News



Members of the Women's Advisory Committee pose with Cardinal Robert McElroy, formerly of the San Diego Diocese. The committee conducted a survey of parishes, pastors and women in leadership within the diocese. (Leonardo Enrique Fonseca)



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Women leaders in Catholic parishes, schools and other ministries are generally satisfied in their work, but many report challenges of sexism, according to a new report from the Diocese of San Diego that surveyed nearly 450 women in paid or volunteer church leadership positions in the diocese.

Nine out of 10 women surveyed said they agreed — either strongly or somewhat — that they felt supported, respected and encouraged in their role as a Catholic leader. A large majority also said it seemed like their insights matter when offered to colleagues.

Yet a third of women said they had experienced sexism, felt marginalized or been the target of female stereotypes. In describing these experiences, they cited unsupportive clergy and laypeople, feelings of having their voice or authority devalued and being spread too thin, with conflicts between ministry, work and family.

One woman said she was told she should be staying home to raise her children, rather than work. Another reported that women "are often passed up at the highest levels, opinions are discounted, women are not protected and often made to feel unsafe when speaking out."

Seventeen percent said unsupportive colleagues or supervisors contributed to their leaving previous Catholic leadership positions. The report also notes the effect of "survivorship bias," which means women who have had the most negative experiences in ministry have likely left this field altogether and are not included in the survey.

Experiences of sexism are not unique to the church, the report said. "But it is especially hurtful when damaging experiences happen in a context of faith and within a place of refuge and care, and to those most generous and dedicated to the Church."



Mary Lyons and Cardinal Robert McElroy, formerly of the San Diego Diocese, meet as part of the diocese's Women's Advisory Committee. The committee conducted a survey of parishes, pastors and women in leadership. (Leonardo Enrique Fonseca)

The report, released in February, was the culmination of a project launched by Cardinal Robert McElroy, formerly of San Diego, now of Washington, D.C., who created a Women's Advisory Committee in response to the synod on synodality in March 2024. The synod's final document called for "full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain underutilized" (Paragraph 60).

"I think the why of the report is more important than the actual report itself," said Mary Lyons, former president of the University of San Diego and co-chair of the Women's Advisory Committee.



Maria Olivia "Marioly" Galván, chancellor and director of pastoral ministries, and co-chair of the Women’s Advisory Committee (Courtesy of Maria Olivia Galván)

McElroy wanted to determine if there were gaps where women were missing in leadership and could be invited into such positions, Lyons said. Under McElroy, several key leadership positions, including diocesan chancellor and chief financial officer, were filled by women.

Maria Olivia Galván, the diocese's first woman chancellor and co-chair of the Women's Advisory Committee, said her experience in leadership mirrors that of many of the respondents. "In general, my experience has been very positive," she said.

A national survey by the Women's Ordination Conference in 2019 was less positive, with 82% of young women preparing for ministry saying they felt women's ministries were not valued equally to men.

In San Diego, women also make up a majority of staff at parish ministries and Catholic schools, according to an accompanying census of parishes. Exceptions include membership on parish finance councils, chairs of parish councils, choir/music directors, liturgy coordinators and in hospitality ministries, in which men are the majority.

In its survey of women leaders, the project polled women religious, parish council chairs and representatives, diocesan directors, members of the diocesan finance council, parish business managers and bookkeepers, leaders in peace and justice and family life ministries, deacons' wives, catechetical leaders, Cursillo leaders, members of diocesan synod commissions and cultural diversity communities, employees of Catholic Charities and Catholic schools, spiritual directors and instructors, and leaders of Vietnamese lay groups.



The San Diego Diocese's Women's Advisory Committee meets with Cardinal Robert McElroy, formerly of San Diego. The committee conducted a survey of parishes, pastors and women in leadership within the diocese. Their report was released in February. (Leonardo Enrique Fonseca)

The report also includes results of a survey of pastors, which found that a majority of those who responded valued women's leadership. However, the response rate was low, perhaps in part because their answers were not anonymous, organizers said.

Most of the pastors believed there were no barriers to women's leadership in parishes and said they faced difficulties recruiting men. A majority said women's leadership was helpful, but that it was not their gender that made them so. Many said gender or other identity factors should not be considered in parish ministry.

One pastor's response was cited as typical: "Women are already in all the leadership roles they can be. There is nothing more to add. They are already in all key positions and very helpful to the parish and myself."

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But when the women were asked what "graces or fruits" they have seen or experienced in having women in leadership, the majority gave examples of particular virtues or personal characteristics they believe women bring, such as empathy, open communication and listening skills, collaboration and organization. Respondents also noted that women in leadership inspire other women.

When asked what additional roles in which they would like to see more female leadership, almost half of respondents mentioned the diaconate and specifically the task of preaching. A smaller number called for priesthood to include women. A few mentioned that they did not want to see women in ordained ministry.



Mary Lyons, president emerita of University of San Diego and co-chair of the Women's Advisory Committee (Courtesy of Mary Lyons)

"Women are interested in hearing women's voices," Lyons said.

Among the recommendations made by the respondents and the committee are further training and mentorship, addressing structural support for women who care for a family, and education and formation to increase awareness of roles that are open to women, such as speaking at parish or diocesan events.

"Part of what we're discerning going forward is to start to explore roles that truly carry some decision-making weight," said Galván.

The report also will be translated into Spanish and Vietnamese, she said.

Sociologist Maureen Day of the University of Southern California, who wrote the report, said she hopes the project inspires other dioceses to conduct similar surveys. "We haven't had a lot of open conversations about sexism and gender in the church, or a listening session approach about what it's like to be a female leader in the church."

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the U.S. bishops consulted an estimated 75,000 women in the writing of a pastoral letter on women, which included voices that were critical of the church. But after Pope John Paul II intervened to influence the document's content, it failed to get the necessary two-thirds vote to pass.

Day wasn't surprised by the negative experiences women reported, but she was pleased they still felt strong callings and saw the overall fruits of their ministries. It reminded her of the women who needed to "roll away the stone" on Easter morning. "They're aware that there's this serious obstacle that will impede what they've been called to do. But rather than turn back, they keep going."