

Domestic Violence: A Global Problem

March 24 – March 30, 2010

Lenten Study 6

Domestic Violence Fact Sheet

Worldwide, 40-70% of all female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner.

In no country in the world are women safe from this type of violence. Out of ten countries surveyed in a 2005 study by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia. Only in one country (Japan) did less than 20 percent of women report incidents of domestic violence [7]. An earlier WHO study puts the number of women physically abused by their partners or ex-partners at 30 percent in the United Kingdom, and 22 percent in the United States.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the costs of intimate partner violence in the United States alone exceed US\$5.8 billion per year: US\$4.1 billion are for direct medical and health care services, while productivity losses account for nearly US\$1.8 billion.

In 2006 89 States had some form of legislative prohibition on domestic violence, including 60 States with specific domestic violence laws, and a growing number of countries had instituted national plans of action to end violence against women. This is a clear increase in comparison to 2003, when UNIFEM did a scan of anti-violence legislation and found that only 45 countries had specific laws on domestic violence.

In the US, domestic violence is most prominent among women aged 16 to 24.

In a randomly selected study of nearly 1,200 ninth-grade students in Geneva, Switzerland, 20 percent of girls revealed they had experienced at least one incident of physical sexual abuse.

In the US, poorer women experience significantly more domestic violence than higher income women.

Around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Most often the abuser is a member of her own family.

In all, women are victims of intimate partner violence at a rate about 5 times that of males.

In the US, the rates at which individuals report domestic violence to police vary along racial and gender lines. Hispanic and black women report domestic violence at the highest rate (approximately 65% to 67% of abuse is reported). For white females, only about 50% of the abuse is reported.

The UK government estimates that 95% of rapes there are never reported to the police. In 2007/8, only 6.5% of rape prosecutions resulted in a convictions (compared with a conviction rate of 34% for other criminal cases)

Sources: UNIFEM, Amnesty USA, Stopvaw.org, findcounseling.com, The Guardian

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John 7:53 -8:11

8⁵³Then each of them went home, ¹while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ¹¹She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

Creating space to think: Bible study on John 7: 53 – 8:11

This is a very short and familiar story. It's just 24 lines long in my Bible yet it still speaks across the centuries. Like the short adverts which form the centre of this week's study, it's trying to provoke a big debate from a few brief images.

We know very little about this woman. Her name is not recorded, neither is her age or social status. Where is the man she was caught with? Did she love him? Was she being raped? Was she being paid? Where is her husband? What's the story?

Whatever the full story was, there is enough detail to ensure that the story remains a vivid encounter even two millennia later. Imagine being 'caught in the very act of committing adultery':- the glare of public gaze, the shock, the humiliation. Whether she was 'caught' in an intimate act of love or during the horror of a sexual assault, being dragged into the busy courts of the Temple would be traumatising.

The woman is not even the centre of the scribes' and Pharisees' concern. Her individual act is much less important to them than the opportunity it gives them to trap Jesus. She is merely an object – "a teaching moment" – providing Jesus' enemies with an opportunity to catch Jesus out.

The scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus that 'In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.' At the start of this Lenten course, Moses is a helpless baby, the focal point enabling some women to embrace what little autonomy they have to resist and liberate. Centuries later, Moses is invoked as the lawgiver, the symbol of social order and guardian of religious purity for the Jewish people. Those challenging Jesus knew full well that he is being given an impossible choice – backing the Law of Moses, or the law of the Roman occupiers, which states that only the governor can impose a death sentence. Whether he speaks for rabbinical or Roman law, his enemies can condemn him – either for disobeying the Torah, or for provoking social unrest by defying the Romans. Hardly surprising then, that Jesus says nothing.

Morality is a complex issue. Adultery – the breaking of marriage vows has serious consequences for the individuals involved, their families and the wider community. Marriage is a private matter but it is also a social institution, with an important role to play in building strong communities. It is a place where private and public meet.

Domestic violence is a complex issue for similar reasons. It generally takes place in private, with abusers and abused often making strenuous efforts to make everything look 'okay' in public. And yet domestic violence is a public problem since it reaps a legacy of pain and dysfunction across generations. While only one person may be hit, all around are affected, as the ripples of violence spread. The adverts in this week's study are aimed at breaking this cycle of violence.

We do not know why the woman in this story was breaking her marriage vows but the scribes and the Pharisees clearly see upholding the moral law as a means of upholding social order. Making an example of those who transgress the law educates the population and strengthens social cohesion. For the crowd, the issue is so clear cut that the reasons

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behind the woman's actions are not even considered. The man, her 'partner in crime' is absent – physically, and as a factor in all the discussions. Her complex personal situation has been made an exhibit for public discussion.

Jesus is being asked to choose between two laws – that of Moses and that of the Romans. The matter is presented as a simple choice about who should judge the woman's misdemeanour. The rabbinic penalty – stoning – is a particularly cruel form of execution. How many misses and painful but harmless wounds are required to kill a person? Stoning was the accepted penalty for adultery precisely because it was a communal penalty. Like a modern day firing squad, it demanded many participants and no one person could be held individually responsible for the death. In a society where honour and vendetta often escalated violence, stoning was proposed as a neat solution. But to take part in a stoning would also be a trauma. Once the frenzy of the crowd dies away – the shouting has stopped, the blood has been spilled – how would the witnesses and those who threw the stones feel?

It is easy for us to make judgements on moral issues when they are presented in the abstract. Domestic violence is wrong – a crime which must be punished. This is now the accepted law of in many countries, including those where these adverts were made. Yet violence the roots and faces of domestic violence are many and far reaching, as the NZ 'It's not okay!' advert shows. It's not just violent physical acts which wound. It's angry words, gestures and the mind games which play out in family life. In human relationships, the triggers of violence are never far from the surface.

Jesus' response to his challengers is silence. He looks at the floor, writing in the dust. His silence creates a space for reflection. It slows the action down. Jesus' enemies keep pressing him for a response but I imagine that they are unnerved, less certain about what is going to happen. Until this moment, the story carries a sense of frenetic energy, the 'thrill of the chase', a woman 'caught' and now used as an object to 'catch' another wrongdoer whose behaviour threatens the status quo. I imagine a large group of men, hurrying so they miss nothing, jostling to hear and see, excited that this might be the moment where they 'trap' Jesus, a man who is a thorn in their side.

The crowd watching and the scribes and Pharisees are not named – they are acting as a group and as we know, people in large groups are capable of things that the individuals in the group might never envisage doing if they were alone. How much of the violence in the world comes from people acting unthinkingly, en masse? How many fights, assaults, rapes, would have been avoided if the individuals in the crowd had thought for themselves and not been swept along by the moment. In taking the momentum out of the scribes' verbal onslaught, Jesus changes the energy of the moment. He creates space for reflection, and although they still press for an answer, the energy of the moment is changed.

Transforming a violent confrontation into a moment for reflection and growth is a miracle. This is a risky encounter and a powerful one, which accounts for the fact that it made sufficient impression of Jesus' followers to be recorded in John's gospel. Such encounters are required whenever mob violence threatens to overwhelm people's gentler instincts – an angry crowd, especially one high on moral outrage, is a lethal weapon

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which can go off in any direction. No wonder Jesus said that the peacemakers were blessed.

In the silence, people have the chance to recognise their own role in proceedings. In this silence, did the scribes think of their own marriages, their own desires, and their own moments of failure? Did they take the time to imagine how the woman was feeling?

The tempo is changed so Jesus is able to answer the still pressing question – ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first one to throw a stone at her.’ Once the crowd is defused, they can hear Jesus’ words as individuals and once again see the humanity of the woman who has up to now been a teaching aid on moral law. Throwing the first stone, would be in, effect, taking responsibility for her death. Whoever takes responsibility for her death would then face the fact that he also deserved death for his sins, his transgressions.

Much of the Law of Moses, developed during the years of wandering the desert, waiting to enter the ‘Promised Land’, was designed as a Public Health programme for keeping a nomadic community socially and physically fit and cohesive. The ideals of the commandments make sense in terms of promoting social cohesion and curbing individual desires through social norms. Even today, when new public health initiatives are introduced – compulsory wearing of seatbelts in cars, smoking bans, fluoridating of water supplies – there will always be some complaints that individual freedoms are being sacrificed for the sake of wider health gains. For the scribes and Pharisees it is obvious that the individual needs of the woman are not as important as the needs of the community.

The domestic violence adverts also aim to create a community around a set of ideals. In order to challenge domestic violence, people need to be aware that it exists in all parts of our societies. In the series of Indian adverts, Bell Bajao! (Ring the Bell!), bystanders are invited to interrupt the private violence they can hear taking place, by literally ringing the doorbell. Exactly as in the John reading, the intention is to create enough space for the perpetrator to reflect, however, momentarily, on his actions. This brief interlude may be enough to break the cycle, at least this once. Bystanders are reminded that they are active participants in any situation and they have a duty to respond.

The UK ad features Kiera Knightley, famous for her film roles and beauty – a reminder that beauty, wealth and fame cannot protect against violence, and that the stigma which causes many victims to remain silent can be particularly strong for those who appear ‘successful’. It is the stigma which is addressed in the final line of the NZ ad – ‘But it is okay to ask for help’ – a reminder to both victims and perpetrators that, with support and time, the cycle of violence can be broken.

Our attitudes are shaped by the societies in which we are raised. We inevitably think ‘like the crowd’ in many respects. Many people still believe that what happens in the privacy of home and family should not be legislated on by the state. Some even use biblical texts to justify violence against wives and children. It will take more than a thirty second film to break down years of cultural denial and tacit acceptance. But creating

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space to reflect on our attitudes and actions is the first step on the road to change. This is the method Jesus uses again and again in the gospels – grabbing people’s attention, making them re-examine beliefs that they had taken for granted.

Once the crowd has been sufficiently unsettled, Jesus offers his suggestion for how to run the stoning. He doesn’t challenge their right to kill the woman directly – which makes his intervention all the more powerful. The crowd is full of self-righteousness – someone has broken the law and they have the right to exact the penalty. They are expressing their fidelity to the Law of Moses, an ancient law which holds them together in their identity as a people. For a people oppressed and challenged by foreign occupiers, this group identity is a powerful feeling.

Being part of a crowd can suppress our feelings of individual responsibility. To be swept along in a wave of people sharing the same emotion can be a glorious, intoxicating feeling – when our team wins, when our favourite singer is given a standing ovation. But if the crowd is a mob which runs riot, there is no warm afterglow – just the cold guilt and shame of being carried away.

By suggesting how to run the stoning, Jesus is fast -forwarding his attackers to that moment. Self-righteousness and moral outrage often spring from self doubt – the desire to strengthen my belief in myself by putting someone else down. When our identity depends on putting another group down, it can be ugly. When the mob descends from the certainty of the moral high ground, it is often to the shameful depths of self doubt. In his gentle but firm reminder that all humans fall short of perfection, Jesus is allowing each person present to recognise his own weaknesses and calling him to act with compassion.

In a short passage, it is significant that Jesus’ body language is repeatedly referred to – he bends down, he scratches writing into the dust on the ground. This is not a defiant rebuke which might further inflame the crowd. It is a low key response, deliberately defusing the aggressive posturing of those confronting him. It takes courage to stand one’s ground without aggression. Jesus embodies the place between the direct eye contact which can escalate violence and the meek passivity which is too weak to meet the challenge. With one sentence, he has quieted the violence of the moment and dispersed the mob. It is the elders who walk away first – those whose self-knowledge has had longer to develop. The mob left ‘one by one’ – each person taking their own time to hear Jesus’ challenge and reflect on their own experience. A good orator can turn gathered individuals into a cohesive group, but only a remarkable person can turn an angry mob into thoughtful individuals.

There is no record of what happened to the woman. How could her life not have been changed by such an encounter? We know that Jesus had not dispersed the angry mob permanently. Within a few chapters, a crowd would be yelling for Barabbas to be saved in place of Jesus. How many of that crowd had been in the temple on this day?

How the message is delivered is clearly important. Had Jesus used different body language or different words to confront his challengers, the results might have been very different. The suggestion that one without sin should begin the stoning is very different from a bald accusation of hypocrisy. How do we spread the message that violence

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against women must be halted? How do we curb the violence in our own hearts and homes? How do we stand against the casual violence of a media-saturated world? What is our role in dispersing the angry mob? Today, as 2000 years ago, Jesus calls us into honest encounter – with ourselves, with our world and with the God of peace who calls us to wholeness.

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Worship to End Domestic Violence

This short liturgy can be used as a personal devotion, as part of a group study, as material to be incorporated into other acts of worship, or in any way you find meaningful. You will need: a globe or atlas showing where you are; a Bible; some candles; a basket of stones; and some products of the area where you are, as signs of the generosity of creation in every time and place.

Call to Worship

In the beginning the Spirit God danced over the void.

It was a dance of creation, of joy, of freedom of wholeness, of power. . .

And God, knowing that all that is good is shared,

held the Earth tenderly and yearned for relationship.

And humanity was born in the yearning of God.

We are born to share the earth.

adapted from: Blessing the Earth, Carter Heyward, USA

Lighting the candle

God bringing light and banishing fear, we light this candle as a sign of our willingness to be your light in the world. We remember before you our own communities; the places where we live and work; the people whose lives are connected to ours. We bring before you all the people whose stories we have witnessed in this Lent study and all those whose stories have shaped our lives.

In Jesus, you show us how to confront violence and how to transform it into peace and justice. Fill us with your peace, that we may be peacemakers. Fill us with your truth, that we may speak truth to power. Fill us with your courage, that we may bring hope to those who live in fear. Fill us with joy, that we may be your beacons in the world.

We ask it in the name of Jesus, our brother and our friend,

Amen

Invite participants to take a stone from the basket to hold as the Gospel is read.

Reading John 8:2-10

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the

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woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Prayer of confession and laying down of stones

After each prayer a stone is laid down, at the end of the formal confession everyone is invited to come forward and lay down a stone in a communal act of confession. If you wish to say a word of confession aloud you are welcome to do so.

God of heaven and earth before you we confess our sin
God of transformation hear our prayer

We confess the terrible physical and sexual violence that so many women and girls across the globe are subjected to.

God of transformation hear our prayer

We confess how even into our own time scripture has been used to justify violence against women and their exclusion from a full role in society.

God of transformation hear our prayer

We confess a violent culture which turns women's bodies into sexualised commodities and sees women as part of the spoils of war and commerce.

God of transformation hear our prayer

We confess the structural violence of our institutions including the church which too often exclude women from decision-making, power or authority.

God of transformation hear our prayer

Assurance of forgiveness and transformation

please move forward to lay down your stones

There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment". When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (Luke 13:11-13)

Let us stand to listen to words we can trust, words which help us and our societies to stand up straight, be transformed and walk humbly in God's paths. *(please rise)*

Behold says God I am making all things new.

I will wipe every tear from their eyes (Rev. 21:5, 4)

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10)
In the name of Christ we are forgiven,
Alleluia, amen!

Prayers

Great God we give you thanks that you call us out of silence to name hidden and domestic violence.

Today we pray for all those women who despite suffering from violence, continue to care for family and children, to grow and prepare food, carry water, earn a living and offer support to others.

We pray for women who are trafficked as domestic or sex workers; for women who are raped and do not know how to find words to name their pain or a way into the future.

We pray for transformation of our societies which often find it easier to judge the victims of violence than to solve the problems of injustice

We pray that women's voices may be heard and taken into account in all peace and reconciliation work.

We pray for a transformation in the violent way many men act towards and think about women.

We pray for right and just relations between women and men that together we may transform and overcome violence in all its forms and learn to celebrate our diversity and interdependence

We look forward to the age of peace, when violence is banished, both women and men are able to love and to be loved, and the work and wealth of our world is justly shared.

Benediction

May the God of Eve teach you to dance.

May the God of Hagar bring you comfort in the desert.

May the God of Miriam bring companions to you when you struggle.

May the God of Deborah teach you courage for your battles.

May the Christ who knew Mary and Martha show you the way of balance.

May the Christ who healed the bent-over woman heal your pain.

May the Christ of Mary Magdala send you out to proclaim your story.

In the name of Christ who is the memory, hope and authority of the future.

Adapted from a worship created by Jane Stranz for the World Council of Churches

Discussion questions

- Which of the adverts do you find most valuable? Why?
- Which do you like least? Why?
- Do any of the films make you uncomfortable?
- How far can personal attitudes and behaviours be changed by public education campaigns? Have you ever changed a deeply held belief as a result of seeing a film advertisement?
- What attitudes need to be change in the society where you live? Would public education films help?
- In the Bell Bajao film, witnesses are encouraged to make personal interventions to stop domestic violence. Have you ever made such an intervention? Have you ever known abuse was happening but been unable to act?
- In 'It's not okay', the definition of domestic violence ranges from rape and physical abuse to shouting at your children and behaving passively- aggressively with your family. Is it helpful to have such a wide definition or does it detract from the abuses at the extreme end of the spectrum?

Bible Study questions

- What do you think happened to the woman after her encounter with Jesus?
- What do you make of the fact that the man who was committing adultery is not mentioned in the story?
- The Scribes and Pharisees have their moral certainty challenged. Are there times when your mind has been changed suddenly and unexpectedly? What happened?
- Have you ever been part of a “mob”? At a concert or at a rally, what emotions did you feel? How did you feel after? Did you do anything that you might not have done otherwise?
- Have you ever felt that you were of value only because you were “better” in comparison to someone else? Why was this?
- Jesus is described as ‘writing with his finger on the ground’ on two occasions during this passage. What do you make of this? What do you think he wrote?