

Elderly nun accused of baby snatching as part of Spanish hospitals trafficking ring

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An elderly Spanish nun was in court today to face charges of stealing babies, after hundreds of women claimed their babies were taken from them at birth and given away in illegal adoptions.

Doctors, nurses and religious workers at several clinics and hospitals in Spain are alleged to have sold babies for adoption over decades after telling new mothers that their infants had died.

Alleged victims say they need help from authorities in unearthing evidence of their claims from graveyards and public registries.



Allegations: Spanish nun Maria Gomez Valbuena leaves court in Madrid after refusing to testify before the judge for her alleged involvement in a case of stolen children

At the hearing at Madrid's Superior Tribunal of Justice, 80-year-old Maria Gomez Valbuena, a Sisters of Charity nun who worked in the Santa Cristina hospital in Madrid, was questioned by a judge but she invoked her right not to testify.

The formal charges against her are illegal detention and falsifying documents in a case dating from the early 1980s.

Many of the mothers have said they believe their babies were taken because they may have seen them as unfit mothers because they were young, poor or unmarried.

Valbuena has been linked to some 3,000 claims of kidnapping by families, with most of the abductions starting during the Franco dictatorship and continuing into the 1990s.

One mother testified in court last week that Gomez Valbuena had told her she could be jailed for adultery. The nun threatened to take her baby away and give it to another family, and later said the baby had died.



'Shamful': Alleged victims of Maria Gomez Valbuena, who appeared in court today in a baby abduction case, shouted 'shameful' as she left the court

The mother, Maria Luisa Torres, has been able to prove through DNA tests the baby she was told had died 30 years ago is alive after being adopted by another family.

An association of parents and families, Anadir, has presented more than 900 lawsuits regarding allegations of child-stealing. Most have been thrown out due to lack of evidence.

Members of Anadir say they were told by health or religious workers their babies had died at birth or shortly after.

Many say they were neither shown a body nor given proper death certificates.

Outside the court people who believe they are victims of the alleged baby-snatching scandal shouted 'shameful' as Sister Maria was escorted to her car.

Maria Paloma Perez Calleja who believes she was taken from her biological parents spoke to the media outside.

She said: 'I don't know who I am. I am registered as their biological daughter, as if I was born in their home. Everything was well planned, through out, and to top it off they are being protected.'

Anadir says the practice began in the 1940s when, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, the fascist government stole babies from political prisoners from the defeated Republican side.

In subsequent decades it became a money-making racket, the victims claim. Parents who wanted to adopt babies were often referred to clinics that were known for finding babies for desperate families, they say.

Coinciding with Sister Maria's court appearance, the Ministry of Justice held a meeting with members of various associations of victims of illegal trafficking of children.



Stolen baby: Paloma Perez, who says she was a stolen baby, talks to reporters in front of a court in Madrid

The ministry said it will gather the facts about all of the different claims to be able to investigate them more systematically, and will also handle the results of DNA tests.

Outside the court, Eduardo Rayo Retamero, president of the Association of Stolen Children in Democracy, who is still looking for his daughter, said that if Gomez Valbuena committed the crime she is accused of, she should be excommunicated.

'I have already said it and I'm not ashamed. I'm a practising Catholic but, if this woman has done what she is alleged to have done, then, there should be no Judas in Church, every Judas in the Church should be excommunicated,' he said.

Many families have found it impossible to track down babies they believe would now be adults, since the birth records, death certificates and adoption papers were falsified, according to Anadir and to the Madrid prosecutor.



Media scrum: Spanish nun Maria Gomez Valbuena was surrounded by journalists and broadcasters following her appearance at court in Madrid today

Isabel Aguera is still looking for her sister.

Her mother, she says, was told the baby had died and had subsequently been buried.

'They never asked permission from my family to carry out this burial so my mum, over the years, starts saying she

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thinks her baby didn't die, that she is alive.

'Since she repeated it so much I decided to investigate so I went to the cemetery and asked where my sister was buried and I was told she wasn't buried in any cemetery in Malaga,' she said outside the Ministry of Justice.

For Jose Antonio Suarez Martinez, Spain's legal system has given him little hope in finding his child.

'I have very little faith in justice. They have made me lose faith, unfortunately that is the way it is. I can't have more faith,' he said.