News
Social Justice



Apostolic Carmel Sr. M. Rashmi (center, in white habit), principal of the Patna Women's College in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, joins her students to demand justice for a rape and murder victim in Kolkata. (Courtesy of M. Rashmi)



by Thomas Scaria

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Mangalore, India — September 13, 2024

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Catholic nuns have joined civil rights and women groups to demand urgent steps to prevent increasing cases of sexual violence against women in the country.

"If a doctor could be raped and killed in a government hospital during duty hours, how unsafe is it for other health professionals?" asked Sr. Victoria Narisetti, the president of the Catholic Health Association of India, the largest nongovernmental network of health professionals in the country.

The Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph nun was reacting to the Aug. 9 gang rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor on duty in Kolkata, the capital of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. Her murder exposed serious irregularities and safety risks in the hospital.

Protests against the murder and other cases of violence against women erupted all over India, leading to the arrest of the main culprit. The victim's parents, as well as the majority of the protesters, demanded the death penalty for the culprit to reduce violence against women in the country.

Several Catholic organizations, such as the Conference of Religious Women India, Sister Doctors Forum of India, and the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, also joined the protests to express solidarity with the Kolkata doctor and other women victims of violence.

Narisetti's association released a statement urging the West Bengal government "to do everything required to find out the culprits and punish them at the earliest."



Members of the Conference of Religious Women India join a protest march in the southwestern Indian city of Mangalore, demanding justice for rape victims and seeking safety for women in workplaces. (Courtesy of Severine Menezes)

Some groups have demanded the death penalty for rapists, but Sr. Mary Scaria, a supreme court lawyer, said it would not work.

She cited a 2012 case where a physiotherapy student was gang-raped and murdered in a moving bus. A national outrage following the incident led to the arrest of the culprits, who were eventually hanged after conviction.

"This incident also resulted in several stringent amendments to the law, but cases continued to rise," said Scaria, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary.

"Incidents of rape and murder have become a serious social issue in India, despite several legislative reforms," Scaria explained.

She cited the National Crime Records Bureau to say that during 2017-22, India reported 189,000 rape cases. In 2022, India reported over 31,000 rape cases despite harsher penalties. The figures for 2023 are yet to be published.

"[The] death penalty may not help, but chemical castration or medical castration of the rapist may be a workable solution," Scaria told GSR Aug. 27.

Scaria also demanded fast-track courts to try rape cases and ensure speedy justice for the victims instead of dragging procedures for several years.

"No matter how many placards we display, ultimately it is the attitude at play," said the nun, who called for educating boys and girls to respect each other and uphold human dignity.



St. Ann of Providence Sr. Severine Menezes leads an awareness workshop on the dignity of women at Athena College of Nursing, Mangalore, southwestern India. (Courtesy of Severine Menezes)

Sr. Beena Madhavath, until recently the president of the Sister Doctors Forum of India, stressed a multifaceted approach to ensure safety for women, children and other vulnerable people.

The Ursulines of Mary Immaculate nun, who directs the Holy Family Hospital in Mumbai, western India, told GSR that the increasing cases of violence against women should also alert church institutions to develop appropriate policies and protocols to prevent such incidents.

Narisetti agreed and said health professionals attached to Christian institutions face similar challenges.

"We have hundreds of sisters and Catholic nurses working in the health care sector in remote villages who are more vulnerable," she said Aug. 28.

The Catholic Health Association of India, founded in 1943 by Sr. Mary Glowrey, an Australian member of her congregation who was the first nun doctor in India, now has more than 1,000 nun doctors, 25,000 nun nurses and 10,000 paramedical professionals working in various parts of the country.

After the Kolkata incident, the association organized several protests to condemn crimes against women, especially those in the health care sector.



Two nursing students of Father Muller Medical College Hospital, Mangalore, southwestern India. The campus accommodates hundreds of health professionals in a safe environment. (Thomas Scaria)

Madhavath wants a united fight for justice and equality involving government, church organizations, communities and individuals.

"We need to promote and uphold a culture of respect and safety across our societies," she said, adding that this can be ensured through education and awareness creation starting from schools.

Canossian Sr. Blanch Ancintha Rosario, the national president of the 1,000-member Sister Doctors Forum of India, said the "most brutal attack" on the Kolkata doctor shocked her people, who condemned the increasing violence against the medical fraternity in the country.

She said her people working in Christian institutions are relatively safer, but many serve the remotest villages without any safety measures.

Rosario, who specializes in gynecology, said each medical facility should be held responsible for the safety of their staff. She recommended a four-point action plan.

The plan includes workplace violence prevention, mental health support, promotion of a safe work environment, and proper communication and reporting systems.

Rosario also wants the government and the church to develop and enforce policies to prevent workplace harassment and encourage reporting of all incidents of violence or abuse. For this, she wants CCTV in all sensitive areas in health care institutions.

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"Health workers also require mental health support as they work in stressful situations," she added.

Rosario also advocated regular counseling services, stress management programs and peer support groups.

She recommended setting up clear communication channels for reporting safety concerns and ensuring timely responses to such reports.

Scaria blamed India's deep-rooted patriarchal system and political domination by upper caste groups for the violence against women. She demanded gender-based legislation to end discrimination in several laws dealing with women, such as marriage, inheritance and ownership of assets.

She suggested creating internal complaint committees in all workplaces, including church-run institutions. It should be followed by awareness building, involving women in public life, and promotion of gender equality in all areas of life, she added.

"Equality not only in letter but should be in spirit and action," asserted the nun lawyer.



Apostolic Carmel nuns in Patna, the capital of the eastern Indian state of Bihar, join a silent march demanding equality and safety for women. They also expressed solidarity with the rape and murder victim in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state. (Courtesy of M. Rashmi)

Scaria commended the initiatives of Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, president of the Conference of Religious Women India, for starting a grievance redressal policy and setting up a nine-member grievance redressal cell at the national level.

"Similar grievance redressal systems needed to be in place for the health care workers, too, so that the cases can be reported without fear," Scaria added.

Sr. M. Rashmi, the principal of Patna Women's College, advocates awareness building and women-inclusive programs as a step toward self-reliance and dignity. "Women are not a weaker section, but they are subjugated by a deep-rooted patriarchal system in the Indian society," asserted the Apostolic Carmel nun.

She said her college also organized a silent march to assert the dignity of womanhood, condemn atrocities against women in India and express solidarity with the victim's family.

"We have done this as part of instilling more confidence and dignity among our own girl students and instilling a sense of justice in them," Rashmi said.

A protest march organized by the Catholic religious, along with various commissions of the Mangalore Diocese and civil organizations, demanded justice for the Kolkata victim.

Sisters of St. Ann of Providence Sr. Severine Menezes, president of the Conference of Religious Women India in the southwestern Indian port city, called for empowering girls at school to assert their dignity and confidence.



St. Ann of Providence Sr. Severine Menezes, president of the Conference of Religious Women India's Mangalore unit, at the Father Muller Medical College Hospital in the same southwestern Indian port city. She is focused on sensitizing medical students about gender equality. (Thomas Scaria)

A trained social worker, Menezes organizes awareness programs and life-skills training as a strategy to bring up an empowered women's community.

Presentation Sr. Dorothy Fernandes, the national convener of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, urged people not to limit their campaign to protest marches and candlelight processions. "Often, we feel we have done everything after such a protest," she told GSR.

"We need to go beyond such practices if we want to ensure justice for the victims and a safer work atmosphere and dignity for women," said the nun, who has campaigned for justice for more than three decades in the eastern Indian city of Patna.

Fernandes lamented the young doctor was raped and murdered in Kolkata, where Mother Teresa had lived. She suspects illegal organ transplantation, drug mafias and political rivalry agendas are behind the crime.

Nirmalini called upon the nuns to never stop fighting for justice whenever womanhood is attacked.

"Millions of women in India, like the Dalits, tribals and other [underdeveloped] communities, are in danger, whose cry or voice is not heard," the Apostolic Carmel nun bemoaned.

She said Catholic nuns in India have to "raise our voice against several incidences of rape and murder among these communities reported almost every day."