Background
Violence against women is an issue all around the world. Often there is some notion that violence only happens in 'other' places or to people unlike us. Yet, when we look at the facts we see that women are suffering everywhere. Around the world, one in every three women is beaten or coerced into sex at some point in her lifetime.¹ Looking at these statistics can be mind numbing. Yet as Christians, and especially during the Church season of Lent, we are called to approach situations that look hopeless through the lens of Jesus' life.

In 2010, WSCF, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World YWCA collaborated to create an online, interactive, multi-media Bible study and guide looking at violence against women around the world (http://women.overcomingviolence.org). ‘During Lent, we remember Jesus in the wilderness, wrestling with the temptations to betray his true vocation as the incarnation of God. Sometimes we are tempted to turn a blind eye to the horrors of the world, to feel despair or to blame the victims themselves’, said Dr. Fulata Mbano-Mayo, Programme Executive for Women in Church and Society for the WCC.

The six part study offered weekly resources during the Lent of 2010. Each week included a video and discussion questions, a Bible study developed by a theologian, and a fact sheet about the country and type of violence featured. The themes and countries were as follows: systemic violence in India, rape as a tool of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, youth in Colombia, masculinity in South Africa, trafficking of women in Uzbekistan, and intimate partner violence around the world. The study had participants from every corner of globe: New Zealand, Argentina, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

While preparing the study
When I told some of my friends at church about this project, one quipped that ‘you’ve found a way to make Lent even more depressing’. Lent is depressing because our world is depressing. Lent is the time when we focus on the sins of this world and a time to understand our own complicity to these problems. Lent is a time where we look for Jesus’ love despite these problems. We look the problems square in the eye and say ‘you cannot win’.

During my research and planning for this project I have learned about atrocities all over the world. Human trafficking is the most profitable black market industry in the world – with estimations going as high as $32 billion a year with over 27 million people currently enslaved. On average, in South Africa a woman is raped every 26 seconds. In India, 21 women of the Dalit Caste ('untouchables') are raped each week. In the United Kingdom, the police estimate that 95% of rapes are never even reported. In the United States, it is estimated that between two and four million women are assaulted every year by their partners.¹

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I did all of this research, yet the image that I see when I close my eyes is of a girl in a pink shirt playing in the dirt in front of her hut in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I can hear her father saying that she will have to be a prostitute because no man will want to marry someone so tainted. She was raped while gathering firewood. Her attacker, jailed for a few months, will go free. I see her face and her tears every time I close my eyes to think about violence against women. Hers is the story that I cannot forget.

Yet, as much as these stories are appalling, what I struggle with is my own place in the picture. What am I doing to contribute to or bring an end to violence against women? Am I ever complicit? I know I have thought, or even said, that perhaps a woman could have done something to avoid being raped. As if she brought it on herself. I have believed that only ‘weak’ women stay with abusers. I looked the other way when I saw a girl harassed on the street. I have failed to speak out when a man talks to me inappropriately in a bar, hoping he’ll just go away. My work to eliminate violence against women is a drop in the bucket. What am I doing in this depressing situation? Where is God in this?

Leading the study
I was working for the WSCF and the WCC in Geneva in 2009. In 2010 I returned home to the United States and continued to work on this Lenten study. I led a small group study at a local Episcopal (Anglican) church during Lent.

The study itself involved an eclectic group of people ranging from young professionals to a retired couple. We gathered for four of the six weeks to openly and honestly discuss the videos and our life experiences in relation to the material presented in the study.

Each week, I learned something new and thought about violence against women in a different way, usually related to how we respond to the violence in our lives. The most moving moment for me came during our final session, which focused on intimate partner violence. I had done the research for this session and I knew in my mind that intimate partner violence was a serious problem. Yet, I have never experienced such violence personally. One participant in the study shared that she had grown up in such a situation. She had seen her mother beaten by her father on a regular basis as a child. For her domestic violence was not a statistic, instead it was a memory and experience that she had lived through. Listening to her tell her story made the months and months of research more real, more human. The numbers were no longer numbers, but began to have a face.

Lenten reflection
Lent is the time that the Church sets aside for us to remember and focus on these tragedies. We do this, not because God is absent in all of this, but because these tragedies are precisely where God is. God’s love for people extends beyond the worst that can possibly happen. Jesus came into the world to give people the ability to live in hope despite our tragic circumstances. Despite all the facts that I listed above, God is here with us. God is giving us hope to face the terrible situations and make something better out of them.

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Luckily, for us and the world, Lent is not the end but only the beginning. We have Easter to live out the rest of the year. When we truly understand and relate to the serious situations in the world we can rejoice even more loudly that Jesus conquers all. Jesus is Lord.

This Lenten study was an attempt to share more women’s stories and to make every day issues connect with women around the globe. 'This is a new style of Lent[en] study', said Dr. Manoj Kurian, WCC's Programme Executive for Health and Healing,

'[T]he impact of violence against women is a major public health issue and we want people to have an idea of the wide range of efforts communities across the world are making to alleviate and prevent this violence. Although this is harrowing, the stories highlight signs of hope, as God works through individuals and agencies to bring healing.

This Lenten study was one of many creative examples of what can be done to raise awareness on the topic in our churches and communities. Through my participation, as a creator and as a leader of this study, I learned to see this international problem as something local and personal. The painful and real stories have made me see that faith in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is bigger than these problems that seem so overwhelming.

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1 These statistics were found while researching for the study, which can be found here: http://women.overcomingviolence.org.

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