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Indian Catholic nuns line up to vote at a polling station during India's general election in Hyderabad on April 11, 2019. India's mammoth six-week general election kicked off April 11, with polling stations in the country's northeast among the first to open. (UCAN/AFP/Noah Seelman)

Michael Gonsalves

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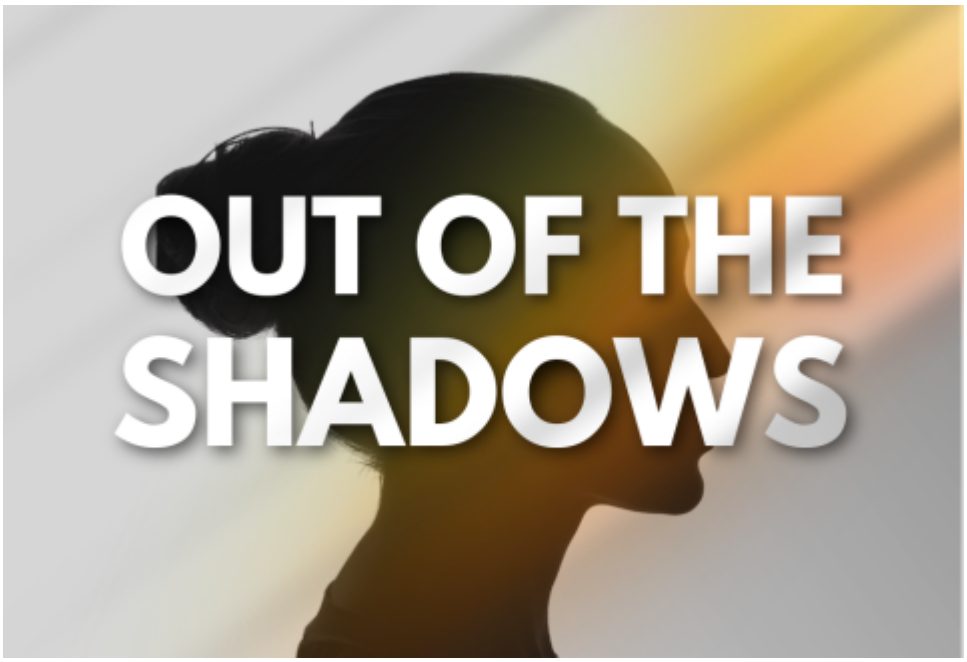
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Editor's note: *This story is part of Global Sisters Report's yearlong series "Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women," which will focus on the ways*

Catholic sisters are responding to or are affected by this global phenomenon.



(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

Catholic nuns in India are conducting a series of training programs as part of enabling women religious to address challenges posed by sexual abuse, poor mental health and suicidal tendencies.

The Conference of Religious Women India, or CRWI, concluded its 10th training workshop April 1-5 in the western state of Goa. About 50 nuns from across India attended the program, which is conducted in collaboration with the church-run Christ University in Bangalore.

"We have begun strengthening the resilience of the religious sisters to face challenges at work and to foster community support for mental well-being," said Sr. Molly Mathew, who leads the project.

The organization represents about 103,000 nuns working across India.

The CRWI assistant program coordinator, Sr. Renjitha Ravi, said the workshop focused on understanding distress, assessing distress, identifying individuals in need, risk and protective factors, and counseling and ethics.

Matthew, a member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, said they started the Training of Trainers program on Basic Counselling Skills for Mental Health

and Wellness in November. About 350 nuns have benefited from it so far.

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The program was developed with the help of Christ University's Department of Psychology. The nun noted that the department helps the conference assess the need to revise religious formation.

Indian media reported several cases of rape, murder and suicides of nuns in recent years, prompting the church to discuss the need to help nuns tackle sexual abuse and mental health issues.

At least 20 nuns have died by suicide in India between 1997 and 2021, according to media reports.

The media also reported several cases of sexual abuse of nuns by members of the clergy, including a bishop, in recent years.

"There have been cases of gender discrimination and sexual abuses in our country, which have driven some even to attempt suicide," Mathew said.

She said that 565 major superiors and others attended a workshop in March and drafted an action plan to improve the nuns' mental health.

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

The group also prepared a Wellbeing Self-Care Kit and Mental Health Action Plan for Religious Women, aimed at promoting mental health and wellness among Catholic sisters in India.

It provides practical tips for identifying the problem and addressing it and tips for safeguarding oneself from potential abuse, Mathews said.

Related: Catholic religious in India revise formation to address sex abuse, suicide cases

Mathew said the conference established a Grievances Redressal Cell, comprising nine members, including lawyers and lay activists, in 2022. The cell has settled a

few cases involving nuns and priests.

"Any nun having a grievance can directly email and telephone the cell without fear or permission from her superiors," she said. The cell "would go a long way in improving the well-being of religious sisters," she added.

Patrick Jude, an assistant professor at the Department of Psychology at Christ University, told UCA News that "mental health is gaining currency in all religious congregations as religious sisters working in diverse fields face many challenges."

This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.