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Reilly H. Brady

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"Guard Your Virtue with Your Life": Current and Former Latter-day Saint Women's Experiences with Purity Teachings and Gender-Based Violence[1]

Reilly H. Brady, University of Virginia*

This study investigates purity expectations directed toward girls and women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The 19 semi-structured interviews explore current and former LDS women's conceptualizations of purity teachings, the impacts of those teachings, and any connections between purity and gender-based violence. The vast majority of interview participants discussed receiving lessons in their youth communicating that LDS girls and women must maintain not only their own purity, but also the purity of boys and men, a concept that this study defines as "responsibility rhetoric." Purity expectations resulted in increased shame for many participants, including in connection to experiences of gender-based violence. Although this study's initial flyer recruited participants solely based on experiences with purity teachings, 42% of interview participants discussed an experience that falls within this study's definition of gender-based violence. This highlights the embedded role purity expectations have played in these participants' experiences and reveals a prevalence of gender-based violence among this study's participants. This study identifies two categories of analysis to understand the mutual embeddedness of purity and gender-based violence: (1) themes of violence embedded in gendered purity teachings and (2) themes of gendered purity embedded in experiences of gender-based violence.

> They would say things like, "Guard your virtue with your life," but what does that mean? How do you do that? Just pray? Cause I remember praying for it to not … I thought God would rescue [me] or intervene, right? But I thought I didn't fight hard enough. So I went straight to the bishop, and he agreed with me. "You didn't fight hard enough." That phrase, "guard your virtue with your life," haunted me for years and years and years, and it still gets perpetuated.

[1] Portions of this article have been adapted from a larger study, which was conducted for an undergraduate thesis at Washington University in St. Louis. See Reilly H. Brady. 2024. "'Guard Your Virtue with Your Life': Purity Expectations and Dynamics of Purity and Gender-Based Violence for Latter-day Saint (LDS) Girls and Women." Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Honors Papers, 3. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wgss_honors/3.

*Email: eyf6vw@virginia.edu.

In sharing this experience with sexual violence when she was 17, Caroline (pseudonym) discussed the integral role the phrase "guard your virtue with your life" played in both how she conceptualized her experience and how her bishop responded when she sought spiritual guidance. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have repeated phrases such as "safeguard your power through purity of thought and action," "it is better to die in defending one's virtue," and "guard and protect your virtue as you would your very life" (Dalton 2009; Kimball 1969; Benson 1986). Although church leaders have long communicated messages on chastity and purity to mixed-gender audiences, these phrases have manifested in particularly gendered ways in the LDS Church.[2] While the interconnectedness of purity and gender-based violence that emerges in Caroline's story exists outside of the LDS Church, such as in American evangelical contexts, Caroline's discussion of "guarding your virtue" and her bishop's reinforcement of that rhetoric reveal the importance of analyzing the unique and specific contexts of LDS structures of purity.

This study investigates gendered purity expectations within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and their connections to experiences of gender-based violence. It aims to understand how these teachings shape LDS women's lived experiences and whether they contribute to a culture of victim-blaming and invisibility around issues of consent. In LDS programs such as Young Women, with meetings on Sundays as well as weekday activities, teenage girls have learned about purity expectations through messaging connecting purity to other doctrine such as worthiness, temple marriage, raising children, and attaining eternal salvation in the highest degree of glory after death (Moslener 2020). In these contexts, gendered purity expectations communicate future implications for young women's ability to fulfill what are believed to be divinely-established gendered roles of wifehood and motherhood that remain after death. In using a term such as "purity expectations," I refer to purity not simply as something deemed important for LDS girls and women, but rather as an expectation that holistically constructs their religious and gendered identities.

The particular constructions of gender and purity in LDS contexts raise important questions for researchers. In her historical overview of sexual pu-

[2] I use a variety of shortened terms to refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints throughout this study, such as "LDS Church," "the Church," "LDS," "Latter-day Saint," and "Mormonism." In 2018, current prophet Russell M. Nelson shifted toward referring to the church by its full title to emphasize Jesus Christ as the center of religious worship and belief, also releasing a revised style guide. I made intentional decisions in my use of terms, balancing these recent structural shifts with a body of research that uses "Mormonism" and "the LDS Church" as scholarly terms.

rity in Mormonism, Sara Moslener (2020) described sexual purity in the LDS Church as "a deeply embedded and theologized principle, not merely borrowed from evangelicals, but grown out of long-standing church teachings on the family and eternal salvation" (271). Thus, while LDS purity functions within frameworks also applicable to purity in American evangelicalism, understanding the particular doctrinal contexts and cultural constructions within Mormonism suggests the existence of LDS purity as operating with its own particulars.

My focus on gendered purity in the LDS Church involves the perspectives and lived experiences of current and former LDS women, a group often overlooked in current scholarship on American religious purity movements. Studies on American Christianity, for example, may not extend intentional efforts to gather the perspectives of women with experiences in the LDS Church due to divides between that church perceiving itself as Christian while Protestant and evangelical Christian groups most often consider it outside the category of Christianity (Jackson 2000). Current and former LDS women themselves may not respond to calls for participants for a study on American Christian purity culture either because they do not recognize themselves within that category or because they think the study's creators might not include them in it. Looking specifically at the LDS Church reveals the unique experiences of LDS women—sources not fully represented within scholarly conversations on purity and gender-based violence in American Christianity (Fahs 2010; Gish 2018; Owens, Hall, and Anderson 2020).

This study identifies specific and unique dynamics shaping constructions of purity in the LDS Church as well as ways in which purity and gender-based violence intertwine. This underscores the importance of conducting an intentional and culturally-specific analysis of gendered purity expectations in the LDS Church. Using qualitative methods of 19 interviews detailing the lived experiences of current and former LDS women, I argue that purity and gender-based violence must be studied together as mutually embedded concepts to fully understand the experiences of LDS girls and women with purity expectations.

Terminology and Definitions

I approached this study with broad definitions of purity and gender-based violence to include a variety of perspectives and experiences from which potential participants entered this study.

Defining Purity in LDS Contexts

When I refer to "purity," I refer to concepts of sexual purity such as chastity, but also to those under the umbrella of "moral purity." This latter umbrella includes pure thoughts and modesty in dress, concepts that are not inherently sexual themselves but often become sexualized in purity frameworks. My discussion of gendered purity in the LDS Church does not conceptualize purity as a set of teachings that only girls and women receive, but rather communicates the particular ways that purity has been embedded within the very constructions of girlhood and womanhood in the LDS Church. Scholar Colleen McDannell (2020) described LDS leaders' increased focus on the body when discussing purity in the mid-20th century, which included the gendered message that "boys were tempted to break the law of chastity because girls flaunted their bodies" (152). This presents unique dynamics for LDS girls and women by instructing them that they must maintain not only their own purity, but also the purity of the boys and men with whom they interact, a concept I call "responsibility rhetoric." David B. Haight's 1977 conference talk titled "Young Women—Real Guardians," for example, exemplifies responsibility rhetoric by instructing young women who date priesthood holders to become "real guardians" of those men's sexual purity so they could prepare to receive higher priesthood authority and embark on LDS missions (Haight 1977).

Defining Gender-Based Violence

I entered this study with a focus on the dynamics of gendered purity in the LDS Church, though also with particular attention to how themes of gender-based violence might emerge within these purity teachings. I define gender-based violence as harm committed on the basis of gender involving dynamics of power and control. In this study, the forms of gender violence most relevant to participants' discussions of purity included sexual violence, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and spiritual abuse, among other related forms of violence. I purposefully use a broad definition to include the contributions of participants who discussed experiencing any form of gender-based violence, as very few previous studies have included the lived experiences of LDS girls and women with gender-based violence (Choruby-Whiteley and Morrow 2021).

Literature Review

Discussion of the impacts of LDS purity teachings have increased within as well as beyond scholarly spaces in the past decade, in part influenced by the

writings of Elizabeth Smart, a survivor of child abduction and sexual violence who critiqued the purity messaging she received in LDS settings in her youth (Smart 2013). Over time, scholars have become more attentive to the gendering of LDS purity teachings, and recent studies have begun to ask questions about connections between American religious purity teachings and experiences of gender-based violence. However, this scholarship is still emerging, especially in LDS-specific contexts (Fahs 2010; Gish 2018; McKinzie and Richards 2022; Choruby-Whiteley and Morrow 2021).

In her sociological research, Dynette Ivie Reynolds (1996) critiqued existing surveys gathering data on premarital sex among LDS members, highlighting how these studies did not ask whether or not these encounters were consensual, thus rendering sexual violence invisible. Despite Reynolds's call to investigate gender-based violence in LDS contexts, there remains no large-scale data on rates of abuse among LDS members, a fact highlighted by Amber Choruby-Whiteley and Susan L. Morrow (2021) in their study analyzing how messages about femininity influence experiences of LDS survivors of child sexual abuse and their lives in the LDS Church thereafter. Choruby-Whiteley and Morrow found that interview participants felt increased "shame for not fighting off their abuser(s)" due to lessons that stressed protecting one's virtue (303). Additionally, in the interviews, women of color discussed how the setting of a predominantly white congregation in which women of color "already felt excluded" exacerbated existing realities of not being believed (305). Multiple scholars have also discussed how the lack of formal training for LDS bishops—including no trauma-informed training—results in bishops being unprepared to respond to disclosures of abuse, increasing the possibility of retraumatization (Choruby-Whiteley and Morrow 2021; Prince 2020; Hinderaker 2020). This study expands upon these works by directly examining connections between purity teachings and gender-based violence through semi-structured interviews.

Methods

I obtained approval with the Washington University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to recruit participants and conduct interviews. To gather participants, I used a flyer distributed online and snowball sampling. Of the 83 people who contacted me after seeing the study's flyer, I sent 30 individuals more information about participating in an interview. To select the 30 to contact, I considered the importance of obtaining a wide range of perspectives in terms of church status while also knowing that I intentionally did not require

that those interested in the study disclose their activity status to me in initial communications. I sent information about an interview to the first 10 people who contacted me and who did not describe any church status, the first five people who described having left the LDS Church, the first five who indicated an inactive status, the first five who identified as active members, and the first five who described occupying another relationship to the church that did not fit into the previous categories. The final group of 19 interview participants does not necessarily reflect this exact ratio of relationships to the LDS Church, as some prospective participants ended their communication before interviewing.

I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews ranging from around one to two hours in length in the summer and fall of 2023. Of these interviews, 17 took place on Zoom, and two took place in person. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 62. Five interview participants described having left the church or no longer attending or believing. Seven described themselves as active members; four of these participants used the word "nuanced" or "progressive" to define their membership, and one of these participants used the phrase "active, but questioning." Seven others fell into a broad category of inactive, semi-active, or some other combination of attending church in some instances but not others; one described their relationship to the church with the words, "It's complicated." Participants had unlimited time to review the informed consent document before setting up an interview time.

I chose a semi-structured approach to the interviews as part of my aim to provide agency, allowing participants to shape their interviews in a way most comfortable and meaningful to them. While the initial flyer only asked about interest in discussing purity, participants received information ahead of time about the types of questions I would be asking, including that I would ask about gender-based violence. While there is no large-scale data on rates of sexual violence among LDS women, anywhere from one out of every six to one out of every four U.S. women experience attempted or completed rape (RAINN; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2024). Thus, while interviews were not based on whether participants had directly experienced violence, this statistic presented the possibility that participants might discuss experiences of gender-based violence, direct or proximal, in interviews. Aware of this possibility, I implemented trauma-informed principles. For example, if participants mentioned an experience of gender-based violence, they were not asked to discuss details they did not want to share, as recounting experiences of violence can be re-traumatizing (SAMHSA 2014). I employed fem-

inist methodologies by grappling with the potential power relations between interviewer and participant and attempting to center the voices of participants (DeVault and Gross 2012).

I offered confidentiality to participants; a few requested to use their real name. Interview participants received $10 Target gift cards with funding provided by the Washington University Office of Undergraduate Research through the Andrea Biggs Undergraduate Research Award.

Results

This study collected data with the understanding that how purity teachings are actually experienced by LDS women themselves cannot be fully comprehended without their perspectives. These interviews reveal how LDS girls and women resist and grapple with purity expectations, as well as how they are not simply the passive recipients of purity teachings. About 42% of interview participants discussed a direct experience with gender-based violence, suggesting possible thematic connections with the concept of purity and prompting future studies to investigate the prevalence of gender-based violence among current and former LDS women.

I break up these interviews into three sections, starting with an investigation of how purity teachings manifest in particularly gendered ways for LDS girls and women and how those teachings affect various aspects of their lives. The second and third sections discuss connections between purity and gender-based violence; this study's interview responses reveal the need to discuss purity and gender-based violence together as mutually embedded concepts to fully understand the impacts of purity teachings. To render the interconnectedness of purity teachings and gender-based violence intelligible, I offer two categories of analysis: themes of violence embedded in gendered purity teachings and themes of gendered purity embedded in experiences of gender-based violence. While these categories of analysis may also apply in other American religious and cultural contexts, engaging with these themes in LDS contexts reveals the distinct dynamics of each of these categories in the lived experiences of current and former LDS women.

Examining Dynamics of Gendered Purity Teachings in LDS Contexts

Purity as All-Encompassing. Interview participants often understood LDS purity as an all-encompassing concept. While all participants identified a shift in how they understood purity after age 12 once they entered into the Young Wom-

en program, many also discussed being introduced to purity around the time of their baptism at age 8, or even before. As Laura (pseudonym, 43, cautious nuanced active member) described the all-encompassing nature of purity: "I just was born into it." Maya (pseudonym, 36, non-attending, non-believing) also identified purity as all-encompassing "from the very earliest conception" in her life because she was born out of wedlock. As Maya stated, "I don't know that it's really possible to separate myself from [purity] because it was such a foundational principle to how I viewed myself, to how I viewed marriage, to how I viewed what my life's purpose should be." Courtney (real name, 38, resigned from the church) also discussed the eternal nature of purity expectations:

> I was so afraid of getting excommunicated or not making it to the celestial kingdom that I felt like I was taking a constant moral inventory of myself, just because I was so afraid of where I would end up, and like, if I mess up so much as a teenager, then I'm not going to be deserving of a worthy husband. And so it's all just so intertwined.

Some interview participants also described a shift when entering marriage, identifying the difficulties of an easy transition after receiving constant messaging about the value of their sexual purity. Harper (pseudonym, 32, active member) identified marriage as a "really hard transition." Another participant, Jade (pseudonym, 25, active member), described her sister's experiences with the transition to marriage, saying, "That was hard for my sister. She had the…'good girl syndrome,' is that the term? Where before she was married, it was like, 'No, no, no, avoid everything, everything's bad and evil and wrong — oh, now you're married, go ahead.'" Jade also expressed desires to address this aspect in LDS contexts and to reframe how leaders and members discuss sex and purity in church settings.

Impacts of Object Lessons. The majority of participants identified receiving a Young Women lesson on purity in the form of an "object lesson," in which Young Women leaders, who are women themselves, compared an object to girls' worthiness in connection to their virginity. One of the most common lessons that participants identified was the "chewed gum" demonstration, in which a leader would offer them a piece of chewed gum, used to symbolize a decrease in worth in connection to losing one's purity. Some participants also discussed object lessons taught by men in Sunday School or other youth settings.

Stephanie (pseudonym, 45, no longer a member) identified the 1990s, during which she was a teenager in the Young Women program, as a time in

which object lessons were frequent, listing multiple examples such as chewed gum, muffins made with dirt, wadded up pieces of paper, and a licked lollipop. Participants who recalled receiving object lessons often identified the long-lasting impacts of these messages on their perceptions of purity expectations. Fiona (pseudonym, 62, recently stepped away from the church) remembered the message relayed with a "piece of cake that everybody touches," describing how her leader said, "Who would want this cake now?"" For Fiona, that message "is very, very much embedded in my mind."

Kendrah (real name, 28, active but seriously questioning) recalled lessons involving a licked cupcake, chewed-up gum, and a crumpled piece of paper, with the message that "you can try to smooth out the piece of paper, but it'll always have those wrinkles, it'll always have these remnants of your past." Kendrah noted how leaders tied these demonstrations of worthiness to future ideals of marriage, conveying the message, "Your future husband doesn't deserve that, he deserves someone who's clean and pure." Kendrah also recalled a lesson referencing the concept of a "v-card," with hole punches in cards symbolizing sexual acts, which Kendrah described as sending the message, "You might still have your piece of paper and everything, but there's a hole in it, and you're never going to be able to fill it or get that back."

Sara (pseudonym, 44, out of the church) described a lesson involving a wrinkled dollar bill, an object which implied that "although you're still worth the same amount of money, it's not the same crisp dollar bill that you once were." Caroline (pseudonym, 54, complicated current church status) recalled a lesson in which leaders explicitly labeled girls' purity as distinct in terms of relationships to repentance, involving a cup of bleach and red dye.[3] As Caroline explained, no amount of bleach could fully remove the red dye, communicating that "even with the Atonement, there's still some residue that you can never take away." Victoria (pseudonym, 45, active member) recalled a lesson involving a fence with holes, which was compared to a woman's sexuality in that "it still serves a purpose as a fence, but those marks will never go away." Victoria described the pressure and anxiety these lessons placed on her, recalling feeling "almost scared or ashamed that I'm a sexual being."

Victoria's experience provides an example of object lessons going beyond concepts of LDS girls' virginity, instilling shame around any expression

[3] Caroline's full description of her current church status: "It's complicated. I love the gospel. I love the Church. I love Christ. Am I actively participating at this time? No, I am not. And I feel peaceful about that. But I'm very connected…I live right in the heart of Utah, which is predominantly LDS –– many disaffected, but nonetheless, predominantly LDS. And I feel like, because I'm 7th generation Mormon, and so I feel like these are my people."

or thought related to sex. Keira (pseudonym, 29, less active member) also recalled an experience in which object lessons extended outside the realm of virginity by acting as a metaphor for immodesty. Keira described a lesson given by a man at Especially For Youth (EFY), a week-long seminar program for LDS teenagers, to a group of girls. He compared immodesty to a donut dangling from a string. As Keira recalled, the leader stated that "when you show your body, it's like literally dangling a donut in front of someone," adding, "imagine how difficult that would be for the young men." In Keira's example, girls and women were regarded as the ones responsible for purity, presenting immodesty as having the potential to shape a young man's purity.

Gendered Responsibility Rhetoric. The vast majority of participants discussed how lessons they received on purity placed added pressures and anxieties on girls by framing impurity as having consequences not only for themselves and their own salvation, but also for the purity and salvation of the boys and men around them. Participants identified that narratives of men's uncontrollable desires, paired with blame and responsibility placed on women they deemed immodest, also existed in broader cultural contexts outside of the LDS Church. However, they specifically recalled hearing that rhetoric repeated in church contexts and discussed the added pressures of compounded messaging both outside and inside the church.

Dominant messaging often framed girls' responsibility for maintaining purity in combination with the idea that boys were unable to control themselves sexually. As Fiona explained, "Think about the double pressure. So if you had sexual urges, you had to control your own and somebody else's." Many participants also identified the term "gatekeepers" within this messaging. Jasmine (pseudonym, 45, inactive) referenced the term "gatekeepers" in describing notions of boys being unable to control their sexuality:

> There was a lot of, in the '90s, of talking about how, "Women or girls, you really are the gatekeepers of the boys' purity, they just can't help themselves, you're going to have to be the ones to" — as if girls didn't have any sex drive, and that they needed to be the brakes on every situation because the men "just couldn't help themselves." So we just needed to be dressing modestly so that they wouldn't be having bad thoughts. There's a lot of that, "It's our responsibility to control and manage your sexuality."

All participants identified that messaging on purity reaches both boys and girls in the church; however, responsibility rhetoric framing girls as "gate-

keepers" stood out to many participants as an example of the added pressures for girls and women to adhere to purity expectations. Keira identified responsibility rhetoric and modesty expectations as elements of LDS purity teachings that boys and men did not receive:

> I think there's some level of equality in terms of what is expected in terms of purity and sexual activity. I think where it starts to slant significantly is [that] women are supposed to almost gatekeep men's sexuality and gatekeep sexuality in general…It's this idea of like, you as a woman have to stop their sexual attraction or ambition, and also not have it yourself.

As Keira's quote suggests, the "slant" of these gendered expectations lies not only in the portrayal of boys and men as having uncontrollable sexual desires, but also in emphasizing that girls and women do not have those desires themselves.

Maya identified how responsibility rhetoric resulted in particularly gendered pressures, saying, "the lessons that [the boys] were taught on controlling their lustful feelings were very different than being taught that you are the source of those lustful feelings." Participants also referenced words such as "temptress" used to describe girls in such lessons. Phoebe (pseudonym, 26, mostly non-believing, semi-active) recalled messaging such as, "Girls, you're the attractive ones, you're the ones that lure men, so you have to make sure you know what your boundaries are so that you can tell the guy 'no.'" This notion of girls as more "attractive" led to a focus on appearance, with many participants identifying negative impacts of these messages on body image for LDS girls. Jasmine identified perceptions of the body as an impact of purity teachings for LDS girls in particular:

> When there is so much focus on appearance, what you're wearing, how you're coming across to people, what you're looking like, how you're dressing, carrying yourself, and because they start that so young, you are going to be more hyper aware of your body in a way that is not positive…I think it does get under the skin of women or girls in a different way.

These participants' experiences suggest that gendered purity teachings for LDS girls call attention to the female body as the site of self-surveillance and moral vigilance in maintaining purity in particularly gendered ways and from a young age.

Molly (pseudonym, 30, nuanced progressive member) discussed how portraying women as both the "gatekeepers" of men's sexuality and as devoid of their own sexual desire can impact power dynamics within marriage:

> I thought of it just like, "Oh, I'm responsible for these boys' feelings, if they're feeling tempted, that's on me." And then I think it flips when you get married, where it's a little bit like, "Oh, now I belong to my husband, my body is his." So it goes 180 where it's like, you need to be a gatekeeper, because here's this person that can't control themselves, and then you get married, and all of a sudden, they're in control of you.

Other participants also said purity rhetoric portrayed women as passive actors who lacked sexual desire. As Sara explained, "In an underlying way, they teach it that women are not sexual beings." Bianca (pseudonym, 37, nuanced active) recalled internalizing the message that "[sexual pleasure] is for a spouse," and thus that sex "isn't for you." As Maya commented, "[men] were the actors, and women were to be acted upon; however, we were responsible for their actions." These quotes suggest tensions between the gendered responsibility to be the "gatekeepers" of purity paired with conceptions of women as those who are "acted upon."

Experiences with Bishops and Other Church Leaders. Participants identified bishops as the source they were told to consult for any perceived loss of purity as well as other spiritual counseling. Bishops in the LDS Church are volunteers, are not required to have any experience in relevant professional or academic areas, and do not receive formal training (Prince 2020). Bishops meet individually with youth each year for what are often referred to as "worthiness interviews." Bishops and other local leaders also interview adult members every two years to renew their temple recommends. Multiple participants recalled experiences in temple recommend interviews in which they were asked specific questions about sexual activity and masturbation, as one of the required questions revolved around one's chastity in order to receive a recommend.

Multiple participants recalled being required to stop taking the sacrament for an extended period of weeks in relation to purity expectations set by bishops and church leaders. Mia (pseudonym, 32, has stepped back from the church, but still participates in her calling) recalled an experience in which a bishop didn't approve her temple recommend. She was unable to go to the temple for the next eight months, and the bishop also required that she stop taking the sacrament for the following eight weeks. As Mia described, "He had

such a negative impact on how I viewed sexuality." Participants who described requirements to temporarily abstain from the sacrament identified increased shame due to the public element of the punishment, especially in a setting in which other members of the congregation understood the implications of someone not taking the sacrament.

At age 25, Caroline became pregnant while not married, and she did not want to get married to her then-boyfriend, who was emotionally abusive to her. Caroline's bishop instructed her that since she would not get married, she needed to give up her baby for adoption. As Caroline explained, "The implicit message is, you're not worthy enough to raise this child." For Caroline, her perceived loss of purity led to a loss of worthiness for motherhood, exemplifying compounding pressures of purity and motherhood as religiously defined gender expectations with eternal consequences.

Dynamics of LDS Purity and Race. Maya highlighted how "being a mixed-race woman of color" played a significant factor in her own perceptions of body image and the sexualization of girls' bodies, as "your body is eroticized and fetishized because you're ethnic, but they also aren't supposed to want that either." For Maya, responsibility rhetoric intersected with the pervasiveness of racism both outside and within LDS doctrine that posited whiteness as pure and desirable. This placed her in an impossible bind in understanding her relationship to her body. Maya also discussed some of the specific LDS rhetoric contributing to complicated relationships to body image and purity expectations for LDS women of color:

> Especially because within Mormonism, the predominant originating ethnic members are of European descent, Scandinavian descent, you have these bodies that are idealized of being blonde, skinny, small chested, not very curvy. And so when you're not that, it's so much more than just that's the body ideal — it's that that's God's body ideal, that's God's chosen people…and given more racist teachings in the Book of Mormon about becoming "white and delightsome," this all really heavily impacts how women of color in Mormonism perceive their bodies and perceive their ethnicity in turn.

Stephanie expressed similar experiences to Maya as a Black woman who grew up in a very predominantly white community in Utah:

> I developed an eating disorder in high school because of it, partially because of that culture, partially because I was the only Black kid in high school, and all of my friends were like "this big" and skinny and

> white, Nordic, Swedish origin, so I had a completely different body than they did, so I was desperately trying to fit in…Also, I kind of felt like, as I was developing and everything, that my body was too sexual because of the purity culture…it affected everything.

For Stephanie, her experiences with body image growing up stemmed from purity messaging that sexualized girls' bodies. This, compounded by her identity as a Black girl, led her to label her body as "too sexual." Stephanie, like Maya, also identified similar racialized language within purity teachings, quoting the scripture about becoming "white as snow":

> I remember there would be lessons about being pure and being as white as snow … and so every time it came up, I was just like, I felt like I was not enough. And then I thought, and then for a while I remember, well, if I do all of the right things and I get to heaven, then I will be enough because then I will have that countenance as white as snow.

Because of constant messaging directly associating purity with whiteness, Stephanie internalized descriptions of purity and cleanliness as "white" during chastity lessons she received in Young Women. Stephanie's and Maya's discussions of phrases such as "white and delightsome" and "white as snow" in conjunction with LDS scripture describing dark skin as a "divine curse" suggest the racialization of purity in Mormonism, paralleling existing scholarship on associations between whiteness and purity in American evangelicalism (Harris 2013, Natarajan 2022). Stephanie also highlighted how associations between purity, whiteness, and the concept of the "divine curse" directly influenced how others perceived and interacted with her, especially in dating and relationships:

> When I was [15], the bishop…told me in one of my interviews that I couldn't marry somebody, I needed to basically not be dating anybody right now and wait until I got to BYU and found somebody who was Black to date, that I couldn't marry anybody who was white because if I did, I would curse him and my children.

For Stephanie, racialized purity teachings impacted not only her own body image and religious identity, but also others' perceptions of her purity, resulting in significant harm and stress. Both Stephanie and Maya identified that purity expectations, notions of whiteness, and doctrine on race intersect in all-encompassing and harmful ways for women of color in the LDS Church.

Dynamics of Agency and Control. Elle (pseudonym, 20, non-active) discussed how leaders would sometimes present purity expectations as a form of "agency over your body." Despite this ideal, for Elle, the reality reflected LDS girls and women lacking agency over their bodies:

> If you dress this way, a man's going to sexualize you. If you don't dress this way, a man's going to sexualize you. If you don't act this way, you're going to struggle with sex. So it's like, you have the option to act, but no matter which way you act, you're doing it wrong.

Elle's conclusion that "no matter which way you act, you're doing it wrong" suggests that gendered responsibility rhetoric can be applied to any perceived loss of purity, rather than operating from a defined and clear set of rules. Phoebe described a "false sense of agency," stating that "it was always presented that we did have a choice, that we did have control, but just with the sense that the consequences are predetermined for you."

Other participants discussed ways in which they were able to exercise agency in defining purity for themselves, or in choosing to embrace their personal sexual and gendered identities. Victoria described complex processes of allowing herself to exist outside of purity expectations while remaining an active member of the church, saying, "I felt like I was betraying something, but then I've learned to realize, no, I've been given that agency and that own power of choice." Jade reframed purity as a personal endeavor between herself and her religious identity, rather than based on others' perceptions, sharing that "I was doing it because I went to the Lord, I found that it was right for me." Jade added that her exercise of agency in choosing to embrace this definition of purity for herself came from her own conclusions, stating, "I don't feel like it was presented to me that way; I feel like that is something that has to be found, unfortunately. I don't know if that's the same today, but for me personally, that is how it happened."

Themes of Violence Embedded in Gendered Purity Teachings

In the interviews, the vast majority of participants indicated that they had never, or rarely, experienced a conversation on the topic of gender-based violence in church settings. However, several had received purity lessons in church settings that alluded to rape as a "danger" or "consequence" of impurity, though they did not think of these moments as discussions of gender-based violence.

This dynamic suggests that themes of gender-based violence appear in purity teachings in ways not intelligible as "discussions" of gender-based violence. Rather, they are entrenched within gendered purity expectations themselves, blurring a variety of experiences into one category of perceived "impurity." When participants did recall direct references to rape during lessons on purity, they most often left with the understanding that an experience of rape would be their fault.

Gendered Responsibility Rhetoric as Victim Blaming. When first asked about receiving lessons on gender-based violence, the vast majority of participants responded that they did not discuss gender violence in church settings; as Harper described, "There was no form of consent lessons." However, when asked about purity teachings, multiple participants identified victim-blaming narratives and references to sexual violence as a "consequence" of impurity, suggesting that for these participants, discussions of gender-based violence more frequently emerged in connection to teachings on purity rather than in independent conversations. For example, when asked if she remembered any conversations about gender-based violence in church settings, Courtney responded that she did not. However, Courtney later recalled references to sexual violence when discussing purity in LDS settings. For example, she remembered reading and hearing phrases indicating that "it would be better for you to die fighting a rape than [you] survive and have been raped." This quote likely references, or pulls inspiration from, the 1969 book by former LDS prophet Spencer W. Kimball titled *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, which states that "it is better to die in defending one's virtue than to live having lost it without a struggle" (196).

Multiple participants identified the ways in which gendered responsibility rhetoric communicated that survivors were responsible for experiencing abuse. Victoria remembered receiving messaging that "rape wouldn't happen if a woman was dressed appropriately, or wasn't flirtatious, encouraging a man's behavior." Participants recalled some messages from leaders as using vague terms such as "danger" to reference rape while other lessons explicitly used terms such as rape and assault. Stephanie remembered hearing this messaging directed toward LDS girls and women in church settings:

> If something bad happens to you as a woman, you were in the wrong place, you put yourself in the wrong place…If you were out past curfew, if you were with a boy alone in a car longer than, you know what I mean, you should be, if you were making out with somebody, if you were wearing something that was immodest, if you were drinking —

> big thing, if you as a female drink — you are setting yourself up to be assaulted. I had a Young Women's leader actually say that verbatim.

Similarly, Phoebe recalled a lesson in which a leader used the word "rape" in describing the "dangerous position" LDS girls would be in if they were to dress in ways deemed to be immodest. This led Phoebe to internalize the message that "if I were ever to get raped, then it would be my fault."

Themes of Gendered Purity Embedded in Experiences of Gender-Based Violence

In addition to identifying themes of violence entrenched within gendered purity teachings, many interview participants viewed purity expectations as holistically shaping experiences of gender-based violence. This section addresses the ways in which LDS purity teachings affect experiences of gender-based violence, from informing survivors' understandings of their experiences to shaping the ways the institution responds to survivors.

Increased Shame for Survivors. Laura described how gendered purity expectations result in increased cycles of shame and self-blame for LDS survivors of gender-based violence who are women. This is compounded with the fact that gender-based violence is already "just a beast to try to heal from" without the added purity frameworks:

> All three of [my sisters] have been sexually assaulted or raped. All three. And so watching them recover from that and how long it has taken to recover from that, I think part of it is because of the purity teachings that they received all their whole lives long, that something happened to them that broke their, like, best gift that they ever had to give the world. Something broke that, so they could never, they couldn't get it back, so they felt terrible about themselves for years.

As Laura identified, framing purity as girls' and women's "best gift" places intense pressure on LDS girls and women and amplifies the existing trauma from gender-based violence.

Responsibility Rhetoric and Gender-Based Violence. Caroline discussed her own experiences after being sexually assaulted when she was 17, and how her internalization of gendered responsibility rhetoric in church settings influenced how she understood sexual violence:

> It was so fast. I remember saying, "no, no, no." And maybe there was a part of me that was like, "Oh, men, they just can't control themselves, my sin was even getting in the back seat, that's where I went wrong." And so I thought, "I set this up. I set it up because men can't control themselves. Boys can't control themselves." [In the church], we're literally taught that what we wear, how we talk, even expressions on our face, could set a boy off on a chain of events hormonally that he will never be able to control.

Caroline also discussed the ways in which the phrase "guard your virtue with your life" shaped her experience:

> They would say things like, "guard your virtue with your life," but what does that mean? How do you do that? Just pray? Cause I remember praying for it to not … I thought God would rescue [me] or intervene, right? But I thought I didn't fight hard enough. So I went straight to the bishop, and he agreed with me. "You didn't fight hard enough." That phrase, "guard your virtue with your life," haunted me for years and years and years, and it still gets perpetuated.

Caroline's quote reflects how gendered responsibility rhetoric can shape survivors' understandings of their experiences as well as influence bishops' responses. For Caroline, LDS language around "guarding your virtue" and expectations to "fight back" seen in texts like *The Miracle of Forgiveness* shaped how she understood her experience.

Lack of Trauma-Informed Approach. Participants often referred to "bishop roulette." This means that, because of the lack of standardized training for bishops, how a bishop might react to a disclosure of gender-based violence will vary. As Caroline stated in describing bishops' responses to people disclosing nonconsensual experiences, "They're not trauma-informed, and so they don't know that when you're in that situation, that you literally freeze."

Multiple participants also discussed not having the language or framework to understand experiences as nonconsensual. As Harper explained:

> He took me on a date, and then we went back to his room and, just, you know, one thing went to another, and I didn't have vocabulary, I did not know about consent, and I was sexually assaulted. And back then, I was so unaware of anything, right? I was just like, I didn't even know the trauma that had happened.

Harper went to her bishop, who acknowledged her as "the victim," saying to Harper, "You're good; you're the victim. So you don't need to repent in the eyes of God." However, reflecting on the experience later has led Harper to realize the harm in associating perceptions of chastity with worthiness. As Harper stated, "He assaulted me, and you're worried about my salvation? … How was that even the mindset?" Harper's experience demonstrates that discussions of salvation do not adequately address traumatic experiences. As Harper discussed, she instead needed resources to help her process and heal from her trauma.

Keira shared similar reflections on her conversation with a bishop about a nonconsensual experience (noting that she did not have the language of "nonconsensual" at the time):

> I went to the bishop that Sunday, and I told him everything. And he just was like, you know, "I see you, it's going to be okay, you can repent and it'll be fine." … Now with just more experience in the world, I wish that he had been better prepped to have the conversation of like, "That sounds non-consensual, let's talk about what that is, how are you doing emotionally, this is not something you have to repent for," … [but there was] like no recognition that like it had not been consensual. I don't know if I even blame him. I just feel like he was so unequipped to handle that kind of conversation or see the nuance or the complexity in the relationship and what had happened.

As discussed by multiple participants, church structures that operate from a framework of purity rather than from trauma-informed practices render consent invisible. Additionally, as Keira identified, her bishop likely received little to no training on how to respond to trauma or recognize signs of abuse, despite being appointed to a position in which lay members may directly or indirectly disclose abuse. Participants' experiences suggest that institutional structures leave bishops unprepared for these conversations and allow abuse to remain unaddressed at the systemic level.

In addition to lack of trauma-informed approaches in bishops' interviews and meetings, participants similarly perceived Young Women lessons as lacking trauma-informed principles. As Mia shared, chastity lessons in a Young Women setting did not include any discussion of gender-based violence, despite the fact that "there were young women in there who had been molested, and I actually had an experience with that when I was young." This ultimately led Mia to internalize her experiences with abuse as something to

"get in trouble" for in connection to purity expectations. Also discussing the harm of these lessons for survivors, Maya shared, "For sexual abuse victims, the rhetoric around purity is really painful because it feels reductive. It feels like it's victim blaming. It feels like being re-traumatized over again."

A boy in Kendrah's LDS ward sexually assaulted her in high school. When Kendrah reported the assault to her bishop, he connected her with the police and provided her with "bodyguards" of men in her ward who kept her perpetrator away from her while the court case was in progress. As Kendrah explained, her bishop's knowledge of resources stemmed from the fact that he worked at the courthouse rather than from any preparation he received as a bishop:

> I have talked to so many women in 10 plus years since that happened — I have never ever heard of that happening anywhere else. And I think that's really, really sad, because honestly, that was so simple. … As I've talked to other people who have been through the same thing, they received so much shame from their bishops and so much blame. … And I just overall do not feel like the church educates people enough on how to handle abuse or assault.

Kendrah discussed her experience as an exception rather than the norm, though pointing out that the support she received from her bishop was "so simple." Kendrah also identified hearing about sexual violence in LDS contexts in the news, such as reading about the LDS Church's cover-up of sexual abuse in Arizona (Rezendes 2022). She added, "I don't know where I would be in my life if that had been me, like if my bishop had not believed me," or if he had discouraged her from reporting. Referencing the church's attempts to cover up that abuse, Kendrah concluded, "I honestly, in the last two years or so since that has come out, I've felt a deep sense of unsafeness at church around like, if this happens to anybody, women aren't safe here."

Discussion

This study finds that an analysis of purity expectations for girls and women in the LDS Church is incomplete without considering relationships between purity and gender-based violence. These two concepts must be understood as mutually embedded—not simply overlapping, but rather conceptually intertwined. In these contexts, gendered violence becomes centered within structures of purity, rendering consent invisible. For many interview participants,

gendered purity teachings in the LDS Church existed as victim-blaming rhetoric, labeling girls and women as responsible for their own purity as well as the purity of boys and men regardless of considerations of consent. An analysis of gendered purity in the LDS Church remains incomplete without investigating allusions to violence, and discussions of experiences with gender-based violence for LDS girls and women cannot be fully understood without analyzing the all-encompassing nature of gendered purity expectations entangled within one's identity as a Latter-day Saint woman.

This study found interview participants based solely on their interest in discussing LDS purity teachings, with no mention of gender-based violence in the initial flyer. I was not directly recruiting participants based on experiences with gender violence. Before conducting interviews, I communicated to participants that I would ask a few questions about gender-based violence to provide informed consent about the interview process, but no question directly required participants to disclose experiences with gender-based violence. Despite these factors, I found that 42% of interview participants discussed experiences with gender-based violence (including sexual violence, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, spiritual abuse, and other forms of gender violence).

This study found that participants with a variety of religious commitments to the LDS Church (including active members, inactive members, and ex-members) discussed experiences with gender-based violence. While religious commitments may have impacted the 19 participants' relationships to purity teachings, their self-identified religiosity was not a statistically significant measure of whether they discussed an experience of gender-based violence. This finding suggests the importance of acknowledging paths toward healing for survivors both inside and outside church structures.

Interview participants' contributions reveal the ways in which lessons on purity may reference gender-based violence without invoking specific terminology, instead alluding to "dangers" or "asking for it." Multiple participants discussed references to sexual violence as a "consequence" of impurity despite indicating that they had not talked about gender-based violence in LDS settings. This conflation suggests that the lessons these participants received presented impurity and sexual violence as mutually intertwined, rather than separate, concepts. In this framework, sexual violence implies impurity, and impurity indicates the possible "consequence" of violence. While participants who experienced gender-based violence had a range of interactions with church leaders, some received responses that drew from victim-blaming narratives and rendered consent invisible.

Interview participants' experiences with bishops and other church leaders demonstrate a need for the LDS Church to institute trauma-informed training. As multiple participants acknowledged, phenomena such as "bishop roulette," in which some participants received support from church leaders while others did not, suggest that these harms cannot be explained by the actions of individual bishops alone. Rather, they stem from the lack of trauma-informed training at the institutional level. Trauma-informed training may involve teaching bishops about possible signs and comorbidities of abuse as well as the various ways in which trauma can impact survivors into the future (Herman 1997). Preparation for bishops should also involve specific training on how to respond to a disclosure of abuse to avoid retraumatization. However, interview participants' experiences suggest that as long as purity structures remain in place, the possibility of retraumatization remains, as survivors may not explicitly label an experience as abuse and thus may be asked to repent for an experience of gender-based violence. Additionally, participants discussed feeling intense shame after being asked to repent or abstain from the sacrament for a perceived "impurity" even if they had not experienced abuse, revealing that gendered purity structures harmed survivors and non-survivors alike among this study's participants.

These interviews provide a framework to understand gendered purity expectations as all-encompassing; purity has the capacity to shape all aspects of everyday life, and is tied directly to LDS girls' identity formations. Within these all-encompassing expectations, interview participants discussed shame as a central theme in their experiences with purity. Shame is present in their relationships to their sexual desires, their bodies, and their perceptions of their worthiness, all with eternal implications. The vast majority of participants also described messaging that fell within this study's definition of "responsibility rhetoric," which often further contributed to feelings of shame. These elements combine with victim-blaming rhetoric within and beyond church structures in ways that can compound shame for survivors of gender-based violence.

Additionally, LDS purity expectations presented impossible tensions for women of color in this study, as lessons framing purity as an active choice became implicated within doctrine portraying dark skin as inherently impure. These dynamics also present the possibility of increased vulnerabilities for LDS women of color in connection to gender-based violence.

Limitations

This study's sample population of 19 participants is not large enough proportionally to be representative of entire populations of current and former LDS

women. It does not fully capture their diverse experiences, particularly when considering factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, race, and varying degrees of religiosity. This study's finding that 42% of participants experienced gender-based violence is also not representative of broader populations of LDS women. It is possible that individuals who have experienced gender-based violence may have volunteered for this study at a disproportionate rate due to the significant impacts that purity teachings can have on those experiences. However, this percentage may still be an underestimate, as I did not directly ask participants to disclose experiences with abuse. This statistic may also have been different if I had asked participants to self-report experiences of gender-based violence, as survivors may not label their experiences as such (Wilson and Miller 2016).

Finding participants based on their interest in talking about purity presents the possibility of self-selection bias. Those who felt deeply harmed by LDS teachings, or those who remained strongly committed to them, may have been more likely to volunteer for this study, which may have skewed the data. Participants' ideological commitments, or lack thereof, to the LDS Church may have also played a role in how they discussed purity teachings. Scholars of cultural anthropology have described ideological commitments to religious identity as socially constructed categories, and in this study, participants' self-identification of their religious commitments through terminology such as "active member," "ex-Mormon," or "nuanced" or "progressive" member likely reference existing social and cultural groupings rather than entirely new constructions of identity (Brooks 2018). Thus, the language with which participants have come to discuss purity in the LDS Church may have been influenced by their identification with these categories.

As a final limitation, conclusions about LDS girlhood in this study stem from participants' reflections on their childhood, meaning that time may have impacted how they discuss or recall the purity lessons they received.

Implications for Future Studies

This study's interviews focus on American facets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since more Latter-day Saints now reside outside of the U.S. than within it, future scholars may explore new questions about differences in LDS purity teachings in various cultural contexts and geographical locations (Schneider 2024).

Additionally, a few participants in this study identified that the purity teachings they received operated within a heteronormative structure that

may have resulted in added stressors for queer youth. Future studies would do well to focus specifically on the perspectives of LGBTQ+ people who received lessons on purity in LDS settings. Building on this study, future scholarship should investigate the racial dynamics of purity teachings in the LDS Church, including how intersecting identities of gender and race may uniquely impact relationships to purity and experiences of gender-based violence. Researchers should also analyze the specific dynamics of purity for LDS boys and men, as multiple participants in this study emphasized purity teachings as harmful to boys and men as a key part of their understanding of purity in LDS contexts. Finally, 42% of this study's participants discussed experiences with gender-based violence, prompting future studies to investigate the prevalence of gender-based violence among broader populations of LDS girls and women.

Conclusion

While various thematic aspects of LDS purity expectations exist in other American religious and secular manifestations of purity, this study finds that LDS purity operates with its own particulars, evidenced by participants' discussions of its interconnectedness with their identities as Latter-day Saint girls or women. Factors that were particularly relevant to the LDS Church in participants' experiences included "worthiness interviews," connections between purity and the ability to take the weekly sacrament, and emphasis on girls and women as the "guardians" of boys' and men's purity.

This study adds to existing literature by including the voices and experiences of current and former LDS women on the topics of purity and gender-based violence. Participants who discussed experiences with gender-based violence held various relationships to the LDS Church, prompting future scholarship to consider how healing processes can occur while remaining in religious structures as well as while operating in post-religious contexts.

Finally, this study offers new analytical frameworks of themes of violence embedded within gendered purity teachings and themes of gendered purity embedded within experiences of gender-based violence. Based on this study's findings, future scholarship discussing purity in the LDS Church should consider its interconnectedness with gender-based violence, and studies that investigate abuse in the LDS Church should examine the role of purity as the framework from which the institution may respond to gender-based violence.

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