



## A Voice for Women

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**Pope's Intention (universal):** We pray for women who are victims of violence, that they may be protected by society and have their sufferings considered and heeded.

relationship with God in whose image they are created.

Many women have died or are still suffering,

The Pope's prayer intention for this month is a simple but possibly inadequate prayer for a hugely complex universal problem. It is of grave concern, not only for the health and wellbeing of women but also because of the consequences of the types of violence women experience. It can damage their sense of being human and also the possibility of nurturing a loving

believing that violence is their lot in life, or this is what is expected if they are to be submissive and obedient to their husbands and receive their reward in eternal life. Many female victims are trapped with no safe way out of their situation. They are voiceless or their voice is made silent, their vocal cords paralysed by fear. It is vitally important that women

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who experience violence have their sufferings heeded and responded to. The range of violence against women continues to grow and cyber violence is the current weapon. The perpetrators must be held accountable.

The human rights to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion have made addressing issues of violence against women from a societal or legal aspect challenging. Many cultures are shaped by religious customs and practices which in turn shape societal behaviours. Relying on human rights alone is limited. Rights can conflict with each other.

The Church needs to witness to and do more in the area of preventing all types of violence against women. However, how credible can the Church be if it does not have its own 'house' in order? 'Let the man among you who has no sin throw the first stone' (Jn 8:7). The Church needs to grapple with its own understanding of what it is to be a woman and accept how its understandings have shaped its teachings and cultural practices, which have left women vulnerable to violence in the name of God or religious obligation.

Much can be learned from both the actions and attitude of Jesus. He was a man, the Son of God, who dissolved the religious and cultural norms of his day. He gave women a voice

and listened to them (Jn 8:1–11). He spoke directly to women (Mk 7:25–30), changing cultural norms. He didn't hold to religious judgments of women. He enabled them to accept the past and become disciples (Jn 4:1–41). He allowed ostracised women to touch him (Jn 12:1–8). He trusted their ability to carry the Good News forth after the Resurrection (Mt 28:9–10). Where would the Church be today if the women of its early days, for example, Lydia (Acts 16:15), Phoebe (Rom 16:10), Prisca (1 Cor 16:19) and Nympha (Col 4:15) had stayed in the home, hidden and silent?

In active response to the Pope's intention, consider what would be a parish response to women who need to leave their home or job due to violence but have no financial security or are too afraid to?

How would the Catholic Church stand up to scrutiny by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women today? If, according to John Paul II, women 'complement men', then the Church needs to allow women to use all their gifts, especially their voice within hierarchical Church structures, enabling them to be heeded, so that when the Church raises its voice against violence to women, it will be a truly credible voice to which the world will listen. 