News
Religious Life



Sr. Nirmala Nazareth, superior general of the Sisters of Apostolic Carmel and president of the Conference of Religious Women in India, speaks at the International Safeguarding Conference June 17, 2025, at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. The June 17-20 gathering looked at current challenges in order to better protect minors and vulnerable adults from abuse. The annual conference is sponsored by the university's Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care (IADC). (CNS/Courtesy of the IADC)

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While women religious may be vocal and courageous about the violence and injustice others face, they often remain silent and intimidated when it comes to speaking up about their own fears and abuse, one superior general said at an international safeguarding conference in Rome.

Women religious need proactive and effective support from their superiors, safe spaces for reporting allegations and training in safeguarding from the very start of their formation, said Sr. Nirmala Nazareth, superior general of the Sisters of Apostolic Carmel and president of the Conference of Religious Women in India, which represents over 130,000 Catholic sisters.

Despite the current training and reporting initiatives promoted by the Conference of Religious Women, "there are few sisters coming forward to speak simply because, I believe, the fear, shame and victim shaming associated with such reporting," she said in her keynote address June 17.

Nazareth and other leaders and experts from 22 countries attended the June 17-20 International Safeguarding Conference, which aims to present current challenges and develop best practices to better protect minors and vulnerable adults from abuse.

The annual gathering in Rome, hosted by the Pontifical Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care, focused this year on "the shared responsibility women and men have in our efforts to support and protect women and girls," Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, director of the

institute, said in his introductory remarks.

In the conference's opening speech, Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla, prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, described ways women who face different challenges support each other.

"These are women who have received from God the secret art of weaving" as they "weave the strong and delicate fabric of mutual care," creating relationships, bridges, safe spaces and hope, she said in her text which was read aloud by Irish Loreto Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General.

Brambilla, the first woman to serve as prefect of a Vatican dicastery, oversees an office that supports close to 600,000 professed women religious in the Catholic Church. She offered a story about an unnamed religious superior who was like "a baobab tree" for her community: possessing deep, solid roots and tall branches reaching skyward, and providing lifegiving water, nourishment and shelter to her members.

The superior was "rooted in God, able to make space, expand the inner caves of listening" so as to protect, nurture and support one of her sisters who felt unsafe with a local priest's "stifling" approach during her pastoral work, Brambilla's text said.

The two women "weave a blessed alliance" so the younger sister does not feel alone and can "face with determination and dignity the insidious dynamic that was developing, breaking certain cycles not without suffering," she said.

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There are many stories in the world and in the Bible of "women of faith, women of strength, women of charity, women of hope, weavers of disarmed and disarming peace," that can be an inspiration, she said.

Nazareth said that while the Bible does depict "women of courage playing significant roles," they are also "depicted often as second-class citizens."

"Despite the role of such bold women, what has remained is the subordinate role of women in society and by extension in the church," she added.

Nazareth described some of the negative cultural attitudes toward women and the difficulties facing women religious in India — the country where "the largest number of religious women on the planet are located."

"Though I am speaking from the Indian perspective, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a similar situation exists in many other countries," she added.

While Pope Francis worked to recognize women and correct many imbalances, she said, "the rest of the church as it stands is still in slow motion. The voices of religious are not heard in most instances, but especially when it comes to cases or forms of abuse."

"Why is there a deafening silence? And why does rarely anyone stand up to support the voices of women who have been victims?" she asked.

Curiously, Nazareth said, sisters who "are ready to fight against systems and governments and prepared to die" are often the same ones who "shy away and go into complete silence as fear grips them to step back" when it comes to "their self-care within the church."

She said she introduced a mechanism to report abuse when she was a principal at a school in New Delhi in the early 2000s, then "made it compulsory for all our institutions" after she became the superior general of her congregation in 2020.

When she became president of the conference representing all women's congregations across India, she created a "grievance redressal cell" in 2022 "for my fellow sisters to have a platform where they can express (grievances), feel listened to and accompanied." The project "conducts workshops and training sessions to raise awareness about issues such as sexual harassment, child protection and legal rights," and it addresses "systemic issues, fostering healing and ensuring that all members feel valued and supported."

Despite the "deeply ingrained fear we carry within us as women religious" when it comes to speaking out about personal experiences, "we need to, however, take the risk if we are truly to live authentic religious life, responding to the Jesus of the Gospel who preached love, compassion and life in its fullness," she said.

When asked how men, especially priests, can help break the silence surrounding abuse and support women, Nazareth said it comes down to synodality.

Pointing fingers and "creating the divide of power will not help this relationship. It has to be a collaborative journey," she said, with "shared power, shared responsibility and respect for the other, both sides, between men and women."

"The more we understand that there is no hierarchy but a shared leadership, a circular flow of leadership," she said, this"change of mindset" will create "a new pathway for this shared leadership, shared responsibility to accompany our people."