

Some Reflections- ISC 2025 (June 18-20)

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The International Safeguarding Conference for 2025 provided a very privileged opportunity to hear from a number of speakers from across the world. This provided many insightful perspectives on the many areas of need for women in safeguarding in the international context.

One of the most powerful and emotional presentations of the conference was given on the first morning by Sr Teodora Shulak who spoke about the abuse, rape and killings used against women in the context of war in Ukraine.

Sr Teodora explained how the violence is being used as a deliberate weapon of war, bringing terror and intimidation to so many women. It was difficult to hear about these women being raped at gunpoint, and how sexual abuse is being used as a means of ethnic cleansing with women being made to bear the children of their enemies. The sexual, physical, and psychological abuse being used to force women into submission, instill fear, demonstrate their weakness and publicly humiliate them was distressing. This violence is an invisible weapon of war that will continue to act long after the fighting ends.

Another powerful presentation was given by Sr Mary Lembo csc, on violence against religious women in the context of the continent of Africa. Sr Mary spoke about the role of consecrated women and the vital role of evangelisation that these women have in their communities. She identified how dependent these women are on the parish infrastructure for their ministry, and this dependency can create vulnerability when the behaviour of a priest or bishop as 'boss', rather than as a collaborator in a working relationship, results in a relationship imbalance.

The impact on the religious sister results in emotional and spiritual exhaustion, the feeling of powerlessness, reduced concentration and energy and difficulty engaging with her mission. In a parish this impacts community life and her ability to carry out her ministry. The sister can be victimized by the community and blame placed upon her rather than the perpetrator, isolating the sister, stating that she created this situation. Internal divisions among members, resulting in emotional and spiritual isolation.

In these communities there is a responsibility to speak out but it was highlighted that this takes great courage to go to community leaders and the local bishop. Codes of conduct and guidelines that set norms of behaviour are helpful to ensure respectful attitudes and set healthy boundaries but are not always in place so formation and education are necessary.

It was heartening to know that Sr Teodora and Sr Mary and other strong and faithful women are standing with and supporting the victims and survivors of these inhumane acts of abuse. This is such a huge responsibility and as one speaker stated, this work is not just compliance, but a sacred duty of safeguarding, where pastoral care is rooted in the Gospel as what happens to the least, happens to Christ.

We were reminded of the difficulty in some cultures where patriarchal systems are deeply embedded, where women are objectified and where it can be very difficult to speak truth to power. Strong and faithful women are standing beside the vulnerable and they are working tirelessly to protect the God given dignity of many victims and survivors, a sign of great hope.

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