

# The Guardian



## MPs demand action over Jehovah's Witness abuse allegations

**More than 100 people told Guardian of child sexual abuse claims and other mistreatment**

**Sarah Marsh**

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MPs are demanding government action after more than 100 people contacted the Guardian with allegations of child sexual abuse and other mistreatment in Jehovah's Witness communities in the UK.

"I am extremely concerned, but not surprised, by the allegations of child abuse within the Jehovah's Witness movement. Whenever there is a closed society with an inherent power imbalance, the potential for abuse is there," said the Labour MP Sarah Champion.

She said she would be raising the issue in parliament and demanding that the government take action to make sure all children were safe.

Alex Chalk, the Conservative MP for Cheltenham, said he planned to raise the issue in parliament, saying it was not just a historical issue but an ongoing child safety concern.

“My instinctive thoughts are that the sheer numbers and seriousness of the allegations coming forward is concerning ... If even half the allegations coming to light are true then it's clear that an entrenched culture of cover-up and flawed in-house investigations continues to this day,” Chalk said.

A Guardian investigation heard from 41 people who claimed they were victims of child sexual abuse and alleged a culture of cover-ups and lies, with senior members of the organisation, known as elders, discouraging victims from talking to the police.

A further 48 people said they experienced other forms of abuse, including physical violence when they were children, and 35 claimed they witnessed or heard about others who were victims of child grooming and abuse.

The Guardian was told that members of the community were taught to avoid interaction with outside authorities. It was also claimed that, according to rules set by the group, for child sexual abuse to be taken seriously there must be at least two witnesses to it. If that happened or a perpetrator admitted abuse, a judicial committee would be called and the case investigated.

A solicitor representing some of the alleged victims said she believed there were thousands of complainants in the UK and that the people who had contacted the Guardian were “just the tip of the iceberg”.

Kathleen Hallisey, a senior solicitor in the abuse team at Bolt Burdon Kemp, acting on behalf of 15 alleged victims, said: “Given the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK, and what we know about the pervasiveness of abuse in the organisation, there are likely to be hundreds and probably thousands more victims. This is truly just the tip of the iceberg.”

Champion said she was concerned that victims had to report their abuse to elders, without independent scrutiny.

She also expressed concern that abuse claims could only be taken before a committee for investigation if there were two witnesses to it. “Abuse happens in the shadows, so to ask for a second witness is ludicrous and effectively prevents reporting,” Champion said.

Several more alleged victims came forward after the initial claims were published. One woman, speaking anonymously, said: “I'm a former Jehovah's Witness and know personally of two girls who were abused and silenced within their congregations.”

Another woman, also speaking under the condition of anonymity, said she tried to kill herself when she was 14 after being abused by her father. “I found an old article in the Awake magazine on abuse in the congregation library and left it open for the elder. I had left the same article for my father at one stage hoping he would read it and stop. When it was found out, I too was subjected to being told not to say anything and a cover-up. In my case the evidence was also destroyed by the elders,” she said.

She said she was told never to speak to anyone about what happened and was not given any counselling. “I asked the elders privately if I could go live with a friend's family ... and they said I had to ask my father as he was the head of the household.”

Operation Hydrant, a British police investigation into allegations of non-recent child sexual abuse, has dealt with 45 potential victims of child abuse within a Jehovah's Witness setting. It said

allegations could be made by a third party which either identifies or does not identify a potential victim.

When informed of the Guardian's findings, the Charity Commission said its inquiry into the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain, Jehovah's Witnesses' governing body in the UK, was continuing. It said anyone affected by safeguarding concerns should come forward.

In a statement, the Jehovah's Witnesses said child safeguarding was of the utmost importance. They said that a victim and their family had the right to report allegations of child abuse to the police, and that the principle of sufficient evidence was a scriptural rule not related to reporting an allegation of crime to the authorities.

*In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international suicide helplines can be found at [www.befrienders.org](http://www.befrienders.org).*

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