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Voice for women

by Dennis Coday



Virginia Saldanha

Mumbai, India, native Virginia Saldanha, 63, had completed one year of university and four years as a corporate secretary when she got married at age 22. By the time she turned 28, she had three children and had become a widow. "The experience of being a widow was life-changing for me in every way," Saldanha told NCR in a recent interview. The experience would lead her first to a bachelor's degree in economics, then to study Catholic catechetics and then theology.

She began working as a volunteer Sunday school teacher and then as a religious studies teacher in the parish school. Appointed to serve on the Bombay archdiocese's justice and peace commission, she would eventually head up the Women's Desk, part of the Office of Laity for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, and a similar post for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. After a dozen years with the Asian bishops, Saldanha left her post in 2009, but continues her work for women and empowerment for all people.

NCR: How did you first get involved as a women's advocate??

Saldanha: I felt strongly about how I was treated as a widow, and decided to show people that I would

live my life without being restricted by what people thought or tradition dictated I should be doing. One woman even exclaimed to me, "You do not look like a widow!"

When I studied theology I was drawn to liberation theology. I began to apply the praxis of liberation theology to my own context. I decided to take up the cause of domestic workers -- women I was directly in touch with. They work in my parish area and are mostly poor *dalit* [outcast] women. I thought that if my life as a middle-class widow was tough, it must be much worse for these women who are poor and disadvantaged by their caste status. I began organizing them to teach them about human dignity and the rights they are entitled to under the Indian Constitution. I met with much opposition in my own community, but it proved that my efforts were successful in empowering these women.



I then joined a women's reflection group called Satyashodak (Search for Truth). We studied theological writings of well-known feminist theologians and discussed women's role and status in church and society. When the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India held consultations to start a Commission for Women, our group was involved in the organization of the consultations. Our auxiliary bishop in Bombay then asked one of us to volunteer to work as secretary of the Diocesan Women's Desk. All the women in the group refused as the bishop said he could not offer a salary at that moment. I decided to volunteer because I felt that if this opportunity was passed up, we may never get the Women's Desk. This was in 1992. The post continues to be worked by women volunteers.

In 1994 I was selected to go to the first Asian Laity Meeting sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Seoul [South Korea]. After this meeting in 1995 I was asked if I would take charge of the Women's Desk in the Asian bishops' Office of Laity, which was to be started then. I took charge of the FABC Women's Desk in 1996.

In 1998 I received a telephone call early one morning from my local bishop who informed me that I was appointed as executive secretary of the [Catholic Bishops' Conference of India] Women's Desk. I said I already had two responsibilities and could not take on the third. But he insisted and promised that this was a stopgap arrangement; he would try and find someone else within the next six months. The six months turned to six years. I worked three jobs and received an honorarium only from the FABC Women's Desk of \$2,000 a year.

Women in India, it is said, face many hardships. Do you think that is a fair assessment? How much has that changed in your years as an advocate and activist?

I have traveled to almost every Asian country, but the women in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) experience the most violence. Whether it be on the street, workplace or even the home, a woman is not safe. She has to constantly watch out for sexual harassment and other forms of violence. Every day our newspapers have reports of cases of horrific violence to women.

The women's movement in India started in the 1970s and has grown very strong. It has succeeded in putting in place many laws and continues to work to enforce those laws relating to violence to women. I have always networked with women's groups in the movement across religion, class and ethnic communities to work for women's rights and empowerment. In the 1980s and '90s we had a vibrant diocesan justice and peace commission that was also doing a lot for the empowerment of women. In fact all the programs of that commission were implemented through women's groups.

This contributed a lot to empowerment of women belonging to all religions who lived in slum areas in Mumbai. But this changed by the end of the 1990s.

Through workshops, and a book I authored, I tried to create awareness among women in the church about violence, their status and dignity. I think today we have a generation of women who will no longer be silent victims of violence.

The women's movement began to be blamed for marriage breakup in the church. No one recognized the fact that earlier women were silent victims of violence in the home, and that the time had arrived when women refused to be silent and carry 'their cross' to save a marriage without men taking any responsibility.

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You have worked at the grass roots and at high levels in the church structure. Can you give us a couple examples of women and the Catholic church?

Looking back at all the work I have done in various capacities in the church, I'd say that the bishops saw me as a 'loyal daughter' and perhaps safe to be in these positions. But I turned out to be a dark horse for them.

Here is one good experience: At the FABC plenary assembly in Bangkok [Thailand] in 2000, the evening before the inauguration of the assembly, the participants gathered for an introductory session. At that session we were informed that three workshops would be canceled because no bishops or observers registered for these workshops. The women's workshop was one of them. I stood up and requested that I be given until the next morning to get a workshop group going. If I did not succeed, the workshop could be dropped. Immediately I had three bishops from India putting up their hands to join the workshop and it was saved! Later that evening, I called together all the women observers at the assembly to draw up a strategy to insert women's concerns in all workshops and I got their wholehearted support. The women's voice was quite strong at that assembly.

However, the plenary assembly of the Asia bishops' federation that took place in Manila [the Philippines] in 2009 invited only 10 observers from Asia, of which only one was a woman. She was a religious, and she remained silent right throughout [the assembly]. The executive secretaries were told they could not participate in discussions during the assembly. The only time we spoke was to present the reports of our offices and answer any questions related to our work. Vatican representatives were present. I was told that the bishops were very happy that this meeting was among themselves; they felt comfortable. It seems like they want a church where they are comfortable, the old boys' club, not a church of the people of God where they exercise servant leadership!

Some time earlier, I had proposed that the Women's Desk hold a meeting for dialogue between women theologians and bishops. After that, I felt my work moving downhill. I think that the bishops felt threatened by such a proposal. For five years I worked to make such a meeting a reality. Several names of women theologians I wished to work with were turned down as unacceptable. Finally I was told to write to the bishops' conferences to get them to nominate women theologians. After I did this I got the go-ahead.

The FABC Office of Theological Concerns agreed to partner with me. The Office of Theological Concerns chose dates for the meeting to facilitate its members' attending. But when the meeting actually took place, just one bishop and one woman theologian, both of whom were scheduled speakers, turned up. The executive secretary himself and every other member found excuses not to attend. I had expected 40 bishops and finally had to work hard to get just 10. That experience finally made me realize that it was not

worth continuing to work in the church structure for women. This was in 2008. By the end of the year I was told that my term was up and I should submit names of possible successors. I was happy to go.

I thought that the purpose of having a Women's Desk in a bishops' structure would be to help the bishops understand the problems of women so that they can carry out their pastoral ministry to women better. But since the bishops felt they had to tell me what to do and how to do it, I felt it is no use wasting my time in the structure. In the earlier years however, I did meet with a lot of success. The women's movement in the church in Asia was launched and grew fast. It will continue to grow even at the margins because there is a lot of awareness about women's rights and status.

What can Asian women's experiences teach Westerners?

I would not want to say that the women in the West need to learn from us anymore than we can learn from them. What we need across the world is solidarity so that we learn from each other. ...

The terms 'affluent North' and 'developing South' are often used to refer to differences in economic power. This is somewhat erroneously used because we have rich countries, like Singapore in the South, and there are Indians who are among the richest men in the world. Still, most of Asia was colonized and controlled by Western powers. Colonialism left Asia quite impoverished.

In the last 60 years of independence, however, India has created a very large, educated and well-to-do middle class, which is bigger than the population of Europe. The number of practicing Catholics soon will exceed those in most Western Christian countries.

The West tends to see India and the rest of Asia differently because of the 'exotic' cultures and spiritualities.

In Asia, though, the leaders in the women's movement come mainly from the middle class. It does not just focus on women's rights per se but on the rights of all oppressed people, which include women. So the women's movement critiques development models, environmental degradation, workers' rights, economic development, and all kinds of injustice, because these directly or indirectly impinge on women's lives. ...

The movement in India has blown the myth that a poor woman is unempowered. On the contrary, my experience has found that poor women are ready to take action to protect their rights more than their economically well-off sisters in Asia. Women in the rich and middle class often do not want to rock the boat when it comes to family status and appearances, and therefore they will tolerate oppression to save the family name. They pretend that they are liberated because they live affluent lifestyles, but gender relations are poor and they are often silent victims of violence.

The women's group has been a powerful tool in women's empowerment. It provides strong support for women as it creates an environment to help them to take action together. But these groups thrive better among the poorer women. ...

When I attend meetings of women's groups in the West, I feel that they look at us women from the 'South' countries with pity, feeling we need their help and sympathy. But they fail to see the problems of women in their own society. There is still male domination and male superiority in the families in the West. ... But no one seems to do anything about this problem.

So having support groups of women is something perhaps our sisters in the West can learn from India. We do a lot of networking that has strengthened the women's movement.

I ardently believe that women coming together locally and being in solidarity internationally can be a strong force to bring about change.

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