Columns
Social Justice



A view of Mumbai, India (Unsplash/Srinivas JD)



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Since the last five years, I have been devoting much of my time and energy to feminist concerns and trying to process the events in life that brought me to where I stand today.

I was shaped in childhood by my mom according to the patriarchal culture in which she grew up, wherein she was forcibly pulled out of school at the age of 6 or 7 years. She still remembers how much she wept that day. Her younger sisters completed high school, which was a big deal.

Till today, she keeps nursing those wounds but continues to promote patriarchy with all her heart and soul, perhaps due to her upbringing.

By contrast, my dad was well-educated and reform-oriented. He went against societal pressures in encouraging me to study and not only fulfill every role in the family traditionally held by men but also go much beyond. He was proud of my professional achievements. Resources were never lacking, and there was no restriction based on my feminine gender.

However, he did express concerns for my safety and the impact on our family's reputation when I ventured out to help the poor in India's slums by collaborating with a feminist nongovernmental organization. He could not stop me, though.

It created a stir. To find a win-win solution, my affluent relatives suggested I start my own organization, such as a home for the aged or orphans, and the poor could come to me for help. However, I firmly refused to follow the institutional charity model and opted to work for justice-related issues. I tried to gel with the poor by going to the slums and experiencing their day-to-day challenges wherever they lived.

The immense suffering of poor women, especially Muslims, was shocking! One day, a newly married woman came to us for help. Her in-laws had smashed her fingertips and toes with a hammer because she used to go out without wearing a burqa.

The father of another woman who was married off at the age of 9, pregnant at 14 and divorced at 15 was trying to marry off his granddaughter when she turned 9. He did not want her to become a victim of abuse in the slums.

Such events left a deep impression on my mind. I was thankful to God for the gift of my own family and the relative freedom and security I enjoyed. Although my dad did not like his daughters to wear skirts, midis were tolerated; long T-shirts with

jeans/trousers were preferred in Western wear. Moreover, he expected Indian dresses to be modest, and he hated the custom of women veiling except during their marriage ceremony.

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So, I grew up amid the tension created by these conservative and progressive currents in family life and tried to accept them as God's plan for me. At the age of 27, I finally decided to move to Mumbai and struggled with an almost empty pocket, starting life from scratch.

The elderly bishops took the place of my parents and displayed similar differences in ideologies, which they somehow harmonized and contextualized according to the needs of people in our local church.

When I was 30, divine providence led me to fill a vacancy in the archdiocese, and I become a consecrated virgin. However, this led to the denial of the right to be paid according to the pay scale of other employees. It became impossible to continue surviving on an honorarium.

Since the *ordo virginum* was little known and much misunderstood around the world, there was nobody to provide correct information and holistic formation for my vocation. Hardly any resources were available in the English-speaking world except from ultraconservatives in the relatively individualized West.

Moreover, I was shocked after my consecration as some of the clergy stopped treating me as a professional. They seemed resentful that the bishops supported my creative endeavors in starting new projects and how I seemed to enthuse people through my training programs, etc.

Looking back, I am amazed how God worked through me more than two decades ago. Surely, I am meant for pastoral ministry. However, some of the clergy began having expectations as they had from religious women, many of whom were domesticated, controlled and mistreated in all possible ways.

They did not want me to be in leadership. Others treated me as a layperson instead of a consecrated woman.

I had hardly experienced this kind of highhandedness in my family life and professional circles; hence, I resisted and spoke out against injustices in the church, only to face the music. There was no forum in the local or universal church to redress my grievances.

I was ostracized to the extent that I had to quit my job and, after a few years, move back to my hometown. The clergy took credit for my innovations by erasing my name from projects.

In hindsight, it feels as if most of them want us to believe they are doing us a favor by letting us serve. My dad spent his last days greatly disappointed with how the church had stifled my spirit.

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Isn't this happening with tens of thousands of religious women, too? Isn't consecrated life meant to raise our spirits to heaven and expand the horizons of our mission?

My desperation has led me to research, over the last more than two decades, on consecrated life in general and the *ordo virginum* in particular and to go to the roots of these problems faced by women. I feel disheartened seeing our vocations being manipulated in different parts of the world by patriarchal, misogynist and sexist elements. I feel the charism of consecrated virgins, being a vocational category currently limited to women, has been domesticated in the church by calling us an "image of the church as the spouse of Christ."

Why have women's vocations been reduced to abstract categories both theologically and sociologically? I feel deeply hurt whenever I read or hear about clergy appropriating the place of Christ, and women in consecrated life told to be satisfied with imitating Mary, who is herself theologically fashioned according to patriarchal convenience as a "domesticated goddess."

It is not uncommon for the hierarchy to treat us not as human beings but as an image of the church, thus using the tactic of mental reservation in assurances and

promises they make.

All this is in total contrast to my dad's outlook toward life and expectations for my future. The church seems to be several centuries behind the rest of the world in its theology about women, especially the consecrated.

However, I feel relatively safe and content, at present, especially with the loving acceptance and friendship of many religious sisters who want the church to do away with such unhealthy theologies of ontological complementarity between clergy and consecrated women.

So, let us all wake up, be enlightened, and arise. We are called by our baptism to be conformed to Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. The horizons of Christ's mission are our own horizons!