News



Members of the Global Research Network pose for a group photo March 31, 2025 in Mexico City, where they gathered to talk about women religious and data collection. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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They rattle off words like "mapping," "modules" and "longitudinal studies," vocabulary more common in the life of a data cruncher than of a Catholic sister.

But some like Sr. Brenda Hernández, of the Mexico-based Daughters of Mary Immaculate of Guadalupe, say the world of research and data collection has much to do with the life of sisters. It can tell the story of women religious, improve their lives and that of others in their midst, she said.

"It gives you a new vision" when you ask a question, get an answer, analyze it and make a decision, whether it be about health, finances or education, Hernández told Global Sisters Report March 31.

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Along with other sisters and their collaborators, Hernández participated in the Global Research Network gathering in Mexico City March 26-April 1. The convening, the second of its kind sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (which also funds GSR), looks to promote research centers where sisters can participate in data collection. Many have used it to measure the health and well-being of their members as well as the efficiency of their ministries, but now they're seeking to apply methods they've learned to answer other questions important to women in consecrated life.

So far, clusters or centers that form the international network have emerged in Mexico, India and Kenya, and receive instruction from a notable research center on the Catholic Church in the U.S. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, also known as CARA, which ran the Mexico City gathering as well as a previous one in Nairobi in 2023, has been a major component in forming the network.

"When the idea of beginning to initiate other research centers began six, seven years ago … the key piece was 'we need the research, the data,' because it's a way to give voice to the sisters in their ministry," said CARA executive director, Jesuit Fr. Thomas Gaunt, in his March 27 homily inaugurating the gathering. "The sisters need to ask the questions, the sisters need to collect the data, and then the sisters need to tell the world … what it means."



Sr. Brenda Hernandez, of the Daughters of Immaculate Mary of Guadalupe, poses for a photo March 31, 2025 after a meeting of the Global Research Network in Mexico City. Hernandez has a passion for data collection, which has helped women religious in Mexico provide help for older or sick members. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Before the network came into being, CARA had trained sisters in research methods through a scholar's program at its Washington offices. After training, one of the first group of sisters, from Kenya, founded its own Centre for Research in Religious Life and Apostolate (CERRA-Africa); another center, the Office of Development and Holistic Health for Women Religious in Mexico, also formed and is focused on sisters' health as well as mapping female consecrated life in the country. The center started as a collaboration between Hernández and Fr. Luis Fernando Falcó, of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, who introduced the sister to data collection.

"At first, it was a little difficult, but then you start seeing the numbers, information, you get a better perspective of what's happening and you can be more strategic when it comes to problem-solving, based on information," Hernández said.

Though India doesn't have a formal research center, women religious like Sr. Mini Joseph, a nurse and member of the Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph, participated in a study that identified burnout in Catholic sisters who serve as doctors among the poor. Sisters there, through the Conference of Religious Women India, also collected

data on the needs of elderly sisters. The conference is now addressing both needs.

The three groups, along with CARA, regularly meet via teleconference and have started conversations about collaborating on common questions across the distance and displaying their findings on a common website. The recent gathering also included a sister representing Haiti as well as of the Latin American Conference of Religious, known as CLAR, the largest group of women and men religious in Latin America and the Caribbean, where data collection is a nascent effort.



Women religious from different parts of the world gather for Mass at Proyecto Cruces March 27, 2025 prior to the start of a four-day Global Research Network gathering in

Mexico City. Some of the sisters have become adept researchers and shared how data collection has benefited knowledge about their communities as well as the general knowledge of women religious. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"I feel challenged to share what I have experienced," said Servant of the Sacred Heart Sr. Inés Greslebin, CLAR's third vice president. "Strategy is important for decisions, as we are in a critical moment, a time of change. We need research to make decisions."

Sisters looked at and showed countless pie graphs, pictographs, bar charts, even a whimsical illustration of nuns in habits, to talk about the realities their communities face. They were told to dream about what data could tell them.

Some like Sr. Candida Mukundi, of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi, told GSR March 31 she thought about how data collection could look at the talents or interests of members of a community, their education and match them to a congregation's charisms. It could make for more effective ministries, said Mukundi, who serves as director of CERRA-Africa.

Others wondered what surveys could tell them about vocations, how data could be used to organize a chapter, whether it can be used to measure synodality, or how well congregations are carrying out their option for the poor, as well as using it to tell the story of why sisters are diminishing in some parts of the world and flourishing in others.

Sisters naturally collect information even if they don't realize it, said Sr. Mary Simiyu, of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus and research coordinator at CERRA-Africa. Simiyu, who has a doctorate in physics from the University of Nairobi, said getting more sisters involved is a matter of explaining methods and giving instruction to those who show an aptitude and interest.

Mukundi told GSR that data collection is crucial for sisters on a number of levels because it helps them make a variety of decisions, big and small, based on facts, not on estimates or opinions that sometimes have led others astray.

"When this is not done, sometimes we make decisions, and the projects we are doing come to fail after a few years and we start wondering, 'what did we not do?' Data would help avoid that," she told GSR. "It also plays an important part in

documentation. It is important to document our histories, our charism for the generations that come."

It also comes in handy when asking for funding from organizations looking for responsible partners, she said.

"Record keeping can keep us away from trouble. We need to audit, be compliant ... we need to learn to do that," she said. "Demographics also helps us and mapping helps us know where the sisters are so that we do not start projects in one place where [similar work is taking place]."



Sr. Candida Mukundi, of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi, talks about her work as director of Kenya's Centre for Research in Religious Life and Apostolate during a March 28, 2025 meeting of the Global Research Network in Mexico City. Around the world, sisters like Mukundi are using data to help their community, members of their congregations and to collect information on vocations. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Eundria Hill-Joseph, Hilton Foundation's learning and evaluation officer, said that her organization's interest in funding research is "to know what works" when helping sisters.

"We also want research and evaluation, to know what does not work," she told those attending March 28.

Research conducted by sisters and others at the centers has helped women religious procure information about young people looking for opportunities, livelihoods or careers, family life, health care, as well as infrastructure, Hill-Joseph said. But there's also a need for information on the sisters themselves and their needs, she added.

Gaunt, in his homily, said the task at hand for the convening was to "listen to the Lord's voice," including in research.

"For us in our gathering .. .our interest or priority is: what is the experience of the sisters and the people they serve, and how is their voice brought forth in our church?" he said. "And so, for us, as the researchers … our duty, our responsibility, is to listen, to listen and to bring that voice forth, to share with the church, to inspire the church, to lead the church in living our life as Christians and living out the Gospel message."