News
Ministry



Sr. Jinu Thomas Valavanolickal of the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph stands in front of the Lumina Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy Centre at Kattangal, Kozhikode, Kerala, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)



by George Kommattam

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A woman who is today a mother of two sons is grateful to the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph for helping her escape a toxic love affair and find a peaceful married life.

"Without the sisters, my life would have been destroyed," the Catholic woman, who requested anonymity, told Global Sisters Report.

She said the sisters emboldened her to break free from the oppressive relationship with a Muslim man she had had since she was a young woman.

Sr. Jinu Thomas Valavanolickal, director of Lumina Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy Centre, recalled the woman's devastated parents bringing her "to us after learning that she was trapped in love jihad."

"Love jihad" is a controversial term used to refer to Muslim men feigning love to marry girls from other religions and convert them to Islam.

The Catholic woman who spoke to GSR is among hundreds of women and girls helped by the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph, also known as Dharmagiri Sisters, through their Lumina Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy Centre. The center, which focuses on family counseling, was opened on May 14, 2017, in Kattangal, in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

Valavanolickal says her clients are mostly young women from Christian and Hindu families in Kerala and the neighboring Karnataka state.

"I will say this clearly: Love jihad is real, although many will not agree with me," Valavanolickal told GSR. "I have handled 737 cases. Among them, 347 were Christian girls."

The sister declined to divulge their clients' personal details to protect them. However, her counseling sessions revealed how Muslim boys target girls who are away from home for studies.

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"These men find out the girls' weaknesses — loneliness, desire for love, or even interests like bike rides or favorite food. Then they use these to trap them,"

explained the 51-year-old nun, who has a doctorate in counseling psychology.

The Catholic woman who told GSR her story agreed. She had joined a nongovernmental organization after earning her bachelor's degree. A Muslim man she met at work asked for her phone number. Her boss had instructed the team to give personal numbers if someone asked, saying it might help in the future.

"Initially he was polite, caring and attentive. He called me often. The calls turned into messages of love. I felt special and thought I had found someone who truly cared for me," she said.

But slowly, the situation changed. The man became controlling. He first asked for money, then jewelry. "Finally, he took my certificates. I thought his love was true. But it was a trap. He compelled me to marry him after converting."

It was then she turned to her parents for help.

She said that, during her six-month stay at the center, Valavanolickal "was like a mother to me. She listened, guided me and prayed for me."

Valavanolickal, who manages the center with three other sisters, said most "trapped girls" are under 20. But she has also helped married women.

> 'Without the sisters, my life would have been destroyed.'
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Weaning away "love jihad" victims has challenges.

One college student kicked Valavanolickal in the knee, causing enough damage that Valavanolickal has to have knee surgery. The girl was brought to the center by her parents after being arrested for drug smuggling. She was recruited by her campus lover.

The girl's parents supported the sisters, who helped her in the center for a year through counseling, prayer and emotional support.

"Today, she is continuing her studies. She and her family visit us regularly during festivals. She calls Lumina her mother's home," Valavanolickal said.

The nun said their work also has other risks. "The boys often come here looking for the girls. They shout, threaten and scare us. Everyone advised me never to go out. I have received threats many times."

Police frequently visit the center, sometimes to provide protection, other times with court orders.

"When the boys file habeas corpus petitions, I have to take the girls to court," Valavanolickal said.

Sometimes, police or court officials will suggest sending girls to Lumina, she said. "They trust that Lumina is a safe place."

In difficult situations, the sisters rely on Fr. Melvin Vellackakudiyil of the Thamarassery Diocese. "Whenever needed, he accompanies me to police stations and courts. Without his support, it would have been very difficult."



The Lumina Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy Centre, managed by the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph at Kattangal, Kozhikode, Kerala, a southwestern Indian state (George Kommattam)

Valavanolickal's companions at the center are Srs. Reshma Choorakuzhiyil, Kripa Kozhikothickal and Lillys Thenmala.

"Nights are often sleepless," Thenmala told GSR. Some minors brought to the center by their parents try to run away, she said. "Some lash out violently,"

The sisters combine psychotherapy with prayer, eucharistic adoration and confession.

Valavanolickal has handled 143 cases from the Thamarassery Diocese, Vellackakudiyil said. "With her help, we organized awareness classes in every parish. This has helped reduce the 'love trap' cases."

The priest commended Valavanolickal's dedication and commitment. "She is a rare counselor. She sits with the girl for hours. God has given her the power to discern," Vellackakudiyil told GSR.

Another priest, Fr. Mathew Puthukkallil, often joins the sisters for deliverance prayers. "She does not stop at counseling — she fights for the soul of each child. Without her, many lives would have been lost," the member of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas told GSR.

Parents of rescued girls also testify to Valavanolickal's impact. One father, who asked to remain anonymous, said his daughter was drugged and exploited by her lover, who then blackmailed her.

"We were shattered. But Sister Jinu stood with us. She prayed, counseled and guided my daughter back to life. For us, she is a guardian angel," he told GSR.

The Medical Sisters of St. Joseph funds the Lumina Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy Centre. The order's more than 700 members in four provinces serve hospitals and clinics in various parts of India.

"Our founder gave us a charism of compassionate care. Here, that care is for girls whose lives are broken," Valavanolickal said.