

# CONVERSATIONS . . .

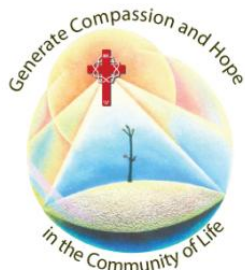
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...with Mrs. Justine Claire Annick Laïson

*“Women are a source of life, but they are also the victims or the witnesses of all forms of violence. . . . thanks to their ‘compassion,’ women develop together, through love and solidarity, strategies to find a way out of suffering according to their social status and their political, spiritual and legal environment.”*





Franciscan Sisters of the Poor  
2008 General Chapter Direction Statement

our Sisters and Associates serve: the U.S., Italy, Brazil, Senegal and the Philippines. These interviews have been diverse in exploring the deeper meaning of our General Chapter direction: “Generate compassion and hope in the community of life.”

We are privileged to speak with Justine Claire Annick Laïson from Senegal, Executive Secretary of the National Coalition of the Associations and NGO for the Defense of Children, about “The Role of Women as a Presence of Compassion in Senegalese Culture.” Mrs. Laïson is also the Director of the Gender and Citizenship Department of the Cultural Association for Education and Social Promotion (ACAPES). She is responsible for the research and compilation of a document with other specialists on ways to stop the abuse of children. Mrs. Laïson is married and has two children. She has an MA in Human Geography, the study of the world, its people, communities and cultures. Mrs. Laïson also has an extensive background in sociology.

Our Congregation has its roots in caring for abused women and Mrs. Laïson comments on the sociological dimensions of this violence in Senegalese culture. She identifies some causes and outlines the positive steps being taken to eliminate violence against women.

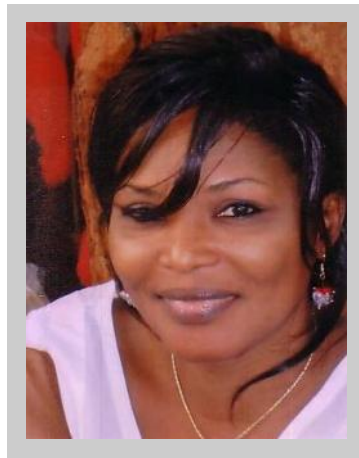
We hope that you visit our website frequently and we invite you to join us in our mission to generate compassion and hope in the community of life!

**Sister Tiziana Merletti, sfp**  
**Congregational Minister**  
**and Council**

*“I felt a holy flame of glowing love for my neighbor . . . ”*  
*[Blessed Frances Schervier, Foundress, Franciscan Sisters of the Poor]*

### **Peace and all good to you!**

With this issue we conclude our publication of Conversations. We have previously published ten contributions from theologians and experts in all the countries where



Justine Laïson

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN AS A PRESENCE OF COMPASSION IN SENEGALESE CULTURE

What is the meaning of compassion for you -- and how can both women and men become a more visible compassionate presence in the Senegalese culture?



In Senegal, the notion of compassion can be translated with the word “YEUREMENDE,” meaning to have mercy to the point of feeling concerned and being affected by the other’s suffering, obliging us to react on and at the side of the victim.

*To be compassionate means to suffer with, to carry the pain of the other.* To share the pain of the other person is the beginning of a way out of a particular situation. Without annihilating the suffering, we can alleviate it by our presence and search together for lasting solutions.

Compassion also means that we accept carrying this suffering and acting with people who are in a situation of existential anguish or pain, finding solutions together in order to find a way out. The direction is to advance toward social integration, self-esteem, and restoration of dignity. Jesus Christ showed us this. Through his life and journey with his apostles, he shared the sufferings of all people up to his redeeming death on the cross.

**How do you see the role of women as a compassionate presence in Senegalese Culture? Can you give some examples?**

*Women are a source of life, but they are also the victims or the witnesses of all forms of violence.* To speak about their role as a presence of “compassion” in the Senegalese culture implies talking, at a sociological and at a spiritual level, about their socialization through an effective values system which governs all relations and behaviors.

In several African countries, and particularly in Senegal, violence against women is caused by inequitable relations between men and women, originating from a social system based on patriarchy. This system allows men to exercise their domination and control on the life of the wife, creating and perpetuating prejudices and dangerous social stereotypes towards women. This kind of environment keeps women in a situation of permanent domination.

*The weight of customs and the negative interpretation of their religions entail their marginalization, relegating women to a subordinate condition.* In this system, a

woman's primary role is to take care of the house and to assure, perpetuate and maintain the domestic, communal, environmental and even social equilibrium.

This situation is the source of inequity and disparity between women and men, and is often the cause of women's suffering. They usually live in dramatic situations that are precarious or dependent because of the institutionalization of these kinds of relations. This reality brings them to be immersed in compassion.

*Next to this patriarchal system, there exists in traditional Senegalese society a matrilineal society where some women are accepted as healers, instructors or priestesses.* These women leaders can be found in some communities (Diola, Lébou or Sérère) where there is a tradition of women who heal, listen, sustain and help the victims without judging them in order to integrate them into active life. And this makes of them a presence of "compassion."



*Though in the political history of Senegal there are some women who have been heroines, leaders, healers and priestesses, many other women are confined by pre-*

*established roles and responsibilities to a secondary function in their society where they are considered and where they feel inferior to the men, to whom they owe obedience and submissiveness.*



For example, concerning education, girls' schooling (even if it is important for their future) is not considered required since they are called by the bonds of marriage to leave their family and to take care of their new house. This tradition often exposes them to all sorts of risks and threats which affect their life, their well-being, lessening their will to advance. They find themselves in a condition which excludes them from all spheres of decision making.

*Women comprise more than 52% of the Senegalese population; most of this majority are illiterate.* Many women see their rights flouted because of their body type or their political, socioeconomic and cultural realities. They seem predestined to this suffering



in a society that does not care much about them.

Every day, women and girls (less than 18 years old) are victims of various forms of abuse or violence. Murders, denial of their rights, political and social discrimination, sexual exploitation, rape, child molestation, verbal or psychological violence, are the harsh facts that give rhythm to their daily life. And what is worse is that these horrible experiences are considered 'ordinary news' since they are continuously dealt with by court audiences and social mediation sessions.

Moments of pain are lived by women and young girls (less than 18 years old) in distress

who are given in marriage too early and assaulted until death. These are the victims of the weight of the tradition or a negative interpretation of religion. They are abused women or young girls who endure in silence the consequences of dangerous traditional practices; women who are affected by fistulas\* and who suffer anguish in isolation; women living with HIV without knowing how they have been infected, etc. The Soutoura (cultural sense of dignity, discretion, privacy) can prevent us from acting.

And yet some legal and institutional dispositions exist. The Senegalese Criminal Code forbids and punishes such practices like: child marriage, rape, sexual abuse, begging etc. The causes of these situations are varied: socio-cultural burden, prejudices and stereotypes, some traditional practices, educational disparity, social pressure; poverty, which brings about their economic dependence; ignorance, illiteracy, recurrent conflicts and impunity; the victim's own silence; the interpretation of religion; lack and inadequacy of welcome centers; the power of the man and his desire to control women; conflicts, migrations etc.

***The role of the woman as a presence of “compassion” comes from their lives as victims or witnesses or simply by their experience as advocates of human rights and women's rights.***

This situation makes them sensitive to the pain of the other. And through the difference with the person who is suffering, ***thanks to their “compassion,” women develop together, through love and solidarity, strategies to find a way out of***

*\*Fistula: without medical care, a condition which can develop after severe failed childbirth.*

*suffering according to their social status and their political, spiritual and legal environment. Their function is particular and it is based on sharing, listening and giving advice, and they are deeply engaged in projects and in actions of sensitization and of support.*

For example, women are primarily engaged in programs devoted to:

- education and health;
- stopping violence against women;
- legal or psychological aid;
- welcome centers;
- listening and counseling;
- creating occasions or platforms for exchange;
- strengthening abilities and talents;
- economic self-financing through microcredit projects.

These projects are implemented by women's organizations, civil society or religious communities in order to create the conditions for their own financial autonomy, allowing them to escape their isolation and finding ways for returning to active life.

There is a demonstration of an acting solidarity and a supporting help and a personal and compassionate presence offering all the needed follow up at a psychological, spiritual and social level.

**How do you see the presence and role of women religious in creating vital, compassionate communities locally and globally?**

Every religious community has its unique orientation and chooses certain areas of intervention (reconciliation, victim follow up, prevention through education / formation, listening and advice).

**How can women religious continue to grow as both agents of action and compassion in eliminating violence against women?**

**Here are some positive actions taken by women religious:**

- **creation of credit funds for women who live in a situation of poverty;**
- **initiation of actions of rehabilitation and self-esteem which allow women who are victims of abuse or other forms of mistreatment to become active participants in development;**
- **construction of welcoming and orientation centers for women who are victims;**
- **holistic follow up of victims with the whole spectrum of aid services (legal help, mediation, psychological and economic support, social integration and self-esteem).**

**Women religious fulfill a role of assistance to suffering women; they assist without judging so that women can overcome isolation and environmental hostility.**

In addition to the work of rehabilitation, education, formation, social mediation and follow up, women religious can build partnerships with organizations that defend women's rights and also join civil society in some movements. **As agents, they can help the victims and, at the same time, give them a sense of responsibility so that they can evolve toward positive change.**



Women religious could also make visible their activities by collaborating with professionals, such as, physicians and lawyers. The victims could organize themselves in a network to share their experiences and to fight against violence.

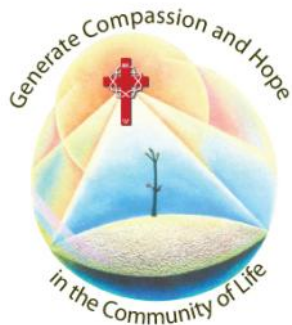
**Here are some questions to ponder . . .**

**After reflecting on Justine Laïson’s interview, do you experience it as supporting our Chapter Direction: “To Generate Compassion and Hope in the Community of Life?” If so, how?**

According to Laïson, “. . . .Women religious fulfill a role of assistance to suffering women; they assist without judging so that women can overcome isolation and environmental hostility.” Do you see signs of this in your culture – in your ministry?

Laison also says that, “. . . thanks to their ‘compassion,’ women develop together, through love and solidarity, strategies to find a way out of suffering according to their social status and their political, spiritual and legal environment.” Is this your experience? If so, can you say something about this reality in your life?

**What can I/we do in my particular culture individually and communally to support women and help facilitate changes in attitude and behavior toward women? Can you give an example/s?**



“Listening to Earth’s Heart”

“Compassion”

“Pieta-Lament”

Artist: Mary Southard, CSJ

[www.MarySouthardArt.Org](http://www.MarySouthardArt.Org)

Courtesy of [www.Ministryofhearts.org](http://www.Ministryofhearts.org)

Congregation of St. Joseph

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