

*Come Lord Jesus among us, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Redeemer. Amen.*

As I speak I am sorry to any men in our congregation. I stress, I am not anti-men. I love men as much as I love women, but this conversation today is one that needs to be had and if you are here then I think you probably agree. However, if you feel uncomfortable, then I say this, the discomfort you feel is how your wives, sisters and daughters have often been left feeling in masculine company. I do though, ask God to bless you for being here with us today.

Last year at this time, I spoke of some horrific stories from within my knowledge and experience. I would like to remind you where I left off last year.

You may or may not remember I felt we women who have freedoms and power within our own lives do have a duty to stand up for those who have neither freedom nor power. I also spoke of the Old Testament women as examples for us today, women who are brave and strong. We have heard one such story today, of Ruth and Naomi. The story of Ruth and Naomi is a beautiful story of female friendship and love that we can all learn from, and through Ruth's loyalty she becomes a key piece of Christ's ancestry and history.

I also spoke to you about not forgetting the feminine in life, and that involves both men and women embracing the feminine in their own nature. I said the Feminine is Christ-like! The feminine are gentle, but still they are strong, but in a different way to the masculine. We all have within us the capacity for masculine and the feminine, neither trait is assigned to just one gender.

I also made a plea for the feminine to be equal to the masculine, the world needs to embrace the message of the majesty of meekness that was our Lord's; because we live in a world that worships power, money and status and not, the core message of the two greatest commandments' To Love God above all else and to Love your neighbour as yourself. This still holds true today. I believe it is true; that, to become truly powerful women and men, we should never lose sight of the feminine within us. I reiterate my message last year, this is not a man's world – it is a human world, to be shared safely by humans of any gender, age, or race.

So where next? .....

Well this year's campaign is concentrating on the issue of stigma around GBV and how stigma relates to the people who have suffered so much already. Sadly, in many cases this negative reaction to abuse and rejection is directed towards the victims of GBV rather than the perpetrator. This results in a double victimisation – once due to the initial abuse, and then due to the reactions of people around them. So mothers union is asking us to talk about it in 2017, during the 16 days

of activism against gender-based violence, where society responds negatively to, or by blaming those who are victims.

MU is calling on members and others around the world to talk about GBV to challenge the myths and harmful attitudes around it. Stigma means the mark of disgrace, stain of reproach as on one's reputation

Responding to and preventing violence against women and girls is a complex picture, and efforts are currently inadequate for the sheer scale of the problem. We need to tackle attitudes by societies across the globe. We have to highlight masculine behaviour and raise awareness of violent and fundamental unequal power relations between women and men, especially in communities where violence against women is rooted in their culture and that includes our own and other western countries.

There are 4 barriers to justice that women find:

- One is women not knowing their international rights,
- Secondly, poor access to Police and advocacy through poverty and often having long distances to travel;
- Thirdly, financial constraints. This is a common barrier worldwide...
- ...but fourthly, their barrier to justice is the battle against stigma in society and their own communities; harmful attitudes from families, communities, police, prosecutors, media and magistrates all conspire against women's pursuit of justice.

Stigma around gender-based violence can take many forms and be multifaceted. There was a case in Australia; a pretty advanced country by any standard; yet, some Air force cadets had been videoed in a compromising situation. The video was taken without their consent or knowledge and plastered across the media. Those involved consisted of 6 men and one woman. The woman complained to the media, not of the incident as she was as complicit as the men, but she complained about the video (a) being taken without consent by another male present at the time, and (b) it being publicly bandied around in another location and across social media.

This woman was suspended for bringing the Air Force Cadets into disrepute. No action was taken against any of the males involved, not even the male who had underhandedly taken the video and distributed it without consent of those involved. The men closed ranks.

There are some areas, where women who have been raped as part of violent conflict or war, are shunned by their families and husbands. Some women and girls who have been victims of human

trafficking, particularly for sexual exploitation, are then rejected by their families and communities, and not allowed to return home, even if they do manage to escape their captors.

Stigma around gender-based violence is often rooted in and made worse by myths and untruths that surround it. Many women who experience domestic violence and abuse, are made to feel that somehow the abuse is their fault, with people around them saying things such as “I don’t understand why she stays with him”; or they are made to feel that what they are experiencing is not abuse, because it hasn’t involved physical violence.

Society, and often the media, uses this further form of abuse to place the blame for the violence on the victim. For example myths such as the idea that sexual assault victims provoke their attackers by dressing a certain way, perpetuates the lie that sexual violence is about uncontrollable sexual desire, IT IS NOT! The reality is, it is about power and abuse.

For us to be effective we have to know the facts and figures and this is spelt out clearly on the MU’s website, just search 16 Days of Activism against GBV and you will find all that you need to know. It is important to be properly informed if we are to challenge the harmful myths and attitudes. If you don’t have access maybe ask someone who does to print off some of this information for you. We need to write to our own and overseas governments, leaders, the media anyone who has the power to make the fundamental changes that need to happen to end the violence and the stigma that is attached to it.

However, in reality the change begins, as I **always** say, with us; have we ever examined our own attitudes to GBV. If not, we should. I would suggest examining our own feelings and attitudes during this season of Advent, the **season** of death, **judgment**, heaven and hell is a relatively appropriate thing to be doing.

For, as Christians our response should never be one of endorsing stigma. For one reason it involves us making judgment on another human being and how many times in our New Testament do we hear the words “Do not Judge” Matthew 7.2; and in Luke 6: 37; In John 12: 47 Jesus tells us, “For I did not come to **judge** the world, but to **save** the world.” Especially he spoke to us women. Yet, we ourselves are guilty of throwing shadow over our sisters. Oh yes! We can be first class at that! We have to fight the darkness in our own hearts to overcome the prejudices within ourselves.

So let me end where we started with Ruth and Naomi two beautiful women who were there for one another, who had each other’s backs, who wanted the best for each other. Do we not want the best for our sisters around the world? If we do, then we have to break down those barriers of

silence and stigma that surround Gender Based Violence. We have to, as the Mother's Union ask of us, to:

Break the silence,

Lift the shame,

Shift the Blame.

I notice that the word Stigma is closely related to the same root as the word Stigmata, the marks resembling the wounds of Christ, said to be supernaturally impressed on the bodies of certain people. Stigma is a derogatory expression but Stigmata has a sense of being blessed.

How can we help the stigma instead become the stigmata? Women openly sharing their wounds to give hope to others still suffering in a dangerous situation. Women who have born such violence should be encouraged to show their scars and speak of their scars with the pride of a survivor. Not brushed behind closed doors of shame, but brought into the light for all to see what they have been through, lived through and eventually escaped from.

As it says in Ephesians 5:11, 'Have nothing to do with the fruitless **deeds of darkness**, but rather expose them.'

So, the challenge to you this year, is to stand in unity with our sisters, here alongside us, in our communities and across the globe and expose these Deeds of darkness in the light of a loving Christ who would condemn the pain and sorrow suffered by so many, Stand alongside, Ruth, Naomi and be a friend and sister, mother and daughter to one another, love one another and cherish the lives of each and every one of us whatever our battle has been.

The Lord has redeemed you, he knows you by name and he feels your pain. So, break that silence, lift that shame and shift the blame from our beautiful and innocent sisters.

Amen!

*GBV Information from:*

*Mother's Union Website – 16 days of activism*

*Huff Post*

*United Nations Website*

*Germaine Greer online*