News
Religious Life

Srs. Ranit Pallassery, center, poses for a photo with her two supporters, Ancitta Urumbil, left, and Alphy Pallasseril, right. (Binu Alex)

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Eight years ago, six Catholic nuns publicly campaigned against a bishop, accusing him of raping one of them. Today, three of the sisters, still clad in brown habits*, have started a clothing business to put food on their table after they say the church hierarchy abandoned them.

"Collective of survivors of gender-based violence" has become the identity statement of the business the three nuns started in southern India, where the six-member group once campaigned against Bishop Franco Mulakkal in one of the most high-profile clergy sexual abuse cases in the country.

Three nuns have since left the congregation, and the remaining members — the accuser, Ranit Pallassery, and her two supporters, Alphy Pallasseril and Ancitta Urumbil — have forged a new path from their convent, St. Francis Mission Home, in Kuravilangad, a village in Kottayam district in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

Mulakkal was cleared of all charges on Jan. 14, 2022, when the Kottayam district court ruled that the prosecution failed to prove allegations that he raped Ranit 13 times between 2014 and 2016.

After the verdict and at the Vatican's request, Mulakkal resigned from the Jalandhar Diocese, where he had been bishop since August 2013.

Isolation and abandonment

"We have moved on," Ranit, a former superior general of the Missionaries of Jesus, the Jalandhar diocesan congregation, told Global Sisters Report.

"Our worry is whether there will be food on the table tomorrow," she said, brushing aside painful memories.

She said the church hierarchy, including the Vatican, remained silent while she sought justice, and that her diocese and congregation stopped providing financial support. Now, her responsibilities include providing for two fellow nuns, one of whom is her younger biological sister, Alphy.

An aerial view of St. Francis Mission Home in Kuravilangad, a village in Kottayam district in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where the nuns live under constant fear of eviction (Binu Alex)

"We have no time to think of anything other than our survival," she said. Pressed by abandonment, isolation and uncertainty, they have decided to mend themselves, she said.

"Our first priority was to engage ourselves so that we could be free from the mental stress we were facing from all quarters. So we started gardening," Ranit said.

Stripped of income, the sisters tried commercial poultry farming and vegetable cultivation, but neither proved sustainable.

"We were broken financially but realized we had a huge support outside this convent," Alphy said. "We never really realized it earlier."

That support came from well-wishers and a network of women, starting with a family donating a sewing machine.

Stitching together a new future

Ranit had learned embroidery at her father's insistence after finishing high school. She worked on a machine at the mission home, but it was taken away.

The recently donated machine became the foundation of a new entrepreneurial brand, Stand By Me.

The venture began with embroidered handkerchiefs and cotton saris, but has now grown into a small clothing business that the nuns manage with five machines and two employees.

"Even today, I cannot pronounce entrepreneurship. All we're only used to speaking about is our province, our bishop, our diocese, our pope," Alphy said.

Their product line includes screen-printed tote bags, custom nightgowns, home furnishings and sari covers, sold largely through social media, with customers paying digitally.

"We don't have the money to buy raw materials. But our well-wishers directly transfer the money to our vendor," Ranit said.

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She said a group of theology students and other women religious, calling themselves Sisters in Solidarity, established a WhatsApp group to provide emotional and practical support. Another group, called Save Our Sisters, gave them moral and financial support.

These groups helped them set up the business through online and offline support and travel outside the convent without institutional permission — a radical step for women vowed to obedience.

The nuns held successful exhibitions in major cities. On Sept. 5, they showcased their work to a broader secular audience at the Women Entrepreneurs Network Carnival in Kozhikode, a city in northern Kerala.

"We will be exhibiting our work where we are invited. We are not going to gate-crash anywhere," Alphy said when asked whether they plan to scale up the business.

"We don't have the capital, the bandwidth or manpower to scale up," she said.

Their sales are mostly online and at exhibition counters, with the few visitors to their house buying to support the nuns.

"We do not have fixed monthly sales or income to speak of. In fact, we are poor in managing our income and expenditure," Ranit said. "All we know is that the price of our finished product should be affordable, but it also should not be less than what we spent on buying raw materials."

The price of their products is higher than that of comparable mass-produced goods on the market. "It is because our products are handmade and people buy them to stand by us in our difficult times," she said.

Desperation forces bold steps

Ranit publicly revealed her face and identity in a media interview on Jan. 10, 2026, ignoring an Indian law that requires the media to protect the identity of rape victims to save them from social backlash.

She said the move was to tell the world that they continue as nuns, even though the hierarchy abandoned them, and that they live cut off from the social mainstream and the local Catholic community.

Even today, a police constable keeps watch from behind louvered wooden windows of their house, purportedly to provide them security.

Few visitors walk the narrow, paved road that connects the home to the main road. The road is covered with a thin layer of dirt and debris, perhaps because it is rarely used.

The St. Francis Mission Home in Kuravilangad, a village in Kottayam district in the southern Indian state of Kerala (Binu Alex)

Ravit did not request security, but after a group of Mulakkal's supporters confronted the nuns during a police investigation, the local police chief arranged around-the-clock protection under the police's Witness and Victim Protection Scheme, which remains in place.

"We used to get abuse every day on the phone. Now it has subsided. Our only fault was telling the truth to the world. We wanted to empower every woman to speak out if they are traumatized," Ranit said.

Of the six nuns who initially stood together, three — Anupama Kelamangalathuveliyil, Josephine Villoonnickal and Neena Rose Edathil — eventually left the convent to rebuild their lives privately.

The diocese and the Missionaries of Jesus congregation eventually severed ties with the remaining three. In 2023, the diocese removed their names from the Jalandhar Diocese list and discontinued their financial assistance, food rations and medical support.

The nuns also live under constant fear of eviction because the house they live in belongs to the Jalandhar Diocese, which continues to pay property tax and some basic government charges.

"We have no idea what the next meal will be. You are asking what we will do if we lose this house. It is a far-fetched question," Alphy said.

Now, every piece of dyed fabric and every stitch the nuns make have become an act of defiance, they said. But those acts have bound them more closely together and built a safety net that the institution they served for decades failed to provide.

**This article has been edited to remove a misidentification of the nuns' congregation.*