Voices of Sisters
Social Justice



by Sr. Dorothy Fernandes

Contributor

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(GSR graphic/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Editor's note: *More than 1.6 billion people worldwide live in substandard housing. Of those, at least 150 million have no home at all. In this special series, A Place to Call Home, Global Sisters Report is focusing on women religious helping people who are homeless or lack adequate shelter. Over the next few months, we will examine how homelessness and a lack of affordable housing affect teens and young adults,*

families, migrants, the elderly and those displaced by natural disasters and climate change in stories from Kenya, India, Vietnam, Ireland, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, the United States and elsewhere.

On the journey of life, when a child is born there's great joy and excitement. However, as the child grows, she gradually imbibes values from the ones who are very close to her. Her circle of influence increases; for most women across the globe, the adjustment process is always a great challenge. Especially if she becomes a young bride, she is constantly learning and trying to learn more from the lessons of life.

The many women with whom I have been blessed to work have given me an opportunity to enter into their world. Very early in my life, in an institutional environment teaching in a school, it was a different group of women with whom I was engaged, who embodied motherly qualities in their being. The beauty of a mother and her sensitivity to the needs of her children, her husband and last of all to herself, is really remarkable.

This characteristic is also true of women who are living on the periphery of society. The last three decades of my life have brought me very close to women who struggle day in and day out, but usually with broad smiles on their faces. One of the biggest struggles that the women in the slums are now facing is eviction — displacement with no alternative. This is a very dangerous situation because the most vulnerable become even more vulnerable, with no security whatsoever. There are many myths held by bureaucrats and the government that make them think evicting people is so easy. They believe strongly that these people have migrated to the city only recently. The bureaucrats are determined to not learn the truth — because the truth would invite them to change their mindset and act differently.

As the encroachment drive begins the people who live on the periphery are in constant fear about when their huts will be demolished. This insecurity and uncertainty looms above them and they are unable to live a regular life. There are even stories of people going hungry because they are afraid to go to work, afraid that their homes will be demolished and their few possessions stolen while they are away. I would like to share the stories of some women I know, describing their fears and apprehensions.

Rukmani Devi is a resident of Sahgaadi Masjid, about 60 years of age. She came to this site as a young girl, when her parents worked in what is now the zoo, planting saplings which have become huge trees today. In 1997 she was identified as an animator (local leader), and trained by the Patna District magistrate office to represent her people. Over the years she has become a powerful leader and has kept the community together. She has stood as a strong rock and — though uneducated — she has vast knowledge and is attentive to what is happening around her. She is an exceptional person who can address a gathering with confidence.

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The local community has planned many strategies and Rukmani is in the frontline guiding her community and saving them from the officials who come to demolish the slums. As is customary, the community even organized a special prayer ceremony, known as havan. A kind of tent is erected and the pictures of the Hindu gods are placed in the middle; a fire is kept burning for eight hours while women, men and children go around the fire chanting the name of Shri Ram. They were leaving no stone unturned, for they did not want to take chances. The next day after the havan, the entire community assembled again to oppose the bulldozer.

As the community sat watching and waiting, slowly their voices got loud and their sobs got louder. Each one was wondering what the future had in store, fearing that the relationships of many decades would be destroyed. These people have lived together as a community for decades and have grown older together, and the very thought that they will be separated disturbs them. As they shared their stories of growing up, and struggled to find meaning in life, their bonds deepened. Now a time has come when this very strong bond is in danger.

For the government and officials only look at development as the key to the future; but to people who live on the periphery — who have shared their joys and sorrows and grown up together — it makes a big difference. It seems as if they are being uprooted; their history being destroyed.

Lakshmi, another woman, comes forward and cries "Where will we go? How will we live without one another … we knew everything about each other? How will we live confined to a room or without the open space that we were used to?"

As the stories of pain poured in, it was difficult for me to hold back my tears. For they were speaking the truth, and I could sense the pain that they were going through. Alas! If only the officials could walk in the shoes of these people; if only they had a heart of flesh instead of stone.

I find it very difficult to comprehend this: How can people who come to conduct the demolition operation leave people under the open sky with only a plastic sheet to protect them from the falling dew? In the process, a 25-day-old baby girl died. It did not make a difference to anyone. Has human life become so cheap … or is it just the lives of those who belong to the low-income group?

Knocking at every door, trying to meet every official, only to be told there is "no room in the inn" … so surprising that in a democracy like ours in India even the head of state does not take responsibility. I wonder, what will happen in the future?

As I awaited the birth of Jesus last Christmas, I felt there was no place for the poor in our city, there was no room in the inn! It seems that the power of money and decision-making takes priority. Is life just about money and power? Do we really mean it when we talk about the sacredness of relationships? Why is there no one to speak and act on behalf of the poor?

[Dorothy Fernandes, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is a social activist who has been working in Patna since 1997 with communities on the periphery, with the goal of making their cities inclusive, so that no one is left behind. She also serves as the chairperson of the Women's Commission for the Archdiocese of Patna and is the advisory member of the social wing of the archdiocese – Forum for Social Initiatives.]

This story appears in the **A Place to Call Home** feature series. View the full series.