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DIGNITY

AN UNDERGRADUATE
HUMAN RIGHTS JOURNAL

Artist Statement for Dignity Journal (visual media submission): Kameryn Guthrie – *In Her Hands*, 2026. Photograph.

This work is inspired by the endless battle women face for their rights to their autonomy. A never-ending and exhausting battle. I created this photograph to illustrate the unspoken labor women carry on a daily basis, to protect their dreams, their lives, and most importantly, their freedom to choose. This photograph correlates to my artistic journey through the way it conveys womanhood in its sincerest form. This packet of pills, birth control, resembles so much more than a daily ritual; it has become our life, and our right. In this image, I quietly hold the power to choose, the freedom to be, yet the fear that this may one day be taken away. Each pill in this polished metal packet carries the weight of responsibility, just as I hold it gently in my hands.

The full image can be found at https://dignityjournal.com.

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Note from the Editorial Board

A central theme of Volume VI, Issue 2 of *Dignity* is the rights violations against women, both in the United States and internationally. In 2022, the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, which overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that protected abortion access across the country. This created the current fragmented state of access to reproductive care. In early 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, stated that "we should not have women in combat roles," and canceled programs that aimed to increase the presence of women within the department. In February 2026, the House of Representatives voted to pass the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, which, if enacted, would add an additional barrier to voting for married women who have changed their names. Pregnant and postpartum women detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement are reportedly not receiving adequate medical care. These are not isolated incidents; they exist within the larger trend of rolling back women's reproductive rights in the United States. The cover image, *In Her Hands*, touches on the right to autonomy for women and the fear of losing it. These fears stem from the recent administrative changes regarding healthcare accessibility, and the demonization of the care still available, which has had detrimental effects.

These issues are not exclusive to the United States. In recent years, the decades-long trend of decreasing the maternal mortality rate has come to a standstill. Cuts to funding of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other programs have left millions of women across the world without access to contraception. Increases in global conflict have led to a significant increase in sexual violence. The erosion of democratic institutions has halted progress towards gender equality, and even in 2026, no country in the world has reached true gender equality. *Voices of Despair and Strength* compiles the accounts of women internationally who have experienced physical and sexual abuse. These accounts demonstrate the global and indiscriminate nature of violence against women. "Social improvement" has been used by the patriarchy as a historical justification for stripping women of their autonomy. *"Wash Me Sins Away": Gendered Punishment and Containment in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries* addresses an instance of this by focusing on the state-sanctioned abuses of Ireland's gendered incarceration system in the twentieth century. The laundries, established through the combined authority of the Church and state, targeted vulnerable women on the grounds of safeguarding Irish identity and honoring the Catholic institution's moral responsibility.

A series of 2025 executive orders caused pauses and cuts to billions of dollars of funding to programs, offices, and initiatives that promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion. In practice, these changes disproportionally impact women, people of color, and queer individuals—

thus obscuring their visibility and undermining marginalized groups' continued fights toward equal rights. *Legislative Gender Quotas and the Promotion of Women's Rights* looks into the system made to promote women-specific policies internationally, the quotas established to create representation within government, and the issues with their execution. The poem *Motherland* allows readers to turn inward and examine what the loneliness of survival breeds concerning desire within a black woman in relation to a black man. By highlighting the disconnect between descendants of slavery and other people of African descent, the lasting effects of human rights abuses are brought to a personal level.

Lastly, we extend our gratitude to our Faculty Advisory Board for their advice and feedback on this issue. We give special appreciation to our faculty advisor, Dr. Eric Roubinek, for his continued dedication to fostering undergraduate scholarship and our student-led publication. We also thank Dr. Peter Haschke for his instruction in typeset coding and assistance in the production of this issue. We are also grateful to the students who submitted their work for this issue of the journal and contributed to the ongoing discussion of human rights.

Sincerely,

Micah Aamon & Guillermo Hernandez
On behalf of the Editorial Board, Spring '26

Voices of Despair and Strength: The Experience of Oppression and Conflict Through the Body of a Woman

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Abstract

I chose 12 countries that face human rights abuses and found direct quotes from women and girls who have experienced violence, often sexual violence. I want to highlight that the violence women experience is universal. You could replace any of these countries, and it would be believable. I hope that by showing these stories side by side, it will show that women do not experience isolated violence; it is systematic and a form of global genocide. Collecting these voices made me feel rotten and dirty. Does it crush your spirit as well? The fight for the liberation of a woman's spirit is nuanced and must be handled delicately, but it is vital that it is at the forefront of our minds when we interact with the world. We are all connected and bear the responsibility to hear and hold the voices whose right to human dignity was stolen from them at birth.

Sudan | "So we walked for three days to another village. My wounds were still bleeding and I had to carry my youngest child on my back."

Iran | "I was crushed when they threatened me with rape. I grew up in a political family and was politically active from childhood. I had never thought about sexual violence and it had never come to my mind that one day I would be a victim of sexual violence. Just the thought of rape devastated me. I got mad and very angry."

Democratic Republic of the Congo | "While we were collecting wood, these men appeared with knives and machetes, dressed in long robes … They tore off our clothes … We resisted until we had no strength left …"

Democratic People's Republic of Korea | "From the moment she was detained she was told she should go through a miscarriage and was told to fall on her hips in order to cause a miscarriage. She did it three or four times but it did not happen. She was taken out of the holding

centre and given an injection to make her miscarry. I saw her giving birth with my own eyes … I heard crying, but then the baby was placed face down, wrapped in plastic and taken out of the cell by a prison guard … No medical attention was given [to the mother]. She died after a week or so."

Guatemala | "They forced us to feed them; they divided us into groups to take turns preparing their meals, to make tortillas. When we had finished, they began to rape us. It was tremendously hard. We were not subjected to one rape or one torture; it was constant. This is why it is very painful to think about it …"

Afghanistan | "My mother and father are separated because my father was a cruel and ruthless man. He did not pay attention to the rights of women and children. He always tortured my mother. Once, he so severely broke her arm, that she [has] not been able to move it properly since. IT WAS PURE VIOLENCE! The life of women in Afghanistan – a world of men – is very difficult. Nobody is interested in our opinion or our hopes. Only very strong personalities can survive. Our mother is that kind of a person, she is a strong and brave woman."

Ukraine | "He said that if I resisted, he would shoot me. He also threatened me with his fists. I told him that I was pregnant and that I didn't want anything, and he said: 'Don't be such a tease. If you don't want to be with me I'll call 20 people and you'll be with everyone in turns. So choose, either be with me, or with them.' I still remember this very foul-smelling alcohol breath. I tried to push him away, and even though he was drunk, he was stronger than me."

El Salvador | "They took their turns … they tied me by the hands. They stuffed my mouth so I would not scream. They threw me in the trash. I feel dirty, so very dirty. This is why I wake up not wanting to live. I feel I have sinned, and this sin lives inside me … Sometimes, I wake up and think it was just a nightmare, but then I feel the pain and remember it was not."

The United States of America | "Officer Miller was working, and it was the middle of the night, and they were coming around to do rounds, and they had come into my cell—four of them. I tried fighting them off so that they wouldn't physically hurt me. Once I was unable to fight anymore, Officer Miller undid his pants and got on top of me, and the rest of it … I just blacked out. The rape went on for what felt like forever, but it was probably a good half-hour."

Haiti | "When I regained consciousness, I saw young men who could have been my [child] raping me. I told them: 'If you want to kill me, you can do it, even if I have young children; God will continue to watch over them. It's better to kill me.'"

Myanmar | "After the fourth rape I went black. After the rape I woke up … there was so much bleeding and then two hours later the baby came out. It died right after."

Palestine | "Again, after an hour, I was raped fully in the same position, with penetration into my vagina, and I was beaten while I screamed. There were several soldiers; I heard them laughing and the camera clicking as it took pictures. This rape was very quick and there was no ejaculation. During the rape they beat me with their hands on my head and back. I cannot describe what I felt; I wished for death every moment."

Each voice screams, but who listens? This is not isolated, this is not ignorable, this is not refutable. This is a systematic global genocide of the spirit of a woman. "Women are the first victims of war, but only they hold the unique key to peace."

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“Wash Me Sins Away”: Gendered Punishment and Containment in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries

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Abstract

Between the 1920s and their closure in 1996, Ireland’s Magdalene laundries confined thousands of women and girls who were deemed morally or socially deviant by the combined power of the Church and State. Under the supervision of nuns, the women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor that served as both punishment and a method of moral rehabilitation. The Magdalene laundries operated as instruments of social and institutional containment within a larger established cultural system that regulated women’s behavior in line with an idealized Irish identity defined by chastity and obedience. The Church and State’s obsession with perceived moral degeneration fueled their efforts to both “cure” the nation of such behavior and to conceal the fact that it existed in the first place. The endurance of the institutions throughout the twentieth century was facilitated by both the State’s capitulation to the Church and by public complicity. An ingrained culture of silence and shame normalized the confinement of women and girls, allowing their systemic abuse to persist in what was virtually plain sight.

Introduction

From the early 1920s to their closure in 1996, Ireland’s Magdalene laundries interned thousands of girls and women deemed socially unfit. The women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor under the label of repentance and rehabilitation, directed by various orders of the Catholic Church and supported by the Irish State. While iterations of the laundries had existed for prostitutes and impoverished women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their populations shifted drastically post-independence. In the new Irish State, the laundries increasingly confined unmarried mothers, as well as girls transferred from other state institutions, such as orphanages, industrial schools, and mother and baby homes, and

girls otherwise deemed "backward" (Smith 2007, 45). The Magdalene laundries served as institutions of moral containment, part of a larger institutional and social system that developed in the decades after their independence to restrict women's behavior in accordance with an idealized Irish identity.

Defined by "purity, chastity, and virtue," Ireland's ideal woman was an embodiment of the new government's aspirations of moral purity, and by extension, a direct contrast to the perceived moral decay of British identity from which the State aimed to separate itself (Fischer 2016, 822). The Catholic Church and Irish State considered any digressions from these standards, particularly as they manifested through female sexuality, to be threats to the moral foundations of the nation. Their close cooperation to obscure such expressions allowed the laundries to persist throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, this perception of female sexuality at the governing levels of society worked through political, religious, and cultural hierarchies to build a culture that rationalized the punishment and confinement of women and girls for the moral betterment of society. This paper relies on the oral histories of survivors to reveal how these systems of discipline were gendered. Through the forced practice of domestic and traditionally feminine forms of labor, the use of moral correction through shame, and the constant enforcement of silence, womanhood in these spaces was purposefully defined by obedience.

Historiography

Before 2001, there had been little to no scholarship about Ireland's Magdalene laundries, likely due to the taboo surrounding the institutions and social norms of respectability that continued to justify the protection of the Church and its convents. Over time, the publishing of survivor accounts and activists' work has challenged this narrative of protection and respectability. In turn, academic writing on the laundries has moved away from brief descriptions of the laundries as "homes for fallen women" to more in-depth analyses of the women and their experiences, as well as the broader systems of Irish institutional containment.

Early mentions of the laundries appeared briefly within broader histories of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, where authors emphasize the profound influence of the Catholic Church on society at the time. Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCaron's *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* is representative of the early approach to the laundries, referenced in passing as "convents that cared for 'Fallen Women" when discussing the control the Church had over women's roles in society (Finnegan and McCaron 2000, 125–138). The first book-length research on the laundries, Frances Finnegan's *Do Penance or Perish*, explains the transition from their predecessors in the eighteenth century as houses of reform for prostitutes to the twentieth-century "female penitentiary systems" (Finnegan 2004, 3). Finnegan's focus on

the New Shepherd Order limits the scope of the research, and she overlooks the complicity of the State and wider society with her emphasis on the culpability of the nuns who ran the laundries.

Subsequent work follows similar patterns, with scholars noting the laundries as products of the Church's influence on the State in the decades before and after Ireland's independence. Dermot Keogh's chapter "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s" in *The Church Confronts Modernity* echoes the emphasis on the role of the Church in drafting the Irish Constitution and its moral influence on Irish society. He defines the laundries as homes for "unmarried mothers and/or 'fallen women"' (Keogh 2007, 93–149). Lindsey Earner-Byrne's chapter "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60" in *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin* examines the legal and social stigma of unmarried mothers, with motherhood understood as something legitimized through marriage (Earner-Byrne 2007, 172–220). She notes the laundries as an option among the various institutions that an unmarried mother could go to. In both works, the author's descriptions of the populations within laundries are limited. They, alongside many authors at the time, fail to note both the population of non-mothers and younger girls who were confined in them and the broader cultural system that sustained them.

James M. Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* was a turning point, becoming a foundational text in Magdalene laundry research through his placement of the laundries within a broader "architecture of containment." By linking the laundries to other state-run institutions, he argues that both their foundation and longevity were due to a state-backed system of gendered incarceration. He describes the systemic and national nature of women's and girl's incarceration through the intersection of legislation, social norms, and national identity (Smith 2007, 42).

Since 2007, research on the laundries has largely built on Smith's framework of government and church organized institutionalization as a method of control. Rebecca L. McCarthy's *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries* traces the roots of the laundry system to Ireland's identity as an English colony, arguing that the development of the "convent asylum system" was a result of post-independent Ireland's desire to create a distinct national morality based on the regulation of women's bodies. (McCarthy 2010, 93). Similarly, Clara Fischer's "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame" argues that the laundries were the result of the efforts of the Irish State and the Catholic Church to create an Irish identity that consequently connected the legitimacy of the state to female purity (Fischer 2016, 821–43). Such works highlight that the control of the female body was justified by nation-building.

Renewed political advocacy throughout the 2010s was largely incited by the 2013 McAleese Report, or the government investigation into State involvement with the Magdalene laundries that found "significant" involvement, and Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny's subsequent official apology to laundry survivors (Department of Justice 2013, 1). It encouraged scholars

to reexamine the combined roles of the church and state, as well as the public's complicity in shaping Smith's proposed "architecture of containment." Sarah-Anne Buckley's "Institutionalization, the State, and the NSPCC" discusses the broader system of state-funded and church-run institutions, such as industrial and convent schools that institutionalized children in poverty and were often directly connected to the laundry (Buckley 2013, 110). Bridget Harrison's "Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: campaigning for a Catholic exception" further reveals how the State enabled the exploitation of women's labor by exempting convents and the laundries from state inspections and labor regulations (Harrison 2021, 223–38).

More recent scholarship has turned to retrospective and comparative approaches. Ronit Lentin's "A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland" traces how systems of institutional control have emerged in the twenty-first century over the control of immigrant reproductive rights (Lentin 2013, 130–36). Sharon Tighe-Mooney's "Irreconcilable Differences?: The Fraught Relationship between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland" examines how the legacy of the laundries played a role in Ireland's social and political separation from the Catholic Church. (Tighe-Mooney 2017, 192). Sarah A. Whitt's "Wash Away Your Sins: Indigenous and Irish Women in Magdalene Laundries and the Poetics of Errant Histories" applies the framework of institutionalization to the experiences of Indigenous women and girls in boarding schools, industrial schools, and American Magdalene laundries (Whitt 2023, 3). These studies aim to apply frameworks that have been developed around laundries to both modern-day and more global structures of gendered containment.

Within the context of a relatively recent historiography, this paper primarily builds on the argument that the Church and State collaborated to achieve an Irish moral order through control over the female body. Using survivor testimonies, it will examine how this manifested in the gendered containment and punishments of the women and girls in the laundries. While much of the scholarship tends to understate the general public's awareness of the laundries' existence, this paper takes the stance that much of the public was aware of their existence; however, the social architecture of twentieth-century Ireland was built on a deeply ingrained deference to the authority of the Church that both concealed the actions of the laundries and resisted any investigation into them.

Early Laundries

In 1767, philanthropist Arabella Denny opened the first Magdalene laundry—then called a Magdalen asylum—specifically for Protestant "fallen women," or prostitutes (McCarthy 2010, 238). There, the women would work for their room and board and could only leave with permission once they secured outside employment or housing. Denny's Magdalen Asylum set a model for the first asylums established by individuals and religious orders of various de-

nominations in the late 1700s and early 1800s (Department of Justice 2013, 37). As Ireland industrialized and urban internal migration increased, many of these smaller laundries closed or were taken over by Catholic orders hoping to address the issues they saw emerging in the rapidly changing social landscape brought on by the famine and rapid industrial growth (Department of Justice 2013, 42). The convents that ran them positioned themselves as moral authorities attempting to restore Ireland's social stability through the control of women, by solely confronting the growing issue of prostitution. Nuns, considered the ideals of virtuous female behavior, ran the laundries, serving simultaneously as networks of social control for the Church and as models of respectability (Harrison 2021, 225).

This combination of social, religious, and moral responsibilities positioned the Catholic Church in alignment with the interests of many Irish politicians of the time. It was during this period of heightened indignation towards the British Parliament that the Church formed a partnership with a group of prominent Irish politicians that was, in essence, codified by the early 1900s. As the British government introduced labor and safety reforms, Irish nationalist politicians vehemently opposed their application within convent laundries in defense of the protection and privacy of the nuns running them (Harrison 2021, 233). After a decade of back and forth, the laundries were eventually exempted from state investigation and interference in 1907, an exemption that continued after Ireland gained its independence in 1922 (Harrison 2021, 223–29). The Irish Parliamentary Party's close association with and protection of the Catholic Church during British rule established a precedent of Church presence in State policy-making.

Church-State Collaboration

Following the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, which positioned Ireland as a self-governing dominion of Britain, the Church influenced state-building at almost every level. Both subsequent administrations of the new Ireland, under W.T. Cosgrave (1922–32) and Eamon de Valera (1932–48), embraced the heightened role of the Church in the new government and implemented conservative policies that aligned with the Church's moral values. This Church doctrine was primarily one of "sexual puritanism," seen in the gendered separation of schools and the 1935 ban on the sale of contraceptives (Finnegan and McCaron 2000, 125–26). It manifested most clearly and decisively after Ireland achieved full sovereignty in 1937. The Constitution of the Republic of Ireland recognized the "special position" of the Catholic Church and directly stated that a woman's "life within the home" defined her role in society (Tighe-Mooney 2017, 194). These policies were imposed on nearly every aspect of life and were largely accepted by a devout Catholic population. The national and social identity became even more entwined with the Catholic Church's moral doctrine.

The collaboration was most visible in the realm of education, where the Church oversaw primary and secondary education with the state's funding. The curriculum was shaped around rigid moral standards and enforced by discipline and a lack of personal choice (Finnegan and McCaron 2000, 107). Deference to the Catholic Church, then, became a fundamental teaching in the most foundational moment of a child's education, reinforcing the long-standing cultural behavior that allowed the Church to dominate state social policy. After state officials completed the 1931 Carrigan Report, an unpublished but internally influential report on sexual crimes and rising illegitimacy, moral panic surrounding the family and motherhood only grew (Smith 2007, 6). Church and state higher-ups largely placed the blame for these issues upon unmarried mothers and "uncontrolled" female sexuality. The popular solution put women in the "institutional care" of the Church, which offered them a sense of relative anonymity, physical shelter, and most importantly, assisted in their "moral regeneration" (Earner-Byrne 2007, 176). The general acceptance of this solution set a precedent that allowed Irish state figures to place the management of social issues in the hands of the Church. As a result, these issues were often hidden away for the sake of maintaining Irish Catholic moral reputation, rather than being confronted publicly and directly.

Smith's concept of Ireland's institutional "architecture of containment" demonstrates how the Church's dominance in the new state created and sustained the gendered moral conditions that enabled the laundries to endure throughout the twentieth century. This "architecture" consisted of a network of Church-run and State-supported institutions that were reinforced by state legislation and a public who deferred to Church authority unquestioningly. These systems were further representative of a social attitude towards the obfuscation of "social realities," particularly illegitimacy and sexual abuse (Smith 2007, 2). This architecture included institutions such as orphanages and industrial schools that functioned similarly to the laundries as places of containment. Although the laundries themselves were not part of the school system, the same religious figures often assigned laundering duties to young girls and women and later transferred them to the laundries. It was this cycle of institutional containment and social acquiescence that transformed the makeup and role of such institutions, from prostitutes in early asylums to a range of young women and girls in early Ireland's Magdalene laundries.

The institutionalization of the children and young adults of Ireland began early on in their lives, facilitated by the Church, State, family, and law enforcement. According to the McAleese Report, the route of entry of the laundries was around 28% undocumented, 27% non-state, 19% state, and 18.6% transfer from other laundries or congregations (Department of Justice 2013, 164). The transfer of inhabitants between institutions occurred as they aged out, misbehaved, or became pregnant. Consequently, these Church and State authorities frequently transferred a number of the young women in or out of the laundries into other institutions, whether it be an orphanage, industrial school, or mother and baby home (Jefferies

2013, 7). Irish law enforcement sent a number of girls directly to the laundries, sometimes after months-long court processes and sometimes with no legal process at all (Evelyn 2013, 3). The religious orders that ran the institutions always facilitated these transfers, working in close communication with state officials. Whether organized by the Church and State or by families in consultation with the laundries, admissions into these institutions largely excluded the girls from the decision, disclosing to them as little information as possible. This culture of secrecy gave the Church almost absolute authority over the "correctional" functions of the laundries and allowed the State to maintain a front of national and moral stability.

The secrecy surrounding the laundries only seemed to intensify between the 1920s and 1960s, as the stigma of untoward female behavior became deeply ingrained within the social consciousness. Families often sent girls to the laundries in an attempt to protect themselves from scandal. One unmarried mother recalled being sent in 1966 "to get away as far as possible" to protect her family's reputation, and especially her siblings' prospects (Bernadette 2013, 6–9). Often, girls were told that they were acting out of order, with the laundries serving as punishment and a method of behavior control. Another woman, sent in 1967, described being labeled a "problem child" as a way of justifying her removal from her home (Martha 2013, 15). In any instance, once inside the laundry, the nuns forbade the girls from discussing why they were there, even if many were never told why they were there in the first place (Doris 2013, 45). The laundries thus served as physical manifestations of Ireland's moral contradictions. The religious orders claimed to reform women deemed "likely to fall," yet never fully defined what this meant (Smith 2007, 46). Furthermore, both the Church and State refused to investigate the underlying causes of these vaguely defined failures, instead working to preserve the laundries as institutions of concealment to retain a surface-level image of moral purity.

Control and Punishment within the Laundries

Inside the laundries, the methods of discipline served to instill a sense of shame within the inhabitants. Humiliation, physical and psychological abuse, and unpaid labor all served as methods of control and punishment. Further abuse occurred in the form of medical malpractice and the lack of labor safety procedures, a direct consequence of the state's non-involvement and its assumption of trust in the nuns' corrective methods. While similar forms of abuse occurred in other Church- and State-run institutions, the laundries' particular form of discipline through the daily rituals of work, prayer, and silence was designed to evoke feelings of gendered shame and repentance in its inhabitants.

Among the many methods of discipline described by survivors, the imposition of silence within the laundry was present in every aspect of their daily lives. One 1963 testimony described their daily routine as "[w]ork, prayer, sleeping, and a little bit of food," with interactions between the girls highly discouraged (Currington 2013, 23). The nuns enforced silence

to maintain constant work productivity and to isolate the girls from each other. It further trained them in passivity, as it associated the practice of domestic labor with silence. The silence was often filled with "holy things," such as a nun reading from a Bible as the girls worked, or prayers playing from amplifiers that the girls were expected to repeat as they worked (Kathleen 2013, 2). In the eyes of the State, the nuns were teachers and enforcers of respectable female behavior. The labor of washing laundry served to train women in domestic duties, while the reinforcement of silence and prayer molded them into obedient and penitent women, the ideals of female Irish respectability.

Punishments in the laundries were a combination of bodily and verbal abuse. Testimonies between the 1940s and the 1960s describe hair-shearing upon their arrival, arbitrary beatings, and solitary confinement as commonly used disciplinary practices that occurred under the guise of moral correction. A testimony of a girl who was interred in 1949 describes the use of solitary confinement without a bathroom as punishment for talking back (Whelan 2015, 15). Nuns often paired physical discomfort and isolation with verbal abuse and victim blaming, all designed to constantly reinforce the girls' supposed moral failings. As late as 1966, a girl described being covered in disinfectant to "wash [her] sins away" upon her entry, later told that she would be given a new name to ensure no one knew who she was (Flanagan 2013, 2). The nuns renamed every girl upon arrival to maintain anonymity, further disconnecting the girl from her identity before she entered the laundry. This purposeful erasure, verbal degradation, and isolation stripped women of their personal identities and instead replaced them with shame that reflected the Church and State's goals of dissuading morally impure behavior.

Abuse further manifested in the laundries' exploitative labor practices and medical malpractice, revealing the consequences of the state's exemption of the laundries from inspection. A survivor described getting burns from scalding wet sheets and being told by a nun that "…your arms will get used to it" (Whelan 2015, 24). Medical neglect was equally frequent due to the state's lack of regulation and the nuns' lack of training. In 1967, one woman, sent to a laundry pregnant at fifteen, endured a dangerous pregnancy: she was given sleeping pills and a symphysiotomy by an under-trained nun, afterwards going blind due to untreated preeclampsia (Creighton 2013, 32–34). The lack of professional medical care demonstrates that the girls' injuries and pain were seen as deserved and unworthy of outside treatment, simultaneously serving to confine them to the laundries.

Another survivor who lived in a laundry in 1964 described the lack of basic safety protections, saying, "there were bars on the window – the door was locked behind you … If there was a fire, you were just a goner" (Kathleen 2013, 3). The State's lack of inspection was rationalized through traditional gendered divisions of labor, as extended into social responsibilities. Where the public sphere of politics fell to men, the moral reformation of young women through domestic labor was put in the hands of female religious figures and their private, hid-

den convents. This separation culminated in the severe oversight of exploitative and abusive labor practices that later enabled the State to deflect responsibility for what occurred within the laundries.

Although the conditions of the girls' entries were decided by external figures, their exits were almost entirely dependent on the laundries. The nuns withheld information from the penitents about almost every aspect of their incarceration, from entry to exit, leaving many believing they would never be released. A survivor explained that "nobody had a release date … until the people who put them in decided … I could have probably walked out the door at any given time… but not a penny in my pocket to make a phone call to say, 'please come and help me'" (Bernadette 2013, 10). Even if freedom was theoretically possible, the material and psychological isolation in which the women lived made them dependent on the system that incarcerated them. This cycle saw that many women remained in the laundries for life. Multiple testimonies describe living alongside elderly women who had entered the institutions as children and lived their whole lives within the laundries (Doris 2013, 40). Although the laundries supposedly served to train girls in employable skills, little else was done to support the supposed goal of a transition back into society.

A strict hierarchy existed between the nuns and their penitents, clearly demonstrated in their decision to withhold any access to the outside world from the girls. One survivor described the lack of media and information from outside the laundries, saying, "I don't ever remember having a radio, there was no telly … that was a sin, having a television. And no newspapers, you were being punished, you see" (Evelyn 2013, 14). The disconnect from the outside world served simultaneously to punish the girls and as a way to keep them from negative outside influences. Another attested to the nun's paranoia when visitors came to the laundries, saying, "You would never answer a door if a bell was ringing. You'd have to leave it ringing till one of the nuns went and opened it … Because we were inside a big wall" (Jefferies 2013, 9). The secrecy was an integral part of the laundries' function, keeping those inside separated from external influence and those outside unaware of who was confined and why.

The oral histories of survivors suggest that the purpose of the laundries remained ambiguous. The nuns gave the girls few answers to their questions regarding why they were there or what the purpose of their "penance" was. One survivor described an interaction she had with a nun in 1958, where the nun described the purpose of the laundries, "to make you fit for the outside world." When the survivor questioned her further, asking, "How am I going to know what's in the outside world if I'm not let out into the outside world?" she was not given an answer (Lynch 2013, 22). The contradictory and ambiguous nature of what the girls were told, as well as every internal aspect of the women's incarceration, denotes the implicit failures of the institution.

Meant to rehabilitate and prepare these women to become respectable and responsible members of society, they were instead systematically punished, shamed, and abused, harming their chances for reintegration into society. One woman, born in 1928, described growing up in an orphanage and working in the laundry as a child, later transferred to various institutions and laundries. Women who grew up in the system often had a more difficult time adjusting to life outside of it, never being taught how to live outside of an institutional system. She said, "It was frightening. I felt I wanted to be back in there again, you know. You get the fear of God back in you because you were entombed in there, weren't you?" (Jefferies 2013, 42). Her and many other women's fear and apprehension of living outside the laundries highlights the contradictory nature of the laundries. The laundries, intended to "reform" women's behavior, often held girls who had grown up in Church-run environments, supposedly away from the moral instability of the outside world. The fear many women felt after returning to live in the outside world was the result of living in an environment that equated their existence with obedience and shame.

Public Perspectives and Complicity

The longevity of the laundries, while largely dependent on the unwilling submission of its penitents and the State's blind eye, also relied heavily on a broader public complicity—an effect of an ingrained deference to the Church. The public's acceptance of the laundries was based on the paradoxical perception of them as both charitable homes and places where girls disappeared. This paradox was accepted because of an innate trust in the Church's care for the women and girls who lived in the laundries. While many of the women who entered the laundries had never heard of them before, many others were aware of their reputation. One who entered in 1958 described the social reputation of the laundries, comparing them to mental institutions. She said: "It's like if someone's gone down to prison for life, you know they're not going to come out. That was the same effect the Magdalene Laundry had on us. Only mad people or bad people went in there, and that was the end of it" (Burke 2013, 21). To some people, especially of the younger generation, the laundries were regarded similarly to prisons or mental institutions: places to fear and be threatened with. In any case, social stigma shaped public knowledge and perception of the laundries, rather than any accessible information about them. This reflected a broader social policing and understanding of female sexuality through fear and pressure over education.

The combined fear and reverence of the laundries was reflective of a larger culture of the Church's moral surveillance, as well as the general perception of sex, pregnancy, and illegitimacy (Tighe-Mooney 2017, 194). Because such topics were rarely discussed, the understanding of the laundries as secret and stigmatized was a natural extension of this societal manner, one that recognized female sexuality through fear and shame instead of health and education.

To the ordinary townsperson, the inhabitants of the laundries were both visible and invisible. Residents were aware of their existence, perceived the buildings in which they resided, and sometimes interacted with the girls, whether they worked for the laundries or saw them around town. However, vague awareness and brief interactions did little to foster a connection between the girls and the towns' residents. For instance, a student in Limerick in the mid-1960s described a "social gap" between townspeople and the girls that went unquestioned because "[y]ou are brainwashed that the priest is superior and better than you" (Cowhey 2010, 4). This similarly shaped the common opinion of the government; both were rooted in an assumption of the Church's moral and spiritual superiority. This deference was so deeply ingrained in Irish daily life that the Church's decisions, including those of its institutions, were understood as beyond criticism.

Other accounts from people who lived near or interacted with the laundries reinforce the degree of literal and psychological separation between the laundries' inhabitants and society. The descriptions of their high walls and "fierce security" emphasize this as a deliberate choice central to their purposes of limiting the influence of supposedly immoral women on the public (O'Byrne 2010, 2). Those who interacted with the laundry, such as deliverers or other workers involved with the organization, described the process of entering the building as "…a closed-door type of set up" that made it difficult to enter or exit them (O'Byrne 2010, 2). This separation, along with the laundries' image as a correctional institution, encouraged the belief that its inhabitants deserved their confinement, an assumption that justified their exclusion. What the public assumed about the laundries from their limited perspectives was only ever enough to stigmatize the women, never enough to challenge the institutions themselves.

Some townspeople further believed that the laundries provided a necessary service for women and girls who would have otherwise been out on the streets. One woman who worked near a laundry and interacted with its inhabitants argued that the laundries "have a very bad reputation … and some of it is deserved, but … [t]his is a place where they would be fed, where they would be clothed … and a lot of them would not have had that" (Culhane 2008, 1). This view, a common one at the time, worked under the assumption that it was only poor or vulnerable girls who were placed in the laundries. Furthermore, the emphasis on what the nuns provided in terms of food, clothing, and shelter demonstrates how the Church was largely able to obscure the realities of what the inhabitants experienced, allowing the public to view the laundries as charitable services. Another outsider recalled that the girls "…seemed to be happy enough … [and] I think they were well looked after accommodation-wise" (O'Byrne 2010, 2). Ultimately, the outside perspective, especially in retrospect, reveals both the towns' willingness to let the Church manage the laundries and their reluctance to investigate further into what actually occurred inside them.

The behavior of the girls only increased the psychological distance in their rare interactions with outsiders. They were frequently described as quiet, shy, and keeping to themselves, a practice of what was taught to them within the laundries through punishment and silence. A man who delivered laundry for the Good Shepherd convent noted that paid workers only interacted with nuns and that "[t]he women were kept behind the scenes ... They were very shy" (O'Byrne 2010, 1). Another man who grew up around a laundry and saw the girls on their supervised walks said, "They wouldn't be allowed to stop and speak to you now or anything like that – like school kids" (Gilligan 2008, 4). Such behavior reflected the nuns' control both inside the laundries and in how the girls presented themselves in public. Their silence and shyness were deliberately molded into them through training and punishment meant to instill obedience.

In this way, the State's goal of teaching traditionally feminine manners through the nuns was successful, reinforcing the belief that the laundries were places of moral correction. However, a woman who worked with children from a laundry described them as fearful and reserved, saying: "They were never happy. There was a great fear there – no matter what you were doing with them" (O'Mara 2010, 2). The reformatory nature of the laundries was, in many cases, traumatic for the girls, with their discipline and reserve in public reflecting this. Ultimately, these outside accounts reveal a split between what the public chose to perceive and what the institutions perpetrated. While much of what they saw raised questions, it was interpreted and rationalized then through an unwavering trust in the Church's intentions.

This selective perception continued into the early 1970s. While little was discussed on the laundries themselves, mother and baby homes began gaining attention, with mixed opinions of their roles in society. The homes served a similar function to the laundries, administered by the state and run by religious orders to train unmarried pregnant women in domestic occupations (such as laundry work) for a period of time during and after their pregnancies (Earner-Byrne 2007, 186–9). In a 1970 article interview with both a Church representative and a Dublin Health Authority official, the author stressed the "bright" and "cheerful atmosphere" of a Dublin location (Anderson 1970, 7). The article emphasizes the anonymity of the women and girls there and further presents it as a refuge for them. Both the Mother Superior and the State representative insisted that "the girls feel accepted and loved." Additionally, they claimed "[t]he idea that people had that the homes are punitive is totally wrong," and ultimately, the decision to place one's baby for adoption was solely the mother's (Anderson 1970, 7). This rhetoric was frequently used when discussing the laundries, framed around the protection of the girl and reinforcing her need for privacy, which ultimately kept both institutions from any outside inspection or criticism. In both cases, the Church's intervention is framed as a necessary function in society. Despite some push for liberal reform in the late 1970s, Irish society continued to uphold an image of the Catholic Church's benevolence that hid its coercion over the country's morality.

Shifting Political and Social Landscapes

The 1980s ushered in changes that saw a society caught between liberalizing reform measures—such as legalized contraception—and attempts by the Catholic Church to maintain its grip on the state and the culture (Tighe-Mooney 2017, 200). By the 1990s, neither the Church, the State, nor the public could comfortably preserve the idea of the Church's uncontested moral superiority. The reveal of a series of scandals, including allegations of clerical sexual abuse and abuse in State and religious-run institutions, caused a drastic shift in public opinion that forced Ireland to confront what had been swept under the rug for the previous decades. The Church's mismanaged responses to these allegations created a "crisis of credibility" that persisted for the following decades (Keogh 2007, 133). As scrutiny intensified at the end of the twentieth century, this attention became directed at the laundries. Questions arose regarding what actually occurred within them, as well as how State powers and societal complicity had allowed them to persist unquestioned for as long as they did.

One such crisis of credibility occurred after it was revealed in 1993 that the High Park convent had exhumed a mass grave containing the remains of 155 women who had lived and died in the laundry. After this story broke, many laundry survivors and family members of survivors felt encouraged to come out with their stories. These early interviews align with the oral histories conducted in 2013, where one survivor described grueling hours of work, uncertain terms of release, and the constantly enforced silence that constituted daily life. In addition to the survivor testimony, the article is notable in its description of the laundries and their deviation from their original intentions: "[I]nstead of just staying a few months in a caring atmosphere, many girls remained shut away for decades" (McGeehan 1993, 13). In another account from the daughter of a woman who had been in the Irish care system, she described finding no other record of her mother, not even her death certificate (Murphy 1993, 3). The perception of the laundries after the discovery shifted drastically from one of a temporary home for wayward girls to one of mass interment and disappeared women.

The exhumation of the High Park mass grave further forced the Irish public to come to terms with the generational and emotional consequences of the laundries. One particularly controversial debate centered on the remembrance of the Magdalene laundries and their survivors. Various opinion pieces throughout the early 1990s reveal a combination of outrage, shock, and defensiveness. One rather controversial article criticized what the author saw as "a flurry of unfocused moral outrage," arguing that the outcry over the mass grave should instead be directed at the nuns' treatment of the women while they were still alive (O'Hanlon 1993, 15). Other opinions defended the laundries, with one characterizing them as "the best shot [of] an ignorant society … at providing humane care for its physical and mental rejects" and sym-

pathizing with the nuns as victims of "rigid class structures" (Redlich 1993, 4). Such rhetoric views the laundries as necessary, if harsh, products of their time, displacing blame onto a past society rather than the Church and State's combined authority or societal blindness.

The author's interviews of those who came to pay respects at the grave reveal a different narrative. For many families, outrage stemmed from the continued injustice the women received in both life and death, saying, "... the nuns conveniently forgot that relatives exist. It seems that the Magdalen women, unworthy in life, were also found unworthy in death" (Redlich 1993, 4). She describes the conflict and grief of the families of those women and girls who had effectively been erased from society. Rather than framing them as past incidents from an older society, these accounts place the laundries in contemporary time and demonstrate how such erasure produced a generational trauma based on the gendered erasure of female family members.

The institutions themselves worked to placate the anger and control the rapidly changing narrative of the laundries. An interview with a representative from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity reveals the internal view of some nuns at the time. She acknowledged that "[t]here are many things that we would feel sorry for," and suggests that, with hindsight, they would have likely done it differently (Star Reporter 1993, 13). Ultimately, though, she ascribes the treatment to simply a product of the time. With pressure directly on the Church, their response was to portray the laundries as misguided results of historical circumstance, offering vague acknowledgement of fault but ultimately refusing to take full responsibility. The Church's attempts at curbing public outrage were largely unsuccessful on all fronts, partially due to the State's silence on the matter. As Ireland moved into the twenty-first century, the Church's moral authority had lessened significantly.

Conclusion

Despite the closure of the final laundry in 1996, the systems of containment and social paranoia still exist. As Ireland has secularized in the twenty-first century, public anxieties and notions of an Irish identity have become detached from the authority of the Church yet remain connected to the control of female bodies. Contemporary fears surrounding a "pure" Irish identity have been projected onto immigrant mothers and their children. Where twentieth-century Irish Catholic fears deemed "fallen women" and illegitimacy as threats to the moral purity of the nation, immigrant bodies now threaten the perceived modern Irish national identity. The 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which revoked birthright citizenship from children with non-Irish parents, reasserts a notion of national control through women's bodies and reproduction (Lentin 2013, 131). Control over national reproductive trends is now defended through secular nationalism, rather than through religious moral concerns.

In this way, the Magdalene laundries were not unprecedented institutions that suddenly appeared in Ireland, nor do they remain in its history. They emerged from centuries of gendered carceral practices and developed into a wider institutional system that allowed for the moral regulation of female behavior. The enduring nature of the laundries was due not to a single actor, but to a misogyny ingrained in the formation of the country that was embedded in practices of the Church, State, and Irish society. The closure of the last laundry in 1996 did not see the automatic disappearance of these structures, but rather their evolution. While the authority of the Catholic Church has decreased substantially, the use of women's bodies in the construction of a modern Irish identity has persisted (Lentin 2013, 130). Ireland's "architecture of containment" manifests today less as a tool for regulating women's morality, but rather as a framework used to regulate the boundaries of who counts as Irish.

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Legislative Gender Quotas and the Promotion of Women's Rights

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the mechanisms used to promote women in politics cross-nationally. In particular, I explore the implications of using legislative gender quotas and on policy output pertaining to the general welfare and to women-specific issues. I argue that countries that adopt gender quotas of any kind will have a higher probability of promoting policies that benefit the general welfare of a population. However, I also argue that the countries will not experience any effect on the output of women-specific policies. The crux of my argument is the use of gender quotas in legislation is performative in nature and does not address the root inequalities at hand resulting in the decline of women's equality in politics. I test these claims using data on 143 countries and various measures of policy output. The results suggest that any country with gender quotas in place experiences neither general welfare or women-specific policy benefits, raising questions about the motivation behind and impacts of these interventions.

Introduction

After 150 years of the ever-growing feminist movement, there still exists a cultural mindset that affects the outlook of women in politics and their representation throughout government. Some countries have implemented legislative gender quotas to combat these biases. For example, Benin has implemented reserved seat quotas designating a target of 22% of their legislature for women—24 out of 109 seats (Gender Quota Portal 2025). However, Benin's legislature only has 7.4% women. The country of Liberia also implemented electoral candidate quotas to promote women in governance. However, like Benin, they also are severely under the targeted number of women in the legislature. Further, Liberia has a maternal mortality rate—a measure of women's access to healthcare—of 628 deaths per 100,000 births and a really restrictive stance on abortion, not reflecting the interest of women. Trinidad and Tobago—a country without any form of gender quotas—on the other hand, surpasses these countries in

terms of having 23.8% women in the legislature (10 women in the 41-member house), while also having a lower maternal mortality rate of 54 per 100,000 births even though the country does not have permissible access to abortion.[1] These examples raise the important question of: What is the effect of legislative gender quotas cross-nationally, particularly with respect to representation of women's issues?

Furthermore, I propose that when these mechanisms are implemented, they will lead to no effect in terms of promoting women-specific-specific policies. However, they may lead to a positive effect when promoting a policy that affects the whole population. While the argument can be made that implementing such a policy would, in turn, promote women in politics, furthering equality in the political sphere, I argue that gender quotas are performative in nature and do not lead to systemic changes necessary to equalize the sexes.

I test my claims using a quantitative analysis of 143 countries and data on a variety of policy outputs. I find partial support for my arguments—gender quotas do not seem to improve policy output specifically designed to benefit women or improve the general welfare. Given this, I suggest that the use of legislative gender quotas may instead be a way for countries to appease the general population or the international community. When implemented, there appears to be no substantive effect of promoting women's equality, nor successful implementation of policies that promote women's issues. This is important to acknowledge as the data suggests that when gender quotas are implemented, they do not address the root inequalities at hand, but rather show as a lackluster attempt to address gender gaps in government.
In what follows, I introduce the previous literature on the topic of gender quotas in governments. I then lay out my theoretical argument, generating two hypotheses. From there, I use an empirical strategy—using real—word evidence to determine the effects of having gender quotas on the promotion and succession of women-specific and general welfare policies—and test my argument using multiple regression analyses. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the results and the implications of using quotas as a means to promote women's equality.

Literature Review

There is a robust body of literature on the effectiveness of gender quotas. Much of this research focuses on whether these quotas increase the representation of women within government and the conditions that contribute to such progress. By acknowledging the global patterns of quotas, we can understand their effectiveness or lack thereof.

[1]It is important to note that in selecting these countries as examples, the goal was to highlight the stark differences between each respective country based on whether or not each has implemented legislated gender quotas.

The strength of gender quotas depends on many factors. Typically, effectiveness is measured as the percentage of women in national legislatures, specifically the lower houses of parliament. Rosen (2017) examined 167 countries from 1992—2012 and found that variables like economic development, democracy levels, and electoral systems matter. Specifically, how the development of a country will affect the primary policies being promoted, as well as how the government and electoral systems affect how equality is observed.

Furthermore, Rosen (2017) distinguishes between three main types of gender quotas, which vary in how they are implemented and enforced. One is voluntary party quotas, which are self-imposed rules adopted by individual political parties, meaning a party commits to nominate a certain percentage of women among its candidates. Electoral candidate quotas are laws requiring political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of female candidates for elections and apply across all political parties. Finally, reserved seat quotas reserve a specific proportion of seats within government for women, ensuring a minimum of guaranteed representation. Rosen (2017) finds that voluntary political party quotas tend to be more effective in developed countries, while reserved seat quotas are significant only in the least-developed countries. Moreover, electoral candidate quotas may play a meaningful role across all development levels. However, this is only the case when they include placement mandates—ensuring women are in a winnable position—effective enforcement mechanisms, and a mandated minimum threshold of at least 30%.

The literature also analyzes the effectiveness of quotas over time, arguing that there may be duration effects. The key findings are that national gender quotas are becoming more effective in increasing women's legislative representation (Paxton and Hughes 2015). There is also clear learning and adaptation in terms of quota design, leading to better implementation. Furthermore, Paxton and Hughes (2015) found that reserved seat quotas were more effective in achieving elevated levels of women's representation.

In other research, scholars examine how democracy, electoral systems, and gender quotas influence the growth of women's political representation over time. Paxton, Hughes, and Painter (2009) analyze representation in 110 countries from 1975 to 2000 and find that countries with proportional representation systems consistently showed elevated levels of women's representation over time. With the adoption of national gender quotas, there is a positive effect on women's presence in legislatures, though the actual representation often falls short of the mandated levels. Furthermore, the growth of women's political representation contributed to the expansion of civil liberties and political rights.

This body of literature reveals that there are several key factors that affect the success of gender quotas in descriptive representation. The type or design of a quota, the electoral system in place, and the development of a country can all influence how these quotas are

implemented and used by individual countries. While quotas often succeed in increasing the number of women in legislatures, the efficacy of quotas rely on the condition of the design and context.

Beyond numerical representation, there is also the question of how gender quotas affect policy outcomes. Generally speaking, the policy impacts from gender quotas lead to the promotion of policies that benefit the general welfare. Clayton and Zetterberg (2018) examine whether gender quotas influence government spending priorities, focusing primarily on whether they lead to increased public health spending in 139 countries from 1995 to 2012. The authors analyze annual government spending data, focusing on public health, education, and the military. They find increased government spending on public health in countries where there was an increase in female representation (due to quotas). Furthermore, the health spending was offset by decreases in military spending and other categories. This provides evidence of women in legislatures prioritizing social investment and welfare-oriented policies.

Clayton (2021) continues to argue that with gender quotas, there will be increased attention to public goods—i.e., health, poverty, education—however, the effects are context-dependent on the factors of a country. She finds that quotas do not always lead to progressive gender policy changes specifically in areas such as health and education (health services, reproductive healthcare, and female education rates), violence against women (domestic violence laws and their enforcement), labor market policies (childcare, maternity leave, and equal pay), and lastly, legal and social equality among genders.

The findings presented show that the general impact of quotas is associated with increased legislative attention to women's interests, but that the effects are not universal. Outcomes are entirely dependent on various contextual factors: political institutions and party dynamics, the type of quota used, sociocultural norms, women's substantive representation, and the quota design and enforcement mechanisms. Some cases show limited policy change or more gender alienation in the legislature post-quota adoption.

Franceschet et al. (2012) continues this research by questioning the broader impact of gender quotas in legislation. They develop a framework to consider attributes of office holders, the promotion of group interests in policymaking, and the cultural and societal implications. They focus on the broader consequences of these gender quotas, not just the number of women elected. The authors establish that quotas should be examined across multiple dimensions, not just the numbers, but also the nature and effects of the representation. They establish that gender quota impact is not straightforward; simply increasing the number of women in government does not automatically lead to policy changes or promotion. Furthermore, these quotas can lead to unintended effects, meaning they can sometimes undermine women's legitimacy in government. While they do not offer a singular conclusion, they clearly state that understanding the impact of gender quotas requires a nuanced, multidimensional, and contextualized approach.

This raises the question of why quotas do not seem to eventually lead to institutional change. Even when quotas improve representation, there remain deep barriers—i.e., tokenism, backlash, and patriarchal norms. Paxton and Hughes (2015) and Franceschet et al. (2012) highlight culture as a limiting factor in terms of the effectiveness of gender quotas in legislation. This is corroborated by research in the business sector, which shows that, though quotas could be legal and legitimate, they continue to be limited in their ability to address root inequalities. Even in cases where there is clearly an increase in women's representation, it is unlikely to address the underlying barriers to gender equality, such as societal norms and culture (Holzhammer 2014).

Holzhammer (2014) argues that there are still structural barriers in place holding women back. Societal and cultural norms play a big part in the influence of women, especially when in power. Even with the support of a legitimate power structure upholding women, these structures cannot influence the underlying problems of the human mindset and opinion in regard to women. I build from this literature to argue why gender quotas have limited impact in resulting in policies that specifically help women.

Theoretical Argument

My argument rests on several key assumptions regarding legislators and the role of gender quotas in policymaking. First, I assume that legislators are self-interested. That is, I assume their voting behavior will align with what keeps their voters pleased and thus what keeps them in office. They will pursue their own policy preferences as well, but they will prioritize re-election concerns.

Regarding gender quotas, I also assume that while quotas can lead to more representation of women within legislatures, countries often adopt said quota policy in an effort to improve their appearance on the basis of gender equality. As such, these quotas are often more superficial in nature rather than substantive or transformative, as governments, which are led by self-interested politicians, want to appease their own populations or the general international community by implementing them.

Building from this, I argue that gender quotas alone do not fundamentally change oppressive systems nor promote women-based legislation. Power structures and general public opinion cannot be simply changed on the basis of allocating more seats to women in government. Because of this, gender quotas do not lead to fundamental policy promotion or approval that benefit women specifically. However, with gender quotas in place, it is more likely that it will lead to investment in policies that benefit the general public.

I argue that when women are elected to office, it is more likely that they will promote policies that are primarily focused on helping the most vulnerable in their communities. This protective form of representation is due to women themselves being a part of an underrepresented

group within society. Further, voters will expect this from women in power, reinforcing their focus on marginalized groups. Importantly, the policies that help these marginalized groups will often have tangible benefits for the whole population. For example, reducing poverty and increasing access to healthcare and education may help some groups more than others, but they are also beneficial to all people. When female legislators focus on these more universally beneficial policies, they are more likely to gain support from their male counterparts and other legislators (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018). In turn, this will help them build broader coalitions within the legislature and the general public to support their policies. Given this, I hypothesize:

HI: *Countries with legislative gender quotas will be more likely to pass policies that promote the general welfare, compared to countries without quotas.*

However, it is important to acknowledge that in situations where female legislators attempt to promote policies that are perceived as only benefiting the female population, they will likely not succeed. Given the male-dominated nature of most legislatures, especially in quota-adopting countries, such policies are often dismissed as serving a minority or too narrow of an interest and fail to gain sufficient support. Many legislators, especially male ones, do not see an electoral benefit in supporting policy that particularly helps women. Furthermore, even in countries where gender quotas are imposed, the majority of said mandates are still not met (Paxton, Hughes, and Painter 2009). This further inhibits the ability of women in power to build legislative coalitions to pass policies that benefit women more widely.

The root of the issue is that there are still deep-rooted structural barriers in place for women. While policy issues, such as maternal health, childcare, equal pay, and abortion access, can have tangible benefits for wider swaths of the population than just women—as they can have benefits for LGBTQ+ members, domestic partners, the family, or even men specifically—they continue to be viewed through a gendered lens. Society and cultural norms cannot be changed on the basis of legislation; rather, they are often changed based on mindsets and personal development. These biases are not just evident within legislatures but also in more public spaces as well (Holzhammer 2014). Thus, I hypothesize:

HII: *Countries with legislative gender quotas will not see an increase in policies that benefit women compared to countries without legislative gender quotas.*

Empirics

To test my hypotheses, I take a quantitative approach and analyze policy outcomes in the year 2023, the most recent year for which the information required is available. Using countries as the unit of analysis, I sampled 143 countries with legislative elections. Some countries were excluded due to data availability issues or the absence of true legislative elections.

Dependent Variables for Policy Output for the General Welfare

My dependent variable for HI is the policy output for the general welfare of a country in 2023. This includes policies aimed at improving the well-being of the entire population on healthcare, education, and overall livelihood. This was measured in two ways: through the Human Development Index and healthcare spending per capita in a country.

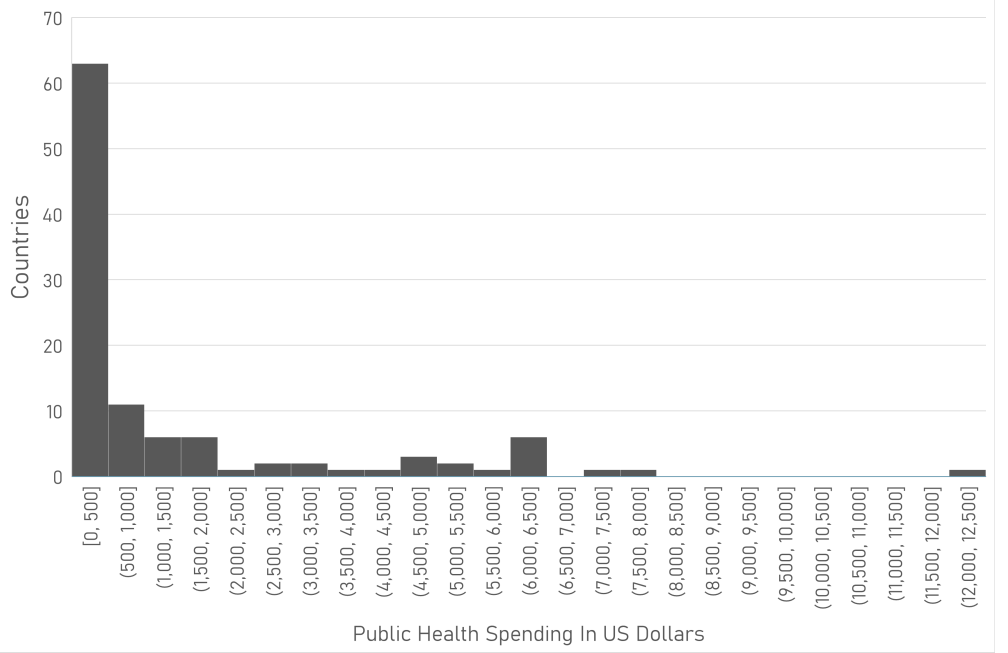
The Human Development Index (HDI) is a scale of policy achievements in a country based on well-being data from the United Nations Development Program. It factors in access to healthcare and life expectancy, access to education, standard of living, and income. Scores range from 0 to 1, with 1 being the best possible score. In my data set, the minimum HDI score was 0.419 from Mali, and the maximum was 0.972 from Iceland. The average HDI score across countries was 0.75. I chose this variable to replicate a scale of human development cross-nationally to compare the effects of having gender quotas in place versus not, and how this score can be affected by having more women in government.

The second measure of policy output for general welfare was per-capita healthcare spending per country in 2023, measured in US dollars by the World Bank. The minimum healthcare expenditure was $16.32 from Madagascar, while the maximum was from the United States, with $12,434.43. I chose to include this variable as to provide a data set showing implementation of health care policy—reflecting general welfare as health affects the entire population. It is important to note that the United States is a clear outlier on this variable. Although it ranks highest in healthcare spending, this is largely due to the structure of its health system—insurance costs and the overall price of healthcare services are significantly higher than other countries, leading to elevated government spending. Figure 1 shows this more clearly, with the only country closely accompanying the US being Switzerland, which spent $10,963.43 per capita. Across all countries in the data, the average healthcare spending per capita was $1,492.68.

Dependent Variables for Policy Output Benefiting Women

My dependent variable for HII covers the policy output that benefits women in particular, per country in 2023. This was also measured in two ways: through the maternal mortality rate of each country and how accessible a country's abortion policy is. Though I will make

Figure 1: Distribution of Public Health Spending per capita in 2023



The Figure shows the amount spent per capita by countries on healthcare, recorded in US dollars. Most countries spend between $16 and $2000 per capita. Towards the right side of the histogram, there is a clear outlier being the United States at $12,434.43. The next highest are Switzerland and Norway, though both countries still spend significantly less on healthcare compared to the US.

the argument that women's healthcare is more of a general welfare policy as it can affect the entire population—especially in terms of LGBTQ+ women, trans women, the family, and the partners of women. However, for the purpose of my research, I will be using these variables as a proxy for women-specific policies.

The first measure was the maternal mortality rate, used as a proxy for women's access to healthcare and support. Using data from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, I measured it as the number of female deaths per 100,000 live births from any cause related to pregnancy or its management. For this variable, the minimum was 1 death per 100,000 births from Belarus and Norway, while the maximum was 993 per 100,000 in Nigeria. The average global maternal mortality rate was 106.19 deaths per 100,000 live births.

The second measure was a dichotomous indicator for how accessible a country's abortion policy was. Using data from the Center for Reproductive Rights, I coded this variable as 1 for an accessible policy—meaning women can receive abortions on request or on broad social or

economic grounds nationwide, even if gestational limits exist. A restrictive abortion policy of any type was coded as 0. Out of the 143 countries measured, 70 had policies allowing for accessible abortion.

Independent Variable: Gender Quotas

My main independent variables cover whether a country has any kind of gender quotas in place for its legislature. Using data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, I coded countries with quotas in place as 1, and countries with no quotas as 0. Out of 143 countries, 110 had legislative gender quotas of some kind, including Austria, Croatia, Honduras, and South Korea. Furthermore, I created an additional variable to measure whether a country's gender quotas are codified into law, as some quotas are only voluntary. It is possible that those codified into law have a more meaningful impact. Out of the 110 countries with some form of gender quotas, only 84 had quotas codified into law. Examples of these include Italy, Liberia, Nicaragua, and Uganda.

Control Variables

I also include a series of variables to account for the other factors that could influence the outcomes of interest. I first control for the percentage of women in the lower house of the legislature to assess whether the presence of women in the legislature has an independent effect on policy from quotas. Though the desired output of having gender quotas is to have more women in the legislature, I decided to control for this variable as to show the comparative effect of whether more policy output is generated simply because women are there. This information comes from the Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline database, which focuses on global data in national parliaments, providing monthly rankings of women in legislatures by percentage. The minimum percentage of women in lower house legislatures in 2023 was 0%, from Papua New Guinea and Yemen, while the maximum was 61.3% from Rwanda. The average was 26.25%.

My next control variable was the democracy score of a country. This was included because regime type can influence the types of policy output observed. I measured this using the Democracy Index (2020) from The Economist, which uses a scale of 1–10, where 10 represents the most democratic countries and 1 represents the least. The minimum score was 1.13 from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the maximum was 9.81 from Norway. The average democracy score was 5.6.

My third control variable covered religiosity, as religion can strongly influence both government policy and legislative inclusion. I used data from the Pew Research Center, focusing on religious composition by country from 2010–2020. I specifically looked at the unaffiliated portion of the population to measure non-religious versus religious individuals in each coun-

try. For data coding purposes, any country with an unaffiliated score of <1% was coded as 1 for this variable. The minimum percentage of unaffiliated individuals was 1%, observed in several countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Egypt, Iran, and Thailand. The maximum was 72.8%, from the Czech Republic. The average unaffiliated score in this data was 11.44.

The final control variable was whether a country had a left-leaning government, included because such governments are typically more progressive on women's rights and social issues. I used information from the Global Parliament Index, which categorizes countries' ideological leanings, to code this variable. Left-leaning governments were coded as a 1, while right-leaning governments were coded as 0. Out of the 143 countries in my dataset, 47 were left-leaning in the time period examined.

Regression Analysis

When conducting my analysis, I estimated four separate regressions to evaluate my hypotheses. The first two analyses include the general welfare policies being promoted from all sampled countries as the dependent variable, while the second set of analyses focuses on policies promoting women specifically. My first regression focuses on the Human Development Index as the dependent variable to test my first hypothesis. The results are shown in Table 1.

I expected the quota variable to have a positive effect; however, there is a coefficient of -0.021, meaning it has the opposite effect. This indicates that countries with gender quotas seem to have lower HDI scores than other countries by 0.021 on the 1-point scale. This is contrary to my expectations in Hypothesis 1, though the effect is quite small. The P value is 0.510, showing that this effect is not statistically significant—meaning that the shown result could have other factors affecting the outcome. The legislated gender quota variable has a coefficient of -0.015, which again is inconsistent with my expectations. It shows that countries with legislated gender quotas will have an HDI score 0.015 lower than countries without legislated quotas. However, the effect is again quite small and not statistically significant.

The percentage of women in the lower house has a positive coefficient. For every extra percent of women in the lower house, the HDI increases by 0.001 on the 1-point scale. While the effect is small and not statistically significant, the direction of the effect is consistent with my expectations. The democracy score variable has a coefficient of 0.037, showing that a higher democracy score promotes more policies towards the general welfare. For every 1-point increase in democracy, the HDI goes up by 0.037 on the 1-point scale. While the effect is modest, it is statistically significant, meaning that this observed effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance. I also found similar results in terms of the unaffiliated religious variable, with a coefficient of 0.002, showing that having more religiously unaffiliated people within a country will promote more policy towards the general welfare of the public. However, the effect is small, despite being statistically significant. The coefficient of the ideological lean of a

Table 1: HDI Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	*p*-value
Intercept	0.536	0.032	<0.05
Quota	-0.021	0.031	0.510
Legislated Quota	-0.015	0.026	0.567
Percent women (lower)	0.001	0.001	0.297
Democracy Score	0.037	0.006	<0.05
Religiosity (unaffiliated)	0.002	0.001	0.007
Ideological Lean of Legislature	-0.037	0.021	0.083

The table shows a regression analysis of gender quotas and how they affect the Human Development Index of countries. The results do not support Hypothesis 1, as I expected a positive effect on the two quota variables.

country suggests that left-leaning countries have a lower HDI by 0.037. This is contrary to expectations, though the effect just misses standard levels of statistical significance. Overall, my first regression indicates that there is minimal to no support for my first hypothesis in terms of gender quotas having a positive impact on the general welfare policies being promoted.

In my second regression, I used per capita public health spending as the dependent variable as an alternative test of Hypothesis 1. The results are in Table 2. When conducting this regression, I expected a positive effect on quotas in accordance with my first hypothesis. However, there was a negative impact of -54.21 dollars, on which the P-value is 0.902. This result suggests that when gender quotas are introduced there is a possibility that health care spending per capita will decline by 54.21 US dollars. Though this shows that the effect is not statistically significant, there still is a large negative effect on health spending when any gender quotas are in place. For the independent variable of legislated gender quotas, I found the negative impact is greater with a coefficient of -780.55. This suggests that countries with legislated quotas spend $780.55 less per capita on healthcare than countries without legislated quotas, an exceptionally large effect that is statistically significant and unexpected. However, what is important to point out is that in this case, the US does not have legislative quotas or any quota type at all. Furthermore, it is an outlier on public health spending. This could affect the result, skewing it towards a greater negative impact.

When focusing on my control variables, I did find that when there is a larger percentage of women in the lower legislature, there is a positive coefficient of 27.4076. In other words, spending increases by $24.41 for every extra percent of women in the lower house. This is a meaningful and statistically significant effect, as it shows that when there are more women in the legislature, regardless of whether there are quotas, there will be more policies promoting general welfare. The democracy score variable has a coefficient of 505.3391, expressing that for every extra point a country is more democratic, per capita spending goes up by $505. This

Table 2: Public Health Spending Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	*p*-value
Intercept	-1846.6	456.0	<0.05
Quota	-54.2	441.0	0.90
Legislated Quota	-780.5	372.1	<0.05
Percent women (lower)	27.4	11.3	<0.05
Democracy Score	505.3	77.7	<0.05
Religiosity (unaffiliated)	37.9	10.9	<0.05
Ideological Lean of Legislature	-436.9	300.1	0.15

The table shows regression results focusing on the effect gender quotas and my control variables have on public health spending from the sampled countries. Contrary to expectations, having quotas has a negative effect.

effect is large and statistically significant, as it indicates that when a country has a higher democracy score, there is a clear priority for health spending compared to countries lower on the democracy scale.

The religiosity variable has a coefficient of 37.9248, showing that when there is a greater number of unaffiliated religious members of a country, public health spending increases. The effect is also statistically significant. However, when there is a left lean in terms of the ideology of the legislature, there is a negative coefficient of -436.8863, meaning spending decreases by $436.89 per capita. The effect is not statistically significant and is not consistent with expectations.

Concluding my first two regression analyses, I found there is a negative correlation between having gender quotas and the promotion of policies for the general welfare of the population. This, in turn, does not support my first hypothesis.

Table 3: Maternal Morality Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	*p*-value
Intercept	248.1	40.6	<0.05
Quota	13.9	39.3	0.72
Legislated Quota	202	33.1	0.54
Percent women (lower)	-1.8	1.0	0.07
Democracy Score	-20.5	6.9	<0.05
Religiosity (unaffiliated)	-1.0	0.9	0.28
Ideological Lean of Legislature	30.3	26.7	0.25

The table shows a regression analysis focusing on the effect that gender quotas and my control variables have on maternal mortality from the sampled countries. I hypothesized that gender quotas would have little to no effect on this variable. In practice, they have positive but not statistically significant effects.

When conducting my regression analysis for my second hypothesis, I focused on two dependent variables: maternal mortality and the accessibility of abortion policy. My first regression for this hypothesis will focus on maternal mortality. The results are shown in Table 3 as seen on the next page. I expected quotas to have little to no change in results compared to countries without quotas in place. However, when a quota is in place in a country, there is an expected 13.9 increase in women dying due to maternal/pregnancy-related problems. However, this is not statistically significant. Furthermore, when legislated quotas are in place, 20.15 more women are expected to die due to maternal complications. Though this is also not statistically significant. These effects are large but not statistically distinguishable from zero, so this provides some support for Hypothesis II.

In terms of my control variables, I did find that when there is a larger percentage of women in the legislature, the maternal mortality rate will decrease by 1.8 fewer women per year for each percent. Though this effect just misses standard levels of statistical significance. However, when a country's democracy score increases by one, I find that 20.51 fewer women are likely to die due to maternal complications, and this is a statistically significant effect. Furthermore, for each 1 percent increase in unaffiliated religious citizens in a country, I find that 1.05 fewer women per year are likely to suffer from maternal complications, though this is not a statistically significant effect. Unexpectedly, however, when the ideological lean of the legislature is to the left, I find that 30.31 more women are more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications, though this also is not statistically significant.

My second regression analysis for my second hypothesis will focus on my dependent variable of accessible abortion policy. The results are in Table 4 as seen on the next page. Prior to conducting this regression, I hypothesized no change in access to abortion care, whether or not there are gender quotas implemented in government. I find that in countries with quotas, we should expect the probability that there is a permissible policy to be 0.3% less than countries without quotas. This is a small effect and is not statistically significant. However, when legislated quotas are implemented, the probability of a permissive policy decreases by almost 16%. This is a large effect in an unexpected direction, but it is not statistically significant. Overall, they lend some support to Hypothesis II.

In terms of my control variables, I found that the probability of permissible policy increases by 0.89% for every 1% of women in the legislature—this effect is also statistically significant. When a country increases its democracy score, it is also 2.4% more likely to have access to permissible abortion care, though this is not a statistically significant effect. Moreover, for every 1% of religiously unaffiliated citizens within a country, it is 1.02% more likely to have accessible abortion care. This is statistically significant. However, when the ideological backing of a legislature is to the left it is 1.03% less likely that there will be a permissive policy in place, though this effect is not statistically significant.

Table 4: Accessible Abortion Policy Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	*p*-value
Intercept	0.103	0.123	0.40
Quota	-0.004	0.119	0.96
Legislated Quota	-0.156	0.101	0.12
Percent women (lower)	0.009	0.003	<0.05
Democracy Score	0.024	0.021	0.26
Religiosity (unaffiliated)	0.010	0.003	<0.05
Ideological Lean of Legislature	-0.010	0.081	0.90

The table exhibits a regression analysis focusing on the effect that gender quotas and my control variables have on accessible abortion policy from the sampled countries. I hypothesized that gender quotas would have little to no effect on this variable. Quotas seem to have negative but not statistically significant effects.

From all four regression analyses, I have found different and unexpected results for both hypotheses. I found no support for Hypothesis I. Gender quotas do not seem to improve policy outcomes for general welfare. Further, for Hypothesis II, I find that, if anything, gender quotas lead to worse outcomes for women, though in practice these effects may be minimal.

Conclusion

Through my research, I have found partially supported results with respect to my first and second hypotheses. In terms of my first hypothesis, instead of growth in areas related to general welfare, I found that gender quotas are associated with negative effects. This finding is contradictory to previous research—Clayton and Zetterberg (2018)—as they found that gender quotas have a positive effect on general welfare-specific policies. Moreover, I proposed that in terms of women-specific legislation, there would be no effect. However, I found that quotas have negative correlations with the adoption of women-specific policies, though the effects were small. This was a somewhat unexpected outcome, but it supports my overall claim that to have real progressive change to promote women in society requires a change in societal mindsets and overall culture, which cannot simply be legislated. Instead, it seems that gender quotas are underwhelming in nature as they do not address the root inequalities in society blocking women from making real policy change.

Though the mechanisms used by countries to promote equality in politics appear superficial in nature, my research does indicate that having women in politics is beneficial to the adoption of general welfare and women-related policies. The real solution to this epidemic is a change in societal and cultural norms. Changing the widespread mindset that women are unfit for the political realm, through education and implementation of access to politics, will

be the best ways to establish equality. This can be done through initiatives such as mentorship and training programs, allowing for women to gain access to the political realm. I also suggest for more progressive education of younger generations, promoting inclusivity of women in politics without creating the mindset of a male-dominated sphere. This can be achieved by acknowledging women-led initiatives in government and providing clear examples of women-led governments or parties.

It is important to note that my research is not without its limitations, especially in terms of data. For example, my control variable of ideological lean of the legislature did result in unexpected outcomes. This statistic can be attributed to how the variable was coded. All left-leaning governments were coded as a 1 and right-leaning as a 0; however, this does not account for left-leaning authoritarian regimes and dictatorships nor more typically progressive countries with right-leaning heads of government—which could restrict the types of outcomes I observed. Furthermore, my public health spending variable had a large outlier with the United States spending the most per capita. However, this large amount of spending is due to the United States overpriced healthcare system and the use of insurance. I decided to keep the United States within my regression analysis, as it provides more data within my research, as it is a country without gender quotas. In further research, I would suggest running another comparative regression analysis leaving the US out of the study to see how it affects the healthcare variable.

I would also like to acknowledge the variable of maternal mortality rating equalizing to women's access to healthcare, as it does not take into account variables such as the development of a country. Which I believe could be another control variable to investigate having an effect of adoption of general welfare and women-specific policy. This variable was unfortunately left out of my empirics due to time constraints, though if I were to further research, I would include it to provide some intersectionality of women in terms of the livelihood of a country. However, in terms of this variable, it could also be argued that separating them on a class label by the development of a country could be interpreted as suggesting that less developed countries should have lower standards of women's rights due to lack of resources, though I would argue that there should not be different standards.

In conclusion, if I were to continue my research, it would be important to expand on my four dependent variables, adding a greater variety of policy outputs. Moreover, I would expand my independent and control variables by introducing the development of a country and how that could influence the promotion and adoption of a policy, without setting different standards as discussed earlier in terms of healthcare priorities.

Though there are many ways to improve upon this work, it is still an important contribution to the discussions and debates regarding women's rights and gender quotas. As Holzhammer (2017) suggests, though these quotas are legitimate in practice, they still lack sufficient support to address the problem at hand—societal and cultural mindsets. My work suggests

that gender quotas lead to tokenism and ultimately backlash and a lack of respect for women in politics. However, perhaps the most effective way to obtain progressive women's policy is through having women in the legislature. Gender quotas are likely just not the correct mechanism to do so.

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Motherland

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I

He said my name
Is his favorite instrument
He'd like to play me
Misshape me between his broken fingers
Tune me to bemoan wretched memories
The ones that led him here
Still— across the checkout counter
In our exchange
Naming the songs of players from landlocked countries

But, his father is from Senegal
He is a first generation American
He will try smiling cordially
He will be too inept to cover his snarl

I notice congealed tears have married his face
Should I wish to make them fall for him...?
His stiff reach for my hand
My unashamed, bitter
Lonely grasp
Binding
An instrument reminding him of his manhood

"Where are you from?"
Give him an answer.

II

No, it's not fair.
You're not made of steel.
White folk scurried in and out.
Others have drowned.
You never meant to hurt anybody.
You're too terrified to believe that.
No one knows how to love you now.

"Where do I know you from?"
Please…

III

Now he wants
To echo into your beaten eardrums
These soft cries and tired melodies
And imitate a rhythm that's produced only by our ugly hips
Until our tines are inextricably linked
Until our jaws lock from sparring
An indurated rut
Separable by intervention
By copper bullets

"Do you know where you're from?"
How can I tell everyone?

IIII

If it were up to me
Maybe my thighs would be a cloister
Maybe my hair a corrugated roof
Maybe I could have laid him like a brick
Maybe I could have cemented him in place
Just so you'd remember
I am not from here.