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Spanish translation

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"Protecting the Perpetator Comes First"

German TV magazine KONTRASTE (<http://www.kontraste.de>) broadcasted a very well researched report on child abuse within the JW community. The report was only 10min long, but it was German prime time - the very first topic after the most watched daily news magazine. KONTRASTE (Contrasts) is very reputable TV magazine. Two victims were interviewed and a JW spokesman.

Protecting the Perpetrator Comes First - Child Abuse Among Jehovah's Witnesses

by Caroline Walter and Marcus Weller

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Once again a scandal within a religious community involving sexual molestation of children by "men of God".

Caroline Walter and Marcus Weller report about a crime against children and a sinister cartel of silence.

Ursel Wagner was 9 years old when she was sexually abused by a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ursel Wagner:

"This brother used to visit us and made the offer to my parents: "I would like to put the little girl to bed, and he r r ead a good night story that will be fun."

Cornelia Wagner, Mother:

"Imagine, as I am there ironing my clothes and doing the dishes, this young man is in my daughter's room, reading s tori es to her and abusing her in the next room."

Ursel Wagner:

"In some way, I knew that it was not right what he did to me. But I was confused, because that was something that did not exist among Jehovah's Witnesses.

At that time, Ursel's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses also. When her daughter told them about the molestation, they proceeded the way they were required: they reported the incident to the elders in their congregation. But the elders told them not to make trouble and keep it quiet.

Cornelia Wagner:

"I was shocked. I could not believe what the elders demanded for me to do: remain silent. They gave some flimsy reasons and said by this we would also protect our daughter."

The family got no support by their spiritual leaders, instead the opposite was true: the perpetrator was protected, fellow congregation members are not warned .

Ursel Wagner:

"It still makes my angry how these people dealt with it back then. I am sure we could have saved some other girls from being molested. But nothing happened, nothing at all."

Cornelia Wagner, Mother:

"They made us feel that the roles had switched, we had become the perpetrators. It was as if we were accusing them and that did not fit their perfect picture."

Jehovah's Witnesses view themselves as a chosen group that lives rigidly by Bible principles. Jehovah's Witnesses believe in a soon-to-come doomsday called Armageddon that is survived by their members only. Their ultimate earthly authority is the worldwide operating Watchtower Society. 210.000 Jehovah's Witnesses live in Germany . They spread their teachings via the magazines "Watchtower" and "Awake". The obedience to the organization is obligatory for all members.

Stephan Wolf was a Jehovah's Witness for 20 years. Today he supports others leaving. More and more victims of child abuse contact him.

Stephan E. Wolf, Ausstieg e.V. (Exit Inc.)

"The woman's attitude is to be in submission and follow the principle of headship, this also applies towards children that are required to be obedient - if necessary violently. I think this prevailing attitude promotes an environment in which child abuse is more likely than in other parts of society."

Ruth Schlegel was born into a Jehovah's Witnesses environment. Her family lived strictly to the rules of the organization. Her father was an elder.

Ruth Schlegel:

"My father started to molest me when I was 9 years old. It began with touching me. It developed into sexual intercourse. That last time was when I was 15 or 16 or so when I was raped."

Ruth's mothe r r eported the molestation to the highest leaders in the congregation, the Elders. But yet again nothing was done and the perpetrator was not reported to the authorities. For years after, Ruthi¿½s fathers abused other girls.

Ruth Schlegel:

"In the elders opinion they had done enough. They had a meeting. They had spo ken to him and had demanded that he had to apologize to me. They had done everything the Watchtower Society says and so the case was closed. That was their opinion, from the religious point of view because everything from outside i.e. the law, reporting to the police did not matter because the Society says they are above law, they deal with it internally."

Protecting the perpetrator and silencing victims - normal procedure of Jehovah's Witnesses?

Dr. Andreas Fincke, Protestant Church expert on cults:

"They have a closed society. When wrongdoing occurs they appoint judicial committees to deal with conflicts and moral transgressions. The idea behind this attitude is that you don't go to court with Brothers and Sisters but to deal with those things internally first. That sounds good but in reality it often results with those in authority the elders, always men, judging matters they have no business getting involved with."

Do elders actually judge in cases of child abuse? We asked Jehovah's Witnesses:

Uwe W. Herrmann, Speaker of Jehovah's Witnesses:

"Because of our Biblical understanding we believe that there are some specific sins for which the local elders are responsible."

PAY ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES AND TO ALL THE FLOCK is the title of the elders' manual. And it is there the Elders are told how to proceed:

"Some disputes should not be dealt with at secular courts."

And:

"...it is the Elders decision if the statements are trustworthy."

Dr. Andreas Fincke, Protestant Church expert on cults:

"For a Jehovah's Witnesses who has become the victim of child abuse, it is impossible to get justice within the organization. The simple reason is that you need two witnesses that confirm the incident and that is almost always impossible when it comes to child abuse because there are of course no witnesses."

The Watchtower Society has built a wall of silence around the perpetrators called confidentiality. By making a simple denial pedophiles can live their inclination and remain in their positions within the congregation.

Stephan E. Wolf, Ausstieg e.V. (Exit Inc.)

"The main principle is to create a perfect image to the outside world. In their own eyes they are models to the outside world concerning moral standards, one of the buzzwords they like to use in the media. Having pedophiles in their midst does not fit that image, let alone the fact that the public gets to know that they are being protected in the movement. So, they are trying everything they can, to prevent the facts from coming out to the public."

But this perfect image is also intended to help Jehovah's Witnesses to get the recognition as a church. For 11 years, they have been going to court through all channels to get the same religious status as the Catholic and the Protestant Church . Recognition would result in several cost saving privileges i.e. to raise a church tax to create revenue.

Thus, the accusations of child abuse does not fit the image presented, yet more and more cases are coming out to the open while the organization keeps on denying there is a problem.

Uwe W. Herrmann, Speaker of Jehovah's Witnesses:

"We, the Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany , don't know of any cases of child molestation here in Germany ."

Stephan E. Wolf, Ausstieg e.V. (Exit Inc.)

"I think the time has come that the public sees there is something going on in the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, pedophiles within have a perfect environment where nothing is being done and they do not have to be afraid."

Uwe W. Herrmann, Speaker of Jehovah's Witnesses:

"Basically, we don't punish at all. Only God can punish. The Elders of a congregation can only check if someone is repentant or not. If he repentant then the sinner gets further help to get over that sin."

It seems that only the victims get punished. Ruth Schlegel has been expelled from the Witnesses because of smoking and adultery. She still fights with the aftermaths of the abuse.