

Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea

A report on the practice of kidnapping, confinement and forced de-conversion in South Korea.

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Human Rights Without Frontiers



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Foreword

This report documents the ongoing kidnapping and confinement of South Korean citizens for the purpose of coercive religious de-conversion.¹ The failure to provide the victims of such kidnappings with equal protections under the law and to hold those responsible accountable constitutes a serious violation of the South Korean people's constitutionally guaranteed rights and the international human rights standards to which South Korea is legally bound.

South Korean politicians and civil society as well as the international human rights community have either been unaware of or ignored this long-standing problem. This has had tragic consequences for over 1,500 people. This report provides objective and empirical documentation, cultural and legal background and analysis, and recommendations in the hope that South Korean and international authorities as well as civil society and the international community will take steps to eradicate these practices.

It may be surprising to observers of international human rights issues to learn of a major human rights problem in South Korea, which is often perceived as one of the most law-abiding societies in the world. Consequently, South Korea is not a focus of intense scrutiny by the international human rights community.

However, members of minority religions often face discrimination and abuse even in the most peaceful societies. The persecution of minority religions often receives inadequate attention and persists due to implicit biases among politicians, activists and the general public. Many people show little concern for the issues of members of religious organizations whose beliefs and practices they disapprove of. This is the case in South Korea.

Additionally, these kidnappings are typically organized by victims' own families, which is a form of domestic violence that is immensely difficult for the South Korean authorities and civil society to address. This is largely due to cultural norms in South Korea that give parents timeless authority over their children and societal expectations for children to be subservient to their parents regardless of their age. However, if South Korean authorities are to respect individual human rights and uphold their legal obligations under international law, they cannot stand behind arguments of cultural relativism.

For almost two decades now these cases have been exposed to South Koreans, but there has been an overwhelming absence of public outrage. This is surprising for a society that is well-known for its capacity for self-criticism and mobilization around social justice issues. Politicians were generally unwilling to engage with this topic publicly; most journalists were uninterested or biased; and none of the local human rights organizations advocated for the rights of these victims. Abductees were traumatized by what had happened to them and deeply frustrated by the inaction of the authorities and the general indifference towards their plight. Sometimes families who had been torn apart by these practices have been able to reconcile, but many lives and families have been changed forever.

¹ **Coercive de-conversion** is a practice that aims to force someone to recant the religion he or she has converted to. In this report, coercive de-conversion concerns adults who freely followed the teachings of the Shincheonji Church, but who were kidnapped and confined for the purpose of forcibly recanting their religious affiliation.

The only consistent documentation of these cases has been conducted by the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, Temple of Tabernacle of Testimony, largely because these kidnappings primarily target their members. However, there was recognition within the Shincheonji Church that these testimonies needed to be dealt with professionally and impartially.

In seeking a solution, Shincheonji came across the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, which is well-known for its expertise on religious freedom issues within a wide range of cultural contexts.

South Korean institutions have been unable to reconcile their international obligations to protect the individual right to freely choose one's religion or belief with traditions and powerful expectations rooted in family or clan structures.

Many current-day societies have faced similar issues. South Korea is not alone in this regard and should receive constructive assistance, guidance, and solidarity from the international human rights community.

The objective of this report by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* is to raise awareness within and outside of South Korea, and to encourage a broad dialogue about family kidnappings for the purpose of religious de-conversion. Ultimately, the hope is that this will facilitate a credible and effective institutional response at the national and international level.

The success of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) in contributing to the eradication of a similar problem of coercive de-conversion in Japan last decade is a reason for hope. This egregious human rights violation must and can end in South Korea as well.

Aaron Rhodes, Hamburg, February 2020

Author of the book “*The Debasement of Human Rights. How Politics Sabotage the Ideal of Freedom*” Encounter Books, New York, 2019.

President of the Vienna-based NGO *Forum Religionsfreiheit Europa (FOREF)*

PART I

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief is a right protected by **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** which reads:

“(1) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2) No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3) Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”

The Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are legally bound to prohibit all coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith. They are obliged to prosecute any person or group found:

- violating the right for an individual to have or not to have a religion or beliefs, to change and retain the religion or beliefs of his/her choice;
- using hate speech and instigating hatred towards a religious or belief community and its members;
- using illegal means to forcefully bring back converts to their previous religion or beliefs;
- and inducing others to kidnap and confine someone for the purpose of coercively de-converting him/her.

They must also ensure that there are appropriate remedies available and accessible for victims of such cases.

However, for years political and judicial authorities in South Korea have turned a blind eye to forced change of religion operations masterminded specifically by the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea.’² The purpose of these programs is to combat what they label ‘heresies’ and ‘heretics,’ by any means, including illegal ones, and at any cost. Under cover of this doctrinal conflict, a theological cleansing campaign has been gaining momentum since the beginning of this century.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) became involved in South Korea’s issue of forced change of religion in 2018 when it received a call for assistance. Someone in Seoul had

² The pastors, evangelists and missionaries active in the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ are mainly from the conservative Hap-dong and Kosin Presbyterian Churches. The Presbyterian Church comprises several denominations, such as Hap-dong, Tong-hap and Kosin. This fragmentation is the result of several schisms.

discovered HRWF's report "**Japan: Abduction and deprivation of freedom for the purpose of de-conversion**" (<https://hrwf.eu/forb/our-reports/>) which was published in 2013. This report described a similar phenomenon of coercive de-conversion that had affected thousands of members of the Japanese Unification Church (UC) over the course of 40 years. This is what scholars in religious studies labeled 'deprogramming.'

Through intensive advocacy efforts, HRWF was the main contributor to the eradication of this heinous practice despite the passivity of Japan's legislative, executive and judicial authorities, and the silence of the Japanese media and international human rights organizations.

In 2019, Willy Fautré, director of HRWF, traveled twice to South Korea to meet with about 15 former Protestants who had converted to the new Bible-based religious movement of the Shincheonji Church. Their testimonies are summarized in Part II of this report.

HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, nor align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any specific religion or belief system, but instead defends the right of a person to have the beliefs of her/his choice as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.

What is the Shincheonji Church?³



Shincheonji Peace Institute

Shincheonji Church of Jesus, Temple of the Tabernacle of Testimony (often shortened to Shincheonji), is one of the largest Korean Christian new religious movements. This church was founded in 1984 in South Korea by **Chairman LEE** and currently has more than 200,000 members in 29 countries.

Shincheonji teaches that it is the promised church in the Bible, destined to appear during the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecies. It also teaches that, when the prophecies are fulfilled, the messenger of Jesus, i.e. **Chairman LEE**, will start a new religious world to spread the gospel of the fulfillment of Revelation and to heal all nations. Because of its original theology and rapid growth, the Church encountered hostility from traditional Protestant denominations.

On 25 May 2013, **Chairman LEE** established the Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) and proclaimed The Declaration of World Peace.

On 18 September 2014, HWPL organized the World Alliance of Religions' Peace Summit in Seoul.

In 2017, HWPL was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

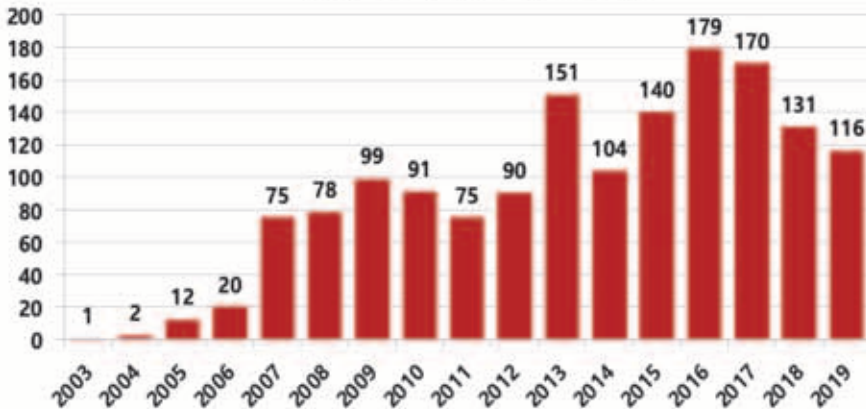
Shincheonji does not have a criminal record.

³ A detailed description of Shincheonji was published by Dr Massimo Introvigne in 'World Religions and Spirituality' on 30 August 2019 (<https://wrlldrels.org/2019/08/29/shincheonji/>).

Family kidnappings and coercive de-conversion in prison-like confinement conditions

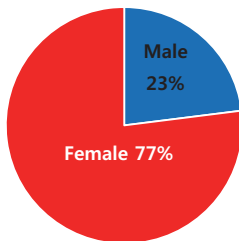
Reliable statistics about the extent of this phenomenon in South Korea are non-existent. The only available numbers are those of known victims who escaped from their de-conversion program or confirmed their beliefs in Shincheonji after pretending to be de-converted. The Shincheonji Church has collected their testimonies over the years, but it is safe to say that there are likely a large number of victims who have never been identified. The infographics that follow were published by the Shincheonji Church and provide some clarity as to the extent of the phenomenon.

Statistics for Forced Conversion Victims
2003~2019, Total of 1,534 cases

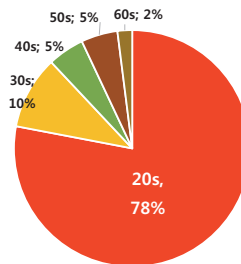


Total number of cases from 2003 until 2019 (September): 1,534

Percentage of Victims by Gender



Percentage of Victims by Age Group



* Statistics from 2016 to 2019
Total of 518 victims

Number of Victims by Gender and Age Groups

(2016~2019, Total of 518 Victims)

Age Groups	Male	Female	No. of Victims	% by Age Group
20s	78	322	400	78%
30s	4	49	53	10%
40s	3	25	28	5%
50s	3	25	28	5%
60s	2	7	9	2%
Total	90	428	518	100%



It is evident that the pattern of family kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of coercive de-conversion is now well established.

In these cases, oftentimes parents⁴ discover that their adult son or daughter has become a member of the Shincheonji Church, whose theology has been deemed heretical or cult-like by mainline Churches, while still living under their roof.

When family members research the Shincheonji Church online they find ‘anti-heretical’ and ‘anti-cult literature’ demonizing the Shincheonji Church and other new religious movements. They are then filled with anxiety and fear, and often look for help. They can easily find ‘cult counseling centers’ online that are organized by evangelists, missionaries and pastors of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’. These individuals are working to bring ‘lost sheep’ back to their church because there is a lot of competition between religions in South Korea.

This misinformation fuels panic in the minds of family members and, consequently, they begin preparations for a de-conversion program. Information sessions are held to train the parents on the necessary steps, which include illegal activities such as kidnapping and confinement. These services are not free.

During the first phase of the operation, the parents are told they will have to organize the kidnapping of their son or daughter and need to choose a well-equipped confinement place where escape isn’t possible. Afterwards, they will have to extort a signature from their son or daughter on a statement declaring that they have willingly asked for the de-conversion services of a ‘cult counseling center’ and voluntarily want to join a so-called ‘religious de-conversion program.’

The people working within this national network of ‘cult counseling centers,’ have a policy to never intervene if the individual has not signed this agreement.

The ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ adopted this policy after the Shincheonji Church started to sue some of the individuals carrying out de-conversions. They now train their evangelists to organize meetings and consultations with parents so as to distance themselves from legal liability. Sometimes the de-conversion sessions are conducted with former Shincheonji members.

In concrete terms, the pastors and evangelists of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ are THE masterminds, behind the scenes, of these kidnapping, confinement and coercive de-conversion operations. They never participate directly in these activities, which are illegal and prosecutable under the criminal code. They leave this to family members.

The agreement that must be signed before beginning a de-conversion program is also left to family members to obtain. The pastors turn a blind eye to the way this is accomplished, which can include: blackmail, threats, psychological and physical pressure, violence, and detention.

When the de-conversion program can officially start, the work is assigned to lower-ranking members of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ who are specifically trained for it. The higher-level masterminds of these operations ensure they cannot be prosecuted.

⁴ There are also cases when the husband organized the kidnapping and confinement before the de-conversion program. See Part II for specific examples of this.

'Anti-heretical counseling centers'



Seoul City

Cult Counseling Centers



Deok-Sul LEE ①
-Presbyterian
Jesus love Church
(Songpa)



Young-Guk SEO
-Presbyterian
Life spring Church
(Gangbuk) ②



Gun-Woo KIM ③
-Presbyterian
Grace &peace
Church (Gangnam)



Gi-Su JOO ④
-Presbyterian
Grace &peace
Church (Gangseo)

Chungcheong Province

Cult Counseling Centers



Suk-Yeon KIM ①
Presbyterian
Jehovah's Church
(Cheongju)



Young-Gook YO,
Young-Kwon WOO
Presbyterian
grace & love Church
(Cheongju) ②



Ji-Ge JUNG
Presbyterian Church
of Korea (Cheongju)
(Cheongju) ③

Jeolla Province

Cult Counseling Centers

	Hee-Baek KIM -Presbyterian Namsung Church (Gwangju)	①
	Shin-Yu KANG, Woong-ki LIM -Presbyterian Jaone Church (Gwangju)	②
	Jong-Han KIM -Presbyterian Dream Church (Suncheon)	③
	Yong-Gil JIN -Presbyterian Seonin Church (Jeonju)	④

Busan City

Cult Counseling Centers

	Ui-Jong HWANG, Nam-Gwae KWON -Presbyterian Saehakjang Church (Sasang)	①
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International conference in Seoul in 2019

On 29 November 2019, HRWF co-hosted a seminar with the *Center for Studies on New Religions* (CESNUR) in Seoul, South Korea titled: *Intolerance and Discrimination Against New Religious Movements: An International Problem*. It highlighted the practice of forced change of religion by non-state actors in the United States (US) and in Europe (in the past), in Japan until recently and in South Korea nowadays.



Conference in Seoul 2019

Prominent professors and scholars from the US and Europe covered this issue from various angles:

Gordon Melton is the Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He is the author of more than 50 books on religious studies, including *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* and *Religions of the World*. A specialist in the study of new religions, he has authored multiple texts on the issues surrounding ‘cults’ and anti-cultism.

Holly Folk, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Western Washington University in the US. In 2019, she served as Program Chair for the Association for the Sociology of Religion’s annual meeting. She has lectured and published extensively on new religious movements (NRMs), religion in Eastern Asia, new Christian groups and communal studies. She has published a number of academic papers on NRMs in China.

Eileen Barker, Professor Emeritus of Sociology with Special Reference to the Study of Religion at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the United Kingdom (UK). Her main research interest is minority religions. She has around 350 publications that have been translated into 27 different languages. In 1988, she founded INFORM, an educational charity

research interest is minority religions. She has around 350 publications that have been translated into 27 different languages. In 1988, she founded INFORM, an educational charity providing information about religions in the UK. She is a frequent advisor to governments, other official bodies and law-enforcement agencies around the world.

Rosita Šorytė is the co-founder and head of the *International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees* (ORLIR). She is the author, inter alia, of *Religious Persecution, Refugees and Right of Asylum* in the Journal of CESNUR.⁵ She graduated from the University of Vilnius in Lithuania and has served on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania at the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to UNESCO, the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the Council of Europe, and the Permanent Mission of Lithuania at the United Nations. In 2011, she worked as the representative of the Lithuanian Chairmanship of the OSCE at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. In 2012-2013, she was the chairperson of the European Union (EU) Working Group on Humanitarian Aid on behalf of the Lithuanian pro tempore presidency of the EU.

Massimo Introvigne is the founder and the managing director of the *Center for Studies on New Religions* (CESNUR) in Turin, Italy. He is also the editor-in-chief of the daily magazine *Bitter Winter* on religious liberty in China. He is the author of more than 70 books and several hundred peer-reviewed articles in the field of Sociology of Religions, which is mostly devoted to NRMs. In 2011, he served as the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, as well as focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions.

Willy Fautré, is the director and founder of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF), which is a Brussels-based NGO that was established in 1989. Before then, he was a *chargé d'affaires* at the Cabinet of the Ministry of Education and the Belgian Parliament. He started defending religious freedom in Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War in the mid-1970's. He is a lecturer in the field of human rights and religious freedom. He has published a wide range of papers in academic journals about discrimination and intolerance targeting and stigmatizing NRMs and their members. Additionally, he has carried out fact-finding missions in more than 20 countries.

Forced de-conversion in South Korea, also known as 'deprogramming' by scholars in religious studies in the US and in Europe, is a social issue that involves kidnapping and forcing de-conversion in confinement conditions. It is usually organized by pastors and evangelists in their crusade against so-called 'heretics.'

More than 80 participants including legal experts, journalists, and civil society representatives reviewed the current situation of forced de-conversion and discussed solutions to defend the individual right to religious freedom.

⁵ Journal of CESNUR/ 2(1), 2018, 78-99



The panelists for this conference

Massimo Introvigne, who co-organized the Seoul seminar, stressed that forced change of religion in South Korea is conducted by mainstream churches: “Korean ‘deprogrammers’ are specialized pastors from the mainline churches, most of them Presbyterian.”

"The recent protests of the Shincheonji Church that commemorated the death of two victims of forced change of religion were mentioned in the 2019 US State Department Report on Religious Freedom, including violations of religious freedom in the year 2018. However, there were new cases of ‘deprogramming’ by pastors and evangelists even after their deaths," he said.

In 2018, 131 members of the Shincheonji Church reported that they had been kidnapped and subjected to attempts of forced de-conversion in confinement conditions of variable durations. In 2019, there were 116 such cases. The total number of people who were ‘successfully’ submitted to a forced change of religion program by members of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ is and will always remain unknown to researchers.

Willy Fautré shared his experience in Japan several years ago when he interviewed over 30 victims of this human rights violation. Through subsequent advocacy efforts, he aided in eradicating this practice together with Toru Goto. Goto was detained for years by his family with the complicity of Evangelical and Pentecostal deprogrammers and his case, combined with HRWF advocacy efforts, finally prompted the international community to exert pressure on Japanese authorities.



Willy Fautré speaking at conference

In 2019, Willy Fautré interviewed victims of attempts of forced change of religion targeting members of the Shincheonji Church in South Korea, and has published these cases. At this seminar, he compared the situation in South Korea to the one he had combated in Japan, and concluded that:

“As in Japan, this devastating practice could be eradicated in South Korea if a multi-dimensional strategy is implemented.”

An open letter was initiated by CESNUR and signed by 15 international NGOs, including the UN accredited NGO *Freedom of Conscience* (CAP) and HRWF. It was addressed to the South Korean President Moon Jae-in on 24 July 2019 and stated that: “South Korea may well be the last democratic country in the world where deprogramming is still tolerated.” It called on the President to “investigate in-depth accusations of forcible deprogramming, put a stop to this abhorrent practice, and hold those responsible fully accountable.”

Recommended reading:

- Cheonji Daily (Korean): <http://www.newscj.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=687421>
- Ghana News Online : <https://ghananewsonline.com.gh/forced-conversion-that-violates-human-rights-becomes-an-international-problem/>
- HRWF report on Japan: <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2012-Report-Japan.pdf>
- HRWF investigated cases in South Korea: <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SouthKorea2019.pdf>
- Modern Ghana : <https://www.modernghana.com/news/970974/forced-conversion-that-violates-human-rights-becom.html>
- Newsmaker: <https://www.newsmaker.com.au/news/376038/forced-conversion-that-violates-human-rights-becomes-an-international-problem#.XeZh6C2ZPyU>
- Sisa Magazine (Korean) : <http://www.sisamagazine.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=304958>
- The Anglo-Celt: <https://www.anglocelt.ie/sponsorededitorial/roundup/articles/2019/12/02/4183056-forced-conversion-that-violates-human-rights-becomes-an-international-problem/>

PART II

10 Case Studies

Members of the Shincheonji Church testified that they were victims of kidnappings, confinement and coercive de-conversion attempts masterminded by the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’

Ji-in GU, a young woman died in an attempt to forcibly de-convert her in confinement conditions

She was killed by her father, who is still on the run years later



Ji-in GU

Ji-in GU was a convert to the Shincheonji Church who lost her life during a de-conversion program masterminded by Presbyterian evangelists. This led to a mass demonstration on the streets of Seoul: 120,000 protested against the impunity of the perpetrators of coercive de-conversion of Shincheonji members. Over 1,500 cases of kidnapping were recorded from 2003 to 2020.

First kidnapping

On 23 July 2016, **Ji-in GU**, then 24 years old,¹ was on her way home in her parents' car along with her older sister when she was kidnapped by her family. They took her to the Catholic monastery of St Clare's in Jangseong county (South Jeolla Province) where she was kept in confinement over the course of 44 days. Her sister, a teacher in an elementary school, was actively backing their parents' decision and tied **Ji-in GU**'s arms to hers during the trip to prevent any escape attempt.

Concerned about the conversion of their daughter to the Shincheonji Church, her parents had previously consulted a Presbyterian evangelist, **Woong-ki LIM** about how to de-convert her. The advice had been to submit her to a so-called 'exit counseling' program to be carried out in 'isolation' (confinement) conditions. Kidnapping and confinement are illegal activities

¹ **Ji-in GU** was born in 1992.

according to Article 276 (False Arrest and Illegal Confinement, Those in Lineal Ascendant) of the criminal code² in South Korea which says:

“A person who illegally arrests or confines another person shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than five years, or a fine not exceeding seven million won. (Amended by Act No 5057, Dec. 29, 1995)

“When the crime as referred to in paragraph (1) is committed on the lineal ascendant of the offender or one’s spouse, one shall be punished by limited imprisonment for not more than ten years, or a fine not exceeding fifteen million won. (Amended by Act No 5057, Dec. 29, 1995)”

During her confinement, two Presbyterian evangelists, **Woong-ki LIM**³ and **Jung-cheol PARK** pressured her to sign a statement asserting that she would voluntarily follow their ‘cult exit counselling’ program to renounce her belief in the teachings of the Shincheonji Church. She signed the agreement because she thought that she would not be able to escape confinement if she did not since she was being held under tight security. It was therefore not her free choice.



Presbyterian evangelists Woong-ki LIM and Jung-cheol PARK

During 44 days of confinement, she was submitted to a forcible de-conversion program. When she left the monastery, the Mother Superior there said, “good job.”

The Presbyterian evangelists thought that they had been successful with their program, but, in fact, she had only acted as if she was ‘de-converted.’ As soon as she was free, she disappeared to escape the surveillance of her family and the post-reconversion program which included religious services and classes about the Presbyterian faith.

In 2017, her parents realized that she still believed in the teachings of the Shincheonji Church⁴ and planned another kidnapping operation.

² Source: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f49e3ed4.html>

³ **Woong Ki LIM**

- Secretary General of the Gwangju Christian Church Council Anti-Cult Committee Gwangju East Presbyterian (Integrated Presbyterian Denomination) Anti-cult Committee, Expert Committee Member
- Advisory Committee of Anti-cult Committee of Jeonbuk Academy of Evangelization
- Korea Christian Cult Counseling Center, Director of Gwangju Area
- Gwangju Ju Won Church, Evangelist (Presbyterian (Integrated) Denomination)
- Jeonnam Province Daily Paper’s Director of Missions Bureau

⁴ Source: A video statement of the victim shot outside the place of confinement. It has not been made public but HRWF has access to it.

Second kidnapping

New Year festivities are always a dangerous period for converts who fear a kidnapping attempt because they cannot escape family reunions. These celebrations are often misused by families to kidnap, confine and conduct coercive de-conversion programs. For these reasons, **Ji-in GU** was scared at the end of 2017 and shared her fears with her closest friends.

On 29 December 2017, **Ji-in GU**'s parents used a family trip as a pretense to kidnap her again. During her confinement and the ensuing 'exit counseling' program, she lost her life under unclear circumstances. A media outlet said:⁵

"A 27-year-old woman, **Ji-in GU**, was killed while she was being held captive at a secluded recreational lodge in Hwasun (Jeonnam, South Jeolla Province). On January 18, the parents of the woman were held responsible for the murder. According to the police department of Hwasun, they bound and gagged their daughter, leading to suffocation. The autopsy revealed a high possibility of cardiopulmonary arrest due to hypoxic hypoxia. The death was ricocheted from a 'family matter' to a national issue, with more than 120,000 people gathering in Seoul and the other major cities of South Korea on 28 January to protest against coercive conversion, of which the woman was a victim."⁶

The incident was also highlighted by the US Department of State in its annual country *Report on International Religious Freedom* published on 19 June 2019:⁷

"In January, following reports that parents killed their daughter while attempting to force her to convert from what the parents viewed as a cult to their own Christian denomination, 120,000 citizens gathered in Seoul and elsewhere to protest against coercive conversion, reportedly conducted by some Christian pastors. The protestors criticized the government and churches for remaining silent on the issue and demanded action."

The father of the victim was indicted but was still on the run at the time of the interview of **Ji-in GU**'s co-religionists in Seoul in 2019.⁸

Impunity: the responsibility of the South Korean authorities

After repeated cases of kidnapping and forced change of religion attempts, several victims of these practices have publicly called for the prosecution of the instigators and perpetrators in these cases. Kidnapping, confinement and forcible change of religion are strictly forbidden by national law. However, there appears to be no will on the side of various South Korean authorities to tackle this issue.

⁵ The Week Magazine: "In bad faith: Korean woman dies during forced conversion", 19 February 2018. <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2018/02/19/in-bad-faith-korean-woman-dies-during-forced-conversion.html>

⁶ Most demonstrators were Shincheonji members and their friends. After the death of **Ji-in GU**, more than 100,000 signatures were collected in support of an online petition asking for the punishment of those promoting forcible programs of de-conversion on members of the Shincheonji Church. It was posted on the Blue House website, which is the website of the residential office of the President of South Korea. However, it was deleted and, up until now, the Blue House has still not provided an official response.

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>

⁸ **Ji-in GU**'s mother was a social worker but quit her job to prepare the first program of forcible de-conversion in 2016. After the first attempt, she went back to work as a contract worker.

In the case of **Ji-in GU**, a civil complaint was submitted to the Office of the President of South Korea, but it was the police station of Gwangju Bukbu that was assigned to the case. The authorities replied that they tried to contact the family, but they were not at home and their phones were all turned off. No further action was taken.

On 18 January 2018, **Hye Jung LIM**, a former victim of kidnapping for the purpose of de-conversion, posted a letter about the violent death of **Ji-in GU** on the website of the Blue House.⁹ In her post, which was quickly deleted from the website, she stated that on 4 June 2017, **Ji-in GU** had called upon the government to prosecute Presbyterian pastors inciting illegal violent actions for the purpose of forced change of religion.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which is in charge of religious affairs, received a copy of the civil complaint and answered the applicant in February 2018 by stating that: “the state cannot interfere with an individual’s choice of religion, religious activities, or that of any particular religious organization, as the Constitution of the Republic of Korea guarantees freedom of religion and the separation between state and religious organizations in Article 20.”

⁹ The Blue House is the executive and official residence of the President of South Korea.

Hyeon-jeong KIM: 50 days of confinement for forced de-conversion

Presbyterian pastors inciting domestic violence and breaches of Korean law



Hyeon-jeong KIM

Hyeon-jeong KIM, the victim of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of religious de-conversion, was born in 1989. Her parents, **Sung-jo KIM** and **Eun-su KIM**, are Presbyterians. They raised their children in their own faith. Her father is a retired teacher and her mother is a housewife. They were living together in Daegu, the fourth largest city of Korea, at the time of the incidents. In 2015, at the age of 27, **Hyeon-jeong KIM** started attending the religious services of the Shincheonji Church. This was the beginning of serious problems with her parents.

Interview with Hyeon-jeong KIM

Q: How did your parents know about your interest in the Shincheonji Church and how did they react?

A: They heard from one of my friends. They were very opposed and put me under strict surveillance. They also contacted Presbyterian pastors to ask them what to do. Knowing that my father could be violent, I told him I would not go to that church anymore. I was a pharmacy student at the time and so I managed to continue attending their services secretly for the next three years.

In 2018, I accepted a job in a pharmacy. At the same time, my parents found out that I had not severed my relations with the Shincheonji Church. On 8 April, during dinner, my father had an angry outburst about my change of religion. I didn't say anything because I did not want to further inflame the situation. During this incident, my father tried to hit me with a glass container and my mother held me by the neck while my brother also tried to hit me. This familial abuse lasted for two hours.

In the aftermath of that fateful day, my parents did some research on the internet about the Shincheonji Church. They only found negative articles and information spread by Protestant

Churches and media influenced by them. After that, they took my phone away and my father followed me to and from work every day as if I were a child. I was 30 years old at the time.

In the meantime, they had been told by Presbyterian pastors to show me films and articles denouncing the Shincheonji Church as a heretic Christian movement. After work, I wasn't allowed to leave the house and was denied access to my cell phone. I had to watch and read Presbyterian propaganda about the Shincheonji Church every day. My brother, who was married and was not living with us, had taken sides with my parents and was threatening me.

Q. Did you try to get outside assistance?

A. There was a police station near the pharmacy with a Women and Youth department at their counseling center. I decided to try to get some help from them. However, due to the close surveillance of my father, I could only go to the police during my lunch break. I did so and told them everything, including the reasons behind the domestic violence I was experiencing. The police response was catastrophic. They called my father and told him to give me back my phone and to put an end to my surveillance. This only further fueled my father's anger towards me.

At the pharmacy, I told my boss and my colleagues that I feared I was at risk of being kidnapped and confined by my family because of my change of religion.

Q. And were you kidnapped?

A. Yes. A few weeks later, on 27 April 2018. My phone had 'disappeared,' but I knew they had taken it away. I was very angry and threatened to call the police. I told my mother I would leave for work earlier than usual and have breakfast in a nearby shop. She thought I was planning to run away from home forever and ran after me. My father caught me and forced me into his car. As I was screaming, passers-by tried to help, but my father told them I was *his* daughter and he was saving me from a heretic religious movement. He informed our family that he was taking me to my aunt's, **Kyung-hee KIM**. It was approximately a 15 minute drive away. This is how my kidnapping and confinement started.

Q. Had the kidnapping been pre-meditated by your parents?

A. Yes, without any doubt. At my aunt's place, we were joined by my mother and brother. I was deprived of all my possessions, tied up and transferred to a faraway place: Hae-woon-dae, Busan. It took two hours by car. I was pushed into a studio on the 7th floor of a building.

My family had made this plan based on recommendations from the Presbyterian pastors. Since no date had been fixed for my kidnapping, the logistics had only been partially prepared. For example, the renting contract of the studio was signed by my mom and my aunt a day before I was kidnapped.

I was locked in a room with closed curtains for 50 days under the surveillance of both my parents and my aunt. They threatened that I would never be able to leave if I did not agree to enter a de-conversion program. Members of my brother's family who visited us on weekends cursed at me and threatened me as well. One day, my father tried to strangle me because I was still refusing to give up my faith. My mom and my aunt stopped him just in time. Otherwise, I would have been killed in the same way as another woman a few months earlier: **Ji-in GU** (25 years old).

After about a month of staying at the studio apartment, my aunt went back to Daegu and the rest of my family remained. I started suffering from claustrophobia.

Q. The Presbyterian de-conversion actors did not appear until the last day of your captivity - why is that?

A: During the 50 days that I spent in captivity, no de-conversion pastor showed up because they do not want to be accused of complicity in a case of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion, which is illegal in South Korea. However, they were in regular contact with my family and instructed them on how to force me to return to the Presbyterian faith. Of course, I do not have any records of their telephone conversations, but whenever I clashed with my parents one of them would leave the room to make a phone call. So, I am assuming that they were receiving instructions on how to act in such situations.

For more than seven weeks I resisted the psychological pressure and the threats of my family and their Presbyterian advisers. I was alone against all of them, without any help or support, but I won my battle for my faith. I continued refusing to sign any agreement stating that I was freely asking to be de-converted in the framework of a so-called ‘conversion counseling program.’

Since my parents saw no solution in sight, some people from the Suyongro Presbyterian Church in Busan were sent to the apartment. This gave me the opportunity to attempt to escape. I was unsuccessful, but was able to leave the apartment long enough to call for help. When I tried to escape that day, my family *and* the three envoys from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church dragged me back into the apartment. Consequently, these three envoys directly participated in my confinement. Their names are **Hana CHO** and **Jin-wook CHOO**, both evangelists of the Presbyterian Suyongro Church, and an unknown woman.

Q. How did you manage to recover your freedom?

A: On 16 June 2018, the 51st day of my confinement, a combination of circumstances gave me an opportunity to run away. I was cleaning the bathroom when someone rang the front doorbell. My father started to remove the water bottles that were stacked at the front door to let the three people mentioned above into the apartment. When my father opened the door, I rushed out, barefoot and calling for help. However, I was on the 7th floor and so my parents were able to catch me. I was brought back into the apartment and the three visitors came inside for my de-conversion program.

I continued to scream and refused to do anything they tried forcing me to do. One of the neighbors came to our door and asked what was happening. I cried out, “please call the police!” before my father closed the door again. That neighbor did call the police.

When the police came, they took everybody to the police station. My mother, my father and myself were in the same car and two of the de-conversion actors – **Hana CHO** and **Jin-wook CHOO** - were in another police car. My brother was in Busan and arrived at the police station an hour after my parents called him. All I wanted was to be separated from my family.

After several hours of discussion, the police brought me to a women’s emergency shelter in Busan despite the opposition of my family. Not long afterwards, my brother managed to find

my safe place and so, for my own security, I had to move to another shelter in Daegu. The police followed my case and I am grateful for that.

Q. What happened at the police station?

A. The police checked the identity of everyone involved and asked me why I had been held in the apartment.

I said that over the course of 50 days my family had tried to force me to leave the Shincheonji Church because they believed it was a cult and wanted me to return to the Presbyterian Church. To this end, they pressured me to sign an agreement to ‘voluntarily’ participate in a religious re-education program run by the Presbyterian Church. However, I kept refusing because it was not voluntary and so they kept me in confinement.

A policeman took me to another room and said that what my family did was a crime. Additionally, since the victim – myself – wanted separation from the perpetrators, they were obliged to provide a safe place.

The members of the Presbyterian Church in Busan – **Hana CHO** and **Jin-wook CHOO** - emphasized that they were just average church members and began to slander the Shincheonji Church. They also cursed and slandered me, and took sides with my family, saying I should go to a “normal church.”

The police listened to their accusations and did not make any comments.

Q. Could you return to your position at the pharmacy after almost two months of absence?

A. On the day of my kidnapping, my boss from the pharmacy received a call from my maternal uncle. He said that they were with me at a restaurant in Gyeonggi-do (Gyeonggi province) and that we were in the midst of a family trip, and then he immediately hung up.

Because of what I had told my boss about my family issues and fear of being kidnapped, he filed a missing person’s report with the police.

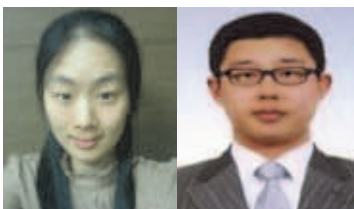
Fortunately, I could return to my job.

Q. How are your relations with your family now?

A. When I was at the women’s shelter in Daegu, my father sent me a letter saying that I could return home and he would respect my religious choice. The local police, who had been informed of my situation by my boss, escorted me home. Now I am living with my family again. I agreed to live with them on the condition that they respect my religious choice. I feel better, but the aftereffects of this traumatic experience have not disappeared.

End of interview.

The perpetrators



Hana CHO

Jin-wook CHOO

The three de-conversion actors from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church who showed up at the place **Hyeon-Jeong KIM** was being detained were aware that she was confined by family members. When she tried to escape, they decided not only to deny assistance to a person in danger, but also to become accomplices in her confinement. Kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion are illegal and criminal activities in South Korea. Her family members were prosecuted, but not the three individuals who helped them.

- **Hana CHO** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church. She carries out de-conversions and directly consults with family members who come to the church for the coercive de-conversion program.

- **Jin-wook CHOO** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church. He carries out de-conversions and directly consults with family members who come to the church for the coercive de-conversion program.

- **Unknown woman** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church.

Management of the case by the police and the judiciary

Judgment of Daegu Provincial Prosecutor's office

On 13 July 2018, Daegu Provincial Prosecutor's Office published its ruling concerning the accused: **Sung-jo KIM, Eun-Su KIM** and **Kyung-hee KIM**. It is noteworthy that none of the Presbyterian pastors involved were on the list of accused despite being the masterminds of the operation. (*)

The official charge was: "violation against the law on violent acts and punishment (Joint confinement)."

In the section of the judgment titled *The result of the investigation and viewpoints*, the accused did not deny the facts – the kidnapping, the confinement and the coercive attempt of religious de-conversion – but instead argued that it was all for the well-being of the victim.

What follows is the section of the judgment outlining the facts admitted by all parties, the statements of each accused and the review of the Prosecutor's Office:¹⁰

¹⁰ Source: Decision of the Court.

➤ *“Facts that are recognized*

The suspects, having the plan of giving the de-conversion program through religious counseling to the victim for being a member of the Shincheonji faith, booked the studio in Jadong Haeundaegu Busan in advance. On the morning of the incident (27 April 2018), they kidnapped the victim in a car, drove to Busan and confined her for 50 days in the studio, She was cut off from the outside world and was not allowed to exit until the day she was found on 16 June 2018 after running away. Everything appears to be true.

The victim is testifying that she was taken by force by her parents and her aunt in a car to Busan and was confined in a studio for 50 days until she could finally escape.

Her testimony includes: she was with her parents and her aunt in the studio and was forced to take the de-conversion program. She was threatened with not being able to leave until she promised to participate in the program. The door was blocked with piles of many water bottles and the shoe rack covered the door handle so that the victim could not leave the room. (Record Page 197 Written Testimony)

➤ *Statement of the suspect Sung-jo KIM*

The suspect decided that the only way for his daughter (the victim) who had converted to the Shincheonji religion to return to the Presbyterian faith was through a ‘cult counseling program’ (coercive de-conversion) in Busan. On the morning of the incident, he kidnapped the victim on her way to work and drove her to a studio in Busan that was already prepared. All of the phones were turned off and water bottles were piled up in front of the front door. The shoe rack was used to block the handle of the door and so on. He admitted that the victim was held in captivity against the victim's will for about 50 days, and included the fact that he didn't allow her to escape. (Record page 213 of Suspect interrogation report)

➤ *A statement by the suspect Eun-su KIM*

The suspect, charged with forcibly attempting to de-convert her daughter (the victim) together with the victim’s aunt (suspect **Kyung-hee KIM**), arrived in Busan the day before the incident. She signed for a studio room in advance, and later moved the victim to Busan by force with her husband (**Sung-jo KIM**). She admitted that she held the victim in captivity for about 50 days against the victim's will. (Record page 229 of Suspect interrogations report)

➤ *Statement of the suspect Kyung-hee KIM*

The suspect reports that she first received a request from her brother (suspect **Sung-jo KIM**) to get a studio for the de-conversion program for the victim because her niece is deeply involved with the Shincheonji Church. The suspect signed a room with another suspect (**Eun-su KIM**) the day before the incident and admits that she went to the parking lot of the World Cup Stadium later to pick up the victim and the suspect in her Lacetti vehicle. She claims that she was there to help the victim and the other suspects with food, but that act was against the will of the victim. She also continued helping the suspects from 27/4/2018 to 30/5/2018 despite knowing the victim was in confinement. (Record page 252 of Suspect interrogation report)

➤ *Review*

The suspects claim that only the de-conversion program through a trained consultant had the potential to bring the victim back to the Presbyterian Church. Even though she was in a confined environment, the suspects argue that she was with her parents and it was all for the wellbeing of the victim. However, it is clearly recognized as an illegal confinement for kidnapping her in the car on the way to work, taking her to Busan where she was completely cut off from the outside world and trapped for 50 days because the front door was blocked. All of this was against the will of the victim until the day of her escape.”

The Opinion of the Prosecutor’s Office was: “the suspicion of the suspects has been confirmed, so they will be charged accordingly (indictment without detention).”

In this case, it means the suspects were officially charged for their crimes. However, since the accused were first-time offenders and had confessed and repented for their crimes, and as the victim was able to resume her life, the prosecution’s civic committee suggested a suspension of the indictment. For this reason, the court ruled that although the charges are formally acknowledged, the prosecution will be suspended for a probation period of seven years.

Hyeon-jeong KIM filed a petition with the Constitutional Court against the prosecutor of the Daegu District Public Prosecutors’ Office, alleging that his decision was infringing on her basic rights, “including equal rights and the right to appeal in hearing proceedings.” However, on 28 June 2019, the judges of the Constitutional Court unanimously dismissed her claim.

Tae-Kyun KIM: Mother and son torn apart and finally reconciled

How a loving mother was transformed into the kidnapper of her son



Tae Kyun Kim and his mother at the DMZ

Tae-kyun KIM is tall and athletic. He was very close to his parents before he was the victim of a kidnapping attempt by his mother in 2013. He managed to escape during the operation but after that, he ran away from home and did not contact his family for the following two months.

How a loving mother was transformed into the kidnapper of her son

Tae-kyun KIM was 19 when he started to attend the Shincheonji Church. He took the required Bible classes from December 2012 until June 2013 and passed an examination that qualified him as a registered member. At that time, he was a student at the police academy and was supported by his mother, but she did not know what type of church her son was in.

After some time, she became suspicious that he was involved with the Shincheonji Church and even aggressive with her son. **Tae-kyun KIM** was very disturbed by his mother's behavior because she had never acted this way before.

His mother then sued the evangelist of the Shincheonji Church in charge of the Bible studies on the grounds that he was still under-age. Eventually she dropped the charges and contacted a deacon of the Presbyterian Church in Gwangju: **Yong-su PARK**.

During this conversation, the deacon recommended that she have her son kidnapped and confined until he recants his new faith, which is an illegal and prosecutable offense in South Korea.

Deacon **Yong-su PARK** promised to recommend a number of strong men for the kidnapping since **Tae-kyun KIM** was a boxer at that time. He advised her to rent an apartment far from home and to confine her son during the de-conversion program. However, before starting, he needed **Tae-kyun KIM** to sign a statement that he was willingly asking for so-called ‘exit counseling.’

Deacon **Yong-su PARK** informed her that it would take about 70 days to plan and carry out the kidnapping and the confinement of her son.

After much preparation, the attempt took place in July 2013. While traveling to a family dinner by car, **Tae-kyun KIM** became suspicious that he was being kidnapped. He escaped once the vehicle stopped. After this incident, he decided to live with some friends and cut off ties with his family. He only revived communication with his mother 1 or 2 months later.

By that time, **Tae-kyun KIM’s** mother greatly regretted her decision to attempt a kidnapping and forced de-conversion. She asked for forgiveness and they were able to restore their good relationship. **Tae-kyun KIM** is now a blue-collar worker, while also busking and performing in musicals.

“I am a mother who tried to force her beloved son into a coercive de-conversion program”

“My name is **Mi-jeong PARK**. I am a mother who tried to force her beloved son into a coercive de-conversion program.

When my son began attending the Shingcheonji Church, I respected his decision and our family lived happily without any problem. However, one day, I heard rumors from my acquaintances regarding this Church. I was shocked and alarmed by those rumors. I was introduced to a pastor under the Christian Council of Korea and he referred me to a so-called ‘cult counseling center,’ which I visited.

March 2013: Instructions about the kidnapping, confinement and de-conversion procedure

At the ‘cult counseling center’ in Buk-gu Samgak-dong, I had a meeting with three people: **Pastor Gang**, who claimed to be a ‘cult counselor,’ evangelist **Im** and another female evangelist.

The ‘cult counselors’ maliciously slandered the Shincheonji Church and personally criticized me. They planted anxiety and fear in my heart and made it impossible for me to make a rational decision. After hearing all of that, any parent would have been desperate to do anything ‘to get back’ their beloved child. I too trusted the ‘cult counselors’ and decided to have my son de-converted.

The de-conversion fee was between 1-3 million won (between 770 – 2,310 EUR) minimum, but they proudly stated that they had received 5 million, 10 million and even 20 million won from other parents.

Their de-conversion business was planned meticulously. They said that the program was comprised of a total of 45 subjects and would take 1 to 3 months to complete successfully. They said that the location of the de-conversion process must be a studio or a pension in a desolate area no more than 2-3 hours roundtrip from the city of Gwangju, such as Suncheon, Hwasun, Gokseong or Gochang.

I conveyed that I would like to de-convert my son at home. However, they told me about a recent case where a young woman who was being forcibly de-converted jumped off the 4th floor of the building. Her father also jumped in an attempt to catch her. Since my apartment was on the 16th floor, the ‘cult counselor’ said the program cannot happen there. They told me to find a studio or a guest house that has no more than three floors.

They also informed me of the case of the kidnapping of a female college student from Chonnam National University.

The ‘cult counseling center’ reassured me that they provide phone assistance 24 hours a day and that I would receive assistance to overpower my son if necessary. They also recommended that I open a new landline with a different number when calling instead of using my current cellphone.

They explained to me how to physically kidnap my son. They recommended forcing him into a car, taking away his cellphone and searching him thoroughly, including his undergarments, in case he is hiding a location tracker. They explained that when we reached the confinement place, my husband and I should tie our son’s arms and legs to our own during the confinement period. They emphasized that I must harden my heart as if he is not my child even if he cries and begs to leave.

Finally, for their legal safety as ‘cult exit counselors,’ they needed a contract form signed by the parents. It was a guarantee for the payment of their services. They also required the person who was to be de-converted to sign a declaration stating that he or she willfully was asking for the assistance of the de-conversion task force (self-proclaimed ‘exit counselors’).

They shared that parents have occasionally sued them in the past, but they triumphantly boasted that they are always released if they are summoned because they have good friends in the police force.

May 2013: Executing the instructions of the ‘cult exit counselors’

I loaded one month’s quantity of food in the trunk of my car, chose a day for the kidnapping and did everything I had been instructed to. My family and the ‘cult exit counselors’ decided to execute the 70-day kidnapping and confinement plan.

I enticed my son into the car with the pretext of a meeting with the evangelist he was studying the Bible with. Instead, we were headed to a pension in Boseong. After my son got into the car,

his uncle forcefully took his phone, as had been suggested. My son tried to open the locked door several times, screaming at us to let him out.

When we arrived at the pension, he burst out of the car and started to run. At one point he turned around and said, “Mum, don’t follow me.” I was frozen there. My heart broke as I watched him run further and further away.

After this, my son rejected me. I called the ‘exit counselors’ to update them and their callous response was: “oh, he is done now.”

The next day I received a call from my son. He was crying and said, “why are you listening to others instead of listening to a single word your son has to say? You are not like that, Mum.” After his phone call, I was filled with immense regret about what I had done.

I went back to the Shincheonji Church that my son attended. After seeing the teachings of the Church, I realized that the ‘cult exit counselors’ had lied to me the whole time. They use religion and their positions as religious leaders for the sole purpose of deceiving people and filling their pockets. They exploit the love parents have for their children, instill fear and anxiety in their minds, and push them to perpetrate illegal acts that destroy their families.

I almost lost my son and gave a significant amount of money to these ‘cult exit counselors.’

At this very moment there are parents who are preparing to send their adult children to a forceful de-conversion program. As someone who has attempted this and deeply regrets it, I would like to tell them this: “Look at your children for who they are. Listen to them sincerely. They are your children. You raised them properly. They did not change all of a sudden. Engage in a conversation with them and treat them as the adults they are.”¹¹



Tae Kyun Kim and his mother reunited after the failed de-conversion attempt

¹¹ Willy Fautré: “I interviewed **Tae-kyun KIM** together with his mother in Seoul in 2019.

Several years ago, I interviewed about 30 victims of parental kidnapping, confinement and forceful de-conversion attempts during long confinement periods in Japan. I spoke to a lady who was a member of the Unification Church in Japan together with her father who had kidnapped her for the purpose of de-conversion. I asked her father if he regretted what he done. He answered that he did not. I asked his daughter if she could forgive her father for what he had done and she answered: ‘I am trying to.’”

Hyun-kyung KIM: detained for 44 days

Confined over the course of 44 days for a coercive de-conversion program



Hyun-kyung KIM

At the time of the incident, **Hyun-kyung KIM** was 23 years old and was living in Seoul.

Her parents were informed that she was attending the religious services of the Shincheonji Church by a former church member. Her mother then consulted the so-called *Guri Cult Counseling Center* for advice as to how to proceed. A Presbyterian pastor there instructed her to kidnap and confine her daughter 'safely' before beginning a de-conversion program.

It took **Hyun-kyung KIM's** mother five months to arrange all of the logistics of the operation. During the planning and implementation of this confinement, her husband took leave from his job and their younger son interrupted his theological studies for a few months.

A lot of expenses

Hyun-kyung KIM's family already had a lot of debt accumulated, and the financial burden of this operation brought them to the verge of bankruptcy. The costs included: a lack of income while the father was on leave, properly equipping a place for the forced de-conversion (which often requires hundreds of thousands of won¹²), fees for the de-conversion program, travel expenses (primarily taxi fares), and religious offerings. On many occasions, her mother wanted

¹² 10,000 won = 7.5 EUR

to give up this project. However, she was always dissuaded by the assistant administrator **Hyun-ja SHIN** of the Guri *Cult Counseling Center*. A common argument she would make is: "If you give up, your daughter will go to hell, and she will ruin her life." This was a clear abuse of her authority when this family was in distress and vulnerable.

The detention house that **Hyun-kyung KIM** was confined in was situated in the mountains of Anseong. It was a remote private property that was owned by her grandfather. Steel bars were fixed to windows and toilet doors, and warehouses were built nearby to store supplies for several months. Nobody had access to this property and there was no cell phone coverage.

The kidnapping

When the house was ready for the forced de-conversion, the kidnapping began according to plan. On the night of 20 June 2016, **Hyun-kyung KIM's** mother gave her some fruit. After eating it, **Hyun-kyung KIM** partly lost consciousness. She could feel she was being moved, but was unable to wake up and resist. It is likely that her mother injected some sleeping pills into the fruit.

The next morning, **Hyun-kyung KIM** woke up and found herself in a remote house in the mountains. She had no access to a phone with the only one on the property located in a locked room. **Hyun-kyung KIM** was not allowed to leave the small room and there were no windows so she could not tell the time of day.

To combat suspicion from her friends and future inquiries from police, her mother posted a picture of the family in front of the front door with a message saying they were on a family trip. She had been advised to do this by the Guri *Cult Counseling Center*.

After some time, **Hyun-kyung KIM** planned an escape. One day, she seized her opportunity to run away while her family was taking a nap. She ran in the wilderness for about 15 minutes, but her father caught up to her. She screamed, but there was no one to hear her.

The de-conversion program

One day, a man named Director **Song**, who had forcibly de-converted his own daughter using the same center, arrived. He brought three people who had been previously de-converted with him. They showed **Hyun-kyung KIM** video clips slandering the Shincheonji Church, claiming that this was a necessary step before the intervention of the de-conversion assistant.

On several occasions during this process, **Hyun-kyung KIM's** parents expressed a desire to leave the space of confinement. However, the de-conversion assistant coerced them into staying by saying, "you don't know what's going to happen, so never leave the confinement room."

After some time, de-conversion assistant **Hyun-ja SHIN** determined that the confinement place was too far away for the implementation of the de-conversion program. She convinced **Hyun-kyung KIM's** parents to move to a location closer to Seoul.

Before this, **Hyun-ja SHIN** requested a voice recording of **Hyun-kyung KIM** stating that she was willingly asking to be de-converted. This is a common tactic to avoid future court prosecution. Under the coercion of her family, **Hyun-kyung KIM** felt forced to do it.

However, **Hyun-kyung KIM's** prolonged absence did not go unnoticed. At one point, her mother filmed a video of her saying that she was safe and then sent it to the police. The Guri *Cult Counseling Center* wrote what **Hyun-kyung KIM** was forced to say for this video.

Forty days after **Hyun-kyung KIM's** imprisonment, the de-conversion assistant **Hyun-ja SHIN** arrived at the new confinement location. She spent two days with her, pressuring her to leave the Shincheonji Church. **Hyun-kyung KIM** knew that the only way to escape was to convince **Hyun-ja SHIN** that she was de-converted, and so she pretended to be. However, **Hyun-ja SHIN** didn't believe her initially. As a test, **Hyun-ja SHIN** had her persuade some of her acquaintances at the Shincheonji Church to contact the Guri *Cult Counseling Center*.

Against her will, **Hyun-kyung KIM** did this, but she began to suspect that the 'cult exit counseling' was fueling a lucrative business. One week later, she was released, but on the condition that she attended follow-up trainings at the Guri *Cult Counseling Center*.

During her 44 days of confinement, she was forced to undergo four 'counseling' sessions, one training session and 10 video training sessions. When she was finally back home, she had to participate in two more 'counseling' sessions and three training sessions at the *Cult Counseling Center*. There, she met with pastor **Hyun-wook SHIN**, who seemed to know the whole background of her kidnapping and detention. **Hyun-kyung KIM** could not escape her family's surveillance until the end of the follow-up training, so she pretended to believe the content of the de-conversion program out of self-preservation.

On 2 August 2016, while she was going to the center with her mother for a follow-up training, she ran into a friend from the Shincheonji Church. With her friend's help, she was able to contact local law enforcement. The police separated her from her family.

Over the next few months, she did not feel safe and was in constant fear of another kidnapping. She experienced nightmares of being kidnapped and confined almost every night and she suffered from emotional distress for a long time. Her family struggled after the forced de-conversion as well. Her mother was traumatized by the whole situation, and her father was unemployed for months because he had taken leave for the 44 days of her confinement.

Now, **Hyun-kyung KIM** and her parents have restored their relationship. Her mother's health has improved and her father is back at work. **Hyun-kyung KIM** is also doing well in her social and religious life.

However, she regrets that the actors responsible for so much damage to her family and her cannot be prosecuted and have continued their deceptive and immensely profitable activities. Worse, she said that "they attribute the failure of their operation to my parents, saying that my parents failed to strictly follow their instructions" in their propaganda aimed at other families.

Ha-seong WEE: Kidnapped twice by his family in an attempt to force him to give up his faith



Ha-seong WEE

Ha-seong WEE, a 26 year-old student, was kidnapped twice by his family in attempts to force him to return to the Presbyterian faith. The first time, in 2018, he was confined for five days and the second time, in 2019, for 23 days. During his confinement, he was subjected to coercion and physical abuse.

Testimony

24-28 September 2018

During Korean Thanksgiving day, I was kidnapped by my parents, my sister, and two of my uncles. They kept me for five days and four nights at the Adama Inn in South Jeolla Province and tried to force me to stop believing the teachings of the Shincheonji Church.

After I successfully escaped, I continued with my religious life despite ongoing conflicts with my parents.

19-22 February 2019

One of my uncles who had participated in that first round of kidnapping reached out to me. He informed me that my parents had recently asked him to help them a second time. He had refused.

23 February 2019

When I came home from church, my grandmother was at home. She was visiting from Mokpo. After greeting her, I took a car to a nearby public bathhouse to meet my dad as promised. However, very quickly my dad said he had a stomachache and we returned home. I fell asleep on the couch and awoke to being lifted by someone who was moving me. When I realized what

was going on, I struggled, saying "please save me!" I resisted as two of my uncles forced me into the back seat of my uncle's car. My dad got into the passenger seat and we all left.

After about 45 minutes, they stopped the car. I was thrown into a mud house. Its structure was similar to where I was detained during the first kidnapping. I said to my parents, "Are you kidnapping me again? This is the second time!" However, my family claimed it was not a kidnapping, and that they had come to spend time with family.

I didn't say much else because I was so angry that I was at a loss for words. We all went to bed without saying anything.

24-27 February 2019

My aunt and uncles left on the first day of my confinement, leaving just my grandmother, parents and me. I was still very upset. My mother tried to comfort me by explaining that they had kidnapped me because they wanted us to all be one family again. She said that we wouldn't leave until I became one with them.

I was distraught the first couple of days and so did not speak much. I asked for the Bible that my parents had brought and read it. They held a family service every morning and asked me to join, but I refused.

On Wednesday, 27 February 2019, I felt guilty for not taking part in family services. I asked my parents and grandmother how we will find a way to live together. They explained that we would first need to determine whose religious beliefs were "right," and so it would be best to talk to a pastor about it. They wanted me to meet pastor **Jae-myung CHOI** of their church. I had already met him in August 2018, so I said I would think about it.

28 February-5 March 2019

I was so frustrated after the first six days of my confinement that I told my parents I would meet their Presbyterian pastor. My parents contacted him, but he was unable to visit because it was Lent. Instead, he suggested meeting with **Myung-cheol CHOI**. I preferred to meet with pastor **Jae-myung CHOI**, but, after a few back-and-forths, I finally agreed to meet the other pastor.

My parents and grandmother were not able to attend Sunday church service, so they worshiped at home and asked me to join them. I decided to participate this time and my grandmother was very happy. On 5 March 2019, my grandmother left because of a toothache that she needed treatment for. This was also the first anniversary of my grandfather's passing. My parents blamed me for not being able to properly commemorate it.

6-16 March 2019

Ten days after Pastor **Jae-myung CHOI** said he would send the other pastor, my dad called him to follow up. Finally, on 13 March 2019, **Myung-cheol CHOI** arrived. I later learned that he is one of those Presbyterian pastors and brokers involved in forcible de-conversion activities.

He needed my signature on a document before he could begin his work. He also wanted to film me filling out the document. He claimed that this was a legal precaution in case any of us later claim that I was forced to attend this program.

I read everything in the document and realized it was an ‘Agreement for Conversion Counseling,’ which I had been warned of in the past. I decided that I would not sign it. **Myung-cheol CHOI** tried to persuade me for about an hour before leaving.

17 March 2019

After **Myung-cheol CHOI**’s visit, my parents exerted more pressure on me to sign the agreement. On the morning of 17 March 2019, my father physically assaulted me. After punching my face several times, he threatened: “do you want another Hwasun pension incident here today?” He was referring to the case of **Ji-in GU** in 2017. Her parents used a family trip to kidnap her for the second time and, when she threatened to escape, her parents bound and gagged her, causing her to suffocate to death.

My father went outside to get something to beat me with since his hands hurt from punching me. When he returned, the door was open and so I tried to escape. I had to struggle with both of my parents, but I managed to run away. I was barefoot and only wearing pyjamas.

I ran to a health care center in Muan town and contacted an acquaintance who came to collect me after about an hour.

After the kidnappings occurred, I lived with his parents. Now, I have graduated from university and I am volunteering with the church full-time. I have my own life, far away from my parents.

So-yeon JUNG: An attempted forcible change of religion resulted in divorce



So-yeon JUNG

So-yeon JUNG was happily married to an engineer until her marriage was destroyed by a few Presbyterian pastors in 2018. She was 40 years old at the time.

Testimony

In August 2018, my husband found out that I was attending the Shincheonji Church. In an effort to be transparent about my change of religious affiliation, I took him to a religious service. He did not say anything negative about it. However, in November, I saw my husband's social media account by chance on the computer. His sister and his brother had sent him groundless slander about the Shincheonji Church that they had found online.

Shortly after that, my husband contacted a 'cult counseling center' linked to the Presbyterian Church. They recommended that he kidnap me and they shared their expertise about how to confine me safely. They also said that they would not intervene with a de-conversion program until I had signed an agreement asking for their 'counseling.' I found out later that my husband gave them 500,000 won (379 EUR) as a donation for their assistance, but I suspect that he also paid other fees. In early November, he decided that we should move to Uijeongbu city for various reasons.

Friday 23 February 2018: Kidnapping and confinement

After moving to Uijeongbu, my husband organized a surprise housewarming party at a restaurant with his family. When we were almost done with dinner, his older sister **Lee-sun NAE** told my daughter **Su-min** that she had bought a nice toy for her. She then took **Su-min** in her car to our next destination. I rode in a car with the rest of the family, separated from my daughter and nephews.

As soon as my husband sat next to me, he took my cell phone and turned it off. He also took

my purse. I was so scared and shocked that I cried and struggled. When I asked, "why are you doing this to me?" they replied, "we have no choice but to do this." After driving for about an hour, we arrived at an apartment in Ansan that they had prepared in advance.

The front door to this apartment had five different locks! Various types of locks had also been placed on the kitchen windows and the doors of each room. The bathroom doorknob was missing and the bathroom window was closed with twelve nails.

A sensor was attached to the wall to the right of the front door so that a bell rang when it was opened. I wasn't allowed to do anything and each of my movements were watched. Even when I was using the restroom, I had to leave the door open. My husband searched my body again, checking if I was hiding extra money, and even asked my mother-in-law to check my underwear. It was very humiliating. This extreme level of surveillance and degrading lack of privacy continued.

I tried to reason with them, but they did not budge. I asked them to call the pastor who was conducting the coercive de-conversion, since this was the reason for holding me in the apartment. My husband replied that his job was to bring me here and then he had to wait for a call to proceed further. After a long argument, he gave me a coercive conversion program agreement titled: 'Religious Consultation Guide.' When I refused to sign it, they threatened to never let me leave. I was terrified of staying there any longer, and so had no choice but to sign it.

Saturday-Sunday 24-25 February 2018: Attempting contacts with the 'counselors'

Since my husband had not heard from the de-conversion pastor yet, he contacted him by sms. I was very angry at that point, and so I began yelling and tried to leave. My husband then grabbed both of my legs which caused me to fall. He dragged me into a room where the TV was on and set at a very loud volume. He taped my mouth shut as a second measure to prevent anyone from hearing my calls for help.

I was so distraught after this that I couldn't eat or drink anything. I cried out that they should bring in the coercive de-conversion pastor and tried pleading with my husband to release me, but nothing worked. After receiving a text, he abruptly said that we needed to move somewhere where we might have to stay longer. However, by midnight he had decided that we should not go.

I continued to protest, but he would cover my mouth and raise the TV volume to drown out my voice.

Monday 26 February 2018: 'De-conversion program' starts

Around 10 am, a woman came in with two heavy bags in her hands. She presented herself as a counselor. I protested about my kidnapping and confinement, but she interrupted and told me that I needed to talk about that with my husband. The coercive de-conversion program finally started.

She browbeat me with various slanderous materials and books about the Shincheonji Church, and forced me to acknowledge them. It was frustrating because she was not listening to me and

she would not answer my questions. It was clearly a forceful indoctrination. After she left, I lost all of my energy and fell unconscious.

Tuesday-Wednesday 27-28 February 2018: Visit from the ‘counselor’

When I woke up, it was dawn. I spent hours crying. In the afternoon, the same ‘counselor’ came back. I was lying down because I was completely exhausted, and so she just prayed for me and left. I was scared because I did not know how much longer I would spend in captivity.

I ate some rice to try to give myself energy, but soon after I became so sick that I couldn't breathe. I screamed and asked to be taken to the hospital, but instead they brought me a handful of painkillers and forced them into my mouth. I had to spend the night alone and in pain. I was scared I was going to die.

Thursday 1-5 March 2018: Domestic violence and calls for help

Another day passed. It was the seventh day of my captivity. They allowed me to sit in front of the main door because I couldn't breathe well and felt pressure in my chest. Suddenly, I heard someone outside and I yelled "please help!" My husband grabbed my feet and dragged me into the other room again. He then got on top of me, tied me up, and pressed down on my mouth and nose. I resisted fiercely, and so he poured water on my face and stuffed several wet tissues into my mouth. It was absolutely awful and caused me to fall unconscious again.

Over the next few days, I continued crying for help. A couple of times my husband became violent with me again to silence me.

I thought that I would never be free again and that I would die in that apartment. When I struggled, my mother-in-law would grab my legs to stop me from moving and my husband would shout that I would leave there in a coffin if I did not change my mind. The entire time, my husband was insulting and threatening me. He was so volatile that he even hit his own head against the bathroom wall and started bleeding.

Tuesday 6 Mar 2018: Rescue by the police

My husband was preparing breakfast when the police showed up. I begged them repeatedly to save my life. They filmed everything that was in the house. An ambulance arrived and I was moved to the Danwon hospital where my parents met me.

That is how my 12-day imprisonment ended. My husband and my mother-in-law were placed under arrest, but were indicted without detention since they're first-time offenders.

After my checkup at the hospital, my parents and I were escorted by the police to the station to make a statement. I told the police about the events of the kidnapping and how I had been assaulted. I also explained that a pastor had orchestrated the whole operation behind the scenes. The police said that they were aware of who and how many people were behind this incident. Since then, I have never been contacted by nor met with the police again. I am not aware of any further investigation or prosecution.

My husband has been charged with kidnapping and assault. We also filed for divorce and are in the midst of reaching an agreement.

My husband is currently living in the studio apartment in Ansan city where I was held and I live in Uijeongbu city. My mother is temporarily staying with me while I stabilize myself mentally and financially.

Yoon-jin LEE: How a de-conversion program involving kidnapping and confinement destroyed a family



Yoon-jin LEE

Yoon-jin LEE was 22 years old and worked at a hospital at the time of the forced de-conversion attempt. Both her and her sister are followers of the beliefs taught by the Shincheonji Church. They were living in Yeongdeungpo-gu, Seoul. **Yoon-jin LEE** wanted to share her beliefs with her mother. She took her to Bible classes but, after some time, her mother stopped attending them. When **Yoon-jin LEE** learned from her sister that her parents were planning to kidnap and confine her until she recanted her new faith, she decided to move out of her parents' home and live with her sister instead.

Once again, Presbyterian pastors were fueling her parents' desire to perpetrate the crime of kidnapping and forced change of religious beliefs in confinement conditions.

Testimony

Tuesday 5 February 2019

On Korean New Year's Day, which was also my birthday, my family and I went on a trip. After 9pm, we were on our way back home when my dad stopped the car in an empty lot. There were two other cars on each side of our car. At that moment, three unknown men grabbed my arms and legs and pulled me out of our car by force. I tried to escape, but it was impossible. Eight male adults carried my sister and I to another car and took us to the Neulsolgil pension in the Yangyang district.

Our parents had prepared a lot of canned and instant food and packed suitcases as if we were going to stay in the pension for a long time. The windows were taped and nailed shut. A lock

was installed on both sides of the front door and the codes were changed frequently. I was so shocked and traumatized that I threw up and could not sleep properly that first night.

Wednesday 6 February 2019

When I woke up the next day, I realized I was still imprisoned. My mother and a large woman were next to me. I asked my mom if we could leave this dark place because I am claustrophobic, but she never answered. I went to the window and drew up the blinds. I then began to yell and cry out for help. Outside, there was a woman and an elementary school student. She was the owner of the pension and she had seen me when I was taken inside by force. I thought she would help me, but instead she swore loudly and admonished me.

Thursday 7 February 2019

While everyone was sleeping, I went to the restroom. I took off all the tape and tried to escape, but my mom and the other woman caught me as I was leaving. After my escape attempt, some men brought nails and wooden boards to block all the windows. While they were working, my mom tied her leg to mine with a scarf.

Friday 8 February 2019

I couldn't eat anything for three days. I had blood, bruises, and wounds all over my body because of scuffles with my captors during escape attempts. I had difficulty breathing because of the extreme stress, but nobody would let me go to the hospital. They stopped giving me food. I was alone every day.

Saturday 9 February 2019

After another day had passed, my state of health further deteriorated to the point where I was almost losing consciousness. My mother told me we would go to the hospital, but that was a lie. She had to help me reach the car because I was very weak. Instead of going to the hospital, the car went to the harbor and there, she placed me in another car.

I was then taken to my aunt's house. All doors were locked and all of the windows were nailed shut. There were no words to express my disappointment and horror. I later learned that this change of location was because my sister had managed to escape and was assumed to have gone to the police.

Sunday-Monday 10-18 February 2019

Every time I used the bathroom or simply went to get some water, I was followed by three people. Every day, the lady that was with us, my mother and my aunt forced me to follow a de-conversion program for 3-4 hours. When I refused their indoctrination, they would get mad at me and sometimes became physical by pushing me. When it seemed they weren't making progress, my mother would call the Presbyterian pastors for advice. She would then try even harder to force me to sign the agreement for voluntary de-conversion.

Tuesday 19 February 2019

For two weeks, I was left to suffer with claustrophobia and extreme stress. This took its toll, and on 19 February 2019, I fainted on the way to drink some water. My mother told me to stop putting on a show and swore at me.

She never took me to the hospital despite my concerning health issues. That has left me with permanent emotional scars. Her behavior with me had changed so much that I could hardly recognize her. She had been fanaticized by her Presbyterian coaches.

Wednesday 20 February 2019

While we were having lunch, my mother felt unwell. The other lady said it was my fault and that my mom might die because of me. She screamed at me to leave the room. However, of course the door was locked so when I tried to leave they became even angrier and started to threaten me.

On another occasion, I had tried to escape, but once more I was caught. I would shout for help from the front door, but my mom would slap me and throw sand at me. One time she even wrestled me to the ground until I couldn't breathe. This scuffle went on for over an hour. Fortunately, the mailman heard my shouts and called the police.

When the police arrived, I begged them to take me to the police station. Instead, they talked to my mom and told me to try to solve the issue by communicating with my family. When I realized they were going to leave me there, I frantically told them the whole story. They finally took me to the police station. My parents did not go to the station, even though they had been asked to.

Since my rescue, I have been living with my sister. I am no longer in touch with my parents, and I am still filled with fear and anxiety.

22 March 2019 Friday

During my detention, my friends had filed a missing person's report with the police. After this ordeal I was in a post-traumatic state and could not go to the police station until a month later to file my statement. Unfortunately, there has not been much progress with my case and the police have not taken any action.

My sister, who had also been kidnapped, sued my father. I sued the lady who was involved along with my aunt, but chose not to sue my mother.

Hye-jeong LIM: VIDEO of her kidnapping masterminded by her family and a pastor

Video link: <https://hrwf.eu/hye-jeong-lim-video/>



Hye-jeong LIM

It is not usual for a kidnapping to occur in broad daylight and in the middle of a crowd, but that is what happened to **Hye-jeong LIM** when she was 21 years old. A passer-by on the other side of the street recorded the incident on his phone.

A shocking kidnapping

Hye-jeong LIM was near the university in Chonnam city when she was kidnapped. A car stopped near where she was on the sidewalk and a few strong men pushed her into a large car. She resisted and screamed, and some witnesses tried to help her, but to no avail.

The masterminds of this kidnapping operation were her family and a pastor who is a part of the controversial de-conversion program of the Presbyterian Church of South Korea.

Hye-jeong LIM had been educated in the Christian faith by her family, who are all members of the Presbyterian Church. However, she decided to join the Shincheonji Church.

The motivation behind her kidnapping was to confine her until she would promise to stop attending the Shincheonji Church. It was not her family's first attempt to kidnap her, but this one was successful.

The first time, her mother came to her apartment unannounced and accompanied by a Presbyterian evangelist, but **Hye-jeong LIM** managed to escape.

A few months later, her mother invited her to a restaurant to celebrate her birthday. After that, they went to a café. There, her mother made a few phone calls. **Hye-jeong LIM** found this suspicious and made her escape through the café's restroom.

The third attempt to kidnap her occurred when her mother scheduled an appointment for them at a shop. However, five strong men showed up at the shop and drove her to her grandmother's house, which was a four-hour drive away. They confiscated her cellphone. Her mother is a social worker and was not concerned about the police because of connections through her ex-boyfriend and a former colleague. In the morning, **Hye-jeong LIM** managed to escape through the bathroom window. She ran barefoot until she was able to take a taxi.

When **Hye-jeong LIM** was kidnapped during the first incident mentioned, there was a lot of media coverage because the video had been posted online and circulated by social media.

When she managed to escape this fourth kidnapping, media outlets interviewed her mother who slandered the Shincheonji Church. They appeared to take sides, supporting her mother's reasons for kidnapping her. Some newspapers attributed the incident to the Shincheonji Church, either mistakenly or intentionally as a means to boost sales. When **Hye-jeong LIM** held a press conference to share her side to the story, these same media outlets did not cover it.

After these incidents in 2012, the relationship between this mother and daughter was very strained. However, with the passing of time, **Hye-jeong LIM's** mother came to regret following the advice of the Presbyterian pastors. Trust was slowly restored and now their relationship has mended.

Hye-jeong LIM's relations with her brother were also rocky after the last incident, but they have improved since then and they are now closer. **Hye-jeong LIM** had lost her father when she was a young child, and so her mother and her brother are her only closest relatives. It would have been a pity if she had lost all contact with them due to their misguided beliefs about her new church.

Hye-jeong LIM is now working for a marketing company.

One devastating result of the forced de-conversion programs carried out by Presbyterian pastors in South Korea is the disruption of families. This is an accusation these same pastors make about religious groups such as the Shincheonji Church.

Hye-won SOHN: A case of abuse of psychiatry

Hye-won SOHN was forced to spend 81 days in a psychiatric hospital



Hye-won SOHN

From a failed kidnapping to a psychiatric internment

Hye-won SOHN was 20 years old in May 2016 when she joined the Shincheonji Church.

When her parents found out about her change of religious affiliation, they contacted a Presbyterian ‘cult counseling center’ which advised them to kidnap their daughter and to confine her for a de-conversion program.

On 2 February 2017, **Hye-won SOHN** was kidnapped by her parents, but she managed to escape. She went to the police for help, but they refused to intervene on what they considered a family matter. Her parents then forced her to undergo an examination by a psychiatrist, but she was declared psychologically stable. Her parents were displeased because they had hoped she would be diagnosed as suffering from ‘religious delirium.’

Hye-won SOHN’s parents asked the staff to recommend a different psychiatric hospital, preferably outside of Seoul where they could commit her as they said, “without too much trouble.” They were referred to the mental hospital in Cheongsong, which is a four hour drive from Seoul.

At this hospital, there was no psychological evaluation administered at admission. Instead **Hye-won SOHN** was admitted solely based on a conversation between the doctor and her parents. This initiated **Hye-won SOHN’s** 81-day forcible psychiatric internment.

Hye-won SOHN was unable to have any contact with the outside world except for her parents’ visits twice a month. Every time they came, they threatened that she would stay there until she promised to stop attending the Shincheonji Church.

A nurse at the hospital was moved by her situation and tried to help. She discreetly advised **Hye-won SOHN** to write to the authorities about her forced internment. **Hye-won SOHN** took her advice and sent a letter to two city councilors calling for help. They responded and sent two officials to visit her on 21 March 2017. However, the officials were not interested in her hospitalization and instead inquired about her life in the Shincheonji Church. After the visit, there was no change.

On 25 April 2017, **Hye-won SOHN** sent a letter to the court requesting her release. Her doctor found out before she sent it, and tried to convince her not to. The next day, she was released without any explanation. She believes that her calls for outside help prompted the hospital to release her so as to avoid legal trouble.

For 81 days, she had been illegally interned in a psychiatrist hospital and had undergone a forced medical treatment despite having no diagnosis or mental health issue.

After her release, she returned to the hospital to ask the doctor, **Hyun-soo KIM**, why he had forced a treatment plan on her. He confessed that he knew she was sane, but had prescribed her sedatives, anti-depressants, and antipsychotic medicine for bipolar depression anyways. This conversation was recorded.

‘Cult counseling’ actors and abuse of psychiatry for religious purposes

So-called ‘cult counseling centers’ have been established by the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ all over the country (see the map below). These centers track and stigmatize all forms of religious doctrines and movements deemed to deviate from the alleged ‘true’ Christian theology that they defend.



Map of 'cult counseling centers' in South Korea

Such centers are the masterminds behind the kidnappings and confinements being perpetrated by Presbyterian families.

The leader of one such center, Pastor **Jin-yong SIK**, was the head of the 'Cult Counselling Center' of Ansan. In 2007, he was prosecuted for sending a member of the World Mission Society Church of God to a psychiatric institution.

He was found guilty of conducting a coercive de-conversion program to a believer of the Church of God by forcibly confining her in a mental institution. When the investigation revealed that he had earned more than one million won through the implementation of his program, it caused an uproar.

Despite this controversy and the undeniable human rights violations, his 'cult counseling center' continues to be a highly profitable business. See a short excerpt of one of his sermons encouraging so-called 'cult counseling' on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61Nr9-9Kj6Q&feature=youtu.be>

Sun-hwa KIM: Killed by her ex-husband



Sun-hwa KIM

In December 2018, **Hwa-baek SEO** was released from prison after serving a ten-year sentence for the murder of his wife, **Sun-hwa KIM**, in 2007. HRWF met **Sun-geong KIM**, the victim's younger sister, in Seoul.

On 7 October 2007, **Sun-hwa KIM** was beaten with a blunt object by her former husband **Hwa-baek SEO** at her home. This brutal attack caused a stroke that necessitated treatment at the Dongkang hospital in Tae Hwadong. Two days later, she needed brain surgery. Unfortunately, **Sun-hwa KIM** did not survive the operation and passed away on 12 October 2007. She was 48 years old.

From kidnapping to murder

Her kidnapping and confinement in 2006

Sun-geong KIM, who joined the Shincheonji Church after her sister, testified to HRWF that:

“My sister’s husband was a short-tempered person. Before their divorce, he had already been convicted on charges of assault and sentenced to a prison term of one year.

My sister had always been a devout Christian, even before her marriage. Originally, she was Catholic, but became Presbyterian later on. After leaving the Catholic Church, she would attend early morning prayers almost every day and she evangelized her family as well.

Eventually she told her husband about her religious commitment and activities with the Shincheonji Church. One day, he followed her to the church located in Shin Jeon-dong and attacked her. After this incident, her husband contacted a Presbyterian pastor from a ‘cult counseling center’ who advised him to enroll **Sun-hwa KIM** in a de-conversion program. The pastor outlined the required steps for his program: her husband needed to kidnap her, confine her and then obtain her signature on a ‘voluntary request’ to follow a de-conversion program.

The kidnapping took place on 9 June 2006. **Sun-hwa KIM's** youngest sister called her for help, saying that she was kidnapped by her boyfriend. However, that was a lie to lure **Sun-hwa KIM** to a secluded place. Instead, they took her to a motel in Bulgyo in South Jeolla Province, where she was confined and submitted to a de-conversion program.

Three Presbyterian pastors took turns 're-educating' **Sun-hwa KIM** every day for 10 hours, which included showing her videos slandering the Shincheonji Church. These pastors are:

- **Jong-han KIM**, former pastor of the Presbyterian Beol Kyo Dae Gwang Church, now a pastor in *A church with a dream* which is a Presbyterian church in Sun Cheon city, in South Jeolla Province;
- **Yong-sik JIN**, pastor of the Presbyterian Sang Rok Church in An San City;
- **Ui-jong HWANG**, pastor in the Presbyterian Sae Jang Hak Church in Busan city.

After three days of detention, **Sun-hwa KIM** managed to shout for help through a window and was subsequently rescued by the police. After this incident, she filed for a divorce and custody of her two sons. However, she was always afraid of being kidnapped again.”

Her murder in 2007

On 19 February 2008, the Ulsan District Court, 3rd Criminal Panel, sentenced **Hwa-baek SEO** to 10 years of imprisonment. Included in that time were the 135 days he had already spent in pretrial detention. The facts were described as follows by the court:

“The defendant was married to the victim (KK female, 48) in 1984. While living a married life with two sons, they divorced by mutual agreement in September 2006. The defendant wished to be reunited with the victim and harassed her, but the victim avoided the defendant's phone calls and refused to meet him. Meanwhile, the defendant believed that their marriage ended because the victim joined the Shincheonji Church and neglected her family. The defendant decided to try to change the victim's mind by any means, including violent ones. Around 4:30am on 7 October 2007, the defendant wrapped a gourd-shaped metal bar, approximately 29cm in length and 6cm in diameter, with green tape while he was inside his Atoz car. He was parked at the entrance of Wawa Park in Samho-Dong, Nam-gu, Ulsan. Then, he took a taxi with an unknown license plate number to the victim's home in Okgyo-Dong, Jung-gu, Ulsan.

Around 5:25am on 7 October 2007, the defendant arrived at the victim's house and entered through the back door. He went into the victim's room by going through the attic window, and he found the victim praying. When the victim saw the defendant, she spoke in a defensive manner and took the metal bar from the defendant. Enraged, the defendant took the metal bar back by force, causing the victim to fall. While she tried to get up, the defendant struck the victim on her head with the metal bar several times. She died from traumatic subdural hemorrhage resulting from blunt force trauma on 12 October 2007 at Dongkang Medical Center in Taehwa-dong, Jung-gu, Ulsan. In conclusion, the defendant is responsible for the death of the victim.”

The connections between the murderer and Pastor Ui-jong HWANG

Two weeks after **Sun-hwa KIM's** death in 2007, Pastor **HWANG** visited the murderer at a detention center in Ulsan. Pastor **HWANG** then transferred 500,000 won to **Hwa-baek SEO** to pay for his legal fees and promised to send 1 million won to him in early November of the same year.

The lawyer's fees cost a total of 4 million won. This was provided by: raising funds in Pastor **HWANG's** church, which were then given to **Hwa-baek SEO's** second son (1 million won); personal funds given to **Hwa-baek SEO's** younger brother (1 million won); and funds raised by downsizing the house where **Hwa-baek SEO's** children lived (2 million won).

This clearly demonstrates that the pastor was closely involved in **Sun-hwa KIM's** case and invested in the outcome, including Hwa Baek SEO's criminal proceedings.

Conclusions and recommendations

The phenomenon of kidnapping, confinement, and attempt of forceful de-conversion masterminded by pastors and evangelists of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ has mainly affected members of the Shincheonji Church.

The first reason is religious. Shincheonji has been a fast-growing movement at the expense of Protestant Churches since the beginning of the century. The fight against a ‘heretical’ group by Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors was first tolerated and then encouraged behind the scenes by the leaders of their denominations.

The second reason is cultural. Parents in South Korea, and in other countries of East Asia, typically maintain some authority and control over their adult children, regardless of their age, intelligence or new social status.

The third reason is political. Most Protestant Churches are politically conservative. The weight of Protestant voters in elections is therefore not negligible. Turning a blind eye to the illegal activities of a number of their leaders is politically safer than challenging them publicly.

In light of international human rights law, the individual right to freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of movement have been and still are grossly violated on this issue.

The religious, cultural and political context cannot justify such actions as kidnapping, confinement and forced change of religion of adults. The argument of so-called ‘family discussions’ to explain the kidnappings and confinements or of ‘protective custody’ to de-convert them under physical and psychological coercion has been unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles.

In 2012, the Concluding Observations of the *UN Human Rights Committee* (HRC) about Japan’s Universal Periodic Review played an important role in conveying a strong message to the authorities in Tokyo where the same practice had created thousands of victims and had enjoyed total impunity for four decades. The HRC declared about Japan that: “the State Party should take effective measures to guarantee the right of every person not to be subject to coercion which would impair his or her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief.”

The situation of the Shincheonji Church in South Korea presents a number of similarities when compared to the situation of the UC in Japan.

The common points identified are:

- the role of pastors and evangelists involved in a doctrinal competition between their church and a NRM in the context of fighting against so-called theological heresies;
- the de-conversion pastors and evangelists use hate speech about the religious movement that they are combating;

- the involvement of mainstream churches in training parents how to carry out kidnappings and detention conditions;
- the same culture of patriarchal power relations between parents and children that demands submission and subservience from children;
- the persistent authority of parents over their children into adulthood;
- the gender-based dimension as many more young women than men are being kidnapped and detained;
- the institutional passivity which creates a culture of impunity;
- and the silence of the media as well as national and foreign NGOs.

The main difference is that the pastors and evangelists in Japan were directly participating in the kidnapping and confinement of the victims, even escalating to the use of violence. In South Korea, the coercive de-conversion actors and their masterminds:

- are more numerous than in Japan because they are trained by the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ under a specific missionary activity – “bringing lost sheep back home”;
- do not directly participate in the kidnapping and detention, but do monitor it remotely;
- pressure parents to extort a signed statement from the abductee that he/she voluntarily wants to follow a so-called ‘exit counseling program’;
- and only physically come into contact with the abductee when he/she has signed the ‘exit counselling program’ statement so that they cannot be prosecuted.

Despite these precautions, South Korean de-conversion actors and their masterminds are responsible for conducting illegal acts when they instruct on how to organize a kidnapping or confinement operation and then train people for this purpose.

As in Japan, this devastating practice could also be eradicated in South Korea if a multi-dimensional strategy is implemented. HRWF therefore recommends:

- raising awareness within the international community of scholars in religious studies, national and international human rights organizations, as well as national and international media;
- highlighting the responsibility of the ‘Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea’ which tolerates, endorses and appears to encourage such practices and urging it to put an end to them;
- developing advocacy at the UN and in organs defending freedom of religion or belief within the EU institutions, national institutions in Europe created for that purpose, the US Department of State, USCIRF, etc.;
- prosecuting those who encourage people to perpetrate an act of abduction and confinement;
- and prosecuting hate speech and hate crimes.

Report available online at:
<https://hrwf.eu/forb/our-reports/>



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