

KEYNOTE SPEECH by
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– Invisible NO More –
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INVISIBLE NO MORE

Welcome – Greeting – thanks for invitation

“For we Know that things can change” Pope Francis Laudato Si #13

Invisible No More—Are we really talking about an invisible emergency in the sense that it is quite visible for those who want to see it?

Violence against women and girls is a global issue which transcends national boundaries, as well as socio-economic, cultural, racial and class distinctions. The problem is not only widely dispersed geographically, but its incidence is also extensive, making it a typical and accepted behavior. It is far-reaching, deeply ingrained, and has serious impacts on women’s health and well-being. Violence against women is a cost issue for individuals, health systems, and for society. It’s an issue that has been widely ignored, and as such, so little understood.

Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls continues to be a worldwide public health, gender equality, and human rights priority. Globally, almost 1 in 3 women (736 million) experience physical and/or sexual abuse in their lifetime, (World Health Organization, 2021) mostly at the hands of an intimate partner. This is a stark reminder to all of us of the scale of gender inequality and discrimination against women.

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation. While domestic violence is often treated as a private matter, the Human Rights Framework provides a tool to challenge this perception and reframe it as a collective problem that society must address. Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to ***Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls***. The goal states that:

Women and girls everywhere must have equal rights and opportunities and be able to live free of violence and discrimination. Women’s equality and empowerment is one of the 17 SDGs, but also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development, in short, all the SDGs depend on the achievement of Goal 5. The vast number of UN documents and programs has

well established gender equality as a right, and the targets laid out in SDG 5 is the best chance we as a global community have to meet some of our world's most pressing challenges for example:

- Target 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere
- Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

Stopping the violence

Violence against women is widespread, but it is not inevitable. Change is possible. Stopping the violence starts with believing survivors, adopting comprehensive and inclusive approaches that tackle the root causes, transforming harmful social norms, and empowering women and girls.

Addressing Gender-based Violence

Responding to violence against women and children must include survivor-centered essential services across policing, justice, health, housing, and social sectors. It must be accessible to all women and girls, including the most vulnerable. It also requires listening to women themselves and understanding their situation, needs, and priorities.

An effective response to gender-based violence must be multi-sectoral. It must address the immediate practical needs of women experiencing abuse; provide long-term follow up and assistance; and promote changing cultural norms, attitudes, and legal provisions that promote the acceptance of, and encourage violence against women, thus undermining women's enjoyment of their human rights and freedoms.

Recommendations for addressing gender-based violence:

- Listen to and believe Survivors
- Increase the visibility of young women and girls in discussion
- Stand up against the normalization of gender-based violence

- Provide adequate support services
- Collect and utilize data
- Take time to educate yourself on gender-based issues
- Use social media
- Share success stories
- Understand it takes everyone to make a change
- Advocate for stronger and more comprehensive laws
- Support Women's Leadership
- Confront cultures of violence

Catholic Religious Women have a significant presence in some of the world's hotspots where gender violence is perpetrated—particularly in Latin America. But with rising rates of gender violence around the world, it is crucial that we as religious expand our footprint with lay organizations and initiatives.

Catholic Social Teaching affirms that solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion at the misfortunes of many people both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is say to the common good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all” (“Sollicitudo Rei Socialis”) (The Social Concern,” no. 38, Dec 30, 1987).

Women Religious across the world have been at the forefront in their leadership to support women experiencing gender-based violence in times of multiple crises and escalating crises. It changes us, and we will never be the same again. Allow me to introduce you to my friend Jennifer. A battered woman, a survivor, a daughter, a sister, a mother. A woman broken by her experience of domestic violence. A woman locked in years of pain and agony. A woman who was brutally raped and abused, and the woman who attempted suicide.

Who wanted to listen to Jennifer's story? Why would Jennifer, who never trusted anyone, want to trust me? I was blessed with time, patience, caring, and with a very deep respect for all people. I had the time to spend with her. I met her sitting on the street outside a cinema in Dublin with her bags and all her worldly possessions at her feet. I sat down beside her on the street on a beautiful summer

morning. She sat there silently, refusing to look at or respond to me. I sat with her and tried to listen to her silence. The street was filled with her pain. She began to look at me. I reached out and touched her. I assured her I could take her to a safe place (wondering as I saw all the black bags how I would get her to a safe place while making sure she could take all her belongings with her).

We began our journey to a safe house—me with the bags and Jennifer under my arm. We eventually arrived at the safe house. Many hours later as I sat with her, her only words were “how much more do I have to take.” She slowly started to tell me about her violent relationship with her partner. How the drinking and the cutting of her body brought her relief from the abuse she was experiencing. All she knew about herself was that she was a nameless woman, an unwanted woman, and a woman with no dignity or respect.

Hitting rock bottom became a blessing and a possibility for her, a threshold of hope, and a new beginning. I journeyed with her for several years and eventually a deep friendship evolved. I realized during this time what the God of our lives is all about, God active in each other. She introduced me to the margins and to the thin places in our world. She loved to celebrate, and she would invite her friend, and prepare the table (which was initially an orange box), where we would share a meal, and share our stories. A ritual of healing, and of how our wounds ached for recognition. These moments were wonderful moments for me, moments of laughter and blessing. We were each coming back to a place called home within ourselves. She would often say to me “isn’t it wonderful to be loved again.”

Sometimes there is resistance to the call to the margins (I felt it). But when we listen to the spirit, when we really listen, we are led to the edge and our lives will never be the same again. We surrender all our plans, our goals, our desires, our certainty, and it is a very positive place to be in once you are in it. We bear witness to something unique. I have learned so much from standing with, and being present for others, knowing we cannot alleviate their unique pain or trauma, but we can alleviate the pain of their situation by being with them (like my friend Jennifer).

How do we encounter the invisible and bring it to visibility?

Our best tool to bring visibility to the invisible is advocacy. The word comes from the Latin “Advocare” and means “to call out for support.” Advocacy takes on many definitions across countries, cultures, contexts, and time periods. There are multiple definitions of advocacy but central to many is an understanding that by working with institutions, changes can be made in policy or implementation of policy that are sustainable, and on a larger scale than any one organization can achieve through direct service delivery or capacity building.

In any advocacy process we need to elevate the voices of those that are invisible. Make sure that our advocacy approach is Survivor-centered. In other words, take a respectful and “do-no-harm” approach to the telling or retelling of survivors stories, only with their informed consent, and under conditions where they feel empowered.

Why do advocacy?

It can include:

- Creating sustainable change
- Challenging unjust structures
- Transforming power relationships
- Increasing awareness of organizations like UISG, Talitha KUM and WOC and what they are working on
- Having better informed members
- Increasing the profile of your group
- Improving dialogue with decision making bodies

Developing an advocacy strategy

There are four key questions to ask when thinking about advocacy and developing an advocacy strategy:

- What do you want to change?
- How will change happen?
- How will you know what you want to change?
- What is your key message?

Here is my best example from passion to product:



Conclusion

This is a historic time to listen to the spirit who calls on us to do something more. To me, Emily Dickinson embodies this sentiment in her words in her poem, 'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers"

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –

And I’ve heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest sea –
Yet- never-in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me

Emily Dickinson, "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983

Let us remember that during the darkest days of our history, quite often a small number of women and men, scattered throughout the universe, have been able to reverse the course of historical evolutions. This was because they hoped beyond hope.