



Women of faith, Women of strength

International Safeguarding Conference Rome 2025

Concluding Panel Observations - Ursula Stephens

First: My thanks for and acknowledgement of the significant presentations we have received over the past three days. This year's theme has been challenging, confronting and thought provoking in so many ways.

Thanks too of course to the organising committee that has brought the conference together – Fr Hans, the team here at the Institute.

We have heard so many powerful stories and case studies - analysing crucial themes including power imbalances, coercive control, cultural norms, clericalism, structural powers, regulatory controls, lack of respect, commodification, objectification, subservience, abuse as a weapon of war.

And as pilgrims of hope always we have heard wonderful stories of empowerment and escapees from abuse. The subtle shifts in language to recovery and connection tell this story too – as spinners and weavers – weft, webs, nets, networks, alliances, collaboration, partnerships emphasising the importance of connection.

While our theme has been Women of faith, Women of strength, I think we have also heard so much from Women of courage, and Women of influence

Fr Hans has asked us to reflect on what we have heard and I have two key observations:

The first is that **we are all being called to ministry in Redemptive leadership** providing pastoral care that is rooted in Gospel teachings.

The most important safeguarding standard we have is investment in leadership, governance and culture. This requires us to shift away from emphasising perpetrator - focused initiatives, to supporting for those living with the experience of abuse.

This is transformative approach to leadership. It places the emphasis on healing, restoration, and empowerment—particularly in contexts marked by trauma, injustice, or suffering. It is rooted in our Catholic values such as compassion, integrity, humility, and a commitment to justice.

Throughout the conference we have had powerful examples of Redemptive leadership seeking not only to guide and inspire us, but also to redeem broken systems and uplift those who have been marginalized or harmed.

This approach plays a crucial role in supporting women who are victims of abuse in several key ways:

- **Creating Safe Spaces:** we have heard this several times during the conference

Where we prioritize psychological and physical safety, fostering environments where women feel secure, heard, and supported.

- **Empowerment and Advocacy:**

Where we actively work to empower survivors by advocating for their rights, amplifying their voices, and ensuring they have access to resources such as counselling, legal aid, and shelter.

- **Restorative Practices:**

Where Rather than focusing on punishment, we encourage restorative justice—helping survivors to heal and rebuild their lives while addressing the root causes of abuse.

- **Modelling Compassionate Leadership:**

By embodying empathy, integrity and moral courage, redemptive leadership sets a standard for others, challenging cultures of silence and complicity around abuse.

- **Systemic Change:**

And - most importantly within our Church - we work to transform institutions and policies that perpetuate abuse or neglect survivors, promoting long-term cultural and structural change.

In essence, redemptive leadership is not just about leading—it's about healing. It offers a powerful framework for supporting women who have experienced abuse, helping them move from victimhood to empowerment, and fostering communities where dignity and justice prevail. As we heard from Talitha Kum - *safeguarding is a sacred duty*.

My second observation is that **trauma recovery takes time** - healing can't be rushed, it needs patience and time. Reparation is only one part of the healing journey.

The powerful stories demonstrate that abuse perpetrates exclusion - the other, being on the outer, experiencing something that no one can really understand. That sense of isolation, worthlessness,

Epigenetics shows us that trauma by experienced by children impacts on their children - so we know that the recovery from the trauma of abuse, will be intergenerational. By understanding this, we can better support children and vulnerable people who have experienced abuse - war, famine, sexual, physical, spiritual abuse.

I am particularly mindful of the abuse experienced by women and children in Ukraine, that Sr Theadora's presentation brought into our presence. How much work is going to be needed to help heal the trauma of abuse being experienced there as a weapon of war?

In this respect - I want to reflect briefly on the situation in Australia that has internalised psychosocial and spiritual abuse for our Indigenous Australians and the power of transformative justice in times of desperation, hopelessness and despair.

- In October 2023 a referendum was held in Australia to give Aboriginal people a voice, to be acknowledged in our nation's constitution.
- This comes after the 1967 referendum – when Aboriginal people were no longer counted as fauna.
- And in 1971 when they were counted for the first time in our national census.
- And then were able to register to vote for the first time in our national elections.

Fifty odd years on – 2023 - the Referendum vote in an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was lost. To succeed it had to have a majority Yes vote, in a majority of states.

The disappointment throughout the country was palpable, the deep hurt of many Aboriginal people sent them into a period of silence and mourning - a sense of rejection that reinforced their otherness. It was the experience of further trauma and psychological abuse for those who had been forcibly removed from family and country as The Stolen Generation.

Redemptive leaders such as Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann - Senior Australian of the Year, Aboriginal leader and elder, and Catholic teacher - responding through sessions of deep listening, healing circles, and the healing foundation. Truth telling, justice and healing – all take time.

So - Our call is to be humble, to walk alongside, to deeply listen, to understand the process of accompaniment.

But - As safeguarding leaders - women and men - our responsibility is also to speak up, speak out, look with our eyes, to be safe guardians - strengthening safeguarding culture not just compliance - as we say –

Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility. So, we all have a role to intervene where we see the need.

Thank you to the brave women who allowed their stories to be shared, and for all of you working to accompany survivors of abuse - for some these stories are confronting, triggering and distressing - for others they are their daily calling.

To encourage personal agency – that saying we know ‘*nothing for us or about us, without us*’.

This is the hope for future generations - that, and eternal vigilance.

Complacency in our world is as complicit as silence.

Ursula Stephens