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This year, at the 70th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women CSW (CSW70), I had the privilege of participating as a speaker in two important parallel events. These engagements provided an opportunity not only to share grassroots experiences, but also to contribute to the global dialogue on dignity, justice, and equality for women and girls.

One of the sessions, "Water, Our Most Essential Resource," was hosted by the Commonwealth Union at the Commonwealth Secretariat in New York on March 11, 2026 and organised by Soroptimist International (SI). The event brought together global voices, lived experiences, and actionable solutions, underscoring that access to clean water is not only a basic human need, but a fundamental human right and deeply connected to dignity, education, and equality.



The session opened with a warm and engaging welcome by Pascale Muylaert, Soroptimist representative to the UN in Geneva who set the tone by reminding us that water lies at the heart of human development. What followed were compelling case studies demonstrating how local action can drive global change.

I had the opportunity to present "Dignity in Every Drop: Water, Hygiene and Girls' Right to Learn in Raigad District, Maharashtra." This case study highlighted the critical intersection of water, sanitation, and education, showing how access to safe water and hygiene facilities directly impacts girls'

Water, Dignity, and Justice: Reflections from CSW70

DR DAPHNE PILLAI

school attendance, confidence, and future opportunities. The discussion that followed reflected both concern and commitment, reinforcing the urgent need for sustained investment in water and sanitation infrastructure in schools.

The conversation then widened to a global lens with "Living on the Edge: Climate Refugees," presented by Dr Donnell Davies. This session highlighted the growing reality of displacement driven by climate change, where water scarcity and environmental degradation are forcing communities to migrate, and reminding us

that water is increasingly an issue of survival and global stability.

A particularly inspiring moment was the introduction of a global network of women water champions—leaders working at both grassroots and

policy levels to advocate for sustainable solutions. Their work is a testament to the transformative power of women's leadership and collaboration.

As I reflect on CSW70, one message resonates deeply: whether through access to clean water or the pursuit of justice, the dignity

of every woman and girl must remain at the centre of our efforts. These are not separate issues, but they are interconnected realities that define the quality of life and the possibilities for millions around the world.

For those of us engaged in faith-based and community work, this call is especially meaningful. Ensuring access to water, education, and justice is not merely a development goal, but our moral responsibility.

In a second session, "From Silence to Justice," organised by the Taiwan Coalition Against Violence on March 12 at the Church Centre United Nations (CCUN), I reflected on the urgent need to confront gender-based violence and restore dignity to women and girls.

In the Indian context, much of this violence remains hidden and embedded in social norms, and is often dismissed as private. Yet, it is not only physical; it is structural, systemic, and deeply normalised, affecting women's freedom, voice, and sense of worth.

A central message was that education is a vital pathway from silence to justice. As noted by Berthe de Vos in relation to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), rights must be lived, not merely written.

Through initiatives such as The Power

As I reflect on CSW70, one message resonates deeply: whether through access to clean water or the pursuit of justice, the dignity of every woman and girl must remain at the centre of our efforts.

of a Second Chance by Soroptimist International of Bombay Chembur, education through literacy drives, skills development and financial empowerment enables women to reclaim dignity and break cycles of vulnerability.

For us as people of faith, this is a call to action. To stand with those whose dignity is diminished, to bring light where there is silence, and to uphold the truth that every woman is created

in the image and likeness of God. Empowerment, in this sense, is not only development, but it is justice in action.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in 1946, is the principal global inter-governmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Convened annually at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, it brings together governments, civil society

organisations, and thought leaders from across the world to evaluate progress, share experiences, and shape global standards on women's rights. ■

Dr Daphne Pillai is the Founder President of Soroptimist International Bombay-Chembur, an organisation established in 1997, that works for women's upliftment with Educate, Empower and Enable as its 3 pillars.

OUR LADY OF DOLOURS CHURCH ... (Contd from Pg. 14)

fabric of the community.

Today, the Church of Our Lady of Dolours stands not merely as a historical monument, but as a living, breathing parish—vibrant, inclusive, and deeply rooted in faith. Its journey from a humble mortuary chapel to a thriving parish church is a powerful reminder that growth is never the work of one individual alone. It is the result of countless acts of generosity—of benefactors who gave selflessly, of priests who led with vision, and of a community that came together in faith and purpose.

Today, the Church of Our Lady of

Dolours stands at another important moment in its journey—one that calls for renewal and collective responsibility. As a heritage structure, the church now requires immediate and extensive repairs. The scale of the three-phase restoration plan for such a historic building is considerable, presenting a significant challenge for the parish community.

True to its enduring spirit, the parish has once again witnessed the generosity of its people. Parishioners, both within the local community and those living overseas, have contributed towards the Repair Fund. Yet, despite these sincere

efforts, a substantial gap remains.

In keeping with the legacy of faith and benefaction that has sustained the church through generations, this moment calls for a wider coming together. It is an appeal to the faithful across the globe to stand in unity with the parish—just as many have done in the past—and to contribute in whatever way possible. The task at hand is not merely one of repair, but of preserving a cherished heritage and restoring the church to its former glory for future generations. ■

LISTENING AS AN ACT ... (Contd from Pg. 15)

move deeper, you notice the speaker's expression change to 'she gets me.'" A paired 3D Modelling session, in which participants mapped their own life stories visually, unlocked something unexpected: "Complicated thoughts become so simple and easy to understand and solve." The Presencing module invited participants into their own interior landscape. Bernadette wrote: "I find I am strong; in whatever challenges I've faced, I've come out much stronger than my earlier timid and frightened self."

Theory U's disciplines resonate deeply with the Church's own traditions: the Synodal call to listen, the Ignatian path of discernment, the

Eucharistic invitation to die to self. One participant captured the convergence simply: "The highest level of listening for me is to listen to the Voice of God in silence — and that, I understand, is listening with an Open Will."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Fr Nigel Barrett, Fr Jervis D'Souza and Alison Rosario provided not only the resources to conduct the programme, but their own committed personal presence — inspiring participants and anchoring the work's pastoral integrity. The same visionary energy that Fr Nigel brought to the physical restoration of St Andrew's Church is now being channelled into this renewal

of its community spirit. Their continued accompaniment as the 26 participants go out into the community is vital to the initiative's sustainability. What St Andrew's learns will, in time, equip parishes across the Archdiocese to undertake the same journey. As one 75-year-old participant wrote at the end: "I know I can be a better version of my reaching-out self. I myself have overcome a lot of hardship and come out strong." A church restored in stone. A community being restored in soul. ■