

Reflections as part of our 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

The MU 2026 theme for the 16 days is **Together for Dignity and Safety**, which is aligned to the United Nations 2026 theme of Ensure Justice, Protect Survivors, End Impunity.

We have provided three reflections, which reflections can be used as part of a service or for personal use. Reflections on the topic of gender-based violence can weigh heavily on individuals so it's important that you have someone to talk to afterwards if using these for personal use.

The first reflection is based on Psalm 142, where we hear the heartfelt cry of someone whose life is unbearable. The second and third reflections are based on John 8:2-11, when Jesus refuses to engage in victim blaming; He wants the woman to feel safe and loved, and at peace.

What is victim blaming and why should we, as Christians and Mothers' Union members, avoid and challenge victim blaming?

The term 'victim blaming' was first coined by psychologist and sociologist William Ryan in 1971. It is defined as 'the transference of blame from the perpetrator of a crime to the victim-survivor, who is held entirely or partially to blame for the harm they suffered'.

Challenging victim blaming in the context of violence against women and girls is a crucial step towards ending it. When someone speaks out publicly about personal experiences of violence or abuse, or a high profile case is covered in the media, similar comments and responses come up time and time again. These include;

"Well, they should have left the relationship sooner."

"What did they expect, walking home alone at night?"

"They probably shouldn't have drunk so much."

Like the examples above, victim blaming often revolves around actions that a victim could have taken (or not taken) to avoid experiencing abuse. In reality, violence and abuse will happen regardless of the victim's choices.

Whether intentional or unintentional, victim blaming can cause serious harm to survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, leaving them feeling responsible for their abuser's actions, therefore increasing feelings of shame and guilt. Blaming victims for their own abuse is never acceptable, abusers are solely to blame.

One of the greatest barriers to seeking help and reporting abuse is the victim feeling they are to blame for what has happened to them. When people speak or behave in a way that reinforces this feeling of self-blame, the impact of the abuse may be greater, leading to a longer recovery. Victim blaming may also discourage a survivor from speaking up again or seeking justice or support, through fear they will not be believed. It can also stop other survivors from coming forward. The effects are far reaching.

If someone tells you that they have experienced abuse, rather than focusing on what they could have done differently, think about how you can support them moving forward. Listen to them, believe them, and let them know that it is never their fault. Look to the future, and their healing journey, by empowering them in their next steps.

With thanks to Revd Sandra Birdsall (Mothers' Union Provincial Chaplain, Wales) and Anna Venables (Exeter Diocese Mothers' Union)

Isolation and fear

Bible Reading: Psalm 142 (NLT)

I cry out to the Lord;
I plead for the Lord's mercy.

I pour out my complaints before him
and tell him all my troubles.

When I am overwhelmed,
you alone know the way I should turn.
Wherever I go,
my enemies have set traps for me.

I look for someone to come and help me,
but no one gives me a passing thought!
No one will help me;
no one cares a bit what happens to me.

Then I pray to you, O Lord.
I say, "You are my place of refuge.
You are all I really want in life.

Hear my cry,
for I am very low.
Rescue me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me.

Bring me out of prison
so I can thank you.
The godly will crowd around me,
for you are good to me."

Reflection

In Psalm 142 we hear the heartfelt cry of desperation from someone whose life is unbearable. It is a cry of pain and fear, a cry of isolation and imprisonment, a cry born out of the desire for change but the terror of just how that could ever happen. As well as the fear of the unknown of what would come next.

Millions of women and girls are living in just such desperate situations. Women and girls in our own streets and communities. Women and girls throughout the world. Women and girls we know personally. But this is all going on behind closed doors. On the surface it might seem that there is nothing wrong or that they keep people at a distance, they may pull out of things at the last moment or leave before the tidying up.

The psalmist voice echoes the sense of isolation, the feeling that no one cares about what is happening to me, that there is nowhere to run to, no future that brings freedom and peace.

The fear of leaving leads them to ask - will I be truly safe? Will they find me and drag me back or worse? What will life be like for my children if I/we leave? Will they be ostracized by coming from a broken home? Will people judge me if the truth comes out?

But our psalmist tells us there is a place to find self-esteem, indeed the love that gives the strength to open the door and walk through it. There is someone we can pray for the courage to step out into freedom. Our Lord is there to walk alongside everyone in good times and in bad.

For people who have home lives free from abuse we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the one who supports, heals, and strengthens. We can try to help to ensure that nobody has to fear that there is no one to help them; nobody who feels that no one cares a bit about what happens to them. We need to observe, listen, and believe that domestic abuse is behind the closed doors in our streets, communities, and families. We need to ensure that nobody is living in isolation and fear because we refuse to hear the cry of survivors, victims and their families.

Prayer:

Loving Lord, please help us to observe, listen, and believe people around us who are imprisoned by abuse of any kind. May we and they follow your call leading us all to the perfect freedom found when we seek refuge in you. Amen

Finding Strength

Bible Reading: John 8. 2-6 (NRSV)

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.

Reflection:

Some bibles subtitle this narrative as - the woman caught in adultery. She has no name worthy of recording. Instead, she has been reduced to her crime against polite society. There is no equivalent man caught in adultery in this scene. The unnamed woman is dragged before Jesus by men wanting to make a political point. They don't care about her, how frightened she is, how shamed she is, how exposed she is. This is not about a person, an individual, this is about an ideal, the need to prove they are in the right. That they are the voice of polite society.

No one seems to care about her dignity, about her humanity, her honour. Except, of course, Jesus. The one who the men are trying to manipulate doesn't buy into the labelling of her as the problem, the guilty, the outcast. To Jesus she is and always will be a beloved child of God. No hurled abuse, no physical violence, no sexual assault can take her worthiness of love and freedom from her.

As she stands before her accusers Jesus gives her something back: her dignity. He bends down and looks at the ground to give her space, to give her privacy, to reduce the threat. He opens a way for her to regain herself. He does not condemn instead he gives her opportunity. He does not judge he gives her understanding. He does not hem her in, he gives her a path to freedom. Jesus does not join in the victim blaming; he gives her space and listens to her.

So many survivors of gender-based violence are only able to find understanding, respect, and healing when they talk to others. When they listen to the voices that say - you can do it, you're are strong, don't look back and get out. You deserve better.

Jesus' very presence in this moment gives the woman strength to rebuild her life. His actions and seemingly inaction is an example to us of how we can help people to heal. Through encouragement rather than accusation, through understanding rather than judgement, through love rather than blame.

Prayer:

Loving Lord, we pray that people trapped in situations which expose them to gender-based violence will be supported and provided with safe pathways to freedom and healing, as their dignity is renewed. May we be your hands, feet, and voices as we help, encourage and restore them through our words and actions. Amen

Justice to Bring Healing

Bible Reading: John 8. 7-11 (NRSV)

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 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.'

Reflection:

Jesus isn't simply satisfied with restoring this woman's dignity and self-esteem. He doesn't turn his back on the issue once she is free from the immediate threat. He goes on to challenge the society in which such a one-sided judgement is metered out.

He is aware of their continuing attempts to get him to agree with them, of their need to sow divisions, or their need to other the woman whilst maintaining or enhancing their roles as the arbiters of right and wrong. So, he stands and issues them a challenge. A challenge that punches right at the heart of their sense of respectability. But he then treats them with the same dignity that he gave the woman. He bends down again and writes in the sand. Jesus gives each individual accuser the space to answer his question for themselves.

With this time of self-examining one by one each of the accusers walk away. Their hearts are opened to see the hypocrisy of their need to punish the woman.

So, we too are called to open our hearts to see where justice is being unfairly denied. Where perpetrators do awful things to their victims, physically, emotionally, and sexually and seem to get away with it because of the fear that they are able to instill. We are called to listen, to open our hearts and to understand that trauma is not simple and there are no right and wrong ways in how people attempt to handle it.

We should ask ourselves where we have been complicit in denying justice to people facing, and people who have survived gender-based violence and seek God's help in guiding us how to call for true and equal justice for women throughout the world. We should watch, listen and challenge voices in our society who manipulate our emotions towards societal denial and victim blaming.

We are all commissioned, by the way in which Jesus responded to the uneven administration of justice, to take an unwavering stand to uphold the dignity and safety of women who are consistently being denied the freedom to live lives fear free that many of us take for granted.

Prayer:

Loving Lord, we ask you to show us the way to campaign to ensure that justice is applied evenly across our institutes, our communities, and our world. We pray that all survivors who seek justice through our courts will be treated with dignity and will be provided with the appropriate protection to ensure their ongoing safety. May no-one be granted impunity because of their gender, wealth, or status. Amen