

COERCIVE CONTROL IN CULTIC GROUPS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

JULY 2022



action against cultic abuse

COERCIVE CONTROL IN CULTIC GROUPS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY
THE FAMILY SURVIVAL TRUST: ACTION AGAINST CULTIC ABUSE
JULY 2022

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The Family Survival Trust is a registered charity (no. 1121388) whose mission is to prevent and provide information on coercive control, cultic behaviour and psychological manipulation. We support those affected by groups that use these techniques. We educate regarding the risks these groups pose to individuals and society and seek appropriate controls on these groups' activities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at how strategies of coercive control are commonly used in cultic groups or relationships to entrap victims. Entrapment due to coercive control has long-lasting psychological and emotional effects on the victim, and the abuse is similar to that which takes place in abusive intimate-partner relationships ('IPRs'). However, whereas in IPRs perpetrators in the United Kingdom ('UK') can be held accountable under Chapter 9, Part 5, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, in cults there are no similarly available punitive measures. Thus, these groups can abuse and exploit their members with impunity.

Definitions

The Family Survival Trust defines 'a cult' as *a group formed and controlled by a charismatic, authoritarian leader or leadership body. It is a rigidly bounded, steeply hierarchical, isolating social system, supported and represented by a total and exclusive ideology. The leader sets in motion processes of coercive control (also known as 'brainwashing') designed to isolate, control and exploit their followers.*

The concept of coercive control, as the terminology suggests, is comprised of both coercion and control. The UK Government defines 'coercive behaviour' in its *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework* ('the Guidance Framework') as 'an act or pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation, or other abuse that is used to harm, punish or frighten their victims.'¹

The Government's definition of 'controlling behaviour' is as follows:

a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.²

Scope

This report uncovers evidence of coercive control routinely used in cultic or high-control groups through a survey conducted by The Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse ('the Trust'). 105 people were surveyed about their experiences of being in cults in the UK or cults that are based in the UK. The 36 groups reported on by victims range from religious/spiritual to personal-growth to political cults. They also range in size from two-person groups to

international groups of millions. These groups represent only a small handful of the estimated 1,500 to 2,000 cultic groups currently operating in the UK.

The resulting evidence is enough impetus for the UK Government to urgently expand Chapter 9, Part 5, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 to include high-control groups.

Participants described how they were isolated, threatened, gaslighted, engulfed and exploited. Many described the process of entrapment as being one so insidious that the isolation often went unnoticed until they were entrapped. They found themselves isolated from their parents, children, partners, extended family members, friends and other support networks. Within these groups, members were often set against each other and prevented from sharing doubts or criticisms about the group, isolating them even further. Once individuals were entrapped, the cultic environment created the conditions for physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse. Many respondents related how they lost years of their lives, living in degrading and abusive households, unable to get the support they needed. Many felt broken and too mentally traumatised to seek help.

Findings

Shunning

Respondents shared their concerns over the practice of ‘shunning’ or ‘excommunication’, which is often used to ostracise members perceived to have broken the group’s rules. The Trust found that shunning is a method of control that not only has profound effects on individuals, but also on others in the group. It is a common form of imposed isolation and also acts as a threat, warning and deterrent. As one study participant revealed:

The shunning policy is incredibly cruel, not only to those who are shunned, but to those who are expected to shun. I’ve had my arms around mothers who are sobbing because they haven’t seen or heard from their child in years, and feel that God demands that of them. That is something to be afraid of.

Rules, Restrictions and Degradation

Another common method of coercive control found in this study was the enforcement of rules and restrictions pertaining to every imaginable life choice of the follower, compounded by continuous monitoring and surveillance, which keeps group members on edge and ensures compliance.

Respondents stated that their cults controlled what they could wear, whom they could see, what they could eat and when they could sleep.

The enforcement of such rules creates an environment of monitoring and surveillance, fear and punishment, self-policing and judgement, thus depriving individuals of privacy and autonomy. All of these tactics are described in the Guidance Framework.³ Respondents spoke of being watched, being informed on by other members and constantly self-policing. The fear induced by this level of control is overwhelming and totally unjust.

The Trust urges the Government and legislators to recognise the debilitating impact of cults' abusive behaviours on their victims' abilities to live lives of freedom and agency.

The monitoring of followers and subsequent engulfment of their time through intense cult work or rituals ensures the sole focus of members is to further the cults' objectives. Respondents felt overwhelmed by this constant, forceful and all-encompassing control of their time. Along with the constant surveillance, this led to an environment of fear, threat and ultimately abuse through coercive control.

Another component of coercive control outlined in the Guidance Framework⁴ is the humiliation, degradation and dehumanisation of the victim – all experiences reported by respondents. This research found that respondents were called names, humiliated in front of others and had to participate in degrading activities while being made to feel as if they were never good enough. Degradation was ultimately used to erode the victim's sense of self to create a vulnerable and exploitable victim.

Respondents shared how they were often made to question their own perceptions in favour of the false realities presented by the cults. Gaslighting is a common component of coercive control used in abusive cultic groups. Said one respondent, 'I questioned if my memories were even real and if I had imagined things because I was gaslighted and treated like a criminal.'

Financial Abuse and Deprivation

This study found evidence of both financial and economic abuse within cultic groups. 83% of respondents did unpaid labour for the groups, often resulting in economic hardship. Respondents felt they were pressured to donate money, take out loans, exhaust credit limits and hand over property and inheritances to the groups. The control of money meant that victims were stripped of their independence and freedom. Respondents shared how the groups' beliefs were used to exploit their followers for financial gain.

Deprivation is an important component of the Guidance Framework and is described as the exploitation of the victim's 'resources and capacities for

personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.⁵ This study found that victims are frequently deprived of the ability to meet their medical and mental-health needs; additionally, they are deprived of education, cultural resources, independent social interactions and free time. Deprivation reduces the victim's ability to resist, thus furthering the control of the group. It also has detrimental effects on the victim's well-being and autonomy.

Control of Family Life

This report highlights how cults and cultic relationships control intimate, family and close relationships. Respondents shared a lack of autonomy in choosing intimate partners as well as the control of parent-child relationships. According to one participant this was because the 'private family unit was considered of lesser importance than the wider group'. The study found evidence of coerced marriages, separations, polygamy and celibacy. Children were often separated from their parents for long periods.

Any close attachments present a threat to the total domination of the cult. This control of a person's close relationships is central to the strategy of isolation and is designed to curtail efforts to resist coercion.⁶

Sexual and Physical Abuse

Sexual abuse and the control of sexuality are also components of coercive control evidenced in this report. 17% of 71 respondents had been raped in their groups. One respondent stated:

The leader had many relationships with women in the group. He said it was our duty to please him. He made us do sexual acts that I didn't consent for because I couldn't say no.

Many respondents felt pressured into engaging in undesired sexual activities. This highlights the unacceptable lack of safeguarding mechanisms in place and the lack of accountability, leaving both adults and children vulnerable to sexual abuse in cults.

The Trust's research highlights evidence of physical abuse to both adults and children used as a form of subjugation, control and intimidation: 'Growing up, I saw children beaten up for not sitting still . . . for two hours in the meetings.'

Respondents shared about the long-lasting physical and psychological impacts of this abuse.

Lack of Safeguarding

The issue of child protection in coercive and controlling cults is urgent and must be addressed immediately. Children growing up in isolating cultic environments are without advocates and thus at greater risk of abuse.

The Trust found evidence of early indoctrination, control of parent-child relationships, social isolation, deprivation, grooming and inappropriate exposure to sexual matters, and a heightened risk of sexual and physical abuse. Respondents shared anger at their experiences of abuse and neglect, and grief over a sense of lost childhood.

The Dangers of Leaving

Just as leaving an IPR in which one partner is coercively controlled presents extreme and often dangerous challenges, so does leaving an abusive cult. Respondents described being stalked, harassed and threatened when leaving. This report discusses how respondents were afraid of being found and that cult enforcers would ‘turn up unannounced’ or ‘keep tabs’ on them. Stalking and harassment are common in coercive-control situations.

A loss of identity and having to rebuild life from scratch on leaving were recurring themes among respondents, as well as frustration at their lack of education, job experience and social skills due to time lost in the cult.

The impact of trauma highlighted in this report was highly significant and troubling. 60% of respondents experienced suicidal thoughts. PTSD and depression presented in many of the victims, with long-lasting, complex and detrimental effects.

Respondents demand change in the form of accountability and legislation, cult-informed help, safeguarding measures for children, education in schools and supportive and preventative measures.

Conclusion

This report clearly outlines how the use of coercive control in cults is rife and continuing, with no legislation in place to prevent this abuse or to hold perpetrators to account. In fact, perpetrators in cults currently feel safe to abuse, as these groups are often given charity status and operate on the sidelines, hidden from mainstream society.

The Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse urges the Government to immediately expand the current coercive control legislation to include cultic groups and non-intimate cultic relationships (see Recommendations).

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- 1 Home Office (2015) *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-framework-controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-in-an-intimate-or-family-relationship>.
 - 2 *Ibid.*
 - 3 *Ibid.*
 - 4 *Ibid.*
 - 5 *Ibid.*
 - 6 Alexandra Stein (2021) *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London: Routledge.

INTRODUCTION

This research report looks at how cults and other coercively controlling groups use the same patterns of behaviour as detailed in Chapter 9, Part 5, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, ‘Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship’¹ and the Home Office’s *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework* (‘the Guidance Framework’).² Using these patterns of behaviour, perpetrators seek to subjugate victims for the purpose of control and exploitation, individually and in groups. The focus of the research in this report is on group coercive control, which should be, but is not, currently covered by the Serious Crime Act 2015 (‘the Act’).

KEY FINDINGS

Recently, The Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse (‘the Trust’) conducted a survey to gather data about people’s experiences of coercive control in cults or high-control groups. Participants were asked to contribute only if their experience of a coercive group took place in the United Kingdom (‘UK’) or resulted from a group operating in the UK, as this research is focused on UK context and law.

Half of the 105 respondents were born or raised in high-control groups, while the remainder were recruited as adults. The respondents represent a total of 36 different groups, including religious, political, wellness, therapy, business, personal-growth and even sport-based groups. Although it is impossible to get exact numbers, it is estimated that 1,500–2,000 cultic groups currently operate in the UK,³ with memberships ranging from three people to large groups of international members totalling in the millions. The groups in this study were either UK-based or operated in the UK with headquarters overseas.

This report does not name specific cults, unless in the context of a direct quote from a survey participant. Given the large number of cults operating in the UK, we do not wish to spotlight only the few represented in this small, initial survey.

Participants were asked to describe what type of group they were a part of.⁴ Of the 105 respondents,

- 91% stated that they would describe the group as ‘religious/spiritual’;
- 14% described the group as ‘personal growth’;
- 11% described the group as ‘political’; and
- the remainder were in therapy, business, family, yoga, meditation or sport-based groups.

Participants were asked if they were isolated from loved ones. Of the 99 respondents,

- 56% said they were isolated from their parents;
- 68% said they were isolated from other family members; and
- 71% said they were isolated from friends.

Participants were asked whether the group monitored the members’ time. Of the 94 respondents,

- 55% said they had to justify time not spent on the group; and
- 35% said they were expected to submit time sheets.

Participants were asked if the group took control over aspects of their everyday lives. Of the 101 respondents,

- 85% said the group controlled whom they could see;
- 82% said the group controlled what they could wear; and
- 45% said the group controlled when they could sleep.

Participants were asked about their experiences of involuntary or coerced sexual contact. Of the 71 respondents,

- 17% said they had been raped;
- 66% said they experienced group-directed celibacy;
- 37% said they experienced other undesired sexual contact within the group; and
- 21% said they had sexual contact with the group leader.

Participants were asked if the group had deprived them of their basic needs. Of the 88 respondents,

- 88% said the group deprived them of recreation or free time;
- 64% said they were deprived of privacy;
- 46% said they were deprived of sleep; and
- 35% said they experienced excessive controls over nutrition.

Participants were asked about access to education and cultural resources. Of the 101 respondents,

- 74% said the group limited access to education; and
- 86% said the group limited or forbade access to cultural resources including books, TV, music and films.

Participants were asked about their experiences of financial and economic abuse. Of the 77 respondents,

- 83% did unpaid labour for the group;
- 62% did long hours of labour; and
- 47% stated that the group generally violated labour laws.

Participants were asked about their experiences of physical punishment. Of the 86 respondents,

- 51% witnessed the physical punishment of children;
- 38% experienced physical punishment themselves;
- 31% experienced assault or violence in the group; and
- 62% experienced other types of punishment (e.g. isolation from others, extra work duties, humiliation, etc.)

Participants were asked about their experiences of criminal activity. Of the 56 respondents,

- 57% felt coerced into fraud (including charity, benefits and tax evasion);
- 37% experienced or witnessed the neglect or abuse of children; and
- 10% experienced the normalisation of, or coercion into, performing acts of violence.

Participants were asked about their experiences of **human trafficking**. Of the 91 respondents,

- 9% witnessed human trafficking;
- another 12% suspected such activities; and
- 8% thought they themselves were victims of human trafficking.

Participants were asked what effects belonging to a coercive group had on their **mental health**. Of the 104 respondents,

- 89% suffered from anxiety;
- 84% stated they have a mistrust of others;
- 80% felt fear;
- 79% suffered from depression;
- 74% experienced dissociation (disconnection from reality); and
- 60% had had suicidal thoughts.

Participants were asked what **obstacles they faced upon leaving**. Of the 103 respondents,

- 82% experienced mental health issues, including PTSD and depression;
- 75% faced the loss of family/friends who remained in the group;
- 40 respondents said they experienced stalking or harassment from the group after they left;
- 47% said they experienced reputational damage; and
- 26 respondents said they were threatened by the group.

Participants were asked what they consider to be the **key elements of recovery**. Of the 101 respondents,

- 87% cited family/friends/relationships;
- 74% cited coercive-control/cult-specific education;
- 56% cited education;
- 55% cited mental-health services; and
- 30% cited housing.

Participants were asked if they were able to access justice. Of the 97 respondents,

- 95% said they were not.

Participants were asked if they were able to get protection from the police. Of the 75 respondents,

- 96% said they were not.

ISOLATION AND ENGULFMENT

This study found that isolation is a key method used in cults to control and entrap members and enforce exclusive dependency upon the cult. Study participants were asked if they were isolated from loved ones. Of the 99 respondents, 71% said they were isolated from friends, 68% said they were isolated from other family members and 56% said they were isolated from parents.

The UK Government's statutory guidance for coercive and controlling behaviour – currently limited legislatively to that occurring in intimate or family relationships – states that 'controlling behaviour' includes 'a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support . . .'⁵ The Guidance Framework also states that 'isolation such as lack of contact between family and friends' and its impact can be used as evidence of the offence of coercive and controlling behaviour.

The Trust has found evidence of this nature in its research – these consistent patterns of coercively controlling behaviour have been seen in cultic groups.

Isolation from Non-Members

They made me feel guilty for seeing my friends and family and they brainwashed me to believe my family were not good for me until eventually I believed them.

[The leader] was always telling us how other people [i.e. people not using the meditation practice] were of lower levels of consciousness. He encouraged us not to be around our parents and kept saying that he felt like he was 'fathering' lots of his students.

They didn't allow social activities outside of group activities, which meant we couldn't be exposed to new ideas and thinking.

I was not to form any close connections with my school peers. I was allowed to speak to them, but I was to make sure that I slipped in some preaching as well from a very young age.

Isolating an individual from their support systems results in the cult becoming their only source of feedback. It creates a loss of perspective with no room for critical thinking. It also heightens the individual's dependency on the group, while falsely positioning the cult as the only 'safe space' for the individual.

Isolation from Members Within the Group

Members were regularly ‘withdrawn from’ [excommunicated] if they were non-compliant or asked questions.

I was ‘marked’ as a weak associate for accessing university education. As such, my peers in the religion were discouraged from spending too much free time with me.

Temporary isolation – ‘shutting up’ – was a disciplinary measure while in. Once I had left, ‘been withdrawn from’, no contact was allowed with anyone still in.

My mother was disfellowshipped for smoking when I was in my twenties and we were told not to visit or have anything to do with her.

I was incredibly lonely, as I wasn’t accepted by the tiny clique of teenagers in my congregation. I had many, many suicidal thoughts during this time.

Threats of isolation within cults can be used as punitive mechanisms of control, creating environments of distrust, anxiety and fear among members and preventing individuals from forming authentic and trusting relationships with others in the group.

Isolation from the ‘Self’

The teachings were designed to engender self-criticism so one became more isolated or separated within oneself.

I was told that I was full of delusion, lacked wisdom, that my perceptions were incorrect, that I was angry, bitter, [and] mentally unstable. Teachings suggested that all personal needs were just a result of your ego, which must be destroyed.

The teachings stated that your perception could not be trusted, that your perception was just a dream/a hallucination, which was then used to gaslight you. Anger was taught to be a delusion, meaning that if you were angry you would be called mentally unstable and deluded.

Repeated verbalisation of ‘we are born in sin and shaped in iniquity’ and other similar verses over time and from birth has a profound impact on a child’s developing mind, mine included.

Disparaging a member's sense of self distorts their ability to think clearly and autonomously, and, once 'emotionally and cognitively isolated, followers can become unable to act in their own survival interests.'⁶

We urge the Government to recognise how cults violate human rights. Imposing isolation and alienation from the self (causing one to doubt one's own perceptions and feelings) through controlling and coercive means directly threatens one's right to autonomy, agency and psychological integrity and leaves one exposed to exploitation.

Us Against Them

We were indoctrinated into believing that only we were the 'right' ones and everyone else was wicked, which caused a mental separation from people outside our group. We were forbidden from eating or drinking with anyone, even school meals, which separated us from people outside our group.

I was raised to believe that every 'non-believer' would die a horrible death at Armageddon, so not to make friends with 'outsiders'. You also knew that breaking the group's rules could mean losing all contact with your family.

As a child, they told me non-members were 'impure'/evil and that contact with them would infect my soul, resulting in terrible consequences. We were not allowed to eat food made by non-members, nor be friends with them, nor watch TV, nor read news, nor trust non-cult authorities. We were told that everyone outside the cult was not to be trusted, including family relations, and that we should try to convert everyone; anyone who wasn't willing to be converted/sympathetic is to be avoided or used.

We were taught everyone would be killed at Armageddon and the birds would peck their eyes out, so not only were you not allowed to make friends, you didn't see the point in making emotional connections with anyone not in the group. That's quite brutal for a small child at school.

This study shows that the respondents' isolation was further compounded by an 'us against them' mentality created by contrasting the worlds of members and non-members. This dichotomous view of good/bad or pure/evil enables members to feel as though they are part of an elite and special group while simultaneously creating distrust of and paranoia about non-members.

However, it is ultimately a mechanism of abuse to further isolate members from sources of support and alternative world-views. It creates a distinct dividing line that members are constantly warned to never cross.

Engulfment

Isolation and engulfment within the group are used simultaneously to remove followers from the outside world and from trusting relationships and colonise all of their time within the cult's social, psychological and cultural milieu. 88% of our respondents said that their group deprived them of free time. Many stated that most of their time was taken up with work for the cult.

We lived communally. It was implicit that outsiders were in 'Satan's world'. [We were] kept so busy and tired and the work was more important than socialising, unless relatives could be recruited or persuaded to give resources. There was deliberate moving of members away from family/friends.

A very tight schedule of activities, beginning at 3.30 am up to 10 pm. We were told all time not spent on cult activity was us 'stealing' time from the cause and that we would be punished for it.

The demand for my time was overwhelming, so there was little possibility to call a friend or family member.

Children are expected to attend three meetings per week, three-day-long conventions that last from 9 to 6, sitting in a football stadium, and then two assemblies.

The restrictions we were under impacted on all aspects of child development – cognitive, moral, emotional, spiritual, etc.

When isolation and engulfment (where almost the entirety of life occurs solely within the group's social arena) are compounded by threat, it is the perfect formula for coercive control to occur.⁷ This is because, once the individual's social environment and time are dominated and controlled by the cult, the arousal of fear through some form of stress or threat results in a trauma bond of the follower to the controlling group.⁸

The Trust found that isolation, engulfment and fear are deliberate strategies used by cults to recruit, retain, exploit and deploy members. These patterns of abuse are so insidious that they often go unnoticed by the victims until they are firmly entrapped.

We urge the Government to recognise the effect that unchallenged coercive and controlling behaviours, such as isolation, engulfment and threat, are having on victims of cults and take the necessary steps to prevent this abuse and hold abusive groups to account.

VICTORIA'S⁹ STORY

During university, I began to seek comfort in religion and attended youth group at church every Friday. At the end of second year, I was approached on Instagram by a Christian blog page, which was doing some informal research for their blog. What I didn't know was that Shincheonji was behind this attempt to recruit me.

I willingly filled in their Google Forms questionnaire. The questions asked me about my pet peeves and then more serious topics such as life satisfaction, my sexuality and whether I consume any substance.

The final question was the option to give your phone number, which I did. This was something I never did – something I usually berate my sister for doing. Dani, from the blog page, began to build a rapport with me. She seemed so friendly and genuine, so I had no second thoughts.

I met up with Dani at the O2. She exuded so much friendliness, it began to get easier and easier to open up to her. It felt as if she were an older sister – someone who wanted to look out for me. She asked if I would like to be mentored. I convinced myself this could help with my future employment prospects.

My new mentor, Eunice, was warm, but was careful to not be overfamiliar with me. We began to meet up bi-weekly.

At that time, the Bible was my ultimate authority, so when Eunice convinced me that telling my friends and family about our meetings was a way for Satan to get in the way of me learning about God, I didn't say a thing.

Eunice then introduced the idea of a Bible study class. I agreed, despite misgivings.

My mentor told me not to ask for the numbers or the denomination of other students because it was a sensitive issue. I was then paired up with a buddy in class. This buddy would save me a seat, drop me off at the train station and always want to meet outside of class. Classes were now three times a week, along with meeting Eunice once or twice and attending university on top of all these commitments.

About two months into the class, the teachers began to make it clear that this wasn't an ordinary Bible study, but, apparently, a journey to understand God and his word. The location of the classes changed; rules slowly got stranger and more restrictive. We now had to take off our shoes and pray before and after classes.

There was a special day where we students were going to meet the individual that all lessons had been leading up to. We were instructed to wear white shirts and dark bottoms. I remember being excited but anxious, but instead of meeting this individual we were shown an emotional video and presentation.

After this reveal, they instructed that Googling was forbidden – something they referred to as ‘poison’. The guilt when I did later Google to research a term I had heard in class became hard to bear. I disclosed this to a friend in the class and she became persistent that I had to tell my mentor. I did so and was reprimanded. I was instructed to write an apology letter to God.

Later we all participated in an event that was our initiation into the cult. I remember the whole ceremony being so emotional – members of the cult crying and us students stifling our tears while trying to perform the Korean folk song we spent weeks rehearsing.

It was then that life truly became hectic. The cult occupied all my time. All major life decisions had to be run by the senior members. My life no longer belonged to me, but the leadership team at Shincheonji. My days now consisted of recruiting members, attending the rest of my classes, attempting to get good university results and etching Shincheonji’s teachings into my brain so I could pass the cult’s excessive and rigorous tests.

This began to put a strain on my health, and I was always on the verge of tears, which would turn into a breakdown at least once a week. My family began to notice my absence at home, and university friends noticed my attainment levels rapidly dropping. A few months as an active member was all I experienced before the cult introduced their own lockdown in February and all activities went virtual. It was the pandemic which gave me an opportunity to escape.



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SHUNNING: A SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISM

Shunning, often viewed as a mechanism of social control, is when an individual is perceived to have transgressed the group's rules and is thus formally and often publicly ostracised from the group. This is an extremely cruel punishment, as members are banned from interacting with those who are shunned – even if they are related. Shunning further isolates the individual member, whose regular interactions are only with the group and whose identity was formed within the group (at least, the new identity that was acceptable to the group).

Shunning is a form of punishment and control that is layered with guilt and shame. The Trust's research found that this mechanism was effectively weaponised, qualifying it as a coercive tool to threaten and control group members.

One respondent said, 'There were always threats of being marked, "shunned" or disfellowshipped if caught breaking the rules.' Another respondent stated that 'shunning is their main method of control'.

Shunning to Punish Victims of Sexual Abuse

When I told them I had been raped, my family kicked me out and cut off all contact.

After a rape and [being] accused of fornication, [I] lost family, friends and community when I needed it the most.

Shunning to Control

Any books, cinema, TV, etc. were seriously frowned upon and forbidden to those who lived in the centres. Again, pressure from seniors and peers in the form of social acceptance or rejection were the tools used.

I knew that if I was ever disfellowshipped or chose to leave then I would be shunned by my family and friends. I was constantly in fear of being killed at Armageddon like the sinners in the pictures in our magazines and books.

No-one talks to you again . . . you are so lost – you return to the religion as you have no choice. You are so alone.

The last quote above reveals the coercive and controlling nature of this punishment. The objectives of this form of abuse are threefold: it removes the perceived offender from within the fold of the group; it acts as a threat or warning to others in the group should they dissent in any way; and it marks out and reaffirms the group's rigid set of rules for what is and is not acceptable. Those who transgress these rules are punished.

Non-Compliance and Rule Breaking

I'm afraid of being caught breaking one of the many rules and being disfellowshipped. Although it would hurt me greatly, I'm more worried about my mother. My mother is devout and up in age, and if I were disfellowshipped, it would not only sever ties with her only daughter, but with her only grandchild as well. It would absolutely break her heart. The shunning policy is incredibly cruel, not only to those who are shunned, but to those who are expected to shun. I've had my arms around mothers who are sobbing because they haven't seen or heard from their child in years and feel that God demands that of them. That is something to be afraid of.

Anyone who failed to follow group rules had to confess to so-called priests (who were not qualified in any way for the role, usually), and in some cases the matter was then brought to the whole local congregation and paraded before them verbally. In extra-bad cases (or sometimes for no reason other than disfavour, often accompanied by the priests' lies, I found out after I left), the person would be put under 'assembly discipline', which involved either shunning via the person being 'shut up to God', confined and not allowed to interact or attend meetings with the group at all for weeks or months... or the person could be 'withdrawn from' or excommunicated, which was a complete cutting off from all friends and family, often forever.

This mechanism of control is used to enforce rules and further isolate victims, while reaffirming the control of the leader. It places members under unspeakable amounts of emotional duress, sowing doubt and distrust among members through monitoring and surveillance of the group. This creates an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Those who have doubts are either reindoctrinated or weeded out to prevent what is seen as a contamination of doubt within the group.

Exiting the Group

If I was seen in the street, they crossed the road. The feeling of being the great unwashed was not hidden on their faces. They whispered to each other, looked over at me in disgust and shame. This was difficult to contend with considering I was homeless and in bed and breakfasts set up by the council at the time.

When I left myself at 41, my in-laws and the entire congregation I had grown up in shunned me and wouldn't have anything to do with me.

As a child we had to shun people who no longer wanted to be in the group. On leaving the group myself at 17 years of age, I was shunned by everyone in the group. This included my mother and father and all of my friends.

This research aims to highlight how cults engage in systematic attacks on members' close personal relationships and, ultimately, break up families and erode individual autonomy. Family members cutting ties with their own because of decisions made by cult leaders or their lieutenants is a clear indication of loss of emotional and cognitive agency and reveals the power and control cults possess over their members.

Effects of Shunning

Being shunned is extremely traumatic, both to the individuals who are shunned and to those who are expected to shun. It is a form of imposed social isolation. Respondents shared the grief, trauma and loss they experienced, either from the fear of being shunned or the effects of being outcast. Many of the respondents who had grown up in their groups had no prior experience of life outside the cult and were left homeless, destitute and alone. Many grappled with mental health issues, including suicide attempts. Most were utterly heartbroken and lonely.

Only some of their experiences are shared in this report.

You're taught to fear the world and everyone in it. You grow up in a bubble, and then, when leaving, you have to relearn everything, but do it without any support system or family.

My siblings shun me and treat me as if I am dead. My parents have very basic contact with emotional distance. My reputation amongst those I once called friends is ‘wicked sinner’, and they will invariably preach that I allowed myself to be ‘drawn away’ by my ‘worldly husband’.

Severe shunning is quite traumatic. To go from having a whole tight knit community where you holiday together, spend all your social hours together, meet 5 times a week, possibly more, to then complete and absolute isolation . . . They can't even look at you and will cross the street if they see you.

Being ostracised. Severe financial challenges due to leaving with nothing but 4 children to support.

Shunning as a form of control is coercive in nature and is an abusive punishment. The lead-up to shunning is crucial, as it involves other coercive and controlling strategies such as isolation, enforcement of rules and constant monitoring and surveillance. This pattern of abuse constitutes coercive control, and the Trust urges the Government to recognise this and respond appropriately to prevent this abuse of its citizens.

ENFORCEMENT OF RULES, MONITORING AND SURVEILLANCE

The UK Government's Guidance Framework states that types of coercive and controlling behaviours exhibited by perpetrators include 'taking control over aspects of their [the victims'] everyday life, such as where they can go, who they can see, what to wear and when they can sleep'.¹⁰

Respondents were asked if their groups took control over their everyday lives. 85% of the respondents stated that the group controlled whom they could see, 82% stated that the group controlled what they could wear and 45% stated that the group controlled when they could sleep.

The Trust urges the Government to recognise the high levels of control these groups have of their victims and the subsequent restrictions on their rights to liberty.

Respondents shared experiences of belonging to groups in which there were rules and restrictions pertaining to every imaginable life choice, from what they could eat, to what they could watch, to whether they had any free time and, if so, how they could use it, to whom they could have contact with, to whether and what they could study, and even to whom they could marry.

Enforcing rules and restrictions in a cult environment is simply another way of intimidating and controlling, which replaces the victim's sense of self and identity with that of the group or its leader. The enforcement of rules in a cult creates an environment of monitoring and surveillance, fear of punishment, self-policing, and judgment of others. Disobedience and non-compliance with the rules are met with harsh penalties, such as physical punishment, shaming and shunning.

Enforcement of Rules

Rules about what we can eat; what we can say; what we can think (literally) – we had to monitor our thoughts to weed out 'negative' thoughts/feelings/impulses; what information we could consume (nothing 'worldly' – no TV, no newspapers, no fiction – nothing unnecessary to the cult's causes).

They are controlling you, and when they have control over you they are controlling aspects of your daily life. Especially at the seminars, in another country, staying for two weeks controlling everything that you did – you were not allowed to spend time for yourself. We did not sleep much. Fasting! (People are more and easily influenced when they are hungry, meditate a lot and forced to have sex.)

I had to ask permission to go anywhere overnight, go on holiday, visit family, have medical attention. All my time was taken up with group activities when I wasn't working.

There was a sense of fear, of being found out to have seen a friend or gone to the cinema.

According to Evan Stark, such micro-regulation and enforcement of rules 'leaves little space for personhood to breathe'.¹¹ The insidiousness of this form of coercive control is doubled in cults, where victims identify as part of a group all conditioned to follow the same rules. This creates a system

where a culture of obedience is created, where minority dissent is quashed immediately, and where these coerced individuals recruit, monitor and surveil each other, thus strengthening the system.¹²

Respondents spoke of being watched, being informed on by other members, having to give explicit confessions to leadership and self-policing their own actions.

The Trust urges the Government and legislators to recognise the debilitating impact of cults' abusive behaviours on their victims' abilities to live lives of freedom and agency.

Monitoring and Surveillance

Monitoring and surveillance of members is a method of control that works in tandem with the enforcement of rules. It is used strategically to reinforce commitment to the group, while simultaneously holding others in the group to the same account. Thus, it creates an atmosphere of distrust of others, self-policing, informing, threat and fear.

I could and was contacted at any time, day or night, to the point where I developed a physical response when my mobile phone rang, which lasted many months after leaving the group.

We lived in community households so our time was constantly monitored by others.

Rules about what to eat, how to preach, when/where to preach or keep silent, every aspect of life was monitored and scheduled under strict scrutiny. Absolutely no privacy, no time for myself except some nights when I could write in my secret journal.

I had to sell my own car when I entered the ministry and drove a car of other members. I had to ask permission to use the car for anything personal like a medical appointment. At all times I had to be around my co-worker who decided when or where we were going to stay.

Monitoring and surveillance deprives the individual of privacy and autonomy.

Even if group members do not live communally, the fact that many people are in the same position, with the same intense restrictions and lack of personal choice, means that the space for free action, free thinking and freedom itself disappears.¹³ Victims are left vulnerable, helpless, afraid and unable to speak freely with others in the group. They are watched, judged and monitored as part of systematic coercive control.

Monitoring Time

Participants were asked whether the groups monitored the members' time. Of the 94 responses, 55% said they had to justify time not spent on the group. 35% were expected to submit time sheets.

We'd also have to write a daily journal outlining what we'd done each day, and what we had learnt.

There was not much free time to do anything else. We had to report how many hours we'd been preaching. I was a full time pioneer so had to report 100 hours a month minimum preaching. 1,200 hours a year with no allowance for holidays.

Demand to be on an online forum all the time which connected members from different parts of the world as well as the leader, group yoga sessions, long talks with the leader (would go on all day and into the night), working for the leader's small businesses, cleaning the leader's land.

It is mandatory to submit a preaching activity report every month. Also when you miss one meeting, people will ring or text to say they noticed you were absent from the meeting (av. 120+ will attend these meetings). Also, if you miss a few meetings, the elders contact you and offer a shepherding call, which ends up being a home visit by 2 men who want to know if your mind is still indoctrinated or if you are having doubts, at which point you have no option but to lie, because if you tell the truth, you could get disfellowshipped or at least ostracized by members of the congregation for being 'a bad association'.

The Trust's research shows that cults monitor their members' time as a method of control. This engulfment of time ensures that the member is focused solely on the cult's objectives. Respondents felt overwhelmed by this constant, forceful and all-encompassing monitoring of their time.

The enforcement of rules, the monitoring and surveillance of victims, and the threat of penalties and punishments for non-adherence are clear indicators of coercive and controlling abuse. The Trust asks the Government to hold these groups to account.

ABUSE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

Confessing one's innermost thoughts, feelings and experiences is a practice common to all totalist groups.¹⁴ Followers are encouraged to expose their doubts and weaknesses of belief and confess their failings. Sometimes they even feel compelled to fabricate such confessions. The information gathered by the cults in these confessional practices is then used against the follower in a flagrant abuse of power. What should be a safe space of privacy and confidentiality becomes instead a manipulative exercise of extracting information for the purposes of power, control and, ultimately, entrapment.

The following section highlights the voices of participants who shared their experiences of being made to confess and how this information was then used as a threatening tool for coercion and control.

Confessions

I was humiliated and named and shamed in front of everyone, and had to confess all of my faults and shortcomings. We would be given demerits if we failed to do things and would be given extra jobs to do.

The leader collected confession letters from each of us every time it was deemed we had done something bad and it was with the understanding he was going to use these to 'out' us.

They send you to the 'Ethics' department, which involves confessionals and making amends, either financially or by other means; e.g. I once had to clean out their sauna as punishment.

The above examples underline the punitive nature of confessional sessions. Confessions are associated with perceived rule-breaking and are often followed by punishments, intensifying fear and anxiety. Respondents also highlighted the humiliation associated with making forced confessions. This degradation is a key factor of emotional abuse, which leads to a vulnerable, and thus deployable, victim.

Abuse of Authority

The head therapist [i.e. cult leader] knew everything about me, since they first had been my therapist, then my colleagues and my bosses. As soon as I said no to something they told me I operated out from . . . abandonment issues or similar. They always had the upper hand. Furthermore, there was always something in my personality to ‘work on’. I always had to be transformed in one way or another. And of course they were the judges, the ones who should determine if I was on the right spiritual track or not.

Since it was therapy and I already, from the first course, in the beginning, had answered 20–30 pages about my private life and my shortcomings, such as my father being an alcoholic etc., they knew everything about me and didn’t hesitate to use it against me as soon as I did not meet up to what they considered to be the correct standard, or if I was questioning stuff . . . There was in general always a lot of drama, and this was a ‘normal’ way for the therapists to treat subordinate staff – a power demonstration. As a submissive you were never on the right page, and constantly had to work on your personal development.

The above experiences demonstrate how information extracted from victims in what should be a confidential and safe space was instead used against them. Followers were encouraged to entrust their most private thoughts and experiences to therapists who would then misuse the information to exert authority and power.

This section has highlighted how private information extracted through confessions and therapy sessions is used effectively in coercive control. Creating an illusion of safety and trust and then misusing disclosed information to make threats produces a power imbalance in which the victim is left feeling exposed. The objective of a cult is that a member submits entirely their sense of self, so they become malleable subjects of the leader. The abuse of power through therapy and confession enables this transfer of the ‘self’ to the cult.

MONA'S STORY

I just went to therapy. I was looking for a therapist who'd worked on trauma a lot and worked on herself. Someone told me that they had a therapist who had done inner-child work and worked on herself.

She said she probably wouldn't be able to see me for about a year because she was so busy. Then I got a call back the next day saying sessions had become available. She told me she would charge me the reduced rate. So I always felt like I owed her from the beginning – that she was actually doing me a favour.

I started going weekly. . . . After about six months, she told me that if I really wanted to explore my trauma, I would have to have the capacity to really fall apart, and if you need to really fall apart, you're not going to do that if you have to go into the office the next day. So she told me that the best thing would be to get on benefits.

She also told me about these groups that she was running. It was a closed therapy group with a core group of people working for years with her. That's when things really heated up. I left my work and went on benefits.

I started to pretend that I was feeling sick, physically sick, to start getting sickness notes. I was lying about those things. Then I started to pretend that I was having a mental breakdown. I cannot believe I went to that level! I asked my GP to refer me to a psychiatrist, pretending I was really feeling suicidal.

I just stopped seeing my friends because I couldn't bear to lie to them about what was going on.

The therapist would say, 'If you were in the French resistance, you would have to lie. You would have to pretend', and that what I was doing was for the good of myself and humanity, because I was working on myself. And that would have ripple effects on my relationships, and society eventually.

But not working, lying . . . it's not something I would have decided on my own.

What authority did she have to tell me that that's what I needed to do? I didn't have any experience of therapists and didn't know that wasn't normal.

Her boundaries were already an issue. She was very quickly open to seeing my friends and family and partner. So, over time, I brought them into the therapy. What that did is, it actually distanced us from each other, because we were in competition with each other: 'How much work and how much healing are you getting?'

There's always evaluation going on. But then it started to be: 'Well, if people are traumatised and they're not working on themselves enough, then you need to pull away.'

I started assisting her in those groups. She set it up as a business where she made us co-coaches with her. We built a website, and we started looking for people to get onto these online groups.

That's when the spirituality chat started to kick in. There was trauma therapy, and then slowly she started bringing spirituality into it.

But more than that, when the spirituality kicked in: was I was gonna miss out on the only thing that was important in life? At some point, it became 'I can't argue with God.' Because she had realised she was God.

When I left she told me, 'Well, if you don't work through your stuff and get enlightened, you are doomed.'

Everyone goes, 'Yeah, but it wouldn't happen to me.' Well, I just thought I went into therapy! All I did was go to therapy. I didn't expect it from a woman. I thought it would be a medical model, not magical, or spiritual, but more scientific.

I found out that she used to be in a personal growth cult. I think that's where she probably learned all this. How do we legislate against that?



EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Fear is the driving force behind coercive control. As shown throughout this report, respondents disclosed this chronic fear arousal in the cultic groups in which they were entrapped. Here are examples from participants remembering their childhoods in cults.

Love was conditional on obedience to the cult . . . constant guilt and fear. I used to bite my nails and wet the bed.

My overriding memory of my childhood is one of constant fear; fear of being bad, fear of being blood guilty, fear of sinning against the Holy Spirit (unforgivable), fear of persecution, which was inevitable, [and] fear of apostasy. It is no way to raise a child.

It has damaged me so much that I now have PTSD from childhood trauma. I have since been to a therapist and I have the tools to cope with this PTSD. At times I catch myself behaving like a child because parts of me have not grown up.

Emotionally abusing victims, often through humiliation and degradation, is a core component of coercive control. Humiliation and degradation were prevalent in the experiences of the participants. The Guidance Framework states that types of coercive and controlling behaviours include ‘repeatedly putting them down such as telling them they are worthless; enforcing rules and activity which humiliate, degrade or dehumanise the victim’.¹⁵

The following section provides evidence of this coercive control in group contexts.

Group Humiliation and Degrading Acts

During the 3-month course, cut off from the outside world, people were humiliated all the time. In my case, I was criticised for not losing weight even though my diet was being restricted and controlled, and I was made to stand on scales and my weight announced in front of about 100 people. On another occasion, my clothes were not arranged neatly in the closet and I had to take all of my possessions outside and spend time folding them into a suitcase in front of everybody. Anyone who reported having sexual experiences in their sleep was forced to sleep outside or in the communal shower block.

Some were given new names that represented their worst fault, like Earnest, Casual. The guru would point out someone in large group settings and humiliate them in front of everyone. People would be ignored, not spoken to, sent away to live elsewhere with no contact with the group until they 'woke up'. Highly personal details I had told the guru in private were spoken about freely to other members.

Beddikess [sic]. Where a rabbi must examine a woman's underwear to decide when a period is over. This is disgusting and finding out I would be required to do this was a massive step to my realising I wanted to leave.

Cults use humiliation as displays of power and control. When used in a group setting, humiliation acts as a threat or warning to others in the group, thus creating an abusive environment. Humiliation causes shame, self-doubt, confusion and further isolation from fellow group members, which falsely strengthens the sense of attachment to the leader, ultimately giving them more control.

Degradation

I really did want to die because [then] the pain would go away. The abuse would go away and I would not have to sit in one more meeting listening to how I was not good enough anymore. I was 13 when I really realised how upset I was.

Constantly told we're sinners. If you didn't put in a report for at least 10 hours the elders would speak to you to say you weren't doing enough. Those not doing full-time preaching were made to feel not good enough. Never felt you were doing enough.

All are repeatedly told they are 'imperfect and not worthy' of God's notice. Constantly told to strive for more. Impossibly high standards of daily Bible reading, preparing 3 different study publications weekly, out on preaching work at least every week, whilst working, etc. No leeway given to 'young people' for mental health issues or exhaustion. Constantly told we are sinners, born of sin, can only pray through Jesus as we are too imperfect to have any direct contact with God.

Many respondents shared the sense that, whatever they did, it was never good enough. The highly demanding expectations of cults lead to constant denigration and degradation of their victims. Degradation is used to slowly chip away at the victim's sense of self, making them more vulnerable to manipulation for the cult's objectives.

Gaslighting

To manipulate (someone) by psychological means into doubting their own sanity.¹⁶

The teachings stated that your perception could not be trusted – that your perception was just a dream, a hallucination, which was then used to gaslight you. Anger was taught to be a delusion, meaning that if you were angry you would be called mentally unstable and deluded. Teachings are abuse enabling, stating you should see an abuser as your teacher.

Every time I raised a critical voice, I was told that I had 'doubt'. When I talked about leaving and instead taking care of myself, I was told that I was egoistic and that I had the 'bodhisattva ideal' (i.e. to practice Buddhism for the sake of all sentient beings).

I was labelled a liar if I found material that challenged the witnesses or a girl spoke out about being abused. I was told not to listen to her as she's crazy and a liar.

I was told that I was full of delusion, lacked wisdom, that my perceptions were incorrect, [and] that I was angry, bitter, mentally unstable. Teachings suggested that all personal needs were just a result of your ego, which must be destroyed.

This research demonstrated gaslighting used as a technique to thwart victims' senses of reality, so that they accepted the false realities presented by the cults. Doubt and criticism were rapidly shut down to quell further dissent. The examples here convey how a victim is made to question their own perceptions, then labelled with a pejorative (e.g. 'crazy', 'liar'), and then told they are hallucinating or deluded and cannot trust their own thoughts. This creates a sense of confusion in the victim that aids in further destabilising them.

According to the Trust's research, humiliation, degradation and gaslighting are all forms of coercive control taking place in cultic environments. Members who are already entrapped within the cult are deeply invested and embedded in the environment and are thus more vulnerable and less aware of the abuse and its effects. According to Stark, 'insults and put downs are effective in

coercive control because they play off complementary forms of deprivation, intimidation and control that disable a victim's capacity to respond.¹⁷ All aspects of abuse work together to create a high level of control and manipulation.

The abuse evidenced here highlights how coercive control in cults attacks the victim's sense of self and personhood. Humiliating the victim by shaming them in a group, forcing them to carry out demeaning activities, dehumanising them and then gaslighting them makes the victim vulnerable to severe manipulation and exploitation. The Trust demands that legislation be improved to ensure that high-control groups do not act with impunity, as they currently do.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC ABUSE

Financial and economic abuse is an aspect of coercive control that is used to maintain power and limit the victim's independence. According to Women's Aid, financial abuse in IPRs 'involves a perpetrator using or misusing money which limits and controls their partner's current and future actions and freedom of choice.'¹⁸ Economic abuse includes 'restricting access to essential resources such as food, clothing or transport, and denying the means to improve a person's economic status (for example through employment, education or training).'¹⁹

The Trust found evidence of both financial and economic abuse in its research with victims of cultic groups. Currently, financial abuse in IPRs is covered by the Serious Crime Act 2015's coercive-control legislation, yet victims of financial abuse in high-control groups have little access to legal help. The Trust asks the Government to bring justice to victims suffering from financial abuse within the wider spectrum of coercive control, who are unable to seek justice for this specific crime at present.

Unpaid Labour

Participants were asked about their experiences of financial and economic abuse. Of those who responded,

- 83% did unpaid labour for the group;
- 62% did long hours of labour; and
- 47% stated that the group generally violated labour laws.

Financially exploited, constantly asked for donations, demands for three-hour prayers, or chain prayers all night, or cold showers, or walking all around the north and south circular roads of London non-stop, etc. Sometimes I slept in a fundraising van or in strange places. Illegally slept on the roof of a factory for six months.

I wasted my entire youth full-time preaching for the group and didn't get my first full-time job until I was 41. This means I have a small pension to live off in my retirement.

I was coerced to hand apply for a loan and handed this to the cult leader to buy a farm. Work unpaid selling cakes at weekends and sometimes in the week.

My P60s show I earned approx. £4,000 per annum for the 10 years I worked for them. My schedule was 9 am to 10 pm [Monday to Friday] and 9 am to 6 pm on weekends. I sometimes had Christmas day off if I got lucky.

Respondents shared their experiences of working with limited or no financial compensation. Members who were required by their cults to preach or spend their time fundraising often did so without reimbursement for their time and efforts. This leaves the victim in financial hardship and having nothing to show for their work after many years of free or low-paid labour. The expectation that a member's time *belongs* to the cult is in itself abusive.

Financial Coercion

Unless you were doing 12.5 hours, were on a course, plus regularly donating tons of money, you were not good enough. When I first joined I was doing well financially. Once they had extracted huge sums of money from me and I got into financial difficulty, then I was no longer up to their standards.

I was pressured into taking a loan for some services. Another bank offered to lend me the money at a better rate. I was pressured into taking out the second loan but not paying off the first one, to pay for more services. I was regularly pressured to buy services [and] products and make donations. They never give up. You're pressured into taking huge loans and lots of credit cards. At one stage I had 7 credit cards maxed out, and 3 or 4 loans.

I was coerced into handing over an inheritance and other money I'd received to them.

Unpaid labour. No access to finance unless overseas renewing visas. Money was gifted erratically and used to control. People gave inheritance to the group in many cases, including myself. Individuals had to donate. Also were pressured to buy houses jointly and donate money to support the publication of the leaders' books. I maxed out my credit card, supporting the tour of the leader in the USA.

A recurring theme in respondents' answers to questions about their experiences of financial abuse within the cult environment is the amount of pressure they felt to donate to the group. The coercion was strong enough to persuade victims to hand over properties, inheritances, wages and incomes to the groups.

Expected Donations

We paid a monthly 'donation' and regular voluntary donations for special occasions like Christmas and birthdays of the leaders, Mother's and Father's Day (and anyone who did not donate voluntarily was reported). Payments for international seminars, which were up to £3,000 per year, were always made in cash.

Forced donation. Everybody gives or the service doesn't end. Doors are locked.

You were expected to give most of your money to the group. You were expected to pay to go to retreats, travel to see the guru, buy him presents . . . They wanted donations all the time. You were encouraged to take out loans, people re-mortgaged their homes, if they still had them. If you did something wrong many paid hefty financial donations in a bid to get back into the guru's good books.

We had to turn in all money we raised from selling the cult literature/tapes/videos, and prostitution, and any gifts. One Christmas my children were sent some Christmas presents by their grandparents, but these were either sold or redistributed amongst other children as well.

Money donation was asked of me regularly, once I was baptized, at 16 years of age, even though I did not have any work or pocket money.

The expectation to donate was felt strongly by respondents. They were also expected to pay for courses and retreats.

Justifications for Financial Exploitation

Pensions were discouraged, along with saving for old age as Armageddon was coming and none of us would grow old, so prep for old age showed a lack of faith. Discouraged from higher education or from doing overtime or putting in extra effort at work, which meant most members were on a low income.

Constantly asking for money and donations from members to pursue group's interests. Members were advised to give up 'earthly possessions' and use their money to further the interests of the group.

Many live paycheck to paycheck, saving nothing for a rainy day, as an expression of their faith. My family did not save for the future because of being promised that the end was going to come decades ago. I think I can safely say that my family has been financially crippled because of the religion. That hasn't been due to force, but due to very strong coercion.

Teachings are used to suggest that giving your money to the group will help to destroy your ego and give you good karma, meaning you're more likely to experience a fortunate rebirth.

If we owned a house we were asked to take out a mortgage and give the money to the church. Ancestors need to be liberated, which cost about £17,000 per member to liberate hundreds of generations. These then needed to have their marriages sanctified, which cost more money. If we owned any property we were asked to sign it over to the church so ownership could be passed from Satan to God.

Respondents shared how the groups' beliefs were constructed in ways that enabled faith, guilt and shame to be used to siphon money from them. Cult members who are already invested in their group's ideology are made to believe the only way to achieve the group's goals is by giving up their possessions, income and time to further the cult's agenda and attain so-called enlightenment for themselves. However, in the process, members are exploited financially, economically and emotionally.

Control over Money

We all gave all our earnings and I gave my 21st birthday money from my parents to the group. We made a decision at the start to 'live in common' and continued to do so throughout. This meant we were not at liberty to leave as we did not hold our own money.

Wages, savings and any gift money was paid into a common fund and members only allowed money for specific, approved purchases deemed to be appropriate by leaders. Threats of expulsion if you didn't abide by rules . . . Spending was monitored to the penny and receipts demanded as evidence.

We were told to give everything up and we would be taken care of. I sold all my possessions or gave them away to realise, after, I had to beg just, for example, to get toothpaste. At one point I really needed underwear and I was too ashamed to ask for the money, as they would ask what it was for.

The above examples demonstrate the economic abuse that can take place in cults when members' money is given to, then controlled by, the cult. This ultimately strips victims of freedom and independence. It can put members in extremely abusive situations where they become entirely dependent on the cult to survive.

This section has highlighted the financial and economic abuse taking place in cults at present, in the form of forced donations; financial coercion; fraud; unpaid labour; expensive courses; donations of property, inheritance and wages; and pressure to use multiple credit cards and loans. The group's ideology is often used as a tool to coerce members into believing that it is their duty or responsibility to fill the group's purse. There is also a sense that expectations must be met to avoid judgement and negative repercussions. The requirement to donate is viewed as a test of faith.

The result of this abuse is detrimental to victims and their families, leaving them with debts and destitute. Many respondents lost years to the cult and were left with nothing as a result. Ultimately, this form of financial and economic coercion attacks the victim's right to autonomy and stability, leaving them entirely at the mercy of the group. The Trust implores the Government to take action against this abuse.

DEPRIVATION

According to Professor Evan Stark, depriving a victim of sleep and access to medical care, therapy, education and everyday necessities induces debilitation, exhaustion and confusion. Crucially, it weakens the victim's ability to resist.²⁰ This is a central component of coercive control and is also included in the Government's definition, which is:

exploiting [the victim's] resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.²¹

This study found evidence of this particular tactic of coercive control. Participants were asked if the group deprived them of their basic needs. Of 88 respondents,

- 88% said the group deprived them of recreation or free time;
- 64% were deprived of privacy;
- 46% were deprived of sleep;

Out of 101 respondents,

- 74% stated that the group limited access to education; and
- 86% stated that the group limited or forbade access to cultural resources including books, music and other forms of entertainment.

Our findings highlight the need for the Government to recognise as coercive control the abuses of deprivation taking place in high-control groups and to hold those responsible to account. Thus far, these groups have been operating with impunity while their victims are deprived of their most basic needs.

This section foregrounds the voices of victims who have been deprived of medical attention, therapy and access to education and social choices.

Medical Deprivation

Permission needed to be sought for medical attention and a report had to be submitted. All communication was done in Spanish, regardless of which country you were in, and this made it harder. Serious illnesses and death were often linked to a person's karma, as a punishment.

I grew up knowing that if I ever needed a blood transfusion then my parents would let me die instead.

It was discouraged to see allopathic doctors. There was an Ayurvedic doctor on site while I was there.

They encouraged us to use ‘psychic healers’ and other New Age ‘specialists’ recommended by them.

I know of people who were discouraged from getting medical help and psychiatric help for many years, with them saying ‘the dharma is all you need’.

I didn’t go to a GP for 10 years, because the leader didn’t want me to. When I needed counselling, I was prevented from seeing anyone.

It is clear that, even for such a basic need as medical attention, participants felt they had to seek permission or approval from their leaders. The participants also describe here unevidenced beliefs around health and healthcare. That limits a victim’s access to medical attention and creates further dependence on the group and their beliefs.

Deprivation of Mental-Health Treatment

People were directly discouraged from seeking any non-physical health or support service like psychology or counselling. Except for when a person went off the rails – then their family would be contacted to come and take them back and deal with them.

They didn’t outright ban access but would berate and shame anyone going to seek medical help for mental health, for example, by saying, ‘If you had enough faith, you wouldn’t need anti-depressants.’ I was forbidden from counselling for anxiety and depression as the organisation’s thoughts were ‘counselling will turn you against your religion’.

Therapists and professionals were from Satan’s system and we were taught to be scared and suspicious of them.

I wanted to start therapy because of childhood abuse that they unearthed before I became a full member and I was rebuked because therapy is only for ‘people who don’t trust God’.

The respondents described the negative views of many cults on therapy and even the outright denial of mental-health problems altogether. Instead, followers were expected to rely on faith and their leaders. Digression from this expectation would be judged as the follower's own weakness of belief, thus making it difficult for them to seek help.

Social Deprivation

The group didn't seem overly controlling when I was in it, but when I left, I realised that I was slowly having my personal behaviours affected/changed. We were told not to listen to heavy metal music (or similar) or to watch overly violent or scary films. We were told to avoid 'toxic' individuals and to not let people with problems burden us. It was frowned upon to eat meat and to drink alcohol, smoke, etc.

Deprived of all contact with relatives and friends who left the group so I didn't see my four grandparents after the age of four. Deprived of pets, TV, radio, pre-recorded music, theatre, cinema, fun fairs, holidays, [and] jobs which were in a Union or where you had to sign a Secrecy Act.

We were not allowed to use the internet for anything apart from our jobs, with the exception of viewing their own website and online videos, which started to be published in around 2010, I think. We were discouraged from reading any literature which was not published by them, unless it was to study the Spanish language.

Higher education was highly discouraged. I was 'marked' as a weak associate for accessing university education. As such, my peers in the religion were discouraged from spending too much free time with me. Films, books, etc. were often spoken of as being 'stumbling blocks' and anything based in fantasy or with sex and violence were forbidden, with a risk of repercussions within the organisation.

Recurring themes in the above responses are social rejection, prohibition, discouragement, risk and repercussions, the sum of which is control. Depriving followers of education, cultural resources and social interactions denies them access to alternative views that could tempt them to leave, doubt or question the cult.

It is clear that high-control groups use deprivation as a tactic to control followers and to weaken their resistance to the demands of the leader. This creates an environment in which followers are

allowed only to communicate within the narrow confines of the groupspeak and rigid rules of behavior; and, due to the dissociation that is created, the follower is also isolated from his or her self, from his or her own ability to think clearly about the situation.²²

This abuse is further exacerbated when victims are not allowed to address their mental health or medical needs, making them extremely vulnerable and open to further abuse and control. This level of control is wholly unacceptable in the UK, where mental-health awareness is on the rise, yet many high-control groups deny the existence of mental-health problems and require members to instead rely solely on leaders' beliefs.

This section has also highlights the flagrant abuse of the following articles of the Human Rights Act 1998:

Part I, Article 2(1): Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law.

Part I, Article 5(1): Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.

Part II, Article 2: No person shall be denied the right to education.²³

The Trust urges the UK Government to take heed and promptly hold these groups to account.

CONTROL OF INTIMATE, FAMILY AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Cultic groups control their members' relationships with intimate partners, children, family, friends, non-members and members alike. Close attachments of any form (other than to the leader and group) threaten the hold of the cult over followers. The main objective of this abuse is to remove alternate safe havens and spaces of resistance, which could provide feelings of safety and validation of followers' actual experiences, thus allowing the exploration of doubts and rational thinking. Instead, verification must solely be sought from the leader and the group ideology – wherein one finds not reality, but fiction.²⁴ This alternate reality is maintained through isolation from loved ones and total engulfment by the group of its members in every area of their lives, leaving no space to question or doubt.

Control of relationships may be obtained by making rules and requirements for sexuality and reproduction, including forced celibacy, promiscuity, arranged relationships, separations or divorces under orders, forced abortions and group-controlled use or denial of contraception.²⁵ This study found that control of sexuality is an integral component of control alongside controlling IPRs, friendships and time spent with children.

Intimate Partner Relationships

The leaders had full control over my relationship and I knew from the beginning they had the power to break it up whenever they wanted. I suspect it was arranged too from the beginning; however, I don't know entirely what went on behind the scenes, but I know that some leaders arranged for us to have a date. I was also ordered not to be in a relationship when we broke up and told I must stay single. I know other people who were coerced into marriages when they didn't want to and told to break up their relationships when the leadership decided they didn't like somebody.

The guru decided who you could be in a relationship with. It was claimed you could say no, but sometimes he would make it clear that he would be displeased if a woman turned down a certain man that was a favourite of his. I saw a number of women distressed about having to say yes to being in a relationship. My own partner was too frightened of him to say no to the two of us being in a relationship.

The private family unit was considered of lesser importance to the wider group. My husband was encouraged to practice polygamy, and we were separated for six months so he could help organise and attend a meeting for the worldwide leadership to meet.

All couples in the group would be separated many times. Some ended up with different partners, thus ending the relationship forever.

I had to be fully accountable to leadership with regards to relationships. Secrets were wrong and I was probed with questions that were not appropriate about my love life.

I was never allowed out of the house without at least a male sibling to chaperone me when not going to a church meeting. Then, when it was discovered I was seeing a man from outside the church through devious means, I was moved to the home of a church elder until I was deemed to be changed by the local priest!!

One of my sisters was ‘married off’ at age 16 before she was fully physically mature, by group elders (under the advice of the leader who was then from N. Dakota, U.S.), against the wishes of my mother. All marriages within the group had – and still have – to be made with the approval of the international leader, which approval sometimes he withholds for no known good reason.

Intimate personal relationships that may develop into sites of trust and shared doubts threaten the total domination of the cult. Respondents expressed the lack of autonomy and freedom of choice they had in regards to relationships. Intimate partnerships were not personal choices and were determined by the rigid confines of the cults’ objectives. Respondents also shared how relationship choices could displease the leaders and lead to punishments such as being forcibly made to end the relationship or being cast out of the group.

The lack of freedom to choose is especially worrying and goes against fundamental human rights. Privacy is also non-existent in coercive groups as the notion of the private within a cult is a threat to its total control. Therefore, cults ritualise and constrain interpersonal relationships in a multitude of ways to maintain control and break up any alliances or ‘islands of resistance’, which could jeopardise the group’s total engulfment of the individual.²⁶

Separating Parents and Children

Those of us with children were expected to have them looked after for significant amounts of time by other, 'less evolved' members.

Later, back in the UK, my children were separated from me and taken care of by others in the same house. My eldest son was sent away to one of the 'training schools' and I didn't know if I'd ever see him again. From the moment I joined I was not allowed to contact or see my family and friends unless supervised, and this was usually only allowed to try and get money from them or to try and recruit them to the group. My mother later told me that the group contacted her saying that I was sick or had had an accident and that money was needed to pay for my treatment and recovery.

Splits families up and turns children against any parent that gets pushed out.

As a child they invited me to stay at a cult site, which was a men's hostel on weekends. Other times when visiting the cult premises, they separated children from their parents, ostensibly so that kids wouldn't distract the parents; the children were put into a 'kids class' where a cruel, terse, angry, bullying lady kept them occupied (or doing manual work) whilst the parents were being indoctrinated. Males and Females had to sit separately, so even in the events where parents and kids could be together, if the genders were different the kids would be separated (often without any guidance/supervision/support).

Control of the parent-child relationship within cults begins before conception with reproductive choices and IPRs being dictated and monitored. The close bond of a parent and child poses a huge threat to a cult. Much work is put into preventing this from blossoming into a healthy relationship that could potentially trump the domination of the leader and the cult's objectives. As Singer wrote, 'Cult parents in essence turn over the custody of their children to a third party, so that the leader or the group becomes the actual custodian of the children.'²⁷ Separating parents from their children is a detrimental yet effective way to prevent stable attachments from being formed. Members are constantly required to prove that their priorities are the group and are thus overwhelmed with copious amounts of cult work. Children are neglected and may be sent away. The impact of this control is catastrophic to the childhoods of those growing up in cults, lending urgency to this serious problem regarding the rights and safety of children in such groups.

LINDA'S STORY

As children, my siblings and I were removed from our parents because one of our older brothers had broken a church rule. Such violations included getting a job with someone who was not a member of the group, or smoking, or going to church a little drunk.

As a consequence, I was 'fostered' on several occasions, for extended periods of time. The longest duration was for well over 12 months. Our practical needs were met, though we were woefully emotionally neglected. We spent most of our time in our rooms, alone. We were not permitted to have any contact with our parents because they were 'shut up'.

The doctrine of the Brethren made this upsetting and extremely frightening; at any time the world could end and I would never see my parents and brother again because they would be cast into the burning lake of fire forever.

The act of removing children in this way is emotionally damaging and causes deep psychological injury. Furthermore, the practice of removing children from their parents for extended periods of time without Social Services' intervention is illegal.



SEXUAL ABUSE

Control of Sexuality

Virginity and ‘purity’ of unmarried ones is high priority, though I am aware sexual abuses have occurred in vast numbers. There are books published and many talks spending an inordinate amount of time telling teenagers and young adults about how abhorrent sexual ‘immorality’ is. They include dictating acceptable sex positions and practices even within marriage, which has left an impact on ones like myself who carry guilt about pleasurable activities since.

Sexual contact with anyone, even with oneself, was not allowed. Married couples had to report their sexual activity, but men were not ‘allowed’ to ejaculate and having an orgasm was deemed a ‘fall’ which led to a decrease of that person’s ‘level of consciousness’ and had to be avoided at all costs.

No sex outside of marriage between man and wife. And sex inside marriage could only be the missionary position. No oral or touching. So no foreplay. Just in and out. This was discussed with couples before they married.

Celibate for at least three years before arranged marriage in the group and kept apart for five years after marriage, until permission finally given to start sexual relations with a specific sex ceremony, always with a picture of the leader in the room.

There is an obsession with how bad sex is. It was discussed graphically and inappropriately at meetings with children present. I knew from a young age that anal and oral sex was wrong but had no idea what it was. The children are therefore both over sexualised and woefully under sexually educated simultaneously.

I was expelled for being gay at the age of 29.

The Trust's research shows that even the most intimate of human behaviours is controlled by cults. The notion of privacy is non-existent, even regarding one's own sexual behaviours, highlighting the fact that nothing should be kept beyond the leader's knowledge and approval. Sexuality is thus less about one's pleasure and expressions of love and more about the constraints dictated by the group. Many cults are homophobic, and individuals must therefore leave to express their sexualities, thus facing the high cost of being shunned, among other sanctions.

Cults exert control over individual relationships, allowing little or no room for spontaneity, freedom and personal choice. The coercive nature of this abuse is apparent when considering the strictly conditional nature of these relationships. A huge number of regulations and rules are dictated to the individual regarding everything from parent-child bonds to intimate and sexual relationships and even relationships with family and friends. Disrupting these fundamental attachments is a central method by which cults maintain the level of control they need to create manageable, malleable and exploitable individuals. Cults force members to 'relinquish control of family life to the leader'²⁸ to remove any attachments that might compete with those to the leader and group.

This section, alongside the section on isolation, emphasises the level of coercive control cults use over intimacy and relationships. It also shows that the repercussions of disobedience can be extremely abusive.

The Trust questions what action the UK Government is taking to stop coercively controlling groups from abusing victims, breaking up families and destroying childhoods. At present these groups continue to abuse with impunity and function 'hidden in plain sight' in the UK today – many with ongoing charitable statuses. We expect the Government to take a stance and act urgently to prevent further abuses.

Participants were asked about their experiences of involuntary or coerced sexual contact. Of the 71 responses,

- 17% had been raped;
- 66% had experienced group-directed celibacy;
- 37% had experienced other undesired sexual contact within the group; and
- 21% stated they had had sexual contact with the group leader.

Sexual abuse in cults operating within the UK today is rife and goes on unaddressed. 17% of respondents have been raped within their groups. This is a crime of a huge magnitude, yet the Government does not pay attention to the plight of these victims.

Sexual abuse in high-control groups takes place in concert with other mechanisms such as isolation, monitoring and surveillance. Victims are often entrapped and embedded deep within the organisation before being abused sexually.

Sexual abuse is a method of degrading and dehumanising the victim to the extent they are unable to retain bodily autonomy. It is a show of power and reminds the victim that they are merely a possession to be owned.

This form of abuse can also include control of a victim's reproductive and sexual choices, such as enforced celibacy, forced use or denial of contraception, denial of sexual orientation, forced marriage or undesired sexual relations.

Sexual abuse is also a significant means of isolating victims, as it interferes with the development and maintenance of trusting intimate relationships.

Child Sex Abuse

Child abuse existed and was protected by the elders in the congregation.

Premarital sex is a sin and results in judicial action from the Elders of the congregation. Child sexual abuse is to be left in God's hands unless there are two witnesses to the offence. If there are not two witnesses then the accused will not receive any judicial actions against them and can remain a member of the organisation. I was 'courting' men in their mid-20s as an underage teenager. This was public knowledge to our families and congregations and never discouraged.

As a young teen I also experienced grooming behaviours from adult members of the congregation who would rub my neck and shoulders against my wishes and without consent. My parents accused me of being 'weird' for having an issue with it.

Judicial committees for people who had committed a 'sin' were degrading. 3 men would question a person in depth. If the sin had been fornication a person as young as 15 might have to explain in great detail how wide they had spread their legs, how many times, how deep, which body parts, did they enjoy it, etc.

Sexual Coercion/Abuse

In India I was threatened with being separated from [my family] and sent back to the UK without ever seeing my husband and children again unless I complied with having to sleep with strangers for money (prostitution) and to try and recruit them. I had no choice but to comply.

The leader had many relationships with women in the group. He said it was our duty to please him. He made us do sexual acts that I didn't consent for because I couldn't say no.

I shared a tiny room with two other women who were all in relationship with the leader and we all slept on the floor.

The leader told a friend of mine that he had 'fucked' one of his employees/students. Also, as I was filming for the group, I have watched quite a lot of footage that seems to show the leader grooming women for promiscuous sex.

There were schedules of who we had to sleep with, and we were not allowed to use any birth control apart from when having STDs.

Was unaware that most women were being raped or coerced into sexual practice with the leader. There was a strong emphasis on celibacy but arranged marriage was tested on a handful of us. My selected partner was 21 years older than me.

21% of 71 respondents had sexual contact with their leader. One respondent further added that they felt it was their duty and that they couldn't say no. This is sexual coercion and abuse. Shame and pressure are usually associated with sexual abuse, and respondents shared this and the level of courage needed to be able to leave.

Lack of Accountability

When a victim of sexual abuse in the group, who was suicidal before, died talking with me on the phone, it prompted me to boldly report to police the sexual offender (which was the State Overseer). After filing the Police Report, I had to hide in a Women's Center at an undisclosed location, and ran for my life. The police officer took sides with the clergy abuser and the rich members of the group in the home where the sexual abuse was committed. I later received telephone threats that made me leave the country.

I discovered the group is led in a misogynistic manner, male ministers being always in charge and controlling female ministers and members. I have knowledge and personal experiences with Clergy Sexual Abuse and Child Sexual Abuses cases in the group. Fear of exposing The Truth, or The Way, as members refer to the group, keeps members or ex-members silenced. Threats, rejection, shaming, shunning and expulsion and all sorts of other methods of intimidation keep the secrecy surrounding the group.

There has been ongoing coercive sex within the men, less now but still there, that I continue to hear about. The men affected refuse to report it and leave so it ends up with nothing being done about it. The perpetrators keep on getting promoted within the organisation, and men affected do not trust internal safeguarding or still want to get ordained, so don't report it. The safeguarding officer will report illegal activity to the police, but the police do not seem interested in coercive sex between adult men who are not related to each other.

In the majority [of] cases guilt was never found and the abuser could continue to associate with children unquestioned. And no parents would be warned. They were also told not to involve the police. Telling someone else in the congregation about a child abuser or rapist could get you disfellowshipped from the congregation for gossip.

At a course in Greece a rape occurred, and I was the only one supporting the victim loudly. They then had to deal with it in the big group. But, somehow, the meeting ended with that it was not so dangerous after all. It was an assistant of the Osho Therapists who raped a woman when she was receiving a massage.

There is an unwritten rule that members do not sue each other or take each other to court, which is not enforceable but is a pressure to sort things out internally. I still know of people who were sexually abused and advised to sort it out with the person who abused them.

This report has found that a lack of accountability is a frighteningly common obstacle in the process of reporting of sexual abuse within cults. Victims share a sense of fear in exposing the truth as not only will they face negative consequences, such as being expelled or shunned, but also they, ultimately, will not be believed. The research reveals a hugely misogynistic manner in the way high-control groups operate and how much power and control leaders have to continue to abuse – even in regards to child sex abuse.

Men, as shown by our research, are not exempt from many of these forms of sexual abuse, though sometimes it may be even more difficult for them to disclose, given social norms of masculinity.

The UK Government must wake up to the sexual abuse taking place within cults in the UK and must not leave it to the groups themselves to protect their members. The safeguarding mechanisms in high-control groups are absent, and such groups cannot be trusted with the safety of children and adult victims. It is entirely inappropriate for these groups to be granted permission to run independent schools for children born into the group, as this essentially closes off major avenues for external monitoring of these children's wellbeing. The Government is doing a serious disservice to these victims by allowing these groups to operate with impunity.

PHYSICAL ABUSE OF ADULTS

The incidents of physical violence shared by respondents have a common purpose – control. As Stark states, ‘Physical abuse and the associated risks of injury or death are as likely to be the consequence of entrapment as its cause.’²⁹ This suggests that when physical abuse takes place in the context of coercive control, it is less about the act of violence and more a mechanism and result of control.

The objective of the use of physical abuse in cult settings is gaining and maintaining power and control while inducing fear. It can also act as an effective warning to other cult members. Over time, this abuse has the effect of making members feel less deserving of value and respect and more susceptible to submitting to the cult.

I was physically beaten publicly around a dining room table, naked to the waist, and it was deeply humiliating and shaming, and [it] took many years to face this, many sessions of therapy and kindness of friends to see that it was not my fault and I did not deserve it. I was beaten about 8 other times and it created fear and terror of stepping out of line – another thing that has taken much work to recover from.

Yes one night I woke to find two female church members slapping another female round the face because she wanted to go to her husband in the next building.

Some top leaders were beaten with sticks. The female leader of UK was slapped in the face by Moon. One wife was beaten with a stick by Moon in Wembley, London in November 1974.

Beating also took place but more privately with less people present and was predominantly used on males.

Yes, public beatings and ‘rebuking’ sessions.

Parts of the physical body therapy exercises could get quite violent; i.e. birth exercises, rebirthing breath, etc. It happened that people broke small bones in ribcages, etc. and got several bruises as well as ended up with disc herniation, etc.

They were taught that physical punishment was to be applauded.

The above experiences of physical abuse suggest victims associated violence with feelings of shame, humiliation and degradation. The physical abuse was also cited as a method of intimidation to induce fear and a profound sense of threat. One respondent also shared that the group exercises could become quite violent, and this is something that is not uncommon in cultic rituals.

The UK Government has a responsibility to keep its citizens safe from physical abuse. How is it keeping victims of coercive control in cults safe?

PHYSICAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Physical punishment was normal. Spare the rod, spoil the child. Many parents took this to extreme and physically abused their children.

In meetings children often punished for not being quiet or still, etc.

Corporal punishment was absolutely recommended.

I have a head injury and hearing loss, due to the physical abuse dished out by my mother, due to not following what [was] the belief system's expectation of me as a very loud and uncontrollable and undiagnosed Autistic.

I experienced physical punishment from my parents, but I also seen other children being punished that way as well. As an example, a 7-month-old baby girl was making a lot of fuss. I seen her mother get a look from one of the elders as if he was saying, 'Why are you not doing something about that child?' The mother took the child out to the back room and spanked her 3 times on her little legs. I could see the marks when she got back to her seat after about an hour. I was a child myself.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe the Bible literally, and where it says 'Spare the rod, spoil the child', they truly believe that they have to spank their children so the child will be a good Jehovah's Witness and receive everlasting life in paradise.

It was always the parents of the children smacking them. It was horrible and I couldn't do anything. Older women in the group also used to hurt other people's children if they misbehaved during the talks they gave us.

Growing up I saw children beaten for not sitting still for 2 hours in the meetings.

As children we would be taken to the back room to be spanked by our parents if we spoke or moved too much during meetings.

Lots of smacking, lots of threats of destruction, frightening dystopian imagery constantly in magazines, being told when I did something naughty, ‘If you had done this in Israelite times we as your parents could have stoned you to death.’

The above quotes are particularly disturbing when one considers that this physical abuse was meted out to children. Even babies were not spared physical punishment. One respondent suggested that such abuse of children was the norm. There are indications of a general lack of patience and tolerance. For example, one respondent witnessed a baby being ‘spanked’, leaving marks on her legs, for ‘making a fuss’. This specific quote indicates that there was a sense of expectation, and thus pressure, on the mother to make the baby stop. The quotes also suggest that this abuse was not only an acceptable, but a *required* form of discipline.

One respondent shared the long-lasting physical impact this abuse has had on their adult life.

Children who witness and receive such physical abuse are likely to suffer long-lasting damaging effects to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

We question what child-protection measures are in place to protect vulnerable children growing up in cults who witness and experience physical abuse from their parents and elders.

CHALLENGES UPON LEAVING

I needed help to find a home, mental and emotional support. Similar to the needs of someone leaving a domestic abuse scenario, but over a lengthy period of time. It takes time to undo the years of being raised in a cult.

Participants were asked what obstacles they faced upon leaving.

- 82% experienced mental health issues, including PTSD and depression;
- 75% faced the loss of family/friends;
- 40 respondents experienced stalking or harassment from the group after they left;
- 26 respondents stated they were threatened by the group; and
- 47% experienced reputational damage.

Participants were asked what effects belonging to a coercive group had on their mental health.

- 89% suffered from anxiety;
- 84% stated they have a mistrust of others;
- 80% felt fear;
- 79% suffered from depression;
- 74% experienced dissociation; and
- 60% experienced suicidal thoughts.

Threats

Our family has been closely watched for many decades. My father, a former preacher, lived with constant threats – especially when he spoke out – legal and coercive. As for me I've had letters of an implicitly threatening kind when I wrote about the group, and have helped other ex-Brethren when they spoke out and came under vexatious litigation measures from expensive Brethren lawyers.

They often threaten me with death online, but not by their hand; by their God's hand. I often get anxious because what if the rules change? What if their rules that God is going to do it, change to the members doing it for God? They would absolutely do it for their God. That is what worries me the most.

They are litigious, and will stop at nothing to try to bring dissenters 'down', using a mix of top QC, barristers and lawyers . . . combined with whatever dodgy computer hacks the group decides to try implementing to gain info/access to one's personal life. The last bits of spiritual, religious and psychological fear they 'embedded' in me, finally all dissipated once I'd been out of the group for as long as I'd been in; i.e. 20 years.

Stalking and Harassment

Fear they would try to get me back. They found out my new phone number and my new address. Some came to my new house years later. Some tried to contact me through social media, etc.

The fear cult members will find me. They tried to reach me through social media. Still dealing with trauma; don't know how to heal. It is extremely difficult to talk about what happened to you – shame, feelings of revenge. Still having difficulties finding a job. Suffering from trauma, PTSD . . . still have financial difficulties because of it.

Church elders would turn up unannounced, and keep me talking into the small hours. They would use the silent tactic, where they would just sit and look at you for hours. If you asked them to leave, they would say, 'Life will get difficult for you.'

They would randomly show up uninvited at my work place or my parents' home to try to talk me into going back in.

They have tracked my movements ever since leaving.

After several house moves they still know and keep tabs on where we live and let us know they do.

Fear

Upon leaving, the group took away all the literature I had bought from them over the years, all the notes I had written, they deleted my email account, deleted phone numbers from my mobile and made me sign a document to say I was leaving due to my own failings. For years I was scared they would contact me or I would bump into one of them.

Fear of litigation if I speak out; fear of them punishing my cult-member family if I speak out; trauma reactions if I see them or visit areas where they operate.

The above quotes demonstrate the level of abuse a victim faces upon leaving a cult. This abuse is serious and can be dangerous, too. In similar ways to victims of coercive control in IPRs, ex-cult members experience stalking and harassment, fear of being found and threatening behaviour. Respondents used terms such as 'keeping tabs', 'turn up announced' and 'try and find me', proving that the coercive control continues in the form of stalking and harassment even after leaving. Ex-cult members feared negative repercussions, and also feared for their safety and their families.

Rebuilding Life from Scratch

You are not allowed or provided access to basic knowledge and skills needed to function in the world. This makes you completely stuck and dependent on the community or face the enormous task of starting again in the world like an infant, only with the added burden of trauma, rejection, isolation and issues with identity and guilt to grapple with at the same time.

Having to build a life from scratch. Making friends, getting an education, finding work, trying to live a normal life. Losing everyone I'd grown up with.

Trying to rebuild life when I literally had lost everything. While dealing with the grief and the coercive upbringing. I continue to still be lost as I don't know how to live a 'normal' life.

ELGEN'S STORY

I was born into the Moonies. My parents were one of thousands of couples whom 'Rev.' Moon matched and married in the 70s and 80s.

When I was four, my dad read to me an illustrated kid's Bible, providing his own commentary along the way. We read the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. In that story, God told Abraham to kill Isaac. Isaac accepted this must be done. So did Abraham, who was willing to kill his son for God's providence, so much so that he placed his son on an altar and raised his arm to murder him. God intervened at the last moment before father murdered son.

My father then told me that the point of the story is that, for chosen people like us, we must be willing to answer God's call, whatever that may be. The implication was clear: my dad was willing to sacrifice my life for the sake of his god. And my duty as a chosen son was to accept, comply and be willing to be murdered by him if that was God's will.

This principle applied to all of us born into the cult: our parents viewed us as sacrifices, expendable – a means to a spiritual end that they chose.

With that backdrop, we suffered all manner of abuse: emotional, physical, sexual, plus, I'm sure, more. We all attended countless indoctrination camps, and many of us had very little formal education. Kids have been raped and murdered in the name of Moon. Many, including myself, were coerced into arranged marriages with other kids from the cult.



Most of us survivors struggle with depression. Many of us struggle with romantic relationships. What does a successful relationship even look like when you've been told since birth that your own needs and wants don't matter and your only purpose in life is to marry someone of the cult's choosing?

I was in that marriage for 14 years. Now, on the other side of it for four years, I'm building a new life for myself and my son on our terms. Based on what's best for him. It's both exciting and daunting at the same time.

This cult and many others hide behind 'religious freedom' in the UK and many other countries, and I see little political will to change that. So what then can be done?

The most exhilarating thing of all in this new, wide-open, post-cult world has been using what I know to help others get out of the cult. My podcast is now a forum for sharing our individual experiences, and those experiences cumulatively add up to a mosaic of the shared abuse inflicted by the Moonies. Viewing that mosaic is helping people leave the cult. Every person who leaves the Moonies is one less person tithing to them, one less person abusing their kids in the name of heaven, and, eventually, when enough people leave, the whole thing will crumble.

Cults intentionally use secrecy and shame as methods of control. The shame that the Moonies instilled in us is an intentional defence mechanism. The Moonies, and in fact all cults, know that exposing their abuses is their greatest weakness.

So the most powerful weapon we survivors have is turning their abuses against them. Our voices, the ones they seek to silence, can tear them down. We only have to tell the truth.



Loss of Identity

I feel like I was assigned an identity and a role and I had to fill that box, no matter what. I feel like I was deprived personhood and humanity, and any real normal human care and human relating. Everything was [a] means to an end. It was dehumanising and debilitating.

You were not allowed to be an individual. To have your own mind. Your feelings, thoughts or needs were always of a low priority compared to the community and the image of the family in relation to it.

I was controlled, manipulated and brainwashed. I was unable to 'be myself' with my family and at work. I feel like I spent many years lying about my own feelings and thoughts and was completely separated from my own mind. I am full of guilt about the years my parents spent trying to take me out of the group, and that my father died while I was still involved and didn't get to see me as I am now: FREE!

Learning to Exist Outside 'the Cult Bubble'

Fitting into a world that I didn't know.

Needing to relearn everything about myself and the world.

Adjustment to a world that felt 'other'.

I am only now, at the age of 40, able to choose the career that I want to pursue and give it my full attention. For many years I was doing jobs that were convenient – 9–5 office work that allowed me to be available in the evenings and weekends to carry out the work of the cult.

If I [had] had the tools I have now, I may have been quicker to get into work. I feel that so much time has been wasted now, worrying and being fearful of a high-control group that is no longer in my life.

I was a single parent with 6 of my 8 children and had to start over from scratch. I got back in touch with my family again and had to apologise for all the trouble I'd caused by running away to join the group when I was recruited. I had to find new housing and claimed benefits. The children had many problems adjusting to life outside the cult as they'd never had proper schooling before and were not 'streetwise' and so fell in with the wrong friends. They got involved with drugs, shoplifting, petty crime and prostitution. I had no friends and my mother was not supportive at all. We were evicted by our landlord as he wanted to renovate the house and rent [it] out for more money. We were put in temporary accommodation before being placed in social housing on an estate full of crime and drug dealers. My husband, who I later divorced, had 2 of the older teenage boys with him and later abandoned them to fend for themselves.

I wasted years when I could have been working at a career, saving money, getting a stable living situation . . . I'm still renting and will always have to now. I've ended up in jobs that replicate the cult in many respects and stayed in them because of feelings of worthlessness and an inability to set boundaries; been in abusive situations with men for the same reasons. I've no idea how I'll manage in old age.

The most common challenge upon leaving a cult is learning to exist in a world outside the cult – in a world that feels 'other'. This is compounded by the trauma ex-members have gone through in the cult and a sense of acute grief at lost or wasted time. The level of isolation members face while in the cult leaves them socially isolated on the outside, and many lose family and friends in the process.

Respondents shared frustration at the education, job experience and social skills they missed out on while in the cult and how this had crippled their chances of survival now they are out. Because they spent so much time engulfed in cult activity, the process of relearning life outside is overwhelming. For those who have grown up in a cult, this task is monumental and can lead to severe, layered and complex repercussions.

Trauma

Participants were asked what effects belonging to a coercive group had on their mental health.

- 89% suffered from anxiety;
- 84% stated they have a mistrust of others;

- **80% felt fear;**
- **79% suffered from depression;**
- **74% experienced dissociation; and**
- **60% experienced suicidal thoughts.**

I was diagnosed and treated for PTSD and other mental conditions. I also have family members and close friends in the group who suffered similar problems, and some who attempted, and others even committed, suicide.

Tried to commit suicide 3 or 4 times when in the group. Had a total mental breakdown.

I think I had a breakdown after I left and then someone from the group randomly popped up in my Facebook friend suggestion – I became paranoid, thinking they were after me and will come after the kids, and I must have had a breakdown. I just kept crying non-stop for no reason for about an hour.

I was so depressed I could barely function. I spent most of the week in bed and could only function for about 8 hours a week. I had no money to buy things and ended up getting rid of a lot of my possessions because I was confused. I had virtually nothing.

Just fear of the conditioning and how the experience has left me. Stuff comes flooding back, especially now during COVID-19 and everything else that is happening in the world. I have had to go back into therapy again. I just want to feel normal and stop being so afraid and anxious.

Quite severe as I basically failed university, I'm unable to leave the house sometimes, unable to practice basic hygiene at times, [and] my self-esteem and confidence has never been so low. Poverty and lack of self-esteem.

My involvement was relatively short; however, PTSD symptoms following the threats in particular make it difficult for me to manage my own mental health.

Difficulty maintaining any relationships or group membership; loss of innocence about society leaves me feeling disenfranchised, demoralised, disengaged, disabused of any sense of safety & trust; damaged educational prospects; lost time means I may not start my own family. I lost a third of my life.

Difficulty with intimacy with my partner – triggered easily and keeping myself distant to avoid being hurt. Hard to make friends – trust and fear of rejection. Low self-worth and self-esteem. Trauma that gets triggered in groups, hypervigilance to others and triggered by seeing lack of care/respect for others. Ongoing struggle with depression and anxiety, wanting to self-harm and feeling suicidal.

The ramifications of belonging to a coercively controlling cult are severe and long-lasting. 64% of our respondents experienced suicidal thoughts, while almost 80% went through depression. These figures are extremely grave, but, unfortunately, not surprising when one considers the level of entrapment and sustained abuse victims endure. As with coercive control in IPRs, the ramifications of the abuse continue upon leaving the cult. Most will experience long-term and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Obstacles to Recovery

I was homeless and lived in a homeless hostel for 3 months with no support or help from family or friends.

Lost all means of financial support, legal battle for the removal of my children, no family support.

Considerable financial loss [and] difficulty in finding accommodation.

Low self-esteem made it more difficult to find work; lack of education, lack of certain work skills and relationship skills, fear of being known as a person who was stupid for joining a cult.

I left with my 3-year-old child. I had no money and nowhere to live. The child's father stayed in the cult and offered no help whatsoever. I was treated like a pariah.

Respondents cited a variety of obstacles they faced upon leaving the cult. These ranged from becoming homeless and enduring financial difficulties to losing children to the cult.

The challenges survivors of coercive control in cults face when leaving are urgent, serious and wide ranging. The abuse, by means of threats, stalking and harassment, usually continues once the victim has left. Many live with a fear of being found. The trauma endured from being in such a controlling and abusive environment seeps into most areas of the victim's daily life, with as many as 60% contemplating taking their own life. Depression, anxiety and PTSD leave many requiring therapy to come to terms with the trauma they faced – yet cult-informed therapy is sorely lacking. Survivors face stigmatisation from their family, friends, peers and society at large, and deal with their own mistrust of those in wider society. The loss of identity is destabilising, and reintegrating into wider society is challenging. The total control of the cult means that many lack education, social skills, job prospects and financial security when leaving, and so suffer immensely to simply survive.

The Trust calls upon the UK Government to urgently provide support to victims.

CHANGE

Participants were asked what they consider the key elements of recovery to be.

- 87% cited family/friends/relationships;
- 74% cited coercive-control/cult-specific education;
- 56% cited education; and
- 55% cited mental-health services.

What is Needed?

Employment Support/Accommodation Support

Informed psychological support, financial support, housing, mentoring.

Specialist, Cult-informed Help

In retrospect I needed the Family Survival Trust sooner.

Mental support and explanations that come through FST. I only discovered FST this year, 2020, and accepted that we are part of Lighthouse International cult.

Specific counselling about high-control religious groups would [have] been useful.

I needed someone to go through a psychoeducational package with me to help me understand what had happened, that it was not my fault, and to explain clearly.

Therapy with someone who understands coercive control and cultic dynamics.

The counselling was very good but would have been better if there were more counsellors who know about high-control groups.

Make it easier for people to access legal help, funding and so on. Also free therapy for say a year to help people recover – if they want it.

Respondents shared the need for support for housing and employment, as well as education opportunities. Another recurring theme was that victims needed people who understood what they had been through, and many cited The Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse as an invaluable source of support, understanding and information. Cult-specific therapy was also required to help with the trauma endured and the oncoming road to survival.

Changes Recommended by Respondents

- Safety measures for children
- Regular police-record checks for those in positions of responsibility
- Annulments of charitable statuses
- Financial reporting transparency
- A hotline for abuse of any nature

Exit Counselling

Deprogramming from all the brainwashing has been a constant process.

Someone Who Understands/Support Groups

Someone to talk to who understood about cultic groups and would be able to help me untangle my thoughts and feelings.

I would have loved to meet up in a support group of others who had left.

Awareness

More awareness is needed that leaving these groups is actually a very big deal and is in no way akin to 'realising Santa isn't real', as seems to be the consensus amongst the public. It's not a case of simply 'get over it'.

Never understood that I had PTSD. I educated myself. Many others from my group haven't understood fully about their experiences. There is a general lack of awareness. Psychology isn't taught as a science at school. We learn about our bodies but not our minds. Young people are ill equipped to navigate or identify undue influence.

More information in the public domain and in education so people can see. However our human-rights laws promote support for people's religious choice, so not sure how you could expose this.

I strongly believe the police and legal system of any country will need specific training and more understanding on how to handle cult-related cases.

Basically I would like to see greater public understanding of the dangers posed by cults, which ideally would then lead to greater regulation of such groups, including legal recognition and protections against cults.

Accountability/Legislation

I would like to see the law changed, to include groups in coercive control and for the way those who practice religion and spirituality seem to have more rights than the individual members and their wellbeing.

I would like to see the Brethren charged with coercive control. I have no doubt that this is what they do [on] a vast scale.

I would like the law to acknowledge coercive behaviour within positions of spiritual power and make this prosecutable. Students are in a very vulnerable position, and just because they are adults doesn't make them not vulnerable. I think the current law only covers coercion within close family or partner relationships.

More support and understanding. Compensation for psychological damage as well as financial. Ability to convict cult leaders for psychological harm to members even if they themselves are consenting. Protection for children involved.

I would like to see mandatory reporting laws in place for religious leaders as well as other people in positions of trust (doctors, teachers, etc.) I would also like to see corporal punishment to be against the law. I think this adds to the psychological abuse.

Coercive mind control must get recognised legally so injustices can be righted and further abuses prevented. Widespread education, especially in the mental health field, is needed.

Legal changes. It would be great with a center providing information about manipulative groups, cult behaviors, etc. And... a campaign similar to the HIV campaign, informing people of how cults work. Personally, I would also like the municipalities to provide us with an open register about alternative methods and science about it. What is proven to work and not, as well as open register that shows what previous customers think about different methods and companies.

Monitoring/Regulation/Safeguarding

Religion should be subject to the same safeguards as other organisations.

I think all spiritual orgs should have to have an external reporting system for abuse... so that people can report abuse outside of the organisation. . . . They should also have compulsory training on spiritual abuse.

Education in Schools

Prevention policies – also information about cult dynamics to be taught clearly in the school system.

I'd like to see more education on cults, everywhere but mostly in spaces where younger people or students gather because they're an easy target when you're looking for your identity and feel strongly about 'changing the world' in any shape or form.

I think there should be some sort of education in schools so people will recognise if they are part of a group or being recruited into one, and where to go to get help. Maybe posters to make the general public more aware as well. There should also be legal changes, and more funding and access to services and prevention policies.

Accountability Regarding Charitable and Religious Statuses

I don't understand how, in the 21st century, the right of a religion to be private comes before the wellbeing of its followers, most of whom do not even know they are being coerced or controlled.

Charitable status removed from these groups so that abusive coercive groups are not seen by victims as condoned by society.

Charitable status withdrawn. Public exposure. Less support from certain MPs.

They should lose their charity status as they are far from a charity. Much has been said on their policies concerning child sexual abuse that needs changing. As a baptism is considered a life-long contract with draconian consequences for breaking the rules, minors should not be allowed to be baptized.

Actual legislations and laws that make the lines between religions and cults/high-control groups more clear. Adjusting the freedom-of-religions legislation so cult survivors can receive justice.

More understanding about the effects on the lives of children and others of this group. There is an assumption that freedom of religion trumps everything else and so there is sometimes hesitancy to stand up to them and actually speak the truth about how they damage people. I would like to see much more research in this area for policy makers to draw upon.

The rules on charitable status need to be much tighter in the UK, particularly with regard to historical institutions such as those related to religion & education, that have not FOR YEARS been mainly of charitable purpose.

LETITIA, FORMER DEPUTY HEAD

Lobbying of [the Government] by members of special interest groups (including religion) must be way more carefully controlled . . . including donations to political parties from group[s] or individual members of charitable groups, such as the [Exclusive Brethren]/PBCC. Neither of these two areas are currently anywhere near transparent enough to stop the practised lobbyists/donors from organisations like the EB/PBCC managing to twist lawmakers around their 'charitable' little fingers.

Family Courts should be far more intelligent in their judgements about the effect of religious indoctrination of children . . . and also on just how far EB/PBCC congregants in particular will go in their efforts to 'hold on to' child members.

Schools of religious groups should be much more rigorously inspected than they are (particularly with regard to coercion, social inclusion, sex/gender discrimination, unqualified congregational interference regarding governance, etc.) and should NOT have been allowed to exempt themselves from Ofsted and create their own inspectorate.



Protection for Minors

Access to help, homelessness is a huge issue as people are shunned and the poor, poor children that are trapped in the group need help most of all. Never mind me; we have to save them.

For it to be illegal to let minors enter into spiritual contracts (by baptism) when they cannot understand the consequences, should they change their minds when they are older.

More monitoring and regulation of how safeguarding young people happens within these groups. More teaching in school about coercive control and high-control groups. Removal of faith schools. Groups to demonstrate that they offer access to external sources of support for all group members, particularly minors.

Respondents spoke of a need for greater awareness about cults and coercive control, not only in general society, but also among policy-makers and authorities. This is due to the lack of legal and general support and understanding experienced by these victims, which had severe implications on their mental health and their abilities to navigate daily life. Respondents emphasised the need for education in schools, to arm young people with the ability to detect a cult through its warning signs.

Many respondents were frustrated at the protection of religious groups and called for an end to the charitable statuses of high-control groups. They also spoke of the need for more safeguarding and monitoring of these groups, with an emphasis on the protection of children.

According to participants, the biggest change would be made by introducing legislation that covers the abuse members face in cults. The need for legislation that holds perpetrators in cults to account, by law, was also highlighted. Respondents shared desires for acknowledgement of the abuse, for justice to be served and for the prevention of further coercive control in cults.

The Particular Problem of Children in Cults

TRACEY'S STORY

We had to take part in the preaching work. In school we weren't allowed to take part in lessons or activities that involved any holidays. We were encouraged to preach to our classmates in school. I was allowed to get baptised and make a lifelong binding spiritual contract with God at the age of 11.

We were read a children's Bible story book and literature with graphic pictures of murder and people dying in them. Sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, nlp [neuro-linguistic programming], torture, alienation from [the] outside world. Expecting Armageddon would come soon, killing the vast majority of humankind.



Expecting to be tortured in the events leading up to Armageddon. Worrying about worrying about torture aloud, because I knew anything I spoke would be heard by the demons, who could use that information to try to get me to break my integrity to God. Having relatives excitedly tell me that there were so many crows around because they were gathering in anticipation of 'eating much flesh'.

Being told that if science ever disagreed with our beliefs, we were to dismiss science (while simultaneously touting anything scientific that supported an aspect of our beliefs).

As mentioned earlier, being required to refuse friendships that I wanted/needed. Never having any real dreams or aspirations, because I wouldn't be allowed to follow them. Sacrificing much of this life for the next one. Knowing from a young age that all it would take is one mistake to lose all (four generations' worth) of my family and friends. Knowing how to properly pronounce 'bestiality' at a young child because children are instructed alongside the adults, and adults apparently need to be lectured about all manner of sexual matters all the damn time.



Coercive control in groups, as in intimate or family relationships, affects the entire family. The cult sits as a third party between parents and their children. In a cult, parents are prevented or, at best, restricted from giving the normal protection and care to their children.

The findings on children's experiences in cults, as already disclosed in this report, are damning. The cult leader dictates child-rearing practices, without consideration for the important child-parent relationship. Children and childhoods in cultic organisations are ultimately shaped by the group's practices and beliefs, without regard for the child's well-being or social, emotional and cognitive development. In cults, therefore, the leader and their ideology trump the wellbeing of the child.

The problem of children in cults is 'serious and complex'; children's rights are few and their existence is 'perilous'.³⁰ Essentially, the very notion of childhood is brought into question in a cult.

A child born in, or brought into, a cult by their parents has no voice or agency regarding their involvement.

I was taken into the cult to live against my wishes due to my age.

I had no choice as I was four when my mum got baptised into the religion. I was dragged to every meeting and assembly and excluded from every school activity. I was made to join the Ministry school at nine.

Children are vulnerable, less able to resist or make independent choices, which renders the child powerless and in need of protection. The problem is exacerbated when these children are hidden from mainstream society, as cult life is notoriously secretive. This raises an issue of child protection, because the isolation and exclusion experienced by these children creates an 'invisible wall around the group'³¹ – essentially, entrapment. Children growing up in cults do so without advocates and are thus at higher risk of abuse. Frontline workers – teachers, doctors, social workers, law enforcement – need to be aware of the often hidden situations of the children with whom they are engaging. Social tolerance and inclusion should not inhibit natural curiosity about the wellbeing of children or their parents.

Indoctrination begins in childhood. 'Children adopt the cult's right-wrong, good-bad, saint-sinner starkly polarised view.'³² Cultic beliefs are centred around fear, guilt and shame and can become heavy burdens for children, affecting their emotional wellbeing and senses of self-worth. Given cult groups' control of the parent-child relationship, children are unable to use the

parent for protection or support, to deal with these fears, which leaves them emotionally isolated and traumatised.

Physical abuse in the form of physical ‘discipline’ was a common experience for many respondents (please see the section ‘Physical Abuse of Children’). Physical punishment may be normalised and routinised. The child internalises this, seeing themselves as fundamentally bad and deserving of punishment. Respondents also disclosed witnessing or experiencing other forms of violence within the groups.

Children raised in cults are usually socially isolated and stopped from engaging in childhood activities. Respondents were excluded from events their peers were taking part in and expected to avoid people who were deemed unsuitable according to cult doctrine. This included being separated from their parents and ignoring people, regardless of their prior relationships with them. The effects of social isolation and relational abuse can affect the developmental outcomes of the child. Fear, threat and isolation are significant elements of coercive control.

Respondents shared their anger at being made to take part in cult work against their wishes. Children’s forced labour in cults serves several functions: indoctrination and conditioning to unquestioning obedience; prevention of independent play and thought; and exploitation of free and unregulated child labour. Sometimes, it simply serves as a punishment.

Study participants revealed child sexual abuse and the unhealthy relationship with sex and sexuality typically found in cults. They shared that they were exposed to graphic material that was frightening and inappropriate. We question why the Government has not done more to ensure that all children are being given age-appropriate sex education in line with the national curriculum. Instead, the Government is ignoring the approach of high-control groups, which wreaks havoc on the normal, healthy sexual development of young people.

Historical child-protection enquiries have highlighted the importance of robust safeguarding policies to ensure young people are protected from harm. That high-control groups who have been granted charitable status can still function without having their safeguarding procedures scrutinised is a complicit act on behalf of the Government and its agencies. It is wholly unacceptable that these groups are allowed to control their members and engage in abusive practices that are contrary to UK law. It is important to consider that children in closed cultic groups are marginalised and without advocates. Children in these groups are often hidden from general society in non-conventional schooling systems, further inhibiting rigorous safeguarding practice.

‘Totalist systems take any competing attachments seriously.’³³ The attachment most threatening to the cult is that of parent and child; therefore, much effort is put into disrupting this. The control of this relationship begins before

reproduction and continues throughout pregnancy and childhood. Disrupting the possibility of a healthy bond forming between parents and children allows the leader to maintain power and control.

Cult work is prioritised over care for the child, and there is an expectation on parents to work long hours while leaving the child for extended periods, often with unqualified carers. This has long-lasting effects on the child's development and their relationships to their parents and other family members.

Education Systems

The Government must ensure the parental duty to secure education for all compulsory-school-aged children is upheld. Children raised in coercive groups are receiving educations that serve the aims of the group rather than the life empowering aims of the national curriculum. When children are being educated in mainstream settings, current legislation permits parents to isolate their children from their peers, compounding the psychological abuse already being experienced by the child.

Further compounding these issues for children is the granting of charitable statuses to cultic groups that separate their members from society. The Charity Commission appears complicit in the difficulties young people in coercive groups face, by extending charitable statuses to cults that operate members-only schools. Research by local authorities has identified that many children in high-demand groups are being educated in unregistered institutions or home-schooled in ways that are not for the lifelong benefit of a child's development.³⁴

Cultic organisations manipulate the educational experiences of young people because they want children who are raised in them to grow into adult cult members and/or they wish to keep children from taking up adult members' time and resources. The Government has a duty to ensure children have access to life-enhancing education, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom of association (under the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child).³⁵ These rights are systematically ignored in coercive groups.

We cannot continue to ignore the neglect and abuse of children growing up in cults. It is time to take note of the findings in this report, take a stand against the effects of coercive control on children in cults and give them the child protection and safeguarding they deserve to ensure they experience childhoods free from fear, isolation, manipulation and control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Amend Chapter 9, Part 5, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 to remove its limitation to intimate or family relationships.

As the legislation stands currently, it is illegal to engage in patterns of coercively controlling behaviour in an intimate or family relationship. However, it remains legal to engage in those exact same patterns of behaviour in the context of a group. *Given these severely damaging patterns of coercive behaviour occur in groups operating in the UK, this discrepancy in the law must be addressed.*

Please see The Family Survival Trust's proposal for amending the legislation in the document accompanying this publication, *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in the Wider Community: Proposal for New Legislation.*

2. Mandate training on coercive control in all social settings for public-facing workers including those in health, mental health, social services, police, education and justice.

At the moment, public-facing professionals receive no training in understanding, recognising and responding to coercive control in group situations. *These workers must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to investigate beyond observable symptoms and take the extra steps needed to evaluate if group coercion could be instrumental in what is being presented.*

3. Provide prevention education on identifying coercive control in groups to students at all levels of education.

Presently, there is a need for teachers to be familiar with methods of explaining coercive control, so they can teach their students how to identify dangerous group dynamics. *This prevention education must be provided to all teachers and at all levels, so the topic can be integrated across the curriculum.*

4. Oblige the Charity Commission to robustly screen charities for patterns of coercively controlling behaviour, and put in place an effective whistleblowing mechanism for those affected.

Too many coercively controlling groups retain charitable status despite the Charity Commission being informed that the Commission's own guidelines have been contravened. Other groups are not monitored to ensure that guidelines and recommendations are being upheld. *The Charity Commission must be proactive in evaluating all charities to see that they adhere to the standards set out in the Commission's guidelines.*

5. Institute an effective system of inspection for monitoring faith and independent schools, to differentiate between valid religious education and coercive control.

There is a lack of consistency in the standard of inspection of schools, depending on their status. All schools should be inspected by Ofsted, not by outsourced bodies. However, this still would not address home-schooled or unregistered schools, which currently evade monitoring. *Inspections must safeguard all children's rights to education and safety, regardless of where instruction occurs.*

6. Authorise public services to recognise the needs of persons leaving coercively controlling groups and prioritise provision of housing, education/training, financial support and access to benefits.

While some of these resources are available to those leaving coercively controlling intimate or family relationships, none are currently available to those leaving high-control groups. People leaving controlling groups have limited resources and social connections and are thus highly vulnerable. They require multi-faceted support to rebuild all aspects of their lives. *Government and frontline services must develop a multi-agency approach to support this invisible population.*

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- 1 Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/76>.
 - 2 Alexandra Stein (2021) *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London: Routledge.
 - 3 BBC Radio 4 (2021) *Am I in a Cult?*. BBC. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011sg7> (accessed 6 June 2022).
 - 4 **Note that percentages may add up to more than 100% as multiple answers are possible.**
 - 5 Home Office (2015) *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-framework-controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-in-an-intimate-or-family-relationship>.
 - 6 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 Judith Herman (1992) *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
 - 9 **No real names are used in this report.**
 - 10 Home Office (2015), *op. cit.*
 - 11 Evan Stark (2009) *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*, p.209. Oxford University Press.
 - 12 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*, p. 116.
 - 13 Hannah Arendt (1948; 1979) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace.
 - 14 Robert Jay Lifton (1961) *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. New York: The Norton Library.
 - 15 Home Office (2015), *op. cit.*, p.4.
 - 16 J. A. Simpson, E. S. C. Weiner and Oxford University Press (1989) *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
 - 17 Evan Stark (2009), *op. cit.*
 - 18 Women's Aid (2022) *What is financial abuse?* Available at <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/financial-abuse/> (accessed 8 June 2022).
 - 19 *Ibid.*
 - 20 Evan Stark (2009), *op. cit.*
 - 21 Home Office (2015), *op. cit.*
 - 22 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*, p.22.
 - 23 *Human Rights Act* (1998) [Online.] Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42>.
 - 24 Hannah Arendt (1948; 1979), *op. cit.*
 - 25 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 Margaret Thaler Singer (1995) *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
 - 28 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*
 - 29 Evan Stark (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 278
 - 30 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*
 - 31 Margaret Thaler Singer (1995), *op. cit.*, p.264.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p.278.
 - 33 Alexandra Stein (2021), *op. cit.*
 - 34 The London Borough of Hackney's Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission (2018) *Investigation into unregistered educational settings in Hackney*. Available at <https://geshereu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FINAL-UES-for-PUBLICATION.pdf>.
 - 35 United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

Please note that some respondent statements have been edited in minor ways for the purpose of clarity.

Images

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| Cover: | Paul Shuang (undated) <i>Crowd audience on street back view</i> . Shutterstock ID: 517990180. |
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