

An open letter to the leadership of North American Jehovah's Witness congregations and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society

This letter is one of many being sent to Watch Tower headquarters and Kingdom Halls across North America. I'm writing to you—the men who run this organisation—calling for a radical shift in the sexist ideology and patriarchal organisational structure that endangers women and empowers abusers.

First, I'll tell you my story, then I'll tell you how you can help prevent it from happening to someone else.

My name is Carmel Mikol and I was born and raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Fourteen years ago, I had no choice but to abandon my faith because this religion no longer represented a safe space for me. For four years prior to my decision to leave, I had been violently physically and emotionally abused by my Witness husband and endangered by the elders in my congregation.

The violence started just a few weeks after our wedding. Initially, I followed the typical protocols—to seek counsel from my congregation's elders. While the elders never doubted the violence I reported, my motives were repeatedly questioned. More troubling, the blame was never placed on my husband, but rather on me. I was told "a husband is head of his wife" and I should "be in subjection" to him ([Ephesians 5:22-24](#)). I was not to provoke him, but to be "quiet and mild" ([1 Peter 3:4](#)). They said the only biblical grounds for divorce is "sexual immorality," not abuse ([Matthew 19:9](#)), so I should focus on my spirituality and support my husband, hoping the abuse would resolve. They told me to be careful getting outside help because it could bring reproach on God's organisation. In other words, the advice I received encouraged me to remain in a harmful and dangerous situation. At one point, the elders even showed up at our house and physically tried to stop me from leaving.

Eventually I got help from a legal advocate at a non-profit women's centre who helped me file for divorce (a non-scriptural divorce, according to Witness doctrine). I left the country and returned home to live with my parents. Even though I was legally divorced, I was still married "in the eyes of god." I was still indelibly tied to the person I most feared.

For years I believed the abuse was my own fault—I'd made a bad choice in who I fell in love with and married. I wasn't a good enough wife or a devoted enough Witness. After my divorce, I learned the family I married into was well-known in the congregation for perpetrating violence. I had to leave the country and abandon my faith just to be safe. They didn't have to change a thing. In fact, my husband remarried and remains in the faith.

Shame around revealing that I was abused, fear of being found by my abuser and having to relive the trauma, and sadness about the possibility of losing contact with my Witness family has kept me silent for almost two decades. But with domestic violence on the rise¹, religious and political institutions around the world attacking women's rights and freedoms, and

¹ [The Shadow Pandemic](#) (UN Women)

Witnesses under litigation for decades of mishandled child abuse cases², I will not be silent any longer.

I now see my experience as part of a systemic problem much bigger than my own story. To be clear, I don't believe Witnesses condone violence against women in principle and I was lucky to have a family that supported me to escape the abusive situation. But the patriarchal organisational structure, the insularity of the community, and a literalist interpretation of scripture combine to keep Witness women subservient to men. When women do experience violence, their power to self-advocate is limited by the structures, practices, and teachings of the Witness faith.

It doesn't have to be this way.

In a patriarchal system built on Biblical laws from a time when women had no legal status or societal power, women will never be safe. Anyone who participates, teaches, or benefits from the rules of that system is responsible for the violence women in your congregation and in others around the world experience every day.

As representatives of the leadership of this organisation, you hold the power to create positive change. Here I offer just a few suggestions, as a starting point to help you understand what meaningful change could look like:

- **Dismantle** the gender-based hierarchy and male headship principle and demand organisational change so women can be represented in leadership positions.
- **Abolish** the current Governing Body—a group of men who are culpable for years of mishandled abuse cases and ongoing sexist and discriminatory ideologies spread through publications and JW Broadcasting.
- **Repeal** the scriptural vs legal divorce rule and support women to escape violence without repercussions to their faith or status.
- **Modernise** interpretations of biblical doctrine to reduce harm and produce more inclusive publications and sources of information.
- **Use** JW.org to provide credible, helpful, and most importantly, tangible resources for women who need support.

Although I have been inactive as a Witness for over a decade, I have never been officially disfellowshipped or disassociated. That changes today. **Please accept this letter as my official disassociation from the Jehovah's Witness faith and from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.** As a gender-based violence survivor, I cannot consciously—even peripherally—be associated with an organisation that has gender disparity and sexist ideology enshrined in its core doctrines and organisational structure.

You have the power to create meaningful change and ensure women can be safe. What will you choose to do?

Respectfully,
Carmel Mikol

² [A Secret Database of Child Abuse](#) (The Atlantic, March 2019)