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Ministry



Notre Dame Sr. Mary Rashmi Mattappally teaches Masai women in Simanjiro, Tanzania, in fall 2019. (GSR file photo)

by GSR Staff

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Much has changed around the world in the last six months, but women religious are still ministering to those who need help in the face of a deadly pandemic that has killed over 925,000 people. This week, Global Sisters Report writers provide updates on sisters they previously interviewed and how the coronavirus has changed the work they do. Read part one here, which includes sisters' ministries in Haiti, Chile, Kenya, the U.S.-Mexico border, Botswana, and two areas in India.

Tanzania: 'We had to drop many programs'

In the remote, deeply traditional corner of northern Tanzania, Sisters of Notre Dame operate schools and dispensaries in the Masai community in Loiborsiret.

The Masai are a seminomadic people who live under a communal land management system on land that spans northern, central and southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. Culturally, men look down on women and make all of the decisions. Women face many challenges that include access to education, female genital mutilation and early marriages.

Religious sisters have been creating awareness among them about the importance of education for all, especially education for girls, as the status of women is still very low. Sisters empower women entrepreneurs to start successful businesses. They also fight high maternal mortality in the region through improved quality of care.

But the effects of the coronavirus pandemic led to the closure of schools, and all the Masai children are now spending their time looking after their cattle, sheep and goats, helping on the farm or assisting their mothers with household jobs.

"We were anxious about their national exams," said Sr. Mary Rashmi Mattappally, a Notre Dame sister who works with Masai women and girls. "The year had just begun [when the pandemic began in March], and no one had covered the syllabus. They had not paid the fees, either, as they usually wait till May or June to sell their cows or goats when their health is better. It was a great challenge for us to pay the teaching and non-teaching staff because even donors who used to come to help us couldn't

enter the country."

"We stopped meeting women and girls to teach them about their rights and how to empower them because of social distancing rule," she added. "We had to drop many programs."

Related: Q & A with Sr. Mary Rashmi, empowering Masai women and girls in Tanzania

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United States: Red tape and no jobs in Kentucky



Providence Sr. Corbin Hannah, youth development coordinator of YMCA Safe Place Services in Louisville, Kentucky, in December 2019 (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The pandemic has made everything harder for Sr. Corbin Hannah, a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, and the youth development coordinator at the YMCA Safe Place Services day shelter for 18- to 24-year-olds in central Louisville, Kentucky.

Many of the shelter's clients do not have the documents they need to get into a housing program or get a job. The pandemic has slowed the Social Security Administration to a crawl, Hannah said, so getting a Social Security card can now take at least a month — and that only comes after getting other documents, such as a birth certificate.

And the entry-level jobs most homeless youth depend on, such as at restaurants, catering companies and hotels, have been hit hardest by the economic fallout.

"Getting a job now is super difficult, even if you have the right documentation," Hannah said. "It puts them at risk of labor trafficking."

It has also led to more despair in a population already rife with it.

"There's a huge rise in people using substances. That's been very scary to watch," she said. "They're in a spot where they don't see any way out, so the only way to deal with it is to numb themselves."

Pandemic restrictions have also meant the shelter has had to limit its clientele to only those who are actively homeless, not those who, with some intervention, might avoid it. Guidelines to prevent COVID-19 — mask requirements, hand-sanitizing rules, temperature checks and quarantine for those who have had contact with someone infected — can make it tough to keep the shelter staffed.

"I'm actually on quarantine right now, working from home, waiting for my test results to come back," Hannah said. "It's a little frustrating."

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Central India: Staying happy with little

Sr. Clara Animottil, who directs an orphanage for children stranded on a railway station in central India, says the COVID-19 lockdown has deepened her faith.

"The biggest challenge for me was feeding my 50 children, as the supply of milk, vegetables, fruits and other food articles stopped," said the member of Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, who manages Jeevodaya (Dawn of Life) in Itarsi, a town in

Madhya Pradesh state.

She said her only solace was to "put my trust in God, as all other help or support I strongly banked on suddenly became helpless."

She and her children survived 47 days with little food in the center, as supplies were thin, until the supply normalized.

"The beauty was that even with little, we all remained happy and contented. That is possible only when God is around you," she told GSR.

None of the children was infected with the coronavirus, despite many people in their neighborhood testing positive.



Orphan children at Jeevodaya make artwork during lockdown in Itarsi, a town in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Sr. Clara Animottil, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, directs the orphanage. (Provided photo)

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Sr. Clara Animottil, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, distributes food to migrants in Itarsi, India. (Provided photo)



A craft from the lockdown collection of orphans at Jeevodaya in Itarsi. (Provided photo)

"My top priority was to strengthen them both physically and mentally at this crucial juncture, as they were all confined to the home. We used to serve them drinks made up of local spices, such as ginger, pepper, turmeric, among other things, to improve their immunity," she said.

They also contacted counselors with the government's child welfare department and arranged for individual counseling twice a week to work through the children's stress and frustration at being in lockdown.

"I also arranged special yoga, meditation, arts and crafts classes to keep the children active and away from the stress," she added.

Animottil and the children helped their neighbors whenever the lockdown rules were relaxed thanks to supplies from well-wishers.

"We supplied food for 850 families of migrants for a month and distributed 1,600 cooked meals migrants on move," she said.

Animottil said they tried to focus more on others who were suffering just as much as they were or more. "It gave us a feeling that we all belong to each other."

She said the pandemic taught her to be more generous toward fellow humans, as many came forward to help them. "We also used our best to help others, especially the migrant works stranded in railway station."

Related: Q & A with Sr. Clara Animottil

Panama: Baby chicks, strollers and kitchen gardens

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An Emberá family from the Cémaco region of Darién, Panama, greets a group distributing supplies. (Courtesy of Clara Meza)

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  Under Centro Pastoral's grow-your-own-sancocho project, each family receives six baby chicks and seedlings of manioc, plantain, avocado, lime and medicinal plants, such as aloe. (Courtesy of Clara Meza)

The pandemic has changed many things at the Maryknoll Sisters' Centro Pastoral in the eastern border state of Darién, Panama.

Maryknoll Srs. Melinda Roper and Joji Fenix and lay missionary Clara Meza have continued to play a key role in the emergency response. Their focus has been both on local families and the estimated 1,800 asylum-seekers who were trying to reach the United States but were stranded at the Panamanian border by the pandemic after crossing the highly dangerous Darién Gap.

"This has not been a time of stillness for us, not at all," said Roper, who spoke with GSR by WhatsApp. The sisters continue to visit the communities outlying the nearby city of Santa Fe on Sundays and do a celebration of the Word with small groups, and they are gearing up to start a small Bible study group.

They have been helping families establish small kitchen gardens and raise chickens. But their biggest responsibility is networking with donors near and far to keep food on the plates and emergencies attended to in the largely rural region they serve.

Hunger has continued to rise, not so much in the countryside, where people are still growing food, but among families who have left behind the agricultural life and now live on the outskirts in difficult conditions. The sisters have been working with the government and the peace and justice committee of the archdiocese to supervise food distribution and to make sure it is distributed fairly and to those who need it the most.



A family in the community of Zapallal, Panama, receives a set of plantain and yucca seeds and fertilizer. (Courtesy of Clara Meza)

Roper said they have been gratified to see the solidarity at all the levels — sometimes where they would least expect it. Roper is fond of telling of the neighboring farmer whose cow fell into a ravine and broke a leg and had to be put down. He contacted the Centro Pastoral to offer a fourth of the meat to the center so it could be distributed among those who needed it most.

One Panama City parish in particular, San Lucas, has a social pastoral committee looking out for the region, staying in frequent touch with the sisters and raising money for special needs. They have been covering the costs of a grow-your-own-*sancocho* program, which provides each family with baby chickens and seedlings of manioc, plantain, avocado and lemon to provide the ingredients of a favorite traditional Panamanian stew. Once, when a family gave birth to twins, the committee sent a double stroller for the family.

Holding the line against hunger has been a full-time job, but Roper said she sees positive outcomes from the pandemic, as well.

"Some people are asking fundamental life questions. A lot of them are questioning where they've put their energy and resources," she said. "I think some people are questioning values and lifestyle choices in ways that are really necessary."

Related: A journey marked by pain: Maryknoll Sr. Melinda Roper celebrates life in Central America

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Nigeria: An adjustment to a new teaching style

In Enugu state in Nigeria's southeast region, the Daughters of Divine Love are living their ministry amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Three sisters from the congregation run a charity home that houses homeless children and provides for their basic needs. At the home, the children, who are mostly from vulnerable communities, are rehabilitated, cared for and provided with an education.

"We still educate the children to wash their hands all the time, use face masks and maintain social distancing among themselves or when they step out of the home," said Sr. Veritas Onyemelukwe, who is in charge of finances at the home.

After the lockdown was announced March 30, schools, including the ones run by the sisters, were closed as part of measures to combat the pandemic. But the sisters have taken up teaching roles for the children in the charity home. They divide them according to their classes and teach English and mathematics based on their school curriculum.

"After they take their breakfast, they go to their classes to learn. This happens every day except for Saturdays and Sundays," Onyemelukwe said. "We are doing this to keep them busy so they won't become idle at home."



Sr. Elizabeth Nwankwo, left, and Sr. Veritas Onyemelukwe direct children in the charity home they run with another Daughter of Divine Love during an afternoon class they started when the lockdown was announced. (Patrick Egwu)

At the early stage of the pandemic, the sisters created a WhatsApp group where health experts among them share vital information on how to stay safe and learn preventive measures. Onyemelukwe says she still receives information from the group.

"That is where we receive information on what is happening regarding the pandemic, and we raise awareness to those around us from what we learn," she said.

Coping amid the pandemic has not been easy, Onyemelukwe said, but the government and other individuals sometimes support the sisters with relief supplies like toiletries and rice, beans and other groceries.

"From what we receive, we give to poor people who often come to our home," she added.

These supplies don't come often. The sisters have a farm where they grow maize, cassava and cucumber as a way of complementing their food supplies. During harvest seasons, some of the children join them to work at the farm.

"We have finished harvesting our cassava to make food with it during the lockdown," she said.

Related: In Nigeria, Daughters of Divine Love give hope to abandoned children

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Vietnam: 'We daily pray to God to end the pandemic soon'

Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Maria Do Thi Quyen said the social distancing measures against the novel coronavirus have affected local nuns' ministries. She and another sister are based in Lai Chau City, capital of Lai Chau Province.

Quyen said no infections are confirmed in the province, but local authorities refuse to allow them and priests to pay pastoral visits to Hmong ethnic villages in districts of Tan Uyen and Than Uyen.

"We could not maintain pastoral activities among local Catholics who have embraced Catholicism for recent years," Quyen said, adding that in the past, they regularly offered catechism classes and taught them how to pray, share God's word, sing hymns, dance and offer flowers to Mary.



Hmong children pray before a meal at Lai Chau parish. (Mary Do Thi Quyen)

"We secretly tried to visit two villages only briefly and give people candies and rosaries in June as a way to console them," she said. "If not, they will join Christian

groups who are led by Hmong ethnic pastors."

She said they offered a summer course to 100 ethnic children from remote areas at Lai Chau Parish with the local government's approval. The children were given free food, accommodation and taught catechism, hymns and prayers in Vietnamese and their own language. The two-week course ended July 31.

"We planned to have tens of ethnic adults and children to receive baptism, confirmation and Eucharist on Aug. 20, but the government denied our plan after a resurgence of COVID-19 in Da Nang City in late July," Quyen said.

She said social distance also affects religious communities. Communities with many nuns who work at day care centers in cities are struggling with a lack of food as their schools are closed. Small communities with a few nuns in rural areas grow vegetables and raise poultry to become more self-sufficient and less dependent on the motherhouse while staying home.

She said fewer benefactors are making donations because of the pandemic, and the nuns have nothing to feed local people, many of whom are hungry and have to collect vegetables and fruits in forests for their food until they can harvest their crops in October.

"We daily pray to God to end the pandemic soon so that benefactors can provide humanitarian aid to local people," Quyen said.

Related: Q & A with Sr. Maria Do Thi Quyen, supporting ethnic families affected by Vietnam's COVID-19 lockdown



Sr. Mary Do Thi Quyen, center, offers rosaries and candy to Hmong ethnic villagers in June in Lai Chau Province. (Provided photo)

Western India: The rights of workers in a pandemic



Migrant workers show off the masks they have sewn to sell as part of an income-generating program in Goa, India. (Provided photo)

Braving the lockdowns and danger of community spread of COVID-19, Sr. Marie Lou Barboza and other Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have resumed their visits to the family of migrants in Goa, in western India.

"I have also resumed my mission. Anyway, I have lived my life. It does not matter what happens now," Barboza told GSR with a smile.

According to her, about 25% of migrant laborers have stayed in Goa, a top tourist destination in India, while the rest returned to their respective villages. Some who used to work for five families now work for only one to prevent the spread of coronavirus, Barboza said.

"We provided provisions for those without jobs for three months. Then we provided cash — 400 rupees [$5.42] a person — to begin some small-scale sale. They pool together the amount and buy things in bulk and divide it among themselves. They sell fish, vegetables and coconuts on the streets," she said. "A few of them make masks to sell at 25 rupees apiece."

On Aug. 16, she met with migrant workers in the premises of a parish to initiate the new members to the National Domestic Workers' Movement, a nongovernmental organization that advocates for domestic and migrant workers and makes them aware of their rights and duties.

"We urged them to make [hand] sanitizer and understand the importance of using it," Barboza said. To educate the new members on the coronavirus, the nun invited a doctor to speak to them.

In July, her community of three sisters began visiting 3,500 families to gather 3,000 signatures to send to Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, Labour Minister Jennifer Monserrate and Labour Commissioner Raju Gawas to press for the rights for the social security of domestic workers.

"We had paid for the postcard we gave them to sign and post, but at the post office, they were asked to pay 600 rupees each for the card. People cheat them, cashing on their ignorance," she said.

"These people have been pushed into hills without an approach road, and their properties are taken by others. Most of them are Catholics. The parish has begun a school. But the children live a very wild life. They need to be educated in value systems," Barboza said.

Related: Migrant workers flood Goa beaches for jobs; sisters help them fit in

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Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, standing in back, watches over as migrant workers register for a coronavirus awareness training program in Calangute, Goa, India. (Provided photo)

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  Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, left, discusses the coronavirus at an awareness training program for local and migrant workers at Calangute, Goa, India. (Provided photo)

[Doreen Ajiambo, Tracy L. Barnett, Patrick Egwu, Sr. Lissy Maruthanakuzhy, Joachim Pham, Dan Stockman and Saji Thomas contributed to this report.][Doreen Ajiambo, Tracy L. Barnett, Patrick Egwu, Sr. Lissy Maruthanakuzhy, Joachim Pham, Dan Stockman and Saji Thomas contributed to this report.]

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