News
News
Religious Life



Catholic religious in India have undertaken several steps to improve the formation of nuns. The Conference of Religious Women India now includes sex education, responsible use of social media and psychosocial well-being in its training programs. (GSR graphic/Olivia Bardo; Photo courtesy of Molly Mathew)



by Thomas Scaria

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Mangaluru, India — March 13, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A recent incident where a trainee nun has been accused of killing her newborn has not only shaken the Catholic Church in India but highlighted an "urgent need" to revise the way religious are formed, Sr. Molly Mathew, a member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, told Global Sisters Report.

The police in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh arrested the 18-year-old trainee on Dec. 8, 2024. They also arrested a Capuchin deacon after the woman blamed him for her pregnancy.

However, further police investigations revealed the child's father was another man, said to be the trainee's boyfriend. The deacon remains in jail because the trainee alleges that he molested her.

The Catholic religious in India have undertaken several steps to form brave, confident and socially relevant nuns.

As a first step, the Conference of Religious Women India, the national body of India's nearly 103,000 nuns, has taken action to combat these sorts of issues, by offering sex education, responsible use of social media and psychosocial well-being in its training programs.



Members of congregations underwent training on counseling and psychology to strengthen grievance redressal cells, in Pune, India, in November 2024. The cells have functioned since 2022. To check abuses, the Conference of Religious India formed grievance redressal cells at national and regional levels to encourage nuns to reveal abuse cases and get proper counseling and justice. (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

"The women religious in India have faced gender discrimination and sexual abuses that have caused mental health challenges for many, driving some to suicide," said Mathew, who coordinates the conference's national program to revise the formation curricula.

"Whether the deacon was involved or not, the fact that a female candidate for religious life had become pregnant, delivered a child in secrecy and killed it indicated a serious lacuna in our formation program," Mathew added.

She said the conference has entered an agreement with the department of psychology of Christ University in Bengaluru, southern India, to introduce changes in the religious training program. The university helps the conference assess the need for revising religious formation.

The conference and the university will conduct a workshop in March at Goa, western India, as the first step to update the religious training in the present context.



Nuns undergo a basic counseling course with the department of psychology of Christ University, at Hyderabad in November 2024. (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

"The proposed workshop aims to teach those in formation basic counseling skills and ways to prevent suicide," said Patrick Jude, the department's associate professor.

The university has already done a need assessment on the psychological health and challenges faced by Catholic nuns in various parts of India, as part of its plan to design a "wellness kit," Jude said.

Mathew said the assessment team includes laypeople and even non-Christians to help evolve a contextualized formation system.

The conference has organized a series of webinars for nuns to identify distress areas.

Some 240 nuns from 78 congregations attended a January program where nuns shared their problems, challenges, expectations and then collectively proposed a revised module for religious formation.

"All these programs were held under the broader agenda of ongoing formation of sisters, updating them with knowledge and skills to deal with their problems as well as those they serve," Mathew said.



Two nuns practice one-on-one counseling on Nov 16, 2024, at Chennai, southeastern India, as part of the strengthening of religious sisters' mental health. (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

She said a formation curriculum relevant to all religious congregations is being prepared under the Conference of Religious India, the national body for both women and men religious.

Welcoming the move, Presentation Sr. Dorothy Fernandes, a human rights activist in Patna, eastern India, said that real evangelization happens only when the religious

live the faith, not when they preach it.

Fernandes, a former national coordinator of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, a solidarity group of religious activists in India, advocates a system where women and men religious are trained together for some time.

Seminary and convent formation should have some "connecting point" to imbibe the real meaning of celibacy and to respect each other as missionaries with equal rights in a multireligious context, she said.

"If the church schools can introduce coeducation after centuries, why can't we think of coformation for both nuns and priests?" Fernandes asked.



Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, head of the Conference of Religious Women India, discusses the revision of formation for religious women in India with program director Sr. Molly Mathew, right, and others at their office in Bengaluru, southern India. (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

Each congregation, she acknowledged, has separate vision and formation, "but somewhere on the way, we must integrate the intercongregational and intergender part."

She also wants trainee nuns and seminarians to work together before they profess their religious vows.

Such steps will help check increasing incidents of clergy sexual abuse of nuns, Fernandes said.

The women's wing of the Conference of Religious India had studied through a commission the gender discrimination and harassment of nuns by the clergy. The findings were published in 2021 under the title "Its High Time: Women Religious Speak Up on Gender Justice in the Indian Church." It spoke of rampant gender discrimination and exploitation in the Indian church.



Sisters attend leadership training as part of ongoing religious formation at Atmadarshan, Pune, western India, in August 2024. (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

Nearly 20 nuns have reportedly died by suicide during 1997-2021, according to a letter signed Dec. 8, 2021, by 89 women, mostly nuns from various congregations.

Prominent among such sexual abuse cases were the alleged multiple rapes of a nun by Bishop Franco Mulakkal, who was arrested Sept. 21, 2018, and jailed for some time. A court in Kerala, southern India, acquitted him on Jan. 14, 2022.

And in 1992, a young nun's body was found in her convent's well in Kerala's Kottayam town. After 28 years, a court convicted a priest and a nun of her murder.

"Similar cases happen every year, and most go unnoticed or are ignored under pressure from the hierarchy," Fernandes said.

Referring to the clergy sexual abuse of nuns, Fernandes said, "Even though we are religious, we are humans and we share human attraction to each other. In fact, our formation should help us handle such emotions."

However, the repeated incidents of clergy abuses of nuns have sent a wrong message to the world, she said.

She suspects several nuns might have kept quiet about their sexual abuse fearing "acute social stigma and extreme isolation."

Mathew too agreed that only a few nuns have shown the courage to report their abuse.



Ongoing formation of sisters, held in mid-November 2024 in Bengaluru, southern India (Courtesy of Molly Mathew)

She said the first step the conference took to check abuses was to form grievance redressal cells at national and regional levels to encourage nuns to reveal abuse cases and get proper counseling and justice.

The Conference of Religious India empowers nuns to break "the culture of silence" and prevent sexual abuses.

"The grievance redress cells have functioned since 2022. They will be further strengthened and decentralized," Mathew said.

Even the laity welcomes changes in the formation of the religious.

Joseph Joe, a lay leader in Mangaluru, southwestern India, says the laity want priests and nuns to be role models in the church.

"More than a good teacher, efficient administrator or a community leader, we want them as real spiritual guides or empathetic brothers or sisters," Joe, whose two sisters are nuns, told GSR. "If the current formation system does not make them so, it has to be revised."

Advertisement

Capuchin Fr. Arun Lobo in Mangaluru too sees the need for a "contextualized formation" to produce modern missionaries with gender equality and mutual respect.

"It is high time we reviewed our religious formation in the present context and made appropriate changes before it's too late," he told GSR.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, who heads the Indian nuns, said they had a tough time to break her people's silence on sexual abuse or other gender issues. "But our definite plans resolved the problem," she told GSR.

"Our next goal is to offer education and awareness, right from their candidature period and continue supporting them with ongoing formation," she added.