



A nun is consoled during a Sept. 13, 2018, protest in Cochin, India. The protest was to demand justice after a former religious superior accused Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar of raping her. A court acquitted Mulakkal of all charges Jan. 14. (CNS/Reuters/Sivaram V)



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New Delhi — February 7, 2022

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The Sisters in Solidarity, a national forum of Catholic women in India, on Feb. 6 demanded "absolute transparency and accountability" in the way the church handles sex abuse cases.

The group, comprising religious and lay women, stresses revising canon law and the "theology of priesthood" to cleanse the church of "elements that breed clericalism, which is an enabler of clerical sexual abuse."

Such steps would prevent the recurrence of sexual harassment, abuse and assault in the church, asserts the solidarity in a letter sent to the church hierarchy in the Vatican and India.

The letter is written against the backdrop of the [acquittal](#) of Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar in the historic nun rape case, and the continued victimization of the accuser and her supporters.

The letter, signed by 15 women and endorsed by 1,263 men and women from around the world, expresses their deep concern and shock at the judgment and the court casting "aspersions on the character of the Sister survivor."

Judge G. Gopakumar of the Additional Sessions Court in Kerala's Kottayam town on Jan. 14 acquitted Mulakkal saying the prosecution had failed to prove the prelate's guilt.

The accuser, a former superior general of the Missionaries of Jesus, a congregation under the Diocese of Jalandhar, in June 2018 filed a police complaint alleging the bishop had sexually abused her multiple times between 2014 and 2016.

The group urges the church authorities to keep Mulakkal away from any administrative responsibilities and spiritual leadership until the case is decided in

appellate courts.

The defense lawyers in the case and groups such as the Save Our Sisters plan to appeal against the verdict in the Kerala High Court within two months' time given by the trial court.

The group also wants the church to keep Mulakkal away from Jalandhar lest he uses his "powerful influence to intimidate the sister survivor and her companions."

All this will uphold the integrity and credibility of the Catholic Church, the women assert.

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They say they regret that the judgment overlooked that the bishop was "within a fiduciary relationship of power and authority over the victim as the patron of her congregation."

The group says the judgment does not take into account the accuser's "multiple vulnerabilities as a religious nun. Minor discrepancies in her statement are relied upon to project the survivor as a manipulator and a power hungry person who has filed a false complaint only to tarnish the image of the bishop at the instigation of his rivals."

The women stress that the acquittal should not deter church courts from conducting an inquiry into the case and give the accuser the right to participate in the proceedings and claim compensation for damages, according to the canon law provisions.

As a step to prevent such cases, the group wants church-run institutions and parishes with ten or more employees to set up an Internal Complaints Committee as mandated by the Indian government's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, and the Norms to Deal with Sexual Harassment at Workplace that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India implemented in 2017.

The women want the church to make public the Vatican guidelines to deal with clergy sexual abuse cases along with the members of the committee instituted to

implement them.

This will help educate the faithful about where to take a complaint, the procedures to follow and the action they can expect from the church.

"Women with the necessary experience and expertise must be involved in the process of receiving complaints, investigations, decision-making, and follow-up action," the letter asserts.

Read full document:

Document

[Sisters in Solidarity and Voices of the Faithful on the Acquittal of Bishop Franco Mulakkal.pdf](#) (505.23 KB)

The women say they are "appalled at the callous attitude of Church leaders in India and the Vatican, who failed to respond sensitively and constructively to this grave issue of sexual assault."

They point out that the accuser went to the police only after the church authorities in India and the Vatican ignored her repeated pleas for help and justice.

"Had the Church authorities responded to her desperate pleas, the issue could have been resolved internally. Instead, they negated her existence as a daughter of the Church by denying her the right to seek justice within the ecclesiastical family," the women assert.

The group recalls the Feb. 22, 2019, talk Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the head of the Indian Catholic Church, gave to other bishop in the Vatican where he enumerated the reasons for the failure of institutional response in sexual abuse cases.

Among them are the failures to listen to victims or take their complaints seriously and withdraw an abuser from situations that would enable them to abuse others.

In the nun rape case, "the Church has failed miserably in its response to the survivor nun afflicted by the crime of sexual assault," the women regretted.

As remedial measures, the women want the concerned church leaders to visit "the traumatised nun and her companions and give them an opportunity to tell their truth."

The women also demand that the leaders should take immediate action to ensure that justice is done to the nun and her supporters and assure their well-being, protect them from threats and allow them to stay in the convent at St. Francis Mission Home in Kuravilangad near Kottayam, where they have been staying for more than three years.

The women want the church to provide the sisters psychological, spiritual and financial support.

This story appears in the **Bishop Mulakkal trial** feature series. [View the full series.](#)