Milo Art

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Poor, Irish, Woman in Education

I have been bullied my whole life. It started in primary school. It could have been for various reasons. Perhaps it was my height. I can't recall a day that passed without someone, either child or adult, commenting on how short I was. They would often rest their arm on my head or pick me up over their shoulder. Perhaps it was because I presented myself as a non-stereotypical girl. (I was labeled as a Yahoo girl, a loud and attractive girl who loves to party. This always confused me because I am certainly not loud, and I wasn't very social at the time.) Perhaps it was because I lived in a home with nine other people. There were belongings stacked up on the wrap-around porch. So, anytime someone found out where I lived, they would ask, "When are you having the yard sale?" Perhaps it was because I am Irish. I was often sexually harassed by boys to give them "Irish head." More than once, I was sexually assaulted through force and/or promises of protection. To be fair, it was probably a mixture of all these characteristics. I was a poor, rebellious little Irish girl, and I was seen as a play toy for many people.

This sort of start to life is not ideal. I developed PTSD. My first full-blown panic attack was on my 13th birthday. I became very self-conscious. I stopped trusting anyone who mentioned my height. Being called cute or "fun-sized" became the worst insult. I had to learn to protect myself, both physically and emotionally. I joined cross country and ran about 3 miles

every day. Along with the labor I performed at home, I became fast and strong. My worsening mental state made my efforts nearly worthless though. No matter how tough I built myself to be, anxiety crippled me every time. Once someone knew my weakness, I was no match. I continued to be a target of sexual and emotional abuse. I coped by focusing on my schoolwork. Home was bad, school was bad, but learning gave me hope. Learning gave me purpose.

School faculty were generally no help. Some teachers believed in me, mostly the ones who personally had me in their classrooms. Others, though, often joined in. Adults would also call me demeaning names like “cute little girl” and “the little green girl.” Then, the day came to discuss college applications with the principal of my high school, he said, “I applaud you for making it this far. You have good grades, but people like you just don’t do well in 4-year universities. I highly recommend a 2-year community college if you decide to continue school. I suggest taking some time off though before you make a decision.” This broke me.

I became very discouraged. I did as he suggested. I didn’t apply to any colleges or universities even though my GPA was 3.75, and I had been at the top of my class with honors since middle school. I imagine the teachers who believed in me became disappointed. This shattered my hopes though. It was the first time I had even talked to the man, and it was also the first time anyone had been so direct with me. As I walked out, his assistant at the desk reassured me that he was the best of character judgment. So, I believed him. I no longer saw school as my way out. I could only rely on my looks. So, that’s what I did. I got on hard drugs and gave in to the solicitation. By graduation, age 17, I was a pill addict, single mother, and sex slave.

My desire for college did not go away. I made a fleeting promise that I would return once my child was in kindergarten. I kept the promise to myself. When the time came, I sucked up my fears and enrolled in Nashville State Community College. With the words of my former principal still ringing in my ears, I did not feel fully committed. That, plus other struggles happening, I did awful. I made multiple Ds but also one A. Seeing that A, even amongst the Ds, sparked my past determination. I adjusted a bit and kept going. I got a work-study job and never gave up. The professors were kind and encouraging. The students were just as odd and nerdy as me. I was offered a full ride to study abroad. I was supposed to study literature in Ireland for an entire semester. Though COVID-19 canceled the trip, the opportunity highlighted my capability.

Since continuing my education at Los Angeles City College, bullying has increased again. Comments about my height started rolling in again. People bluntly told me that I should be ashamed for being Irish. My work-study job was threatened. I feared for my success. I wrote a letter about why being Irish is important and not shameful. I kept my job but was put in the back, away from the other workers and students. A couple of professors have commented on how they think Irish people are not important to America. I have had several more students bully me for my height and culture.

To cope, I have stayed focused. I replace the insults with encouragement that I have received. I have allowed learning to be my greatest strength again. I have found faculty that are Irish as well, one who is Italian. They understand me and encourage me. I also get great support from outside resources such as mental health care and legal services. I have sued a couple of

people who have been persistent in their harassment. That helped me feel more in control, and hopefully, it helped them realize that it is not acceptable behavior.

Research from Collins shows that there is a long history of Irish discrimination. The Irish, compared to the British and Germans, have a slow social mobility rate. In other words, the Irish are expected to work harder to meet higher expectations. I was a child in poverty, trying to use education to rise from my low socioeconomic situation. The principal did not see me as someone who could do well enough in higher education. At that moment, I was discriminated against and denied help to change my status. As far as the school was concerned, I was damned to live in poverty for the rest of my days. If I did want to accomplish intra-generational mobility, I would have to work harder than my peers. I would have to find my own motivation and figure out how to move through the process on my own. This is all because the principal decided that he would not allow me the same assistance. Considering the frequent mocking of my ethnicity, I find it fair to assume his decision was based on me being Irish. This would relate to the historical records that indicate Irish social mobility was less steep than other European ethnicities.

Research from McCarthy shows that Irish women are historically invaluable to modern medicine, labor laws, and women's rights. However, they were still overly represented in domestic and sex work. In other words, Irish women earned higher social status if it were only accounting adequacy. Still, though, these same women were subjected to a life of domestic work and sexual exploitation. I worked very hard to be a good student. I wanted to do nothing other than learn and be valuable. Still, though, I was subjected to harassment for "Irish head." My intellect was constantly ignored while my ability to provide pleasure was prioritized. I

became a house servant for a while, and I was sexually exploited for decades. Of course, this is not something unique to Irish women. Women of many ethnicities are objectified. However, when I was harassed or assaulted, people often referred to my ethnicity. This leads me to believe that I can reference the history of Irish exploitation when determining the cause. Irish women have historically been victimized even when contributing so much to society. I am Irish, people commented on my Irishness, I was presenting as woman, people commented on my womanhood, I contributed much [for a school-aged kid] to my society, I was victimized, and other women of other ethnicities were not victimized. Thus, I am led to believe that it was being both a woman and Irish that had my efforts to be valuable undermined for sex work instead.

The final bit of research I will mention is the history of Irish anxiety. Dowd writes about the assimilation of the Irish during the mid to late 1900s. The Irish seemed to be getting fed up with the lack of opportunity and being pinned as the bad guys. This led many to become, more or less, the bad guys. When doing as they were told out of fear or frustration, their Irish culture assimilated into what is considered the white race. The Irish became a part of racism and anti-labor movements. This left older generations with disappointment in themselves. They feared that they did not pass down the good faith of the Irish culture to their children. Dowd emphasizes the anxiety of the Irish at this time. The older generations were mourning their past, and the younger generations were trying to improve their future. Audie Murphy also emphasized the effects of mental health, particularly PTSD in veterans. He led to an increase in medical research on PTSD.

Again, I can't say that mental health issues are unique to the Irish. However, Celtic culture seems to not endorse the stigma on mental health. In other words, I think the Irish are known to be anxious because we are more open about being anxious. Sometimes, religious Irish people do label mental disorders as something spiritual. Nonetheless, they consider it an issue that needs to be addressed in some way. Growing up in a culture that recognizes the struggles of mental health likely helped me endure harassment and discrimination. I believe the Irish have resilience for setbacks because we confront our trauma and anxiety. If this belief is valid, it would explain why I showcase the same anxiety and PTSD as the 20th-century Irish.

The sociological theory that best fits my experience would be structural functionalism. To my former principal, people like me are not meant for higher education, especially 4-year universities. He suggested that poor Irish girls do not function well in higher socioeconomic positions. He told me to go straight into the workforce. This could suggest that he believed that I would do better or function more effectively as a worker rather than a scholar. Structural functionalism is the theory that states everything in society has a particular function to keep that society stabilized. The society that I lived in at the time functioned with the Irish, as well as other marginalized ethnicities, as the working class and white supremacy ethnicities as the bourgeoisie.

The TAKE A STAND Program is a bullying prevention program run by the Coalition for Children. It is meant to educate about bullying. They believe that education and awareness are the best routes to prevent child bullying. I do agree that education is certainly one of the best prevention tactics. However, the program has two major flaws. For one, it does not consider the

reality that some children are bullies even if they are fully aware of the negative impacts. Typically, cases like this stem from an unhealthy home environment. If the program is to teach how to prevent bullying and what to do if bullying occurs, it should educate about how parents can influence children to become bullies. It does mention how parents can influence children who are bullied. So, it may include this already, but it is not specified on the website.

The second major flaw is the sentence, “As soon as children begin to interact with others, we can begin to teach them not to be bullies and not to be bullied” (Kraizer, 2023). Telling people that we can teach kids “not to be bullied” (Kraizer, 2023), puts blame on the victims. We should indeed teach kids to articulate their thoughts and feelings to helpful adults. We should also teach them how to get out of an unsafe situation. However, these efforts do not assure that the kid will not be bullied. If the program wants to focus on not blaming the child being victimized, which they do mention multiple times, they should not put a sentence on their educational website that contradicts this goal. I think this shows a lack of understanding when it comes to the nuance of the emotional damage that bullying does to a child.

Resources like the TAKE A STAND Program are helpful when becoming aware of bullying. However, these programs only work if children are seen as equals. The schools I went to had anti-bullying programs too. They were also enforced on many occasions. The issue though is that when a particular ethnicity is discriminated against, these programs do no good. The principal of my high school saw me as nothing more than a factory worker, at best. He was not going to put my needs over the needs of a bully whom he saw as the future potential president. This goes for diversity-oriented programs and laws too. Regulations only work if people work

them. There is no true way to change the lives of marginalized groups other than to listen, trust, and change your perspective.

On reflection of my journey, which has not concluded, I think it is important to mention the cliche “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” I often get told that my experiences are what have led me to my success [so far]. However, I don’t find this to be true. I don’t like to give credit for my achievements to people who have abused me. Those people did everything they could to keep me from my success. My experiences did not make me stronger. They weakened me. They stunted me. They made me hate myself. They influenced my growth the same way bleach influences a sunflower. It is not because of my experience that I am who I am today. It is because of my experience that I am not who I could have been yesterday. I am the reason for my success. I fought myself from quitting, daily. I am a determined, passionate person. It was the harassment and bullying that almost had me forget this. I am resilient because I pushed myself back into the flames. It was when I told myself that the burns don’t hurt for too long that I began to control the heat. Perhaps the harassment made me more eager to be more, but it certainly was not the harassment that encouraged me to make it happen. Like the Irish before me, I am determined, I am important, and I am passionate. No matter what society tells me my function ought to be, I create my own destiny.

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