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League for Human Rights presses officials to probe Jehovah's Witnesses, other religious groups

A number of former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have come forth saying they were prevented from reporting sexual crimes to the authorities. The Finnish League for Human Rights stresses that freedom of religion does not empower religious groups to violate human rights.



Covers of Finnish-language editions of the Jehovah's Witnesses' publications "Watchtower" and "Awake". Image: Yle

The call for closer scrutiny of the activities of religious groups came from the secretary general of the League for Human Rights, Kaari Mattila, after Yle's A-studio television programme on Wednesday broadcast interviews with former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Interviewees said that they felt they had been forbidden to report sexual crimes to the authorities. Instead, offenses were handled by internal "courts".

The public information service for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Finland denied the claims, saying to Yle that the group's policy is that criminal offenses must be reported to temporal authorities.

Mattila pointed out that at present, organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses usually undergo official review only during the process of registering as a religious group.

No entitlement to human rights violations

Kaari Mattila says closer oversight is needed.

"Finland has a lot to do to catch up. The good thing is that in just the past few years there have been both academic research and investigations, as well as reports from the association providing assistance to victims of religious practices. The evidence is mounting. What is missing is that the authorities should seriously consider the issue of oversight. The laws on freedom of religion, or religious autonomy, are not an entitlement to human rights violations," Mattila stated.

The League for Human Rights Secretary General added that for years various organizations have made approaches on the issue to the Interior Ministry, the Justice Ministry and the Ministry of Education and Culture, which has a committee that examines the law of freedom of religion and religious groups. She says that provisions of the law on freedom of religion provide for issuing warnings to religious communities.

On the basis of information gathered by Yle's A-studio team, the Ministry of Education and Culture has decided to request a report from the Jehovah's Witnesses explaining its activities.

Sources Yle

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