

Women in Argentina claim labor exploitation by Opus Dei

by [Débora Rey](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue



Former Opus Dei domestic workers (from left) Lucia Giménez, Alicia Torancio, and Beatrice Delgado pose for a photo in Buenos Aires on October 21. (AP Photo/Natasha Pisarenko)

Lucía Giménez still suffers pain in her knees from the years she spent scrubbing floors in the men’s bathroom at the Opus Dei residence in Buenos Aires for hours without pay.

Giménez, now 56, joined the conservative Catholic group in her native Paraguay at the age of 14 with the promise she would get an education. But instead of math or history, she was trained in cooking, cleaning, and other household chores to serve in Opus Dei residences and retirement homes.

For 18 years she washed clothes, scrubbed bathrooms, and attended to the group's needs for 12 hours a day, with breaks only for meals and praying. Despite this, she says: "I never saw money in my hands."

Giménez and 41 other women have filed a complaint against Opus Dei to the Vatican for alleged labor exploitation, as well as abuse of power and of conscience. The Argentine and Paraguayan citizens worked for the movement in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Italy, and Kazakhstan between 1974 and 2015.

Opus Dei—"Work of God" in English—was founded by the Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá in 1928 and has 90,000 members in 70 countries. The lay group was greatly favored by St. John Paul II, who canonized Escrivá in 2002. It has a unique status in the church and reports directly to the pope. Most members are laypeople with secular jobs and families who strive to "sanctify ordinary life." Other members include priests and celibate laypeople.

The complaint alleges that the women, often minors at the time, labored under "manifestly illegal conditions." The women are demanding financial reparations from Opus Dei, an acknowledgment of and apology for the abuses, and punishment of those responsible.

In a statement, Opus Dei said it had not been notified of the complaint to the Vatican but has been in contact with the women's legal representatives to "listen to the problems and find a solution."

The women in the complaint have one thing in common: humble origins. They were recruited and separated from their families between the ages of 12 and 16. In some cases, like Giménez's, they were taken to Opus Dei centers in another country, circumventing immigration controls.

They claim that Opus Dei priests and other members exercised "coercion of conscience" on the women to pressure them to serve and to frighten them with spiritual evils if they didn't comply with the supposed will of God. They also controlled their relations with the outside world.

Most of the women asked to leave as the physical and psychological demands became intolerable. But when they finally did, they were left without money. Many also said they needed psychological treatment after leaving Opus Dei.

The women's complaint, filed in September with the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, also points to dozens of priests affiliated with Opus Dei for their alleged "intervention, participation and knowledge in the denounced events."

The allegations in the complaint are similar to those made by members of another conservative Catholic organization also favored by St. John Paul II, the Legion of Christ. The Legion recruited young women to become consecrated members of its lay branch, Regnum Christi, to work in Legion-run schools and other projects.

Those women alleged spiritual and psychological abuse, of being separated from family and being told their discomfort was "God's will" and that abandoning their vocation would be tantamount to abandoning God.

Pope Francis has been cracking down on 20th-century religious movements after several religious orders and lay groups were accused of sexual and other abuses by their leaders. Opus Dei has so far avoided much of the recent controversy, though there have been cases of individual priests accused of misconduct.

Josefina Madariaga, director of Opus Dei's press office in Argentina, said the women's lawyer informed the group last year of their complaints.

She said that all the people currently "working on site are paid," adding that some 80 women currently work for Opus Dei in Argentina. However, she said, "in the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, society as a whole dealt with these issues in a more informal or family way. . . . Opus Dei has made the necessary changes and modifications to accompany the law in force today."

So far, the Vatican has not ruled on the complaint, and it's not clear if it will. A Vatican spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for information.

If there is no response, the women's legal representatives say they will initiate criminal proceedings for "human trafficking, reduction to servitude, awareness control, and illegitimate deprivation of liberty" against Opus Dei in Argentina and other countries where the women worked.

"They say, 'we are going to help poor people,' but it's a lie; they don't help, they keep (the money) for themselves," Giménez said. "It is very important to achieve some justice." —Associated Press