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Migration



Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, left, a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation, speaks to Chandra, a migrant woman from Telangana state who now lives in Saligao, a village in Goa. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)



by Sr. Lissy Maruthanakuzhy

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Panaji, India — July 9, 2020

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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.*

Sr. Marie Lou Barboza was shocked to see the condition of a teenage girl one of her volunteers brought to her. The girl had burn marks on her body, and her unkempt hair was cut haphazardly. She would become hysterical when someone approached her. Barboza discovered that her condition was the result of maltreatment by her employer.

"That incident compelled us to begin our work among migrants," the member of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary told Global Sisters Report earlier this year in an interview at the congregation's apartment in Porvorim, just north of

Panaji, in Goa state.

That incident was seven years ago when Barboza was working for the National Domestic Workers' Movement in the west coast Indian state, the country's tourism hub that draws thousands of laborers from other regions.



An elderly migrant woman manages a stall where she sells vegetables in Fontainhas, Panaji, capital of Goa, a western Indian state. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Barboza's congregation, a partner of the workers movement, sent two sisters to Goa in 2011 to aid domestic workers. Barboza joined them two years later after working with the movement in Mumbai, India's commercial capital, and Tamil Nadu, a southern Indian state.

After meeting the mistreated girl, Barboza began visiting parishes and homes of migrant domestic workers in Goa. She went by herself to visit the slums, as her two elderly companions could not travel.

Later, two young nuns joined Barboza to work exclusively with about 1,600 migrants, mostly tribal women of various religions from states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Odisha and Telangana. The nuns' three-bedroom apartment has become the meeting place for the migrants, who work in different parts of Goa, a small state.

While migrant women work as domestic help and serve in restaurants, shops and roadside kiosks, the men build houses and roads or work as waiters and bakers.



Migrant men repair a road in Mala, a village in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Barboza, who is 67, says many migrants refuse to join the workers movement because of threats from employers, who dislike the job demands the activists are seeking.

"We send notices to employers if they pay unjust wages," Barboza said as she took GSR to a slum of migrant workers in Saligao, 3.5 miles from the nuns' residence.

The nun said the migrants want to maintain their self-respect. "They are not pleased if we take photographs" of them and their families.

A 12-hour day for the sister

The nun's weekday routine begins at 6 a.m. when she sets out with her lunchbox to visit families in the slums to help them get food and medical aid. She returns to the convent at 6 p.m., exhausted.

"My heart goes out for the migrants. They struggle for their living. They are also forced to find new places to stay every two years," she said as we moved from one family to another. Employers keep migrants on the move, fearing that, after two years, they can claim permanent residency on their property. In addition, when new tenants come, landlords can raise the room rents.

Sunday is the busiest day for the nuns because a string of workers come with their families to chitchat with the sisters and sometimes stay for a meal. "That is our life. We have committed to serve the poor, the migrants, the domestic servants, daily laborers," Barboza explained.

Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, lower right, touches base with a migrant woman at her home after wo

Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, lower right, touches base with a migrant woman at her home after work in Saligao, a village in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Barboza got a call one night from another teenage girl, complaining about her employer trying to molest her when his wife was away to have her baby. "I called the man and asked him to bring the girl to our residence at once. He brought her and apologized for his misbehavior. He requested me to send the girl back to work for him, but I refused."

But her decision brought another problem for the sisters, whose quarters are limited. She had to find a place for the girl to stay at night. "There are times when we have to provide accommodation and food to such people."

Besides attending to such problems, the nuns visit the migrants' houses, focus on the faith formation of the Catholics among them, and create awareness about their

rights.



A cluster of tenements where migrant workers live in Saligao village in Goa (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Pushback from employers and locals

Barboza says her involvement with the migrant workers was challenging in the beginning. "It was tough to get acceptance of our mission by the employers."

Her troubles were not limited to employers alone. Even local people and government officers ridiculed her for spending time on behalf of the migrants. They warned that the migrants would bring more like them to Goa and create problems for locals.

"They told me to find locals as domestic workers and help them first. Then look after the migrants. I took the challenge and found many local domestic workers. The government officials were willing to help them, but the local maids were not enough to meet the demand," she said.

She says even their parish priest could not understand their involvement with the migrants, until she took the girl who had burn marks to him so that he could pray over her to dispel her fear.



A migrant woman selling waste papers collected from shops stops to converse with another woman in the city center of Panaji, in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

"The priest recognized the necessity of our work. Since then he and other priests have been very cooperative," Barboza explained.

One of her hurdles was to get "ration cards" for migrant workers. The cards enable people to procure subsidized food grains, oil and other domestic provisions from the government's public distribution system.

The nun helped both the local people and the migrants to acquire ration cards.

Barboza says they also have to handle arrest criminal cases involving migrants. A few of them were jailed for robberies. "We had two such cases. The police called us to bail them out with our identity card of the National Domestic Workers' Movement."

Because some migrants have resorted to theft, she says, the sisters require them to show proper documents when they come seeking help.

The nuns also have assisted the migrants with burying their dead.

Dignity and days off

Sr. Raichel Sophia Benny, who joined the Goa community three years ago, says their work with the migrant domestic workers through empowerment programs has brought results.

Benny said the domestic workers now acknowledge that their work is as good as any job and have found dignity in it. "Earlier they were ashamed to acknowledge their work," she told GSR.

She says while some full-timers live with their employers, others have to stay in rented houses.

Chandra (who goes by one name), a mother of two from Telangana, said the nuns' intervention has helped them get days off on Sundays and public holidays.

Her house in Saligao is a one-room tenement among a cluster of homes. She shares a kitchen with two other families. Her family uses one room for eating, sleeping and for the children to study. Every house has several vessels kept outside in front with water to use all day for cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and bathing.

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Some 50 families share two bathrooms and two water supply taps.

Benny wants the government to help the workers get cheap accommodations. "By the time they are 50, the migrants become sick because of heavy workloads," she said.

The employers force the workers to do all chores manually, she says, even though they have machines for washing, grinding rice and spices for cooking, and cleaning. Some women work for five families to earn enough to survive, the nun explains.

Several of the workers acknowledge the sisters for their assistance.

"The sisters have helped us understand about the social securities and privileges available to people like us. They help us to fill out the necessary forms to apply for the necessary documents," said Kiren Kerketta, a woman from Jharkhand in eastern India who is a domestic worker at Calangute, a popular beach area on the Arabian Sea coast lined with bars and restaurants.



Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, right, a member of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Panaji, capital of the western Indian state of Goa, assists migrant workers in the tourist region to acclimate. From left are Immaculate Heart Srs. Raichel Sophia Benny and Sr. Sushmita Barla. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Kerketta was excited to say that her only son has entered the Society of Pilar, a Goa-based congregation, to become a priest. "I am very happy God has chosen him. And I feel privileged to give my only son for God's work," she told GSR.

She said the nuns have taught her to save from her meager income so that the family can contribute some money for the son's priestly formation.

The nuns also organize Mass and retreats for migrants to help them spiritually, and encourage the tribal people to hold their annual harvest festival Karam. "It is an occasion for them to share about themselves and their concerns," Barboza said.

Giving back

Barboza also gets help from the migrants to fulfill her mission.

Pancretia Toppo from Chhattisgarh, who lives in Calangute, was the first leader Barboza appointed to manage and inspire a migrant group. "I contacted our people, visiting their houses for 13 years," said Toppo, who came to Goa some 20 years ago.

She works in Miramar about 8 miles south of Calangute. "I have to change buses and board a ferry to reach the workplace," she said.

Toppo says their Sunday gatherings at the church after Eucharist help them support each other and share information about job opportunities.



Janvi Toppo, a migrant woman, serves evening customers at her fast food kiosk in Panaji in the west coast state of Goa, India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

"We live far away from our dear ones, but the sisters boost our morale," the mother of two teenage daughters said. Her employer, a German, has helped educate her children.

Barboza says the migrants come to them when they face difficulties in the workplace or at home. "We spend time with them. Sometimes they come hungry and we provide them meals from what we have."

Fr. Maverick Fernandes, director of Caritas Goa, the archdiocesan social service wing, hails the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters for organizing the local and migrant domestic workers so well.

"Their gatherings help them to network with each other amongst themselves. They are able to voice out issues that crop up at the workplace. Celebration of festivals enables them to maintain their sociocultural traditions. Thus they do not feel

alienated from their tribes," the priest told GSR.

Barboza says they forget their personal tensions and difficulties when they reach out to the migrants.

"Only with faith in the Lord who has called us can we go forward," she said as she hurried to the bus stand, clutching her lunch bag to go home after the day's work.

Editor's note: *This story was reported before the COVID-19 lockdown in India, and an estimated three-fourths of migrant workers in Goa have left the state. Since the government's loosening of the lockdown three weeks ago, the sisters have been checking in on the remaining migrant workers, urging them to develop new small-scale trades, such as selling fish, footwear or homemade items on the roadside. Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, the sister featured in the story as a lead advocate for the migrants, says they are working with the labor commission to help in this transition, and that the workers are receiving food kits from local sources and are "living rather comfortably.*"

[Lissy Maruthanakuzhy is a member of the worldwide Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul in India and a correspondent for Matters India, a news portal that focuses on religious and social issues.]

This story appears in the **A Place to Call Home** and **Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth** feature series.