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Catholic Sisters

**THEIR WORK AND FOCUS
ON BUILDING PEACE**

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ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

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Foreword

In the complex world of peacebuilding – a world of towering leaders, numerous peace forums, shifting concepts and boundaries, and proliferating institutions – the frequent invisibility of women has become a focus of attention. The challenge is perhaps best exemplified in the important United Nations Resolution 1325, which centers on women’s roles. This report, inspired by the leading global interfaith network, Religions for Peace, shines a light on a distinctive category of women peacebuilders, Catholic sisters. It is set in the broader context of understanding what we mean by peacebuilding and the complex partnerships that are indispensable to it in today’s world. Catholic sisters share many challenges and assets of both religious peacebuilders and women and work with specific identities and organizational setups that merit a closer look. That look opens a vast array of ideas, actions, and challenges that enrich an understanding of what is involved on the path to building peace.

The around 600,000 Catholic sisters today are strikingly diverse both in their approaches and the work they do, but they are linked by their distinctive faith commitment. They share assets that include a lifelong dedication to working for the common good and institutional bonds and networks. Possible liabilities include limited formal institutional power and voice within the larger Catholic Church and what some see as a strategic invisibility. Nonetheless, many sisters have actual and potentially powerful roles as leaders in areas of peacebuilding, including at very local levels, in educational institutions, and in advocacy that extends from nuclear disarmament to ending violence against women and children in conflict to addressing related challenges such as human trafficking and gang violence.

A hypothesis that inspired this report is that Catholic sisters’ peace work is little known and that an exploration of its diverse nature could offer significant lessons. Another is that with purposeful capacity building and network strengthening, the impact of sisters’

insights and work (within but particularly beyond the Catholic Church) could be expanded and amplified.

A significant idea that emerged in interviews and reading about the work of Catholic sisters is that new forms of partnerships across religious secular boundaries but also interreligious lines have a large potential; however, such partnerships require a better understanding, both of the work and structure of sisters and of peacebuilding approaches more broadly.

This report thus aims to spark discussion and further investigation of networks, approaches, and individual leadership. Ongoing efforts to build the capacity of sisters reflect a conviction that their work has particular merit and distinctive assets. They also reflect challenges, including exclusion from some circles, misconceptions of their roles and work, and certain past legacies. But with better knowledge and tools of sharing and learning, the already large contributions of this distinctive community offer a special potential for good.

Katherine Marshall
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Executive Summary

Catholic sisters run schools and universities, health clinics and hospitals. They oversee vocational programs helping women and girls gain valuable skills on the road to economic independence. They clothe, nourish, and shelter victims of violence, reintegrating them into their communities if possible and providing them with a fresh start elsewhere if not. They assist and advocate on behalf of communities at the margins of society: women, children, incarcerated people, victims of human trafficking, Indigenous people, refugees and migrants, and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. They draw on their moral authority in denouncing armed conflict, human rights abuses, and corruption. At the same time, their rootedness in their communities allows them to build sustainable change over time. While not all of these activities are considered “peacebuilding” by different definitions, they nevertheless play a crucial role in laying the foundations of a peaceful society and keeping those foundations strong in the face of conflict and tensions.

Despite Catholic sisters’ indisputable contributions, there has been remarkably little research into the specific ways in which they promote peace and development. This report seeks to address this gap in the research by providing a broad overview of the work Catholic sisters undertake in communities around the world and by identifying and analyzing trends that arise with respect to where, why, and how such work takes place. In doing so, the report aspires to help foster connections and collaborations among sisters, NGOs and civil society groups, and the individuals and institutions shaping policy on the local and global stages. The research draws on digital and print resources, as well as one-on-one conversations, to pinpoint the particular vantage point

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Catholic sisters bring to their work, including the strengths they bring and challenges they face as Catholic women religious. In doing so, it aims to aid understanding of the work and roles of Catholic sisters and pave the way for collaborations with governments and NGOs that are based on mutual trust and respect.

The report has four chapters. Chapter 1 is essentially a background discussion. It explores the history and meanings of the term peacebuilding, women and gender roles in peacebuilding efforts, and the strategic history of Catholic women religious in relation to peace work. It also provides a brief history of Catholic sisters. Chapter 2 highlights the main peace-related areas where Catholic sisters are engaged today, giving examples of congregations, individuals sisters, and organizations that collaborate with sisters in promoting peace and development. Chapter 3 takes a step back from the research, drawing on interviews with sisters to discuss broader trends relating to sisters' work, including the perceived strengths and limitations Catholic sisters face on the ground. Finally, chapter 4 proposes several areas of action for NGOs and governments seeking to collaborate with Catholic sisters.

KEY FINDINGS

Sisters live in every corner of the globe, with a growing presence in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. There are over 600,000 Catholic women religious in the world today. While their ranks have been declining in aggregate terms, the number of sisters is on the rise in several regions of the globe, including sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and India. A significant proportion of the initiatives highlighted in chapter 2 are from these regions, attesting to the pronounced role Catholic sisters play in peacebuilding efforts in the Global South.

Sisters are engaged in broad, multi-faceted work tied to peace, exemplifying an understanding of peacebuilding that goes beyond merely preventing and intervening in conflict. Sisters' work is often broad and overlapping: sisters educate, advocate, and intervene in issues such as anti-trafficking, climate change, nuclear disarmament, refugees and migrants, women and girls, and incarcerated people's rights. Their work is lifelong and continuing, focusing far less on achieving a singular goal but rather on improving the common good in as many ways as possible. Implicit in sisters' approaches to their work is an understanding of peacebuilding as a long-term enterprise, seeking to influence the foundations of social relations in favor of peace and cooperation.

Sisters participate in a broad network of Catholic institutions stretching across the globe. Their identity as Catholic women religious gives sisters access to a wide range of influence within the Church, including Church offices, Catholic NGOs, and inter-congregational bodies of women religious. While Church institutions remain predominantly

male-dominated to this day, several sisters now occupy high-ranking positions at the Vatican, including Sister Alessandra Smerilli, Sister Raffaella Petrini, and Sister Nathalie Becquart. Despite these gains, many sisters are beholden to the decision-making of priests and bishops and must carefully navigate complex power dynamics in their daily work.

Sisters are deeply embedded in the communities they serve, which enables them to cultivate trust and collaboration from the ground up. Many sisters are from the communities and countries where they serve, while others spend decades, if not most of their lives, in another place. Close proximity to and shared experiences in their communities give them insights into the challenges the communities face, while their engagement with cultures and religions other than their own enables them to model social co-existence in their own lives and build bridges for sustainable peace. At the same time, sisters' religious vows enable them to devote more of their time to their communities and the common good than others. Taken together, these facets of Catholic sisters' positions make them valuable players in peace and development work, especially at the local level.

Many sisters welcome collaboration with governments and NGOs, but on their own terms. Many collaborate with secular partners, particularly in the health and education sectors, while others have expressed their openness to doing so. Several high-profile partnerships between sisters and NGOs, including the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Fund for Sisters, attest to the potential for such collaboration. When asked, many sisters stressed the importance of genuine collaboration in which sisters are given an equal say in shaping agendas, rather than having this imposed upon them from the outside. One way in which governments and NGOs can work to expand sisters' impact is through the training and formation of sisters.

Misconceptions and prejudice about sisters' lifestyle and peacebuilding work poses a challenge to their message and efforts. While sisters enjoy the respect and trust of many, assumptions and prejudices among some groups means that sisters are sometimes regarded with suspicion, even by fellow peacebuilding practitioners. Misconceptions include ideas about sisters' "proper place" in convents rather than out in the world, sisters' celibate lifestyle, and even their choice of religious attire. While many of the interviewed sisters downplayed the adverse impact of such prejudices on their work, these ideas can nevertheless cause sisters' valuable contributions to peacebuilding to be overlooked.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected Catholic sisters in different and often unexpected ways. Just like billions of people across the globe, sisters' lives and work were upended by the outbreak of COVID-19 starting in early 2020. The impact varied for different congregations in different places; some sisters were able to continue their work online, while others were completely cut off from the communities they served. Still others continued their vital services despite government-imposed restrictions. Like many peace and development practitioners, sisters faced funding shortages and feelings of frustration at having to cut back their efforts.

CHAPTER 1

Background

Through their work promoting peaceful societies, Catholic sisters fit into the wider landscape of faith-linked peacebuilding work. The chapter begins with a brief history of Catholic women religious in order to contextualize their work. It then gives an overview of the field of peacebuilding and discusses the role of women, and Catholic sisters specifically, including distinctive strengths and limitations.

CATHOLIC WOMEN RELIGIOUS: A BRIEF HISTORY

There are over 600,000 Catholic women religious in the world today, living and working across six continents and belonging to hundreds of orders and congregations. While there is great diversity among them, they share a common heritage that goes back a millennium and a half.

Catholic women religious trace their origins to the fifth century CE, when some Christians began following rules of monastic life formulated by Benedict of Nursia (480-548 CE) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE); these groups became the basis of the Benedictine and Augustinian orders of monks and nuns. Prior to the 13th century, monastic life was centered around the monastery/convent; while the founding of mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) in the thirteenth century expanded the role of monks in the world, the female equivalent of these orders remained cloistered due to gender conventions of the time. Church leaders would continue to uphold and tighten limitations on women's movements until the nineteenth century. While the establishment of the Ursuline order in the sixteenth century expanded nuns' ministry to teaching, their activities were nevertheless curtailed by rules governing women's behavior.¹

Organizational Structures

All Catholic women religious are members of an order or congregation. Many orders and congregations participate in national conferences of women religious, as well as international organizational structures. Examples of national and international bodies of Catholic women religious include the following.

Many countries have national conferences of women religious, which provide a platform for orders and congregations to communicate and collaborate. In Nigeria, for example, the **Nigeria Conference of Women Religious (NCWR)** oversees over 60 orders and congregations of women religious. Among its initiatives, NCWR helps run the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women and participates in the African Sister Education Collaborative (see chapter 2).²

In the United States, two separate organizations oversee the work of women religious: the **Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)** and **Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR)**. LCWR was founded in 1956 with the purpose of helping its members spread the Gospel, while CMSWR branched off of LCWR in 1992 in order to offer its members support in sustaining more traditional forms of religious life, including the wearing of traditional clothing.³ A 2015 report found that two-thirds of orders and congregations were members of LCWR, while only 14% belonged to CMSWR.⁴

On the regional level, associations such as the **Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR)** and the **Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA)** bring Catholic sisters together to share expertise, address common challenges, and collaborate on projects across geographical and cultural regions.⁵

On the international level, the **International Union of Superiors General (UISG)** fosters communication and collaboration among over 1900 member orders and congregations across five continents. Founded in 1965 as part of the Second Vatican Council, the UISG is composed of Superiors General orders and congregations. Today, the UISG facilitates communication and collaboration among member orders and congregations. In addition, UISG liaises and coordinates with Vatican authorities, including the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the branch of the Roman Curia responsible for overseeing consecrated life.⁶

The nineteenth century brought changes to the place of women in society, including women religious. Many Catholic nuns engaged with communities outside of the convent, as teachers, nurses, doctors, and social workers. At the same time, newly founded missionary orders and congregations of male and female religious spread from Europe to countries with growing Catholic populations, including colonial territories in the Global South. These included the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (Marist Sisters), which worked principally in the

South Pacific⁷; the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (White Sisters), whose first congregation in Algeria has since expanded to 14 countries on the continent of Africa⁸; and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded in Italy by St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, whose sisters were sent to administer to the needs of Italian immigrant communities in the United States.⁹ Missionary orders and congregations continued to grow in the twentieth century; for example, the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic were established in New York in 1912 with the explicit purpose of undertaking foreign missionary work as nurses, doctors, teachers, and social workers.¹⁰

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries also saw a rise in religious orders founded by sisters from the Global South. The Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, founded in Durban, South Africa, in 1885, supported the establishment of autonomous religious congregations across sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ In Asia, locally founded orders and congregations include the Missionaries of Charity, established in Calcutta in 1950 by Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu (better known as Mother Teresa). Some of these orders and congregations are now sending missionaries to wealthier nations.¹²

The Second Vatican Council brought about another major shift in sisters' roles in society. In many places, congregations of sisters took on new responsibilities in ministering to vulnerable and marginalized communities. Many sisters abandoned the religious habit as part of this transition, while other communities chose to continue wearing it.

Today, sisters continue to innovate in their mission to reach others and connect with new generations. A number of sisters have turned to social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, to reach an increasingly global audience.¹³ Sisters also participate in contemporary Catholic lay movements, including the Focolare Movement, which promotes spiritual unity across the Catholic Church and beyond. Sisters have been members of the movement since 1971.¹⁴

A Caveat on Terminology

While Catholic sisters are referred to as both sisters and nuns, the two terms are not identical in meaning and therefore should not be used interchangeably. A nun's life and work takes place within a convent, which is typically cloistered or semi-cloistered. In contrast, sisters (sometimes also called religious or apostolic sisters) do not live separately from the secular world but minister to people of all walks of life. These differences between nuns and sisters are further reflected in terminology for religious institutes of women religious: an order refers to a group of nuns, while congregation is the analogous term for a group of sisters.¹⁵ Nuns and sisters also take different vows. While both groups profess vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, nuns profess solemn vows, which are permanent and can only be dissolved by the pope, whereas sisters profess simple vows, which may be temporary and can be dissolved by a bishop.¹⁶ This report is primarily concerned with sisters rather than nuns.

Catholic Sisters and Martyrdom

Catholic Sisters have been persecuted and killed for as long as they have existed; some have been specifically targeted for their faith and/or their social justice work. Often, sisters are targeted for their associations with the Catholic Church, including eleven Carmelite nuns who were executed during France's Reign of Terror¹⁷ and sisters who were brutalized and executed by both Nazi¹⁸ and Soviet forces during World War II.¹⁹

Sisters have faced martyrdom well into the 21st century, often in areas prone to violence and conflict. Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered in 2005 for her advocacy for environmental sustainability and opposition to industry in the Amazon (see Chapter 3, "Environmental Activism" section).²⁰ Sister Leonella Sgorbati spent four decades working for public health causes in sub-Saharan Africa, first in Kenya and then in Somalia, where she was killed in 2006 by Islamist gunmen.²¹ Four Missionaries of Charity working at a retirement home in Aden, Yemen, were killed when gunmen stormed the building in March 2016.²²

More recently, Sister Luisa Dell'Orto was killed in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in June 2022, following an attempted robbery; she had worked in Haiti for 20 years, running a ministry for street children in the capital city's poorest slums.²³ Sister Maria De Coppi was killed after terrorists attacked a Catholic mission in Mozambique in September 2022, and Sister Marie-Sylvie Kavuke Vakatsuraki died at the hands of rebel soldiers while working at a Catholic mission hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in October 2022.²⁴

As the global Church faces new challenges in the twenty-first century, sisters are at the forefront of addressing the needs of the Church and the world more broadly. At the UISG plenary assembly in May 2022, superiors general from 700 congregations met to discuss issues facing their communities and congregations. Among the issues discussed is the Church's focus on synodality, which sisters plan to implement in their own ministries by embracing humility and listening to the perspectives of those on the margins of the Church. At the same time, the UISG also addressed issues facing sisters, including declining membership and care for elderly and poor sisters.²⁵

Sisters' roles in Church leadership have been changing gradually over the past several decades, with Pope Francis leading the effort to bring more women into Vatican administration. In 2021, Francis appointed three Catholic sisters to high-ranking Vatican offices. Sister Nathalie Becquart is one of two undersecretaries of the Vatican's General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, making her the first woman to have a vote at the Synod. Sister Raffaella Petrini was named secretary general of the Governorate of Vatican City State, a position previously occupied by a bishop. Sister Alessandra Smerilli is secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. While these sisters are most visible in their roles, they are among over a dozen sisters working as officials in Vatican

departments in 2022.²⁶ In 2023, Pope Francis announced that five sisters would be voting members at the October 2023 Synod Assembly of Bishops.²⁷

Despite these advances, there remains a widespread culture of treating sisters as second-class members of the Church, overlooking their education and intellect. This is true at the highest levels of the Church; one sister who teaches at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome says that women remain “unobserved, invisible, ignored, and not respected” in the male-dominated Vatican.²⁸ In parishes and dioceses around the world, priests and bishops exploit sisters for household labor such as cleaning and cooking, with little or no compensation. Pope Francis recently addressed the issue, acknowledging that for many women, work for the Church “sometimes is more servitude than true service.”²⁹

Sisters in Society and Popular Culture

Historically, sisters were among the most educated women in their societies, and many sisters stand out for their contributions to literature, the arts, scientific knowledge, and social reform movements. Prominent luminaries include Sisters Hildegard von Bingen,³⁰ Juana Inés de la Cruz,³¹ Elizabeth Ann Seton,³² and Corita Kent,³³ to name just a few. Sisters such as Joan Chittister,³⁴ Helen Prejean,³⁵ Simone Campbell,³⁶ Carol Keehan,³⁷ and others continue in this tradition, expressing their vocations through their contributions to the arts, literature, academia, and public activism.

Sisters continue to loom large in the cultural imaginary, appearing as fictional characters in literature, theatre, film. Dozens of well-known films have centered around sisters, including *Black Narcissus* (novel: 1939, film: 1947), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (novel: 1952, film: 1957), *The Nun's Story* (novel: 1956, film: 1959), *The Sound of Music* (musical: 1959, film: 1965), *Viridiana* (1961), *The Trouble with Angels* (1966), *Agnes of God* (play: 1979, film: 1985), *Sister Act* (1992), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), *Doubt* (play: 2004, film: 2008), *Ida* (2013), *The Nun* (2013), *The Innocents* (2016), and *Benedetta* (2021).

The number of Catholic women religious is dropping across the world today. Between 1980 and 2016, the number of women religious worldwide declined by almost a third (from around 960,000 to 660,000).³⁸ According to the 2021 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, the number of women religious decreased by over 50,000, or nearly 8%, between 2016 and 2021 (from roughly 660,000 to 610,000). However, these trends are far from uniform across regions; while there has been a decline in women religious in Europe (16%) and the Americas (14%) between 2016 and 2021, numbers rose in Africa (13%) and Asia (2%) in the same time period.³⁹

Catholic sisters are a significant feature of the landscape of faith-linked peacebuilding work. The next chapter explores the various dimensions of their work in greater detail, deepening and nuancing our understanding of how peacebuilding takes shape on the ground.

Table 1. Number of Catholic Religious Sisters (Vatican Annuaire 2021)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Africa	72,510	73,999	76,219	77,054	79,557	81,832
All Americas	168,168	163,285	160,032	154,717	150,391	145,206
North America	57,893	55,674	53,976	51,856	49,540	47,125
Central America (mainland)	33,401	32,343	32,551	31,935	31,612	30,928
Central America (islands)	7,322	7,430	7,310	5,877	5,899	5,751
South America	69,552	67,838	66,195	65,049	63,340	61,402
Asia	171,829	172,947	174,165	174,764	175,128	175,494
Europe	239,373	231,413	224,246	216,846	207,994	200,190
Oceania	7,555	7,266	6,999	6,718	6,476	6,236
Total	659,435	648,910	641,661	630,099	619,546	608,958

Reckoning with Abuse

Allegations of sexual abuse of children and adults at the hands of priests continue to rock the Catholic Church in all corners of the globe. In the last several years, Catholic sisters have become a focus of investigations surrounding abuse, both as victims and as collaborators.

Abuse of sisters at the hands of priests and bishops has been recognized and reported for at least three decades, but only recently has it gained media and Vatican attention. A 2019 report in the Vatican women’s magazine, *Women Church World*, claimed that the Vatican knew of sexual abuse in African dioceses in the 1990s, but little was done to make changes.⁴⁰ Similarly, a 1994 report by Irish sister Maura O’Donohue covered over 20 countries but was kept secret by Vatican officials for years.⁴¹ Both reports mention how sisters who were impregnated by priests were forced to have abortions or cast out of their congregations.⁴²

As with child victims of priests, sisters are often targeted by abusive priests because they are seen as powerless against clerical authority; this power dynamic is the product of a culture in which priests are placed on a pedestal, wielding authority that makes them feel immune to consequences.⁴³ At the same time, many sisters do not report their experiences for fear of retaliation by priests and/or superiors of their congregations.⁴⁴ In some instances, priests also invoke their theological knowledge to justify abuse, which can make it even harder for sisters to object.⁴⁵ Misogynistic beliefs that women are responsible for tempting priests to sin can further discredit sisters who speak up.⁴⁶

Growing public attention to the sexual abuse of adults, including seminarians, as well as the influence of the #MeToo movement, has helped empower sisters around the world to speak up about their experiences, from Chile to India.⁴⁷ A 2018 article by the Associated Press reported cases of sexual abuse of sisters by priests across the world, in Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia.⁴⁸ In November 2018, the UISG released a statement condemning the Church's "culture of silence and secrecy" and calling on sisters who have suffered abuse to report their experiences.⁴⁹ In light of these findings, Pope Francis acknowledged abuse against sisters and emphasized his commitment to addressing the problem.⁵⁰

At the same time, sisters have also been implicated in crimes against children and adults. These include psychological, physical, and sexual abuse; enabling abuse committed by priests; and being complicit in other crimes, including child trafficking.

In the United States, a number of former child victims of sexual abuse by sisters have spoken up and received media attention, emboldened by growing public discourse around sexual abuse by priests and the existence of support groups such as the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests (SNAP). As of September 2020, just over 160 women religious have been publicly accused of sexual abuse, but a spokesperson for SNAP suggested that there may be thousands of perpetrators.⁵¹ In numerous other countries, including Germany and Argentina, recent cases have emerged of sisters facilitating the sexual abuse of children at the hands of priests and bishops.⁵²

In Ireland, Catholic sisters were responsible for running Magdalene Laundries, state-sanctioned institutions in which women deemed socially errant – including those who had become pregnant out of wedlock, had been sexually abused, were considered "promiscuous", or were regarded as burdens to their families and/or the Irish state – were confined for decades, sometimes their entire lives.⁵³ From the 1920s to 1990s, Magdalene laundries housed women in prison-like conditions, isolated from one another and their families and often forced to do manual labor without any compensation. The official estimate places the total number of women confined to the laundries at 10,000, but advocacy groups say the true number is much higher. Though the last Magdalene laundry was shuttered in 1996, there has been little accountability for what transpired in these institutions, though activists are working to change this.⁵⁴ One of the most high-profile cases comes from Tuam, County Galway, where the remains of potentially as many as 800 infants and young children were found near the former site of a Mother and Baby Home run by the Sisters of Bon Secours; local activism led to the exhumation and reburial of the remains and new government policies on dealing with remains and compensating those affected.⁵⁵ While the Sisters of Bon Secours have issued an apology, the congregations responsible for running the Magdalene Laundries have remained silent about their role in the abuse that occurred there.⁵⁶

In North America, Catholic sisters were among those responsible for running boarding schools tasked with assimilating Indigenous children to white society. In Canada, some 130 "residential schools" operated between the late 19th century to the 1990s, during which over 150,000 children

were separated from their families, often forcibly.⁵⁷ In 2015, a truth and reconciliation commission established by the Canadian government collected and published the testimony of survivors, some of whom described being beaten, starved, publicly humiliated, forced into strenuous physical labor, confined to small spaces, and, in some instances, sexually abused.⁵⁸ The commission estimates that at least 4,100 children died or went missing at the schools, though the real number may be far higher. The discovery of mass graves of over 1,000 children at three schools in the provinces of Saskatchewan and British Columbia in 2021 has further highlighted the possibility of thousands of victims who remain unaccounted for.⁵⁹ In the United States, a list published in May 2023 documented at least 87 Catholic-run boarding schools for Indigenous children operating prior to 1978 across 22 states; at least 74 of these were operated or staffed by Catholic sisters. More than 500 children died at these schools, though the number is likely to increase as further details come to light.⁶⁰

In Spain, Catholic sisters participated in the systematic theft and trafficking of newborn children under the Franco dictatorship. Children were taken from “undesirable” families – those opposed to the regime or considered morally or economically deficient – and given to “approved” families. One estimate says that up to 300,000 children were stolen from their birth families in this way. To this day, the Spanish government has resisted calls to set up a national inquiry into these crimes.⁶¹

To address these and other concerns, the UISG and USG established a Joint Commission for Care and Protection in 2020, a first step in acknowledging and addressing the abuses and crimes inflicted by and upon Catholic sisters.⁶² This process will no doubt continue for decades to come. The approach of individual congregations and larger structures, such as the UISG, on these matters is likely to play a role in shaping public perceptions of these institutions, and may even influence membership in congregations, especially in regions where the number of sisters is declining.

DEFINING PEACEBUILDING

In academic circles, intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations, think tanks, NGOs, and religious communities, reflections on what is meant by peacebuilding are common. Yet the term is relatively new, and it conveys different meanings in different contexts. Indeed, the diversity of actors pledging their commitment to peacebuilding in today’s world – from governments at war to NGOs with a financial stake in the peacebuilding process – testifies to the malleability of the term, employed to serve different political, economic, and social agendas that may not always be peaceful. It is appropriate to begin with a brief history of the concept of peacebuilding, culminating in a definition of the term as it is used in this report.

The University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies defines peacebuilding as the “development of constructive personal, group, and political

relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries” that seeks “to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict.”⁶³ Peacebuilding differs from related terms (conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, etc.) in its focus on addressing structural conditions that may lead to conflict even in societies without a history of violent conflict. Peacebuilding also implies a long-term approach to preventing conflict and division in a society. Peacebuilding work extends to many different focal areas; these include establishing and strengthening public institutions; providing psychosocial support to heal and reintegrate victims of conflict into society; and promoting social and economic recovery and long-term stability.⁶⁴

Definitions of peacebuilding employed by governments, intergovernmental bodies, and NGOs draw on the contributions of several prominent scholars. Johan Galtung (1969) distinguishes between negative peace, which he defines as the absence of physical and psychological violence, and positive peace, which he equates with social justice, or the “egalitarian distribution of power and resources.”⁶⁵ Violence, in contrast, refers both to acts that cause psychological and physical harm to individuals, and to structural violence, the unequal distribution of power in a society. For Galtung, a comprehensive peace must address both forms of violence: it must combine both positive and negative peace. John Paul Lederach (n.d.) advocates for an expanded understanding of peace, called “justpeace,” which he defines as an “adaptive process-structure of human relationships” that focuses on building relationships over time and constructing governmental and organizational infrastructure that can address conflict in nonviolent and just ways.⁶⁶

In recent years, local aspects of peacebuilding have been a central focus in peace studies scholarship. Cedric de Coning (2013) argues that, while much lip service is given to “local ownership” of peacebuilding and development, international interventions frequently undermine such local government and grassroots efforts by imposing “neoliberal” norms designed by outsiders with little input from local actors. Because they are not tailored for the particular context in which they are to be implemented, such peacebuilding measures often fail in the long term.⁶⁷

These arguments resonate with Galtung’s (1976) concern that peace agreements reached in a particular situation may not hold as the situation itself changes; moreover, third party intervention, even when conducted in the name of peace, can create new forms of dominance that perpetuate structural violence. To counter this, Galtung stresses the importance of local structures in formulating and implementing peacebuilding efforts.⁶⁸

As the world’s largest and most influential intergovernmental body, the United Nations is especially influential in shaping and implementing protocols around peacebuilding. The UN first defined peacebuilding in 1992 as “an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.”⁶⁹ The definition has since expanded: peacebuilding now refers to a range of targeted measures to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict, including the strengthening of national capacities for conflict management and the laying of foundations for sustainable peace and development.⁷⁰

Since the start of the new millennium, the UN has created several bodies to promote peacebuilding on the ground. Established in 2005, the Peacebuilding Commission supports the transition from war to peace in conflict-affected countries, with a focus on developing institutions that promote sustainable development.⁷¹ The Peacebuilding Support Office manages international support for the Commission, including the Peacebuilding Fund, which finances the Commission's efforts with contributions from UN member states.⁷²

Historically, work for peace was commonly seen as distinct from development, while humanitarian work often associated with conflicts was also separate. However, it has long been recognized that the fields are intricately interconnected. The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals' multiple objectives are summarized as five "Ps": peace, prosperity, people, planet, and partnerships, with frequent stress placed on the links among them. At the same time, the emergence of large-scale institutions dedicated to peace and development work has been accompanied by criticism of a peacebuilding "industry" with financial interests that may not always align with those of the people on the ground.

This report draws on a broad definition of peacebuilding that encompasses not only conflict prevention and intervention but also efforts to build a peaceful society. Chapter 2 attests to this broad definition, exploring the work of sisters as it relates to peace advocacy but also to anti-trafficking, women and girls' empowerment, work with underserved communities, and environmental conservation. The report does not go into depth on the vast network of health institutions run by sisters, but clearly issues of health are closely connected with peace, not least during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report thus touches upon sisters working on health-related projects, with a special emphasis on the COVID-19 response. Underlying research demonstrates increasing awareness of the complex of interconnections that involve peace and peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding and Related Terminology

Peacebuilding is distinct from peacemaking, peacekeeping, and conflict prevention. United Nations documents note that both peacekeeping and peacemaking address conflicts already in progress: peacekeeping refers to the deployment of forces to control and/or resolve armed conflict, while peacemaking procedures aim to bring such conflicts to an end.⁷³ Conflict prevention comprises actions taken to prevent tensions between hostile parties from breaking out into violent conflict. In contrast, peacebuilding efforts aim to mitigate the risk of conflict by building and fostering political, social, and economic structures that promote long-term peace and development.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, boundaries among these different terms are often blurred, and their methods and goals can overlap.

RELIGION, WOMEN, AND PEACEBUILDING

Religious individuals and communities play valuable roles in local, national, and international peacebuilding efforts, and their contributions are increasingly recognized. Faith actors have several strategic advantages in peace work: many are rooted in their communities, are often regarded as moral authorities, and may address taboo and divisive issues in ways that few others can. Moreover, in situations where social tensions and conflicts are tied to religious and cultural differences, religious leaders are often well positioned to deescalate and mitigate conflict and promote an ethos of solidarity and peace.

Faith actors play different parts in peacebuilding processes: as witnesses to the impact of conflict on their communities, as educators who promote peace in the classroom, as advocates who ensure that their communities' concerns are heard at the negotiation table, as mediators settling disputes within and between communities, and as peacekeepers who directly intervene to prevent conflict situations.⁷⁵ This is especially true in situations where religious factors cause or intensify conflict. For these reasons, international bodies are increasingly apt to engage with faith actors in their efforts to grow peace in countries and communities worldwide. A criticism, however, is that such engagement tends to be rather ad hoc, dependent on both the attitudes of actors formally engaged in peace processes. The nature of religious engagement varies quite widely, ranging from central to informal roles.

Women play significant roles in peacebuilding, including women whose inspiration and networks are primarily religious. Around the globe, women reach across cultural and religious boundaries to mediate disputes, advocate for nonviolent solutions to problems, build dialogue and understanding, promote economic development, and support the psychosocial needs of survivors of conflict.⁷⁶ U.N. Resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000, recognizes and reaffirms the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and humanitarian responses to conflict. The resolution calls on U.N. institutions to “incorporate gender perspectives” in peace and security efforts, and to pass measures focused on protecting women from gender-based violence in conflict situations.⁷⁷

Despite advances, women are still routinely excluded from high-profile peace processes today. A quick glance at official statistics shows that women are far less represented in high-profile, public forms of peacebuilding work, such as peace negotiations. Of 21 major peace processes that occurred between 1992 and 2009, women comprised a mere 2.4% of signatories to peace agreements.⁷⁸ These numbers have improved since: in 2020, 23% of conflict parties delegations in UN supported peace processes were represented by women, though this number would likely have been far lower without concerted UN efforts to include more women.⁷⁹

This underrepresentation is partly due to traditional understandings of women's work, which have been reinforced by women's general absence from the political arena. In the eyes of actors involved in peace processes – whether they be states, NGOs, or armed groups involved in peace talks – women are typically seen as being far more apolitical than men. Reasons for these perceptions include the fact that women are confined to the domestic sphere in many parts of the world, which prevents them from participating in politics. This

is often doubly true for women with strong religious affiliations, many of whom live in accordance with expectations of humility and service shaped by their traditions. Moreover, the field of international relations, like most fields related to governance and diplomacy, is still largely dominated by men.⁸⁰

Exclusion of women from official peace discussions means that the resulting agreements and policies often do not address women's experiences during wartime nor do they consider their concerns in the transition from conflict to peace. Issues such as gender inequity, sexual crimes (perpetrated during conflict as well as in peace time), and women's and girls' education are poorly addressed because they are not regarded as priorities in building a more peaceful society. To make matters worse, since peace talks lend an aura of importance and responsibility to their participants, the absence of women further undermines the legitimacy of women peacebuilders and the interests they represent.⁸¹

Yet it is an oversimplification to suggest that gender is always an obstacle to women involved in peacebuilding work. This view overlooks the many ways in which women contribute to peacebuilding in ways other than direct negotiation. Women often serve as effective mediators in conflict situations precisely because they are excluded from formal power structures, which grants them an aura of impartiality. At the same time, the seemingly apolitical nature of women's peacebuilding efforts can help them gain traction in communities where more explicitly political initiatives might not. By downplaying their personal roles in the work they do, women also grant a sense of agency to their communities, which can strengthen the long-term sustainability of these efforts by building up community members' capacity to address problems effectively. It is also worth noting that women peacebuilder's low profiles can sometimes protect them from becoming the targets of violence in conflict zones.⁸²

Several prominent women scholars have highlighted the gendered nature of discussions of peace and conflict as part of a broader call for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding forums. Sister Joan Chittister has been especially vocal in emphasizing the oft-overlooked experiences of women in war and how these experiences should inform our understanding of peace and peacebuilding. Criticizing traditional understandings of war, Chittister argues that women have everything to do with war – as victims of sexual violence; as wives, mothers, and sisters of soldiers; as the people left to rebuild society after the fighting stops – and therefore must be a part of peacebuilding processes in order to ensure a just and lasting peace. For Chittister, women of faith have a particular role to play in opposing politics that threaten life and in being witnesses for peace on the local level.⁸³

CATHOLIC SISTERS AND PEACEBUILDING

Many Catholic sisters work to build peace within their local communities, across national and regional networks, and on the international stage. They work in areas such as education, health, and economic empowerment, though these efforts are not always seen explicitly as

peacebuilding. While the nature and scope of their work varies significantly by context, their social position as Catholic women religious shapes their work in significant ways.

Through their ties to the Catholic Church, sisters participate in various influential networks, including their individual religious congregations, inter-congregational bodies of Catholic women religious, diocesan and pontifical institutions, and Church-affiliated organizations. With over 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide, both formal Church structures and grassroots Catholic groups can serve as “transmission belts” for Catholic sisters’ ideas and actions and can help to foster collaboration among sisters and the broader Catholic community.⁸⁴ Moreover, because the Church influences the ideas and norms of secular governments and international bodies, Catholic sisters’ peacebuilding efforts can shape ideas and actions well beyond their local communities.⁸⁵

Their ties to the Catholic Church can lend sisters credibility in their communities; in places where the Catholic Church is seen as a source of moral authority, sisters themselves are treated as authority figures, albeit not always on the same level as male priests. (Conversely, in places where the Catholic Church is viewed with skepticism or mistrust, sisters may be regarded with suspicion or be accorded a special measure of trust.) Sisters’ dedication to a life of service earns them further respect among community members and faith and secular leaders. Because many sisters are highly educated, they are considered sources of wisdom and knowledge.

As consecrated women religious, sisters are able to serve others in ways that differ from both laypeople and male clergy. As one sister put it, the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience ensure a “radical availability” to serve others, free of the worldly obligations of work and family that place limits on one’s time, energy, and finances.⁸⁶ In addition, sisters’ responsibilities to their communities differ from those of priests, whose duties are often tied to a particular parish and/or diocese. While sisters may also have obligations toward parishes or other institutions, they are typically less encumbered in offering their services and in organizing informal networks outside of Catholic institutions, including intercultural and interfaith groups.

Just as their identity as Catholics shapes the scope and effectiveness of Catholic sisters’ peacebuilding efforts, so too does their identity as women. While gender norms close many doors for women peacebuilders, they can also open doors to certain areas of peace work less accessible to men. Catholic sisters are able to bear witness to the needs and wants of women and girls in ways that men cannot; they are often the first line of support for vulnerable women and girls. In particular, sisters assist victims of gender and sexual violence, many of whom would feel uncomfortable seeking help from men. Moreover, sisters’ lived experience as women, and their close proximity to women in their community, equip them to advocate on behalf of women’s issues in formal and informal forums.⁸⁷

CHAPTER 2

Catholic Sisters Building Peace: An Overview

Throughout the world, Catholic sisters are working for peace, drawing on the ideas of **Catholic Social Teaching** (CST). Rooted in scripture and conveyed through the writings of Church leaders, CST centers the inherent dignity of each person and emphasizes the importance of working toward the common good. A key aspect of CST is the preferential option for the poor: the idea that God has a special concern for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, and that Christians should share this concern. Other areas of CST include advocacy for peace and non-violence, the rights of workers, and stewardship of the environment.⁸⁸

This chapter highlights key areas of peacebuilding work in which Catholic women religious have a significant and well-documented presence. They range from peace advocacy to care for vulnerable communities to environmental activism. Importantly, these areas often overlap; their porous boundaries attest to the multifaceted and interconnected nature of peacebuilding work in general and of sisters' efforts in particular.

PEACE ADVOCACY

While they may not always be sitting at high-profile negotiating tables nor directly intervening in conflict situations, Catholic sisters advocate and work for peace in myriad ways: through public demands to political leaders, grassroots education initiatives promoting peaceful conflict resolution, support and rehabilitation of victims and veterans of armed conflict, and much more. This section highlights several ways in which Catholic sisters work to build peace from the grassroots to the global levels.

Calls to Action against Conflict

Sisters live and work in conflict zones, and they are among the most vocal promoters of peace and reconciliation on the local and global stage.

In October 2022, several congregations of Catholic sisters signed an open letter that called on UN representatives to take concrete steps to end global conflicts that disproportionately affect women, while also urging them to uphold women's human rights, gender equality, and women's participation in decision-making.⁸⁹

In Colombia, the **Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate and St. Catherine of Siena** issued a 2021 report in which they called on militants on both sides of the ongoing armed conflict to respect humanitarian law and end harmful practices against civilians, including the use of anti-personnel mines, the recruitment of minors, and threats to civilians.⁹⁰

In the Asia region, the **Sisters of the Good Samaritan** called on the leaders of North Korea, Japan, and the United States to prioritize peace in the wake of escalating tensions around nuclear conflict in the region in autumn 2017.⁹¹

In the United States, there is a long history of Catholic sisters joining priests and Catholic laypeople in protesting against the production of nuclear weapons. **Sisters Ardeth Platte and Carole Gilbert** of the **Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids** have been educating the public about nuclear disarmament for 40 years and have participated in protests with the Plowshares movement, leading to their arrest on multiple occasions.⁹² **Sister Megan Rice** of the **Society of the Holy Child of Jesus**, who spent decades protesting war and nuclear weapons, became a household name in July 2012, when she and other Plowshares activists broke into a federal government facility that produces and stores materials for making nuclear weapons. She was subsequently sentenced to nearly three years' imprisonment.⁹³

Sisters have also been vocal in the fight against anti-personnel mines. A member of the coordinating committee of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, **Sister Denise Coghlan** of the **Sisters of Mercy**, has advocated for a global ban on anti-personnel mines and the clearing of existing mines, as well as providing support on behalf of survivors of mines.⁹⁴ Coghlan is from Australia but has been based in Cambodia since 1990, where her anti-mine work is part of a broader effort to assist communities impacted by war and exile.⁹⁵

Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue

Catholic sisters are involved in interfaith dialogue at all levels, from the local to the international. The **International Union of Superiors General** is a member of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, a collaboration with the Union of Superiors General (which represents men's religious institutes) focused on sharing experiences and best practices regarding interfaith dialogue.⁹⁶

Individual sisters also engage in dialogue at the local level. A prominent figure is **Sister Agatha Chikelue** of the **Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy**, who co-founded the Women of Faith Network of Abuja and the Interfaith Youth Forum Nigeria.⁹⁷ Chikelue also serves as the Executive Director of the Cardinal Onaiyekan Peace for Peace Foundation, which focuses, among other things, on interfaith dialogue.⁹⁸ Chikelue's example shows how sisters participate in existing structures while also establishing new avenues for dialogue in their communities and countries.

Sisters also participate in dialogue initiatives between conflicting factions in their communities, whether these factions are divided by religion, culture, or other social differences. An example is **Sister Mary Tarcisia Lokot** of Uganda, the first female member of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, a group instrumental in mediating among armed groups in the north of the country.⁹⁹

In Sri Lanka, **Sister Dulcie Peiris** and members of her congregation, the **Sisters of the Divine Savior (Salvatorian Sisters)**, run "exposure camps" that foster understanding and friendship between members of the Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups, which were on opposite sides of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war from 1983 to 2009. As part of the camps, families from each ethnic group host a family from the other group, spending time together cooking, eating, gardening, and going through other actions of daily life. Many participants befriended their counterparts and remained in touch beyond the camp.¹⁰⁰

Peace Education

Catholic sisters promote nonviolent conflict resolution and mediation at the grassroots level through educational initiatives. With their connections to schools and universities, Catholic sisters play an important role in developing curricula focused on peace and conflict resolution. This is especially true in the global South, where sisters are the main providers of primary and secondary education in many communities.

Examples of sisters' peace education abound. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Sister Marie-Bernard Alima** of the **Sisters of St. Joseph of Kalemie, DRC**, developed a peace education program for schools.¹⁰¹ In Kenya, **Sister Wamuyu Teresia Wachira** of the **Sisters of Loreto**, created a peace and reconciliation program designed especially for young women before going on to lead the Peace and Conflict Studies at St. Paul University in Nairobi.¹⁰² In northern Uganda, **Sister Pauline Acayo** of the **Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, Uganda**, has trained dozens of Ugandan and Sudanese religious leaders in conflict management, peacebuilding, and interfaith and intercultural dialogue. She has also hosted a radio program focused on peace and reconciliation and has founded "peace clubs" that reach over 5,000 youth in local schools.¹⁰³ The **Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary and St. Catherine of Siena, Cabra**, have been teaching peace education programs in schools and local communities in Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil for four decades. In one such program in Bolivia, sisters train teachers and community leaders in conflict resolution and prevention.¹⁰⁴

In Kenya, **Sister Hedwig Muse** and her fellow **Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, Uganda** run civic education workshops focused on democratic participation and non-violence in elections; workshop participants went on to use their knowledge to train members of their communities. The sisters also instruct women in peacebuilding skills across Kenya's dioceses.

ANTI-TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking and modern slavery are among the most widespread and pressing human rights issues in the world today. Nearly 50 million people, the majority of them women and girls, are living under conditions of modern slavery, including forced labor and/or forced marriage. At least a fifth of victims of forced labor are subjected to some form of debt bondage, in which the victim's personal debts are used to force them to work.¹⁰⁵ Trafficking occurs in all corners of the globe but is especially concerning in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, where poverty, armed conflict, displacement, lack of education and economic opportunity, and the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened the risks for vulnerable girls and women targeted by traffickers.

Catholic sisters are among the most prominent and well-connected anti-trafficking activists in the world today. **Talitha Kum**, also known as the International Network of Consecrated Life Against Trafficking in Persons, is an international network of Catholic women religious working to combat human trafficking at the local, national, regional, and international levels. Launched by the UISG in 2009, Talitha Kum coordinates anti-trafficking efforts through local, national, and regional networks; the organization focuses on prevention and protection for vulnerable groups, support and reintegration of survivors,

awareness raising and advocacy, and systemic change to address the underlying causes of trafficking.¹⁰⁶ In some regions, Talitha Kum networks partner with individuals and groups of different faiths; one example is the Wells of Hope initiative in the Middle East, which promotes collaboration among Christian, Muslim, and Druze women leaders to combat trafficking in the region.¹⁰⁷

Catholic sisters are among the most prominent and well-connected anti-trafficking activists in the world today.

In 2020, Talitha Kum-affiliated local and national groups existed in 89 countries; over 6,000 people participated at the national level, including male and female religious as well as laypeople. An estimated 337,000 people benefited from Talitha Kum's efforts in 2020 alone.¹⁰⁸ Many of Talitha Kum's national and regional member networks existed prior to the establishment of Talitha Kum. Examples of these networks include:

Brazil: Um Grito pela Vida (A Cry for Life)

Since 2007, Um Grito pela Vida has facilitated collaboration between male and female religious, civil society groups, pastoral and social workers, and media professionals to combat human trafficking on multiple fronts. These include raising awareness and providing pastoral care, especially among populations vulnerable to trafficking such as women, migrants, Indigenous peoples, and transgender people; organizing study and reflection groups that examine the causes of trafficking; training volunteers to address trafficking in their communities; and influencing public policy and media messaging around trafficking.¹⁰⁹ Today, the network has 150 members from different regions and religious congregations, working from over 20 centers across Brazil.¹¹⁰

Nigeria: Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women (COSUDOW)

Founded in Benin City in 1999 by the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious, COSUDOW takes a multifaceted approach to addressing trafficking in Nigeria. The committee raises public awareness of human traffic, provides vocational skills training to young women vulnerable to exploitation, offers individual counseling for survivors of trafficking, and reintegrates survivors into society. COSUDOW has reintegrated nearly 400 survivors into society since its founding.¹¹¹

United States: U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT)

As the national network of Talitha Kum in the United States, USCSAHT focuses on educating the public about human trafficking, advocating for policy measures to address the range of tracking-related issues, and supporting survivors. Since its founding in 2014, USCSAHT membership has grown to include over 100 congregations of Catholic Sisters.¹¹²

Asia: Asian Movement of Women Religious against Human Trafficking (AMRAT)

Founded in 2009 in Goa, India, AMRAT brings together women religious from India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to address and implement the goals of Talitha Kum in South Asia. It is one of three regional networks in Asia, along with Talitha Kum East Asia and Talitha Kum South East Asia.¹¹³

Europe: Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE)

Founded shortly after the establishment of Talitha Kum, RENATE connects women religious and anti-trafficking activists in 31 European countries, encompassing over 130 anti-trafficking networks.¹¹⁴

In addition to Talitha Kum, several anti-trafficking NGOs were founded by Catholic sisters and retain strong ties to women religious. The **Mary Ward Loreto Foundation**, founded by Sister Imelda Poole, works to eradicate modern slavery in Albania by mitigating vulnerable populations' risk to exploitation and reintegrating victims of trafficking into their communities.¹¹⁵ **LifeWay Network, Inc.**, a U.S.-based organization that runs numerous programs to address trafficking, was founded by Sister Joan S. Dawber in 2007. LifeWay Network provides housing for female survivors of trafficking and educates members of the public about the issue.¹¹⁶

Several religious orders and congregations stand out for their anti-trafficking work, particularly in their engagement with and advocacy for vulnerable groups on the local level. The **Sisters of the Good Shepherd** have become known for their anti-trafficking work; in Cambodia and Thailand, the Sisters run Fountain of Life Women's Centers that offer counseling, skills training courses, and English classes to women seeking an alternative to working on the street.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, **Maryknoll Sisters** offer vocational training to young women and girls; in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Helene O'Sullivan M.M. founded the Horizons Vocational Training Institute, which runs a two-year training program to help women gain skills and financial security through work in the hotel and tourism industry.¹¹⁸ **Sisters Adorers** run over 70 projects that help vulnerable women and girls in 24 countries and on 4 continents. In India and Cape Verde, for example, they operate centers that educate and assist sexually exploited women and girls, providing social and psychological support as well as job training.¹¹⁹ In Mexico City, the **Oblate Sisters of the Holy Redeemer** have accompanied and supported women involved in the sex trade for 100 years. Sisters offer skills-building workshops, basic education courses, and spiritual and pastoral care to around 450 women on a regular basis, providing a safe space and opportunities to earn income outside of sex work.¹²⁰

WOMEN AND GIRLS

Anti-trafficking is just one of many areas in which Catholic women religious work on behalf of vulnerable women and girls. Their gender-based advocacy and support are among their more publicly recognized efforts; this is especially the case in societies where gender norms put sisters in a strategic position to address the needs of their fellow women. This section highlights the different ways in which sisters help women and girls in their communities.

Women's and Girls' Education

Catholic sisters have a long history of running schools across the world. Numerous orders and congregations have a special focus on education. These "teaching orders" include the Society of the Sacred Heart (also known as the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). Sacred Heart sisters run nearly 200 pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools on six continents.

Sisters have also taken an active role in helping educate their fellow sisters. Founded in 1999 by a group of U.S.-based Catholic universities, the **African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC)** works to give African women religious access to high-quality secondary and tertiary education, which in turn helps them to expand the impact of their ministries in education, health, economic and social support, environmental justice, and pastoral care. ASEC is active in 10 sub-Saharan African countries today; it has reached over 5,300 sisters through a range of programs, including workshops on leadership and technology, scholarships to attend secondary schools, and sponsorship for undergraduate and master's study, both in African countries and in the U.S.¹²¹

Women's Rights

Catholic sisters advocate on behalf of women's rights, whether appealing to the law or working to influence political agendas in favor of oft-overlooked women's issues.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Sister Marie-Bernard Alima** has used her position as the first woman on the DRC's Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace to push for a greater focus on women's issues related to armed conflict, including educating the military, police, and community and religious leaders about war-related sexual crimes.¹²²

Sister Julie George of the **Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit** is trained as a lawyer in Pune, India; she serves as director of Streevani, an NGO that fights for women's rights in the justice system. Women come to Streevani for a range of issues, including domestic and/or sexual violence and dowry-related harassment and violence. George also heads the Women Religious Lawyers Forum, which coordinates the work of women religious lawyers who represent the interests of marginalized groups throughout India.¹²³

In Rwanda, **Sister Immaculate Uwamariya** works with a local NGO, Famille Espérance, to end child marriages and violence against women and girls. Uwamariya has trained hundreds of religious leaders, civil society groups, and community members on these issues, and has provided counseling services to over 700 couples to prevent domestic violence.¹²⁴

Amplifying Women's Voices in Peace Work

Recognizing the untapped leadership potential of women and girls in their communities, Catholic sisters implement programs to educate and empower women and girls about issues of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. At the same time, they create forums and groups to channel the expertise of fellow women peacebuilders.

In Uganda, **Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe** of the **Sacred Heart of Jesus Congregation** introduced a peace curriculum to help survivors and former perpetrators of northern Uganda's decades of violent conflict to "find peace within themselves and within their communities."¹²⁵ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Sister Marie-Bernard Alima** created a nine-month training program for women of different faiths to strengthen their advocacy and peacebuilding skills.¹²⁶

Catholic sisters also help amplify the voices of women already engaged in peace work by creating spaces for these women to exchange insights. Nyirumbe created a peace forum for women in Gulu, Uganda,¹²⁷ while Alima established the Coordination of Women for Democracy in Peace, which brings together women peacebuilders from civil society groups to advocate for human rights, trauma healing for victims of gender-based violence, greater participation of women in local and national politics, and a peaceful end to civil conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹²⁸

VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

In addition to their work with women and girls, Catholic sisters assist many other populations that face particular vulnerabilities or risks. These include migrants and refugees, incarcerated people, racial and ethnic minorities, and vulnerable children.

Migrants, Refugees & Survivors of Armed Conflict

Catholic sisters are often at the front lines of support for displaced persons, whether they are fleeing violence or economic hardship. Sisters also help survivors of conflict to heal, return to their homes, and achieve a socially and economically stable life.

On the global level, the **UISG** runs the International Migrants and Refugees Network, which connects congregations of sisters working on migration issues and builds partnerships with governments and civil society actors.¹²⁹

U.S. & Mexico

As migration from Central America to the United States grows more common and more dangerous, Catholic sisters work on both sides of the border to assist migrants and refugees at various stages of their journey. In Tapachula, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, a group of **Comboni Missionary Sisters** started *Effatá*, a crisis intervention program to assist Central American migrants headed to the U.S. Since May 2019, the program has provided shelter, offered therapy and trauma healing services, and trained community leaders to intervene in crisis situations.¹³⁰

On the U.S. side of the border, **Sister Norma Pimentel** of the **Missionaries of Jesus** runs the Humanitarian Respite Center to provide newly arrived migrants with food, shelter, clothing, and assistance in reaching their families and sponsors in the U.S.¹³¹ Pimentel, who is executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, has been doing this work for over 30 years, assisting over 100,000 migrants arriving in the U.S. since 2014 alone.¹³²

U.S. Catholic sisters based far from the border have also been involved in assisting migrants in times of crisis. In the autumn of 2018, the **Leadership Conference of Women Religious** put out a request to its 300 member congregations to assist migrants at the border, whether through volunteering or financial support. More than 700 sisters responded to the call, raising more than \$1.5 million for immigration-related non-profits.¹³³ In September 2021, numerous congregations joined over 160 U.S. Catholic organizations in calling on President Biden to stop using the COVID-19 crisis as legal justification for expelling asylum seekers already on U.S. soil.¹³⁴

In San Diego, California, **Sister Ann Durst** and **Sister Mary Wayne Gradon**, both of the **Society of the Holy Child Jesus**, co-founded the Casa Cornelia Law Center, which assists migrants, refugees, and people who are seeking asylum, particularly those who have experience human and civil rights violations. The center works with a network of employed and volunteer lawyers, interpreters, translators, law students, and community members; since its opening in 1993, it has helped more than 15,000 people.¹³⁵

Mediterranean Region

In Sicily, inter-congregational communities of sisters provide material and pastoral support to migrants who have completed the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. The initiative, sponsored by the **UISG**, began in 2015.¹³⁶ On the Greek island of Lesbos, the **Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo** teamed up with the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay association, to support migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East in the summers of 2020 and 2021.¹³⁷ On the island of Samos, the **Daughters of the Charity of St. Vincent de Paul** help refugees by providing clothes, food, and tarpaulins, as well as moral and spiritual support.¹³⁸

In Israel, **Sister Azzet Kidane** of the **Comboni Missionary Sisters** ministers to refugees from Eritrea; she has compiled a database that documents cases of extortion and torture perpetrated by human traffickers. Through interviews with survivors, Kidane was able to provide in-depth information to Physicians for Human Rights, an Israeli NGO that fights for the political rights of minority populations; this data has since been by the U.S. State Department, European Union, and United Nations.¹³⁹

In the West Bank, **Sr. Alicia Vacas Moro** of the **Comboni Missionary Sisters** runs a ministry to the Bedouin community, providing job and skills training to Bedouin women and a kindergarten program for children. She and her fellow sisters also provide assistance and pastoral care to refugees and asylum seekers in the region.¹⁴⁰

In Baghdad, Iraq, the **Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena** continued running schools and a hospital even after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and subsequent war. As the city was bombed, the sisters opened their convents to fleeing families, providing food, shelter, and pastoral care.¹⁴¹

Sub-Saharan Africa

In northern Uganda, several sisters stand out for their work rehabilitating and reintegrating survivors of tumultuous decades of violent conflict between the Museveni government and guerrilla forces, notably Joseph Kony's Lord Resistance Army (LRA). By the time the conflict had dwindled in the late 2000s, over 2.5 million people had been displaced and 100,000 killed. During and after the conflict, Catholic sisters have been helping survivors, including young people coerced by the LRA into perpetrating atrocities. Many returnees lacked educational opportunities and social support from family members, who shunned them for the crimes they were forced to commit under the LRA.¹⁴²

Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe runs a school in Gulu, Uganda, that offers literacy programs and vocational training in agriculture, weaving, catering, and tailoring for women and girls who survived LRA brutality, including young mothers. The school also offers psychosocial support, including therapy, to help students process their trauma and start a new life. Since 2002, Nyirumbe has enrolled over 2,000 girls at the school; graduates have gone on to start their own businesses, become leaders in their communities, and start families. Nyirumbe has also started a microlending group to help graduates in setting up small businesses.¹⁴³ Nyirumbe has since founded a second school in Atiak, Uganda and is currently working to build a third school in South Sudan.¹⁴⁴

Sister Pauline Acayo, also of Gulu, shares Nyirumbe's focus on reintegrating survivors of the LRA, many of them internally displaced persons, as well as helping victims and their families forgive the children who committed atrocities. Acayo developed a rehabilitation program that uses drama and role-playing techniques to help survivors acknowledge and cope with their trauma and develop nonviolent conflict resolution skills. She has also trained over 100 internally displaced persons as paralegals to assist others in legal matters and lead trainings on communication, conflict resolution, and life skills. In addition, Acayo helps community members reconcile with formerly kidnapped children who committed atrocities under the LRA. Thanks to her efforts, some 2,000 individuals have returned to their communities.¹⁴⁵

In Kenya, members of the **Franciscan Missionaries of Mary** and the **Missionary Sisters of Charles De Foucauld** lead reconciliation efforts between members of the rival Nuer and Dinka tribes who have fled conflict in South Sudan and the surrounding region. In the Kakuma Refugee Camp, violence often breaks out between Nuer and Dinka, who blame each another for crimes perpetrated during South Sudan's civil war. In response, the sisters began hosting weekly group counselling sessions during which members of both ethnic groups can share their experiences and memories of the war; the sisters encourage attendees to forgive each other and to discuss how to achieve peace amongst themselves. Sisters also run practical skills training programming for refugees in tailoring, masonry, catering and accommodation, hairdressing, welding, plumbing, and baking.¹⁴⁶

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Sister Angélique Namaika** of the **Augustine Sisters of Dungu and Doruma** runs the Center for Reintegration and Development, which helps refugees fleeing the Lord's Resistance Army, most of them women and girls, start a new life. Namaika, who received the UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award in 2013, has since built a school for refugee children, a pediatric center, and a bakery to help refugee women become financially independent. To date, the center has helped over 22,500 women and girls.¹⁴⁷

In Zimbabwe, **Sister Mildness Chinake** of the **Handmaids of Our Lady of Mount Carmel** is project director for Jesuit Refugee Service at Tongogara Refugee Camp, where she provides psychosocial support, education, pastoral care, vocational skills training, and child protection services to over 7,000 refugees from other African nations.¹⁴⁸

In northern Nigeria, **Sister Agatha Chikelue** runs a program in different IDP camps to help women and girls gain skills, such as jewelry-making and pastry making/baking, to earn money. According to Chikelue, financial independence counters the pull of gender-based violence and violent extremism.¹⁴⁹

In Burundi, **Sister Pudentiana Kirungo Mushumbusi** provides support to survivors of the Burundian Civil War.

Asia

In Cambodia, **Sister Denise Coghlan** has worked to help refugees from civil conflict in the region. In the late 1980s, Coghlan traveled to the Thai-Cambodia border to minister to refugees displaced by civil conflict in Cambodia.¹⁵⁰

In Sri Lanka, 200 Catholic sisters from 20 congregations provide trauma counseling to survivors of the 2019 Easter bombing attacks on three churches in southern Sri Lanka.¹⁵¹

Vulnerable Children

Children are often the first to experience deprivation in their communities, a reality that many Catholic sisters recognize and work to address.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Sister Winnie Mutuku** of the **Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul** started the Upendo Street Children Program, in Kitale, western Kenya; the program provides meals for street children and helps reunite them with their families.¹⁵²

In northern Sri Lanka, a community of **Salvatorian Sisters** run the Child Development Center, founded in 2010 to help reintegrate orphans of the Sri Lankan civil war and survivors of sexual exploitation. The sisters provide trauma counseling to help the children onto a path to a normal life. Some 20 children are currently living and attending school at the center.¹⁵³

In Odisha state in eastern India, the **Sisters of St. Joseph of Annecy** run St. Joseph's Seva Sadan Community College, which provides education to young men and women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from rural villages and city slums.¹⁵⁴ The school provides vocational skills training in areas such as industrial machine operation, fashion design, computer technology, hotel management, nursing, and English; administrators help graduates find job placements through the school's network of employers. The college has trained more than 4,100 students, 85% of whom are currently employed.¹⁵⁵

In Burundi, **Sister Pudentiana Kirungo Mushumbusi** of the **Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus of Bukoba, Tanzania**, established an orphanage for children who lost their parents to the Burundian Civil War. The sisters also provide support to survivors of the conflict.

In Monterrey, Mexico, members of the **Society of Mary of Nazareth** minister to children and young men involved with or at risk of involvement with gang violence and drug addiction. Sisters and lay ministers visit neighborhoods as well as drug rehabilitation centers, where they offer support and companionship to the young men in the hopes of steering them away from violence and drugs.¹⁵⁶

Incarcerated People

Catholic sisters around the world advocate for reforms to the inhumane and unjust treatment of criminals. Many sisters also provide pastoral care for incarcerated people, including those facing execution, and their families. Many of the most well-documented examples of this advocacy come from the United States, which has the world's highest incarceration rate.¹⁵⁷

Sister Helen Prejean of the **Sisters of St. Joseph** is one of the most well-known advocates for the abolition of the death penalty in the U.S. Prejean chronicled her experiences as a spiritual advisor to men on death row in *Dead Man Walking*, which ignited a national debate on the issue of capital punishment and the criminal justice system.¹⁵⁸ Four decades later, Prejean continues her campaign for reform within the legal and criminal justice system, as well as providing support for families of victims of murder and other heinous crimes.¹⁵⁹ Based in New Orleans, Louisiana, she has brought her campaign to the Vatican, urging Popes John Paul II and Francis to take a decisive stance against the death penalty; this influenced Pope Francis to revise the language of the Church Catechism to unequivocally condemn capital punishment.¹⁶⁰

Prejean's advocacy for criminal justice reform and pastoral care for incarcerated people draw parallels with sisters around the world. In Singapore, **Sister Gerard Fernandez** of the **Good Shepherd Sisters** spent over four decades tending to the pastoral needs of individuals on death row and their families.¹⁶¹

LGBT+ People

Catholic sisters minister to LGBT+ people in a variety of ways: by providing pastoral care, advocating for gay and trans rights, and marching in solidarity at pride parades – all in the face of pushback from clergy and lay Catholics. U.S. sisters' LGBT+ ministry is among the reasons that the Vatican has opened investigations into individual sisters and congregations, including an investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 2009, which was discontinued in 2015.¹⁶²

Despite the controversies, U.S. sisters' ministry to lesbian and gay people has been going on since at least the 1970s, beginning underground and going public in more recent years. As early as 1974, the National Coalition of American Nuns campaigned for civil rights for gays and lesbians, later calling for recognition of same-sex marriages.¹⁶³ **Sister Jeannine Gramick** of the **Sisters of Loretto** co-founded New Ways Ministry, a Catholic outreach organization that advocates for LGBT+ equity, inclusion, and justice and seeks to foster dialogue within the Church and with broader society.¹⁶⁴

Catholic sisters were among a small but vital group of Catholic clergy and laypeople who cared for victims of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S., many of whom were gay. At a time when most Catholic institutions perpetuated rather than confronted the stigma of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, Catholic sisters were among those who cared for sick and dying AIDS patients, providing medical care, shelter, and other forms of assistance.¹⁶⁵

Transgender ministry has its roots as early as the 1990s, with instances of sisters providing pastoral care and support to transgender individuals.¹⁶⁶ **Sister Luisa Derouen** of the **Dominican Sisters of Peace** stands out for her ministry to over 250 transgender people and their families since the 1990s; she worked under a pseudonym until going public in 2018.¹⁶⁷ In Bengaluru, India, the **Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima** minister to around 200 transgender people, providing pastoral care and vocational skills training aimed at providing alternative sources of income to sex work and begging.¹⁶⁸

In March 2023, a coalition of over 27 congregations representing 6,000 U.S. Catholic sisters published an open letter supporting transgender rights and protesting against legislation and rhetoric hostile to trans communities in the country. Its publication came shortly after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement advising Catholic health service against offering gender transition interventions.¹⁶⁹

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

With climate change and environmental destruction among the most urgent issues facing humanity today, Catholic sisters are doing their part to raise awareness of these issues on both the grassroots and global stage.

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On the international level, the **International Union of Superiors General (UISG)** has released a statement calling on the global development community to engage with sisters on environmental issues. The statement, entitled “Sisters for the Environment: Integrating Voices from the Margins,” addressed policy-makers attending the COP27 climate and

COP15 biodiversity summits; drawing on *Laudato Si*, the statement calls for an “integral, integrative, and inclusive approach” that recognizes the urgent challenges facing the climate and biodiversity and that centers vulnerable groups in such responses.¹⁷⁰

The Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Commission (JLIC), a group run jointly by the UISG and the Union of Superiors General (USG), has partnered with the Laudato Si’ Movement, a lay group advocating for action on climate change, to form **Sowing Hope for the Planet (SHFP)**. The initiative, which launched in 2018, empowers women religious to respond to the calls for action laid out in Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical. Program participants meet online and in person to exchange experiences, advice, and encouragement.¹⁷¹ As part of SHFP, Catholic sisters have participated in campaigns for climate action and environmentally friendly policies, divested from fossil fuels and switched to renewable energy, planted trees, grown community gardens, advocated for Indigenous land rights, promoted access to clean drinking water, and contributed to ocean cleanup efforts.¹⁷² On the grassroots level, over 40 sisters have launched their own initiatives that mobilize around environmental issues and address the social and spiritual needs of their communities.¹⁷³ In late 2021, SHFP joined in the launch of the Laudato Si’ Action Plan, which invites Catholics around the world to connect and share best practices in caring for the planet; the first such gathering took place online in January 2022.¹⁷⁴

Founded in 1994, **Sisters of Earth** is an informal network of sisters in the U.S. and Canada who “share a deep concern for the ecological and spiritual crises of our times.” Members of the group, which convenes general meetings twice a year, support each other’s efforts and exchange best practices in work related to environmental restoration and sustainability.¹⁷⁵

On the other side of the globe, the **Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious (AMOR)**, founded in 1972 by women religious from across Asia, hosted its 2017 annual conference on the topic of ecological preservation. The conference, entitled “A Call for Global Ecological Conversion,” focused on elevating sisters’ voices in promoting sustainable practices, countering climate change, and assisting communities adversely impacted by environmental destruction.¹⁷⁶

Individual sisters and congregations also focus on environmentalism in their ministries. **Sister Wendy Flannery** of the **Sisters of Mercy**, has advocated on behalf of Pacific Islander communities existentially threatened by rising sea levels, as well as Aboriginal Australians whose ancestral lands are facing environmental degradation. As the official representative of the Sisters of Mercy at the United Nations, Flannery used her platform to engage on climate change issues at a global level.¹⁷⁷

Catholic sisters are also an active presence in the Amazon rainforest, where they advocate on behalf of environmental protections and Indigenous rights. In a region with few priests who frequently must travel between settlements, Catholic sisters and lay women are a consistent presence in their communities, helping build up health care, education, and development infrastructure over time.¹⁷⁸

Sister Dorothy Stang of the **Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur**, originally from Ohio, USA, had been working in Brazil for nearly 40 years when she was murdered near the town of Anapu, in the north of the country, in 2005. Prior to her death, Stang had helped found settlements for peasant farmers to teach them how to live off the rainforest sustainably.¹⁷⁹ Stang had received numerous threats from landowners, ranchers, and loggers, and she was murdered by gunman hired by a Brazilian rancher, making her one of thousands of environmental and land protection activists murdered in the twenty-first century.¹⁸⁰

Today, numerous Catholic sisters continue in Stang's footsteps, including Indigenous women. Two prominent examples are **Sister Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso** of the **Franciscan Catechist Sisters**, who assists Indigenous communities in defending claims to traditional land and in helping youth pursue education, and **Sister Jean Bellini** of the **Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester**, a prominent voice in Brazil's Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), a Catholic group founded by the country's bishops that advocates on behalf of peasants in land conflicts.¹⁸¹

PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN NGOS AND CATHOLIC SISTERS

There are numerous and diverse examples of NGOs and private foundations, large and small, supporting the work of Catholic sisters around the world. This section highlights several organizations that stand out for their collaborative efforts.

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Since 1944, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has supported Catholic sisters in over 90 countries.¹⁸² The foundation allocates resources for the education and training of sisters, supports their personal development, promotes collaboration among congregations, supports the expansion of data management and research and evaluation methods in existing

initiatives run by sisters, and provides elder care for retired sisters.¹⁸³ Between 2012 and 2020, the foundation invested over \$160 million, with plans to invest an additional \$200 million between 2021 and 2025. Among its many beneficiaries is the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC).¹⁸⁴ The Foundation also funded an extensive COVID-19 vaccination program in Uganda, spearheaded by the Association of Religious in Uganda.¹⁸⁵ Most recently, the foundation co-sponsored the Women in Faith Leadership Fellowship, which sponsored ten sisters from the African continent to meet with policymakers and scholars in Washington, D.C., participate in leadership and management skills training, and complete a capstone project under the mentorship of Georgetown University faculty. The fellowship was co-sponsored by the Bill & Melina Gates Foundation, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, and the Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership at Georgetown University.¹⁸⁶

Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters

Established in 1986 as a separate fund within the Hilton Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters provides grants of up to \$25,000 to congregations working on projects linked to a variety of focus areas, including anti-trafficking, health care, women and children, environmental issues, migrants and refugees, food and agriculture, and infrastructure. The Hilton Fund has supported over 700 congregations in 160 countries, with nearly \$160 million in grants since its founding. It also provides emergency grants to sisters responding to environmental disasters and population displacement, as well as education and leadership training for sisters in the developing world.¹⁸⁷

Pax Christi International

Pax Christi International is a global Catholic movement promoting peace and reconciliation, human rights, and social justice.¹⁸⁸ Pax Christi sponsors projects for and by Catholic sisters throughout the world, especially in the Global South. One recent example is a collaboration with the Association of Sisterhood in Kenya in which sisters provided training in non-violence and peacebuilding skills to people across the country.¹⁸⁹ A similar initiative was sponsored by Pax Christi in South Sudan.¹⁹⁰ Numerous congregations of women religious are members of Pax Christi International.¹⁹¹ Catholic sisters have also served as leaders of the organization on the national and international levels; **Sister Teresia Wamuyu Wachira** currently serves as co-president.¹⁹²

Global Solidarity Fund (GSF)

The GSF brings together actors from the private sector, development sector, and Catholic world to work toward achieving the SDGs. GSF fosters collaboration and partnerships between Catholic sisters and groups in business, government, and development.¹⁹³ The GSF has worked closely with the UISG to support trainings for sisters on capacity-building

and advocacy, highlight the efforts of sisters around the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic, and launch the Sisters Advocating Globally for Human Dignity, an initiative that promotes the voices of Catholic sisters in policy discussions.¹⁹⁴ Sisters Advocating Globally for Human Dignity also provides **mentoring and training for hundreds of sisters in the areas of advocacy and communication.**¹⁹⁵

Sisters Rising Worldwide (SRW)

Founded by Sister Irene O'Neill in 2017, Sisters Rising Worldwide is one of the most recent efforts to support sisters by connecting them directly with donors. Based in Minnesota, USA, the organization runs an online platform that facilitates collaboration and knowledge exchange among sisters worldwide. SRW also hosts a crowdsourcing platform that enables donors to give directly to sisters running projects in education, health care, elder care, and sustainable farming, in countries such as India, the Philippines, the United States, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As of early 2022, SRW has raised over \$10 million in funding for projects in 13 countries.¹⁹⁶ Among its many initiatives, SRW supports emergency relief for women and children fleeing war in Ukraine.¹⁹⁷

UNANIMA International

Founded by several congregations of Catholic sisters in 2002, UNANIMA International advocates on behalf of women and girls in front of the UN, frequently hosting and participating in UN events and meeting with UN representatives. The organization's issue of primary focus changes every two years; its current focus is on homeless and displacement, with past issues being trafficking, migrants and refugees, and the impacts of climate change. UNANIMA International currently draws its membership from 22 congregations of women religious, covering 23,000 members in 85 countries.¹⁹⁸

Alight

Formerly known as the American Refugee Committee, Alight provides humanitarian relief to displaced populations in nearly 20 countries.¹⁹⁹ Alight has been partnering with Catholic sisters in Latin America since 2018 through the Color Movement, an initiative that provides resources to sisters in order to expand their impact in the communities they serve. In El Salvador, the Color Movement supports sisters' work on violence prevention, youth and women's empowerment, and vocational training programs, while on the U.S.-Mexico border, the initiative helps sisters provide shelter to migrant families.²⁰⁰ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Color Movement launched an online platform connecting sisters around the world with medical professionals who advised them on emergency planning strategies and Covid prevention and treatment; the project reached over 1,300 sisters in 37 countries.²⁰¹

GHR Foundation

The GHR Foundation's Sister Support initiative focuses on building the capacity of congregations of sisters in the U.S. and other parts of the world, especially sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative does this by providing funds for leadership training, formation, and education, and by helping strengthen congregations' human and financial resources and communications skills. GHR focuses especially on congregations ministering to children and families in developing countries.²⁰²

Porticus Foundation

As part of its larger goal of revitalizing Catholic communities and promoting a culture of public debate and interfaith collaboration, the Porticus Foundation supports the religious formation of Catholic sisters in countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe. With Porticus funding, some 8,000 Catholic men and women religious are receiving training designed to help them meet the changing needs of the communities they serve.²⁰³

Solidarity with South Sudan

Established in 2008 at the request of Sudan's Catholic bishops, Solidarity with South Sudan is a joint initiative of the UISG and USG to accompany survivors of violence across South Sudan and provide them with the skills and knowledge to start a new life and build a more peaceful, healthy society. The initiative trains teachers, farmers, healthcare professionals, and pastoral care agents across South Sudan. In its first 10 years, it trained 475 primary school teachers, 190 nurses and midwives, over 1,000 farmers, and more than 1,500 pastoral agents. Some 14 religious congregations are directly involved in running the initiative, with 260 more helping indirectly through financial support and expertise.²⁰⁴

Misean Cara

Based in Ireland, Misean Cara supports the work of missionary organizations to improve the lives of vulnerable communities in over 50 countries. Through its Missionary Approach to Development, Misean Cara identifies the ways in which missionaries are distinct from other development professionals and FIOs, including their long-term (sometimes lifelong) commitment to the communities they serve and their willingness to work in more dangerous places such as conflict zones.²⁰⁵ Misean Cara currently partners with nearly 90 congregations of men and women religious with links to Ireland, including over 50 congregations of sisters.²⁰⁶

Catholic Extension

Catholic Extension is a U.S.-based organization that strengthens Catholic ministries in poor and underserved areas across the country.²⁰⁷ Its work with Catholic sisters includes the U.S.-Latin American Sisters Exchange Program, which sponsors sisters from Latin America to serve in the U.S.'s growing Latino Catholic communities.²⁰⁸ Catholic Extension also provides education, ministry, and salary support for Catholic sisters in the U.S.²⁰⁹

Missio

Missio is the pope's charity that supports parts of the world where the Catholic Church is young, poor, and growing. As part of its mission, Missio supports the training of 11,000 Catholic sisters every year.²¹⁰

Religions for Peace

Founded in 1970, Religions for Peace brings together representatives of the world's different faiths to promote peace through interfaith-led projects addressing humanity's most urgent challenges. One of its efforts is the Global Women of Faith Network, which connects national and regional religious women's organizations across the globe to work together to facilitate peacebuilding efforts in their communities and countries. The network focuses especially on promoting women's voices – in leadership roles, in peacebuilding, and in addressing gender-based violence.²¹¹ Catholic sisters participate in the network in all regions of the world, and the International Women's Coordinating Committee is chaired by Sister Agatha Chikelue.²¹²

Sisters on the Frontlines

Sisters on the Frontlines was an initiative that ran from 2020 to 2021; it provided grants of \$1,000 to Catholic sisters helping individuals and families dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. The project was sponsored by an alliance of organizations, including Catholic Extension, Congregation of St. Joseph, Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, FADICA, GHR Foundation, Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, and the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. While only a year long, the program exemplifies the potential for collaboration among multiple organizations to extend sisters' impact.²¹³

Other NGOs and foundations that involve and support Catholic sisters include Caritas Internationalis (CRS), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, Coopération internationale pour le développement et la solidarité (CIDSE), Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA), Jesuit Relief Services (JRS) Misericordia, the Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF), and Trócaire.

In communities across the globe, Catholic sisters administer to the most vulnerable, providing food and shelter, spiritual and psychosocial support, and a voice for advocacy. While not exhaustive, this chapter has highlighted some of the sisters and congregations who stand out in their efforts. The next chapter draws on examples explored here to identify overarching trends that connect the work of sisters across the globe.

CHAPTER 3

Trends

Catholic sisters' contributions to peacebuilding are indisputable, yet there is very little scholarly discussion regarding their work. While social scientists have researched and written about religious groups and secular peacebuilding institutions, academic engagement on the topic of Catholic sisters and peacebuilding has been strikingly limited.

This chapter begins to address the gaps. By highlighting trends related to the where, why, and how of Catholic sisters' peacebuilding work, it seeks to identify how this work stands out in the peacebuilding landscape. Specifically, it asks: what makes sisters' work different from that of other peace and development practitioners? What role does their identity as Catholic women play in their work? And what are the strengths, limitations, and areas for growth for Catholic sisters and the individuals and organizations who collaborate with them? By addressing these questions, the chapter seeks to increase understanding of Catholic sisters and assist in the creation of more informed collaborations between sisters, policymakers, and NGOs.

In addition to identifying trends from the research highlighted in the previous chapter, this chapter draws on one-on-one interviews conducted with sisters and with development practitioners who work closely with sisters.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The initiatives highlighted in this report reflect the global reach of Catholic sisters, from Colombia to Uganda, India to Israel, Thailand to the United States. Several regions stand out in the research, most notably sub-Saharan Africa but also India and Southeast Asia. In contrast, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas are less frequently discussed.

Several factors help to explain this trend. One is demographics: the Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa is growing at one of the fastest rates in the world, and this growth also applies to Catholic sisters in the region. Between 2018 and 2019, there was a 1% rise in the number of male and female religious in Africa and a 0.4% rise in Southeast Asia, compared to a decline in Europe and North America.²¹⁴ While the Catholic populations of Europe and the Americas still dwarf those of Africa, a Pew Research Study estimates that 40% of the world's Catholics will be from Africa in 2060, the largest proportion from any continent.²¹⁵ With growing numbers of Catholics – and Catholic sisters – in sub-Saharan Africa, there are likely to be more and more local peacebuilding initiatives to report on.

Another potential reason peacebuilding efforts in Africa and Asia stand out is because these areas experience more “hot” conflicts associated with conventional understandings of peace work. While peacebuilding goes well beyond resolving violent conflict, it is often still equated with conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution. In places where there have been a number of armed conflicts covered by international media in recent decades, journalists, NGOs, and policymakers may be more likely to frame sisters' efforts in terms of peace work; in contrast, outside conflict zones, initiatives are more likely to be described in terms of development and human rights even when the activities undertaken are very similar. This may be especially true for African nations, where a history of violent conflict tied to colonialism and resource extraction has shaped assumptions that peacebuilding activities are more applicable here than elsewhere.

Finally, aspects of the research process can stand in the way of a comprehensive account of sisters' work across the globe. The majority of research for this report was conducted using online sources, which overlooks grassroots and/or informal efforts without a presence on the internet. Online research was supplemented with one-on-one interviews with sisters, but these can only ever present an incomplete picture. Furthermore, research and interviews heavily favored English language sources, which helps to explain why peacebuilding efforts in English-speaking communities are overrepresented in the research while other initiatives, notably those in Latin America, are not. The hidden, “under the radar” nature of many initiatives run by sisters poses an additional obstacle to documentation. These and other factors are strong reasons to suggest that the research is far from comprehensive and must be built upon.

DEFINING PEACE

The report examined the different definitions of peacebuilding, with an awareness that peace means different things to different people. As peacebuilders in their communities, Catholic sisters' understandings of peace can shed valuable light on the term. Several key themes emerged in sisters' discussions of peace and peacebuilding.

When asked, some sisters voiced their hesitation in using the term “peace” to describe their work because they think of it as an abstract, over-idealized concept. One sister emphasized that peace is above all about the everyday, difficult work happening on the ground, asserting that “we don’t build peace in the air.” Another sister explained that peacebuilding isn’t so much a technique to reach a particular goal, but rather a way of life, of building relationships and creating opportunities for peace to flourish in one’s community. Some sisters connected peace to terms that felt more concrete to them, such as conflict resolution, human rights, and justice. Still others emphasized the importance of inner peace as a prerequisite for peace between individuals, communities, and nations. In general, there was a sense that peace is a shifting term, shaped both by events playing out on the world stage and circumstances in one’s immediate context.

Many sisters defined peace in contrast to conflict, but they understood both terms in a broad sense. For many, peace is not just about ending war among factions and nations, but also about addressing tensions in families and communities. Similarly, many sisters saw intercultural and interfaith dialogue initiatives as a form of peacebuilding, along with efforts focused on promoting ethical leadership, good governance, and social responsibility. Sisters in conflict zones, such as Syria, framed peace foremost as the absence of war, but also emphasized that peace extends to other areas, such as securing access to food, shelter, and economic opportunity. “To have peace,” one sister pointed out, “one has to have food.”

As this last point suggests, peace is inseparable from the issue of human dignity. Such dignity means having access to food, shelter, safety, and dignified work. At the same time, peace requires respect for the life and rights of all people; indeed, even in societies without active conflict, there cannot be peace if human rights are disregarded and violated. Though most Catholic sisters around the world are not working in conflict zones, they promote peace through their work for human dignity, whether by helping the victims of violence or displacement, providing educational and vocational training for women and youth, or advocating on behalf of underrepresented and vulnerable groups.

Sisters engaged in environmental causes also drew a connection between peace and climate change. Climate change encroaches upon the security and well-being of millions, posing an existential threat to island nations and increasing the number of climate refugees around the world. One sister also emphasized that peace is not just the prerogative of human beings but must extend to all living beings on the planet; seen from this perspective, environmental destruction caused by humans is a form of “waging war” upon the planet.

Peace requires respect for the life and rights of all people; indeed, even in societies without active conflict, there cannot be peace if human rights are disregarded and violated.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed lives in every corner of the world, and Catholic sisters are no exception. Although the long-term impact of Covid on sisters' peacebuilding efforts is yet to be determined, many interviewed sisters offered observations on how the pandemic has altered their approaches to peace work.

COVID-19 has impacted sisters in different ways, depending on the scope and severity of infections, health care infrastructure, government response, and economic impact of the pandemic in their communities. In many places, sisters had to halt their work due to government-imposed policies to curb the spread of infection, including restrictions on movement. While much of the world shifted to working online, the on-the-ground nature of sisters' work meant this was not always possible. Some sisters reported feelings of guilt and frustration at not being able to serve their communities in the same way as before. One observer remarked that many sisters she spoke with also exhibited signs of "compassion fatigue," the physical and psychological exhaustion from helping others cope with stressful and traumatic experiences. Moreover, sisters were not immune to the feelings of isolation that billions experienced throughout the pandemic.

Although Covid has adversely impacted communities the world over, in some contexts it took a back seat to more pressing issues. One sister from Damascus, Syria, observed that many city residents were primarily preoccupied with securing basic necessities for themselves and their families in the midst of ongoing armed conflict and escalating economic hardship. Here, Covid worsened an already dire political and economic situation.

Covid-related funding gaps are another issue for sisters around the world. During the pandemic, large amounts of financial support from governments and NGOs were diverted to Covid-related relief efforts, leaving sisters without the resources they needed to continue their work. Moreover, sisters who rely on donations from visitors and tourists were adversely affected when government restrictions brought international travel to a standstill.

Sisters have adapted their approach to meet these challenges. Where lockdown and quarantine restrictions made it harder for sisters to identify and reach out to vulnerable individuals in person, they shifted their focus to online networking and advocacy, and, where possible, traveled over greater distances to meet face to face. Like so many others around the world, some sisters made the transition from in-person to online communication wherever possible, as in the case of online educational workshops facilitated by ASEC.

The pandemic has also enabled sisters to reflect on their approaches to peacebuilding work and plan ahead for a post-pandemic world. For Talitha Kum, the pandemic offered an opportunity to refocus on formation and advocacy work, as well as formulate a Call to Action, released in late 2021. For sisters working in Siem Reap, Cambodia, pandemic-related restrictions made them realize the importance of sustainable home gardens to ensure food security.

For many sisters, Covid was a potent reminder of the interconnected nature of the world, underscoring our collective responsibility to take care of one another and the planet. One sister compared the pandemic to a war: both prove that each person's well-being is bound up with that of everyone else.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF CATHOLIC SISTERS

The opening chapter of this report highlighted the specific ways in which Catholic sisters draw on their identity, both as Catholics and as women, in their peacebuilding work. It is worth revisiting this topic in light of the research from chapter 2, as well as interviews with sisters themselves. When asked what they thought of the particular strengths sisters bring to peacebuilding – and what challenges and limitations they face as women of faith – many spoke openly about their own experiences. This section highlights some of their insights.

The “Catholic Factor”

By virtue of their affiliation with the Catholic Church, sisters have access to its wide global networks of influence; these include religious congregations, inter-congregational bodies of women religious, Church structures, and organizations affiliated with or even simply inspired by the Church, including Catholic NGOs. These networks enable sisters to organize across national and regional lines. Sisters connect online and in-person with other sisters, members of the clergy, and laypeople, at the local, national, regional, and international levels, convening discussions and planning actions on particular areas of focus. The UISG, Talitha Kum, African Sisters Educational Collaborative, and Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious are but a few such international and regional networks. Shared history, values, and goals encourage effective collaboration within these groups.

Moreover, as representatives of the Catholic Church in their communities, sisters are accorded a certain level of respect and moral authority from fellow Catholics, followers and leaders of other faiths, and even secular governments and institutions. The research identified numerous examples of how sisters' status enables them to wield moral authority among both secular and religious actors involved in peacebuilding activities. These include interreligious dialogue initiatives run and supported by sisters, such as the Christian/Muslim Women Dialogue Forum in Nigeria and the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative in Uganda, sisters' leadership and membership in interfaith networks, notably Religions for Peace's Women of Faith network, as well as secular-religious partnerships, including the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Alight. Furthermore, in countries such as Colombia, the United States, and South Korea, sisters have used their moral standing to call on leaders to take action for peaceful conflict resolution, immigration reform, and denuclearization.

Despite its many advantages, sisters' affiliation with the institutional Church can occasionally lead to tensions with male Church leadership. Many sisters collaborate closely with priests but have little input in formal decision-making and struggle to navigate the power dynamic between themselves and Church authority. In one example from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, a priest shut down a Church-run clinic out of concerns about infection; while this was against the wishes of sisters working at the clinic, they found it difficult to voice their concerns given the priest's authority. Indeed, the formal power arrangements within the Church hierarchy can foster an environment in which sisters lack the confidence and capacity to effectively vouch for themselves and their communities. Those sisters who are in leadership positions have called for more sisters to be given leadership responsibilities, not just in the Vatican but at the grassroots level; this call has only intensified in light of Pope Francis's appeal for synodality within the global Church.

Sisters' Catholic identity can also ignite prejudice, often from societal elites, including political and civic leaders who serve as gatekeepers to peace-related forums and projects. These prejudices vary in nature and scope, but they can cause policymakers and practitioners to overlook sisters' expertise, making it harder for a sister to access spaces in which policies relating to peace are decided upon. Almost all of the interviewed sisters acknowledged that being "put in a box" by others has impeded their effectiveness at times.

In addition, pre- or misconceptions about the "proper" place of sisters in society can fuel resentment from outsiders; in many places, there remains a widespread belief that sisters' foremost duty is to live in seclusion and pray. Ironically, sisters' leadership roles and knowledge about issues in their communities can intensify this resentment among elites who are not as in touch with local perspectives. Furthermore, peace and development professionals may resent sisters for doing work similar to their own without monetary compensation.

In some social contexts, sisters' vow of chastity can be an additional source of prejudice. In sub-Saharan Africa, unmarried and childless individuals are seen as not having reached full adulthood, and unmarried women in particular are not considered to be "real women." Moreover, in much of Western society, celibacy is regarded as an outdated concept, and those who choose to remain celibate are seen as following a repressed and/or unhealthy lifestyle. While many people respect and admire sisters' vow of chastity, others see it as a reason not to take sisters' work seriously.

Sisters' choice to wear the religious habit can also trigger prejudicial thinking. As an outward sign of sisters' commitment to religious service, the habit may grant sisters legitimacy, but it can also evoke negative stereotypes of sisters as severe and moralistic and/or deferential and submissive. Conversely, sisters who choose not to wear the habit may be perceived as radically progressive. One observer noted that sisters' choice of dress might hinder them from being heard in peacebuilding forums, as others may be more focused on their appearance than their message.

While many sisters expressed frustration at these and other prejudices, many emphasized the importance of seeking out common ground and finding ways to speak past the judgments and assumptions of others. In addition, many pointed to the difference in perceptions between societal elites and the “common people,” emphasizing that the perception of sisters among the latter was by and large positive. Moreover, many sisters stressed that their work speaks for itself and will eventually change the hearts and minds of those prejudiced against them.

Just as their Catholic identity shapes how they are perceived by others, sisters’ religious beliefs and practices play a central role in nourishing their peace work. Indeed, numerous sisters emphasized their spirituality as a strength they bring to the field. For many, prayer and ritual are essential to keeping hope alive in the face of great hardship; at the same time, Christian scripture and Catholic social teaching provide a framework for respecting human dignity and being present to the needs of others. In many situations, the use of symbols linked to religious beliefs and practices – candles being a prominent example – speak to deep emotional meaning that is a source of commitment to and yearning for peace. While religious frameworks are not always suitable for secular peacebuilding spaces, they can nevertheless be a powerful source of motivation and meaning for sisters.

The “Woman Factor”

Catholic sisters are strategically well placed to administer to the needs of their fellow women, whether through education, economic empowerment, psychosocial support, other forms of pastoral care, or advocacy on behalf of women and girls. As women, sisters are able to gain trust and build relationships with women and girls in ways that men cannot, especially in socially conservative and gender-segregated societies; women and girls are often more comfortable speaking to them about personal and confidential matters than they would with a male religious figure. Many sisters invoke the concept of accompaniment – meeting somewhere where they are and walking alongside them without judgment – in explaining their approach to pastoral care.

While their gender opens doors for sisters to serve women and girls, it also limits their ability to engage in other forms of peacebuilding. The research in chapter 2 confirms scholars’ findings that sisters are largely absent from formal peace negotiations. This is in part because many governments and NGOs do not see sisters as valuable participants in peace talks, as there is widespread ignorance of the particular roles sisters play in peacebuilding. As discussed in the opening chapter, this lack of awareness is also caused by a narrow definition of peacebuilding that does not account for the areas in which Catholic sisters are involved, including education, anti-trafficking, and support for displaced persons.

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Several sisters interviewed mentioned the issue of invisibility, noting that even when governments and NGOs recognize sisters' work, there is little attempt to engage sisters in the long term. During the war in northern Uganda, for example, sisters played a key role in brokering peace negotiations. While they were recognized for their role in the talks, there was no follow-up from governments or NGOs to harness sisters' relationships and experience in rebuilding after war. Indeed, recognition and long-lasting partnerships are often lacking. There are many possible reasons for this: a lack of awareness of sisters' expertise, misconceptions about the focus of sisters' ministry, and the aforementioned prejudices relating to faith and gender.

Ties to the Local Community

The majority of sisters worldwide work in their native countries and communities. Even those not originally from the community in which they serve often spend many years there, learning the language and participating in local culture. This embeddedness in the community comes with its advantages and disadvantages.

Sisters' close ties to their communities are key to building trust with community members. For sisters coming from the community in which they serve, their lifelong relationship with that community means there is a certain level of established trust. Sisters' commitment to working with people in the community, to sharing their hardships and joys, and to staying put in times of difficulty contributes to a spirit of egalitarianism, trust, and respect among sisters and community members. At the same time, sisters' close proximity to their communities gives them insight into issues of peace and conflict on the ground, allowing them to anticipate tensions and work toward solutions.

While being embedded in the local culture can be a strong advantage for sisters, it can occasionally prevent them from recognizing pervasive problems in their communities. Conversely, in those contexts in which sisters are not from the predominant culture of the communities in which they serve, their perceived outsider status may make it harder for them to build trusting, long-lasting relationships with community members.

At the same time, sisters' vows of obedience mean that they may be required to serve in communities far from home. This is especially true of sisters who belong to international congregations; bishops can send sisters to other areas regardless of their commitments to a particular diocese or their own wishes about where to serve. When these sisters move elsewhere, it can jeopardize the sustainability of their work in a particular place.

Availability

Catholic sisters' commitment to a life of religious service enables them to impact their communities in ways that others might not. Without the obligations that come with marriage, motherhood, and career, sisters have more time to commit to others. Furthermore, sisters are not interested in making a career, but rather go where the need is greatest. As

one sister put it, sisters “aren’t looking for greener pastures, they’re looking for the desert.” This focus on pursuing the common good rather than their own career advancement earns sisters a reputation for being reliable and sincere and contributes to public confidence in them and their efforts.

Lack of Training

A persistent challenge for many sisters is their lack of formal training in peace work. Hundreds of thousands of sisters work in peace-related fields without necessarily having the tools to conceptualize peace in a structured way. Moreover, many sisters may not consider their work to be peacebuilding, making them less likely to participate in peacebuilding forums and partnerships.

One particular area in which there is a need for greater training is interfaith engagement; while many sisters work alongside people of other faiths and/or serve communities of different faiths, many do not have formal training in interfaith dialogue; several interviewees highlighted this as a gap and priority for action. As such, there is an unfulfilled potential for sisters and their counterparts of other faiths to engage in discussions around their differences and similarities; this level of engagement could not only improve these relationships and lead to better partnerships, but it can also address power differentials that sometimes arise between sisters and the communities they serve.

Insufficient or Inconsistent Funding

A lack of financial resources can be a major obstacle to sisters’ peacebuilding efforts, as sisters heavily depend on funding from outside sources. Even when sisters do receive funding, it can be inconsistent and may be withdrawn when donors’ priorities shift, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the numerous successful partnerships between funding organizations and sisters outlined in chapter 3 demonstrate the potential for sisters to expand their impact when they receive consistent and adequate funding, whether via large grants or individual donations.

These points aim to begin a broader conversation about the strategic position of Catholic sisters in peacebuilding. In doing so, they seek to advance the work of sisters and promote

collaboration with governments, NGOs, and other faith-linked actors. The final chapter proposes potential courses of action in this regard.

CHAPTER 4

Looking Ahead: Proposals for Engaging with Catholic Sisters

Catholic sisters are in a strategic position to promote work for peace, both in their communities and on the global stage. Others in the peacebuilding sector, including governments and NGOs, stand to benefit from engaging with sisters in ways that recognize their perspectives and expertise. This report aims to facilitate and support collaborations between sisters and those in strategic positions to amplify their work, including NGOs, policymakers, and grassroots organizers. This final chapter offers several proposals for peacebuilding and development practitioners seeking to engage with Catholic women religious. It is important to note that these proposals are not a “to-do list” of concrete tasks, the completion of which will result in seamless collaboration with Catholic sisters. Rather, each proposal is about creating space for dialogue and encounter with sisters, building relationships that will bear fruit in meaningful and perhaps unexpected ways.

COLLABORATION

Numerous successful collaborations between sisters, policymakers, and NGOs are a significant if often underappreciated feature of today’s peacebuilding landscape. Many interviewed sisters expressed an openness to collaborate with outside organizations, but they

stressed the importance of genuine collaboration, with sisters as equal partners in shaping the agenda.

Genuine collaboration requires that those involved – whether they be governments, NGOs, or individuals – listen to the ideas and experiences of sisters and build a common agenda from the ground up. Projects with an already existing structure and framework need to have sufficient flexibility to accommodate the concerns of sisters and their communities. Without such flexibility, sisters may grow wary that they are being taken advantage of. As one sister put it, “sisters aren’t naïve”: they won’t enter into a collaboration unless they trust the sincerity and commitment of the other groups involved.

NGOs and governments seeking to partner with sisters on a specific peace-related issue should first acquaint themselves with the specific congregations working on this issue in a particular geographical area. It may be helpful to speak with individuals and organizations close to the sisters and/or those who have worked with the sisters in the past. Where possible, NGOs and governments can contact congregations directly or address a national conference of women religious, which can help them get in touch with congregations. Contact with sisters at the very initial phases of a project can help ensure a more successful collaboration down the line, with more sustainable results. Several sisters also emphasized that collaborators should pay heed to the work sisters are already doing in their communities and expand their impact by helping sisters strengthen existing projects, such as through capacity training.

INCLUSION

As peacebuilding becomes an increasingly important and recognized field, prominent voices are calling for the inclusion of underrepresented groups in peacebuilding forums. Yet assumptions that peacebuilding is a male field can be an obstacle for women seeking to change this fact, as it can bias the very people responsible for setting peacebuilding agendas from seeking out women’s perspectives. Indeed, Catholic sisters’ contributions are often overlooked or deemed irrelevant to the peacebuilding process.

In light of this situation, inclusion can take on several forms. On the most basic level, true inclusion means bringing Catholic sisters into peacebuilding forums, including formal peace processes at the local, national, and international levels. Policymakers and NGOs involved in setting the agendas – including lists of participants – for such forums should take conscious steps to include Catholic sisters as part of a larger effort to hear the perspectives of women and other underrepresented groups. This sort of inclusion cannot happen overnight, not least of all because policymakers and NGOs are often unfamiliar with the sisters most suited to participate in policy forums. Hence, long-term collaboration and relationship-building is crucial to ensuring that sisters have the attention of those who can help them reach a wider audience.

As previously discussed, the issue of inclusion is not just about bringing more women to the table but also about challenging deep-seated assumptions about who belongs at that table. Policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners looking to work with faith communities often focus on religious leaders who are, in many cases, men. While these collaborations represent a positive step, it is important to engage with oft-overlooked members of religious groups, including women and lay people.

When engaging with the Catholic Church specifically, governments and NGOs need to look beyond the male clergy and seek out the perspectives of Catholic sisters as well as those of lay women and men. One way of doing so is to refine understandings of religious leadership to intentionally include women, or to reframe the key players as “religious representatives” or actors, rather than “religious leaders,” as Catholic sisters may not identify with that label. Another step is to recognize and challenge gendered language within the peacebuilding sector. A more mindful and inclusive approach can help open doors to women, which in turn helps break down the very gendered assumptions that have created barriers in the first place.

SUPPORT AND EMPOWERMENT

There are many ways to amplify the impact of Catholic sisters. The examples set by organizations such as the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters and the African Sisters Education Collaborative attest to the potential that is unleashed when sisters are able to secure the funding and education needed to further their peacebuilding work. Policymakers and NGOs can support sisters’ work through direct financial funding and by sponsoring opportunities for further education and training. At the same time, they can use their networks and media presence to draw attention to sisters’ work and magnify their platform.

Governments and NGOs can support the work of sisters indirectly by fostering the growth of grassroots community initiatives, both secular and religious, focused on a wide range of peace issues, including interfaith dialogue, economic justice, criminal justice reform, and educational access. In doing so, they promote a culture of peacebuilding that can help further the aims of Catholic sisters and create fertile ground for future partnerships.

UNDERSTANDING

Misconceptions and prejudices about sisters and their peacebuilding work persist, and secular governments and NGOs are not immune to these ideas. It is crucial for those seeking to build relationships with sisters to acknowledge their own preconceived notions

and to work to break down harmful stereotypes and prejudices, as doing so opens doors to genuine collaboration.

In order to enhance mutual understanding, one must first identify misconceptions. It is important to listen to sisters, as many know from their own experience what kinds of assumptions and prejudices exist in organizations and government bodies they have worked with in the past. To name but one example, one interviewed sister described how some secular organizations assumed that Catholic sisters only work with fellow Catholics, though this is far from true. By listening to sisters' perspectives on this issue, partner institutions can identify and address misconceptions and prejudices that stand in the way of productive collaboration. At the same time, sisters may not always be familiar with and/or accustomed to the ways in which NGOs and governments operate, and they may have their own misunderstandings. As such, it is important that the exchange of perspectives be two-way.

In addition to addressing misconceptions, it is important to keep in mind that sisters may view their peacebuilding work with a different framework than NGOs and governments. While the latter may approach a project with a set of clearly defined goals, a specific timeline, and certain financial restrictions, sisters' work is typically less circumscribed. Those working with Catholic sisters should openly communicate about their approach and be willing to adjust their framework in order to accommodate sisters.

It is also important for NGOs and governments to acknowledge the work of Catholic sisters, as their contributions are so often overlooked. Conversely, in some instances, sisters may wish to keep a low profile, whether out of a desire to live out their vocations or a concern for safety in potentially hostile contexts. Policymakers and NGOs who partner with sisters should prioritize their wishes regarding privacy, supporting sisters' efforts in ways that enable them to have at least some control over the public attention they receive.

Genuine understanding of sisters' perspective also requires an understanding of how sisters conceptualize and work for peace. While it may seem obvious in the context of a report that has repeatedly deconstructed the meaning of peacebuilding, the term is still too often equated with conflict intervention. Yet this definition does not adequately capture the myriad ways in which Catholic sisters promote peaceful societies. By understanding peacebuilding as a long-term enterprise that seeks to influence the foundations of social relations in favor of peace and cooperation, policymakers not only can move beyond dealing with short-term aspects of peace, but they also open the door for expertise from practitioners involved in a wide range of peace issues, including many Catholic sisters. Thus, NGOs and policymakers need to adopt a broad definition of peacebuilding that emphasizes not only immediate conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution, but also considers the long-term causes and consequences of conflict.

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