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## Abuse victim: "Jehovah's Witnesses refused to report rape to the police"

The Jehovah's Witnesses' so-called "judicial committee" is dealing with criminal cases, according to some former members of the Christian religious denomination. The committee has refused to reveal sexual abuse cases to the police. Minister of the Interior Päivi Räsänen of the Christian Democrats is asking for clarification on how police could better serve victims in such cases.



Kirsi-Maria Aho speaks up on suffering the dual misery of sexual abuse and subsequent ostracism.

Image: Yle

Kirsi-Maria Aho, a former member of the Jehovah's Witnesses denomination, faced sexual abuse some twenty years ago. Cases of abuse are heard by the faith's judicial committee. The abuser was not part of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"It was a crime. First, the man raped me and then he abused me sexually. This would have been a matter for the police, but the elders banned me from going to the police because the name of Jehovah couldn't be dragged through the mud," Aho says.

Aho had to appear before the committee several times. She describes it as cruel and accusatory.

"It was really cruel. A young girl under fire in front of three men," she says. "The men asked confusing questions, such as whether I had indulged in group sex. The Committee emphasized that I had done wrong and that I was wicked and adulterous. No one defended me."

As punishment, Aho was ostracised from the community. At the same time she was isolated from her loved ones.

Recovery from the devastating experience has been slow.

"I thought for 22 years that I was bad," says Aho. "Since I was isolated from the Jehovah's Witnesses I've thought that. Art therapy studies have brought me self-respect and understanding. I've realized that I'm not the bad one."

## **Minister of the Interior calls for clarification of police role**

The Victims of Religion Support Association has documented 28 such human experiences under the Jehovah's Witness' legal committee. Aho's is one of them. This week the association gave the Minister of the Interior Päivi Räsänen a list of suggestions on how society should address the issue of Jehovah's Witnesses legal committees. Räsänen is the parliamentary member responsible for matters relating to religious communities.

The association proposes, among other things, that religious courts be prohibited by law. Räsänen has passed the report on to the Ministry of Justice for clarification.

"In any case, we should not accept parallel legal systems in which crimes are investigated and sanctions considered," says Räsänen. "Now, of course, it should be figured out where these judicial committees stand in light of our legislation."

The report recommends that police have a better understanding of such cases and Räsänen has already called on her own Ministry to clarify their role.

The Jehovah's Witnesses see the Victims of Religion Support Association as an attack on the principles of the faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses community did not wish to comment further.

**Sources** Yle