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Author of controversial Washington Post op-ed addresses bishops

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins
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Did you happen to read the *Washington Post* op-ed on Tuesday that seemed to incite the outrage of every major publication on the Internet? You know, the op-ed that argued that one way to end violence against women is for women to stop sleeping around and get married?

The op-ed was originally titled, "One way to end violence against women? Stop taking lovers and get married," with the subhead, "The data show that #yesallwomen would be safer hitched to their baby daddies."

But the headline created such a firestorm that the editors soon changed it to: "One way to end violence against women? Married dads," with the subhead, "The data show that #yesallwomen would be safer with fewer boyfriends around their kids." (The webpage's address still bears the original title.)

Now here's the kicker for Catholics. One of the co-authors of the piece is W. Bradford Wilcox. Guess who Wilcox addressed Thursday? The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The topic? That's right: marriage.

Wilcox is associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia and the director of the National Marriage Project, which is housed at UVA.

According to its website, "The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability."

Sounds innocuous enough. But Wilcox and his project were heavily involved in the conception, publication and production of a controversial paper called "New Family Structures Study" by Mark Regnerus* in June 2012. The paper alleged "that children raised by same-sex parents are more likely to attempt suicide and experience sexual abuse than children raised by a married mother and father."

The study was often cited in proposed legislation and legal decisions in the U.S. and abroad that blocked or attempted to block LGBT couples' rights to marry and adopt children.

It's no wonder, then, that the bishops -- who this week decided to stay the course on their religious liberty and anti-same-sex-marriage campaigns -- would want to call forth Wilcox's wisdom.

Wilcox's latest op-ed, which he co-authored with Robin Fretwell Wilson (a legal scholar at Washington and Lee University), was a response to a new movement, known by its hashtag #YesAllWomen, that emerged in response to the recent shooting at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Because the shooter's rage seemed significantly motivated by misogyny, #YesAllWomen generated a large social media conversation about violence against women.

Wilcox and Wilson believe that a crucial point has been missing in this discourse:

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Obscured in the public conversation about the violence against women is the fact that *some other men* are more likely to protect women, directly and indirectly, from the threat of male violence: married biological fathers. The bottom line is this: Married women are notably safer than their unmarried peers, and girls raised in a home with their married father are markedly less likely to be abused or assaulted than children living without their own father.

Journalists and columnists from all corners of the Internet have done a fine job picking apart the op-ed's argument.

At the website fivethirtyeight.com, writer Mona Chalabi pointed out that while intimate violence rates appear to be lower among married women, Wilcox and Wilson failed "to rule out the possibility of confounding variables."

"The marrying kind tend to be more educated, wealthier and whiter,' so the focus on marriage should come with some exploration of the fact that education, income and race could also partly explain trends in intimate violence," Chalabi writes.

Chalabi even talked to Shannon Catalano, the author of the 2012 Department of Justice study upon which Wilcox and Wilson rely for much of their analysis. Not surprisingly, Catalano says they presented her statistics without sufficient context.

"The graph which they used from my report does show clear differences between intimate violence rates -- but that is because it is only showing one variable; household composition. The story could change if we started to control for other factors," she told Chalabi.

When the Department of Justice did try to control for other factors in a 2000 study, it found that couples with status disparities experience more intimate partner violence than do couples with no status disparities. It also found that women were more likely to report intimate partner violence if their education levels were higher than those of their male partners.

"We don't know if married women are more or less likely to report to the Bureau of Justice Statistics that they are being victimized by an intimate partner than unmarried women," Chalabi explains. Wilcox and Wilson's "op-ed never addresses the fact that relationship status could affect reporting rates -- and therefore the reliability of the authors' conclusions."

Wilcox and Wilson completely ignore such variables in their narrow interpretation of the statistics. But the deeper injury done by their op-ed, of course, is that their essay ultimately arrives at the same old tired, harmful conclusion: shaming and blaming women who are victims of gender-based violence.

Over at Salon, assistant editor Katie McDonough summed up overwhelming reaction of most readers:

The actual lesson of the social science is not that marriage is the solution to violence against women, but that cultivating nonviolence, trust and open communication in our relationships -- and in men -- really matters.

Being legally married to a woman does not mean that a man will not violently abuse her. Being the biological father of a child does not mean that a father will not violently abuse that child.

The problem is not unmarried women. The problem is abusive men.

Near the end of their essay, Wilcox and Wilson make almost flippant allusion to the film "The Burning Bed" to apparently make it clear that they are aware that abuse also happens within marriage, writing:

Marriage is no panacea when it comes to male violence. But married fathers are much less likely to resort to violence than men who are not tied by marriage or biology to a female ... [M]arried fathers provide direct protection by watching out for the physical welfare of their wives and daughters.

Ironically, that opinion would almost seem to contradict some of the arguments that the U. S. bishops have used in their attempts to put clergy sex abuse into perspective. As Cardinal Timothy Dolan famously wrote in his blog in April 2011:

Studies tell us that most children sexually abused are victims of their own fathers or other family members.

Obviously, the U.S. bishops couldn't have predicted that their invited speaker would be embroiled in a massive controversy about violence against women just days before he was scheduled to address their conference.

But the truth is, Wilcox and the National Marriage Project have spent years perpetuating the ideas expressed in this recent op-ed.

Philip N. Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland who has dedicated a lot of his own blogging to monitoring Wilcox, made this point about the National Marriage Project on Tuesday:

Their audience is married people who feel superior to women who aren't married, who want to coerce women into marriage -- or cast them out. The friendly side of this is paternalistic shaming, the unfriendly side is violent shaming; both are expressions of patriarchal outlook.

And that shared patriarchal outlook, sadly, may be precisely why the bishops were so eager to hear Wilcox.

**An earlier version of this column misspelled Regnerus' last name.*

[Jamie L. Manson is NCR books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her NCR columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

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