

# NATIONALISING WOMEN'S BODIES: DISCOURSE AND POLITICS OF PROSTITUTION IN IRELAND AND SPAIN (1939-1975)

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how women's sexuality has played a central role in building and reproducing the collective identity of the nation in two countries, Ireland and Spain. It argues how a nationalisation of women's bodies created a symbolic and idealised version of womanhood, reinforced by a complex infrastructure of criminal code, places of rehabilitation and a system of surveillance operating through government, medical and religious institutions. We explore these processes through an analysis of the discourses governing prostitution in leading newspapers between 1939 and 1975, corresponding to the public nation-building projects to Catholic nationalism through the idealisation of family, motherhood and domestic life. Three key discourses from the newspaper coverage have been identified around prostitution: protecting the national body, the exile of women in prostitution and *ordinary* women as a threat, to trace the process of renewed nation building that occurred in both countries from the 1940s onwards.

KEYWORDS: prostitution, Ireland, Spain, nationalism, women's bodies, catholicism.

NACIONALIZAR LOS CUERPOS DE LAS MUJERES: EL DISCURSO Y LA POLÍTICA DE LA PROSTITUCIÓN EN IRLANDA Y ESPAÑA (1939-1975)

## RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda el papel central de la sexualidad en la construcción y reproducción de la identidad colectiva de nación en dos países, Irlanda y España. Desarrolla la idea de que la nacionalización del cuerpo de las mujeres generó una visión simbólica e idealizada de la femineidad, a su vez reforzada por una compleja infraestructura del código criminal, lugares de rehabilitación, así como un sistema de control que operaba a través de las instituciones gubernamentales, médicas y religiosas. Exploramos estos procesos mediante el análisis de los discursos en torno a la prostitución en los principales periódicos entre los años 1939 y 1975, cuando se desarrollaron los proyectos públicos de construcción de la nación propias del nacionalismo católico a través de la idealización de la familia, la maternidad y la vida doméstica. Son tres los discursos sobre la prostitución identificados en el seguimiento periodístico: la protección del cuerpo nacional, el exilio de la mujer en la prostitución y las mujeres *ordinarias* como amenazas confluyentes en el nuevo proceso de construcción de la nación en ambos países a partir de 1940.

PALABRAS CLAVE: prostitución, Irlanda, España, nacionalismo, cuerpos de las mujeres, catolicismo.



## 0. INTRODUCTION

Women's sexuality and their bodies have played a central role in building and reproducing the collective identities of the Irish and Spanish nations (Yuval-Davis 37, Crowley and Kitchin 355, Evered and Evered 840, Morcillo, *Constructing* 13). In these two states, the nationalisation of women's bodies created a symbolic and idealised version of womanhood during the central decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Spain, general Franco rose to power after a bitter Civil War in 1939 while in Ireland prime minister, and later President, Eamon de Valera was the chief architect of the 1937 constitution and Ireland's declaration of neutrality at the beginning of the Second World War. His leadership also institutionalised the nation's commitment to Catholic social teaching on the family, overturning the previous 1922 constitution that defined the state as officially secular (Crowley y Kitchin 357).

From 1939 to 1975, marking the death of both statesmen, the public lives of these two men fused nation building projects with Catholic nationalism through the idealisation of family, motherhood and domestic life. In this process, women's bodies were effectively deployed as instruments of a collective re-imagination of the nation drawing on the symbolism and values of the past to unify the contemporary state in a common purpose.

In Spain, Franco's new regime in 1939 sought to unite disparate right wing factions under a brand of Catholic nationalism that would both utilise and defend symbols of the nation's glorious past threatened by forces of secularisation under the Second Republic (1931-1939) (Morcillo, *Constructing* 4). Right after the Civil War (1936-1939), Franco aimed to create a cohesive and unified nation supported by the ideology of National-Catholicism (Redondo, Longhurst). In 1945, the *Fuero de los Españoles* guaranteed state protection for the Catholic faith, while article 22 committed the State to defending the institution of the family recognised as the pillar of Spanish society (Morcillo, *Constructing* 31). The State and the Catholic Church came together in partnership to pass legislation that prohibited divorce (1939), abortion and contraception (1941) and criminalised homosexuality (1954) (Morcillo, *Constructing* 136-137).

A similar process occurred in Ireland where divorce was outlawed (1937) and the legal system provided for the censorship of publications (1929), banned the importation of contraceptives (1935) and restricted women's participation in public and economic life (Smith, *The Politics* 209; Crowley y Kitchin, 360-362). The new Constitution of 1937 set about to institutionalise a re-imagined understanding of the uniqueness of Gaelic Ireland, first initiated by cultural nationalist organisations in the late nineteenth century, in the face of growing permissiveness throughout Europe. Articles 44.1.2 enshrined the "special position" of the Catholic Church while

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article 41.2 recognised the role of women in the home providing a constitutional basis for the promotion of Irish women's chastity, modesty and their devotion to motherhood and the domestic sphere. These virtues symbolised both the uniqueness of the nation in an embodied form and also guaranteed the cultural reproduction of these virtues in the home.

Yet, not all women were allowed to participate in this nation building however. This surveillance of sexuality contributed to the creation of sexual *others*, where a range of women suspected of being sexually transgressive were deemed beyond the confines of Irish and Spanish national identity. The single mother, the promiscuous woman, the lesbian and the prostitute were all cast beyond the confines of this imagined community into an exile that often separated them from their families and communities and often, through emigration, from the nation itself. As women who failed to surrender their bodies to the needs of the state through a perceived disregard for chastity and the vocation of motherhood demanded of them, they were destined to remain on the margins of society (Leane 43, Inglis 223-224).

In this article, we aim to explore the portrayal of women who worked in prostitution in Ireland and Spain, and to analyse how, unwittingly, through their sexuality, they became traitors to this national moral character, which so embodied the symbolic and political aspirations of both countries. From a conceptual point of view, we consider the diversity of circumstances that were categorized as prostitutional activities and, thus, criminalized or punished. At the light of Lucía Prieto's thesis, the condemnation of «deviant behavior» overstepped the limits of a strictly defined dimension of prostitution, allowing the regime to intervene in the intimate aspects of Spanish women when they were considered to transgress the principles of national Catholic morality (Prieto 315).

Our main research interest refers to the public discourses governing prostitution in the leading newspapers in Ireland and Spain between 1939 and 1975. Among our research question we include: How did the written press represented women in prostitution along the period? What commonalities and differences can be found in the construction of the prostitute as the sexual 'other' in Ireland and Spain? And how the projected image of prostitutes has changed over the four decades?

We explore these processes through an analysis of the discourses governing prostitution in leading newspapers in Ireland and Spain between 1939 and 1975. Newspapers represent a valuable source of data in which to trace the development of a nation building project and the emergence of a national consciousness which utilises national symbols (Anderson 44). The written press also provides a challenging data set with editorial decisions and the whims of owners shaping and excluding content. Not less important, in our research, we start from considering the press as a strategically meaning producer, politically legitimised to transmit certain ideas about women's sexuality and to create and disseminate arguments about prostitution at a public level.

The selection of the newspapers included in our study was based on their broad readership across both nations and that cut across differing ideological positions. The *Irish Press* was founded by Eamon de Valera in 1931 and was closely associated with his Fianna Fail party with three of Ireland's first presidents all



holding senior positions in the newspaper. The paper sought to advocate for the cause of Irish nationalism and address what it perceived as the neglect of the Gaelic language and sport in other media outlets (O'Brien 86).

The *Irish Times*, by contrast, was founded in 1859 originally as a Protestant newspaper, where it championed unionist causes such as the execution of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion. It regularly clashed with the Catholic hierarchy, for example, in its anti-Fascist opposition to Franco's Spain and, in later years, as an advocate for liberal causes such as divorce.

Among the Spanish press, we selected two main nationwide daily newspapers published during the Franco dictatorship: *ABC* and *La Vanguardia Española*. *ABC*, founded in 1903 was seized by the Republican government after the outbreak of the Civil War but returned to its original owners after the establishment of the Franco regime (Giner 36). We also included its weekly magazine supplement *Blanco y Negro*, which maintained a conservative and religious outlook during the first francoist decades, progressively moderated from the late 1960s onward.

*La Vanguardia* was founded in 1881 in Barcelona and is one of the oldest Spanish newspapers. Initially positioned within the Liberal Party of Barcelona, soon established itself as a benchmark of the independent Catalan press and, by the end of the 1930s, became the newspaper with the largest circulation in Catalonia. During the Franco era, the paper was pressured to change its name to *La Vanguardia Española*. It maintained hegemony within the Catalan press and, often, it came into conflict with the central national control, representing at the time the more pluralistic middle classes of Catalonia (Huertas). Its editorial line maintained a moderate Catalanism and its "non-ideology," according to Alférez (74), was one of the keys to its success (Danet).

More dissident public discourses, represented during the late francoist regime by *Triunfo*, were also incorporated in the study. Published since 1946, initially as a journal dedicated to cultural and show events, this magazine turned into an important political and economic publication in 1962, embodying the ideas and culture of the Spanish left and also representing a symbol of intellectual resistance to Franco's regime.

We performed a historical-discursive analysis of the selected source material (44 articles), combining the critical discourse analysis with elements of socio-historical analysis. This process was based on the identification and interpretation of the semiotic and discursive strategies used by the press in the historical construction and representation of prostitution in both Ireland and Spain. This methodological and interpretative frame has been applied in the context of what David Serlin (25) calls "intertextuality<sup>1</sup>," allowing us to contemplate and contextualize the

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<sup>1</sup> With this concept, Serlin refers to the production of knowledge in the field of public health and, more specifically, "intertextuality" describes how the visual culture of public health modifies and re-organizes both public knowledge and the social and cultural relations produced through the knowledge (Marcum 34).

social discourses around prostitution, within the framework of national identity construction.

## 1. POLITICAL, HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND: PROSTITUTION IN THE LEGAL CONTEXT

This part of the manuscript synthesizes what is known about how women's sexuality was put at the service of the political and cultural construction of both Irish and Spanish national identities during the central decades of the 21th century. It also explains the legal context of prostitution and its changes during the four decades, in order to show how the shift to traditional and moralist values were part of the symbolical representation of the nation, making possible and legitimizing the gender politics and the adoption of different measures for women's individual and collective control.

When describing this state of the art in the current historiography, we used the conceptual framework developed by Outshoorn to explore comparative prostitution regimes. Outshoorn (6-8) identifies abolitionism –where the intention is to ban prostitution but not to criminalise the prostitute; prohibitionism which seeks to outlaw all aspects of prostitution and regulationism which seeks to control and regulate prostitution without criminalising the prostitute. Such frameworks allow us to trace the “intentions and values” of Irish and Spanish prostitution policy over time (Ward 48), as we explain below.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish nationalist movement embarked upon a campaign to highlight the cultural distinctiveness of the nation. This would involve the promotion of the Irish language and literature, the rejection of colonial *English* sports previously enjoyed by the nationalist elite and the deployment of sexuality and gender roles in the services of the prospective independent state (Nash, Embodied Irishness). The state would embody this *Irishness* through its language, culture and superior sexual morality (Valiulis 100).

Women would play a central role in this re-imagined Irish nation. They were to become the guardians of Ireland's moral superiority, responsible for their behaviour and for the very reproduction of the Irish nation through motherhood and transmission of its values in their exclusive role in the domestic sphere. After significant involvement in the struggle for Irish independence, women were returned to the home, where the passage of a series of legislative acts intended to close down women's participation in the public and economic sphere (Valiulis 101, Crowley and Kitchin 359). Church and State readily co-operated to contribute to a unifying national identity that placed Catholicism at its core (Howell 339).

Ireland would be recast as female, a mother who had endured the indignities of colonial humiliation, while now calling upon a morally pure Gaelic masculinity to rise up and defend her honour (Finlayson, Nash Embodied Irishness, Kearney, Conrad 11). The English colonial presence in Ireland was by contrast, portrayed as a corpulent, immoral, effeminate contagion that would sweep across Ireland if left unchecked. Homosexuality and prostitution specifically were seen as alien to the



Irish character, a direct consequence of colonialism (Howell 326). Actually, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prostitution in Ireland had been seen as a consequence of having large military garrisons of British soldiers based in towns throughout the country. This cultural and political representation could not be demonstrated, as, with the advent of independence, prostitution remained a feature of the independent state prompting Catholic moral purity movements like the Legion of Mary to campaign for the closure of brothels, particularly in Dublin's Monto red light district between 1923 and 1925 (Hill 46, McCormick 28, Luddy 214, Howell 330).

During both World Wars, the danger prostitution posed to the nation emerged intensively, leading to renewed attempts to regulate, punish, classify, rescue or treat women, whose behaviour was seen as culpable (McCormick 5). Prostitutes and sexually active working class women were seen as most risk (Valiulis 112). Within a society that viewed women as being of a higher moral standing than men, those that transgressed from these expectations were more severely punished (Reidy 57-58). Within a context where venereal disease had been portrayed by Irish nationalism as a distasteful legacy of colonialism, women seen to be servicing this demand were inevitably seen as sexual traitors to the mythical construction of Irish womanhood. They were also held to be responsible for a wider fall in moral standards, which was now a source of embarrassment for the newly independent State (Valiulis 105).

In Spain, debates about prostitution had a longer historical context having already taken place in the 18th century (Guereña), following concerns about the degeneration of the Spanish race. Such concern was accelerated by a political crisis following the loss of Spain's last colonies in 1898 and a belief that national vitality had weakened due to the decadence of society (Nash Social Eugenics 742).

In the early 20th century, public health programmes tackling diseases such as tuberculosis and venereal disease were seen as crucial measures to improve the health of the nation (Castejón, Nash Social Eugenics). In time of the Second Republic (1931-1939), many efforts were made in the field of prostitution and, in 1935, the Decree of June 28 abolished the regulatory system that had prevailed in Spain since the mid-19th century. Prostitution came to be considered an unlawful means of livelihood (Rivas Arjona). Yet, the decree was supposed to be a transitory measure until the elaboration of the new Health Law. Suddenly interrupted by the Spanish Civil War, the legal and political process of the new abolitionist provisions were put on hold, excepting the suppression of periodic medical examinations for prostitutes and the obligation for them to have a permanent health card (Guereña).

The concern for the venereal diseases increased during the Spanish Civil War, under the circumstances of the concentration of military men on both sides of the divided country, the number of widows in a dramatic economic situation, the poverty and generalized hunger. Nevertheless, as Guereña highlighted, in the context of a war, there was a degree of permissiveness towards prostitution certainly differentiated between the Republican zone (closure of brothels) and the Franco zone (tolerance of prostitution due to military needs) (Alcaide).

The broken nation after the Civil War was likened to a *fallen woman* –destroyed by the moral decay of the Second Republic (Morcillo, *Constructing* 97). Nationalist movements that emerged during the Second Republic in Catalonia or



Basque Country would be repressed in favour of a unified Spanish identity based on a Castilian heritage of the conquistadores (Nash Social Eugenics 747). Franco's priorities of advancing political unity, consolidating a common and hegemonic national spirit and trumpeting the State's goodness and the greatness of the *patria*, led to the creation of *Spanishness* (Santana de la Cruz 165-184). Allied to this was a discourse of *grandeza*, by which Spain could be regenerated by imperial adventures, racial health and a growing population (Nash Social Eugenics 746).

With pro-natalism at the centre of the national regeneration project, the focus would inevitably turn to women's bodies and the development of their reproductive capacities. This vision of Spanish society promoted by the dictatorial regime found legitimisation through the valorisation of the traditional, nuclear family. Spanish masculinity was increasingly based on attributes like bravery, nobility and honesty (Enders and Radcliff), while women were considered to be pure, religious and passive, destined to remain in the domestic sphere and play a subordinate, supporting role to men's lives in the public sphere (Ruiz Franco).

The Francoist interest in restoring the traditional family and public morality was promoted by domestic policies that defined the role of the *good woman*. This definition followed the recommendation of the monk and writer Fray Luis de León, who had proclaimed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the *natural feminine* qualities as maintaining a domestic life, dedication to motherhood and a willingness to refrain from an advanced formal education (Morcillo, *Shaping*). Under the strict influence of the Catholic Church and other organizations especially created for women's social control (e.g. *Sección Femenina*- Feminine Section or its section, *Hermandad de la Mujer y el Campo*- Sisterhood for Women and the countryside), Franco imposed a model of Spanish womanhood which saw her as the "temple of the race," both intellectually and spiritually inferior to a man, but the custodian of higher moral virtues (Ortiz).

This symbolic and social regulation of the *good woman* imposed special (self) control on women's bodies and sexual behaviour. Catholic social teaching extolling the virtues of modesty and virginity repressed all expressions of sexuality deemed representative of "anti-Spanish exotism" (Ortiz). In this ideological and moral context, prostitution was seized upon by the Francoist regime and transformed into both a public morality and public health issue. Yet, as reflected in recent investigations, Franco's ambition of creating a new social order didn't consolidate as an unique value system, but crystallized in a variety of priorities and methods, all directed to "the curtailment of vice and for the purification of the new national Spain" (Cleminson and Hernández 95).

Under the Franco regime, prostitution policy was contradictory, ranging from ambivalence in the early years –where it was regarded as a necessary evil for Spanish men to satisfy their sexual urges, in a space which did not threaten the virtue of Spanish women who would be called upon to become wives and mothers–, to a re-educational approach, in which the "fallen" women had to seek forgiveness for their sins according to Catholic social teaching.

This policy of state surveillance of public morality was legally strengthened with a Decree in 1941, when the Ministry of Justice established the *Patronato de Protección de la Mujer* (Foundation for the Protection of Women), with a permanent



commission headed by Franco's wife, Carmen Polo (Núñez). From 1941, all brothels became *houses of tolerance*, places where prostitution was considered a *private* issue and, thus, permitted and regulated. On the other hand, women who worked on the street, making visible the *public* dimension of the issue, were subject to prosecution and harassment. This artificial separation between the private/ individual approach to sexuality and its manifestation in the public sphere intensified the social and moral persecution of women in prostitution, and also enhanced the polarized social identification for women, clearly separating between the good and the bad ones.

The Foundation was responsible for both monitoring and auditing levels of immorality in Spanish society and developing an infrastructure to rehabilitate offenders of the new moral order in collaboration with the Catholic Church (Roura, *Mujeres*). Convents and prison wards were converted to house and supervise the redemption of *fallen women* or save those at risk (Morcillo, *Constructing* 98). The Foundation oversaw the training of female guardians (*Cuerpo de Caladoras*) who would be part of an infrastructure of surveillance of women's public morality in conjunction with religious and state authorities. Those identified to be at risk – women factory workers and those in domestic service– were thought to be responsible for declining moral standards (Morcillo, *Constructing* 103).

The legal context governing prostitution in Spain changed again in 1956. A law declared all houses of toleration illegal to protect women's dignity, marking a movement from regulation to abolitionism (Morcillo, *Constructing* 122). The law was defended by the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church<sup>2</sup>, who declared all forms of prostitution as "illicit traffic," withdrawing support for any health controls to prevent the spread of transmitted diseases. Guereña highlights the Catholic Church's somewhat ambiguous position on prostitution, seeing the prostitute as a less threatening figure to the stability of the Spanish family, compared to the mistress, for example.

The 1960s brought an intense economic and political development and were also representative of the Integration and seek of acceptance of Spain in the international context (Medina y Menéndez). This modernization affected gender policies, with the Law of 1961 about political and professional rights for women. Regarding prostitution, the abolitionism persisted and consolidated with the Law of Dangerousness and Social Rehabilitation (1970), which considered prostitutes as dangerous people, and regulated their confinement and week-end detention, while also prohibited them from residing in certain places. In 1973, the Penal Code also included the sanction of soliciting and criminalization of "pimping".

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<sup>2</sup> A complete analysis of how the Catholic and regime's press supported the abolitionist campaign during the early 1950s can be found in Guereña (432-436).





## 2. CONTAMINANTS, SYMBOLIC *OTHERS* AND *ORDINARY* WOMEN. DISCOURSES ON PROSTITUTION IN THE IRISH AND SPANISH WRITTEN PRESS (1939-1975)

In the following three main parts of the manuscript, we present and discuss the results encountered through the discourse analysis of the selected press articles published in Ireland and Spain from 1939 to 1975. We argue that despite different regulationist and abolitionist approaches to prostitution during the period under review, both countries maintained similarities in the application of a system of National Catholicism, while being increasingly aware of their international obligations. Three main discourses on women in prostitution were found in both the Irish and the Spanish press: for the first part of the period, the prostitute as a contaminant and as a symbolic *other* prevailed, while, starting with the late 1950, a new discourse was introduced, reflecting the prostitutes as *ordinary* women.

### 2.1. PROTECTING THE *NATIONAL BODY*. DISCOURSES ON THE PROSTITUTES AS A *CONTAMINANT*

In Ireland, there was a historical legacy from the nineteenth century that cast women who worked in prostitution as conduits of venereal disease, and as such, they were perceived as a grave risk to both the military capacity of the nation and the moral boundaries of the family unit. This moral panic culminated in the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) which gave the police and the medical profession extensive jurisdiction over the female body to examine, to label and if necessary to incarcerate (Walkowitz 1, McCormick 4).

Although public opinion saw prostitution as a key conduit for the spread of venereal disease, the evidence did not always support this assumption. The 1926 Committee on Venereal Disease found that within the military 90% of infection was contracted with women not classified as working within prostitution, with over 50 per cent of infections happening outside the Dublin region (Howell 323). Governments resisted increased calls from both military and social purity campaigners to implement a regulationist model of registration and/or compulsory medical detention, fearing it would be perceived as an official acknowledgement of the sex industry (Howell 327).

A range of criminal and penal responses to prostitution targeted women who needed control or reform for a lifestyle that was often not understood within a context of low income, alcoholism and petty crime. The *Irish Times* (20 May 1944) reported that cases of venereal disease were at epidemic proportions with Westmoreland Lock Hospital, the main hospital dealing with infections, at maximum capacity. In response to the increase, the paper reports that the parliamentary Joint Committee of Women's Bodies were calling for a women's police force to target key areas like the Dublin Quays to bring the infection rate down.

Women were not allowed to join the Irish Police Force until 1959. An investigative journalism piece in the *Irish Times* (7 October 1944) brought the



journalist, aided by an informant into what was termed as “notorious drinking dens” that operate beyond official regulation, where men arrive with “questionable women” to drink all night until the sun rises. The article describes the semi-secret entrance where men and their ‘prostitute hangers-on though warns that “judging from the type of woman present, they are easy stepping stones to disease” (*Irish Times* 7 October 1944).

By 1947, the issue of venereal disease and proposed measures to isolate and treat those infected were back on the political agenda as part of a new health bill. The Minister of Health, Dr. J. Ryan claimed that he had reluctantly agreed to include that “the guarantee that infectious disease regulations would not prescribe compulsory surgical treatment” and that a person could be confined at home rather than compulsorily isolated elsewhere. The minister was reluctant to specify cases where this may be necessary given there was a “certain delicacy or reticence as to the matters for which the provisions were primarily intended” (*Irish Times* 2 May 1947).

This delicacy and reticence shown on behalf of Irish politicians to speak openly about prostitution contributes to a partial explanation as to why Ireland failed to embark upon a more regulationist model governing prostitution similar to their Spanish counterparts. The proceedings of the Carrigan Report, the evidence on which the 1935 Act was based, remained suppressed in a strategic alliance with the Catholic Church that concealed crimes of sexual abuse, infanticide and rape under a wider discussion of sexual immorality (Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries* 4). An open discussion of prostitution would have revealed the state’s failure to protect vulnerable women and the male culpability associated with crimes that forced women, stigmatised by unmarried motherhood or the suspicion of sexual impropriety from their families and communities into precarious lives. Rather than adopt a model of central regulation, Ireland often embraced a policy of subsidiarity –where key social services were out-sourced to Catholic lay organisations, for example, the Legion of Mary’s role in assisting women in prostitution to exit.

The *Irish Times* (19 December 1964) reporting on figures released by the World Health Organisation citing a rise in venereal disease placed the blame now on “loose living amateurs” rather than prostitutes. There remained a perception among parliamentarians that such an increase also existed in Ireland although the Minister for Health claimed in response to a question from a member of parliament that Ireland “had the lowest incidence of venereal disease in northern Europe” (*The Irish Press* 30 October 1969). Unsatisfied, a Member of Parliament, Dr. H. Byrne recommended that prostitutes should be subject to compulsory medical examinations if arrested, and compulsory blood tests if convicted.

However despite such talk of a return to state sanctioned policing of bodies, the discourse around prostitution and venereal disease in the 1960s and 1970s did change. Now there was a new scapegoat. The spread of the permissive society, particularly associated with Britain, had contributed to a rise in sexually transmitted infections like gonorrhoea, with British men reporting that they had contracted an infection from a prostitute declining from one in three, thirteen years ago to one in twenty today illustrating, the paper argues, a more “casual promiscuity” (*The Irish Press* 11 April 1969). The perception of the social class of those infected had also



changed. The historical understanding of an undisciplined working class sexuality gave way to a realisation that the middle classes, perhaps better at avoiding medical surveillance, were also a key group in the transmission of infections with the *Irish Press* reporting that:

Doctors are worried about the spread of V.D (venereal diseases) among the middle classes – the thirty patients mentioned above all came from an upper middle class Dublin suburb. For many years V.D had been a problem in working class areas and tended to remain there. Prostitutes are no longer the main source of infection: in fact ‘professional ladies’ (as they are affectionately called by doctors) are regular visitors to V.D clinics ... Prostitutes do not seem to suffer the usual hang ups about sex and co-operate with the doctors in tracing partners who could have been infected (*Irish Press*, 30 May 1972).

Other articles similarly placed a declining importance on the role “professional prostitutes” played in the spread of venereal disease and the rise of the “enthusiastic amateur,” perhaps as a consequence of the economic situation in the country (*The Irish Press* 22 December 1969; *The Irish Press* 19 April 1974).

In Spain, the decree in 1941 prohibited public prostitution while regulating transactions conducted in private and proclaimed that “fallen women” needed redemption (Roura, *Un inmenso prostíbulo*). The prostitution industry responded and evolved to the new legal environment. There were more than 1500 brothels in the country by 1942 (excluding Barcelona and Madrid) and more than twenty thousand prostitutes in Madrid in 1941 alone (Guereña). Between 1939 and 1956, state authorities issued registered women working in prostitution a health report card that certified that they were healthy; otherwise they would be required to remain in hospital. This regulationist model was criticised, as it did not include women who were unregistered while the health infrastructure was unable to deal with those women who were registered fuelling demands for an outright ban introduced in 1956 (Morcillo, *Constructing* 112).

Newspaper coverage also revealed the policy tensions in the approach to prostitution with *La Vanguardia Española* and *ABC* announcing in 1950 that “in 1940 the Health Ministry prepared an abolitionist plan, but as venereal disease increased, we came back to the regulationist system because when recognizing the existence of prostitutes, the evil is reduced” (*La Vanguardia Española*, 14 July 1950)<sup>3</sup>. In this statement, the *evil* seemed to be considered from both a religious and public health perspective that regarded prostitution almost impossible to eradicate from society. Within this regulationalist model, *fallen women* who had not registered and therefore not subject to police surveillance, were considered a

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<sup>3</sup> The translations from Spanish to English of all fragments extracted from the Spanish press, were made by the Spanish author.



danger to society and risked being incarcerated into special prisons for behavioural reform (Nicolás Lazo)<sup>4</sup>.

## 2.2. DEFYING THE NATION: THE EXILE OF WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION. DISCOURSES ON THE *SYMBOLIC OTHER*

In this section we discuss the portrayal of women in prostitution as representing the symbolic other, exiled beyond the confines of Irish and Spanish society.

While not all Irish women were of sufficient moral character to uphold the Catholic values of the state, even within prostitution, differences emerged between women and their culpability for their moral lifestyle. Newspaper discourses constructed a portrayal of some women as being so beyond the confines of respectable society that there was little hope of rescue or rehabilitation; others, through naivety or unfortunate circumstance ended up in prostitution either at home or abroad and were more deserving of sympathy. This distinction had been a feature of a broader surveillance and discipline of female sexual conduct. With regard to unmarried mothers, in 1927 state officials had identified two categories of women – “those amenable to reform” and “less hopeful cases” (Garrett 332), each requiring a period of detention in specific places of rehabilitation– County Homes and Magdalen homes, respectively.

The language to describe these women lacks empathy and implies a degree of agency and choice in the pursuit of a career in prostitution and sees little redemption to enable these women’s return to *respectable* society. The *Irish Press* (9 August 1944) and the *Irish Times* (9 August 1944) reported on the Bishop of Galway’s condemnation of the immoral behaviour seen in the city during Race week due to the “influx of into Galway of a large number of undesirable persons, including many prostitutes” (*Irish Press* 9 August 1944). Such undesirables are described by the Bishop as “enemies to the peace, honour and morality of their city” and he urges residents to resist such excesses as it risks offending “decent and respectable visitors.” It is not just prostitutes who are singled out by the Bishops, other women are also guilty as

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<sup>4</sup> Other new emerging nations faced similar dilemmas and took alternative strategies to protect *this national body*. The new Turkish Republic founded in 1923, regarded prostitution and the associated threat of syphilis as a major health issue that held the potential to damage both the moral and economic fabric of the nation and even its very existence (Evered and Evered 843, 847). Turkey’s provincial medical directors initiated regulatory procedures governing prostitution requiring medical examinations and the establishment of brothels to enable officials collate greater data on the health of women working within them (844). State laws followed in 1921, which enabled health officials enforce treatment and detention on women suspected of being infected with syphilis, taxed the proceeds of brothels and banned the entry of foreign prostitutes (846). A subsequent law in 1933 identified those working in prostitution as “public women” a broad concept that defined any woman who had sex with multiple men as a prostitute requiring their identification and registration by state authorities (848).

they “forget Christian modesty as to drink in bars and public rooms to late hours with great danger to their honour” (*Irish Times* 9 August 1944).

There is evidence that the rhetoric surrounding women’s sexual conduct was also matched by interventions on the ground. Local judiciary intervened by policing the moral behaviour of women in bars with the *Irish Press* (18 January 1964) reporting that a Limerick pub was refused a licence to trade, after allowing convicted prostitutes consort with foreign sailors from ships docked close by in the port. It was the connection between prostitution and port cities in Ireland that generated the greatest concern and the most reporting in Irish newspapers in the mid to late 1960s. The port of the city of Cork was seen to be particularly problematic in this regard with calls for stronger legislation to prevent women going onto foreign ships (*Irish Press* 29 April 1966).

Others favoured more direct action with the chaplain of the Port of Cork pleading with women not to go aboard these vessels (*Irish Press* 4 July 1967) while letter writers suggested a vigilante committee that would patrol the port forming a human wall to prevent women going to the ships (*Irish Press* 17 December 1968) or city authorities would close access to roads around the port (*Irish Press* 27 November 1968; *Irish Times* 18 March 1970). Parliamentarians expressed frustration that the police had no jurisdiction in preventing the women’s access: “Under the law these girls were visitors of the captain and crew of that ship and the Gardai (police) has no right to cross into that ship for the purposes of removing those girls, whose souls and bodies were being destroyed in a conscious co-operation between citizens of Cork who did well out of this particular trade” (*Irish Press* 31 October 1968).

The *Irish Press* (21 March 1970) reported that the girls were described as “ships rats” and their presence was met with “indifference or inevitability” however there is little discussion in the coverage as to the motivations or backgrounds of the women involved. The same journal reported that the Cork Port chaplain described some of the women as “poor and pathetic and the product of broken homes ... badly dressed and penniless,” although other members of the Cork Port Board described the allegations of prostitution as “grossly exaggerated” (*Irish Press* 24 November 1970). The same chaplain two years later described the women involved in prostitution as doing it “for kicks rather than money” tempted by access to free food and beer who slip for this “novelty” into regular prostitution (*The Irish Press* 18 August 1972). However, the courts did hear cases of women who were found to be drunk and disorderly onboard the ships (*The Irish Times* 8 April 1971). The newspapers revealed that the courts offered women who were victims of violence or robbery little protection. The defence counsel of a policeman (garda) charged with the robbery of a prostitute, Ms Lynch in Dublin described that the “woman was no innocent abroad and from the evidence she was no stranger in court” and the policeman’s car was the fourth car Ms Lynch had gotten into that night. The –mostly men– acquitted the accused after a five-minute deliberation (*The Irish Press* 18 July 1975).

The police also came under criticism after reports surfaced that female police officers would be used to prevent the solicitation of those thought to be prostitutes on Dublin streets. However, according to the *Irish Press* (9 April 1964) “respectable women” were now being solicited by men which the presence of female police officers



(Ban Gardai) was designed to prevent. There was concern from parliamentarians that (respectable) female police officers could also be misconstrued as prostitutes with devastating consequences to their reputations. These police officers could, according to a member of parliament, “be easily seen by people who knew them and would go back to their native villages and would say they were just prostitutes on the streets of Dublin” (*Irish Press* 9 April 1964). Such anonymity was not granted to women who were deemed beyond the confines of respectable society. In 1968, the *Radharc* documentary broadcast a programme about prostitution on ships in Cork port using secret cameras that clearly identified the women aboard the ship (*The Irish Press* 24 December 1968).

In Spain, the legal context governing prostitution and its shift in 1956 created the breeding ground for the consolidation of moral discourses about prostitution in the press. *ABC* reported on the government’s decree stating that it was “opting strongly for the abolition of the so-called *houses of tolerance*, for the sake of the immediate treatment and suppression of the immoral exploitation of women” *ABC* (10 March 1956). Article 5 of the decree would charge the *Foundation for the Protection of Women* with the task of re-educating the women who formerly worked in brothels in “non-penitentiary” shelters and reintegrating them back into society (*ABC* 10 March 1956).

Yet, the political dimension of the decree in 1956 can’t be underestimated. Domestic politics were not the only motivating factor behind the 1956 decree, as Spain was seeking entry to the United Nations who had recently adopted an abolitionist approach. Moreover, the real impact of the decree was not complete. In spite of the enforcement of the law and the efforts of the *Foundation for the Protection of Women* –140 houses of tolerance were closed in Barcelona alone (Villar 205)– prostitution in Spain persisted in the public sphere, by means of an adaptation to new spaces and strategies of “camouflage” and “professional recycling” (Guereña 440; Morcillo *Constructing* 126).

Attempts to integrate women who had worked in prostitution back into the mainstream industrial workforce also met with resistance from fellow workers, such as the stigmatization the women endured (Morcillo, *Constructing* 129). The increase has been credited with more women relying on prostitution for economic subsistence, but also with an unintended consequence of the Spanish gender order that promoted virginity before marriage for women while at the same time condoned a machismo that actually encouraged prostitution during the postwar period (Guereña, Morcillo *Constructing* 92).

The Spanish press served and promoted the Francoist regime, by using this dichotomy between the success of the national-catholic ideals in Spain and foreign countries condemned to social decay through prostitution. Different journal articles from the 1950s praised the valiant efforts of Italian female police officers in fighting against prostitution described as “very feminine in their sentiments and kindness” in contrast to the women in prostitution (*ABC* 30 November 1950). Newspaper coverage focuses on using both redemption and rehabilitation in combating prostitution in Spain. *La Vanguardia Española* stated that “in two or three days the first expedition of women leading an immoral life will leave for



Gerona, to a special establishment. This way we'll get a solution for what could have been a problem, but it won't be anymore" (16 November 1941). The Spanish press was highly critical of other countries' attempts to curb prostitution, which was seen as a symptom of a slide into extreme decadence. Referring to the struggle against prostitution in war torn Italy, *La Vanguardia Española* explained that "The American liberation is disappointing [...] prostitution is extending due to hunger and misery" (14 March 1944). And describing the concentration camps of Spanish children, the so-called Basque refugees, evacuated to Russia, the newspaper describes the dire conditions:

Among the girls, the strongest and prettiest, with shame and indignation we must say, are prostituted. In Russia, prostitution is a king of State service, a direct part of the political police [...]. We can see so much pain in these acts that we consider the children who died during the war as more fortunate (*La Vanguardia Española* 14 February 1946).

The comparison of Spanish moral conduct with neighbouring countries seen as in the midst to this moral decay continued throughout the 1960s. Central to this was the valorisation of marriage and the domestic sphere, where the ideals of true love became symbols of a spiritual salvation that held the potential for a long and healthy life. An article from *ABC* described marriage as the combination of "real" love and friendship, while prostitution responded to the most animal instincts of human beings stating that: "Love is based on sexual attraction and friendship. Prostitution is the worst form of love, because it lacks any friendship. Man and woman shouldn't get together as male and female animals, but they should also achieve a spiritual education with higher moral sentiments" (*ABC* 16 October 1962).

The Spanish articles also linked prostitution to other socially dangerous acts principally homosexuality and pornography that were seen as endemic, particularly in French society: "In Paris prostitution is also practiced by men wearing women's clothes. This information makes us feel sick and ashamed [...] Wearing women's clothes can't be used for degeneration, nor as an offense to moral and human dignity" (*ABC* 18 December 1963). It continued that, in order to diminish these "antisocial behaviors," there must be an increased importance placed on education and social control, especially for the young people where "vagrancy, prostitution, homosexuality, drug use and drug traffic, pornography, immoral habits ... indicate corruption especially of young people."

The official position of treating prostitution as a foreign entity threatening Spain was located within a wider context of Catholic social teaching. The Church communicated these teachings in the Spanish press confirming the national catholic ideals of 'the exercise of love, at the service of life'. Human sexuality was located within a context of love and marriage, but also connected to the importance of increasing the birth rate and raising children. "Sexuality is not only biological and physiological, but also a humane, noble and generous disposition to accept children" (*Blanco y Negro* 16 July 1966). Even later in the 1970s, the press explained the Spanish Bishops' position towards the morality of sexual relationships, condemning



premarital and extramarital relations, homosexuality and use of contraception which remained illegal until 1978 (*La Vanguardia Española* 19 June 1971).

### 2.3. THE THREAT OF PROSTITUTION. DISCOURSES ON THE *ORDINARY* WOMEN

Irish and Spanish newspaper discourses on prostitution frequently expressed concern that *ordinary* women are being drawn into the industry. At times it is difficult to ascertain the characteristics assigned to these *ordinary* women as opposed to those women who are believed to be more *professional*. Culpability is a key criterion with ordinary women seen as more often from rural areas and being distinguished by a naivety and innocence which has led them to being tricked into prostitution by older unscrupulous men. In this section we examine how these issues of ordinariness and culpability are discussed in relation to women in prostitution, particularly those who emigrated from rural to urban zones, in both Ireland and Spain.

An *Irish Press* reporter described how the girls involved in prostitution on the Cork quays were difficult to define stating that “she is not the brassy pro, as generally characterised. There is no inherent viciousness, no professionalism and it is this that is most frightening [...] for the girls are so ordinary and from such normal homes” (*Irish Press* 5 December 1968). Rural girls were particularly seen as naive and particularly vulnerable to exploitation in becoming potential victims of prostitution themselves. The *Irish Press* claimed that there was an increase in the number of girls involved in prostitution “particularly girls from the country who are used by unscrupulous men to make huge sums of money” (*Irish Press* 8 November 1972).

This understanding of prostitution was particularly pronounced in the discussion of the emigration of young, rural Irish women to London and other British cities. The fate of Irish female emigrants was a regular theme in newspapers designed to catch the readers’ attention with often sensationalist headlines that emphasised the moral quandaries surrounding emigration, reproduction and the nation (Redmond 141-142, Ryan 52). Emigration of large numbers of young women from Ireland represented a failure of the state but that some women ‘fell by the wayside’ was a cause of further embarrassment to the nation. Irish women were seen as representatives of this virtuous nation abroad and deviation from it would ensure that these women would be placed beyond the national collective (Redmond 143).

The reasons for emigration were complex. Between 1946-1951, eight out of ten Irish emigrants travelled to Britain, the overwhelming number being women (Redmond 143). The profile of the female emigrants was young and rural often forced to leave by the constraints imposed by traditional rural inheritance (Ryan 56) and limited viable economic alternatives at home where women were “encouraged” to remain in the domestic realm (Redmond 146). There is evidence to suggest that many of these women who arrived in Britain were pregnant and already consigned to exile with British local government authorities in the 1940s appealing to their Irish colleagues to support voluntary repatriation (Redmond 150, Garret 337). Women were reluctant to do so fearing long periods of detention in mother and baby homes,





county homes or Magdalene asylums all part of a large network of places of discipline and reformation (Garret 338, Crowley y Kitchin 364-366).

Britain had historically been constructed by Irish nationalism as a pagan country whose permissive values that had seen a rising tide of depravity now threatened to lay siege to Ireland's superior moral values (Ryan 70, Redmond 151). Irish born priest, Eoin Sweeney who worked in England during the 1960s suggested that Irish people under 18 should be banned from emigrating such was the risk to their souls (Ferriter 342). The evidence suggests that the sexual revolution in Britain did not extend far beyond parts of London and the Southeast of England (Ferriter 362) and British people remained conservative in attitudes to sexuality in the 1950s and 60s (Weeks 253-254).

There was considerable evidence reported in newspapers from groups working with Irish emigrants and from the probation services that a considerable number of Irish women were involved in prostitution. *The Irish Times* (7 November 1958) reporting on the recent publication of W.W. Sanger's book found that 706 out of 2,000 prostitutes working in New York City were Irish. The paper (*The Irish Times* 25 June 1963) returns to the topic of crime and Irish emigrants in 1963 when reporting on a study from a professor from Trinity College Dublin that found that 9% of the total prison population in Britain were Irish and one in every 6 prostitutes convicted in 1961-2 were Irish. The article continued:

Irish girls rarely adopted prostitution as a premeditated career. The average Irish girl seemed to be some time in England before succumbing. She arrived very often from a poor type of rural background which had left her quite unprepared for the problems of an urban existence. She could get a job in the kitchen of a hospital or as waitress in the poorer type of cafe. Her wages were too low to cope with the high cost of living in London and send something home to her parents. Soon she met undesirable company who took advantage of her ignorance and loneliness ... naivety not vice or cunning was the characteristic of the average Irish delinquent (*The Irish Times* 25 June 1963).

Evidence does exist of men charged with approaching Irish women in London and "attempting to procure the girl to become a common prostitute." *The Irish Times* 25 September 1953) and also convicted of murdering Irish women working as prostitutes (*The Irish Times* 2 January 1960). The female emigrant was often constructed as naive, innocent and foolish, easily manipulated by more worldly and undesirable men. By implication, women's vulnerability reinforced the view that sexuality was dangerous if left unsupervised by the church or state (Ryan 59-61). The narrative of innocent Irish women being preyed upon also extended to men, with the *Irish Times* (16 November 1963) reporting that "some Irish people who were not homosexuals leaving Ireland, were picked up by these people and later became homosexuals themselves." *The Irish Press* was concerned about young men but "in the case of girls the moral dangers they are exposed to is an even more serious matter." Exiting prostitution can also be more difficult for Irish women who "because of their religious upbringing they become morose and ashamed and therefore find it very difficult to seek or respond to help" (*Irish Press* 10 December 1964). In the



1970s deficiencies in the education system were highlighted as contributing to the high percentage –up a third of all prostitutes in England being Irish (*The Irish Press* 9 January 1973).

From the late 1950s through to the 1970s, the Spanish press also highlighted how economic difficulties, compounded by a lack of education and social exclusion were the main factors pushing young girls into prostitution. With little economic prospects women emigrated from rural areas to urban centres where they should, elements of the Spanish press suggested, receive help, forgiveness, rehabilitation and help to adapt to their new environment (*La Vanguardia Española* 20 June 1956). This marked a transition to a more charitable presentation of women in prostitution who were now seen as “poor women,” victims of misery and with limited life chances. The factors pushing women into prostitution were explained in a wider context of “the inequalities between men and women, between rich and poor” where prostitution was considered to be “a social valve [...] condemning people to the worst slavery” (*La Vanguardia Española* 20 June 1956).

*ABC* also led with a more charitable response stating that while “the prostitute herself is repudiated although she prays for her penance. We should all believe in true faith and love, which represents the real salvation” (*ABC* 25 August 1956). This image of the defenceless, naïve and repentant prostitute that needed society’s understanding and forgiveness contrasted with the view of prostitution as a social phenomenon which remained located within an understanding of global moral corruption (*La Vanguardia Española* 15 June 1951). This transition in portrayal marked a greater paternalism in how these young women should be treated.

As the 1970s progressed, it was an image increasingly rejected by the women in prostitution themselves where social collectives increased the visibility of women in the public sphere as they started new campaigns to agitate for their rights. This set the stage for increased confrontation between Catholic organizations as they responded to what was perceived as a new normalization of transgressive sexuality with measures to close public spaces, like parks, associated with prostitution across Spain (*Triunfo*, 26 September 1970).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This article traced a process of renewed nation building that occurred in Ireland and Spain between 1939 and the 70s. In both countries, it was embarked upon to restore a national unity through the appropriation of symbolism from the past and the creation of superior moral and cultural values that set Ireland and Spain apart. The process was based on the development of a unifying *national moral character*, under the rubric of Catholicism that deployed women’s bodies in the service of the nation, ascribing them with virtues of chastity, modesty and a vocation for motherhood, all important virtues that symbolised both nations in an embodied form and also guaranteed the cultural reproduction of these virtues in the home (Ortiz, Valiulus).



With such responsibility placed upon the conduct of women came great sanction against those women deemed unworthy or unsuitable for this role by the patriarchal guardians of the nations in both Ireland and Spain. This was reinforced by a complex infrastructure of criminal code, places of rehabilitation and a system of surveillance operating through government, medical and religious institutions.

This *national body* had to be defended and protected from threats both within and outside the nation, through a series of legislative measures that encouraged the continuation of this gender order. Crucially, women could not be trusted to act in the best interests of the nation. Those women who defied it through their transgressive sexual practices were dealt with harshly through a combination of the criminal code, re-education and confinement in places of rehabilitation and reform.

Women working in prostitution were seen as posing the greatest threat to both the physical well-being of the nation and the re-imagined construction of it. This article identifies three main strategies that were endorsed by the newspaper coverage: protecting the national body, the exile of women in prostitution and the construction of *ordinary women*, which represented the basis of a comparative analysis of the different strategies deployed by Spain and Ireland.

Ireland and Spain represent cases of both similarity and difference. Both embark on a re-imagining of the nation at a time of perceived national crisis and rely heavily upon a national Catholicism and an imagery of an historic and glorious past to seek solutions to a moral malaise. Both identify enemies that are the cause and impediment to the nation's rebirth. While the treatment of the women and men, who disrupted this nationalisation of the body through their sexual behaviour, remains similar (e.g. Magdalene homes) political and colonial traditions ensure nuances in the manner both countries regulated sexuality.

In Ireland prostitution had been identified as foreign to Irish womanhood, a legacy of colonisers whose moral degeneracy still threatened to overwhelm the new state. The newspaper analysis reveals a continual focus on the plight of Irish women working in prostitution in Britain rather than those who walked the streets of Dublin and is reflected in a confused policy response that ranges from ambivalence towards a drift to abolitionism. Regulation would have provided an official recognition of the existence of a category of women who represented the failure of the state to reinforce its moral order alongside limited economic opportunities for women.

Prostitution in Spain, by comparison, had occupied a more ambiguous position in society seen as a product of the decadence of the Second Republic by the Franco regime that posed a threat to the continued health of the nation. The movement from a policy of regulation to abolition in 1956 disrupted an existing gender order originally supported by the regime that had facilitated the existence of both *good women* and those who serviced the needs of Spanish machismo on the margins of society. The newspaper coverage reveals the attempts made to accommodate women who had previously worked in brothels and who now were faced with an uncertain future in an inhospitable workplace, places of rehabilitation or working back on the city streets and parks.

Ireland and Spain would be both transformed by economic liberalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Religious authorities would struggle to defend prohibitions against



contraception and divorce in the face of opposition from new social movements led by second wave feminism, the gay movement and sex work activism. This challenge within the public sphere to the state's continued deference to the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Irish and Spanish life led to the disruption and resistance to a model of *good* womanhood. The newspaper analysis reveals how the dismantling of the legislative infrastructure that restricted women's economic and intimate lives contributed to more women making choices around their sexual lives that contributed, in some way, to lessening the marginalisation of women working in prostitution.

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