

*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.*

The 16 days of activism is an international campaign to raise awareness of gender based violence as a human rights issue. Worldwide it is estimated that 1 in 3 of women have experienced physical or sexual violence. The UN's new sustainable development goals' on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls has a target to end all forms of violence against **all** women by 2030. I do recognise there is DV on men but women make up the majority of those who suffer. With women making up the majority of the world's poor, we simply cannot ignore gender inequality.

I could list the many atrocities against women, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Honour killings, arranged marriages, domestic violence and rape to name but a few; but we know; even here in our own country we are not exempt. We often think it is not a problem close to home; but inevitably and realistically it is a problem very close to home.

For those who wish to know more I can recommend reading from the Christian Aid Website or the Mothers' Union 16 Days of Activism page on their Website which will give you ample insight on the abuse.

However today I would like to begin by sharing with you the story of someone I met whilst I was on pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine 8 years ago. During our trip we had a visit to a children's home run by a lady called Najwa, she was the daughter of a couple who started the JeelAmal Boys Home based in Bethany, which was once home to Mary, Martha and Lazarus and only a "Palm Sunday" walk over the Mt of Olives from Jerusalem. The village is now in economic collapse and isolated behind the Separation Security Wall.

Najwa following in her parents footsteps opened a children's home for girls. She movingly told us of one particular rescue. We met the young girl, then aged 12. She appeared happy, secure and safe, she was well educated and even spoke a little English. However, Najwa related to us the girl's story. She was brought to the home after she was found, shackled in a cave when she was 8 years old. She was kept prisoner in this cave as a sex slave so that men would come and have sex with her and pay her captors money so to do. It was a lucrative business.

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Thank God, someone happened upon her one day by pure accident they found her in a very bad way. She was rescued and taken to Najwa. She was treated for the injuries to her body; the psychological scars that her experience inevitably had upon her would take a whole lot longer.

It is a horrible story but not an isolated one; this is why, we need it urgently addressed; 2030 is a generation away from us, a generation of education of our girls and more importantly I would say our boys.

Here at home we hear of abuse of women in our newspapers by husbands, sports personalities or celebrities who feel because of their standing they can get away with sexual assault or worse. As much as the power of celebrity opens up the field of advancement for people from all walks of life, it also reinforces a very real suspicion of anyone who makes a complaint as seeking notoriety. There is a collective intensity to disbelieve anyone who comes forward saying they have been raped; and with money and power being on the side of the celebrity, it takes a great deal of courage and bravery on the injured party to pursue their case through the Courts.

There is also a problem with the language, labelling and reporting of such cases. Activist Jackson Katz says, that, "The media's common use of a passive voice when reporting on [rape or] domestic violence [Most usually violence against women] it inaccurately emphasises a shared responsibility of the perpetrator and victim for the abuser's violence and generally leaves readers with an inaccurate perception that domestic violence is not a gendered social problem".

However, having worked in within the law and probation, I can assure you the photos taken at the time of domestic violence incidents present a much more vivid picture of the reality, as Jackson Katz also says, the photographic evidence can be a "powerful antidote to the [media] misrepresentation". When you see the faces of a woman's face battered beyond recognition there is no room for doubt that domestic violence is a very real problem for a lot of women. Women who to protect their children will nearly always put themselves into the firing line. Women who are financially reduced which is caused by the inequality on gender pay differences due to them usually taking on part time or zero

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hour contracts, usually being the parent taking on the core responsibilities of parenthood leaves them in a vulnerable position and unable to escape the situations they're in. But domestic violence is not restricted to the poor, we know that poverty is not the only danger trap, people from all walks of life are subject to acts of extreme violence.

How can we change the machismo culture of men in Brazil? How can we change how women are viewed as second class citizens? This is a job for us all to approach and it needs desperately to be addressed. For as much as we believe women are going places because they are able to become the German Chancellor, Prime Minister of UK; Chairman of a Footsie 100 company, or the CEO of an International conglomerate, all these achievements are hollow when there are girls and women in the world who still live with constant fear and abuse. If there is gender-based violence in this world, then we are a long way off achieving equality.

Which is why I don't think we women can avoid some of the responsibility. I am not saying the women who have been abused are in any way to blame no, no, no, not that old chestnut, but we who are in positions of power ourselves do have that obligation in the same way we have shouldered the responsibility of equality.

For years we have fought for equalities and have demanded parity with men and this is to be admired and celebrated that we are now beginning to be able to achieve this. However in so doing, I also believe we have inadvertently played a part in the increase of the myth that it is a man's world that is to be desired. That power, status, and money is to be desired, that the things men traditionally do is the mark of achievement. In so doing, we have unconsciously emphasised the myth that feminine qualities are second class and not to be sought after; and I don't think that will change until we truly embrace the nature of life in all its blessings, and one of those blessings is the gentleness and meekness of the feminine. Too long we feminists have strived for the masculine rather than promoting respect for the feminine. We ourselves do not always appreciate the feminine qualities we behold and I do not believe we will achieve parity until the feminine is cherished and respected for what it is.

Why do I say this, because I am speaking from the point of view as a Christian.

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Our Bible tells us, Jesus, loved women, he broke with the traditions of his day to be with women, he spoke with them to encourage them, and he stood up for them; They were his friends. We have him standing up for the woman caught in adultery, clearly challenging the men who would abuse this poor woman by stoning her to death without a consideration that there would by the very nature of their complaint have been two parties involved. We have Jesus standing up for the girl with the Alabaster jar of ointment, he speaks alone and without judgement to the woman at the well, he is persuaded in argument by the woman of Samaria; when he was tired and needed rest he turned to the hospitality of Martha and Mary and then Mary Magdalene a key member of his disciples, she is the first to arrive at his tomb and the one he trusts with the first message of his resurrection, but the patriarchal society that follows does not recognise her as one of them.

We also have St Paul's message you can read at the front of your service booklet. (in God there is no man or woman, no freeman or slave etc...)

The Old Testament is littered with stories of brave, strong women who are fine examples for us today. 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 actions she becomes a key piece of Christ's ancestry and history.

The feminine in the Bible have Lion hearts that can hold love for children, loved ones and for the world around them, and this hasn't changed we only have to look at members of the Mothers' Union. The Feminine is Christ like! The Feminine are good neighbours, nurturers, parent helpers, nurses, teachers and so much more. The feminine are gentle, and they are strong but in a different way to the masculine. The Feminine is not assigned just one gender as is neither, we have discovered, the masculine.

However 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.

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We desperately need to combat Gender violence and like it or not, the change begins with us. (I know, a woman's work is never done). But it is true; to become truly powerful women and men, we should never lose sight of the feminine within us. This is not a man's world – it is a human world, to be shared safely by humans of any gender, age, or race. We have shown the world that we can survive in a man's world, now is the time to challenge all to live alongside us in the Human world, the world which belongs to us all and where all are equal. We all say we want peace on earth and that, my brothers and sisters, begins with the source of all human interactions between us and God; and between one another.

Around the world, education is needed for both our sons and daughters to move away from the unequal and violent gender attitudes and the passive language that prevails in the reporting of domestic violence and sexual assault; we women have also to stop competing against each other and to honour, appreciate and support our sisters both here and across the world. We must report violence when we encounter it. We cannot turn a blind eye. When we read passive reporting on violence we should write to the papers and approach our MPs to insist that it is addressed.

If its what you wish, have the power, the status, and the money; we are free to reach for that; but please don't lose the feminine, the Christ likeness, within you, the majesty that comes with meekness and love, the power within the gentle heart, be the restoration of the status of the feminine.

I have two boys of my own and a daughter, I noticed as they grew up that they were fundamentally very different from each other; not better or worse, just different. I would not be without either. It is right for us to educate and cherish our girls for a better more equal future, but for women around the world to achieve a better future, our boys need cherishing and educating too.

Maybe today you have only just become more aware of the darkness of domestic violence that pervades this world, and you may want to play your part; beware you will face many forces dedicated to obstructing its change, if you think otherwise then you are, I'm sorry, naïve. We must show that feminine resolve to be the heart of change; we have to show that God's love is not softy stuff but the very soul and heartbeat of all creation.

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Girls, boys, women and men all bear God's image, its about time we began cherishing each other as such and that begins with us.