

How nuns changed the workforce

Article (Accepted Version)

Derounian, Flora (2017) How nuns changed the workforce. BBC Capital.

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/88322/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

“Nuns’ labour and how it exemplifies the way society undervalues women’s work

‘The Prioress of my needlework school called me and said, “listen, I must return to Rome because my mandate is over. If you’re thinking about taking vows—”. I had never breathed a word about wanting to take vows, but hearing those words, I exclaimed, “what??”. “To become a nun”, she said. From that moment, I exploded, and since then no one has held me back.”

So runs the story of one of the Italian nuns I interviewed earlier in 2017, as part of a wider investigation into the unsung contributions of women workers, and why they have been historically undervalued. In a month where we discovered that only a third of the BBC’s top earners are female, it is clear that we have an issue when it comes to valuing women’s work. My research took me to Rome, the ‘panting heart of Catholicism’, to the mother houses of three convents, to talk to nuns about their work from 1939 to today, and to assess how they understand themselves as professionals.

The oldest female profession

To take become a nun is arguably one of the longest-standing career choices for women, yet we rarely hear about the emancipatory potential of entering holy orders. In 2010 there were 577,532 nuns worldwide. In the period following WW2, nuns accounted for 23.4% of the unmarried female population of Italy. Yet, the number of nuns to be beatified is approximately 10% of all saints. Nuns are still excluded from the most venerated (and remunerated) echelons of the Catholic Church, and are classed in the Italian census in a different category to vicars, priests, and bishops.

The Era of the Housewife

‘As a diplomatic courier, I have been to all of the countries in the world, except one’. Working for the Vatican, this sister was responsible for carrying secret messages between embassies. She was also fluent in five languages, had been director of an international school in Pakistan, and – she noted proudly – was a champion high-jumper in her youth. Other interviewees had founded communities in rural Burundi, housed victims of civil war, and set up pharmacies in the Pakistani desert. Many others I spoke with had taught in schools, cared for the elderly, worked in shelters for drug addicts, or given communion to the dying. The testimonies I collected shared many

commonalities, the most striking of which is the contrast to most other women living in the epoch between 1947 and 1965, which historian Perry Wilson called 'the era of the housewife'.

Wives and mothers, brides of Christ, apostles

20th century Catholicism was torn between traditionalism and progress, and envisaged three ideal models for women: wives and mothers, brides of Christ, or apostles. So how do nuns reconcile these models with their roles as professionals? Catholicism saw the world of work as fraught with dangers for women, and it could only reconcile female professionals with the notion of them entering professions in a wider spirit of apostolic charity and sacrifice. However, the Church recognised increasing social pressure to valorise women, exemplified by Cardinal Suenen's pithy comment that 'they do after all appear to constitute almost 50% of humanity'. Suenens was among those to champion nuns' work, arguing in *The Nun in The World* (1963) that 'yeast is not placed behind the dough it is to leaven, but right in it'.

'Everything we do is written in heaven'

The conflicting messages which nuns received about the value of their work can be seen in how they describe their professions. One nun remarked 'they are natural skills that come out. I'm not highly educated, or have had goodness knows what kind of career. It's just that each person has these skills inside'. Such a comment exemplifies how nuns' professional skills are attributed to internal predisposition.

Emotional Work

There is a tendency amongst female workers to express their work through a nexus of family ties, emotion, and service. Crying, one woman told me why she chose her career, saying 'I thought, "if mother can see me from up there in heaven, I must be a nun, I must become a nun". And so I worked hard'. Nuns' professional competence is ascribed to managing emotions, whether this be to squash or to conjure feelings. Emotional labour is defined as the requirement to display organizationally desired emotions, and is typically expected in 'female' professions like care and education. It is also a requirement of religious professionals; see the bible's entreaty to 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience' (Colossians 3:12). Nuns repeatedly affirmed the need for emotional work in their roles, in statements such as 'you need

compassion. [...] Compassion, compassion. You need a lot of love'. As well as mustering emotion, nuns recounted having to master it. 'If I didn't like something, I said nothing. You have to adapt to many things. Otherwise you would never succeed'.

Women Don't Ask

[A July article for The Conversation](#) asserted that 'the real issue behind gender pay gaps is that women too readily accept low pay offers'. Although a very particular example of female labour, nuns may exemplify the valuable, yet undervalued, work that women perform, and why they do not value themselves in the same way as their male counterparts. Encouraged by popular and religious discourse, women continue to see many of the skills they utilise as part of their gender and spiritual makeup, and may hesitate to lay them on the table as collateral for promotion or negotiation.