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Sandra Russo meets Pope Francis at APEC Haus in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Sept. 7, 2024. (AP/Mark Baker)



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In his first address in Papua New Guinea on Sept. 7, Pope Francis deviated from his prepared remarks to specifically highlight women as "ones who carry the country forward."

"They give life, build and grow a country," said the pontiff. "Let us not forget the women who are on the front line of human and spiritual development."

The pope — who arrived in the Pacific Island capital on Sept. 6 as part of a demanding two-week swing through Asia and Oceania — was speaking alongside the country's Governor-General, Bob Bofeng Dadae, who also singled out women in his own remarks.

"The very act of God when he took the ribs from man and created the woman, exemplified the indiscriminate connection of gender as equal," he said, adding that the pope's voice is useful in helping others "respect the rise of women in a free world."

Those lofty words struggle to match the bleak reality on the ground here where, according to some statistics, more than 1.5 million people in Papua New Guinea experience gender-based violence and where a woman is beaten every 30 seconds. And in a United Nations Gender Inequality Index, the country ranked 160 out of 161.

While new policies have sought to make progress on the role of women in the country, there is still a dearth of women in government, high rates of domestic violence and human trafficking and an overall lack of both legal and financial resources to improve the status of women and girls.

When the pope arrived at the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, a Salesian parish on the outskirts of the capital, he heard testimony that here on the ground, the Catholic Church is often on the frontlines when it comes to leading the fight on behalf of women.

But he was also reminded that even in his own house, disparities remain — both here in Papua New Guinea and throughout the global church.

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In an afternoon meeting with clergy and religious women and men, Franciscan Sister of Divine Providence Lorena Jenal told Francis about a ministry she helps lead that provides shelter, security and healing to those who have been accused of witchcraft and sorcery.

To date, the ministry has helped over 250 women who have been victims of violence stemming from witchcraft and sorcery accusations — a familiar reality in this land.

Jenal went on to tell the pope the story of Maria, who, in 2017, was taken in by her shelter.

"She was so badly tortured and burnt that we did not know if we could save her life," Jenal recounted. "Her family did not visit her due to feelings of fear and shame."

But as Jenal explained, the ministry continually met with Maria's family, informing them of her progress and eventually they visited her and came to better understand her situation. After six months, she moved back home with her family to continue her recovery, and two years later, a court ruled that she was innocent.

"Today she is working in our team standing up for human rights and the dignity and equality of women," the sister reported to the pope. "She witnesses to the importance of love and forgiveness among all people."

In another address, Grace Wrakia — a single mother of three girls — turned the conversation inward, focusing on the challenges inside the Catholic Church when it comes to appreciating the role of the laity, especially women.

Grace Wrakia, a synod delegate from Papua New Guinea, speaks during a briefing about the a

Grace Wrakia, a synod delegate from Papua New Guinea, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 11, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Wrakia is a delegate to the Vatican's ongoing synod on synodality and described her experience of being present in Rome at last year's 2023 monthlong assembly as one of the greatest honors of her life.

The final synthesis report from that meeting described expanding women's leadership in the church as an "urgent" need, and Wrakia said that when she returned home here after the synod, it was religious and lay women that were the first who were eager to hear about the experience.

Now, with the pope in her own backyard, she spoke to him directly about the challenges that remain.

Wrakia said that while the synod gave her a voice, she was unsure how that experience would translate in the local church — though she wants to remain hopeful, especially when it comes to listening to the voice of the laity and her desire to see more priests acting like "servant leaders" and "collaborators."

Among those in the crowd that were listening were several hundred religious sisters — some of whom nodded along in agreement with what both women had to say.

Included in that number was Sister of the Rosary Robetta Modi who ahead of the event told NCR that "we, as women, are oppressed. We are vulnerable and we are marginalized."

Religious women, she said, have been working for years, particularly through education efforts and partnering with civil society, to raise awareness about the plight of women both in society and in the church.

"The pope's visit will help with this," she added. "Men will listen to what he has to say."

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. View the full series.