



CWC Report on their Discussions on Synodality and what it means for Women.

The Catholic Women's Council has been engaged in understanding and discussions on the issues of women concerning the Synod on Synodality ever since Pope Francis opened the process in October 2021. We have conducted two series of Listening Sessions. The first in 2022/2023 and the second during the interim period of the Synod of 2023 and 2024. The process of preparation and the Synod of 2023 gave numerous reform organisations of the People of God worldwide the opportunity to network and discover that we have concerns that are similar.

Violence against women in church and society

The issue of violence against women and girls is a global concern – prevalent in all countries, cultures, religions and social environments.

The Catholic Church, with its patriarchal and hierarchical structure, is no exception. Sexualized violence and abuse are widespread in the church and the church environment. We are deeply concerned that the structures of power in the Catholic Church, subject women and vulnerable groups of persons to violence, much of which is covered up and never even acknowledged. The spiritual power exercised by ordained men, is often misused to coerce women and vulnerable persons to commit sexual abuse. Victims/survivors still cry out for justice from the Church.

The sex abuse crisis has significantly eroded the Church's credibility. Many women and young people go to priests to seek advice in situations of family violence and abuse, only to be further victimized in their vulnerable state. The abuse is not only sexual but also spiritual. As a result increasing numbers of young people have distanced themselves from the Church.

Women expect the Synod to provide answers and visible signs that the Church is advocating for their voices and rights.

Women expect

- **An end to the exclusion of women in leadership and decision making.**

Women are repeatedly told that they should not perceive exclusion and the denial of their rights as violence and that this does not constitute discrimination. But exclusion is violence and experiences of exclusion are experiences of violence that are just as traumatic and painful as physical violence.

- **Eliminating Patriarchal Culture**

Sexism in the church is omnipresent. To eliminate violence against women, the church must work internally and politically to deconstruct patriarchal culture. Patriarchy has fostered a pervasive narcissism in men: prioritizing their own interests and power above all else. Pope Francis refers to this as “clericalism”. This toxic masculinity must be critically analysed and deconstructed.

- **Give justice to victims of Clerical abuse/sexual abuse**

Experiences of abuse are diverse and often concealed. Women who report abuse continue to be wrongfully accused of being ‘aggressive and slanderous women’ and denounced. We demand that a structure be set up wherein women are appointed to examine the reports of abuse and initiate the process of justice and healing for victims. No more cover up! No more silencing! No more victimization of whistleblowers!

- **An end to clerical dominance, abuse and violence against religious women**

Violence perpetrated against religious women is particularly severe as they are not covered by any civil law, but by discriminatory Canon Law where all decisions are taken by male leaders. Leadership within congregations lack autonomy and is obliged to adhere to decisions taken by the male hierarchy.

- **Recognition that domestic violence is a crime**

The patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the church is particularly reflected in families, where women and children are subjected to a teaching on marriage and sexuality that demands submission thereby promoting various forms of abuse such as mental, emotional, physical violence, sex abuse and incest. The Catholic Church has failed to condemn domestic violence and has not classified it as a sin, despite its recognition as a crime in civil society.

- **Recognize that Marital Rape is Rape.**

Sexualised violence and rape in marriage are among the most extreme forms of violence. Men do not have an inherent right to a woman's body for the fulfilment of his sexual desires, nor should there be any obligatory expectation from a woman to satisfy a man's sexual demands in every circumstance.

Establish an interreligious dialogue on the recognition of women's rights in religions.

The church has a worldwide network and it is precisely this interconnected perspective that should be used to address the issue of discrimination and violence against women. Discrimination against women and the use of violence are criminal offences and rape is a crime against humanity. To this day, the Catholic Church has failed to ratify stricter laws for the protection of women as defined in CEDAW and the Istanbul Conventions.

- **Establish independent commissions**

Women are calling for the establishment of independent commissions headed and run by women to address and make changes in attitudes and culture that abuse women. Numerous studies show correlations between religiosity in a family and violence against women. Especially where the hierarchical structure of the church overlaps with the cultural, social and political structure, violence against women is often particularly concealed leaving women isolated with their experiences both by society and the church. These commissions should be accessible to every woman through the network of the diocese, parish, and SCCs.