

Women's Spirituality in the Workplace: Diocesan Focus Groups (Part 3)

In 2002 the Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and in the Church invited dioceses to hold focus groups with women who work outside the home. The Committee wanted to find out how women describe the relationship between their faith and their work. Seventeen dioceses participated in the first round of focus groups, held in late 2002 and early 2003.

Based on feedback from these focus groups, the Committee identified several issues that it wanted to explore in more depth. In Part 2 of the project, the Committee invited dioceses to sponsor additional focus groups around these selected issues. The Committee prepared a second template with suggested questions. A total of 14 arch/dioceses conducted Part 2 focus groups, **including St. Paul and Minneapolis, Cleveland, Gary, St. Augustine, Philadelphia, Rapid City, Lexington, Buffalo, New Ulm, New Orleans, Newark, Grand Rapids, Galveston-Houston, and San Angelo.** These focus groups involved 78+ women (one diocese did not report the number of participants).

Summary of Major Themes in the Focus Group, Part 2

1. Women take advantage of opportunities to witness to their faith in the workplace. Negative experiences—gossip, office politics, unethical practices—can become occasions for witnessing to their beliefs.
2. Most women believe that work has an overall positive impact on their marriage and family life. The major negative effect is a lack of time for personal relationships.
3. Women identify relationships, and issues associated with relationships (cooperation, mutual support, communication) as gender-specific in the workplace. Men place less emphasis on workplace relationships.
4. Women who work outside the home want church leaders to understand the realities of their everyday lives. In particular, a lack of time limits their ability to volunteer for church activities and ministries.

Summary of Responses from Diocesan Focus Groups, Part 2

(Direct quotations from participants are in italics)

1. Experiences in the Workplace

How is your personal identity affected by your experiences in the workplace? How do you respond to negative experiences in the workplace?

Workplace experiences can affect personal identity (*I am definitely a better person for the work I do*) This is especially true for women who believe that they are making a positive contribution to society, for example, by advocating for children or immigrants. Working can contribute to a woman's fulfillment and self-esteem.

Workplace issues such as office politics bother women, but do not affect the "core" of who they are. Some fear that their personal identity is too closely tied to work. They try not to define themselves by the job. One woman spoke of two identities: the woman at work and the woman/mother at home. A couple of women expressed concern about becoming cynical because of negative workplace experiences.

Work and spirituality can positively affect each other. (*My spirituality has had a positive effect on my work. When people know that you are or try to be a good person they don't involve you in gossip. They respect you. It draws people to you so you are witnessing to them.*) Some say that their spirituality leads them to call people to accountability or to challenge certain behaviors. Others try to witness more through their actions than words. Some have the opportunity to share faith with colleagues of different religions. They appreciate this opportunity to learn from others.

Negative experiences range from gossip to dealing with a co-worker who was guilty of embezzlement. Many women see negative experiences as an opportunity to grow in their faith. They can prompt people to share with others who hold similar beliefs. Some complained that their jobs are tedious or allow little room for creativity; this adversely affects their spirituality.

Some women have experienced discrimination because they are Catholics. One woman pointed out that Catholics and Catholic practices are sometimes misunderstood. Ethical issues surfaced. One woman worked in a woman's clinic that required employees to tell pregnant women about all their options, including abortion. (*I couldn't do that. I didn't feel it was an option.*)

2. Family/Personal Life

What effect does your work have on your marriage and family life and on other relationships that are important to you?

Women identify both positive and negative effects. Positively, they bring fresh ideas from the workplace into their homes. The workplace provides stimulation and affirmation, which has a positive effect on family life. Some noted that getting out into the "real world" makes them a better wife and mother. They contribute to the family's income and provide a financial safety net.

Negatively, work reduces the time available for family life (*I take away from family life to get work done.*) Compromises are necessary, which leads to tension. Work-related concerns carry over to home, while family conflicts can affect work performance.

Most women see their husbands as generally supportive of their work. The extra income eases the burden on the husband as breadwinner. Some pointed out that husbands help out more with children and household tasks; others, however, resent that their husbands do not do more or fail to recognize their needs.

Women struggle to balance work and their children's needs, especially when the children are younger. One woman spoke of being a positive role model for her children, who are now grown. Another woman, who took time off from working to be with her family, sensed a loss of identity.

Women speak of being tired and having too much to do. This limits the attention that they can give to relationships. One woman laments that she rarely has time to visit her grandmother. Another, however, admits that she can make the time she wants to visit sick relatives.

3. Gender-Specific

What experiences in the workplace do you think are specific to women?

Many women noted that relationships in the workplace are important to women. They find co-workers with whom they can gather to talk. Women tend to be more supportive of each other. They are less competitive than men. Women bring a more human face to the workplace and exhibit more empathy and compassion than men, who tend to be more matter of fact. Women find it harder to work with people whom they do not like or respect.

Several women noted discrimination against women: lesser pay, the glass ceiling, role stereotyping (*When I travel with my male assistant, customers presume that he is the one in charge.*) Sexual harassment, overt and covert, is a problem. Some women need flexible or part-time hours, which are not usually available; others need accommodations for breastfeeding. Several women observed that women do the work for social events while men "just show up." Women are still expected to make the coffee and clean up.

Some women noted a widespread impression that the husband's job is more important than the wife's. For example, one woman received calls at work from her children's teachers, but her husband was never called.

What spiritual insights arise out of women's specific experiences at work?

The participants offered several insights. Some believe that women try to create a cooperative workplace. They pointed out, however, that the workplace is often designed for profit, not compassion. It does not accommodate spiritual concerns. This can be difficult for women, who bring spirituality to their work because it is part of them.

Many women see themselves as more sensitive and intuitive than men. They "see more than men," especially in non-verbal communication. In general, women communicate more and ask more questions.

Women in general try to make the world a better place. Men do not usually think in those terms.

Are there unique ways in which women deal with the relationship between faith and work?

The interrelationship between faith and work emerged strongly. Women insisted that they cannot separate the two. They find ways to fit faith in, for example, by praying before work or posting inspirational messages in the work area. Since women are more verbal, they tend to talk about issues, including spirituality. Many speak of sharing faith with their co-workers. Some coordinate with colleagues to accommodate each other's religious holidays.

Have you found images, saints or role models to help you in your spiritual life?

Women mentioned most often: favorite saints, both female and male; mothers, grandmothers, and other older women in their family and community; Mary; and Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

4. Support from the Church

How can the church support you as you manage work, family and other responsibilities? How can the church help you to become a more effective witness in the workplace?

Women want the church to acknowledge their time constraints. Some parish activities take place at times that are impossible for women who work outside the home (e.g., daytime bible study). Some believe that parishes and parish schools expect too much from women, especially those with younger children. After working all day, mothers do

not want to come out at night or on weekends for church ministries.

Many said they would like to learn more about their faith. They suggested religious education tools and retreats and workshops for women. Others want practical services: day care, after school care, workshops to help people deal with aging parents.

Some pointed out that the sex abuse scandals make it more difficult for them to counter negative comments at work. They want the church to be open about abuse issues. The church also needs to be a more effective witness (*The church is probably close to being the last community to fully accept women from the top down.*) Women want to have a voice and to be taken seriously in the church. They want the church to acknowledge their gifts.

What would you like church leaders to know about women's experiences in the workplace in order to help them in their pastoral responsibilities?

Women want church leaders to know about the realities of their lives (*Some leaders should spend a day with a typical working mom, single mother, or caregiver to see the stresses of women's jobs (often two or three) and workplace harassment.*) Women who are wives and mothers rarely get a day off. Moreover, some women already feel guilty about working and they do not the burden of additional guilt (*I need to hear that I'm okay even if I can't participate in what's going on at church.*)

More women are the principal breadwinners and most women work in order to provide the basics of life. Women need affirmation (*Change the perception that a working woman is less of a mother and that her family suffers because she works.*)