

Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church

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ABSTRACT: Deprogramming has been considered illegal in North America and Europe since the late 20th century, but is still practiced in South Korea by conservative and fundamentalist pastors, who try to “de-convert” adult members of new religious movements, after they have been kidnapped and detained by their parents. Shincheonji is the main, although not the only, victim of this illegal practice. The article discusses some specific cases, and what was the attitude of South Korean police and courts of law to them, asking the questions why reactions to these crimes are inadequate in South Korea, and what the international community can do to put a halt to them.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Deprogramming, Forced Conversion, Coercive Change of Religion, Deprogramming in South Korea, Forced Conversion in South Korea.

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right protected by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which proclaims that,

- (1) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
- (2) No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

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

As a member state of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are legally bound to prohibit any type of coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith. They are obliged to enforce this by prosecuting any person or group found to be:

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

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

However, for years, political and judicial authorities in South Korea have turned a blind eye to forced change of religion operations, masterminded specifically by the Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea (CCCK). The CCCK has a nationwide network of centers that combat what they label “heresies” and “heretic movements” or “cults,” by any means, including illegal ones, and at any cost. The pastors, evangelists and missionaries active in the CCCK are mainly from conservative or fundamentalist Presbyterian Churches.

Korea has 51.4 million inhabitants. According to the *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom* on Korea published by the U.S. Department of State, only 44% of the Korean population is religious while 56% is not. Among the religious population, the three main denominations are: Protestants (45%), Buddhists (35%), and Catholics (18%). Under “Others” (2%) are: Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, members of the Unification Church, Won Buddhism, Confucianism, Jeongsando, Cheondogyo, Daejonggyo, and Daesoon Jinrihoe. According to the Korean Muslim Federation, the Muslim population is estimated at 135,000 (U.S. Department of State 2019). The website for Jehovah's Witnesses reported about 102,000 members (JW.org

2018), while the only rabbi in the country released official numbers of approximately 1,000 Jews, almost all expatriates (U.S. Department of State 2019). In comparison, the new and fast-growing Shincheonji Church claimed to have 240,000 members, according to a March 18, 2020 article in the *Korea Joongang Daily*, which was confirmed in the same article by the Ministry of Justice (Chung and Hill 2020).

Deprogramming in South Korea

As a member state of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are bound to enforce the prohibition of any form of coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith, but the reality is different. In South Korea, adults converting to a new religious movement (NRM) are kidnapped by their families and forcefully confined for weeks and even months to be submitted to a de-conversion program carried out by fundamentalist Protestants. This is what scholars of religious studies call “deprogramming.”

The phenomenon of coercive change of religion in South Korea is exclusively carried out by fundamentalist Protestant Churches associated with the CCKK. Their victims are primarily, although not exclusively, members of the Shincheonji Church, hereafter referred to as Shincheonji.

Shincheonji is an NRM that stems from Protestantism but has developed its own theology (Introvigne 2019), like several other movements, which gravitate on the fringe of the Protestant family.

Statistics about the extent of this phenomenon are non-existent. The only available numbers are those of known victims who escaped from their confinement and de-conversion program, or confirmed their beliefs in Shincheonji after pretending to be de-converted to escape.

Shincheonji has collected their testimonies over the years, but it is very likely that there are many victims of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forceful change of religion who have never been identified. The infographic that follows was published by Shincheonji. The numbers represent the victims who could not be de-converted. The total number of victims, which should also

include “successfully” de-converted individuals, must be much higher than what is currently known.

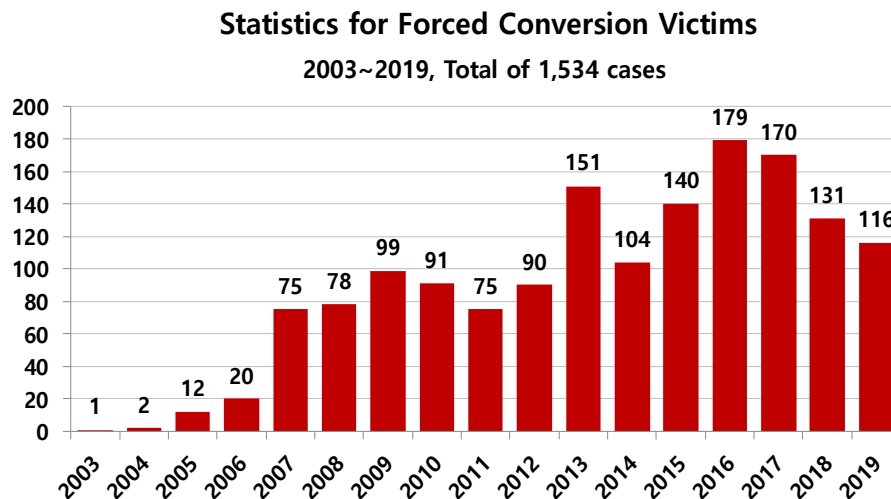


Figure 1. Total number of cases from 2003 until 2019 (September): 1,534 (source: Shincheonji).

According to an analysis of statistics provided by Shincheonji to HRWF, the main victims of this practice are young women in their 20s (77%), while young men of the same age group only account for 23%. The rates of coercive de-conversion are much lower for older people: 10% for thirty-year-olds, 5% if they are in their 40’s or 50’s, and 2% for sixty-year-olds.

The consequences of this practice are dire. These kidnappings and confinements for forced de-conversion have resulted in two deaths, thirteen admittances to psychiatric institutions, and forty-three divorces.

I personally interviewed a number of these victims and their relatives in 2019. A dozen cases were published in March 2020 as part of a 60-page report titled *Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea* (Fautré 2020), published by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF).

HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, nor align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any specific religion or belief system, but instead defends the right of all persons to have the

beliefs of their choice, as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.

Kidnapping, Confinement, and Coercive De-Conversion

In the majority of cases, parents discovered that their adult sons or daughters, often still living with them, had changed their religion by joining Shincheonji. The theology of Shincheonji has been deemed heretical or “cult-like” by mainline Churches. So, when family members research it online, they find “anti-heresy” and “anti-cult” literature demonizing the movement. They are then filled with anxiety and fear, and often look for help.

“Help” is easily found online from the so-called “cult counseling centers” that are organized by evangelists, missionaries, and pastors of fundamentalist Protestant churches, mainly arch-conservative Presbyterian branches. These individuals are working to bring “lost sheep” back to their churches.

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

Incitement to Illegal Activities

During the first phase of the operation, parents are informed that they will have to organize the kidnapping of their son or daughter and choose a well-equipped place from where escape would not be possible. Afterwards, they will have to extort a signature from their son or daughter on a statement declaring that they have requested the de-conversion services of a “cult counseling center,” and are voluntarily joining a so-called “cult exit program.” The CCK has a policy to never intervene if the individual has not signed this formal agreement.

The CCK adopted this policy after Shincheonji filed lawsuits against their de-conversion program implementers. They now train their evangelists to organize meetings and consultations with parents to distance themselves from any legal

liability. Sometimes, the de-conversion sessions are conducted with former Shincheonji members.

In concrete terms, pastors at a higher level are *the* masterminds behind the scenes of these kidnapping, confinement, and coercive de-conversion operations. They never participate directly in these activities, which are illegal and prosecutable under the criminal code. They leave this to family members.

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

When the de-conversion program can “officially” start, the work is assigned to lower-ranking actors specifically trained for that purpose. The higher-level masterminds of these operations remain behind the scenes, to ensure they cannot be prosecuted.

Why Is Forced Change of Religion “Tolerated” in South Korea?

The first reason is religious. The Shincheonji Church has been a fast-growing movement at the expense of the mainline Protestant Churches. The fight against a “heretical” group by conservative and fundamentalist pastors was first tolerated, and then encouraged behind the scenes by the leaders of their respective denominations.

The second reason is cultural. Parents in South Korea, and in other countries in East Asia, feel entitled to some level of authority and control over their adult children, especially women, despite their age, competency, or social status. This explains the high percentage of young women kidnapped for the purpose of de-conversion.

The third reason is political. The fundamentalist Protestant Churches are politically conservative, aligning closely with the parties currently opposed to President Moon. They are anti-liberal and represent a powerful majority in South Korea. They organize rallies and occasionally resort to violence against groups they label as “cults,” LGBTI people, and Muslim refugees seeking asylum in the

country. They consider Islam to be a violent religion that is inherently inclined to terrorism.

The weight of Protestant voters in elections in South Korea is significant. While campaigning for the legislative elections on 15 April 2020, fundamentalist Protestant groups instrumentalized the COVID-19 crisis by accusing Shincheonji of being the main propagator of the virus in Korea and, consequently, asking for the ban of Shincheonji. In March 2020, a prominent scholar of religious studies, human rights activists, a reporter, and a lawyer published a 30-page “White Paper” (Introvigne, Fautré, Šorytè, Amicarelli and Respinti 2020), debunking the fake news and fictional stories that stemmed from their campaign.

Another example of the power of fundamentalist Protestant Churches in Korea is an incident that took place in 2019. President Moon had not participated in the annual Korean National Prayer Breakfast, which has been attended by every President with very few exceptions since its launch in 1968. Following his absence, some Protestant groups criticized him fiercely, claiming he skipped the National Prayer Breakfast deliberately because it was largely attended by conservatives. Amid growing complaints, President Moon finally hosted a luncheon with Protestant leaders (Ser 2019).

This context has enabled the culture of impunity that the masterminds of forced de-conversions have benefited from for decades. Ignoring the illegal activities of several Protestant leaders is indeed politically safer than challenging them publicly, due to the influence of the Christian religious lobby in the country.

Serious Breach of Human Rights

Considering international human rights law, the individual right to freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of movement have been and continue to be grossly violated by coercive de-conversions in South Korea.

The religious, cultural and political context cannot justify actions such as kidnapping, confinement, and forced change of religion of adults. The argument of so-called “internal family discussions” or “protective custody” in attempts to

justify these crimes was used to justify deprogramming in other countries, but has been unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles.

In 2014, the *Concluding Observations of the UN Human Rights Committee* (HRC) during Japan's Universal Periodic Review set an important legal precedent for this issue. For four decades, thousands of believers of the Unification Church, as well as hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses, had been kidnapped, forcefully confined, and submitted to de-conversion attempts by pastors and evangelists in Japan. Their perpetrators had always enjoyed total impunity until the survivor of a 12-year captivity, Toru Goto, and HRWF united efforts (Fautré 2013) to put an end to this egregious practice. The HRC conveyed a strong message to the authorities in Tokyo by declaring that,

The Committee is concerned at reports of abductions and forced confinement of converts to new religious movements by members of their families in an effort to deconvert them (arts. 2, 9, 18, 26 [of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]).

The State party should take effective measures to guarantee the right of every person not to be subject to coercion that would impair his or her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief (U.N. Human Rights Committee 2014, 8, no. 21).

Case Study 1: A Young Woman Killed During a Coercive De-Conversion Attempt

Ji-in Gu (1992–2018) was a convert to the Shincheonji Church who lost her life during a de-conversion program masterminded by Presbyterian evangelists. This led to a mass demonstration on the streets of Seoul in 2018: 120,000 people protested the impunity of the perpetrators of coercive de-conversion of Shincheonji members.

First Kidnapping

On July 23, 2016, Ji-in Gu, then 24 years old, was on her way home in her parents' car along with her older sister when she was kidnapped by her family. Her sister, a teacher in an elementary school, was actively backing their parents' decision, and tied Ji-in Gu's arms to hers during the trip to prevent any escape attempt. They took her to the Catholic monastery of St. Clare's in Jangseong

county (South Jeolla Province), where she was held in confinement over the course of 44 days.

Concerned about the conversion of their daughter to Shincheonji, her parents had previously consulted a Presbyterian evangelist, Woong-ki Lim, about how to de-convert her. The advice had been to submit her to a so-called “exit counseling” program, which was to be carried out in confinement conditions.

Kidnapping and coercive confinement are illegal activities according to Article 276 (False Arrest and Illegal Confinement, Those in Lineal Ascendant) of the South Korean criminal code.

During her confinement, two Presbyterian evangelists, Woong-ki Lim and Jung-cheol Park, pressured her to sign a statement asserting that she would voluntarily follow their “cult exit counseling” program to renounce her belief in the teachings of Shincheonji. She signed the agreement because she thought that she would be unable to escape confinement otherwise, as she was being held under tight security. Therefore, it was not a decision she made freely.

During 44 days of coercive confinement, she was submitted to a forcible de-conversion program. The Presbyterian evangelists thought that they had been successful with their program, but, in fact, she had only acted as if she was de-converted. As soon as she was freed, she disappeared to escape the surveillance of her family and the post-deconversion program. This program included religious services and classes about the Presbyterian faith.

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

Second Kidnapping

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

On December 29, 2017, Ji-in Gu’s parents used a family trip as an opportunity to kidnap her again. During her coercive confinement and the

ensuing “exit counseling” program, she lost her life under unclear circumstances. A media account reported that,

A 27-year-old woman, Ji-in Gu, was killed while she was being held captive at a secluded recreational lodge in Hwasun (Jeonnam, South Jeolla Province). On January 18, the parents of the woman were held responsible for the murder. According to the police department of Hwasun, they bound and gagged their daughter, leading to suffocation. The autopsy revealed a high possibility of cardiopulmonary arrest due to hypoxic hypoxia. The death was ricocheted from a “family matter” to a national issue, with more than 120,000 people gathering in Seoul and the other major cities of South Korea on 28 January to protest against coercive conversion, of which the woman was a victim (Mathay 2018).

The outrage sparked by the murder of Ji-in Gu was also highlighted by the U.S. Department of State in its *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom*, in the section about Korea, published on June 19, 2019:

In January, following reports that parents killed their daughter while attempting to force her to convert from what the parents viewed as a cult to their own Christian denomination, 120,000 citizens gathered in Seoul and elsewhere to protest against coercive conversion, reportedly conducted by some Christian pastors. The protestors criticized the government and churches for remaining silent on the issue and demanded action (U.S. Department of State 2019).

In addition to this protest, more than 100,000 signatures were collected for an online petition demanding punishment for those promoting forcible programs of de-conversion on members of Shincheonji. This petition was posted on the Blue House website, which is the website of the residential office of the President of South Korea. However, it was deleted and, up until now, the Blue House has still not provided an official response.

After the death of Ji-in Gu, her mother, who had quit her job to implement the program of forced de-conversion, went back to her office as a social worker. She was not prosecuted. Her father was indicted, but was still on the run at the time of this writing.

Impunity: The Responsibility of South Korean Authorities

After this tragic case of kidnapping and attempted forced change of religion, several victims of these practices publicly called for the prosecution of the instigators and perpetrators. Although kidnapping, confinement, and

forcible change of religion are strictly forbidden by national law, there appears to be no political will by various South Korean authorities to tackle this issue.

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

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which is in charge of religious affairs, received a copy of the civil complaint, and answered in February 2018 by stating that,

the state cannot interfere with an individual's choice of religion, religious activities, or that of any particular religious organization, as the Constitution of the Republic of Korea guarantees freedom of religion and the separation between state and religious organizations in Article 20.

Additionally, on January 18, 2018, Hye Jung Lim, a former victim of kidnapping for the purpose of de-conversion, posted a letter about the violent death of Ji-in Gu on the website of the Blue House, the executive and official residence of the President of South Korea. In her post, which was quickly deleted from the website, she stated that on June 4, 2017, Ji-in Gu had called upon the government to prosecute Presbyterian pastors inciting illegal violent actions for the purpose of forced change of religion.

Case Study 2: 50 Days of Confinement for Forced De-conversion

Hyeon-jeong Kim was raised in a Presbyterian family. At the time of her kidnapping, she was 29 years old, and was working as a pharmacy assistant. She was living with her father, a retired teacher, and her mother, a housewife.

In 2015, at age 26, she started attending the religious services of Shincheonji. This was the beginning of serious problems with her parents.

Domestic Violence

Her parents heard about her membership through one of her friends, and put Hyeon-jeong Kim under strict surveillance. Knowing that her father could be

violent, she told him that she would not go to that church anymore. At that time, she was a pharmacy student and she managed to continue attending Shincheonji services secretly for the next three years.

In 2018, she accepted a job at a pharmacy. At the same time, her parents found out that she had not severed her relations with Shincheonji. On 8 April, during dinner, her father had an angry outburst about her change of religion. During this incident, her father tried to hit her with a glass container and her mother held her by the neck while her brother also tried to hit her. This familial abuse lasted for two hours.

Domestic Coercive De-conversion Attempt

In the aftermath of that horrific day, her parents did some research online about Shincheonji. They only found negative articles and misinformation spread by Protestant Churches as well as media influenced by them. After that, they took Hyeon-jeong Kim's phone away, and her father followed her to and from work every day as if she was a child. She was almost 30 years old at the time.

In the meantime, her parents had been told by Presbyterian pastors to show her films and articles denouncing Shincheonji as a heretic Christian movement. After work, she was not allowed to leave the house and was denied access to her cell phone. She was forced to watch and read Presbyterian propaganda about Shincheonji every day.

Detrimental Intervention by the Daegu Police

Life was becoming unbearable for Hyeon-jeong Kim. As there was a police station near the pharmacy with a Women and Youth Department, she decided to go to the authorities for help. She told them everything, including the reasons behind the domestic violence she was experiencing. The police response was catastrophic. They called her father, and told him to give her back her phone and to stop surveilling her. This only further fueled her father's anger towards her.

She told her boss and colleagues at the pharmacy that she feared she was at risk of being kidnapped and confined by her family because of her change of religion.

Kidnapping

A few weeks later, on April 27, 2018, she was kidnapped. Her father forced her into his car and, with the assistance of other family members, took her to a location that was about a two-hour drive. The whole operation had been premeditated and masterminded by Presbyterian pastors.

She was locked in a studio on the 7th floor of a building for 50 days, under the surveillance of both her parents and her aunt.

Renewed Domestic Violence

Family members visited Hyeon-jeong Kim regularly, and violently pressured her to stop believing in the teachings of Shincheonji. One day, her father strangled her because she was refusing to give up her faith and sign a “voluntary” request for “exit counseling” from an “anti-heresy” center. Her mother and her aunt intervened just in time. Otherwise, she could have been killed, like Ji-in Gu was a few months earlier.

The Deprogrammers Step into Play

During the 50 days that Hyeon-jeong Kim spent in captivity, there was no sign of a de-conversion pastor. This is because they do not want to be accused of complicity in a case of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion, which is illegal in South Korea. However, they were in regular contact with the family and instructed them on how to force Hyeon-jeong Kim to return to the Presbyterian faith. Whenever she clashed with her parents, one of them would leave the room to call the pastors for guidance.

For over seven weeks, she resisted the coercion and threats of her family and their Presbyterian advisers. She was alone against all of them, but she continuously refused to sign any agreement stating that she was freely asking to be de-converted.

Since her parents saw no solution in sight, a few evangelists from the Suyongro Presbyterian Church in Busan were sent to the apartment. This led to a combination of circumstances that provided Hyeon-jeong Kim the opportunity to attempt an escape.

On June 16, 2018, the 51st day of her confinement, Hyeon-jeong Kim was cleaning, when the evangelists from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church rang the doorbell. When her father opened the door, she rushed out, barefoot and calling for help. However, she was on the 7th floor of the building and so her parents were able to catch her. Her parents *and* the three evangelists dragged her back into the apartment. Two of these envoys were Hana Cho and Jin-wook Choo.

Once inside, she continued to scream and refused to do anything they tried forcing her to do. One of the neighbors came to the door and asked what was happening. Hyeon-jeong Kim cried out, “Please call the police!” before her father closed the door again. Fortunately, that neighbor did call the police.

Effective Assistance by the Police in Busan

The police arrived shortly after, and took everyone to the police station, including the three implementors of the de-conversion program. There, the evangelists of the Presbyterian Church in Busan—Hana Cho and Jin-wook Choo—declared that they were just average church members and began to slander Shincheonji. The police listened to their accusations and did not make any comments.

After several hours of discussion, the police brought Hyeon-jeong Kim to a women’s emergency shelter in Busan, despite the opposition of her family. Despite her absence for over two months, the pharmacy she worked for was happy to have her back.

While Hyeon-jeong Kim was at the women’s shelter in Daegu, her father sent a letter saying that she could return home and he would respect her religious choice. The local police, who had been informed of her situation by her boss, escorted her home. Now, Hyeon-jeong Kim is living with her parents again, but the aftereffects of this traumatic experience have not disappeared.

About the Perpetrators

The three de-conversion actors from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church that came to the location where Hyeon-jeong Kim was detained were aware that she was confined by family members. When she tried to escape, they decided not only

to deny assistance to a person in danger, but also to become accomplices in her further confinement.

Kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion are criminal activities in South Korea. Her family members were prosecuted, but not the three individuals who helped them.

Judgment of Daegu Provincial Prosecutor's Office

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

The official charge was: "violation against the law on violent acts and punishment (Joint confinement)." In the section of the judgment titled "The result of the investigation and viewpoints," the defendants did not deny the facts—the kidnapping, the confinement and the coercive attempt of religious de-conversion—but instead argued that it was all for the well-being of the victim.

What follows is the section of the judgment (copy of which has been obtained by HRWF) outlining the facts admitted by all parties, the statements of each of the accused, and the review of the Prosecutor's Office:

➤ *Facts that are recognized*

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

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

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

➤ *Statement of the suspect Sung-jo Kim*

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

➤ *Statement of the suspect Eun-su Kim*

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

➤ *Statement of the suspect Kyung-hee Kim*

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

➤ *Review*

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

The Opinion of the Prosecutor's Office was that, "the suspicion against the suspects has been confirmed, so they will be charged accordingly (indictment without detention)."

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

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

Case Study 3: 81 Days in a Psychiatric Hospital

Hye-won Sohn was 20 years old in May 2016 when she joined Shincheonji. When her parents found out about her change of religious affiliation, they contacted a Presbyterian "cult counseling center," which advised them to kidnap their daughter and to confine her for a de-conversion program.

From Failed Kidnapping to Psychiatric Internment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pastors Recommend Forced Internment in Psychiatric Hospitals

The case of Hyun-soo Kim is not an isolated incident. Forced internment in a psychiatric hospital has been recommended in the past by "cult counseling centers." This is evidenced by the statistics from Shincheonji, which has documented 13 such cases.

In 2007, Pastor Jin-yong Sik, who was then the head of the "cult counseling center" of Ansan, was prosecuted and found guilty for sending a member of the

World Mission Society Church of God, another Korean Christian new religious movement (Introvigne and Folk 2017), to a psychiatric institution. According to a news story published in *Newshankuk* on 24 October 2008, he was sentenced to 10 months in prison with two years' probation for coercive de-conversion (Song 2008). In 2012, there was a public uproar when the investigation about his complaint against human rights activists revealed that Pastor Sik had earned more than one billion won (850,000 EUR) with his de-conversion business (Lee 2012).

Despite these controversies and undeniable human rights violations, his “cult counseling center” continues to be a highly profitable business.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of kidnapping, confinement, and attempted or “successful” forced de-conversion masterminded by pastors and evangelists of the CCKK has mainly targeted members of Shincheonji, although the World Mission Society Church of God and other groups have also been attacked.

The situation of Shincheonji in South Korea presents several similarities with the persecution of the Unification Church during 40 years in Japan. These human rights violations were investigated and condemned by HRWF, and the case of Toru Goto decided by Japanese courts put an end to them (Fautré 2011).

The common points identified are:

- the role of pastors and evangelists in a doctrinal competition between their church and NRMs in depicting it as a battle against so-called theological heresies;
- the de-conversion pastors and evangelists using hate speech against the religious movements that they are combating;
- the involvement of mainstream churches in training parents how to carry out kidnappings and detention;
- the same culture of patriarchal power relations between parents and children, which demands submission and subservience from children;
- the persistent authority of parents over their children into adulthood;
- the gender-based dimension, as many more young women than men were

kidnapped and detained;

- the institutional passivity, which created a culture of impunity;
- and silence from the media, including both national and foreign NGOs.

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

- are more numerous than in Japan, because they are trained by the CCKK under a specific missionary activity—“bringing lost sheep back home;”
- do not directly participate in the kidnapping and detention, and instead monitor it remotely;
- pressure parents to extort a signed statement from the abductee that he/she volunteers to follow a so-called “cult exit counseling program;”
- and only physically encounter the abductee when he/she has signed the “exit counseling program” statement, so that they cannot be prosecuted.

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

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

Firstly, there is a need to raise awareness within the international community of scholars in religious studies, national and international human rights organizations, as well as national and international media.

There is also a need to highlight the responsibility of the CCKK, which tolerates, endorses, and appears to encourage such practices, as well as urging the CCKK to put an end to them.

Additionally, there is a need to develop advocacy at the United Nations and in organs defending freedom of religion or belief within the European Union institutions, national institutions in Europe, the US Department of State, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and others.

There is a need to prosecute those who encourage people to perpetrate an act

of abduction and confinement.

Lastly, there is a need to prosecute hate speech and hate crimes against new religious movements and other targeted groups.

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