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The Status of Women in the Jehovah Witnesses

Born almost 140 years ago, the Jehovah's Witnesses movement at its origins had several women as part of the direction of the organisation. As such, the President and founder's wife wrote and participated in an exclusively female group, which ensured that the organisation's choices were good.

Starting in 1916, early in the life of the movement, things changed. That year, local committees exclusively made up of women were created. Their role was to proselytize to convert new followers. They were sent to the homes of people and brought back those they met to public speeches made exclusively by men. Their mission was to attract, not teach.

The organisation quickly evolved into a totally patriarchal structure. Men played a predominant role while women were just "companions".

Today, while women can participate in activities that help grow the movement's followers, their place within the community is limited. In each congregation, women are all invited to complete hours of preaching, meaning door-to-door work. Given that many of them do not look for paid work, they widely participate in "the work of evangelisation".

I will first examine the structure of the hierarchy within the Jehovah's Witnesses. You will note that many positions are jealously kept by men. Then I will examine the place of women within the family unit and will finish with a recurrent problem within the movement – pedophilia.

Each congregation is made up of several dozen members. It is led by a committee, called elders, men usually over 35. They have authority over the members of the congregation to:

- Judge reprehensible actions by all the other members;
- Give instructions, most of which come from the branch office or Governing Body of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The instructions that they apply to all the other members of the congregation are written and controlled by other male members of the movement, "Overseers" appointed for regions. They report directly to the branch office.

Within branch offices both men and women work, but men are more numerous. Most tasks can be completed by both men and women. However, a large percentage of the men are "elders" within the congregation, which once again places the women in a socially inferior position.

Certain positions are reserved for men within branch offices, in particular those dealing with managing the organisation's activities. The major religious questions, which stem from each congregation or followers, are forbidden to women. Only men can answer these questions.

The Governing Body functions in the same way. At the head of each organisation is a committee called the Central Committee, made up of about ten men. They are responsible for giving instructions that must be applied in all countries or in certain sectors.

Here is an example.

In February 1999, the journal *The Watchtower*, the official magazine for the Jehovah's Witnesses, distributed around the world, was published with the same texts in Italy and France. However, the French version published photos of women Jehovah's Witnesses with long skirts, which the Italian version had shortened the skirts by several dozen centimetres. If in France instructions dictate that "sisters" must wear skirts that cover the knees, the Italian instructions are much more liberal.

Dress is controlled by the elders. A woman can be reprimanded from the stands, in public, for dressing in what is judged an indecent way by the committee of elders of her congregation. In this case, she must meet with 3 elders, who will judge her within a "judicial committee". I will come back to this later.

Women are not better treated within the family unit.

Her first responsibility is the children's education. She is also responsible for training them spiritually. But her inferiority to men is total, because, and I cite, she must be "respect her husband". On the Jehovah's Witnesses official website, the definition of the word "woman" includes the following elements:

- a married woman is "possessed by her husband";
- a woman's role is to sexually serve men. The following quote comes directly from the Jehovah's Witnesses website: "He did not oblige the man to go seeking a companion among the animals, but he brought the animals to Adam for naming. Adam was not inclined toward bestiality and was able to determine that there was no suitable companion for him among these." Thus, God made woman...
- however, subsequently qualified as "his equal", the site affirms immediately after that "The woman, being created out of the man, was dependent upon the man for being brought into existence. Being part of the man, "one flesh" with him, and a complement and helper to him, she was subject to him as her head. She was also under the law that God had given Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. She was responsible to work for the good of the man. Together they were to have children and to exercise dominion over the animals".

So, it is as a tool for labour and as a mother that the woman finds her place within the home. This is supported by the "Description of a Good Wife". It says: "The happy state and activities of the faithful wife are described at Proverbs 31. She is said to be of more value to her husband than corals. He can put trust in her. She is industrious—weaving, making clothing for her family, attending to the buying of household needs, working in the vineyard, managing a household with

the servants, aiding others who need help, clothing her family attractively, even bringing in some income by her handiwork, equipping her family against future emergencies, expressing herself in wisdom and loving-kindness, and, through fear of Jehovah and good works, receiving praise from her husband and from her sons, thereby honoring her husband and her family in the land. Truly he who has found a good wife has found a good thing and gets goodwill from Jehovah.”

- Finally, I would add that the Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that a portion of followers must go to heaven after their death. Women can...But with the condition that they stop being women, as their belief states, and I cite, “These all must receive a change of nature at their resurrection, being made partakers together of “divine nature,” in which state none will be women, for there is no female sex among spirit creatures, sex being God’s means for reproduction of earthly creatures.”

This same text, which I would like to remind you is the official belief of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, continues to speak about women who go door-to-door as “women slaves”.

So, I think you can understand that the woman is an accessory that must be nice to her husband and the congregation. Within the home, she is qualified as a “weaker vessel”, who must get her spouse’s approval for the tasks she needs to do. She must be submissive even during sexual relations, given that she “has no power over her own body”.

She cannot get abortions, irrespective of the reason she got pregnant. Jehovah’s Witnesses have published texts describing “sisters” who were raped, who kept the child and are very happy, as they remained faithful to Jehovah by not getting an abortion. Of course, the texts never talk about the case of a raped woman who had a very difficult pregnancy...that doesn’t happen it seems.

Concerning pregnancy, it must be noted that the refusal of blood also poses a problem when giving birth. Because of their beliefs, in fact Jehovah’s Witnesses would rather die than receive a blood transfusion. And according to a clinical study completed in the US in 1998 and 1999, because of their refusal of blood transfusions, the mortality rate among women Jehovah’s Witnesses who give birth is 44 times higher than among the general population.

I will continue with the role of the woman in the home. We have seen that she is inferior to her husband, but not only to him, because her submission does not stop with her husband and the elders of the congregation. Sometimes, she is also vis-à-vis her male children.

A campaign has been ongoing for several months, one that incites Jehovah’s Witnesses parents to baptise their children as young as possible. Cases of boys and girls being baptised at 5, 6, 7 or 8 are no longer rare. When a boy is baptised, they receive a special status. In effect, his mother can no longer educate them spiritually without “covering her head”, as such showing her “respect” to the baptised male. Mothers of families find themselves inferior to their own children within the home. This inferiority is judged to be divine.

The book Reasoning from the Scriptures states: “When should a woman cover her head? When she “prays or prophesies,” as stated at 1 Corinthians 11:5 (...). However, she should wear such a head covering as an outward sign of her respect for man’s headship when she cares for matters

pertaining to worship that would ordinarily be cared for by her husband or by another man.” Her son is part of that group, given he is a baptised male member.

You can also read: “Those charged with oversight of a congregation are described in the Bible as being males. The 12 apostles of Jesus Christ were all males, and those later appointed to be overseers and ministerial servants in Christian congregations were males. Women are counseled to “learn in silence with full submissiveness” at congregation meetings, in that they do not raise questions challenging the men in the congregation. The women are ‘not to speak’ at such meetings if what they might say would demonstrate lack of subjection. Thus, although women make valuable contributions to the activity of the congregation, there is no provision for them to preside, or to take the lead by instructing the congregation, when qualified men are present. In contrast, if no man can teach, women could then teach with their head covered as a sign of submission to the celestial organisation of God.”

A young boy who does not have the capacity to teach must receive his teaching from his mother, with the condition that she covers her head. It is the same if she must pray: she covers her head to show her inferiority.

Of course, women cannot rebel within the home without being immediately judged by the congregation’s elders. She is also forbidden to divorce without being immediately excommunicated, which would lead to her total banishment, and every member of the community, including her children, would no longer be able to see her.

Additionally, on February 15, 2007, the Watchtower discussed changes in society, first talking about feminism. “At the start of the 1960s in the US, women who wanted to liberate themselves from male domination launched a new “women’s liberation” movement. At the start of that period, about 300 men for every one woman abandoned their family, but by the end of the 1960s the gap was reduced to 100 to 1. Today, it seems that women swear, drink, smoke and behave immorally equal to men. Are they happier? No.” That is feminism for this movement – it says it all. Vulgar, alcoholic women who smoke and sleep with everyone. It is a bit reductionist, no?

Let’s talk about sexuality.

In 1969, rules started being applied concerning authorised or forbidden sexual relations within the couple. Starting from this period, women had to explain in detail their sexual practices to committees of elders. The elders would state whether her intimate relations were in accordance with divine will or not. Many couples were placed in difficult positions. In 1983, the Watchtower wrote about practices other than vaginal copulation as “unnatural conjugal relations”, which could lead to “expulsion”. This still applies today. It destroys families.

The elders are involved in every aspect of a couple’s intimate life.

With regards to the wife of an elder, she does not have the right to know about the files her husband is handling. In fact, the wife, judged as a “gossip”, presents the risk that confidential information would be communicated to unauthorised persons.

As such, the wife of an elder must accept that her husband attends meetings reserved for men, continually absent from the home without having to justify his actions, given the “secret” character of his role.

Additionally, this secret is a tool used to hide unsavoury acts, mainly pedophilia.

In 2015 a Royal Commission examined more than 4,000 cases of victims of acts of pedophilia in Australia. The number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the country is estimated at 68,000. 4,000 victims out of 68,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses. It is a scary statistic. And Australia is not an exception, given cases have been noted around the world.

It is serious enough that the association Silentlambs, which helps victims of sexual abuse within congregations, qualifies the sect as a “paradise for pedophiles”. A file held by the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses lists all the cases around the world. Several years ago, it contained the names of 23,700 Jehovah’s Witnesses pedophiles.

We have seen that a woman can be banished from the congregation if she wears clothing judged inappropriate by elders, or because she decided to divorce her spouse, or because she had an abortion, perhaps following rape. How is pedophilia handled?

The first element that will be analysed by elders is the presence of at least 2 witnesses, people who were present at the scene. If no, the pedophile cannot be found guilty, unless they recognise the facts.

Here is a letter sent from the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to all congregations in 2012: “Elders must keep in mind the following clear biblical directive when they analyse testimonies for the exclusive purposes of religious discipline: “A single witness cannot testify against a man about any fault or sin. It is only on the word of two or three witnesses will the case be heard”. (...) As such, while the elders verify each allegation, they are not authorised by the Scriptures to undertake an action within the context of the congregation unless they have the confession of two reliable witnesses.”

How is an act of pedophilia judged by the Jehovah’s Witnesses?

The child is brought forward to explain in detail what happened. They must remember each act, and the elders ask precise questions to judge the facts. Imagine the impact on a little 6-year-old girl! She was fondled and must explain it to 3 men, sitting in front of her, all serious in their suits and ties. No women can be in attendance as they do not have the authority to judge...And after the interrogation, if there are not several witnesses to the act, the child must meet along with the rapist. And they must confront their differing explanations.

The committee of elders, in most cases, to save the reputation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, will not communicate the facts to authorities. And the elders never explain what happened to other members of the congregation or to neighbouring congregations. This allows pedophiles to continue their acts with other Jehovah’s Witnesses children.

If they are found guilty, they are only rejected from the movement if they don’t “repent”. Once again, the members of the congregation will not learn why they were banished from the

movement. And they can return if they “sincerely repent”. It is the same elders that will judge the value of their “sincere repent”.

What should one think about the overly numerous cases of elders, themselves pedophiles, who were judged by their peers?

Adult or child, among the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a woman is a tool to create followers, but is very inferior to men. A situation that will not change given one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses gurus, Geoffrey Jackson, indicated in front of the Australian Royal Commission in 2015 that it is out of question that women participate in judgements for acts of pedophilia within congregations. And there will never be a woman with responsibility within this sect that counts more than 8.2 million members around the world.