

## ‘On the wet side of the womb’: The construction of ‘mothers’ in anti-abortion activism in England and Wales

European Journal of Women's Studies

1–16

© The Author(s) 2018



Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1350506818785191

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw)

Pam Lowe  and Sarah-Jane Page 

Aston University, UK

### Abstract

Across the UK, there has been an increase in anti-abortion activism outside abortion clinics. The activism deployed includes explicitly religious activities such as ‘prayerful witnessing’ and ‘pavement counselling’, which aim to discourage women from entering clinics. This article stems from a wider ethnographic study of public activism over abortion to determine what claims about motherhood are being made within these debates. Two arguments are presented. First, how women’s role as mothers is central and essentialised in anti-abortion discourses, with the body of the mother often disappearing as activists seek to erode the distinction between a foetus and a baby by constructing pregnancy as a foetal environment. Motherhood is constructed as ‘natural’ and sacred, therefore abortion must be damaging because it destroys women’s ‘natural’ position. Second, the article argues that although the activists’ arguments are always religiously framed, their activism takes place in a largely secular context, meaning that they have to find ways of appealing to secular audiences. This leads to a complex interrelationship between secular and religious discourses, where theological viewpoints sit alongside ‘scientific’ claims to buttress activists’ views. This article explores how the presence and absence of mothers within activists’ narratives is due to the tensions between religiously based understandings of motherhood, and the need to appeal to a secular audience.

### Keywords

Abortion, activism, Catholicism, motherhood, prayer vigil

---

### Corresponding author:

Pam Lowe, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, UK.

Email: [p.k.lowe@aston.ac.uk](mailto:p.k.lowe@aston.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Whilst there are likely to be variations in their exact positions, around 90% of the UK population indicate in surveys that they support abortion (see for example Park et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, public activism against abortion has increased, especially outside abortion clinics, prompting public discussion regarding whether buffer-zones should be implemented.<sup>2</sup> Typically, activism is religiously derived (e.g. a prayer vigil) and consists largely of Catholic activists.<sup>3</sup> Whatever form of activism is deployed, the activists' aim is to discourage women from accessing abortion services (which may be within hospitals, health centres or at stand-alone clinics, depending on the local context).

This project mapped the nature and content of activism at sites across mainland England and Wales, using an ethnographic approach. We also interviewed participants involved. In this article, we seek to examine how 'the mother' was positioned by the activists, and what claims about motherhood were being made. In this context, the ideas about mother/motherhood are essentialised and largely abstracted from the everyday positions of women. Moreover, abortion is often seen as opposite to motherhood, which clearly may not be the case. Our analysis will explore the underlying assumptions about 'naturalised motherhood' within the narrative presented by participants, in that they are the only ones offering 'real' support and compassion to women. It will contrast these ideas to arguments about pregnancy as a foetal environment in which the body of 'the mother' disappears from view through an erosion of the distinction between a foetus and a baby. These ideas can be explained in relation to narratives of sacrificial motherhood associated with religious icons such as the Virgin Mary. This article outlines the presence and absence of 'mothers' in the accounts of anti-abortion activists. It argues that the inherent contradictions in the framing of motherhood are due to tensions between activists' religious beliefs and their need to appeal to a secular audience. As their religious understanding of women *as* mothers underpins their anti-abortion beliefs, this often frames any non-religious arguments utilised.

## Sacrifice as 'natural motherhood'

The idea that motherhood should be a women's primary role in life has a long history and is linked to all areas of reproductive health (Forna, 1998; Hays, 1996; Lowe, 2016; Luker, 1984). This is manifest through maternal sacrifice; the idea that women should always put the welfare of their children before their own, whether children are already born, *in utero* or imagined in the future. This sacrificial stance is deemed the marker of the 'proper' woman (Hays, 1996; Lowe, 2016). The notion of sacrifice is used to police women's bodies and behaviour, whether they have children or not (Lowe, 2016). Maternal sacrifice has a symbolic function which can reassert traditional ideas about gendered roles at individual, community or national levels (Lowe, 2016; Page, 2016). The 'bad mother' who refuses to make 'appropriate' sacrifices is constructed as endangering her existing or future children and, more broadly, the reproduction of societies (Lowe, 2016). Moreover, mothers in marginalised positions, for example due to their social class, ethnicity, or being the 'wrong' age, are often positioned as 'bad' regardless of their mothering behaviour. The idea of maternal sacrifice materialises in abortion

discourses, not least that women, regardless of the costs, should continue with a pregnancy (Ginsburg, 1989; Lowe, 2016). These ideas of ‘natural’ sacrifice are important in the anti-abortion position as ‘proper’ women should put the welfare of a developing foetus before themselves. Hence women who seek abortion are not just ending a pregnancy but constructed as failing in a central tenet of womanhood.

Ideas about sacrificial motherhood are also religiously embedded. In 2015 Pope Francis commended mothers for their dedication and sacrifice; sacrifice was constructed as an under-recognised societal good, rather than something to be critiqued (Page, 2016). There is a historical trajectory regarding the construction of sacrificial motherhood within Christianity, centred on the symbolism of the Virgin Mary. Influential theologians such as Aquinas and Augustine traditionally accorded women a very limited role in society, premised on them having children and being subordinate to men (Furlong, 1991; Lloyd, 1993; Warner, 1978). This had a crucial influence on how femininity within Christianity was constructed; women were to be gentle, innocent and humble, following the image of the Virgin:

[Mary’s] purity and submissiveness and poverty became quintessential motherliness ... she is obedient, respectful, humble, quiet, and modest, simple in her tastes and demeanour, compliant and gentle. Even her silence in the Gospels is turned to good account, becoming an example to all women to hold their tongues. (Warner, 1978: 190)

Although Mary has been variously utilised to support competing formations of womanhood (e.g. Beattie, 2002), it is the notion of Mary as a sacrificial mother which is influential (Llewellyn, 2016). Within Catholicism, Mary is particularly important, and such interpretations have often disciplined motherhood, encouraging women to aspire to an impossible ideal:

Although Christianity did not, on its own, invent the motherhood myth, the Church has been highly efficient at marketing the maternal ideal. Mary is held up to Catholic women everywhere as an inspirational figure. ... No one has ever painted Mary going about the mundane tasks of motherhood. (Forna, 1998: 9)

Because sacrifice has been utilised as a disciplining tool to promote specific motherhood formations, this has also, paradoxically, enabled its devaluation, for it is a passive femininity that is being endorsed. These ideas are reflected in religious framings of the sacredness of motherhood in many anti-abortion narratives.

## **Motherhood and anti-abortion understandings**

Understandings of motherhood have often been central to anti-abortion positions. Luker (1984) argues that US anti-abortion activists were shocked by the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* judgement, because they largely believed their views about abortion, motherhood and women’s place in society were generally shared. This traditional stance was buttressed through particular religiously endorsed understandings of gender complementarity, which Shaw (1998: 14) describes as the ‘dualistic view of humanity in which men and women are

seen as essentially different from each other, and are often thought in that “difference” to display “complementarity”’. Although conceptualisations of gender vary enormously between religious traditions, and not all adherents accept all religious doctrine (see Page and Yip, 2017), the religiously engaged participants in Luker’s study endorsed gender complementarity; gender roles were understood as distinct; women’s primary identity seen as fulfilled through motherhood. *Roe v. Wade* changed this, allowing a rejection of motherhood, undermining it as a ‘natural’ status (see also Ginsburg, 1989):

Abortion therefore strips the veil of sanctity from motherhood. When pregnancy is discretionary – when people are allowed to put anything else they value in front of it – then motherhood has been demoted from a sacred calling to a job. (Luker, 1984: 205)

Sheldon (1997) identified three central understandings about motherhood within arguments both for and against abortion at the time of the UK 1967 Abortion Act.<sup>4</sup> First, women as minors with immature or selfish attitudes should be responsabilised through continuing with their pregnancies – a view mostly held by those against abortion. The second understanding, women as victims, appeared more in the accounts of those seeking reform, who often used examples of desperate or vulnerable women who could not be ‘good mothers’ and risked injury or death through seeking illegal abortions (Hindell and Simms, 1971; Sheldon, 1997). Examples given in Parliament included those considered automatically ‘bad mothers’ (e.g. prisoners and substance users) and those in difficult circumstances such as having large families or women married to ‘ne’re-do-well’ husbands (Lord Silkin, in Hindell and Simms, 1971: 149–150). More generally, women were also potential victims of their ‘unstable’ biological bodies. Whilst the image of ‘women-as-victims’ was most clearly articulated by those seeking abortion reform, Sheldon (1997) argues that this representation was also accepted by those opposed.

The final position, women as ‘natural mothers’, was supported by both sides (Sheldon, 1997). Those against abortion saw it as ‘unnatural’, whilst those in favour suggested that for ‘desperate’ women, abortion would allow them to be better mothers to existing, or future, children. The idea that abortion was only needed for ‘desperate’ or ‘deserving’ cases was important for those against abortion ‘on demand’ (Greenwood and Young, 1976). Consequently, the basis for the 1967 Abortion Act was an understanding that abortion was necessary only for women who through behaviour or circumstance would not be a ‘good mother’. It left unchallenged understandings that motherhood is ‘natural’ for ‘normal’ women. The Act, rather than rejecting ideas of compulsory motherhood for women, allowed exceptions where ‘good motherhood’ was at risk (Sheldon, 1997). Moreover, the innate ‘irrationality’ of women was contrasted with the sagaciousness of (presumed male) doctors who were to become the gatekeepers of abortion after the legislation passed (Sheldon, 1997).

Commentators elsewhere have suggested that around the turn of the 21st century, anti-abortion campaigning shifted towards specifically focusing on the idea that abortion is harmful to women (see for example Oaks, 2000; Rose, 2011; Saurette and Gordon, 2015). Cannold (2002) argues that this strategy is a tactical choice adopted due to the lack of ‘success’ of foetal-centric approaches, which failed to mobilise significant attitude changes. In the US, this has often coalesced around Target Regulation of Abortion Providers (TRAP)

laws<sup>5</sup> which restrict abortion access but make little difference to safety (Gold and Nash, 2013). As Saurette and Gordon's (2015) study of North America has shown, the harm outlined by anti-abortion groups is broad, including psychological impact, iatrogenic procedural impact, and risks to women's future health. Moreover, they claim that women are misled about the risks, positing women as victims of a 'disingenuous' medical profession.

In contrast, in the UK, the 'abortion-as-harmful' framing has been a prominent theme in anti-abortion campaigning since the 1970s (Greenwood and Young, 1976). This includes claims that women are tricked, coerced or misled into abortions by 'corrupt' or 'financially-motivated' doctors (Greenwood and Young, 1976; Lee, 2003). More recently, anti-abortion Members of Parliament (MPs) unsuccessfully attempted to make abortion counselling mandatory (Hoggart, 2015). The idea that counselling is necessary arises from claims that abortion causes mental health issues and the continuing framing of women seeking abortion as being 'inherently vulnerable and susceptible to duress' (Hoggart, 2015: 369). These framings of 'women as victims' are important in that they overlook or discount the idea that women really *choose* abortion. By emphasising a potential lack of agency, they overcome the possibility that women's 'natural' inclination is not motherhood. This reduces the potential tension between their religious beliefs and women's actions by locating abortion decisions away from individual women.

## Methodology

This article is based on an ethnography of abortion debates in UK public spaces, exploring the form and rationale for public activism surrounding abortion. The study as a whole has included wide-ranging methods including observations at both anti-abortion and abortion rights public events (e.g. marches, demonstrations, prayer vigils), formal and informal interviews with activists from a range of organisations, and documentary analysis of public statements and other data. This article is based on the data from the anti-abortion groups and activists involved in clinic vigils and March for Life events. In the UK, the anti-abortion movement involved in clinic activism is comprised of three main organisations and local grassroots groups: Helpers of God's Precious Infants (HOGPI), Good Counsel Network (GCN) and the Centre for Bioethical Reform UK (known as Abort 67). HOGPI and GCN are both largely Catholic whereas Abort 67 involves more evangelicals. HOGPI and Abort 67 are both UK versions of organisations that began in the US. GCN began in the UK (modelled on an Irish organisation) but its involvement in the US-based 40 Days for Life (40 Days) campaign illustrates its links to the US anti-abortion movement. The 40 Days campaign is a bi-annual ecumenical global campaign, although in the UK those taking part are mainly Catholic. Some groups have clear rules on the behaviour of activists and create professionally produced material displays, whereas others include material objects (e.g. signs) which are the property of individuals, who bring and remove them when they leave, even though the vigil continues. The Catholic-led groups use similar tactics, are sometimes at the same sites, and individuals may be active in more than one group, so it can be difficult to ascertain which organisation/group is actually the 'lead' on any particular day. For example, HOGPI prayer books can be seen at many sites, including those organised by GCN and 40 Days, and leaflets at vigils organised by HOGPI and 40 Days can contain the GCN telephone number.

This article draws on observations from 10 clinic sites, some of which we attended more than once, and the annual March for Life events in 2015 and 2016 in Birmingham. Ethical approval was given by Aston University, and the ethical approach was guided by what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe as ethical situationalism: we aimed to balance issues such as consent, the likely harm to individuals and the need for research. The anti-abortion groups seek to make a public statement about abortion, hence we did not seek consent for observations about the actions of the groups, but we did seek consent for individual motivations. At observations, fieldwork notes were taken detailing the geography, signs and actions of the anti-abortion activists. Where permission was granted, we also carried out informal interviews and collected leaflets and other materials used by the activists. We took photographs of the clinic sites, including signs and other items on displays. Care was taken to avoid photographing service users or abortion clinic workers, who, unlike the activists themselves, are not seeking to be part of a public statement about abortion.

Most clinic observations lasted between one and two hours. The level of organisation and frequency of such activism vary between groups and whether they have paid 'pavement counsellors' or are volunteer-based. The numbers varied from just one activist to larger groups of 70 people. The larger numbers were usually connected to a special event; on a day-to-day basis, it was usually two to four people. Apart from Abort 67, at each site, activists spend much of their time praying, sometimes combined with one or two 'pavement counsellors'. Abort 67 use large graphic images and 'pavement counsellors' but do not usually pray. A few sites have activists present throughout the year on an almost daily basis, whereas others have a vigil for a couple of hours a week. Some groups seem unable to cover their advertised times. For example, during the 40 Days campaign, which asks for a commitment to a 12-hour vigil for 40 Days, many sites in 2015 and 2016 had insufficient activists to cover this, which may indicate how few people support the vigils. Some sites managed a reduced number of hours; others were not there every day. All the activists we talked to were religiously committed, with most identifying as Catholic. Religious practices and iconography were present at all the sites we visited, and within most of the printed materials we collected. This article also uses data from four of the in-depth interviews carried out with anti-abortion activists who were outside clinics and/or were involved in the annual March for Life. Due to the very small numbers of anti-abortion activists at some of the sites we visited, we have not included demographic information as this could potentially identify our participants. These interviews were usually audio-recorded (with permission) and were transcribed. Notes were taken in other cases.

As Smyth and Mitchell (2008) have argued, whilst much has been made of developing rapport within qualitative research, reflexivity can provide the tools to research groups who hold views diametrically opposed to those of the researchers. We were always open about our views on religion and abortion, but tried to do so in a way that did not undermine the activists' position. During the analysis, we endeavoured to represent the activists' views clearly even though we disagreed with them. All the data (fieldwork notes, photographs, interview transcripts) used in the article were analysed thematically through a system of close reading, coding and comparison (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved initially developing codes inductively from the data, then later combining these into broader themes. The photographs of signs and material objects were analysed

in a similar way, whereas the photographs of the geography and positioning of the activists have mainly been used descriptively rather than analytically. Both authors were involved in data gathering, analysing and writing, and in-depth discussions took place about the meaning of the data.

## Essential ‘motherhood’

In this section, we outline the ways in which ideas about motherhood as women’s ‘nature’ are at the heart of anti-abortion framings and how they are connected to religious positions, and supported through the use of religious messages and iconography.

Many of the organisations and activists argue that concern for women is at the heart of their campaigns (also see Lowe and Hayes, 2018). For example, Stuart, a middle-aged man we met at a 40 Days prayer vigil conveyed that he prayed for both women and the ‘unborn’, and that it was women’s lives which were inevitably damaged by abortion. This concern is based on essentialised views that motherhood is the ‘natural’ destiny of women. The idea that women may not desire motherhood did not seem conceivable for activists:

Abortion violates something basic in a women’s nature. She is normally the giver of life. When she is deprived of her natural role as a mother she usually reacts with bitterness and feelings of resentment with those that *led* her to abortion. (Leaflet, Birmingham, our emphasis)

I think it harms women, you know, because women they are biologically, mentally and emotionally ready to bring, to give life, whether they have chosen to or not. (Derek, interview)

These quotations illustrate the way in which for the activists, women *are* mothers whether or not they want to be, and, moreover, they are ‘led’ to abortion rather than it being their own decision. Moreover, Derek’s position that women do not have to choose to be mothers, also justifies activists’ position on continuing pregnancy even after sexual assault.

The idea that women need to be reminded of their position as mothers was also reflected in some of the materials given out. In Manchester, envelopes are distributed to women before entering the clinic, featuring the wording, ‘Ask to see the scan’. The activists felt that women would recognise themselves as ‘mothers’ if the foetus was visible to them. In the US, this belief has led to some states making viewing a scan before abortion mandatory, yet this ignores the complexity of how images are interpreted (Sanger, 2017). Beynon-Jones’s (2015) study in England (where viewing scans is always optional) also found complexity in women’s feelings about seeing a scan, and, in contrast to the beliefs of the anti-abortion activists, for some women, it confirms their understanding of the foetus being ‘developmentally and morally insignificant’ (2015: 710).

Inside the envelope was a leaflet with the caption ‘Think about yourself’. This suggested that women may ‘panic’ when faced with an unplanned pregnancy, but that they needed to be sure of their ‘true feelings’ – implicitly their ‘true feelings’ would eschew abortion. Similarly, a ‘pavement counselling’ guidebook for activists involved in 40 Days distributed in Birmingham suggests they ask women about their existing children to ‘help re-awaken her maternal instinct’, assuming that if women reflect appropriately,

they will always want to continue the pregnancy. This framing replaces the idea that women who have abortions are selfish (a common concept within abortion stigma; Kumar et al., 2009), with being misguided or misled.

It is often assumed by activists that women choose abortion because of fear or coercion; choosing abortion through free will contests and contradicts activists' worldview that motherhood is women's 'natural' state. This was a significant framing within the literature and activists' accounts. Birmingham's 'pavement counselling' guide states that:

Most women abort due to fear (fear of telling parents, fear of having an 'imperfect' baby, fear of change, fear of missing out on a career/study opportunities, fear of a partner finding out about an affair, fear of losing a boyfriend, fear of how they will cope etc), trust in God is a perfect antidote to all fear and even women/couples with very limited faith can recognise that.

The reasons cited focus on the anticipated fear generated when women breach their 'naturally-ordained' roles, such as pursuing education or a career, or act counter to expected femininity, like having an affair. First, these views indicate the 'problems' caused when gender complementarity is not followed – i.e. when women aim for career success. Second, this view recognises that society has changed: traditional understandings of gender are under attack, with the result that male partners may not always be relied upon. It also hints at the problems caused by a consumer society and the desire for the 'perfect' baby, ignoring the severity of some conditions that are diagnosed *in utero*. Implicitly, the underpinning view articulates that had gender complementarity been followed, the fear generated through an unplanned pregnancy would not arise. Whilst the lack of coping could extend to settled couples, the guide suggests that all concerns are really inconsequential, and their role is to make women see this. The guide also references God. Not only are those seeking abortion expected to lack faith, this non-religious position is explicitly negatively framed. It is articulated that their faith may be 'very limited', thus presenting women as immature and constrained by their lack of faith development. It also rejects the possibility that religiously identified women may freely seek abortion. Continuing with the pregnancy is positioned as 'easy' and 'unproblematic' so long as women use their allegedly few faith resources to channel God's help.<sup>6</sup>

The notion that women would never 'naturally' chose abortion allows anti-abortion activists to claim that there must be direct or indirect coercion, emerging from partners, family or friends or from the 'abortion culture' more generally. When asked about the definition of abortion culture, Derek spoke about a range of things, from the sexual revolution to the rise of consumerism. Overall, he felt there was a decrease in the 'value of life', in which individuals acted selfishly, leading to a decline in the 'natural' moral framework aligned with traditional gender roles. Derek's emphasis aligns with the influential Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) by Pope John Paul II, who argued that the 'culture of life' is under threat in contemporary society from the 'culture of death', with the 'culture of death' understood as mediated through individualism, materialism and hedonism, including practices such as abortion and euthanasia (Vaggione, 2012). Stuart also stated that women themselves did not actively choose abortion; they were forced by partners, family, friends or by wider society. This facilitates the strategy of offering support that they believe women lacked, based on the assumption that women would never



voluntarily opt for abortion (Linders, 1998). That male partners might cultivate coercion is also a potential tension in the activists' position. On the one hand, they uphold socially conservative views about heterosexual marriage and gender roles, yet on the other they may need to 'save' women from their partner's influence.

The belief in the 'naturalness' of motherhood is entwined with participants' religious beliefs on the sanctity of motherhood. This is visibly represented through religious iconography. The Virgin of Guadalupe, a 1531 Mexican manifestation of the pregnant Virgin Mary, was a popular image. June, a 'pavement counsellor' at a HOGPI prayer vigil, explained that the Virgin of Guadalupe signified the converting of Mexicans to the 'true' religion, represented an end to child sacrifice (practised by the Aztecs shortly before the Virgin's manifestation), and esteemed the life of the 'unborn'. Therefore some participants likened abortion to child sacrifice. As Ginsburg (1989) highlights, Christian iconography utilising the Virgin Mary acts as a powerful tool in anti-abortion campaigns. Mary is constructed as the woman managing the unplanned pregnancy, making the 'right' decision in enabling Jesus to be born. As previously noted, Mary has routinely become a figure to be emulated (Warner, 1978). This not only valorises a sacrificial form of motherhood, with Mary putting the needs of others before her own; it also gives sacred legitimacy to the protection of the foetus, giving birth to God incarnate. Whilst the Virgin of Guadalupe is commonly recognised as a synthesising figure and key to Mexican national identity, consolidating Christianity in Mexico (Hernández, 2014), many participants in this study referenced her as the 'Patron of the Unborn', and a significant symbol in their campaign. Her prominence was articulated through displaying her image during vigils, carrying her image through the streets on processions, as well as activists wearing badges of her image. Yet despite her importance to many participants, her signification as a pregnant Madonna would rarely be recognised in the British context where there is little cultural knowledge about this particular manifestation.

The majority of activists we spoke to suggested that they were the ones offering women 'real choice', meaning that women should continue with the pregnancy and choose between motherhood and adoption. But at the heart of this choice was the notion of sacrifice. In other words, women should make the appropriate sacrifice and continue with the pregnancy. Not only were sacrificial understandings connected to the Virgin Mary, the pronouncements of key Catholic religious figures were used to underscore the point. In Ealing, one of the prayer cards distributed reaffirmed the religious expectations of women. It contained a quotation accredited to Pope John Paul II from the aforementioned Encyclical (1995), and is addressed to women who have had an abortion. The message affirms the 'wrongness' of abortion but offers redemption. It tells women that:

Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.

This idea, that women can be forgiven if they admit that abortion was wrong and seek forgiveness through either becoming mothers or caring for others, reaffirms women's traditional role, underscored by an expectation for women to sacrificially put others first, subduing their own needs. The salience of motherhood itself, or the performance of mother-like care, is thus a central part of the anti-abortion message.

Yet despite the focus on idealised motherhood, pregnant women are often absent in anti-abortion campaigns. Of all the groups, Abort 67 was the most likely to erase women from their arguments surrounding abortion. To attempt to convince the public that abortion should be outlawed, they display large graphic images of bloodied fetuses. Their activities are deemed controversial, and many activists critiqued their approach. One of the Abort 67 spokespeople argued against the use of pictures of babies in anti-abortion campaigns, thereby validating the use of fetuses instead:

... most people who support abortion agree that killing chubby born babies is wrong, but they mistakenly believe that there is a moral difference between a chubby born baby and a baby on the wet side of the womb. (Abort 67 training video)

The idea that pregnancy is just the 'wet side of the womb' is a clear example of a foetal-centric argument which disregards the lives of women. As their stated rationale is to expose the 'reality' of abortion, that the 'unborn' are killed, it is not surprising that such foetal-centric arguments occur.

Yet these types of arguments do not sit easily with the presumption of motherhood as 'natural' and sacred for women. Although, as outlined above, there is an assumption of coercion, that does not seem to be enough to explain the abortion rates. In the same speech, the spokesperson explained that the reason that some women chose abortion is that they do not really understand what pregnancy is:

... the unborn child is also an abstraction even though in some sense the *mother* will have an idea that she is pregnant, she is with child, but the issue is that the child is less real to her than her crisis pregnancy. (Abort 67 training video; our emphasis)

The notion that women *are* mothers, and abortion is chosen because of a lack of understanding, can be seen to merge the three discourses of women as minors, victims and 'natural mothers' that have been present since the 1960s (Sheldon, 1997). Women are positioned as immature; lacking education to understand their actions. This offers no direct challenge to the notion of 'natural motherhood' for women, as presumably, once they are sufficiently educated they will understand their role. Moreover, their lack of recognition of their motherhood state is an outcome of the 'abortion culture' which they have fallen victim to. Hence even for organisations that focus the most on foetal-centric arguments, the role of women *as* mothers is an essential part of their understanding, and remains part of the religiously framed understandings of abortion that underpin the beliefs of the activists.

## Mediating secular and religious discourses

In this section, we look at the ways in which the anti-abortion groups adopt secular framings utilising pseudo/quasi-scientific narratives. Whilst religiously endorsed and naturalised understandings of motherhood are not explicit, we purport that they still inform their understanding and usage of more foetal-centric arguments.

Whilst religious discourses impact UK activists' understanding of abortion, they are usually aware that religiously based arguments are unlikely to be persuasive. Whilst levels of

religiosity are difficult to measure, the 2017 British Attitudes Survey suggests that the number of people in Britain who state that they have no religion has increased to 53% (NatCen, 2017). British culture can be considered both religious and secular, but forms in either category that are deemed 'excessive' are often undermined (e.g. through using humour) (Lee, 2015). The situatedness of religion in British life is therefore complex but overt displays of religiosity, or anything implying an 'extreme' position, are often deemed unwelcome.

The proportion of those identifying as Catholic is approximately 10% (NatCen, 2017). Amongst religious people, support for abortion is fairly high. For example, Clements' (2014) national survey of Catholics found that 75% felt that abortion should always be allowed or allowed in some circumstances. Therefore, Catholic-identifying anti-abortion activists are a minority amongst fellow adherents. The declining significance of religion was seen as a problem by activists. One activist from Abort 67 described the UK as a 'post-Christian' country, and argued that religiously framed messages would be ineffective, so other campaign strategies were needed. Therefore, many activists attempted to frame their arguments in non-religious formats, suggesting that 'science' supports their position. These include claiming a causal link between abortion and breast cancer and mental health issues, widely disproved by medical researchers (Lee, 2003; Saurette and Gordon, 2015).

Activists also argued that 'science' has demonstrated that life begins at conception. In Leeds, one activist described how scientists had discovered that there was a 'flash of light' when the sperm enters the egg. The activist could not explain where this claim came from, but it could have emerged from a misunderstanding regarding a scientific experiment using chemical fluorescence.<sup>7</sup> Such science-like narratives enabled activists to reaffirm their religious views: for example, the 'flash of light' narrative resonates with the religious idea of ensoulment, that not only had life begun, but a soul had been made. They also used the idea of foetal DNA being present from the moment of conception as proof that human life needed to be protected. The anti-abortion narratives therefore put together a series of facts and claims that collectively could be deemed a form of pseudo/quasi-science, where 'scientific facts' are pushed in certain directions to make claims that scientists themselves would not routinely make, e.g. assertions about when life begins.

Alongside emphasis on genetic 'proof of life', many of the leaflets make explicit reference to foetal development, emphasising the autonomous actions of the foetus. For example, a booklet given out by HOGPI at Buckhurst Hill states that in the 2nd month:

Swimming with a natural swimmer's stroke in the amniotic fluid, she now looks like a miniature human infant.

The personification of the developing embryo, justified with reference to 'scientific facts', is seen as evidence that non-religious people should accept unconditionally. This was therefore an explicit attempt to portray the 'wonder of life' without using god-like language. Given the way non-religious identification has been associated with science and rationality, and the assumption, as previously articulated, that those seeking abortion are deemed non-religious, 'scientific' language is utilised as a means to 'speak' to these constituents. Nevertheless, values about motherhood permeate the narrative. This leaflet (similar to those distributed elsewhere) presents the developmental information

as factual, but the emphasis was on appealing to women *as* mothers. In line with the activists' religious beliefs, motherhood begins at conception and this frames the foetal information. Hence rather than there being a tension between the secular and religious, their 'secularised' message was still based on appealing to women *as* mothers which is at the heart of their religiously based abortion beliefs.

All of the campaigns retain a focus on the foetus as an 'unborn child' in need of 'saving'. In some instances, the numbers of 'saves' are featured on a chalk board and displayed as 'proof' of the activist's success. Similar to campaigns elsewhere, the images often depict young babies or free-floating foetuses in which the pregnant body is absent (Ginsburg, 1989). The complete erosion of women from discussions of abortion is illustrated in the 'SLED' argument utilised in training materials for anti-abortion activists. SLED stands for size, length of development, environment and degree of dependency. The intention is to convince people there are no relevant differences between the foetus and a baby for any of these factors. In this framing, pregnant women are reduced to being a foetal environment, an incubator whose life needs no significant consideration. Yet outside the clinics, any foetal-based arguments used by the activists were linked with women recognising themselves as mothers (such as the aforementioned 'ask to see the scan' envelopes). Whilst this corresponds with the fact that this is their target audience outside of the clinics, the data indicated that, rather than just being a tactical choice, it was firmly rooted in their religious beliefs. Whilst the co-option of 'science' was utilised to convince a secular audience, the activists' understanding of abortion as against women's nature remained central to their campaigns.

## Conclusion

Anti-abortion activism in England and Wales is underpinned by particular constructions of womanhood, where womanhood is realised through being a 'mother'. This essentialised understanding informs the way activists construct their arguments, and the types of secular and religious messages they utilise. This construction of womanhood has a long trajectory, linked to ideas of separate spheres and gender complementarity, where women's activities support those roles associated with men. This construction has promoted motherhood as women's supreme role in life, which overrides all others (such as employment). In addition, such arguments constructing women *as mothers* has historically played a role in UK-based abortion debates (Sheldon, 1997). In the 1960s, much of the debate over abortion rights implicitly suggested that rather than undermining the 'natural' family, better access was necessary to ensure 'good mothers' had children or had them in 'good' circumstances (Sheldon, 1997). Hence rather than being a new discourse as seen elsewhere (Oaks, 2000; Saurette and Gordon, 2015), the emphasis on women in current British anti-abortion discourse shows significant continuities with the past. Whilst the positioning of pregnancy as merely a child 'on the wet side of the womb' is a predominantly foetal-centric argument aimed at eroding birth as significant, it also simultaneously repositions women's bodies as central. In general, anti-abortion activists seek to *remind* women of their 'natural' embodied role, a message that they believe has been eroded within an individualist, consumerist culture that the 'abortion industry' is exploiting

(Ginsburg, 1989). From this position, the only logical explanation for women choosing abortion is that they have been coerced.

Whilst notions of sacrificial motherhood remain strong in both religious and secular contexts (Hays, 1996; Lowe, 2016; Page, 2016), gender complementarity has fallen out of favour, and ascribing women a role only as mothers is often critiqued, even in religious settings (Page and Yip, 2017; Woodhead, 2008). However, anti-abortion participants draw on conservative religious teaching, to reaffirm gender complementarity and women's essential role as mothers. These conservative narratives, espoused by various popes, emphasise women's 'inherent' sacrificial nature, and willingness to put the needs of others before their own. The presumption that women would 'naturally' sacrifice their lives for a developing foetus is embedded in the activists' understandings of motherhood as sacred, supported through the way in which Marian imagery is used in the campaigns to denote motherly obedience and sacrifice (Beattie, 2002; Page, 2016). Such iconography, however, fails to appeal in a context where there is immense distrust of religion in relation to gender and sexuality matters. For many, religion is no longer considered a legitimate form of authority, especially in the wake of numerous abuse scandals (Francis and Richter, 2007). In addition, this version of motherhood is out of step with modern understandings of sacrificial motherhood. In a context where 53% of the population do not identify with any religion, sacrificial motherhood is demonstrated in other ways (e.g. 'quality time' with children and encouraging 'enriching' experiences – see Hays, 1996). In the highly contested space outside abortion clinics, an overt display of religiosity is considered unwelcome, and invokes religion in terms of control and domination. In addition, the specific meanings of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe are lost due to little recognition within British culture that she denotes a pregnant Madonna.

The activists are aware that their arguments are being made in a largely secular context. In light of this, for broader appeal, they have tried to incorporate secular arguments drawing on 'science' as an authority, demonstrated in their use of 'scientific' understandings of conception and foetal development. However, due to the strength of their religious beliefs, this appropriation is often not convincing, as it is still entwined with their religious positioning of women as 'natural mothers'. Adopting 'scientific' claims that seem to support their worldview is a clear tactical choice. Yet whilst the emphasis on the developing foetus could erase the body of the woman, the absence is only partial as these arguments are placed alongside their attempts to get women to recognise their motherhood status. Whilst some of the activists believe that having foetal-centric arguments may have greater appeal to a secular audience, their religious worldview of women and abortion means that specific understandings of women *as* mothers remain at the heart of their campaigns.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**


The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. In Britain, access to free healthcare, including abortion, is based on residency/immigration status. The rules are complex: for example, migrants who have no recourse to public funds have free access to contraception but not abortion. Data are collected on the age, ethnicity and marital status of those accessing abortion, but not analysed in relation to the population. In 2016, 98% of abortions in England and Wales were free; the crude data indicate: peak age was 22; 81% single women; recorded ethnicity was 77% white, 9% Asian/Asian-British and 8% Black/Black-British women (Department of Health, 2017).
2. In April 2018, Ealing Council became the first in the UK to instigate a legal measure to prevent anti-abortion activism directly outside an abortion clinic.
3. The anti-abortion campaigners outside clinics claim not to be protesting. We have used the term activist here as it is closer to the way that they see themselves.
4. Though abortion remains a criminal offence in the UK (the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act was never repealed), the 1967 Abortion Act provided a legal route to abortion in England, Scotland and Wales. It did not apply to Northern Ireland. Abortion is lawful if two doctors agree that it meets the criteria set out in the legislation. These include the risk of the pregnancy to women's mental and physical health. As it is always safer to have a medically supervised abortion than continue with the pregnancy, this means that, in practice, all requests can be legally granted up to 24 weeks (Sheldon, 2016).
5. TRAP laws are considered an anti-abortion movement tactic to reduce abortion access through burdensome safety regulations which make running clinics extremely difficult. Whilst UK abortion services have specific regulations, the different political context has not led to similar restrictions.
6. In the UK, a few anti-abortion organisations offer support to women continuing pregnancies, but in most cases women would be reliant on the welfare state.
7. There are public accounts of this misunderstanding, such as this one in the National Catholic Register ([www.ncregister.com/blog/trasancos/pro-lifers-there-is-no-flash-of-light-at-conception](http://www.ncregister.com/blog/trasancos/pro-lifers-there-is-no-flash-of-light-at-conception)).

## ORCID iDs

Pam Lowe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5933-453X>

Sarah-Jane Page  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6879-536X>

## References

- Beattie T (2002) *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*. London: Continuum.
- Beynon-Jones S (2015) Re-visioning ultrasound through women's accounts of pre-abortion care in England. *Gender and Society* 29(5): 694–715.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Cannold L (2002) Understanding and responding to anti-choice women-centred strategies. *Reproductive Health Matters* 10(19): 171–179.
- Clements B (2014) Research note: Assessing the determinants of the contemporary social attitudes of Roman Catholics in Britain: Abortion and homosexuality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(3): 491–501.
- Department of Health (2017) *Abortion Statistics, England and Wales: 2016*. London: HM Government.
- Forna A (1998) *Mother of All Myths*. London: HarperCollins.

- Francis LJ and Richter P (2007) *Gone for Good? Church-Leaving and Returning in the 21st Century*. Peterborough: Epworth.
- Furlong M (1991) *A Dangerous Delight: Women and Power in the Church*. London: SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge).
- Ginsburg FD (1989) *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gold RB and Nash E (2013) TRAP laws gain political traction while abortion clinics – and the women they serve – pay the price. *Gutmacher Policy Review* 16(2): 7–12.
- Greenwood V and Young J (1976) *Abortion in Demand*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd edn. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hays S (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hernández M (2014) *The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Conversos*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hindell K and Simms M (1971) *Abortion Law Reformed*. London: Peter Owen.
- Hoggart L (2015) Abortion counselling in Britain: Understanding the controversy. *Sociology Compass* 9(5): 365–378.
- John Paul II (1995) *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. Encyclical Letter. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html) (accessed 9 April 2018).
- Kumar A, Hessini L and Mitchell EM (2009) Conceptualising abortion stigma. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 11(6): 625–639.
- Lee E (2003) *Abortion, Motherhood and Mental Health*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lee L (2015) *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Linders A (1998) Abortion as a social problem: The construction of ‘opposite’ solutions in Sweden and the United States. *Social Problems* 45(4): 488–509.
- Llewellyn D (2016) Maternal silences: Motherhood and voluntary childlessness in contemporary Christianity. *Religion and Gender* 6(1): 64–79.
- Lloyd G (1993) *The Man of Reason*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Lowe P (2016) *Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice: Women, Choice and Responsibility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Lowe P and Hayes G (2018) Anti-abortion clinic activism, civil inattention and the problem of gendered harassment. *Sociology*. Epub ahead of print 23 March 2018. DOI: 10.1177/0038038518762075
- Luker K (1984) *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oaks L (2000) Pro-woman, pro-life? The emergence of pro-life feminism in Irish anti-abortion discourses and practices. *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies* 4(1): 73–90.
- NatCen (2017) British Social Attitudes: Record number of Brits with no religion. Available at: [www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/september/british-social-attitudes-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/september/british-social-attitudes-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion/) (accessed 9 April 2018).
- Page S (2016) Altruism and sacrifice: Anglican priests managing ‘intensive’ priesthood and motherhood. *Religion and Gender* 6(1): 47–63.
- Page S and Yip AKT (2017) Gender equality and religion: A multi-faith exploration of young adults’ narratives. *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 24(3): 249–265.
- Park A, Bryson Clery E, Curtice J and Phillips M (eds) (2013) *British Social Attitudes: The 30th Report*. London: NatCen Social Research.

- Rose M (2011) Pro-life, pro-woman? Frame extension in the American antiabortion movement. *Journal of Women Politics and Policy* 32(1): 1–27.
- Sanger C (2017) *About Abortion: Terminating Pregnancy in Twenty-First-Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Saurette P and Gordon K (2015) *The Changing Voice of the Anti-abortion Movement*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Shaw J (1998) Gender and the Act of Synod. In: Furlong M (ed.) *Act of Synod – Act of Folly?* London: SCM Press, pp. 14–26.
- Sheldon S (1997) *Beyond Control: Medical Power and Abortion Law*. London: Pluto Press.
- Sheldon S (2016) British abortion law: Speaking from the past to govern the future. *The Modern Law Review* 79(2): 283–316.
- Smyth L and Mitchell C (2008) Researching conservative groups: Rapport and understanding across moral and political boundaries. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11(5): 441–452.
- Vaggione JM (2012) La ‘cultura de la vida’: Desplazamientos estratégicos del activismo católico conservador frente a los derechos sexuales y reproductivos. *Religião e Sociedade* 32(2): 57–80.
- Warner M (1978) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Quartet Books.
- Woodhead L (2008) ‘Because I’m worth it’: Religion and women’s changing lives in the west. In: Aune K, Sharma S and Vincett G (eds) *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 147–161.