

John Paul II's Apostolic Letter [*Mulieris Dignatatem*](#) (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) emphasized that the central event of salvation history—the Paschal Mystery—occurred through the mediation of the woman Mary, and that women have a moral and spiritual strength. [*Gaudium et Spes*](#), the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Church in the Modern World, affirmed in 1965 that:

all women and men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all.¹

Today, however, in cultures that give preference to male offspring, 100 million women that one would expect to find in census data are simply missing.² An estimated 129 million girls and women in 29 countries have been subjected to female genital mutilation.³ Estimates of the number of persons trafficked each year across international borders range from 800,000 to two million; 80% of these persons are women and girls, and 79% of this trafficking takes the form of sexual exploitation.⁴

In the United States, challenges facing young women include:

Media Culture

- Women are sexualized in television, music videos, movies, magazines, the Internet, and advertising. Sexualization ascribes value only to physical sexual appeal or behavior and objectifies a human person as a commodity for another's sexual use. According to a [report](#) of the American Psychological Association, the effects of this media culture on young women include anxiety, shame, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.⁵
- According to Family Safe Media, 12% of Internet websites are pornographic and 25% of search engine requests are for pornographic material.⁶ Seventy percent of teens surveyed in a Kaiser Foundation study were exposed to Internet pornography without even seeking it out.⁷ An analysis of scenes in popular pornographic videos found that 88.2% include physical aggression against women and 48.7% contain verbal aggression.⁸ There is substantial evidence that this pornographic culture does harm to the integrity of both women and men.⁹

Sexual Harassment and Violence

- According to one study, 83% of girls in secondary schools experienced sexual harassment from peers. Another study found that 62% of college women were sexually harassed at some point in the course of their college careers, and sexual harassment has also been documented in the work place. Its adverse consequences are both mental and physical.¹⁰
- 1 in 6 women in the United States have experienced stalking.¹¹

- Nearly 1 in 5 women in the United States have been raped.¹² A 2001 review of multiple studies found that the number of women reporting an experience of sexual violence ranged from 14.8% to 36.1%.¹³ Among the women reporting rape to the National Women’s Study, 32.3% were between the ages of 11 and 17 when the rape occurred, 29.3% were less than 11 years old, and 22.2% were between 18 and 24 years old.¹⁴ Research indicates that sexual violence “has a devastating impact on victims’ emotional and physical health.”¹⁵

Hook-up Culture

- There are strong pressures on youth at many secondary schools, colleges, and universities to participate in a social culture characterized by parties in which women dress in scanty clothing, drink alcohol, and engage in hook-up sexual encounters. [Studies](#) correlate this culture with the incidence of sexually-transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies and abortions, depression, sadness, and low self-esteem.¹⁶ Most young women and men, observes Donna Freitas in her analysis of this culture, are unhappy with a status quo they have not invented and “want to find a better way forward.”¹⁷

Insufficient Maternal Leave

- The United States is one of the few nations that does not mandate paid maternity leave for women who work outside the home.¹⁸ Even employers who do grant maternity leave rarely provide the six months recommended by pediatricians as the minimum time a mother should be supported in nursing an infant.

Inadequate Support for Crisis Pregnancies

- Approximately one-fourth of women in the United States have undergone an abortion. Often, according to [Project Rachel Ministry](#), “these were women who were challenged and stressed by the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy, and the people on whom they normally would rely for support in difficult circumstances were unable, unwilling, or unavailable to help with the crisis pregnancy. Boyfriends, even husbands, said they weren’t ‘ready for fatherhood.’” According to Project Rachel, women who have had abortions may experience grief, depression, guilt, anger, substance abuse, suicidal feelings, and post-traumatic stress.¹⁹

Single-Parenting and Poverty

- Families headed by a single adult are more likely to be headed by a woman, and almost 31% of households headed by a single woman were living below the poverty line in 2012.²⁰

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 29.

² Amartya Sen, "More than 100 Million Women Are Missing," *The New York Review of Books* (20 December 1990); <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1990/dec/20/more-than-100-million-women-are-missing/>.

³ <http://www.un.org/en/events/femalegenitalmutilationday/>.

⁴ <http://www.talithakum.info/index.php?sez=9&sotsez=3&lang=1>.

⁵ See the Report of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls at <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>.

⁶ http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html.

⁷ <http://kff.org/health-costs/report/generation-rx-com-how-young-people-use/>.

⁸ Ana J. Bridges et al., "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update," *Violence against Women* 16 (2010): 1065-1085.

⁹ See, for example, Jill Manning, *What's the Big Deal about Pornography? A Guide for the Internet Generation* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Books, 2008); William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2009); Eric Owens, Richard Behun, Jill Manning, and Rory Reid, "The Impact of Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 19 (2012) 99-122.

¹⁰ Phoebe Morgan and James E. Gruber, "Sexual Harassment: Violence against Women at Work and in Schools," in *Sourcebook on Violence against Women*, 2nd ed., eds. Claire M. Renzetti, Jeffrey L. Edleson, and Raquel Kennedy Bergen, eds., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), 75-92.

¹¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/>.

¹² <http://www.cdc.gov/violencePrevention/RPE/index.html>.

¹³ Rebecca Campbell and Stephanie Townsend, "Defining the Scope of Sexual Violence against Women," in *Sourcebook on Violence against Women*, 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶ Anne Hendershott and Nicholas Dunn, "The 'Hook-Up' Culture on Catholic Campuses: A Review of the Literature," *Studies in Catholic Higher Education* (June 2011): available at <http://www.catholicculture.org/Culture/Library/SpecialItems/The-Hook-Up-Culture-on-Catholic-Campuses-A-Review-of-the-Literature.pdf>.

¹⁷ Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 13.

¹⁸ Laura Addati, Naomi Cassirer, and Katherine Gilchrist, *Maternity and Paternity Leave at Work: Law and Practice across the World* (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2014). See http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_242615.pdf.

¹⁹ <http://hopeafterabortion.com/>.

²⁰ <http://www.nclj.org/poverty-in-the-us.php>.