alive in enough places that it warrants mention.

Just as the propaganda machine of a cold war identifies enemies and encourages attacks, in the end what the Cold War on Women does is to categorize people into worthy or unworthy, good girls or bad girls, allies or enemies, and then gives us permission to treat those deemed enemies with suspicion, callous indifference, or outright antagonism. Our cold war with the Soviet Union eventually came to a relatively peaceful conclusion, although there are still hostilities. This cold war against women—with the help of some faith traditions—has evolved into an all-out open war that is actively impacting the lives of entire communities in ways that may be irreparable.

The Cold War on Women creates the subtle atmosphere of fear of those women taking over with their lax morals and loose living. What it doesn’t allow is an understanding of contraceptive needs of the working mother living just above the poverty line with her disabled veteran husband and struggling to pay tuition for her children to go to the private school because the public school system in her town is inadequate.

The Cold War on Women evokes the idea of an internal enemy looking to subvert the family structure by allowing women to have sex indiscriminately without consequence. What it does not show is the

27. Kristen J. Leslie, *When Violence is No Stranger* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 25.

agonizing decision of a young woman to access abortion care because she is the first in her family to have the opportunity to go to college and whose only real shot at survival is to do so.

The Cold War on Women paints a picture of a brown-bodied welfare queen having babies in order to get more money from the government. At the same time, it vilifies this same brown-bodied woman for trying to prevent or terminate a pregnancy that will send her further into poverty.

The Cold War on Women makes the entire conversation about women's healthcare focus on abortion and ignores the fact that the boundaries that we erect to keep women from accessing abortion care can also interfere with their ability to access treatment for life-threatening illnesses.

The Cold War on Women pays white women seventy-seven cents on the dollar in comparison to men—and women of color even less—and then mocks women for needing help to survive. It forces families into poverty with inadequate educational systems, housing, health care, government representation and, yes, inadequate spiritual guidance—then blames them for the negative outcomes of that poverty.

The Cold War on Women calls a woman a murderer for controlling her own reproduction, but refuses to punish the state-backed murderers of her children in the streets. It feigns concern for the lives of children, but cares nothing for the children that are already here or their mothers.

The Cold War on Women shames young people for becoming pregnant unexpectedly or contracting a sexually transmitted infection, but rejects providing educational strategies that would help teach them to avoid such outcomes.

The war on women that we hear about in today's news was not always what it is now. It was built over many years starting with cold war ideologies put forth in pulpits and Bible studies. It started with simple categories and grew into big business and politics and further and further from Jesus.

When we oversimplify the issues facing women today by quoting rules with no nuance, we ignore the examples Jesus set for us altogether. The examples of Jesus's encounters with women in crisis are not rare. And they were never reflective of Cold War on Women ideology. Jesus did not meet women with suspicion or antagonism. When we read the gospels, we see Jesus encounter women in their hour of need and respond with compassion even when the woman is caught in situations that may have been considered morally ambiguous by the standards of the day.

When he encountered the woman at the well (John 4), Jesus would have been well within the cultural precedent to refuse to interact with her. In fact, he faced judgment from his disciples for interacting with such a woman. But instead of treating her harshly, Jesus acknowledged her lived experiences and addressed her need for a new way of living. Without shaming or blaming or placing her in an "untouchable" category, as his disciples would have had him do, Jesus changed her lived experience from the inside out and gave her reason to run and help another.

This, I believe, is one of several biblical narratives that serve as models for our behavior toward women whose experiences and needs do not fit neatly into our snug little boxes. Like Jesus with the woman at the well, we are called to see whole human beings with unique experiences, gifts, and needs when we look at one another. Our interest should be in improving the circumstances of those we serve, not simply forcing them to conform. When we seek to control people rather than partner with them and Jesus to create a more perfect world, we have no other option but a cold war mentality and the quiet violence it always produces.

Our responsibilities as people of faith go beyond just avoiding the cold war mentality. We must also be committed to an empowering, peacemaking way of life for ourselves and the women in our communities. We must not stop at refusing to silence, shame, or erase the uniqueness of the women in our communities, but we must also encourage them to give voice to their lived experiences. They are the experts on their own lives, after all, and their experiences are sacred texts.

How much more effective would our ministry with women be if we sought the voices of women in the text and allowed them to speak for themselves while simultaneously encouraging the women in our faith communities to do the same? What could we teach young women if we preached Queen Vashti (Esth 1) as a woman who refused to be paraded in front of strangers as an object instead of simply as a defiant wife?

What might that teach our girls about deciding whom to allow access to their bodies? What would that teach our young boys about the value of a woman's power to give or not give consent?

We owe it to our women and girls—as well as our men and boys—to teach respect, reverence, and value of their bodies as the image of God. When we value our bodies properly as the image of God entrusted to us for many purposes, there is no need for us to police and control each other's bodies. When we recognize that women's bodies have always been full participants in God's good creation and their minds always capable of good decisions, we might free ourselves as we free those in our care. And when in doubt as to the nature of our activity regarding women, as always, we must seek the example of Jesus who chose love rather than rule every time.

Every person's story is different. Each experience deserves consideration. We cannot do positive, impactful ministry with people who have seen struggle by trying to force conformity or assert control over their lives. We must walk in love even when we are unable to walk in understanding. We must learn to trust women with their own bodies and trust the God who created them and the Christ who redeems them to move us all toward the salvation of all creation. The Cold War on Women has failed to produce peace. Let's try love now.

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