Phoenix Street is a single-lane road in a disadvantaged neighborhood known as Ballyfermot, just west of the Dublin city centre. Each of the houses on Phoenix Street are identical two story, brick-fronted, terraced cottages. Mick Gaynor, a retired mechanical technician, lives in Number 27. He has lived alone since his wife passed away four years ago. Mick is nice fellow, approachable, easy-to-talk-to, and funny. Despite these qualities, Mick’s life is a lonely one. Mick has no family in Dublin and his closest relatives (a niece and nephew) live five hours from Dublin in County Donegal. Aside from short trips to the parish church and the local supermarket, Mick rarely leaves his house. When his wife was still alive, Mick led a very active life, attending various social gatherings sponsored by societies of which his wife was a member. At these meetings, Mick would often socialise with other men and women. Since his wife passed away, however, Mick has found that keeping up these social contacts has proven too difficult for him.

In 2008, Mary McAleese, the President of Ireland, announced the launch of a new initiative which seeks to address the roots of societal norms which have led to a starkly higher rate of social isolation among Irish men than among Irish women of the same age. On the occasion of the launch, President McAleese said: 'I often attend senior citizens events, and one of the things that would perplex me would be the vast number of women and the small number of men at these events. I would ask where all the men are. They just are not as good at social engagements as women. Rural men living alone are particularly vulnerable'.

That this isolation occurs at such a high rate gives some indication of how difficult people can find it, particularly Irish men, to discuss their personal lives. This may have to do with the way in which the family, as a social unit, functions in Irish society. The family unit (that of a man, woman, and occasionally children) is held in high regard in Ireland. The institution of the family is protected by specific language in the Irish Constitution. The Irish public generally accepts that one’s immediate family is the first point of contact for all concerns. The prevailing view of the family is that the 'man of the house' is the chief breadwinner, while women and children stay at home. In recent years, there has been a growing number of households in which both parents engage in full-time employment, but, even in these scenarios, studies have shown that the women in each household end up contributing far more hours to cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing than their male counterparts.

Family matters are frequently viewed as private matters and the family home is frequently viewed as a private space. Social drinking in public arenas, most commonly pubs or alehouses, plays a significant role in the daily lives of Irish people. Socialisation occurs far more frequently in the public space of a pub than in the private space of a family home. What one says or how one acts in the public forum of a pub, where intoxicating beverages are a common feature, is commonly kept quite distinct from the more private words and actions behind closed doors within a family unit. This public/private culture is quite strong in

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present day Ireland and, as such, there is a certain generally accepted sense that subjects of
a personal nature are taboo. This is particularly true with cases of domestic violence.

There is no way of knowing exactly how many cases of domestic violence occur each year. A
national study, conducted in 2005 by the National Crime Council of Ireland, found that 1 in 7
Irish women have experienced severe abusive behavior of a physical, sexual, or emotional
nature from a partner at some times in their lives. The survey estimates that 213,000
women in Ireland have been severely abused by a partner.2 213,000 people is about 5% of
the total population of Ireland.

There are a number of practicing and policy-based organisations operating in Ireland to
address cases of domestic violence. Irish Women’s Aid and SAFE Ireland are two NGOs
working to raise awareness of domestic violence among the Irish public. A 24-hour
emergency phone line is also available. State organisations, such as the Irish Equality
Authority and the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based
Violence, function to secure needed funding and implement the law. Other groups, such as
the not-for-profit group AMEN, serve as a support system for male victims of domestic
violence. A national housing organisation, Threshold, provides advice and guidance to
anyone seeking alternative accommodation or emergency housing.

One might ask what role the church is playing in relation to domestic violence. In Ireland,
90% of the population identify as Roman Catholic. The Catholic Church in Ireland funds
and promotes the Catholic Marriage Care Service. This is a service that married men or women
can avail of for counseling, therapy, and other supports (homosexual couples and unmarried
'co-habiting' couples are ineligible). Among married couples in Ireland, the rate of uptake of
the services offered by the Church is quite low. The Church offers reasons why this might be
so on its own website, as follows:

Because couples sometimes see this type of [service] as an admission that there is
something wrong with their relationship, it can be difficult to convince them
otherwise. Another reason for couple’s reluctance is that men can be reluctant to get
involved, perhaps from a fear of change or it may be from the point of view that it is
not a macho thing to do. 3

There is space for the Irish Catholic Church to do more in relation to raising awareness of
domestic violence and in relation to outreach for victims. In 2010, however, secular groups
have taken the lead in championing the rights of women, men, and children to live lives free
from the threat of violence and the related physical, social, and economic suffering.

Addressing domestic violence in a holistic way necessarily involves addressing the roots of
societal constructions of behavior for men and women alike. Perhaps both the Church and

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2 D Watson and S Parsons, ‘Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland: Report on the National
accessed 11 November 2010.

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the State have a good deal to learn from the experiences of Mick Gaynor, and from the experiences of many other Irishmen and Irishwomen. Discussions of gender roles and the impact of domestic violence must not only occur in the halls of academia and on the pages of magazines and newspapers, but also, and perhaps most crucially, in local pubs all around Ireland. Both the Church and the State have roles to play in breaking down the social stigma associated with discussing private affairs in public. If the majority of the Irish public is comfortable discussing domestic violence down in the pub then we, as a society, will be well on our way towards securing a safe and just Ireland for all.

John Delap is a Roman Catholic living in Dublin, Ireland. Originally from New York City, John studied at the Irish School of Ecumenics before moving to a position with the Access Service at Dublin Institute of Technology. He is working on rebuilding the Student Christian Movement in Ireland, so please send him an email if you are even mildly interested in getting involved jodelap@gmail.com.

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