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Jehovah's Witnesses 'use the Bible to victim-shame,' sex abuse survivor says

On the heels of a \$35 million jury award to a woman who alleged the congregation mishandled her childhood abuse, other survivors say there's a pattern of cover-ups.



Moriah Smith left the Jehovah's Witnesses faith after elders in the church turned away when she approached them with accusations against another fellow congregation member who had raped her when she was 14 and he was 25. Rajah Bose / for NBC News
Oct. 7, 2018 / 9:45 AM EDT
By Elizabeth Chuck

She was 14, and at first, the attention felt innocent — like any other friendly interaction Moriah Smith had with fellow Jehovah's Witnesses during worship meetings.

Smith didn't think anything of the casual conversations she was having with Elihu Rodriguez, a 25-year-old man in her Seattle-area congregation. When he started giving her gifts, like new clothing and a cell phone, Smith — who was taught through her religion that sex is only between a husband and wife — did not think she was being groomed for sexual abuse.

Smith says it was in October 2012, five days before her 15th birthday, that Rodriguez had sex with her in the bedroom of the house she lived in with her father, a respected Jehovah's Witness elder. More sexual abuse followed for the next three months, she said. Ridden by panic attacks but ashamed and confused by what was happening, Smith didn't tell anyone, including her family, what was going on.

"I didn't understand anything really about sex," Smith, now 20, said. "I also had the fear of disappointing God. Not only that, but I could potentially be shunned."

The following year, Smith moved to Fairfield, Washington. Although she still did not feel comfortable disclosing to her parents — who she says did ultimately cut off contact with her when they found out years later what she endured in her prior congregation — she worked up the courage to report it to three elders at the Fairfield Kingdom Hall.



[Jehovah's Witnesses ordered by jury to pay \\$35M to abuse survivor](#)

The elders "basically told me that it was my fault. They told me that I wasn't sorry enough to God for what I had done," said Smith, who has since left the religion and works in the Spokane, Washington, area as an administrative assistant at a private medical company. "They talked about putting Jehovah first, putting God first in your life, and I wasn't, apparently, doing that to their standards."

HOW THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES HANDLE SEX ABUSE CLAIMS

In the tight-knit Jehovah's Witness community, outsiders, including authorities, are often viewed suspiciously, according to religious scholars. As a result, accusations of any sort between members of the congregation are typically first

dealt with through an internal judicial process — one that requires two witnesses to a crime to prove guilt, a tenet that's in keeping with the Witnesses' strict, often literal interpretation of the Bible.



[\\$35 million sex-abuse verdict puts spotlight on insular Jehovah's Witness community](#)

The religion's handling of abuse claims has recently come under fire. In the past decade, there have been at least 30 lawsuits nationwide against the organization arising from its responses to childhood sex abuse, and a jury award of [\\$35 million](#) on Sept. 26 to a Montana woman who claimed the congregation covered up the abuse she suffered at the hands of a congregation member as a child put a [rare spotlight on the insular religion](#).

In Smith's case, she said the elders she reported to privately reproved her, Jehovah's Witnesses' quiet way of denying wrongdoers in the congregation of certain privileges. Rodriguez was not punished, she said.

"They had used the Bible to victim-shame me for what I had done, and they never did anything to him."

"They had used the Bible to victim-shame me for what I had done, and they never did anything to him," Smith said. "He got married, and he remained within the congregation — a child molester living among them."

Smith's allegations led to charges against Rodriguez. NBC News verified the details of her claims through charging documents filed in King County Superior Court in Washington in July; in addition to rape of a child in the third degree for what allegedly happened with Smith, Rodriguez was also charged with rape of a child in the second degree involving a 12- or 13-year-old Jehovah's Witness girl he allegedly had a relationship with around the same time.

When reached by phone, Rodriguez repeatedly told NBC News that he had no comment. He has not entered a plea in the case.

The Office of Public Information at the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses responded to last month's Montana jury verdict with a brief statement that said Jehovah's Witnesses "abhor child abuse and strive to protect children from such acts," while adding it planned to appeal the \$35 million fine.



Photographs of Moriah Smith's grandparents, (from left) her mother, her brother and her father, sit on a table at her house near a memento signifying the date of her baptism into the Jehovah's Witnesses faith in 2011. Rajah Bose / for NBC News

In response to questions from NBC News about what happened to Smith, Fairfield Kingdom Hall did not return a request for comment, and the Office of Public Information at the World Headquarters said in an email that "it would be inappropriate for us to comment on specific cases."

It directed NBC News to its "[scripturally based position on child protection](#)," a two-page document on its website that intersperses Biblical references with denouncements of child abuse and outlines how the congregation aims to protect its children.

"When elders learn of an accusation of child abuse, they immediately consult with the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses to ensure compliance with child abuse reporting laws. ([Romans 13:1](#)) Even if the elders have no legal duty to report an accusation to the authorities, the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses will instruct the elders to report the matter if a minor is still in danger of abuse or there is some other valid reason," says one bullet point in the document.

Smith says that kind of protection was never offered in her case. Even worse, when she finally told her family a couple of years later that she had been in a sexual relationship with an older man at age 14, she says they accused her of flirting, and have since stopped talking to her because they view her as a "spiritual threat" to their own commitment to their faith.

"They were willing to turn their back on their own child to pursue a religion rather than support their own child," she said.

'THERE'S NO LIST OF QUESTIONS OR PROTOCOLS'

Other former Jehovah's Witnesses say they have experienced a pattern of covering up abuse to protect the religion's reputation dating back decades.

"There's no list of questions or protocols. These men are literally flying by the seat of their pants. They're not cops or welfare workers," said William Bowen, a former elder who now serves as an expert witness on how Jehovah's Witnesses operate with respect to allegations of sexual abuse. Bowen is also the national director of [Silentlams](#), a victims' support group where abuse survivors who have gotten kicked out of the religion anonymously share their stories. He says he has collected more than 1,000 stories on the website since he started it in 2001.

Chessa Manion, 29, describes the abuse she saw within the religious organization as "systemic." She says she was raped by the teenage son of an elder in 1994 in Illinois when she was five years old, and when her parents told elders what had happened, their response was: "Let bygones be bygones for Jehovah's sake. Don't ruin his name by taking this public."

"I feel that their first interest is not for the victim. It's for themselves," Manion said. "It's really this culture of silencing and of cleaning things up and of tolerance."

'THIS IS NOT TOLERABLE IN A CIVILIZED SOCIETY'

Smith's attorney, Irwin Zalkin, whose San Diego law firm has been litigating against Jehovah's Witnesses across the country for nearly two decades, expects to file a civil lawsuit in the coming month on her behalf.

He says the suit will claim negligence on the part of Jehovah's Witnesses for how they process child sex abuse claims such as Smith's. It will seek financial compensation and an overhaul of the religion's response to victims.

"At some point, they have to understand that this is not tolerable in a civilized society," Zalkin said. "She was the one who they, in essence, prosecuted."

Smith said she hopes that by taking legal action, she will prevent what happened to her from happening to other Jehovah's Witness children.

"It is absolutely an environment where the abuser is set up to abuse again," she said. "They are putting children at risk all the time because of the lack of action on the part of the organization. They do not have things in place to get these dangerous people out of the midst of their children."

Polly DeFrank contributed.