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An article in a Jesuit magazine describing alleged exploitation of nuns in Catholic convents has been criticized as an attempt to silence members of women's religious orders who have begun to speak out against sexual abuse by priests.

"I think there is a possibility of a revolt of religious sisters," said Lucetta Scaraffia, the former head of the Vatican magazine Donne, Chiesa, Mondo (Women, Church, World), adding that many nuns she has heard from "are furious."

Published Aug. 1 in La Civiltà Cattolica (Catholic Society), the article raised concerns about the "lack of attention that abuse within female congregations has garnered," particularly overreach by some orders' mothers superior.

Superiors were said to enjoy better health care services and opportunities for vacations, while rank-and-file nuns are denied access to eye doctors or dentists, some sisters told the magazine. Other nuns reported not even being able to enjoy a walk outside without asking for permission.

The article, by the Rev. Giovanni Cucci, also detailed the practice of "importing vocations" — bringing young nuns from other countries who don't speak Italian and are therefore more easily exploited. Their communities, he wrote, "are experienced more as a prison." He also called attention to cases of sexual abuse of nuns by superiors.

The accusations "may appear puzzling and hard to believe for those who live in male congregations," wrote Cucci, "in the face of which one can simply smile."

Scaraffia, who left Donne, Chiesa, Mondo in March 2019 after denouncing a climate of "cover-up and censorship" created by Vatican higher-ups, said the Civiltà Cattolica article represents an effort to undermine the newfound voice of nuns in the church.

"It's a way to tell sisters that if they have press conferences, make their voices heard and denounce sexual abuse, (church authorities) will air all their dirty laundry," she told Religion News Service.

In her tenure at Donne, Chiesa, Mondo, Scaraffi published accounts of numerous cases of sexual abuse of nuns by male clergy. Her articles drew a wave of media attention to the conditions Catholic nuns endure around the world and helped inspire the #NunsToo movement.

"Nuns are emerging and speaking up as protagonists, but the church continues to ignore their existence," Scaraffia said.

A 2018 report by The Associated Press investigated numerous cases of sexual abuse of nuns by clergy in Asia, South America, Europe and Africa, attributing it to "the universal tradition of sisters' second-class status in the Catholic Church and their ingrained subservience to the men who run it." Other cases in Italy and Chile have brought calls for the Vatican to investigate.

The same year, a superior of the Missionaries of Jesus, a local women's order, accused Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar, India, of raping her 13 times between 2014 and 2016. Nuns from her congregations filed charges that ran to 2,000 pages and, when the church was slow to answer, marched in the streets.

Mulakkal, currently facing trial, has since been accused of rape by a second religious sister. (It was recently announced that he has contracted COVID-19.)

Scaraffia accused the church of hypocrisy for allowing the sexual abuse of nuns to go unpunished, especially in cases where the nuns have been forced to have abortions. "This is very serious for a church that claims to fight abortion," she said.

In February 2019, Pope Francis called bishops to a summit at the Vatican to address the sexual abuse crisis, which also took into account the cases reported by religious sisters. Scaraffia said a nun addressed the cardinals at the summit, stating that she had undergone three abortions after repeated rapes by a priest in her diocese.

During a papal visit to the Middle East after the summit, Francis lamented the behavior, which he said stemmed from a society that "views women as second class."

He called the abuse of religious sisters by priests "a scandal" and hinted that it was a long-standing issue within the Catholic Church.

In May 2019, Francis imposed mandatory reporting rules for sexual abuse in all male and female religious orders.

The International Union Superior Generals, a global network of almost half a million nuns, asked its members to report sexual abuse and promoted "open conversations" within convents and better formation for nuns.

Still, Scaraffia, who said she has heard thousands of complaints from nuns about sexual abuse by priests, criticized the Vatican for not taking the necessary measures or looking into the charges appropriately.

"I love the church and I fight for the church," she said, adding that the church would have to deal with "a great rebellion" brewing among nuns.

"Don't forget that women are a revolution," she said.

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