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How the role of nuns highlights a low view of women’s work

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The prioress of my needlework school called me and said, ‘listen, I must return to Rome … but if you’re thinking about taking vows —’. I had never breathed a word about wanting to take vows, but hearing those words, it was as though something exploded inside of me. Since I became a nun no one has held me back.

So runs the story of one of the Italian nuns I interviewed earlier this year, as part of a wider investigation into the unsung contributions of women workers, and why they have been historically undervalued. My research took me to Rome, the “panting heart of Catholicism”, to the headquarters of three convents, to talk to nuns about their work from 1939 to today, and to assess how they understand themselves as professionals.

Becoming a nun is not often associated with women’s emancipation. But it did offer an interesting career option for women. Working for the Vatican, one sister I spoke to was responsible for carrying secret messages between embassies:

As a diplomatic courier, I have been to all of the countries in the world, except one.

She was fluent in five languages, had been director of an international school in Pakistan, and – she proudly told me – was a champion high jumper in her youth.

But catholicism in the 20th century saw the world of work as fraught with dangers for women, and could only reconcile female professionals with the notion of them entering professions in a wider spirit of religious charity and sacrifice. Nonetheless, many nuns in this time showed themselves to be incredibly capable and industrious.

Other interviewees had founded communities in rural Burundi, housed victims of civil war, and set up pharmacies in the Pakistani desert. Many others had taught in schools, cared for the elderly, worked with drug addicts, or given communion and comfort to the dying.

The testimonies I collected shared many commonalities, the most striking of which is the contrast to the existences of most other women living in the epoch between 1947 and 1965, otherwise known as “the era of the housewife”.

Rarely in the limelight

Revelations of women being paid less than men for doing the same job make it clear that society has a serious issue when it comes to valuing women’s work. Nuns offer a unique insight into how work is divided between the sexes and rewarded accordingly.

To become a nun is one of the oldest career choices for women. In the period following World War II, nuns accounted for 23.4% of the unmarried female population in Italy and in 2010 there
were more than 700,000 sisters worldwide. Rarely in the limelight, nuns have played an important role across the globe, particularly when it comes to service, education, and care work.

This is in relative contrast to their male counterparts in the Catholic Church. There are far fewer monks worldwide, and they are more likely to be focused on contemplation, cutting themselves off from the world. Yet, the number of nuns to be beatified is about 10% of the total – mostly Male – 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 – all positions currently barred to women in the church hierarchy.

Saintly but rarely beatified. shutterstock.com

**Always putting others first**

Everything we do is written in heaven.

Nonetheless, as with many women, nuns’ valuable work has long been overlooked and its importance ignored. This was clear in the way that the women I interviewed spoke about their contributions to society. Instead of recognising the skilled nature of their work and expertise involved, they would emphasise their lack of formal education and an innate propensity as a woman to serve. One nun remarked, “you have 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”.

Similarly, the professional character of nuns’ labour has long been downplayed through the emphasis that is placed on its emotional nature. Nuns must be experts in managing their emotions – whether this be in squashing or conjuring feelings. For example when caring for the poor and the sick, always putting others first.

This requirement to display emotions that suit their organisation’s needs is common among other professions that are dominated by women, such as care and education. We see this in the UK with the government’s current 1% cap on increases to nurses wages, a significantly female-dominated profession. Though, of course, for nuns, emotional labour is also a religious requirement. The Bible entreats Christians to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”.

Nuns provide a unique example of female labour. They exemplify the often extraordinary, but undervalued, work that women perform. Encouraged by popular and religious discourse, women continue to see many of their skills as part of their gender and spiritual makeup. This may explain why society, religious institutions, and nuns themselves do not value their work in the same way as their male counterparts. More widely, undervaluing women’s work may lead them to hesitate to lay their skills and hard work on the table as collateral for promotion or negotiation.