



Kovai Meera, a trans woman, blesses Srs. Stella Baltazar and Anita Edwin, members of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, at her residence in Coimbatore, a major city in Tamil Nadu state in southern India. (Saji Thomas)



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Sr. Elizabeth Rani said she had always avoided interacting with transgender people. But when India went into a lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, she started coming into contact with them when distributing raw rations to the poor with her congregation, the [Franciscan Missionaries of Mary](#).

Four years later, the principal of Nazareth Convent High School and Junior College has become "*amma*" ("mother") of trans people in Ooty, a hilly tourist destination in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

"When we reached their residence, 12 transgender women were packed in a tiny room with nothing to eat," Rani recalled. "We provided them provisions as much as they wanted and offered any other help they needed."

Saira (single name), who was one of the trans women, recalled the Catholic nun coming to them like "a messenger of God when nobody was there to help us. We were starving as we had no way to go out to seek help."

"Amma provided us with more rations than we needed and shared the items with the needy in our neighborhood," Saira told GSR.

That was the beginning of the trans women's collaboration with Rani, who tries to wean them away from begging and prostitution and make them self-reliant.



Sr. Elizabeth Rani, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and principal of Nazareth Convent High School and Junior College in Ooty in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Rani)

Rani said Indian society generally treats a trans person with contempt, afraid of "curses" from trans people. However, in some parts of northern India, people seek their blessings for newborns, new couples, and on other auspicious occasions.

In 2019, the Indian government [reported](#) that during a 2011 census, 487,803 people (among the country's then 1.2 billion people) recorded their sex as "other," instead of recording male or female; among them, 22,364 were in Tamil Nadu.

Rani and others working among trans people say the population could be much larger, as many do not reveal their identity because of family pressure and social taboo attached to that status.

Saira too said society treats them like untouchables and that few are willing to understand them. "But Amma has inspired us to come out of depression and stand

on our own," the 30-year-old trans woman added.

Rani has helped Saira (an electrical engineer) and others to open a milk shop in Ooty, taught two of them driving, and provided them study materials to prepare for state examinations to get government jobs.

Rani said it is also important for the nuns to change people's attitude towards trans people so that they gain social respect.

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As the first step, the principal invited them as special guests to social and religious functions in her school.

"We were a bit hesitant to go the first time, but could not refuse our Amma's invitation," said Sowmiya Shasu, another trans woman, who is a lawyer based in Ooty.

Rani said initially the students, their parents and the teachers of her school could not accept the presence of trans people, but could not oppose them openly as it was the principal's decision.

R.T. Lakshaya, a 12th grader, told GSR that until a year ago she always shunned trans people. "If I saw them on the road I would move to the other side. I was afraid they would do some wrong to me.

"But today, I feel comfortable in their company," she said. "I have no problem shaking hands with them or talking to them in the school or on the road," and trying to "make them comfortable in our company." Lakshaya thanks her principal for helping the students accept trans people as other humans.



Srs. Elizabeth Rani (right) and Stella Baltazar, members of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, share pleasantries with some trans women who visited Nazareth Convent High School and Junior College in Ooty. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Rani)

Mary Dorothy, a teacher, also said she was prejudiced against trans people until they came to the school on her principal's invitation.

"In the past I considered them as bad people, who engaged in prostitution to make easy money," she told GSR. "Now, I do not hesitate to interact with them."

Dorothy said the school community was inspired when Rani and other nuns embraced them like their family members. "Even parents' attitude to these people has changed," she added.

The trans people have surprised Dorothy with their unity and mutual support. "They come from different religious and cultural backgrounds but live for each other rather than for oneself," the teacher said.

Shasu, the 33-year-old lawyer, said their "amma" has taken them to leaders of various religions during interreligious programs. "We were well received by them all."

She said they no longer engage in prostitution, but occasionally beg to supplement their income. "Our prime target is government jobs, and the sisters give us confidence to study," added the trans woman, who revealed her gender status after completing the law degree.

Rani said education and government jobs could help them enter the mainstream and gain social acceptability and dignity.



Sr. Stella Baltazar, former Ooty provincial of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (second from right) in her habit, and Sr. Anita Edwin, (third from right) with Kovai Meera (third from left) in front of the rented residence for trans women on the outskirts of Coimbatore, a major town in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. (Saji Thomas)

Rani's congregation also works among trans people in Coimbatore, another town in Tamil Nadu state, more than 50 miles southeast of Ooty.

"The sisters saved our lives during the COVID-19 lockdown," said Kovai Meera, who manages a YouTube channel and lives with 45 trans women on the outskirts of Coimbatore.

The 42-year-old trans woman recalled the nuns taking care of her people's medical needs, besides supplying provisions. "They also assured us support and gave us a mobile number to contact them in emergency," Meera told GSR.

Sr. Stella Baltazar, the congregation's former Ooty provincial who was based in Coimbatore during the lockdown, said their team found the trans people by chance. "Our people reached their home as part of food distribution. We did not know their situation. We are happy that we could help them when they needed the most," she told GSR.

To wean them away from begging or prostitution, the nuns and Meera's team discussed several plans and finally agreed to start a catering service. Baltazar, who was then the provincial, agreed to help them, Sr. Anita Edwin told GSR.



Sr. Stella Baltazar is pictured with Kovai Meera, near the deity of trans women in her residence on the outskirts of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu state in southern India. They worship this deity as they do not follow other religions. (Saji Thomas)

The nuns funded them to buy utensils and other accessories to start the catering service.

Meera said initially they had difficulty in getting orders, but the situation changed gradually. "Now, we get many orders for marriages, political functions, birthdays and other occasions," she said.

In May 2021, Meera, who is illiterate, launched her YouTube channel [Kovai Meera Family](#) taking advantage of lockdown and highlighting various activities of trans people, including cooking shows.

As the programs became popular, public perception of the transgender community began to change, said Meera, who receives visits almost every day from schoolchildren and their families.

She has uploaded more than 1,000 videos on the channel in the Tamil language, with around 1 million subscribers with over 441 million views.



Srs. Stella Baltazar (fourth from right) and Anita Edwin (third from right hidden behind the leaves), members of the Franciscan Missionaries, stand near the deity of transgender women with Kovai Meera and her team at their residence in Coimbatore, a town in Tamil Nadu state southern India. The woman in green salwar suit with a child was visiting Meera. (Saji Thomas)

Meera said she was forced to leave home after her family refused to accept her transgender identity. She was 17 at the time.

Until 15, Meera lived as a boy, and but when she asserted her trans identity, "my brother thrashed me and my mother threatened to commit suicide," said Meera, the youngest among four children of farm laborers at Thottiyam town, in Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappalli district.

After leaving home, she roamed around different places as part of a transgender group. Her worst experience was entering prostitution. "One man would hire me for a night for 500 rupees [then \$7.35] and three or four would join him to use me in

total disregard to my feelings," Meera recalled.

Her many clients refused to wear condoms, and when she protested, they looted her. "Police seldom entertain complaints from people like us," she said.

These experiences made her form a group that would help trans people become self-reliant and "show the world that we are not different from others just because of a birth deficiency."

She started the group in 2013 with 20 young trans women in Coimbatore. It has now 45 members.



Transgender women who are members of Kovai Meera's group sit in front of their rented accommodation on the outskirts of Tamil Nadu state in southern India. (Saji Thomas)

Meera said they received a "new lease of life" when the Catholic nuns entered their life during the lockdown.

Baltazar said she also was not aware of trans people's lives before the lockdown, "but now they are like part of my family," explained the former provincial, who wants these people integrated into society.

Riya, a member of the Ooty group, said the lockdown was "definitely a dark period in our life, but it brought us close to the sisters, who embraced us like one of them."

"We wish we could have met them much before as it would have helped us make more progress in our lives," said the 32-year-old, who has a master's degree in mathematics and a bachelor's degree in education.

Edwin said what trans people need "is not our sympathy, but space to work and lead a decent life like anyone of us."