

Summary

Introduction

This study focuses on the influence that patterns, rules, customs and structures within the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands have on the manner in which sexual abuse or alleged sexual abuse are dealt with as well as the willingness to report sexual abuse or alleged sexual abuse. One important conclusion of the study is that the manner in which the abuse is handled within the Jehovah's Witness community leaves victims or alleged victims of sexual abuse feeling insufficiently recognised and supported.

The study was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security, which requested a study be conducted in response to a motion of the Netherlands House of Representatives submitted by Van Nispen et al. (Motion 31015 no. 154). This motion served as main impetus for the WODC and this research project.

The study examined reports on experiences of sexual abuse provided by Jehovah's Witnesses and ex-Jehovah's Witnesses via an electronic contact point. We also conducted ten in-depth interviews with victims and their families, friends, and acquaintances. Furthermore, the research team consulted with the board of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Netherlands and a representative of the US-based Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses, we inspected the files at a Kingdom Hall to assess how records are kept, and we conducted a meeting with the board of the Reclaimed Voices foundation, whose mission is to support the victims of sexual abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses. Finally, we examined previous domestic and international studies into sexual abuse within closed communities, including the Jehovah's Witness community.

The purpose of this report is not to establish the truth, but focuses on the experiences of how sexual abuse and reports of sexual abuse are handled within the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands. During our study, we noted that writings within the Jehovah's Witness community clearly state that attention must be paid to the victims of sexual abuse. However, we also noted that in practice, a great deal of attention is paid to the perpetrators or alleged perpetrators and that many of the interventions conducted by the community focus on keeping these persons within the community or accepting them back into it.

Research results in figures

A total of 751 people shared experiences concerning sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands via an electronic contact point that was specially created for the purposes of this study. These included 292 accounts of personal experiences of sexual abuse and 459 accounts of sexual abuse experienced by another person.

In 98% of the cases, the abuse had been stopped at the time that the experiences were shared via the contact point. 53% of the reported cases took place in the period 1980-1999. 32 of the cases reported by the participants in the study took place in the period from 2010 onwards. In 9 of the reported cases, the abuse was still ongoing at the time the questionnaire was completed. We suspect that the number of recent cases is relatively low because it probably takes some time for victims to become psychologically capable of sharing their experience, especially if they are young (see also Chapter 1).

Approximately half (48%) of the participants in the study were still members of the Jehovah's Witness community at the time of their participation in the study. 56% of the participants were female and 44% were male. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 79 years, with an average age of 49 years.

The reported abuse often took place within the nuclear family (father/brother, 34%), by fellow Jehovah's Witnesses (27%), or by relatives such as uncles or grandfathers (16%). 48% of the respondents who reported a specific type of sexual abuse indicated that they had experienced incest. 34% reported that they had been indecently assaulted and 21% reported that they had been raped. 6% had experienced unwanted sexual activity within a relationship and 9% reported other experiences. (Because many respondents reported multiple experiences, the sum total of these percentages exceeds 100%.) Nearly half (47%) of the respondents reported multiple experiences, that is, a combination of sexual abuse, indecent assault, rape, incest, and/or unwanted sexual activity within a relationship.

80% of the participants in the study reported their experiences of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community. Practically all of these reports were made to the elders of the relevant local community. Some of the respondents (30%) had also notified the police, with 27% of the respondents having filed an official police report.

On a 10-point report scale used in the Dutch school system, respondents indicated how their complaint was handled by the Jehovah's Witness community. Three-quarters of the victims (75%) gave a score of 5 or lower on this scale, indicating an insufficient grade concerning how their complaint was handled by the Jehovah's Witness community. 1 was the most frequently awarded score (the modal score) given by participants for how their complaint was handled with 57% of the respondents giving this score. Victims awarded the handling of reports by the community of Jehovah's Witnesses an average score of 3.3. Current Jehovah's Witnesses were clearly more satisfied with the handling of reports by the community than ex-Jehovah's Witnesses.

On a similar 10-point scale, respondents who had reported their case with the police, indicated how their report was handled by the police. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the victims gave a score of 6 or higher to the treatment by the police, indicating a sufficient grade of

their treatment by the police. The most frequently awarded score (the modal score) in this regard is 10, with 18% of the respondents who answered this question awarding this score. Victims awarded an average score of 6.4 for the handling of reports by the police. On average, current Jehovah's Witnesses were somewhat more satisfied with the handling of reports by the police than ex-Jehovah's Witnesses.

The number of respondents answering each question declined as the questionnaire progressed, with only 179 respondents answering the demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire. As such, all questions were not answered by all respondents. This does not detract from the fact that a large number of profound experiences were reported. The findings reported by the respondents display a range of experiences - some good, some bad - concerning how reports are handled within the community.

Experiences of sexual abuse and the handling of sexual abuse within the community

Via the contact point and a series of 10 interviews, we examined the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses and ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in relation to how reports of sexual abuse are handled. Based on this input, the following state of affairs emerged:

The reports of abuse by the interviewees were only made to parents and elders within the Jehovah's Witness community: these interviewees did not contact the police. According to the respondents, this is mainly due to the inwardly oriented culture of the Jehovah's Witness community and the biblical principle that you shouldn't take your brother to court.

The interviewed victims are not satisfied with the manner in which their report was handled. This dissatisfaction stems from the lack of recognition that they experienced and the strong desire of the elders to keep the community together, preferably by reconciling perpetrator and victim. The reports are usually handled in close compliance with the applicable procedures, although according to the parties involved, these procedures are also strongly focused on keeping the community together and pay little attention to recognition of the victims.

The experiences of how reports are handled result in secondary victimisation for the people making the reports, that is, the process of handling the reports victimises them all over again (or is perceived to do so). They feel insufficiently listened to, ignored, and in some cases they feel stigmatised and isolated. The characteristics of the Jehovah's Witness community - such as the strong and male-dominated hierarchy, the closed nature of the community and the strict code of sexual morality - make the victims' experiences in their view particularly painful.

Willingness to report sexual abuse

80% of the participants in the study reported their experiences of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community. The police are notified less frequently (30%), and police

reports are filed even less frequently (27%). This is a low percentage in absolute terms (after all, it means nearly three-quarters of the participants in the study did not file a police report despite 80% reporting the abuse internally).

However, the percentage of notifications and official reports made to the police is relatively high compared to the percentage of sexual offences in the Netherlands of which the police are notified (9%) and for which a police report is filed (3%). We note that it is difficult to interpret these percentages as our study is limited to the percentage of Jehovah's Witnesses and ex-Jehovah's Witnesses who were willing to participate in our study. Based on our study and previously conducted international studies, we cannot establish any solid causal factors that affect the willingness to report offences. To gain insight into these factors, further scientific research is required that makes use of other research methods such as experimental designs.

Reactions and suggestions

A variety of measures have been established by the Netherlands board of Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, the level of communication on this issue within the community has recently been increased. The respondents to the questionnaire (via the contact point) and the interviewees do recognise these developments, although most of the interviewees report that only minimal adjustments have been made and that these adjustments are mainly procedural in nature. They feel that the way cases of sexual abuse are handled in practice leaves a lot to be desired.

The respondents offered a variety of suggestions to improve the process of handling reports of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community, for example, greater openness about this issue and greater recognition for victims. They also mentioned the need for professional help for the victim, support and assistance within the community, and guidance in the process of filing police reports. Other suggestions included training and education of elders to help them handle reports of sexual abuse and recognise the complexity of the problem. Finally, the most tangible suggested improvement is a legal obligation to notify the police: a measure for which widespread support can be expected. The Netherlands board of Jehovah's Witnesses says that all applicable laws will be complied with in the countries in which they are established.

Results in context

International studies conducted in Australia, Belgium and the United Kingdom show that the issue of sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witness community is not restricted to the Netherlands. Furthermore, studies conducted within the Dutch Roman Catholic Church and the youth care sector in the Netherlands show that the issue of sexual abuse is not exclusive to the Jehovah's Witness community.

Our study and the international studies show that the Jehovah's Witness community can be characterised as a closed community. Each of these studies shows that fixed structures and protocols have been established based on the Bible.

Furthermore, all of the international studies showed that the Jehovah's Witness community does not adequately handle reports and complaints of sexual abuse against minors and that victims find themselves in a vulnerable position.

Our study and the studies conducted in Australia, Belgium and the United Kingdom also suggested that the closed nature of the community hinders transparent handling of reports of sexual abuse. At first glance, this closed nature also seems to have a negative influence on the willingness to file a police report. International studies into the Jehovah's Witness community have found that there are very few opportunities to make such complaints outside the community and that doing so involves a very high risk of shunning and exclusion. The victim-support mechanisms within the community appear to be insufficient, no support is provided to enable external reporting of sexual abuse and according to many respondents, external reports are discouraged.

The obligation to notify the authorities of suspected or actual sexual abuse is a vital measure that has been taken by or recommended to the Jehovah's Witness community in Australia and Belgium. The Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands has also been advised to introduce a notification obligation. Since the studies in Australia and the United Kingdom were conducted, the Jehovah's Witnesses have set up a protocol to determine how elders must handle allegations of child abuse. The effects of the measures taken by the Jehovah's Witness community in Australia, the United Kingdom and Belgium in order to improve child safety are not yet known.

When we look at the three Dutch studies examining communities (closed or otherwise) that were examined during this study (the Roman Catholic Church, the youth care sector and the Netherlands Ministry of Defence), we note that being in a closed community hinders people from reporting a variety of offences. At the time, the minors who reported sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church community seemed to be in an extremely vulnerable position (due in part to the lack of personal counselling), which - among other factors - discouraged them from notifying external parties. Studies within the youth care sector and the Netherlands Ministry of Defence indicate that non-religious organisations also have structural inadequacies concerning the protection of members against undesired conduct and external reporting of such conduct. Furthermore, it can be carefully concluded from the studies within the Roman Catholic Church and youth care sector that the weak levels of procedural transparency concerning issues, such as to whom the incidents should be reported and how the reporting process is conducted, appear to have negatively impacted the willingness to report offences.

Conclusions

- A total of 751 participants shared their experiences of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community via our contact point. These experiences included 292 accounts from people with personal experience of abuse and 459 accounts from people who know somebody who suffered abuse.
- 80% of the participants in the study reported their experiences of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community.
- 30% of the respondents notified the police and 27% of the respondents filed a police report.
- Three-quarters of the victims awarded a score of 5 or less for the handling of their report by the Jehovah's Witness community (average score: 3.3).
- 63% of the victims awarded a score of 6 or more for the handling of their report by the police (average score: 6.4).
- Compared to internal channels (80% report the offence within the community), a relatively small proportion of the participants in the study engage external channels (30% notify the police and 27% file an official police report). There are reasons to assume that the filing of a police report is hindered by the closed nature of the community and the risks involved in informing external parties. However, our study does not provide causal evidence for this factor and follow-up studies would be required for such evidence.
- According to our respondents, the closed culture within the Jehovah's Witness community can also be linked to the problems concerning the handling of reports of sexual abuse. The board has now put protocols and instructions in place to establish procedures for responding to reports of sexual abuse, although these mainly seem to focus on protecting the community - and, by extension, the culprit - rather than the victim. As a result, victims receive limited support and insufficient recognition, which can result in secondary victimisation.
- While the community has taken steps over the past 10 years to improve how reports of sexual abuse are handled, the Jehovah's Witnesses' formalistic system still provides no guarantee of an adequate response to sexual abuse.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions in the study, we have formulated recommendations for the Jehovah's Witness community and for the Dutch government.

- We appeal to the community of Jehovah's Witnesses to ensure better support for and recognition of victims and alleged victims via measures such as the following:
 - Providing more explicit information regarding the options for reporting the abuse externally or filing a police report and/or seeking external help as well as providing clear assistance with these external channels.
 - Setting up an internal reporting centre for victims of sexual abuse, with adequate knowledge of the subject and of the internal and external options for victims. Clear agreements must be established within this reporting centre concerning timely

- engagement of external parties for the purposes of reporting the offence and/or supporting the victim.
- Compiling annual reports regarding the activities of the internal reporting centre in relation to its own website, fellow believers and the public.
 - Training and educating elders in how to handle in cases of sexual abuse, in order to better equip them to provide support to victims.
 - Investing in openness and transparency in relation to sexual abuse and how it is handled.
 - Initiating cultural change that establishes a clearer position for women.
 - Engaging in discussions within the community and with other parties - such as politicians, the police, the authorities and the Reclaimed Voices foundation - concerning how to prevent and handle sexual abuse.
- Furthermore, the results of this study could help to ensure relevant parties - such as the municipal health services and the police - are better informed of the influence of closed communities on victims of abuse.
 - The Netherlands board of Jehovah's Witnesses actively cooperated with our study. The board also stated that it complies with the law of the land and the Reclaimed Voices foundation confirmed this policy principle. This situation provides the Dutch political system with the opportunity to take action and enter into talks with the community about patterns, church rules, other rules, customs, structures and their consequences for the willingness to report sexual abuse within the community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Within this context, a law is being considered that would make it mandatory for the Jehovah's Witnesses and other organisations to report instances or suspicions of sexual abuse to the police. Other countries have already introduced this type of law. Assessment of the usefulness and desirability of this instrument for the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands will require further research.
 - Finally, we recommend supplementing the independent scientific research presented during this report with additional future research. After all, the number of missing values/responses for a number of variables and the self-reports presented here imply that establishing truth is not the purpose of this report. Furthermore, no solid causal links concerning willingness to report sexual abuse can be derived from this report. Further research would be necessary to determine how applicable the findings concerning sexual abuse are to the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands and in other countries, as well as within other organisations. However, the research presented in this study into sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community in the Netherlands provides ample grounds for future research to establish a more comprehensive picture of the people reporting sexual abuse, the people not reporting sexual abuse, and the perpetrators of sexual abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses in the Netherlands and in other countries.