

A gender based violence bible study



Life Abundant for all God's People

John 10:10

Gender matters. Christ came so that all would live life in abundance, but many girls and women around the world are prevented from this because of gender based violence. Boys and men can also be affected, but the overwhelming majority of people who suffer violence on the basis of their gender are female. This violence takes many forms including physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence and the restriction of freedoms such as access to healthcare or education.

While the root of gender based violence across the world is the same, in patriarchal systems that position men over women, in the Global South it is closely connected with issues of colonialism, race, caste, poverty and traditional philosophies. We believe that God wants all human beings, female and male, to live life in fullness and this resource will help you explore issues of gender based violence, which stop that from happening.



Each of the stories you will read is true. Each is the real life experience of a woman from one of our partner churches across the world. Each will ask you to question how issues of gender and violence are viewed around the world including here in Scotland. They have been taken from our 2015 Gender Based Violence Report, which is an exploration of the reality of gender based violence from the perspective of our partners. The report is a culmination of voices and experiences from practitioners in our partner churches in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East, who are taking practical steps towards creating a world where all can live life in fullness regardless of gender. It is available on our website or from the Church Offices.

Another more informal way of engaging with issues of gender is through our WM MATters Gender Edition. These fun coaster style discussion cards are ideal for Café Church events, prayer groups, youth groups (16+), Guilds, as ice breakers or on notice boards. These are also available from the Church Offices.

What does the Bible have to say about this issue?

This bible study combines stories from our partner churches and biblical texts. By walking alongside and learning from people in other parts of the world our eyes and ears can be opened: this is akin to the Emmaus Road journey. Each week we share a story from a partner church and ask you to read the bible passage with this in mind. There is a reflection and discussion points prepared by people from all across the church. You might be surprised how these texts open up to you in light of the experiences of others.

More information:

Read

- World Mission Council 2015 Gender Based Violence Report
- Church and Society Council 2014 Report, 'Living a theology which counters violence against women'

Discuss

- Use our WM MATters Gender Edition discussion cards

Learn

- Invite someone from the World Mission Council to speak to your church or group about gender issues in the world church
- Use our listening workshop to find out more and reflect on gender issues

Contact us for more information or resources:

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1. Different Standards, Unequal Expectations

John 8: 1-11

The detestable part is when women and girls are raped during the evening or night, there are many who pose ridiculous questions as, 'What was she doing alone in the night, why did she have to go out at that time?' as though she deserved to be raped because of the crime of going out alone. How do we the church, look upon women who are abused, or those who are seeking justice? Or more pointedly, how does the church understand gender justice?

Rev Priscilla Papiya, Church of North India



Reflection

A woman, caught in the very act of committing adultery, is stood in front of Jesus, publically shamed and accused. Surely there's something wrong here? Why hasn't the man she was caught with been brought before Jesus too? Then the religious leaders refer to the Law of Moses, but only to part of it. The Law condemns both the woman and the man to death.¹ Immediately we are aware there are different standards for the man and the woman in this story. And there are other questions: Why would the woman willingly enter into a relationship that could end in her death? Or maybe she didn't do it willingly? Maybe she was forced to, violated? We don't know.

What we do know is Jesus did not condemn her. 'Adultery is a scandal. But perhaps a greater scandal is grace'.² Jesus is more interested in life than death. Jesus subverts the status quo and gives the woman the opportunity to move from her old life to a new one, to a life of wholeness – and he does the same for her accusers. In this story sin and redemption are linked to actions. It is actions that are the well-spring for living life in fullness.

Different standards for men and women are not just a thing of Jesus' day but are blatantly evident in today's world. As Rev Priscilla Papiya points out, all too often when a woman is raped the finger of accusation is pointed at her and not her rapist. What is true of other countries is true of Scotland too.

At the heart of our faith is the belief that all people are created in God's image and possess equal worth. Yet we live in a world where men and women are not treated equally. Rev Papiya challenges the church to do more to work for gender justice. If actions are the well spring for living life in fullness, do our actions match our beliefs?

Our partner churches are challenging unjust and oppressive structures. Their stories of activism both challenge and inspire. Gender injustice is a scandal. But perhaps a greater scandal is to do nothing about it. Jesus calls us from old ways to new life, a life of wholeness and right-relationship. 'I do not just wish to hear inspiring messages on GBV, but my strong desire is to hear transformative messages; messages which cause us to change and act.' (Mable Sichali, UCZ) Amen!

Discussion points

- What do you feel about only the woman caught in the very act of committing adultery being brought before Jesus?
- Where do you see examples of different standards and unequal expectations for men and women in your church? Community? In the world?
- Jesus subverts the status quo by not condemning the woman. In what ways might we need to subvert the status quo to bring about gender justice in our world?
- Rev Papiya is calling on the church to do more to work for gender justice. What could your church do both in its local community and in supporting our partner churches to challenge gender injustice and to model right-relationship between men and women?

Prayer

Creator God, your image is planted deep within each human being and you delight in and love each one of us. May we reflect your delight and love in how we live in community with others.

Jesus Christ, you call us to abundant life. You offer us grace in the face of our brokenness. You challenge injustice. May our lives reflect your desire for right-relationship, your compassion for others and your passion for justice.

Holy Spirit, you sweep among us touching our hearts through the stories of others. May the work of our partner churches inspire us in our ministry and, together, may we work to eradicate gender based violence from our world.

Amen

Rev Dr Valerie Allen: Church of Scotland minister; convenes the Church of Scotland's Violence Against Women Task Group; works in spiritual accompaniment (individual and group) and various projects encouraging women's empowerment; passionate about women's spirituality, wholeness, justice, right-relationship and feminist theology.

¹ Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22-24

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 155.





2. Deceiving the Innocent: Tamar's Story

2 Samuel 13: 1-22

My neighbour came to my place of work in hurry; she asked me to rush home to see what had happened to my daughter. When I came home I found my daughter screaming pointing to her private parts saying 'daddy, daddy, daddy!' When I asked what dad had done she said he had put what looked like a hard stick into her private parts. Then I realised she had been defiled by her stepfather. When I checked her with my neighbours the girl was badly hurt and she had blood all over her clothes. My daughter was not only hurt; she was traumatised and is frightened of older men. He had been an abusive husband and I always forgave him, but this? No I can't take it.

Church member, United Church of Zambia



Reflection

Both of these stories – the one from the Bible and the present-day story from Zambia – are hard to read! They are a painful reminder that sexual violence, in the past and still today, is most likely to be inflicted not by a stranger in a dark street but by a family member in a domestic setting.

The story of Tamar from 2 Samuel has been described as one of the ‘texts of terror’; stories of extreme violence against women in the Old Testament. Here is a young woman sexually assaulted by a man close to her, whom she loved and trusted. She was exploited through her kindness, and because she had been socialised into a culture in which her role was to take care of men. Her attacker colluded with another man to trick her into a vulnerable place. She said no, but her refusal was not respected. After raping her, the man treated her with hatred and contempt. She was thrown out. When she sought help from another brother, she was told to keep quiet. Her story became men’s business, part of a power struggle between warring siblings. She herself was left abandoned, desolate, invisible. No care or compassion was shown to her.

The modern story is one that is sadly familiar, of a girl child sexually abused by her stepfather. Neither the fact that one story is from long ago and the other is from far away should blind us to the reality that they could equally well have happened in our country. And the fear and trauma are as intense for a little girl as for a king’s daughter.

Sexual violence is a global pandemic at every level; it becomes a mass outrage against women and girls in contexts of conflict, displacement and social disorder, when it is used as a weapon of war and humiliation. It is always an abuse of power, and finds its authorisation in ideologies of male supremacy and entitlement.

It’s hard for churches to hear these stories of rape and incest; we would rather not listen. But the role of religion, with its potential both to harm and to heal, is a crucial one in challenging and ending sexual violence. Part of what it means to be a world church, to be part of the body, is the recognition that if one part suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. There is a call here for us.

Discussion points

- Have you ever heard or read the story of Tamar before now? Have you heard the story told or preached on in your church? Have you ever heard any of the stories of gender violence in the Bible in your church? If so, what was the reaction? If not, why might that be?
- Gender and sexual violence is one of the major health problems in the world today, both globally and nationally. Are you aware of strong feelings in yourself when you hear or think about either of these stories? Does it feel safe for you to think or talk about them?
- What do you think the church’s role is, or might be, in speaking out and acting against sexual violence? What impact might it have globally?
- Are there ways in which you think your church might change its practices to play a part in combatting sexual violence?

Prayer

Spirit of grace and truth,
for revealing yourself in community,
for laying bare the grievous wounds of violence
for bringing us healing through the work of justice
and mercy,
for inspiring us with courage to change
we give thanks.

We pray for everyone who has experienced sexual violence, humiliation, or powerlessness in the face of threat.

May we listen without turning away,
May we know when to speak out and when to be silent
and may we become part of the solution
rather than part of the problem.

Amen

Kathy Galloway is a theologian, writer and campaigner, a member of the Iona Community and a minister of the Church of Scotland. She is currently Head of Christian Aid Scotland.





3. Sex, stigma and suffering

Mark 5: 21-43

Even in his sickness he insisted we have sex. In obedience I agreed because that is what our culture says. I started feeling sick during pregnancy. I did not know that the reason was that I was HIV positive. I gave birth four months after his death to a very unhealthy baby. I was always in and out of hospital with him until he died a year later. I became depressed and very sick such that I almost died. I was diagnosed with TB. I was counselled and was tested for HIV and was found positive.

Church member, United Church of Zambia



Reflection

'If I just touch his clothes I will get well' is the casual statement made about the woman who had bled for years. Yet behind that statement I suspect it is hard to imagine the woman's trepidation and the courage it took to actually go and touch Jesus. Social space in Jesus time was profoundly gendered and women were always considered in relation to and under the authority of kinship men. Women's place was private and domestic and there were rules governing behaviour in public spaces. So, it would be shaming for a man to speak in public to a non-related woman - not to mention purity rules. A menstruating body was polluting and not to be touched at any cost. For her to dare to think, that she could touch the clothes of a rabbi was a fairly outrageous idea.

So what made her action possible? I suspect the key to this was respect. This story happened early on in Jesus ministry when Jesus was just becoming known and with that his attitude towards women which was clearly different from a lot of men at that time. He respected them. He respected their company, their support and their intelligence. So armed with the knowledge that she would be respected this worn out desperate woman touched Jesus. When he discovered who had touched him, Jesus respected her faith and actions. He didn't tell her off for breaking purity laws. He respected her humanity and her faith.

Respect for the completeness of every person's humanity would go a long way to addressing some of the many inequalities in the world including that of gender inequality. World Mission partners know that to stem the spread of HIV information is not enough. It has to be about changing attitudes, starting with that of boys and girls where each has to learn genuine respect for the other.

The Zambian woman quoted above, like many the world over, lived with lack of respect. Her role in life included having to submit to her husband's desires and belief in 'conjugal rights' What about her right to respect and with that her right to say 'no' or insist on barrier contraception to prevent her getting the virus? The church the world over has a huge challenge to follow Jesus' example and model behaviours which stand against the norm and show everyone a community where everyone's life is truly respected.

Discussion points

- What activities in society today might be seen as for 'women' or for 'men'? Is it easy for people to break these barriers? What sort of things might be said about people who ignore these labels?
- How active have we been as a church/community in promoting ideas of respect between men and women and boys and girls? Is it something we can even talk about particularly in a context of sex?
- There will be someone in your church experiencing violence of some description. You may not know it. Who would they turn to in your church? Remembering that the problem with violence is that it is often seen as 'private' what steps could you take to make this issue more public?

Prayer

God of the gentle touch who touched the world with love and created people to love and live gently,

Touch us with gentleness.

Christ of the compassionate touch whose hand healed the broken and embraced the cast out,

Touch us with compassion.

Holy Spirit whose fiery tongue touched all on Pentecost and enabled them to speak,

Touch us again with your fire to have respectful just voices for all women and men.

Amen

Eildon Dyer is a stay at home granny/daughter juggling the support needs of the young and the old.





4. Abigail's Silence

1 Samuel 25: 1-38

My husband and I were very happy when we were first married, but after our second child he started drinking heavily. One day I went out and he came back home to find that I was not there. When I got back he started beating me in front of my three kids. It was so bad that the next day I went to the clinic for treatment because I was so swollen. I never reported to the police because I was so shy especially because I am a counsellor who deals with these cases. I was leading a double life. The end finally came when my husband, in an alcohol-fuelled rage, told me I was going to die. I decided to separate from him and take the children. Now I am trying to rebuild my life without living in fear.

Ann, United Church of Zambia



Reflection

The King-maker is no more. Samuel, who anointed both Saul and David, the first of the Kings has died leaving a legacy of a new form of leadership among the people, a restored trust and reliance upon the laws of Moses, a resurgence of the prophetic tradition and a deeper sense of what it means to be the people of God. Yet this announcement comes only as a forerunner to the story of David and Abigail which sits amid tales of the strife that exists between Saul and David. There is a moment of peace between the two protagonists, and then comes this account of poor hospitality, of a request rebuffed, threats of violence and harm, and the quiet wisdom of a woman who demonstrates power without might as she points to the crucial role of God in their situation.

The woman we are told is clever and beautiful while the man bears the name of a fool, but he is a rich fool and David's men encounter him at a time of feasting and celebration when it is customary to show hospitality and share something of the riches to hand. For David with a large retinue of men it was necessary at times to rely on the generosity of others for food and in return for this David's men had protected Nabal's men as they did their work of shepherding. There was no quarrel between the young men who worked for David and the young men who worked for Nabal but, insulted by Nabal's rebuff, David planned to send his men to attack.

Abigail is quick to respond by taking a generous portion of food and wine and going out to meet David. She does not warn her husband of the danger or plead with him but takes matters into her own hands, both by approaching David and by accepting responsibility for the wrong done. She appeals to David's sense of goodness and encourages him not to bring guilt on his own head by spilling blood in anger. David in turn sees the hand of God in her words and actions, preserving him from exacting vengeance.

It was morning before Abigail spoke to her husband of all that had happened and the news proved to be too much for him. It is not long after his death that David takes this wise woman to be his wife.

Discussion points

- As we see in the story from Zambia a relationship may start well and then through other circumstances fall apart. What does it mean to you for spouses to be equal?
- Many women bear violence for a period of time and then find enough is enough; others campaign for zero tolerance. The threat of death pushed both Abigail and Ann to act but when do we need to say enough is enough?
- In response to bad hospitality David plans a battle. Abigail points out to David that he would be guilty of shedding blood unnecessarily. How do we work towards a balance and wisdom in response to wrongdoing?
- What cultural norms influence our own views in relation to marriage and gender based violence and can you identify any changes that have taken place in your own life-time? How do you think faith does or should inform our thinking on marriage and gender based violence?

Prayer

The love of Creator, Son and Spirit
Weaves together the pattern of God among us
Three in one enfolded in equal sharing
Sure in purpose, strong in vision
Making and re-making all that is and might be
Encompassing in God's love the earth and all its people
Forming wonders from the dust
Warming humanity in the sun
Filling hearts with possibility

The love of the three in one
Reveals the wisdom of God among us
Forging a strong circle that supports the weak
Shares out the power
Responds to all our needs
Showing the way that leads us out of violence
Building communities of peace
Matching people to their best loves
Restoring relationships of wholeness

The love of the Creator, Son and Spirit
The love of the three in one
Enfold, encircle, entice us
Into the dance of life in all fullness
Amen

Rev Marjory McPherson is the Education and Support Secretary for the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland.





5. Male and female he created them

Genesis 1:27

When I was a child my mother took me to a doctor to be circumcised. She promised me that if I obeyed all of her instructions I would be rewarded and good things would happen to me. I still remember every painful moment I went through. Although I am educated and a part of me felt guilty, I had planned to do the same for my daughter. Once I learned about the dangerous consequences from the church workshop I changed my mind. I won't commit this crime to my child.

Female Church member, Synod of the Nile, Egypt



Reflection

There's an inbuilt sense of balance and equality in the creation story of Genesis 1: all people are called to share the vocation of caring for the whole of creation, under God's loving, watchful gaze. Before gender is even mentioned, we read –twice – within verse 27 that people were made in God's 'own image'. If God, the good and just ruler of all the earth, has delegated to us the stewardship of that earth, shouldn't our care be a reflection of the God in whose image we are made? Surely we all have a responsibility to ensure that each living being is respected, protected and provided for?

If we read to the end of the chapter, it tells us that God saw everything God had made and indeed, it was very good,(1:31a). Since God made a world that was very good, don't we all have a part to play in pulling the world, bit by bit, back towards that place of goodness?

God has promised us 'life in abundance' (John 10:10), as reflected in the creation account of Genesis 1. This text calls us to reach for that abundant life and be vigilant against the potential violation (physical, mental, emotional or spiritual) of any woman, child or man. We can't allow ourselves to be blinded by culture, history or tradition: we need to seek discernment to recognise when something is less than 'very good' in God's eyes.

Humans are not like the rest of creation: unlike plants and animals, we have the capacity to think, to make ethical and moral choices, to love or to commit unloving acts. We can chose good character, do good things, be good people, make positive contributions to our communities.

If we read Genesis 1 in the light of the Gospels, where we see Jesus welcoming and affirming people regardless of gender, we can find a basis for living as a community of equals. In such a community, people are able to flourish (along with the rest of creation) in the harmonious state in which they were created.

The balance of male and female gives a wholeness to human life. Not only that, but we have been given the ability to procreate, to make more life. How will we care for each new life and ensure that she or he is treated as a beloved child of God, made in the image of the Creator?

Discussion points

- If God has created male and female, does this necessarily polarise men and women or is there a less stereotyped and more inclusive interpretation to be found here?
- Reflect on the story of the Egyptian mother and the part the church played in changing her mind about female circumcision. What can the church/theology provide that a general education may not offer?
- How important is it to an awareness of gender-based violence to understand the cultural context?
- What would it mean to you, in your own life, to flourish as God intended?

Prayer

God our Creator, we thank you for our shared calling as your children, male and female together, to care for all of creation.

Forgive us when we fail to notice or to question that which is less than good: when we condone or perpetuate violence of any kind.

Fill us with your Spirit of wisdom and help us to see the world through your eyes of compassion and justice.

Give us courage to challenge and to change,
In the name of Jesus Christ our Liberator, Amen.

Erica Wishart - who is a wife, mum and gran - was ordained into her first charge in Tranent in December 2014, having previously spent 22 years as a primary school teacher.





6. Ripzeh's Protest

2 Samuel 21: 1-14

My older daughter was in Class 9 when I transferred her sister, but instead of transferring schools when just one year to go, the eldest left school early. Me and her father did not want her to have to go through the checkpoint every day and were afraid for her with the soldiers. I would not let my daughters go alone through the checkpoint.

Mother, Al Khalayleh, the Seam Zone of the West Bank



Reflection

Women in Palestine are caught between two oppressive forces; the hammer of settler/colonialism and the hammer of patriarchy. In our story the daughter was forced to leave school early because her parents did not want her to go through the checkpoint and be potentially harassed by soldiers. Her parents fear is real as sometimes girls are sent off to a security room to go through x-ray machines and metal detectors without a female guard in attendance. At other times they are asked to remove their hijab or head covering. Her parents wanted to protect her from this kind of sexual harassment so they have restricted her freedom of movement.

The Separation Wall with its elaborate system of checkpoints restricts Palestinian movement. It cuts farmers off from their lands, families from families, and even students from their schools. It also prevents Palestinians from getting health care which has led to women giving birth at checkpoints or even people dying waiting to get through to a hospital.

This daughter is caught between two systems of oppression which not only restrict her freedom of movement but also her right to education. Her parents wish to protect her modesty and potential harm from soldiers and the Israeli military occupation restricts her right to education.

This young woman is like Ripzeh who suffered at the hands of the Gibeonites who killed her two sons as well as King David. She is caught between men who use ritual killing as a tool of state terror and power. Ripzeh, however, refuses to be a victim and rises up against the men in the palace and the beasts of the field. She sets her sackcloth upon the hill in the shadow of the crosses and stays from the beginning of the harvest until the first rains. Her outrage and pain lead her to make this silent vigil or protest. She shows immeasurable dignity and compassion. Her care for all the dead is a witness to a God who rejects vengeance. In the end she is allowed to bury her sons and all the dead she came to protect.

Discussion points

- Tell why her parents don't want her to cross the checkpoint? Do you agree or disagree?
- What else could they do to support their daughter?
- What could the young woman do to support her right to become educated? What could she learn from Ripzeh?
- The Separation Barrier is illegal under international law according to the International Justice Court (ICJ) ruling in 2004. Freedom of movement is a human right. How do these facts impact the way you understand the story of this young woman?
- What other examples can you think of that illustrate the way women in Palestine or your country are caught between the oppressive forces of patriarchy and the forces of a political conflict?

Prayer

God of the oppressed and the outraged,
show us how to be as bold as your daughter Rizpeh,
how to stand up to the power and authority of men
who seek to confine or restrict our freedom.

God who know no boundaries,
whose movement cannot be restricted
help us be audacious and brave
to stand up for ourselves
and challenge all that binds us
blinds us to your call for freedom.

Amen

Rev Loren McGrail is a Global Minister for UCC and Disciples of Christ serving The YWCA of Palestine and an Ecumenical Partner with St. Andrews Scots Memorial Church, Jerusalem.





7. The Persistent Widow: The Journey towards Gender Justice

Luke 18:1-8

Mable Sichali, United Church of Zambia - I do not just wish to hear inspiring messages on Gender Based Violence, but my strong desire is to hear transformative messages; messages which cause us to change and act in order to build a peaceful Zambia where women, men and children will be able to participate equally without being harassed.

Nadeel, YWCA Jerusalem - As a young girl I'd like to feel secure – we are at the beginning of our lives and the future is ahead, but this takes away our freedom and right to life and security.



Reflection

We are challenged throughout this series by the dreams of two women, dreams for justice, for security, for freedom and peace, all of which we frequently take for granted. There have been stories and questions to wrestle with, and many of them will have been very disturbing, as our eyes have been opened to the many ways women's lives are being violated.

The story of the persistent widow is a timely reminder against any sense of powerlessness we may feel in the face of such an entrenched problem. It is also a salutary caution that it is not enough to be disturbed. This passage highlights the need for prayer – faithful, persevering and persistent prayer – not only out of compassion for the women of Africa or Asia or the Middle East, but for the conviction that our voices can and must be heard by even the most powerful or uncaring, all those represented here by the judge. As Walter Wink reminds us, 'History is shaped by the intercessors.' And the choice for us in the story is; do we act like the judge, not listening, and not concerned, or do we align ourselves with the widow? The good news, of course, is that her constancy wins the day. Their dreams and ours are not enough, our faith calls us to pray and to act.

Our sustained prayer will take many forms; prayer for the women and their situation, that they find the confidence to tell their story and the courage to act; that they might find protection; that the 'judges' may have a change of heart. Prayer for ourselves that we can let go of any attitude of 'there's nothing we can do,' 'it's not my problem,' and that we learn to hear the testimony of those suffering with compassion, and without judgement. Prayer for the faith, that, with God, we will have the courage to do something, and we will not give up even though the task seems insurmountable and the cultural opposition all powerful.

This story comes between two passages in which our Lord points out that the religious leaders are just not getting it right; And in the midst, this story of the widow, a nobody, in that society, someone with no status, who by prayer and action changes the judges' mind.

Discussion points

- 'When one woman weeps, another is disturbed in her sleep' Beijing Conference on Women 1995. As you look back on the last six weeks, what are the stories which 'disturb you in your sleep'?
- Look again at the character of the persistent widow, her faith, her remarkable confidence, and her willingness to challenge; and ask yourself where you might need help to become like her.
- You have been on a journey with women from many countries and now need to decide where your journey might take you. What is your dream for gender justice, and what scares you about the task ahead or becoming involved?
- What might your small group do together to become the 'persistent widows' against gender violence?

Prayer

Forgive us Lord
when we hear neither your plea,
nor the cries of your people.

Free us Lord
from the fears that bind us,
or from any sense of powerlessness.

Fill us Lord
with your dream of a just world
and the tenacity to keep going
in playing our part,
in your name,

Amen

*Maggie Lunan now expresses her concern for women through her work with **Alternativity** and as a spiritual accompanier.*

