

Respect@Work shines a light on male-dominated workplace cultures



This report on women’s safety in the workplace has implications for the Catholic Church in Australia as we journey towards the first Assembly of the Plenary Council, writes Patty Fawkner SGS.

Admittedly, I have only read the 40-page [Executive Summary and Recommendations](#) rather than the entire 995-page Australian Human Rights Commission report, *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*.

Though delayed for more than 12 months, the release of the report is timely given the plethora of allegations of sexual harassment and abuse within the walls of Federal Parliament. The report does not specifically examine sexual abuse within Church workplaces. However, it does shine a light on women’s safety within workplace cultures such as the Catholic Church.

The report notes (pp 20-21) that workplace settings where there is a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment include those that are male dominated due to:

- the gender ratio;
- the over-representation of men in senior leadership roles;
- the nature of the work being considered ‘non-traditional’ for women;
- the masculine workplace culture;
- being organised according to a hierarchical structure.

Even though the gender ratio favours women in the pews and in many Church ministries, the *Respect@Work* findings indicate that the Church is potentially a very unsafe place for women. Senior leadership roles in the Catholic Church are exclusively male; it is considered “non-traditional”, indeed “divinely forbidden”, for women to be ordained leaders; and the Church is hierarchically structured in the extreme. The Catholic Church is intrinsically male dominated in its leadership, governance, liturgy and language.

The dangers that inhere in Church workplace settings was borne out for me when I participated in an online International Women’s Day event run by the [Voices of Faith](#) organisation in March this year. Differing from the usual diverse group of speakers, this year’s event, called [Sisters Unveil Your Truths](#), asked Religious Sisters from around the world to reflect on their experience of obedience.

The testimonies of two religious Sisters – Mumbi Kigutha CPPS from Kenya and Julie George SSps from India – were disturbing. They were speaking about a present reality rather than about incidents from a distant past. Sister Mumbi outlined the many forms of sexual abuse nuns had suffered at the hands of priests and bishops and, at times, religious superiors. The abuse was able to flourish because of grossly patriarchal attitudes, abuse of power, gaslighting, domination rather than collaboration, and the blaming and shaming of victims.

Elsewhere, Mumbi [wrote](#):

I'm sharing this because I'm a victim myself of psychological and spiritual abuse and have listened to the cries of victims of sexual, psychological, spiritual abuse from powerful clergy and religious within the Church who continue to live their lives with no care for the victim and no consequences for their actions.

Sister Julie spoke of the double standards in dealing with priests and nuns who have violated their vow of celibacy. A priest is relocated to another diocese while the Sister is often compelled to leave her congregation, certainly if she is pregnant.

Julie said that the appeal to obedience to the hierarchy and respect given to and demanded by them, the expectation that religious women unquestioningly obey and serve, often without adequate remuneration, allowed abuse to thrive.

Respect was one-way. No respect was given to anyone who dared raise concerns. Such women were summarily dismissed as “troublesome”. Sisters could be publicly criticised, priests could refuse to celebrate Mass at the convent of those who complained about clergy behaviour, and clergy-required references for study and ministry appointments could be withheld or given in exchange for sexual favours.

When it was my turn to speak, I said that, personally, I did not feel that I had ever been wounded directly by my vow of obedience and, unlike Mumbi and Julie, I didn't have any distressing stories to tell. But I was wrong.

As I began to write this article it dawned on me that I had experienced verbal sexual abuse as a young Sister. This is the first time I have named it as such.

I taught in a Catholic primary school in the early 1980s when members of our congregation were beginning to replace the traditional veil and habit with contemporary clothing or “civvies”.

If the parish priest saw me without my veil, he would later declare from the pulpit during Mass that he had seen a “topless nun”. No respect at work here! Though not as traumatic as many of the instances of abuse documented in *Respect@Work*, I still felt humiliated, disrespected and angry. At the time, it did not occur to me to challenge the priest or ask him to desist.

Prior to reading the *Respect@Work* report I read another document, the [Instrumentum Laboris](#), the working document for the Australian Catholic Church's Plenary Council. I am pleased that I will attend the first Plenary Council Assembly, which will be held in October this year with the second Assembly to be held in June 2022.

I read the document, keen to see what it said about the role of women in the Church. In all truth, I was disappointed.

The document gives a nod to fuller participation of women in the mission of the Church. It refers to the “perceived” under-representation of women in formal leadership and decision-making roles. It

acknowledges a need for the Church to be open to the gifts and contributions of women in leadership and decision-making “at appropriate levels”. And it admits that “some” Catholic women have encountered patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes within the Church.

The qualified language dampened my expectations but not my hopes that the fruit of the Plenary Council journey will be a more inclusive and less glaringly unequal role for women in the Church.

It occurs to me, that as well as reading the *Instrumentum Laboris*, all members attending the Plenary Council, including the hierarchy, would do well to read the Executive Summary of *Respect@Work*. It might, it just might, shift perceptions of the risk the Church poses for women because of the over-representation of men in senior leadership roles and its entrenched hierarchical structure.

I am holding tightly to the Plenary Council’s commitment to synodality, that is, to communal discernment, dialogue and listening to all voices. Herein lies my hope.

If this article has raised any issues for you, please contact [1800 RESPECT](#) through the toll-free national counselling hotline 1800 737 743. You can also find support through [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14.

The Sisters of the Good Samaritan take all safeguarding concerns seriously and treat them as a priority. If you wish to raise a concern with the Congregation directly, please visit the [website](#) or contact the Congregational Safeguarding Coordinator on (02) 8752 5319.

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Taken from *The Good Oil*