



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

The women in our lives

THE world marked International Women's Day on March 8. Observed since the early 1900s, it is a day to celebrate the economic, political and social achievements of women, and remember how women in many parts of the world continue to be discriminated against and marginalised.

Sister Susan Thomas, Novice Mistress of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Singapore, has seen first-hand the suffering of women in countries where they are not treated with the same dignity as men. From 1997 to 2001 she was principal of a school in a remote desert town in Pakistan. One poignant memory of those years is of little girls looking into the classroom from the outside.

She remembers vividly a girl who was always hanging around outside the classroom, peering through a window, yearning to catch what was being taught. "It was truly sad - knowing that their thirst for learning could never quite be quenched because their society was such," she said.

Explaining the situation there in the late 1990s, Sister Susan, 56, said: "The children would come to school, but sadly the girl child was not a priority in the education process. Even if girls attended school, they would, shortly after, pull out because girls in Pakistan needed to be accompanied everywhere. So if they did not have a minder that day, they could not attend school. This then created a situation where many of them would eventually drop out of school and their education was simply incomplete. The other very common situation, of course, was that many would drop out to honour family obligations of marriage."

She tried to change the way boys viewed their sisters, and was taken aback when a seven-year-old boy told her innocently: "What can my

Girls and women in Singapore are more fortunate than their sisters in many other parts of the world, in terms of access to education and opportunities in the workplace and society. But if you look at the women in our midst, you will see those who are marginalised here too.

sister do? She is only a girl."

Her response: "I tried in my own small way to tell this little boy the worth of his sister."

Here in Singapore, girls enjoy the same opportunities as boys when it comes to education. Women make up half the full-time student population in local universities. At the workplace, women and men are largely assessed based on merit and work performance, in line with Singapore's meritocratic system. But a gap remains, with far fewer women than men in top leadership positions in politics, the judiciary, public service and the corporate sector. There is also a gap in wages, although that has narrowed over the years.

But not all women in Singapore enjoy the same opportunities. There are groups of women who continue to be marginalised and taken advantage of, and who need help and support.

Foreign maids comprise one group, whose plight has been highlighted in several Caritas publications. A second group are foreign spouses, especially women from poorer countries in the region and whose marriages resulted from commercial match-making arrangements. They often have little recourse if their Singaporean husbands decide to abandon them.

There are also large numbers of older Singaporean women who may not be able to read and write or to communicate in English because they grew up in an era when it was not a priority for girls here to complete their education. Then there are older women who may have little money of their own because they stayed home raising children and caring for their husbands, parents and parents-in-law.

All these groups of women are vulnerable to being exploited and marginalised because they lack the resources and skills prized in today's society.

The Church's social teaching, however, reminds us that all of us are equal in dignity, and we should treat and respect each other accordingly.

Having witnessed how women in Pakistan suffer because of discrimination, Sister Susan consciously teaches FMM novices about the worth of women, in their formation studies.

She sees education on this front as a work in progress: "The Church today is more open to listening to women's voices in theology. The availability of books written by women in the library is a positive indication and the more we talk about women, their faith and their worth, our perspectives and thoughts will gradually widen."

All of us can do our part too, and not only when International Women's Day comes round each year. Here are three things to consider:

- **LOOK** at the women around you and notice how they are treated by those who are richer or more powerful than them.
- **CONSIDER** if it is fair for these women to be marginalised or discriminated against because of a lack of status, money, skills or because of where they are from. How does that sit with Catholic Social Teaching on the dignity of every person?
- **THINK** about what you can do to include a marginalised woman in your life, and help her gain confidence. Take steps to do so, today.



While working in Pakistan, Sister Susan Thomas (above, right) tried to change the way boys viewed their sisters. A seven-year-old boy asked her innocently: "What can my sister do? She is only a girl." Taken aback, Sister Susan knew she had more work to do: "I tried in my own small way to tell this little boy the worth of his sister."

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