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Women's Month: A double-edged sword

By Russell Pollitt SJ

August is "Women's Month" in South Africa. The month commemorates the march of more than 20 000 women to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 to protest the extension of the so-called "pass laws" to women. It is a month in which we celebrate the achievements and the contribution that women have made to the building of this country, often through hardship and tears.

Women are the backbone of any society, shouldering much of the responsibility as professionals, mothers, caregivers and, often, the moral conscience of nations. It is right and just that in a (still) predominantly patriarchal world, we should continually be made aware of women's pivotal contribution to our society.

However, despite the annual dedication of a month to women, we must also acknowledge the duplicity it reveals. We celebrate women, say they make a pivotal contribution – both historically and to our contemporary reality – and yet we continue to perpetuate a patriarchal system that many women spend their daily lives battling against. Economically, women are still the most disenfranchised and are not remunerated as their male counterparts. Women struggle for education and health care. Women are often given tedious menial tasks. Women, because they may not be as physically strong as men, are cast as the "weaker" of the genders and this discourse is used to undermine women.

Women's bodies are commodified and some of the worst crimes against the human body are performed on women by men. Women are often forced into doing things they clearly do not want to do – even in marriage. Many women are still treated as possessions. Often, when we speak about women or make jokes, the language we use, for anyone who pays attention, conveys deeper truths about the fact that many men still think they are superior to women. Little boys are often socialised to believe they are "stronger" or "better" or more "prized" than their sisters and mothers.

In the Church, we are not immune to this either. Many women – not all – feel like they are treated as second-class citizens. Language shapes our experience and our theology. In the liturgy, for example, we "mansplain" the use of the word "men", arguing that it means "all people". If we really did believe that, why would we simply not say "all people" to remove the offence that many women feel when they hear that phrase over and over? There is, it seems, a conscious decision not to listen to or hear women's experiences and, through this, invalidate them. This reveals what we really believe.

Our theology of women and the role of women in the Church should be a prophetic witness to society. Until we recognise this and are willing to grapple with this reality, we too are complicit.

We will continue to wrestle with these issues for a long time. Conversion is a process – sometimes a long process! Maybe that is the value of women's month: it is a double-edged sword reminding us of the immense contribution that women make and how, despite this, they are not given their rightful place. It continues to be an uphill battle.



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