

**Submission
No 182**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

Organisation: Olive Leaf Network Australia

Date Received: 31 July 2025

A close-up photograph of an olive branch with several green olives and dark green leaves. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the branch and leaves. The overall tone is natural and somewhat somber.

CHILDREN IN CULTS

**SUBMISSION FOR INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS
AND IMPACTS OF CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**



Olive Leaf Network

Outline of Submission: Children in Cults

1. Executive Summary

- **1.1. Core Argument:** Children in high-demand groups are victims of systemic coercive control, not "recruits." They are captives placed into systems of abuse by manipulated caregivers.
 - **1.2. Central Thesis:** The fundamental rights and safety of a child must supersede the claimed religious freedoms of any group or parent.
 - **1.3. Key Harms Identified:** The systematic dismantling of a child's identity through educational deprivation, forced labour, psychological manipulation, and the corruption of the parent-child relationship.
 - **1.4. Calls to Action:**
 - **Distinction and Scrutiny:** Make a clear distinction on the public record that religious freedom does not exempt organisations from child protection laws. All practices affecting children must be scrutinised under Child Safe Standards.
 - **Legislation:** Enact new legislation creating a specific criminal offence targeting the architects of group coercive control systems.
 - **Proactive Protection:** Mandate training on cult dynamics for child-facing professionals and implement rigorous oversight of all educational settings within closed communities.
 - **Funding:** Allocate dedicated public health funding to specialised, survivor-led organisations like the Olive Leaf Network (OLN) to create effective recovery pathways.
-

2. Introduction

- **2.1. The Olive Leaf Network (OLN)**
 - **a. Mission:** To support survivors of abuse in high-demand, coercively controlling groups, with a focus on those born and raised within them.
 - **b. Core Objectives:**
 - **Aid:** Bridge the gap to critical services (health, education, employment).
 - **Advocacy:** Champion the rights of former members, connecting them to justice avenues and redress.
 - **Awareness:** Educate professionals and the public using lived experience for prevention and intervention.
 - **2.2. About the Directors**
 - **a. Note on Volunteer Capacity:** Highlighting the urgent need for government grants to sustain operations.
 - **b. Maria Esguerra:** A Queensland-based psychologist with 15+ years of experience and lived experience in the Children of God cult.
 - **c. Mirriam Francis:** A Victoria-based survivor and advocate with lived experience in Scientology's Sea Org child labour camps.
 - **d. Dani Sorensen:** An advocate with lived experience in the Children of God cult, focusing on the vulnerabilities of child whistleblowers.
-



Olive Leaf Network

3. Focus of This Submission: A Child-Centric Framework

- **3.1. The High-Demand Hand:** Focusing on the five main areas impacted by systems of control, rather than ideology.
 - **3.2. Experience-Driven Child Advocacy:** Representing the reality of a childhood in service to an unchosen ideology.
 - **3.3. The “Lost Children of Cults” Concept:**
 - **a. Defining "Lost":** A term referring to the societal and legal invisibility of these children and the cult-perpetrated erosion of the self.
 - **b. Unique Challenges:** Limited socialization, systemic abuse, developmental trauma, identity fragmentation, educational deprivation, and distorted family dynamics.
 - **3.4. *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro:** A literary metaphor for the experience of being raised for a purpose that is not one's own, capturing the profound passivity and psychological ownership that outsiders struggle to comprehend.
 - **3.5. Child Rights Advocacy:** Arguing that a child is not a tool to be sacrificed for a cause and has an inalienable right to a self-determined future.
-

4. The Primacy of Child Rights: Legal and International Context

- **4.1. Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):**
 - **a. Core Principles:** Emphasising non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and participation.
 - **b. Need for Distinction:** Highlighting how cults blur the line between adult and child to exploit children and negate parental responsibility.
 - **4.2. Historical and Legal Precedents:**
 - **a. The Commonwealth vs. Religious Beliefs:** Referencing Australian High Court rulings (*Adelaide Company of Jehovah's Witnesses Inc. v. The Commonwealth*) establishing that religious freedom is subject to limitations necessary to protect public safety and the fundamental rights of others.
 - **b. Children Cannot Be Made Martyrs:** Citing *Prince v. Massachusetts*, which established that parental rights do not permit them to "martyr the child" by overriding child labour and safety laws.
 - **c. Australian Family Law:** The *Family Law Act 1975* prioritises the best interests of the child over parental religious rights in custody and parenting matters.
-

5. Addressing the Terms of Reference

- **5.1. Recruitment: A Misnomer for Children**
 - **a. Defining Roles:** Contrasting adult recruitment with the involuntary placement of children into authoritarian environments at birth.
 - **b. The Cult Parent:** Redefining the parent's role from protector to enforcer of group ideology, often driven by enmeshment and a dissociative state induced by coercive control.
 - **c. Generational Differences:** Outlining the profound differences between First-Generation Adults (FGAs) who chose to join and Second-Generation Adults (SGAs) who were born in and have no outside context.



Olive Leaf Network

- **d. Correcting the Language:** Submitting that "recruitment" is the wrong term; coercive control, family violence, or child trafficking are more appropriate frameworks.
- **5.2. Control of Members: Systems of Coercion and Violence**
 - **a. The BITE Model:** Introducing Dr. Steven Hassan's model for understanding authoritarian control (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotion).
 - **b. Family Violence in a Cultic Context:** Applying the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* to cultic structures where the group functions as "family" and women can be perpetrators within a culture of violence.
 - **c. A Women's Rights Issue:** Highlighting the links between the denial of women's autonomy and the direct impact on children's welfare, including reproductive coercion, risks to maternal health, and the specific harms faced by girls in patriarchal systems.
- **5.3. Harmful Practices: Defining Child Abuse in Cults**
 - **a. Practices Require Scrutiny:** Arguing that all group practices must be examined under Child Safe Standards, with no religious exemption for harm.
 - **b. Child Abuse, Not "Spiritual Abuse":** Stating that abuse in a religious setting is child abuse as defined by the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*.
 - **c. Imprisonment and Punishment Programs:** Detailing systematic, punitive programs like Scientology's RPF and the Children of God's Victor Program, which constitute unlawful imprisonment and abuse.
- **5.4. Harms and Impacts: Lifelong and Intergenerational Trauma**
 - **a. The ACEs Connection:** Linking the high number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in cults to severe, long-term health consequences and reduced lifespan.
 - **b. Systemic Abuse and Deprivation:** Detailing pervasive sexual abuse, sanctioned violence, educational and medical neglect, and financial exploitation.
 - **c. Destruction of Identity:** Explaining the erasure of personal identity through isolation, information control, and the suppression of critical thought.
 - **d. Human Trafficking:** Identifying the movement of children between states and countries as a deliberate strategy of control, exploitation, and evasion of justice.
- **5.5. Barriers to Justice and Protection**
 - **a. Barriers to Reporting:** Outlining the internal prohibition of reporting, fear of the outside world, psychological manipulation, and dependency.
 - **b. Systems Designed to Conceal:** Exposing institutional systems used to cover up abuse, such as Scientology's Office of Special Affairs and the Jehovah's Witnesses' two-witness rule.
 - **c. Failed Interventions & Lack of Oversight:** Citing historical failures, such as the 1992 raids on the Children of God, and the general hands-off approach by authorities that allows abuse to continue unchecked.

6. Pathways to Protection and Recovery

- **6.1. Child Protection:** Applying the principles of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (2005)* to ensure children in cults are not excluded from protection.



Olive Leaf Network

- **6.2. Opening the Door on Closed Communities:** Advocating for education and intervention within groups to inform members of their rights, especially the distinct rights of children.
 - **6.3. Examining Legislation and the Importance of Recognition:**
 - **a. Targeting the Architects:** Arguing that legislation must target the individuals who design and run abusive systems, not the victims entrapped within them.
 - **b. The Case for New, Specific Legislation:** Calling for a new law on coercive control in group settings to provide justice where existing laws fall short and to formally recognise the harm.
-

7. Recommendations: A National Action Plan

- **7.1. National Inquiry and Governmental Framework:** Launch a National Inquiry, establish an independent watchdog agency, and form a multi-department taskforce.
 - **7.2. Legislative and Regulatory Reform:** Strengthen child protection laws, clarify the limits of religious freedom, and regulate all educational settings.
 - **7.3. Proactive Prevention, Intervention, and Professional Training:** Implement prevention strategies and specialised training on cult dynamics for all frontline professionals.
 - **7.4. Centering Lived Experience and Public Awareness:** Create a Lived Experience Advisory Council and launch a nationwide education campaign on the UNCRRC.
 - **7.5. Comprehensive Survivor Support, Redress, and Reintegration:** Fund bridging pathways to services, support new caregivers, address systemic barriers (e.g., identity documents), reform redress systems, and allocate public health funding to survivor-led organisations.
-

8. Appendices

- **Appendix A:** Olive Leaf Network: Capability Statement
 - **Appendix B:** Models for Coercion and Thought Reform (Biderman's Chart and Lifton's Criteria)
 - **Appendix C:** Modern Slavery Act
 - **Appendix D:** Examples of Closed Communities
 - **Appendix E:** Statement of Dr. Jill Aebi-Mytton
-

9. References

- A comprehensive list of legislation, academic works, government reports, and other resources cited in the submission.



Olive Leaf Network

Executive Summary

Children are being systematically abused in high-demand groups across Australia, yet they remain invisible to the systems designed to protect them. They are not "recruits"; they are captives, placed into systems of coercive control by caregivers who are often manipulated themselves. Current legal frameworks fail to pierce the veil of secrecy surrounding these groups, leaving a generation of children stripped of their fundamental rights.

Those of us at the Olive Leaf Network (OLN) assert an unequivocal principle: **the rights and safety of a child must always supersede the claimed religious freedoms of any group or parent.** Our submission details how a child's identity is systematically dismantled through educational deprivation, forced labour, psychological manipulation, and the conversion of parents from protectors into enforcers of the cult's ideology. These are not accidental harms; they are the direct result of an orchestrated system of abuse.

To end this critical failure in child protection, we call for immediate, decisive action in these key areas:

1. **Make distinction on the public record:** The freedom to practice religion is subject to the limitations as prescribed by law, which includes the safety and protection of children and the upholding of their rights. Religious freedom does not exempt individuals or institutions from the duty to protect children.
2. **Education for Social Change:** Broad education on children's rights as distinct from adult rights, due to their particular vulnerabilities and needs.
3. **Enact New Legislation:** Create a specific criminal offense targeting the architects who build and maintain these systems of group coercive control.
4. **Mandate Proactive Protection:** Enforce mandatory training on cult dynamics for all child-facing professionals and implement rigorous oversight of schooling within these closed communities.
5. **Scrutiny of Practices:** It is necessary under the Child Safety Standards to examine the practices of every organisation which provides services to children. The practices, whether deemed religious or not, should bear scrutiny for the purpose of discernment with regards to their application to children. The Commission for Children and Young People of Victoria should remain curious about religious practices and understand that where practices are harmful to children, that they have a duty to intervene.



Olive Leaf Network

6. **Fund Survivor-Led Recovery:** Allocate dedicated public health funding to specialized organizations like OLN, whose survivor-led expertise is essential for creating effective pathways to healing and independence.

The law must see these children for who they are: individuals with an inalienable right to a future they can choose for themselves.

About the Olive Leaf Network

The Olive Leaf Network (OLN) is a collective of individuals in Australia dedicated to supporting survivors of abuse within high-demand, coercively controlling groups, particularly those who were born and raised in cults. We understand that these groups take various forms—religious or non-religious—all of which are characterised by coercive control. We connect survivors with essential services and resources to aid their healing, recovery, and journey towards independence and freedom.

Our work is driven by three core objectives:

- **Aid:** We bridge the gap in support for survivors, facilitating access to critical services like health, education, employment, and social connection. People leaving high-demand groups face unique challenges due to their experience in closed communities and may have no understanding of the services available to them.
 - **Advocacy:** We advocate for former members, especially those raised as children in closed group systems who may have lacked access to education or information about their rights and applicable laws. We connect survivors to avenues for addressing harms, including reporting crimes, seeking civil restitution, and accessing redress and services.
 - **Awareness:** We contribute to education through lived experience, to universities, schools, health professionals and justice, taking a proactive approach to prevention and early intervention. We raise awareness about issues related to coercively controlling groups, focusing on harms, deprivation of rights, and exploitation. Our aim is to educate wider society, officials and, crucially, people within these communities, including parents, caregivers, and children themselves.
-



Olive Leaf Network

About the Directors

Please note that as survivors dedicated to this critical work, we are currently operating in a **volunteer capacity**, which underscores our urgent need for **government grants** to effectively meet the organisation's vital aims and adequately support those we serve.

Maria Esguerra is a leading voice and deeply committed advocate for survivors of high-control groups in Australia. As a Queensland-based psychologist with over 15 years of experience in disability sector, Maria brings a unique and powerful blend of professional expertise and profound personal insight to her work. She mentors allied health professionals.



What truly ignites Maria's passion and informs her specialised focus on "Second Generation Adults" (SGAs)—those born and raised within cults—is her **own lived experience**. She was born into and raised within the Children of God cult, enduring significant abuse and neglect. Her harrowing escape at age 22 with her two children, both of whom have disabilities, forged an unwavering dedication to those who share similar pasts. This personal journey fuels her relentless advocacy for specialised interventions, deeper understanding, and equitable access to governmental schemes like Redress for survivors.

Maria's influence extends far beyond her clinical practice. She has shared her expertise on cults and community as a guest **lecturer at universities**, been featured in **numerous media appearances**, and delivered **keynote speeches**. Her significant research contributions have been presented at prestigious international conferences, including the **International Cultic Studies Association (2024 & 2025)** and **Decult (2024)**, demonstrating her commitment to advancing both understanding and support for survivors. She has also founded a vital support group for multi-generational survivors across various cults, addressing the devastating impacts of abuse, denial of basic rights, and forced labour.

Miriam Francis is a compelling survivor, based in Victoria, and a determined advocate for child protection within high-control organizations. Her unique and impactful perspective is forged from being born into and raised within Scientology, specifically enduring its Sea Org



Olive Leaf Network

child labour camps. Mirriam's courageous story of abuse and her eventual escape has garnered significant public attention, notably being featured on "Leah Remini's Scientology and the Aftermath" and prominent podcasts like "Let's Talk About Sects." With direct involvement in the justice system due to the abuse she experienced, Mirriam possesses invaluable insight into the institutional failures that allow such harms to persist. She is a vocal champion for children's rights, meticulously detailing how



Scientology's teachings and practices violate Child Safety Standards. Her advocacy, informed by her personal experiences across three countries, is dedicated to ensuring that robust regulations and laws are not only in place but are rigorously applied to protect children from the insidious practices of coercively controlling groups.

Dani Sorensen fight for justice began in the silence of a childhood where abuse was normalized and safety was non-existent. Raised within the notorious Children of God cult, she learned the devastating cost of truth firsthand. Her mother's brave decision to expose the group's crimes—providing key information for raids in Melbourne and Sydney—did not lead to rescue, but to her own psychiatric collapse, leaving Dani to care for her younger siblings.

This profound betrayal by the very systems meant to protect them became the bedrock of Dani's advocacy. Her work is a direct challenge to the silence that surrounds child whistleblowers and the lifelong trauma inflicted by coercive control. By channeling her deeply personal story of survival and resilience, Dani Sorensen now stands as a powerful voice for a generation of children from closed communities, demanding that their experiences are not just acknowledged, but are finally met with meaningful justice and unwavering support.





Olive Leaf Network

Focus of Our Submission

This submission is provided to the Committee for the Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups, drawing directly from our lived experiences. While we anticipate numerous submissions detailing recruitment tactics, controlling behaviours, and the harms experienced by adults who have left such groups, our unique contribution is to represent **vulnerable persons in cults**, particularly **children**, who have experienced or are currently experiencing harm due to their age, developmental stage, vulnerabilities, and/or reliance upon caregivers within the perpetrating group.

High-Demand Hand

Our focus is not on the ideology or beliefs of a group, but the systems of influence and control that deny children fundamental rights and protections. We have created the high demand hand to show the 5 main areas impacted.

THE "HIGH-DEMAND HAND" OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

RELATIONSHIPS

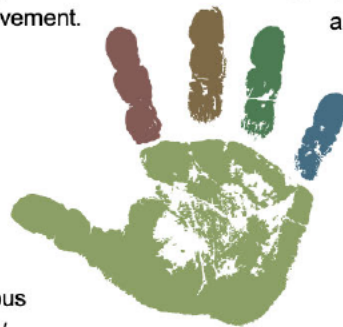
This includes biological family relationships, sexual/romantic relationships, friendships and social/community involvement.

RESOURCES

This includes any asset that belongs to a person, including their finances as well as non-financial assets such as health, skills, time, property and personal effects.

LIFESTYLE

This includes a range of components of a person's life, including place of residence, living standards, morality, religious beliefs, and entertainment/recreation choices.



EDUCATION

This refers to childhood/adolescent education, as well as graduate/post-graduate education, professional development and other adult education opportunities.

EMPLOYMENT

This refers broadly to a person's engagement in either paid work or unpaid work such as volunteering.

OLIVE LEAF NETWORK, 2023



Olive Leaf Network

Experience-Driven Child Advocacy

As directors of the Olive Leaf Network, we have dedicated our lives to advocating for the rights of children raised in high-control groups across Australia. We come from these groups ourselves. We have lived the reality of a childhood spent in service to an ideology we did not choose.

The “Lost Children of Cults” Concept

The phrase "lost children of cults" generally refers to individuals who were born into or raised within a cult environment from a young age, often experiencing a unique and potentially harmful upbringing.

The term *lost* is not meant to be reductive, nor minimise the incredible resilience of child survivors - many of whom have thrived in spite of their experiences and have gone on to achieve great things such as for their personal interests, creativity, career, education and raising their own families - we strive to give our children a better childhood than the one we experienced, to do better as parents than our own. Many of us do this while tending to our wounds, seeking redress or restitution or pursuing justice for the harms that we have experienced. We hold hands with those who are struggling due to addiction or mental health issues. Many of us are still mourning those we truly have lost, who took their own lives or whose lives were cut short. And we mourn the loss of those with whom our connection has been severed, including siblings and those that we grew up with, who have not made it out of the cult.

***Lost* refers to the disregard of child rights by the parents, the turning a blind eye by governments and child protection authorities and the erosion of the self, perpetrated by the cult upon the child. It highlights the problem that society overlooks and which laws have difficulty reaching beyond. It demands the attention of all to address the concealment of harms to children; it demands that the children be “found”.**

Persons born into or raised with a cult face unique challenges. They may struggle with issues of social integration, trauma, and identity formation due to their experiences, such as:



Olive Leaf Network

- **Limited Socialization:**
Children in cults often have restrictions placed upon their exposure to and interactions with mainstream society.
- **Abuse and Exploitation:**
Many cults subject children to various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as exploitation.
- **Trauma and Mental Health Issues:**
The experiences within a cult can lead to significant trauma and mental health impacts, including CPTSD, anxiety, depression, and other psychological and emotional impacts.
- **Identity Formation:**
Children raised in cults may struggle to develop a sense of self separate from the cult's ideology and may face difficulties in forming their independent identity, including defining their own beliefs and values as well as connecting to their emotions. They may be denied or punished due to their sexuality or restricted with regard to pursuit of interests which differ from the cult's mission.
- **Educational Deprivation:**
Cults often restrict access to formal education, leaving children with limited knowledge and skills, disempowering them and creating challenges to develop towards independence.
- **Family Dynamics:**
Cults can distort family relationships, potentially disrupting or leading to a lack of healthy attachment.

We had to grow up and leave before we could understand the laws and that what happened to us were crimes.

We *find* ourselves in the recognition of our rights, in the steadiness of our voices, the overcoming of disadvantages. We find ourselves through adequate support, education, advocacy, access to health services and freedom from trafficking. We become our true selves, independent of authoritarian and coercive control. We discover autonomy and pursue our dreams.



Olive Leaf Network

Never Let Me Go, by Kazuo Ishiguro

Many books, films, and articles have tried to capture this experience, but few have resonated with the quiet, bone-deep truth of our pasts like Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. We include mention of it here as it can be challenging to use language alone to encompass the unique experience of children in cults. We feel that this fictional story, later adapted to film, captures what it *feels* like to not be regarded as human, but rather, as the property of others. When we read about the lives of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, we don't just see characters in a dystopian novel; we see ourselves. Their school, Hailsham, was our world. It was a place that told us we were special, chosen, and set apart from a dangerous and corrupt outside world. But this specialness was a cage. Like the students of Hailsham, we were being carefully and meticulously prepared for a future that was not our own. Our purpose had been decided for us before we could even comprehend what it meant.

In the novel, just as the children reach the age when they begin to dream and voice out loud their individual futures, Miss Lucy, the children's "guardian", feels it is her duty to be direct with them. "Your lives are set out for you" She says, "You were brought into this world for a purpose and your futures, all of them, have been decided".

The novel's central theme—that the clones were created to be organ donors—is a brutal, physical manifestation of a psychological reality we lived every day. We were not raised to be doctors, artists, or explorers for our own fulfillment. We were raised to be soldiers for a cause, to be wives and mothers who would create more soldiers, to be workers whose labour would fund the mission. Our dreams, our desires, our very bodies were considered assets of the group, to be sacrificed when the time came. The idea of a "deferral," that faint, desperate hope the characters chase, was achingly familiar. It was the whisper of a possibility that maybe, just maybe, our lives could be our own, a hope that often kept us compliant within a system we didn't have the tools to question.

Ishiguro so perfectly captures the profound passivity that outsiders find so difficult to understand. His characters don't stage a rebellion; they don't try to escape. People ask us constantly, "Why didn't you just leave?" *Never Let Me Go* is the answer to providing that understanding; what it *feels* like - beyond words. When your entire reality has been constructed, when you have been taught that there is no safe or meaningful life beyond the boundaries you know, the thought of leaving is not just terrifying—it is almost inconceivable.



Olive Leaf Network

You are conditioned to accept your fate, to see it as natural, even noble. To fight against it would be to invalidate every relationship, every belief, every moment of your life.

The closing lines written in *Never Let Me Go* leave a haunting in the reader - like our experiences have left inside of us. *I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that - I didn't let it - and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.*

Never Let Me Go conveys the sense of normalcy within which extreme abuse can be delivered in, with beauty being used to disguise exploitation and delivers the feelings to describe imprisonment and ownership by another, on a person's body and autonomy.

In Australia, we hold to the principle of a 'fair go,' of the right to self-determination. Yet, right now, there are children being raised in insulated communities, cut off from mainstream education, denied access to external information, and taught that their sole purpose is to serve a pre-ordained cause. They are being prepared for a "donation" of their own—the donation of their autonomy, their critical thinking, and their right to choose a life beyond being sacrificed for a cause.

Child Rights Advocacy

We passionately advocate that the best interests of the child must supersede the ideology of their parents or community. That parent's right to practice religion should not override the child's rights to their identity, freedom of thought and expression, and supported development towards their future independence. A child is not a tool. A child is not a means to an end. They are not here to fulfill a prophecy, to be a foot soldier for a religious war, or to be a living sacrifice for any cause, no matter how righteous it seems to those in charge. Our work at the Olive Leaf Network is driven by this conviction. It is driven by the memory of our own quiet acceptance and the ghosts of the futures we were never supposed to have.



Olive Leaf Network

We fight to ensure that every child in Australia has the full protection of Australian law, the privilege of a broad and unbiased education, and the fundamental human right to imagine a future of their own making. We do it so that no child has to look back on their life,, and find meaning only within the confines of a story that was written for them by someone else. We want them to write their own.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was established by the United Nations in recognition of the fact that children have distinct needs and, therefore, distinct rights from adults. Children's rights are prioritised in their best interest, focusing on their health, safety, well-being, and development. In contrast, adults have greater freedom to make choices, even those that may be self-harming.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any person under the age of 18. These rights are universal, applying to every child without discrimination, regardless of their background, identity, or family circumstances.

The core principles of the Convention are:

- **Non-Discrimination:** No child should be treated unfairly for any reason.
- **Best Interests of the Child:** All decisions concerning a child must prioritize their well-being.
- **Right to Life, Survival, and Development:** Governments must ensure children survive and develop to their fullest potential.
- **Participation:** Children have the right to express their opinions on matters affecting them, and these opinions should be taken seriously.

The rights can be grouped into several key areas:

- **Identity and Family Life:** Children have the right to a name, a nationality, and a sense of identity. They have the right to know and be cared for by their parents and should not be separated from them unless it is for their own protection.
- **Health and Welfare:** Children have the right to the best possible healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, a safe place to live, and social and economic support if their families are in need.



Olive Leaf Network

- Education, Play, and Culture: Every child has the right to an education, with primary education being free. They also have the right to rest, play, and participate in cultural activities, as well as use their own language and practice their own religion.
- Protection from Harm: The Convention mandates that children be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. This includes protection from dangerous work, sexual exploitation, kidnapping, and trafficking.
- Civil Rights and Freedoms: Children have the right to privacy, freedom of thought and religion, freedom of association, and access to information from various sources.
- Special Protection: The rights ensure special care and protection for vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, refugee children, and children in alternative care.
- Justice: A child accused of breaking the law has the right to fair treatment and legal assistance, with imprisonment used only as a last resort.

Ultimately, governments are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and fulfilled for every child. They must also make these rights widely known to both children and adults.

Need for Distinction Between Adults and Children

In the groups where we, as children, were harmed, the boundary between adults and children was often removed. Our protection rights, particularly concerning our vulnerabilities, were denied. We were exposed to harm because no protective barrier existed. This blurring of lines served to lessen or negate parental or caregiver responsibilities, enabling them to contribute more to the organisation, and/or to facilitate the exploitation of children. Both scenarios ultimately benefit the group or its leader.

We were often told we were not children, expected to assume adult responsibilities, and regarded as property of the organisation, exploited for labour. We were harmed, imprisoned, and punished while our parents and the group claimed the right to religious freedom and are still reaping the benefits of our labour and silence (**See Appendix C: Modern Slavery Act** for relevant legal considerations).

It is imperative that the Committee maintains a clear distinction between adults and children throughout this inquiry, recognising children's particular protections and rights as separate from those of adults.



Olive Leaf Network

Holistic-Societal Approach

We aim to assist the Committee in comprehensively understanding the specific harms and impacts on children within cults. We urge the Committee to adopt a holistic, solutions-based approach that extends beyond legal examination and reform, embracing public health and social efforts to reduce harm through education, awareness, prevention, early intervention, and recovery. **Children growing up in cults is a significant public health issue that must be addressed.**

To change culture, we need to improve language and have better defined constructs through which issues can be understood and addressed so that as a society we can prevent and intervene on the systemic and unfettered abuse of children in cults, which currently continue, undisturbed or disrupted by laws.

Understanding the child's experience is essential to tackling the pervasive harms to children in cults. That starts with this inquiry, with the Committee uniquely positioned to examine the topic of cults through the lense of the child. This Committee will have the opportunity to acknowledge the particular harms to children and in doing so ease the suffering of survivors. As well as recommend frameworks, systems and policy to improve outcomes for children in Victoria, which will no doubt have national and international impacts.



Olive Leaf Network

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control.

The Olive Leaf Network Australia provides this submission to the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee to address the terms of reference for this inquiry, through the lens of the child experience within cults. We are advocating through our lived experiences to provide an in-depth understanding of this experience, which is complex and multifaceted.

From within environments governed by strict belief systems and absolute authority, the child learns early that their safety is conditional. Boundaries are often blurred in such settings — care and control are entwined, devotion is demanded, and questioning may be met with consequences. A child raised here often exists in a state of internalised vigilance, navigating an emotional landscape shaped not by free expression but by fear of retribution or isolation.

Daily life may be structured by rigid expectations, where independence is discouraged and compliance is spiritualised. In these contexts, expressions of distress may be reframed as moral failings or spiritual immaturity, rather than indicators of harm. Opportunities for healthy development — emotionally, cognitively, relationally — are narrowed. Access to external perspectives is often restricted, and relationships outside the belief structure may be viewed with suspicion. When concerns arise, the child may not have the language or audience to voice them. Efforts to disclose harm, if made at all, may be reinterpreted as disloyalty or a test of faith.

Historically, some oversight bodies have been slow to respond or ill-equipped to engage meaningfully with such closed environments. Institutional responses have often prioritised reputational management over relational repair or child welfare. The power of religious groups to use the legal system as a shield, or to pressure members not to report abuse, leaves the child abandoned. In the absence of culturally appropriate scrutiny, these groups



Olive Leaf Network

have developed internal processes that lack accountability, transparency and trauma-informed principles.

For the child, the result is a kind of silencing that extends across time — a slow erasure of their experience from formal records and collective memory. Even as adults, many struggle to reconcile what happened to them with the frameworks that were used to justify it.

Children growing up in these groups are not passive observers. They are subjected to indoctrination, labour, and emotional neglect. Their lives are micromanaged, and their identity development is stifled. Many are denied access to education, healthcare, or a supportive adult who could advocate for their rights. Instead of play, exploration, and safety, they face punishment, surveillance, and silence.

Children do not have the language or power to explain systemic grooming, coercion, or psychological harm. Even when children are removed or grow up and come forward later, they encounter barriers to justice: statute limitations, cultural reluctance to challenge religion, and social stigma. The trauma doesn't end when the abuse does. Many survivors struggle with trust, mental health issues, and the lack of formal recognition of what was done to them.

Any policy or investigation that fails to centre the child's experience risks replicating the same patterns of neglect and institutional complicity that allows abuse to flourish in the first place.

Recruitment

The continued use of terms like 'recruitment' and 'membership' in the context of children is not a semantic issue; **it is a primary barrier to their protection.** This language incorrectly assigns agency to a child, misclassifying a child protection crisis as a matter of religious or lifestyle choice. To protect these children, we must first name the harm correctly: it is **coercive control, child trafficking, and systemic family violence**, not recruitment.

Recruitment refers to the methods and tactics used by cults to attract new members and draw them into the group's ideology and practices.



Olive Leaf Network

Defining roles

The goal of cult recruiters is to gradually increase the commitment of a person, ultimately leading to full integration into the cult. However, we are submitting for this inquiry through the lens of the child experience. Children who are dependant upon their parent or caregiver due to their age and stage of development, do not undergo such a process; they are placed into authoritarian environments, often through birth. The cult obtainment of the child is done through the parent, therefore in order to address this, we must place accountability on the parent who is charged with the responsibility of protection of the child.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that in all actions concerning children, their best interests shall be a primary consideration. These best interests include their safety, health, well-being, and development. Children have a right to their own identity and expression of thought, and the right to speak on their own experiences. The right of a family to practice religion should never override the protections for a child. **Freedom of religion is subject to limitations, as prescribed by law.**

The Cult Parent

The Family Violence Protection Act 2008 defines a parent as:

- a person who has responsibility for the long-term welfare of the child and has, in relation to the child, all the parental powers, rights and duties that are vested by law or custom in the guardian of a child; and
- a person with whom the child normally or regularly resides.

Through our lived experience, we have observed that parents of children in cults often prioritise their perceived right to practice religion above the child's rights to protection and healthy development. This "religious right" is often used to the child's detriment, denying their distinct rights to education, appropriate medical care, and adequate support for healthy development. Furthermore, children suffer damage from the infliction of group practices for punishment and exploitation.

While the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 defines a parent as having responsibility for a child's long-term welfare, this responsibility is corrupted in a cultic setting. Recent Australian research into multi-generational cults, such as Dr. Aebi-Mytton's study on the Exclusive



Olive Leaf Network

Brethren, highlights the concept of family enmeshment. In this dynamic, the boundaries between the family unit and the cult system become blurred. The parent ceases to be a protective barrier for the child against the group's demands. Instead, they become a primary gatekeeper and enforcer of the group's ideology, prioritising the cult's doctrines over the child's developmental needs and fundamental rights. This enmeshment means the "cult parent" directs the child's life not for the child's own future, but for the benefit of the group.

A core issue regarding the welfare of children in cults is that parents may themselves be uninformed of children's rights. Furthermore, the effects of coercive control can induce a dissociative state in the parent, numbing their empathy and impairing their ability to respond to their child's needs. The child's welfare is often sacrificed to prove the parent's commitment to the group, a dynamic survivors often describe as an "addiction" to the leader or cause. In the DSM-5, dissociation related to cult involvement can be diagnosed under Other Specified Dissociative Disorder (300.15), specifically within the category of Identity disturbance due to prolonged and intense coercive persuasion. This includes experiences like "brainwashing, thought reform, indoctrination while captive, torture, long-term political imprisonment, and recruitment by sects/cults or by terror organisations."

Child survivors often describe their parents' attachment to the leader, group, doctrine, or practices as an "addiction." This means the source of the "supply" (the cult) becomes the primary focus of the parent's attention, efforts, and dedication, often minimising or disregarding the child's welfare, many times proving their worth and commitment by sacrificing their child to the cause.

The report of the Board of Inquiry into Scientology, 1965 established that:

"Scientologists frequently have a strange and obsessive dedication to scientology, which enables them cheerfully to make considerable personal and economic sacrifices in the interests of scientology. This dedication arises because of the bemused state produced by its processes and the insidious appeal which it makes to those persons who seek escape from the realities of everyday existence and its problems. Adherence to scientology is sustained by a mixture of mental conditioning and fear."

We have experienced for ourselves our own parent's disregard for the law and common sense decency in allowing for us to be abused. There is a need to address the complicity of parents in cults and their participation in the violations of children through either handing their children up for abuse or themselves inflicting it upon their children.



Olive Leaf Network

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that in all actions concerning children, their best interests shall be a primary consideration. These best interests include their safety, health, well-being, and development. Children have a right to their own identity and expression of thought, and the right to speak on their own experiences. The right of a family to practice religion should never override the protections for a child. Freedom of religion is subject to the limitations described by law.

The Family Law Act 1975 focuses on the needs of children and the responsibilities that each parent has for their children, rather than on parental rights. The Family Law Act aims to ensure that parenting arrangements are made in the **best interests of children**.

Major long-term issues are issues about the care, welfare and development of the child that are of a long-term nature. They can include issues about the child's education, religious and cultural upbringing, health, name and significant changes to the child's living arrangements.

Often family disputes regarding children and religion are brought out in family court. Under the Family Law Act 1975, when the court is making a parenting order in relation to a child, the court must regard **the best interests of the child as the paramount consideration, above the religious rights of the parents**.

In determining the best interests of the child, the court must consider what arrangements would promote the safety of the child and each person who has care of the child (including any history of family violence and family violence orders), the developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs of the child and the capacity of each person who has or is proposed to have parental responsibility for the child to provide for the child's developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs.

Susceptibility to Tactics

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen, while it also recognises that children reach increasing stages of independence in relation to their age.

In Australia, during late adolescence, a child begins to make their own choices regarding education pathways, training for skills, work and learning to drive a car. And even taking risks, for example at the age of sixteen a child can legally skydive, but not without the consent of a parent or guardian.



Olive Leaf Network

It is in this stage of increased independence that children may be susceptible to recruitment tactics by cults. However, this stage of childhood which affords greater independence and choices by the child is still governed by specific protections for children and responsibilities of parents, caregivers and authorities, as prescribed by law.

Correcting the Language

We submit that *recruitment* in the context of cults - being brought into a group which is harmful - is not the correct term to use in reference to children since by their rights and by law they can not choose or accept such harms or risks on themselves. It would be more appropriate to place this under the framework of coercive control in a group setting, family violence, or where it meets the criteria—to be classified as child trafficking.

Kids Cannot Consent to Harm

The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)**, ratified by Australia in 1990, recognizes that: **"The child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth."**

Children cannot choose to be exploited. They cannot choose to sacrifice themselves for a "greater cause." Children cannot consent to harm. While a parent or responsible caregiver participates in a group, their experience must be viewed as separate from their child's; the child is not an extension of them. Parental responsibility is to ensure safeguards and adequate care and protection for their child, aligned with the child's needs and developmental stage.

Children Cannot Be Made Martyrs

In a U.S. Supreme Court case, the point is made very clearly in *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944). The appellant, Sarah Prince, appealed a conviction for violating Massachusetts' child labor laws based upon her permitting her children to preach and sell pamphlets relating to the Jehovah Witness religion on the streets in the evening.

Sarah Prince was the mother of two young sons and had legal custody of her niece. Appellant as well as her children are Jehovah's Witnesses. They would distribute



Olive Leaf Network

“Watchtower” and “Consolation” each week on the streets. She had allowed the children to do so previously, and had been warned against doing so by the school attendance officer. On December 18, 1941, she allowed the children to accompany her for the first time in the evening to distribute “Watchtower” and “Consolation” and engage in preaching work. The pamphlets were sold for five cents each, but no one accepted a copy from the niece or her aunt that evening.

Sarah Prince was appealing her convictions by the state of Massachusetts on the grounds of religious rights. The question at stake was: does the freedom of religion and parental rights prohibit Massachusetts from enforcing the child labor law?

The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the state convictions of Sarah Prince on the basis that the State’s authority to prevent child labor overrides the constitutional protections in this case:

“Two liberties are at stake, the parent’s right to bring up the child in the way he should go, and the child’s right to practice his or her religion. The custody, care, and nurture of the child reside first in the parents. However, neither rights of religion nor rights of parenthood are beyond limitation. The state as *parens patriae* may guard the general interest in a youth’s well being by requiring school attendance, and regulating or prohibiting the child’s labor.”

The appellant urged that the activity in this case in no way harmed the niece. However, the state’s authority over children’s activities is broader than over like actions of adults.

“The parent may martyr themselves, but this does not mean they may martyr the child before the child reaches the age of majority.”

The U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged the parent’s right to raise her children and the child’s right to practice religion as she chooses, but found that the state’s interest in protecting children validates the child labor laws in this case.

Generational Differences in Cults

There are vast differences in the experiences of the first generation members of cults compared to the second generation (or subsequent generations). The difference lies primarily in how and when they entered the group, which deeply shapes their experiences, beliefs, and the challenges they may face upon exiting.

First-generation: *chose* to join, often as adults, and typically had a life before the group.



Olive Leaf Network

Second-generation: were *raised* in the group, with no opportunity for choice, informed consent or available options for alternative ways of living and limited or no exposure to alternative ideology.

The impacts of cult involvement are deeper, more developmental, and more complex for second-generation members, who often require significant, long-term support to build a life after leaving.

Here's a breakdown of some key differences between **First Generation Adult (FGA)** and **Second Generation Adult (SGA)**:

Feature	First-Generation Adult (FGA)	Second-Generation Adult (SGA) - The Focus of this Submission
Entry	Chose to join as an adult with a pre-existing identity.	Born or raised into the group; no choice or outside context.
Identity	Pre-cult identity can be reclaimed.	Identity is constructed entirely by the cult; must build a self from scratch.
Education	Often has prior education and work skills.	Systematically deprived of education; major barriers to employment.
Trauma	Trauma from manipulation and coercion.	Developmental Trauma. Abuse and neglect are normalized from infancy.
Leaving	Loses a community, may feel deceived.	Loses entire reality. Family, identity, community, and worldview collapse.

Control of Members

Evidenced by the guidance note, it is clear that the Committee already has a strong understanding - at least in a generalised sense - of methods used by cults to control members. Further, we are glad to see the Committee's recognition for coercive control, abuse and family violence.

Our focus is on the specific impacts of control on children in cults. In 1984, a paper was published titled, *Child Abuse in Cults*. It was presented at the Fifth International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, in Montreal, Canada, in September 1984, and at the American Humane Association Children's Division 108th Annual Meeting and Training Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, in Anaheim, California, USA in October 1984.



Olive Leaf Network

The paper was based on interviews and conversations with hundreds of cult members and their families over a number of years and identifies patterns of child abuse in cults and suggests ways to counter it. It is summarised as follows:

Cults are totalitarian pseudo-religious groups governed by religious principles formulated to suit the plans of the cult leader. Cult leaders demand absolute obedience and acceptance of their leadership.

Cult leaders foster the isolation of cult members from larger society by prohibiting children's attendance at public schools and the use of medical services outside the cult. Isolated from the influence of ideas, values, and morals of mainstream society, cult members are vulnerable to mind and behavioral control by the cult leader.

The cult leader's obsession with obedience and behavioral control is particularly manifested in the treatment of children. Brutal corporate punishment of children is common, and normal parental nurturing and bonding is discouraged because it threatens bonding to the cult leader. Other documented physical and psychological abuse in cults include incest, starvation, denial of medical care, and emotional deprivation.

*No parent should be exempt from the legal responsibility to seek medical care for his/her children, and **children's civil rights should have priority over parents' religious beliefs.***

Family Violence/Domestic Violence in Cults

Often in a cult environment, children are removed from their biological parent or parents and placed under replacement, family-type structures. Alternatively, even when parents are present, children remain dependent on other relationships within the group or community. Violence occurring within these family replacement structures falls under the definition of family violence according to the **Family Violence Protection Act 2008**.

The **Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (3)** states: "For this Act, a family member of a person (the relevant person) also includes any other person whom the relevant person regards or regarded as being like a family member if it is or was reasonable to regard the other person as being like a family member having regard to the circumstances of the relationship, including the following—

- The nature of the social and emotional ties between the relevant person and the other person.
- whether the relevant person and the other person live together or relate together in a home environment;
- the reputation of the relationship as being like family in the relevant person's and the other person's community;



Olive Leaf Network

- the cultural recognition of the relationship as being like family in the relevant person's or other person's community;
- the duration of the relationship between the relevant person and the other person, and the frequency of contact;
- any financial dependence or interdependence between the relevant person and another person;
- any other form of dependence or interdependence between the relevant person and the other person;
- the provision of any responsibility or care, whether paid or unpaid, between the relevant person and the other person;
- The provision of sustenance or support between the relevant person and the other person."

The Olive Leaf Network recognises the following features of family violence as highly relevant to cults:

- While anyone can be a victim or perpetrator, family violence is predominantly committed by men against women, children, and other vulnerable persons. However, the rate of occurrence of family violence perpetrated by women (particularly, mothers or responsible caregivers) may be higher in cults than in general society, as it is a culture of family violence. In cults that have a sexual exploitation aspect, we often see women in leadership positions as facilitators, traffickers and/or sexual offenders.
- In a cult, the entire group is often seen as family, blurring distinct family bonds (e.g., calling the leader "Father" or "Grandpa," and other members "brother" or "sister"). It's common for children to be viewed as the property of the group, with all members having access, responsibility, and the power to punish and exploit them, particularly in closed communities.
- Children exposed to family violence are highly vulnerable, and such exposure can profoundly impact their current and future physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.



I know a lot that are in jail now for doing exactly what was done to them growing up. And the government assumes that they should know the laws... If you hear hate speech your whole life, and then you come out and say it not in that cloistered community, how can you be responsible?

MARIA ESGUERRA

Psychologist born into the Children of God





Olive Leaf Network

- Family violence affects all segments of society, irrespective of location, socioeconomic status, health, age, culture, gender, sexual identity, ability, ethnicity, or religion.
- Family violence extends beyond physical and sexual violence to include emotional or psychological abuse, economic abuse and medical abuse through unlawful practices and medical neglect such as prohibiting treatment or appropriate care
- Emotional and psychological abuse in cults can occur in many ways such as social segregation or isolation, interrogations disguised as “counselling”, forced or coerced confessions, punishments, victim shaming or blaming, and using personal information or relationships to cause fear or for threat, manipulation, exploitation or control.
- It may involve overt or subtle exploitation of power imbalances and can consist of isolated incidents or patterns of abuse over time.
- When abusive language and practices are normalised and children have no access to outside perspectives or knowledge of laws, how can they be held responsible when they leave and continue the behaviour?

A Women's Rights issue

The welfare and rights of women are inextricably linked to the welfare of children. When women are denied autonomy, subjected to coercion, or deprived of access to healthcare, education, and support networks, the impact extends directly to their children. A mother’s ability to make informed decisions, access resources, and provide emotional and physical stability forms the foundation of a child’s development and safety.

Australia is a signatory to such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women - Violence against women and girls (VAWG), who are adversely impacted the most by cults. www.un.org International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women | United Nations It can manifest in physical, sexual and psychological forms, encompassing:

- Intimate partner violence (battering, psychological abuse, marital rape, femicide);
- Sexual violence and harassment (rape, forced sexual acts, unwanted sexual advances, child sexual abuse, forced marriage, street harassment, stalking, cyber-harassment);
- Human trafficking (slavery, sexual exploitation);



Olive Leaf Network

- Female genital mutilation; and
- Child marriage.

Girls in cults often face a unique and compounded set of harms shaped by both their age and gender. Some cult environments are rigidly patriarchal, with strict gender roles, limited autonomy, and early indoctrination into belief systems that subordinate women and girls. From a young age, girls may be socialised to serve, submit, and remain silent—discouraged from asking questions, pursuing education, or developing a sense of self outside the group's identity.

Many cults exert control over girls' bodies through early sexualisation, arranged or coerced marriages, or teachings that frame obedience as spiritual virtue. As a result, girls may be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, reproductive coercion, and physical punishment, often with no access to external protection or legal recourse. Education is frequently restricted or heavily filtered, depriving them of critical thinking skills and pathways to independence.

Psychologically, this can result in deep-seated trauma, identity confusion, and complex PTSD. The impact of growing up in such an environment can carry lifelong consequences, including difficulties with trust, boundaries, and self-worth. The intersecting vulnerabilities of being both a child and female in a cultic system make girls especially at risk and underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive child protection frameworks.

Cultic environments can have profound and often overlooked effects on maternal health. Women in high-control groups may experience coercive control over their reproductive choices, birthing practices, and parenting decisions, often without access to adequate prenatal or postnatal care. The pressure to conform to group doctrine can lead to chronic stress, emotional suppression, and isolation—factors that significantly impact mental health during and after pregnancy. Additionally, the absence of supportive networks, medical autonomy, or informed consent can increase risks of trauma, postpartum depression, and long-term psychological harm.

For mothers who attempt to leave or speak out, threats of losing custody, community, or safety compound the emotional and physical toll. Cult members may withhold children from their mothers as a means of control, coercion, or punishment, or to further exploit the children, such as for labor.



Olive Leaf Network

The separation between parents and children in cults can occur through forced relinquishment, assigning children to communal care or movement or hiding of the children, including across state lines or internationally. The systemic separation of children from their mothers - while the mothers were current cult members, while dissenting or during or after leaving the cult - have occurred in both the Children of God (The Family) and Scientology.

These widespread occurrences not only violate maternal rights but also cause deep psychological harm to both mother and child, disrupting the fundamental bond and fostering long-term trauma. Maternal health within cults must therefore be examined through a lens that recognises the intersection of reproductive coercion, systemic control, and the erasure of women's agency.

Practices

It is crucial to distinguish between the experience of a parent and that of a child in cultic environments, as these may differ significantly. What an adult considers "enlightenment" may have profoundly harmful psychological impacts on a child. Adults can choose certain experiences for themselves, while exposure to the same experiences for a child would be inherently harmful.

Practices Require Scrutiny

The Child Safe Standards require organisations involving children to have policies, procedures and practices to keep them safe. Child safety standards are a set of guidelines and requirements designed to protect children and young people from harm within organisations that provide services to them. These standards aim to embed child safety into the culture, policies, and practices of these organisations.

All groups which include children must examine their practices to ensure that they are not posing harms to children, no matter whether these practices are deemed religious or not. There is no



“

As early as 1965, we had the Anderson Report... and the report is so extensive and so damning in regards to the harms of Scientology, of Hubbard's practices. Reading it, it just makes your hair stand on end.

MIRRIAM FRANCIS



Olive Leaf Network

religious exemption for practices which harm children.

The organisation must have guidelines in place which safeguard children from practices which are invasive or psychologically harmful.

In cults, abusive practices are broadly known and accepted. In the cults that we grew up in, the Children of God/The Family and Scientology, there were endless reports on how harmful their practices were, not only were they accepted by the cults, but it appears endorsed by governmental organisations, due a lack of oversight and action, or flip flops on actions by authorities.

The report of the Board of Inquiry into Scientology, for Victoria, written by Kevin Victor Anderson QC was published in 1965. It is known as the “Anderson Report” and it was searing in its assessment of the evidence regarding Scientology practices:

“If there should be detected in this Report a note of unrelieved denunciation of scientology, it is because the evidence has shown its theories to be fantastic and impossible, its principles perverted and ill-founded, and its techniques debased and harmful.”

The report revealed that the techniques caused mental suffering.

“It is not to be doubted that scientology techniques worsen and prolong the mental troubles of the mentally ill and that they produce in even a normal person disturbances and anxieties which may precipitate mental trouble.”

And contributed to distorted sexual attitudes:

“Scientology theories are in part at least responsible for the distorted attitude of scientologists towards sexual matters, for it is argued amongst some scientologists that to seduce a girl of, say, fifteen years of age would be of no moment, for the thetan has had many sexual experiences and really such a girl would be 76 trillion and 15 years old. And it is said amongst scientologists that if a girl of 15 years were to be upset when introduced to sexual relations at that age it would be because she had some enormous overt on sex in a past life.”

At the time, they did not have the opportunity to examine evidence with regard to how children would be affected by these practices but the report submits that they would be just



Olive Leaf Network

as harmful for children as they are for adults. Given what we understand today about the child brain and impacts on development, we submit that the practices are more harmful for children than adults.

“While making an appeal to the public as a worthy system whereby ability, intelligence and personality may be improved, it employs techniques which further its real purpose of securing domination over and mental enslavement of its adherents. It involves the administration by persons without any training in medicine or psychology of quasi-psychological treatment, which is harmful medically, morally and socially.”

The inquiry report resulted in the Psychological Practices Act 1965, which regulated the practice of psychology to safeguard the public by ensuring that they could easily identify qualified professionals and differentiate them from those not authorized to practice and effectively led to the banning of Scientology on the basis that it was essentially practicing psychology without a license.

Despite bans across major states of Australia, piece by piece Scientology gained slices of religious recognition - first under the Marriage Act, and then through repeals on the Psychological Practices Act on the basis of religion. Ultimately culminating in the High Court decision in 1983, which determined that the idea of Scientology being a religion was "irresistible".

Along with the religious status bestowed upon Scientology by the High Court of Australia, came the aversion of eyes away from its practices. No one questioned why practices which had been evidenced to be immoral and perverted were being applied to children. No one questioned how a child could sign a *billion year contract* and pledge their life and future lifetimes to Scientology. How a child could even be allowed to sign such a contract and be forced into labour and servitude, while incurring debt bondage, called a “freeloader’s debt”. No more scrutiny of Hubbard’s practices, once deemed quasi-psychological treatments, which to this day are being applied to children en masse.

While the Victorian government is limited in intervening on the religious practices of adults, it conversely has a duty to protect children. The laws which apply for the protection of children are applicable for all children, regardless of religion.



Olive Leaf Network

Pervasive Nature of Cult Practices

The practices are part of the culture and, particularly when under a religious or spiritual banner, often escape scrutiny. There is little to no discernment in whom they are applied to, and no regard for the specific protections which should be in place for children due to their particular needs. Because the practices are whole-sale accepted by the group, there is no one to advocate on behalf of the child's vulnerabilities. Abuse in this form is done openly, in contrast to one-on-one abuse that is done out of sight of anyone who might intervene or report.

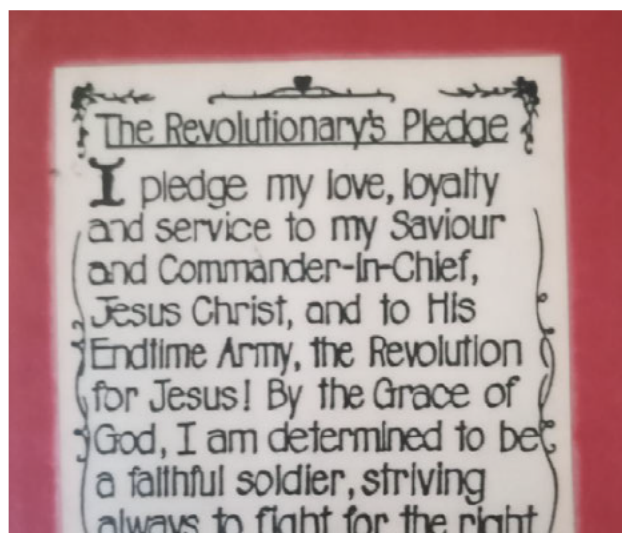
We see a great need for education of parents and people within cults, particularly with regard to psychological and emotional safeguarding, as this will improve discernment and may reduce children's exposure to harmful practices.

Imprisonment and Punishment Programs

In the cults that we grew up in, Scientology and the Children of God/The Family, there were extreme punishment programs, which children were placed into. These programs were designed to be **punitive, degrading, abusive, and involved forced child labor, isolation, harmful practices and extreme psychological control.**

Scientology's prison camp called the Rehabilitation Project Force ("RPF") involved:

- Isolation as degradation. Segregated from the broader group.
- Wearing of arm band or the black or grey to symbolise being in the punishment program. No colourful or expressive clothing allowed.
- Restrictions on communication - not allowed to address someone outside of the punishment program - must wait until you are addressed/communicated to first and only then are you allowed to respond.
- Invasive interrogations and forced confessions in group environment.
- Harmful psychological practices.
- Humiliation.
- Poor and cramped living conditions - mixed adults and children, including perpetrators of child sexual abuse.





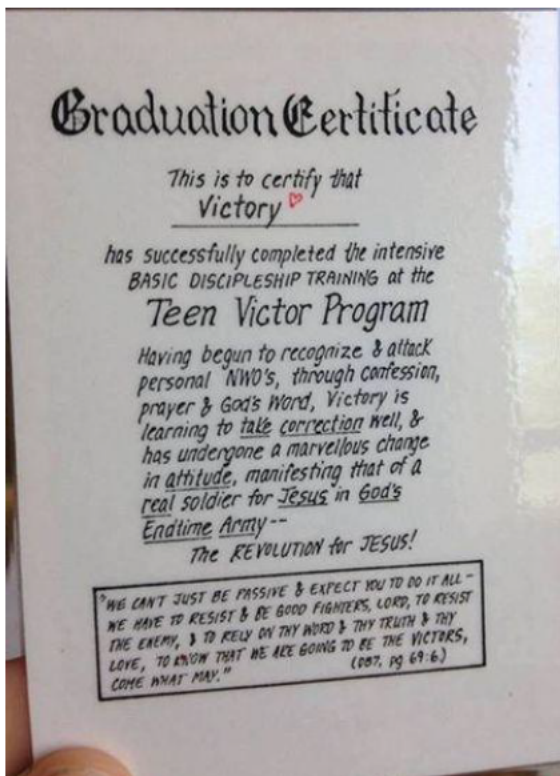
Olive Leaf Network

- No education.
- Daily forced hard labour - no days off.
- Sleep deprivation during heightened work periods such as for a particular event.
- Restrictions on food.
- Forced running - no walking allowed.
- No time off or ability to play, no access to entertainment.
- No privacy, always watched and controlled.
- Long term imprisonment - up to and in excess of ten years.

The Children of God's Victor Program involved:

- Hard labour (long work days, up to seven days a week)
- Silence restriction –no contact at all allowed with others (sometimes used for months)
- Corporal punishment (including public beatings on bare backs and buttocks)
- Strict diet and forced fasting
- Seclusion from other children or teens
- Denial of any and all entertainment
- Constant supervision
- Locked in rooms at night (sometimes even tied to the bed)

- Public humiliations and shamings
- Rigorous physical exercises
- 'Smile machines' (a crude elastic device attached to the ears and mouth corners to create a 'smile'.)



While these organisations claimed that these practices were of spiritual or behavioural benefit they were unlawful and inherently abusive.

There is no defence for subjecting children to these practices. Children can not consent to abuse, especially not in these extreme and



Olive Leaf Network

extensive forms, cut off from parents and subjected to harms in violation of laws.

Harms and Impacts

Harm to children is categorised as **child abuse** and involves damage to a child's health, safety, or well-being. This includes physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological harm, which can result from a single act or accumulate over time.

Abuse of children in cults or religious groups is not "religious abuse" or "spiritual abuse." It is child abuse.

The **Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005** states: "Child abuse includes— (a) any act committed against a child involving— (i) a sexual offence; or (ii) an offence under section 49M(1) of the Crimes Act 1958; and (b) the infliction, on a child, of— (i) physical violence; or (ii) serious emotional or psychological harm; and (c) the serious neglect of a child;"

"Reportable conduct means— (a) a sexual offence committed against, with or in the presence of, a child, whether or not a criminal proceeding in relation to the offence has been commenced or concluded; or (b) sexual misconduct, committed against, with or in the presence of, a child; or (c) physical violence committed against, with or in the presence of, a child; or (d) any behaviour that causes significant emotional or psychological harm to a child; or (e) significant neglect of a child;" *Sexual misconduct includes behaviour, physical contact or speech or other communication of a sexual nature, inappropriate touching, grooming behaviour and voyeurism.*

We acknowledge that the Child Safety Standards and the Reportable Conduct Scheme under the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (2005) provide a legal framework to prevent and report harm to children in organisations. The Committee should examine how these laws are applied, or crucially, whether they are applied at all in cults, which by their nature often do not subscribe to external law or consider themselves part of general society.



Olive Leaf Network

The Queensland Family and Child Commission is a statutory body charged with significant responsibilities to review and improve the systems that protect and safeguard our children. The Family and Child Commission Act 2014, states that our responsibilities are to: Promote the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people; Promote and advocate for the responsibility of families and communities to protect and care for children and young people; and Improve the child protection system. QFCC's vision that "**every Queensland child is loved, respected and has their rights upheld.**" This resonated deeply with us – the focus not just on preventing harm, but on fostering an environment where children can truly thrive, is incredibly insightful.

We also wish to highlight that while the National Principles for Child Safety requires organisations to *inform* children of their rights, Victoria's Child Safe Standards, which are regulated by the Commission for Children and Young People, requires that children are *empowered* by their rights. This is what we are aiming to do and our submission reflects our mission to empower children not only through education and advocacy, but also through societal recognition and change.

Children raised within high-control groups endure a systematic and multi-faceted array of harms designed to ensure their total control and loyalty. This submission, grounded in our direct lived experience and corroborated by our work supporting other survivors in therapeutic and peer-group settings, identifies the following key areas of impact:

Systemic Abuse and Coercive Control

Children were subjected to an environment of absolute control where abuse was normalized and justified by the cult's doctrine.

- **Pervasive Sexual Abuse:** Cults create a predatory environment, where abuse is covered up and at times endorsed, leading to widespread child sexual abuse (**over 77.6% of former members in the CoG sample**). In Dr Jill Abebi-Myttons sample of 113 Australian former members from various cultic groups (see appendix A), 55 (53.4%) reported child sexual abuse with 43 (41.7%) of these occurring with other members of the same group. The main groups reporting CSA perpetrated by other members of their group in Australia are the Exclusive Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some groups such as the Children of God are currently underrepresented in the main sample.



Olive Leaf Network

In the Children of God/The Family children were groomed, taught to sexualize themselves, and their understanding of consent was deliberately erased - Maria

- **Sanctioned Physical Violence:** Corporal punishment was a routine and brutal tool of control. Children were beaten with implements like cricket bats and paddles for minor infractions, instilling a constant state of fear and learned helplessness.
- **Intense Psychological and Emotional Abuse:** Children endured constant manipulation, gaslighting, public shaming, and were indoctrinated with intense fear of the outside world, demons, and damnation. Their individual thoughts and emotions were suppressed, and dissent was punished severely through methods like shunning.

Profound Deprivation and Neglect

The cult's priorities systematically superseded the fundamental needs of children, leading to severe and lifelong deprivation.

- **Educational Deprivation:** Formal education was denied, with "homeschooling" consisting solely of cult propaganda. This resulted in extremely low educational attainment (**only 18.7% completed high school in the cult**), creating immense barriers to employment and integration into society.
- **Medical Neglect:** A doctrine of "faith healing" led to the denial of conventional medical care for treatable illnesses and injuries, resulting in preventable deaths, chronic health conditions, and permanent disabilities.
- **Financial Exploitation and Poverty:** Children were used as tools for financial gain through forced labor (street fundraising) and systemic welfare fraud. Despite the income generated, they lived in poverty, often lacking basic necessities like adequate food, clothing, and shoes.

Destruction of Identity and Social Development

The cult's structure was designed to erase individual identity and ensure total dependence on the group.



Olive Leaf Network

- **Isolation and Information Control:** Children were completely isolated from mainstream society, family outside the group, and any external media or cultural influences. This created an "us vs. them" worldview and left them without the tools for critical thinking.
 - **Suppression of Identity:** Children's personal, cultural, and national identities were erased and replaced with a singular "cult identity." They were also subjected to doctrinal discrimination based on **race, gender, and perceived sexual orientation.**
 - **Social and Emotional Stunting:** Lacking normal social interaction and healthy attachment models, survivors struggle with basic social cues, forming relationships, and understanding boundaries. This leads to chronic feelings of being an "alien" or "outsider" in the world.
-

Human Trafficking and Transnational Exploitation

The constant movement of children was a deliberate strategy of control that constituted human trafficking.

- **Forced Transit for Exploitation:** Children were moved between states and countries for the purpose of forced labor and/or to facilitate sexual exploitation in new, unfamiliar environments.
- **Evasion of Justice:** This transnational/international nature created a "jurisdictional black hole," making it nearly impossible for law enforcement to investigate crimes or for children to be protected, as perpetrators could simply be moved to another state or country.
- **Control of person and identity:** Removing and withholding vital, identifying documents such as passport, birth certificate, etc.
- **Lack of citizen rights:** Being placed in unfamiliar locations and cut off from the outside world was further isolating especially, when the person does not have citizen/residency rights or further impacted due to overstaying on their passport and not having the appropriate visa. Those who would consider leaving had no access to resources or the knowledge needed to navigate the outside world including accessing services which might help them such as social support, funding assistance, consular or immigration.



Lifelong and Intergenerational Trauma

The cumulative effect of these abuses results in devastating long-term consequences that often continue into the next generation.

- **Complex PTSD (C-PTSD and Mental Illness):** Survivors overwhelmingly suffer from C-PTSD, leading to chronic anxiety, depression, dissociation, and suicidal ideation. A study of 50 Jehovah's Witnesses in Western Australia found that members are three times more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia and nearly four times more likely with paranoid schizophrenia than the general population.
- **Lack of Life Skills:** Upon exiting, survivors are ill-equipped to navigate the world, facing immense challenges in managing finances, obtaining employment, and accessing essential services.
- **Vulnerability to Further Abuse:** The indoctrination of compliance and the lack of healthy relationship models leave survivors highly vulnerable to further exploitation, with a significant number (**46.1%**) experiencing domestic violence after leaving the cult.
- **Intergenerational Trauma:** The psychological wounds and lack of healthy parenting models can lead to the transmission of trauma to survivors' own children, perpetuating a cycle of harm.

Impacts on Children: The ACEs Connection

The **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study** has demonstrably linked adverse childhood experiences (such as family violence, abuse, and neglect) to various negative health outcomes. High ACE scores correlate with increased risks of mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse) and physical health problems (e.g., chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, autoimmune diseases).

The ACE-Q score: (out of 10) Directly reflects the number of adverse childhood experiences; a higher score indicates a greater risk for social, mental, or other well-being problems. For instance, individuals with an **ACE-Q score of 4** are twice as likely to smoke, 5 times more likely to experience depression, 7 times more likely to be alcoholic, 10 times more likely to use illicit drugs, and 12 times more likely to attempt suicide compared to those



Olive Leaf Network

with a score of 0. In our study 67% had an ACEs score of 6- indicating a 20 year lifespan reduction.

Barriers to Reporting on Abuse, Exploitation, Neglect and Coercive Control

In groups that internally prohibit reporting to outside authorities, harm to children inevitably goes unaddressed. Furthermore, when children are taught that the outside world is evil, they are unlikely to seek external assistance. This creates a haven for abuse, which often continues until the child reaches an age or developmental capacity to escape, or if their parent(s) decide to leave. This highlights that these issues cannot be resolved purely through legislation alone, as it requires participation and recognition for adherence.

Here are some common barriers to reporting crimes in cults:

1. Fear of Retaliation

- Victims may fear punishment, ostracism, or violence from the group.
- Cults often use threats—spiritual, physical, or legal—to silence members.

2. Psychological Manipulation

- Victims are often indoctrinated to distrust outsiders, including authorities.
- They may feel loyalty to the group or due to their indoctrination, believe that the abuse is justified or deserved.

3. Isolation

- Cults often isolate members from family, friends, and society, reducing access to support or alternative viewpoints.

4. Shame and Guilt



Olive Leaf Network

- Victims may feel responsible for the abuse or too ashamed to speak out.
- They may believe they won't be believed or that they're betraying others by reporting.

5. Lack of Awareness

- Some individuals may not recognize their experience as abuse or illegal due to normalized practices within the cult.

6. Distrust in Authorities

- Cult members may have been taught that law enforcement, child protection, or the legal system is corrupt or hostile.

7. Dependency

- Children are dependent upon members of the cult, making it difficult to leave or report wrongdoing.

8. Legal and Institutional Barriers

- Authorities may lack the understanding or training to recognize cult abuse.
- Some cults operate under religious or charitable protections, complicating legal intervention.

Systems Designed to Conceal

Cults employ language, systems and people to conceal crimes.

In the **Children of God/The Family**, systematic sexual abuse of children was promoted by leadership and veiled as religious practice. The organisation produced publications of grooming materials such as in the form of comic-books to encourage sexual acts of children. It defended its use of "Flirty Fishing", which was in actual fact sex trafficking, as a way of "bearing witness" for Jesus to people who would not otherwise be open to it.

It has been revealed through recent court cases, that the **Mormon Church (LDS)** has been using an abuse hotline across the U.S. over the past two decades as a way to keep reports



Olive Leaf Network

of child sexual abuse in house and shield the Mormon Church from potential lawsuits that pose a financial threat to the Church.

In **Scientology**, the network in place to create a cone of silence around victims of crime to prevent reporting to authorities is called the Office of Special Affairs. It is responsible for all legal and public relations matters of Scientology. This is a global network with agents in every Scientology organisation and acts as a buffer between Scientology and outside interventions such as by government, agencies or law enforcement. Its tactics include moving a victim and/or perpetrator out of the jurisdiction of the crime (interstate or out of the country) in order to prevent reporting of the crime.

Scientology uses language to conceal crimes such as referring to rape and child sexual abuse as “out 2-D” and having an internal system of reporting which requires that a person not be allowed to use certain words such as “rape” as was testified to by victims and an expert witness in the trial which resulted in the conviction of Danny Masterson on two counts of rape.

Scientology’s policy states that it is a high crime to report a Scientologist to authorities and the Office of Special Affairs (or “OSA”) are the enforcers of this policy and mandated to threaten, harass and intimidate victims of crime to prevent them from reporting to authorities or bringing a civil suit. These victims are declared enemies of Scientology and are subject to fair game - a practice of unleashing unrestricted harms against a person.

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse described the process undertaken by the **Jehovah’s Witnesses** in response to child sexual abuse:

“Investigating elders may take further action only if the truth of an allegation can be established according to the scriptural standards of proof. For those standards to be met, the elders must receive a confession by the accused and/or the testimony of two or three ‘credible’ eyewitnesses to the abuse. Investigating elders may also consider the evidence of two or three witnesses to separate but similar incidents of the same kind of abuse.

The evidence before the Royal Commission is that it is not the practice of the **Jehovah’s Witness** organisation to report child sexual abuse to authorities unless it is required by law to do so. **At the time of the public hearing, the Jehovah’s Witness organisation in Australia had recorded allegations, reports or complaints of child sexual abuse made**



Olive Leaf Network

against 1,006 members of the organisation. There is no evidence before the Royal Commission that the organisation reported any of those allegations to police or any other secular authority.”

New Zealand’s recent Royal Commission of Inquiry for Abuse in Care found that the **Jehovah’s Witnesses** forced victims to submit to a traumatising process of detailing their abuse in a group setting. The internal process that was followed by leadership allowed for perpetrators to avoid any consequences for their crimes:

“In practice the two-witness rule meant an abuser would face no consequences unless they committed the abuse in front of another person or another witness came forward and reported similar conduct by the abuser.”

New Zealand’s Royal Commission of Inquiry for Abuse in Care concluded that there was a lack of reporting to external authorities and inadequate consequences for abusers.

Failures to report and adequately address child sexual abuse are not just due to an insular inclination - it is deliberate. It is done by people who enforce the silence and facilitate the cover ups to prevent undesirable exposure to the group. It is done to protect the reputation of the group and therefore the operations and profits of the organisation. It is done in perpetuation of the idea that the group must be protected above all. These are criminal activities.

Legal Strongarm

Reporting a crime committed by a cult member involves not just going up against the perpetrator, but the entire organisation. A victim may consider how this will affect them in terms of their position within the group or face ex-communication and separation from their friends and family. They will have to consider the risks of retaliation and they may experience threats and intimidation by cult members.

In a civil case, the plaintiff will have to withstand the weight and force of the cult’s legal team which is often far better financed than their own.

And what about evidence and witnesses? These may be tied up under the cult. Evidence may become unavailable and witnesses may be unwilling to provide statements to police which makes it difficult to sufficiently support a case. This may mean that a case is closed by



Olive Leaf Network

police or rejected by prosecutors. All of this creates massive barriers for reporting crimes, pursuing justice or obtaining restitution.

The cult may use the legal system as a way to wear down or deplete a person whether emotionally or financially or use other tactics to silence victims or affect outcomes:

1. Legal Intimidation

- Cults may file defamation or harassment lawsuits against whistleblowers, journalists, or former members to drain their resources and discourage further action.
- Threats of lawsuits or legal action are used to intimidate victims and critics into silence.

2. Exploiting Religious Freedom Protections

- Cults may disguise abusive practices as religious rites, invoking constitutional protections (e.g., freedom of religion) to block investigation or prosecution.
- Some operate as registered churches or nonprofits, complicating oversight and shielding them from certain regulatory scrutiny.

3. Co-opting Legal Professionals

- Some groups recruit or groom lawyers, police officers, or judges sympathetic to their cause, creating conflicts of interest or bias in legal proceedings.
- Internal legal teams aggressively defend the group, discredit victims, and delay investigations through procedural tactics.

4. Obstructing Victim Testimony

- Victims may be pressured, threatened, or blackmailed to recant or refuse to testify.
- Psychological control and fear of retaliation discourage cooperation with authorities.

5. Delaying and Overwhelming



Olive Leaf Network

- Cults may file numerous legal motions, appeals, and jurisdictional challenges to delay proceedings and exhaust plaintiffs.
 - They may also destroy or hide evidence, complicating the burden of proof.
6. Misusing Confidentiality, NDAs or “Arbitration Agreements”
- Victims or defectors may be forced to sign agreements under coercion or threat, silencing them from reporting abuse.
 - Confidential settlements are used to bury allegations without admitting fault.

Failed Interventions

In 1992 in Melbourne and Sydney, police raided Children of God locations and welfare officials took children into protective custody. These actions were taken due to reports of extensive and systemic child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse. The children were released back to the communes, at times when they had NO parents living there, and were required by the court to experience “external socialization activities” for three hours each week. This did nothing to address the physical and sexual abuse, medical and educational deprivation and forced labour—many teens were trafficked overseas following this.

The cult only let the children choose from activities where there was no socialisation with the “systemites”, like horse riding and tennis - Maria

The Cost of Speaking Out

Throughout history, whistleblowers have often sounded the alarm at great personal risk, only to be met with indifference, retaliation, or systemic neglect. Rather than being protected for exposing wrongdoing, many have faced professional ruin, legal threats, social ostracism, or psychological harm. Cult members prioritize preservation of the group over accountability and in doing so actively prevent reform. The process of speaking out often leaves whistleblowers isolated and vulnerable from all sides. This historical pattern not only deters future disclosures but also allows harmful practices to persist unchecked, often at great cost to vulnerable individuals, especially children.

It is important for the committee to examine whether a robust and effective framework exists to protect whistleblowers, particularly those emerging from high-control or cultic environments. This includes assessing whether clear, accessible, and safe pathways are in place to support individuals who come forward with disclosures of abuse or misconduct.



Olive Leaf Network

Lack of Oversight

Brought out by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, government bodies and authorities have historically taken a hands-off approach with regard to the welfare of children within religious organisations, allowing the internal systems to prevail. These internal systems prevent reporting to outside authorities and the lack of oversight by government bodies allows for a vicious cycle of unfettered perpetration of abuse and concealment.

Child Protection

How do we ensure that children in cults are not excluded, while protections for children improve in other organisations? We see the need for lived experience to inform and strengthen the abilities of responsible persons, through education and training, to integrate the principles for children in these communities, as outlined in the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (2005), which emphasises:

- Shared societal responsibility for child wellbeing and safety.
- Opportunity for all children to reach their full potential.
- Prioritisation of child safety, health, development, education, and wellbeing by service providers and parents.
- The government's responsibility is to meet children's needs when families cannot provide adequate care.
- Early identification and intervention for risks, harms, and damages to children.
- Strengthening parental, family, and community capacity to support children early in life.
- Culturally responsive and coordinated services.
- Prioritising assistance for communities with the greatest need.
- Continuous improvement in service quality based on knowledge of child development.
- Protection of children's rights and encouragement of their participation in decision-making.
- Respect for children's individual and cultural identity.



Olive Leaf Network

- Prompt decision-making and service provision to avoid harm from delays.
- Ensuring families are aware of available services.
- Cooperation among services and professionals in the child's best interests

Opening the Door on Closed Communities

The Olive Leaf Network extends its services not just to former members but also within the groups themselves, focusing on education, prevention, and early intervention. We recognise the need for individuals within these groups to understand their rights, particularly the distinct rights of children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.

The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19**, states: "**States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.**"

There is a clear need to open the door on closed systems and facilitate equality in line with legislation like the National Principles for Child Safety, creating a safety culture where children are recognised as such, and their voices heard and needs met. We encourage the Committee not to alienate cult members but to integrate them by informing them of their rights and clearly distinguishing between the rights of adults and the rights of children. (See **Appendix E** for examples of closed communities.)



Olive Leaf Network

Addressing Family Violence

We aim to strengthen the abilities of responsible persons to address family violence within cults more effectively. This aligns with the **National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence**, which prioritise information gleaned from lived experiences. These principles highlight:

- **Shared understanding of the common features of coercive control:** A shared understanding is foundational to effectively identifying, preventing, and responding to family and domestic violence. By combining **Biderman's Chart of Coercion** with **Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform**, we gain a profound understanding of the systematic and multi-faceted abuse children endure in cults. They are not merely victims of individual acts of cruelty, but rather subjects of a meticulously crafted environment designed to strip them of their autonomy, identity, and critical thinking skills from a very young age. The intertwining of physical, psychological, and spiritual control, through isolation, manipulation of perception, constant threats and the systematic destruction of self-worth, creates a reality where resistance seems impossible and the cult becomes the child's entire world. (See **Appendix B** for a detailed explanation of these models and their application.)
- **Understanding the traumatic and pervasive impacts of coercive control:** Coercive control has traumatic and pervasive immediate and long-term impacts on victim-survivors, their families, and communities. A common understanding of these impacts should inform policies and practices across prevention, early intervention, response, recovery, and healing.
- **Taking an intersectional approach to understanding features and impacts:** Victim-survivors are diverse; an intersectional approach recognising these differences and the role of compounding forms of structural discrimination should underpin policies to address coercive control.
- **Improving societal understanding of coercive control:** Limited understanding within society can limit the effectiveness of interventions and compromise safety. Improved societal understanding is crucial.
- **Embedding lived experience:** Centring the diverse lived experiences of victim-survivors is critical to ensuring effective initiatives.



Olive Leaf Network

- **Coordinating and designing approaches:** Approaches are more effective when roles and responsibilities are clear, and services are coordinated to support safety, hold perpetrators accountable, and provide avenues for behaviour change.
 - **Embedding the National Principles in legal responses:** Legal responses, including any specific coercive control offence, should be underpinned by the shared understanding of coercive control established by the National Principles.
-

Examining Legislation

The critical distinction that legislation must recognise is the difference between a high-demand group with a clear power structure—often defined as a cult—and a more disorganised, transiently toxic group. In a cultic environment, a leader or a leadership group intentionally establishes a system of control designed specifically to abuse and exploit members for the benefit of the leadership. The harm is not an accidental byproduct of group dynamics; it is the result of an orchestrated system.

A legislative focus on the "group" as a whole risks inadvertently penalizing the victims who are caught within these systems. It is a defining feature of coercive control that individuals are manipulated into behaviours they would never otherwise exhibit, acting in ways that are completely contrary to their character. Any legal framework must be precise enough to distinguish between the architects of the abusive system and those who are entrapped by it.

These coercive systems frequently manifest through recognised forms of abuse. For instance, leaders often exert interpersonal coercive control, compelling members to harm others, such as forcing parents to abuse their children. They also engage in transactional abuse, coercing members into providing free labour or significant financial donations. These are not random acts but tangible, orchestrated actions that directly benefit the leadership.

Therefore, our central recommendation is that any proposed legislation must be designed to precisely target the individuals who create, maintain, and benefit from the system of control. The focus must be on holding the leaders who run the system to account, not the victims who are harmed and manipulated by it.



Olive Leaf Network

The Case for New, Specific Legislation and the Importance of Recognition

A new law that specifically addresses coercive control in environments where leaders establish systems of undue influence and abuse would provide a clearer pathway to justice for survivors. It would introduce a much-needed nuance for legal interpretation that is not currently available. Such a law is necessary to hold perpetrators accountable and provide a remedy for survivors whose experiences may fall outside the scope of existing legislation, such as the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*.

Furthermore, the formal recognition and acknowledgment of this specific type of harm by the legal system is, in itself, a powerful and necessary remedy for the healing of survivors.

In examining the submissions for this inquiry, we ask the Committee to thoroughly consider and identify the particular risks and harms to children in cults. It is imperative to acknowledge these harms with an explicit recognition of children's distinct rights. We believe that grounding this inquiry in a rights-based framework, with a clear distinction between adult rights and the specific rights and vulnerabilities of children, is essential to effectively addressing the profound harms perpetrated by these groups.



Challenging Religious Beliefs

There is a broad misconception that the government can not challenge beliefs. In fact, while other aspects of cults are included in the terms of reference for this inquiry, beliefs are not. However, the subject of beliefs does bear mentioning as these can profoundly affect the safety of children in cults. It should be known that there are in fact limitations on the freedom to manifest one's beliefs such as prescribed by law and which are necessary to protect people.

The limitations on the protections of beliefs is supported by article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which came into force in 1976. Article 18 of the ICCPR provides:

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.

Example: Victoria requires Child Safe Standards to be implemented in every organisation which provides services to children. One of the fundamental beliefs in Scientology is that "children are not children, they are adults in small bodies." How does the Commission for Children and Young People ensure a child safe culture in Scientology and that the children in Scientology are equally protected compared to children in other organisations?

In the report for the Board of Inquiry into Scientology, 1965 Kevin Victor Anderson QC makes a point to address the issue of beliefs, as follows:

In Adelaide Company of Jehovah's Witnesses Inc. v. The Commonwealth (1943) 67 C.L.R. 116, (1943) A.L.R. 193, the High Court of Australia unanimously ruled that, notwithstanding section 116 of the Australian Constitution which provides that "The Commonwealth shall not make laws for establishing any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth", the Parliament of the Commonwealth was not prevented from making laws prohibiting the advocacy of doctrines



Olive Leaf Network

*or principles which, though advocated in pursuance of religious convictions, were prejudicial to the prosecution of a war in which the Commonwealth was engaged. **Thus, even where there are constitutional guarantees as to freedom of religious beliefs the advocacy of such beliefs may be curtailed or prohibited in the national interest.***

In the course of his judgment, the Chief Justice, Sir John Latham, referred with approval to a number of decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States dealing with restrictive action which the government was entitled to take to curtail or punish allegedly religious practices, even though constitutional safeguards for the freedom of religious belief existed.

One such case, Reynolds v. The United States (1878) 98 U.S. 145, will serve as an illustration. In that case, Reynolds, a Mormon who had a religious belief in polygamy, and who had more than one wife, was convicted of bigamy. In announcing the unanimous decision of the Court, which refused to set aside Reynolds's conviction, Waite, C. J. said at p. 166 "Suppose one believed that human sacrifices were a necessary part of religious worship, would it be seriously contended that the civil government under which he lived could not interfere to prevent a sacrifice? Or if a wife religiously believed it was her duty to burn herself upon the funeral pile of her dead husband, would it be beyond the power of the civil government to prevent her carrying her belief into practice? So here, as a law of the organization of society under the exclusive domination of the United States, it is provided that plural marriages shall not be allowed. Can a man excuse his practices to the contrary because of his religious belief? To permit this would be to make the professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land, and in effect to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself. Government could exist only in name under such circumstances".

Where there are no constitutional guarantees, the position of the State would be at least as strong.



Olive Leaf Network

Recommendations

Drawing on our knowledge and lived experience, which we believe are crucial for informing law and responsible systems, we have developed the following recommendations to address the unique vulnerabilities of children in cults and prevent future harm:

A National Action Plan to Address Abuse in High-Control Groups

Building on the findings of the Victorian inquiry, a comprehensive national strategy is urgently required to address the systemic abuse and neglect occurring within insular and high-control groups. This plan outlines a multi-pronged approach focused on government accountability, legislative reform, proactive prevention, and robust, survivor-centric support systems.

I. National Inquiry and Governmental Framework

To ensure a coordinated and effective response, the following foundational structures must be established:

- **Launch a National Inquiry:** Extend from the Victorian inquiry to launch a full-scale National Inquiry. Its mandate will be to investigate the true scale and nature of the problem across the country and to establish a historical record of institutional failures.
- **Establish an Independent Watchdog Agency:** Create a permanent, independent statutory body responsible for the ongoing monitoring of high-control groups. This agency will have the power to investigate complaints, ensure compliance with child safety standards, and provide a clear point of accountability.
- **Form a Multi-Department Government Taskforce:** A dedicated taskforce, comprising representatives from health, education, justice, social services, and immigration, must be formed to coordinate a unified, whole-of-government response, mirroring successful models implemented in Europe.
- **Secure High-Level Commitment:** Obtain a public commitment to action and response from the Prime Minister and Attorney-General. This leadership is essential to drive reform and signal that this issue is a national priority.

II. Legislative and Regulatory Reform

Current legal frameworks are inadequate for protecting individuals, particularly children, within these environments. The following reforms are critical:



Olive Leaf Network

- **Strengthen Child Protection Laws:** Amend legislation to explicitly allow for the auditing of organisations, including religious and high-control groups, to ensure compliance with child safety standards. This must include a comprehensive review of past cases and recommendations to identify and rectify systemic failings.
- **Clarify the Limits of Religious Freedom:** Strengthen legal frameworks to explicitly address child abuse and neglect within insular groups. It must be codified that the defense of "religious freedom" does not override a child's fundamental rights to safety, education, and healthy development as enshrined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989).
- **Regulate Educational Settings:** Implement stringent regulations for "homeschooling" and schooling within insular group settings. This is to ensure that all children receive a standard of education that is academically sound, socially inclusive, and provides clear pathways to higher education, fulfilling their rights under the UNCRC.

III. Proactive Prevention, Intervention, and Professional Training

A reactive approach is insufficient. The focus must shift to proactive protection and early intervention.

- **Implement Immediate Prevention Strategies:** Prioritise proactive prevention and early intervention to protect children currently in cultic environments. The well-being and safety of children must be paramount, superseding any claims of adult religious freedom that lead to harm.
- **Develop Specialized Professional Training:** Create and mandate clear guidelines and training for professionals, including child protection services, law enforcement, educators, and healthcare providers. This training must address the specific dynamics of indoctrination, isolation, and control that can mask abuse and equip professionals to identify, report, and respond effectively.
- **Adapt Child Safety Standards:** Ensure that national child safety standards are effectively applied to children in high-control groups. This requires developing specific protocols to overcome challenges of secrecy and isolation, including mechanisms for external oversight and proactive outreach into these communities.

IV. Centering Lived Experience and Public Awareness



Olive Leaf Network

To ensure reforms are effective and culturally competent, they must be guided by those with direct experience and supported by public understanding.

- **Create a Lived Experience Advisory Council:** Establish a formal council of survivors to guide all policy development, legislative reform, and service design. This ensures that all measures are survivor-centric and grounded in the reality of these experiences.
- **Form a Parliamentary Friends Group:** Establish a cross-party Parliamentary Friends Group to build sustained political support, champion legislative changes, and maintain focus on this issue beyond electoral cycles.
- **Launch a Nationwide Education Campaign:** Initiate a public education campaign on the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The campaign must clearly articulate that children possess distinct rights and that their protection from harm, neglect, and sacrifice is a non-negotiable societal responsibility, paramount to parental beliefs when those beliefs result in harm.

V. Comprehensive Survivor Support, Redress, and Reintegration

Leaving a high-control group is often the beginning of a new set of challenges. A robust support system is essential for recovery and successful reintegration.

- **Provide Bridging Pathways to Services:** Fund and create clear pathways connecting individuals leaving cults to essential services. This must include:
 - Trauma-informed therapy tailored to the unique experiences of cult survivors.
 - Educational support to address significant gaps in schooling.
 - Vocational training and life skills programs to foster independence.
 - Community integration programs to help build new social networks.
- **Support New Caregivers:** Establish dedicated support programs and grants for new caregivers of children exiting these groups. These programs, potentially delivered through expert organisations like the Olive Leaf Network, must provide guidance and resources to manage the unique challenges of a child's transition.
- **Address Systemic Barriers:** Develop targeted solutions to address systemic issues faced by survivors, including:
 - Resolving illegal immigration statuses and obtaining identification documents.
 - Providing support to mitigate the devastating impact of shunning.



Olive Leaf Network

- Establishing safe and protected avenues for whistleblowers to engage with legal and protective systems.
- **Reform Redress Systems:** Overhaul redress systems to provide comprehensive, ongoing support. Financial payments must be accompanied by mandatory financial literacy education and long-term support planning to prevent survivors, who often lack family networks, from being targeted by predatory individuals or systems.
- **Allocate Public Health Funding:** Formally recognise the impact of cultic abuse as a significant public health issue. Allocate dedicated public health funding to support the vital, ongoing work of survivor-led organisations like the Olive Leaf Network, enabling them to provide essential services and advocacy without relying on the unpaid labour of already disadvantaged survivors.



Olive Leaf Network

Appendix A: Summarised Rights of the Child

1 DEFINITION OF A CHILD	2 NO DISCRIMINATION	3 BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD	4 MAKING RIGHTS REAL	5 FAMILY GUIDANCE AS CHILDREN DEVELOP	6 LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT	7 NAME AND NATIONALITY
8 IDENTITY	9 KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER	10 CONTACT WITH PARENTS ACROSS COUNTRIES	11 PROTECTION FROM KIDNAPPING	12 RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S VIEWS	13 SHARING THOUGHTS FREELY	14 FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND RELIGION
15 SETTING UP OR JOINING GROUPS	16 PROTECTION OF PRIVACY	17 ACCESS TO INFORMATION	18 RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS	19 PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE	20 CHILDREN WITHOUT FAMILIES	21 CHILDREN WHO ARE ADOPTED
22 REFUGEE CHILDREN	23 CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES	24 HEALTH, WATER, FOOD, ENVIRONMENT	25 REVIEW OF A CHILD'S PLACEMENT	26 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HELP	27 FOOD, CLOTHING, A SAFE HOME	28 ACCESS TO EDUCATION
29 AIMS OF EDUCATION	30 MINORITY CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION	31 REST, PLAY, CULTURE, ARTS	32 PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL WORK	33 PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL DRUGS	34 PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL ABUSE	35 PREVENTION OF SALE AND TRAFFICKING
36 PROTECTION FROM EXPLOITATION	37 CHILDREN IN DETENTION	38 PROTECTION IN WAR	39 RECOVERY AND REINTEGRATION	40 CHILDREN WHO BREAK THE LAW	41 BEST LAW FOR CHILDREN APPLIES	42 EVERYONE MUST KNOW CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
43-54 HOW THE CONVENTION WORKS	CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD					



Olive Leaf Network



1
DEFINITION OF A CHILD
A child is any person under the age of 18.



2
NO DISCRIMINATION
All children have all these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what language they speak, what their religion is, what they think, what they look like, if they are a boy or girl, if they have a disability, if they are rich or poor, and no matter who their parents or families are or what their parents or families believe or do. No child should be treated unfairly for any reason.



3
BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD
When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. All adults should do what is best for children. Governments should make sure children are protected and looked after by their parents, or by other people when this is needed. Governments should make sure that people and places responsible for looking after children are doing a good job.



4
MAKING RIGHTS REAL
Governments must do all they can to make sure that every child in their countries can enjoy all the rights in this Convention.



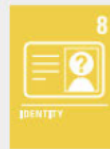
5
FAMILY GUIDANCE AS CHILDREN DEVELOP
Governments should let families and communities guide their children so that, as they grow up, they learn to use their rights in the best way. The more children grow, the less guidance they will need.



6
LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT
Every child has the right to be alive. Governments must make sure that children survive and develop in the best possible way.



7
NAME AND NATIONALITY
Children must be registered when they are born and given a name which is officially recognized by the government. Children must have a nationality (belong to a country). Whenever possible, children should know their parents and be looked after by them.



8
IDENTITY
Children have the right to their own identity – an official record of who they are which includes their name, nationality and family relations. No one should take this away from them, but if this happens, governments must help children to quickly get their identity back.



9
KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER
Children should not be separated from their parents unless they are not being properly looked after – for example, if a parent hurts or does not take care of a child. Children whose parents don't live together should stay in contact with both parents unless this might harm the child.



10
CONTACT WITH PARENTS ACROSS COUNTRIES
If a child lives in a different country than their parents, governments must let the child and parents travel so that they can stay in contact and be together.



11
PROTECTION FROM KIDNAPPING
Governments must stop children being taken out of the country when this is against the law – for example, being kidnapped by someone or held abroad by a parent when the other parent does not agree.



12
RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S VIEWS
Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously.



13
SHARING THOUGHTS FREELY
Children have the right to share freely with others what they learn, think and feel, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms other people.



14
FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND RELIGION
Children can choose their own thoughts, opinions and religion, but this should not stop other people from enjoying their rights. Parents can guide children so that as they grow up, they learn to properly use this right.



15
SETTING UP OR JOINING GROUPS
Children can join or set up groups or organisations, and they can meet with others, as long as this does not harm other people.



16
PROTECTION OF PRIVACY
Every child has the right to privacy. The law must protect children's privacy, family, home, communications and reputation (or good name) from any attack.



17
ACCESS TO INFORMATION
Children have the right to get information from the Internet, radio, television, newspapers, books and other sources. Adults should make sure the information they are getting is not harmful. Governments should encourage the media to share information from lots of different sources, in languages that all children can understand.



18
RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS
Parents are the main people responsible for bringing up a child. When the child does not have any parents, another adult will have this responsibility and they are called a "guardian". Parents and guardians should always consider what is best for that child. Governments should help them. Where a child has both parents, both of them should be responsible for bringing up the child.



19
PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE
Governments must protect children from violence, abuse and being neglected by anyone who looks after them.



20
CHILDREN WITHOUT FAMILIES
Every child who cannot be looked after by their own family has the right to be looked after properly by people who respect the child's religion, culture, language and other aspects of their life.



21
CHILDREN WHO ARE ADOPTED
When children are adopted, the most important thing is to do what is best for them. If a child cannot be properly looked after in their own country – for example by living with another family – then they might be adopted in another country.



22 Children who move from their home country to another country as refugees (because it was not safe for them to stay there) should get help and protection and have the same rights as children born in that country.



23 Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society. Governments should remove all obstacles for children with disabilities to become independent and to participate actively in the community.



24 Children have the right to the best health care possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a clean and safe environment to live in. All adults and children should have information about how to stay safe and healthy.



25 Every child who has been placed somewhere away from home - for their care, protection or health - should have their situation checked regularly to see if everything is going well and if this is still the best place for the child to be.



26 Governments should provide money or other support to help children from poor families.



27 Children have the right to food, clothing and a safe place to live so they can develop in the best possible way. The government should help families and children who cannot afford this.



28 Every child has the right to an education. Primary education should be free. Secondary and higher education should be available to every child. Children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. Discipline in schools should respect children's rights and never use violence.



29 Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment.



30 Children have the right to use their own language, culture and religion - even if these are not shared by most people in the country where they live.



31 Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.



32 Children have the right to be protected from doing work that is dangerous or bad for their education, health or development. If children work, they have the right to be safe and paid fairly.



33 Governments must protect children from taking, making, carrying or selling harmful drugs.



34 The government should protect children from sexual exploitation (being taken advantage of) and sexual abuse, including by people forcing children to have sex for money, or making sexual pictures or films of them.



35 Governments must make sure that children are not kidnapped or sold, or taken to other countries or places to be exploited (taken advantage of).



36 Children have the right to be protected from all other kinds of exploitation (being taken advantage of), even if these are not specifically mentioned in this Convention.



37 Children who are accused of breaking the law should not be killed, tortured, treated cruelly, put in prison forever, or put in prison with adults. Prison should always be the last choice and only for the shortest possible time. Children in prison should have legal help and be able to stay in contact with their family.



38 Children have the right to be protected during war. No child under 15 can join the army or take part in war.



39 Children have the right to get help if they have been hurt, neglected, treated badly or affected by war, so they can get back their health and dignity.



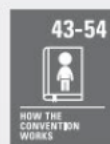
40 Children accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment. There should be lots of solutions to help these children become good members of their communities. Prison should only be the last choice.



41 If the laws of a country protect children's rights better than this Convention, then those laws should be used.



42 Governments should actively tell children and adults about this Convention so that everyone knows about children's rights.



43-54 These articles explain how governments, the United Nations - including the Committee on the Rights of Child and UNICEF - and other organisations work to make sure all children enjoy all their rights.



Olive Leaf Network

Appendix B: Olive Leaf Network: Capability Statement

Our Vision: Empowering Freedom, Fostering Healing The Olive Leaf Network envisions a future where all individuals, especially children, are safeguarded from the harms of coercively controlling groups, and where survivors are empowered to reclaim their autonomy, heal from past trauma, and design lives of independence and fulfillment. We believe in building a society that understands, prevents, and effectively responds to the insidious nature of cultic abuse.

Our Approach: Aid, Advocacy, and Awareness for Lasting Change The Olive Leaf Network is a collective of courageous individuals, deeply informed by lived experience, committed to supporting survivors of abuse within high-demand, coercively controlling groups in Australia. We recognize that these groups manifest in diverse forms, regardless of their stated purpose or legal registration. Our mission is centered around three interconnected pillars:

AID: Bridging Gaps, Building Foundations for Recovery

We understand that leaving a coercively controlling environment presents a unique constellation of challenges. Our capability in Aid lies in our ability to:

- **Facilitate Access to Essential Services:** We connect survivors with vital health, education, employment, and social services, acting as a crucial bridge to mainstream support systems often alien or inaccessible to those from closed communities.
- **Provide Trauma-Informed Support Pathways:** Recognizing the profound and often complex trauma experienced by survivors, particularly those born and raised in cults, we prioritize connections to trauma-informed therapeutic resources that understand the specific dynamics of coercive control and thought reform.
- **Empower Self-Designed Lives:** Through fostering connections to vocational training, educational opportunities, and life skills programs, we equip survivors with the tools and confidence to rebuild their lives, achieve greater independence, and forge a future defined by their own choices, not the group's agenda. This includes facilitating post-cult group work that emphasizes personal agency and self-discovery.



Olive Leaf Network

- **Support New Caregivers:** Develop and deliver specialized guidance and resources for new caregivers (e.g., extended family) of children leaving cults, helping them understand the unique needs of these children and easing their transition into a healthy, integrated life.

ADVOCACY: Amplifying Voices, Upholding Rights

Our strength in Advocacy stems from our lived experience and our unwavering commitment to justice and protection, especially for the most vulnerable. We are uniquely positioned to:

- **Champion Children's Rights:** We advocate tirelessly for the distinct rights and protections of children within cults, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). We highlight that children are victims, not recruits, and that their fundamental rights to safety, education, and healthy development must always supersede parental religious beliefs when those beliefs lead to harm.
- **Inform and Influence Legal Reform:** Drawing on personal experiences, we provide crucial insights to legal and social bodies, advocating for legislative changes, such as new coercive control laws, that address the specific tactics and systemic abuses prevalent in high-demand groups, including those that fall outside existing family violence frameworks. We also advocate for reforms to redress systems to ensure comprehensive, long-term support.
- **Connect Survivors to Justice Avenues:** We facilitate access to avenues for addressing harms, including reporting of crimes, pursuing civil restitution, and accessing redress schemes, providing vital support for survivors seeking accountability. This includes advocating for specific protections and support for child whistleblowers.
- **Address Systemic Barriers:** Advocate for solutions to issues like illegal immigration and lack of identifying documents often faced by those leaving cults, and work to mitigate the detrimental impact of shunning.

AWARENESS: Illuminating Harms, Educating for Prevention

Our commitment to Awareness is rooted in our proactive approach to prevention and early intervention, transforming lived experience into powerful educational tools. Our capabilities in this area include:



Olive Leaf Network

- **Educating on Recruitment and Protection:** We provide education on the subtle and overt methods of recruitment and coercion employed by these groups, specifically tailored for the protection of vulnerable individuals, with a strong emphasis on how children are placed into, rather than recruited into, these environments.
- **Fostering Understanding of Ongoing Behaviour:** We raise awareness about the pervasive and enduring impacts of coercive control and thought reform, drawing on models like Biderman's Chart of Coercion and Lifton's Eight Criteria (**Appendix B**). This education extends to recognizing the ongoing behavioural patterns and psychological effects survivors experience, fostering empathy and informed support.
- **Training Professionals and Communities:** We develop and deliver specialized training for therapists, educators, child protection services, law enforcement, and healthcare providers, equipping them with the knowledge and sensitivity to identify, respond to, and support individuals impacted by cultic abuse, ensuring children are not overlooked by protective services.
- **Public Education and Prevention:** We actively engage in public education campaigns, making broader society aware of the harms, deprivation of rights, and exploitation that occur within coercively controlling groups. This includes targeted outreach within communities themselves, particularly to parents and caregivers, to promote an understanding of children's distinct rights and foster a culture of child safety.

The Olive Leaf Network stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of collective action. By integrating lived experience with strategic aid, forceful advocacy, and comprehensive awareness initiatives, we are building a safer and more informed society for all.



Appendix C: Models for Coercion and Thought Reform

Albert Biderman's Chart of Coercion and Robert Jay Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform both offer powerful frameworks for understanding how individuals are systematically controlled and manipulated within high-demand environments. While Biderman's model originated from the context of prisoner-of-war interrogations and now finds extensive application in domestic violence, Lifton's work emerged from studies of "brainwashing" in Chinese Communist regimes and is widely used to analyse cultic influence. When combined, these models provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine the profound psychological abuse experienced by children in cults.

Here's how these two models intertwine to illuminate the plight of children in cults:

Biderman's Chart of Coercion and Children in Cults:

- **Isolation:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Depriving individuals of social support, controlling communication, and discrediting external relationships.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are often born into cults or brought in at a young age, meaning their entire social world is the cult. They are isolated from mainstream society, often denied access to external education (homeschooled within the cult's curriculum or attending cult-run schools), restricted from forming friendships outside the group, and taught to distrust "outsiders." Family members who leave the cult are typically shunned, further severing external ties and reinforcing the idea that the cult is their only true family.
- **Monopolization of Perception:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Fixing attention on the immediate predicament, controlling information, punishing independent thought.
 - **Children in Cults:** The cult dictates every aspect of a child's worldview. Information is tightly controlled, often limited to cult-approved texts, teachings, and media. Critical thinking is actively discouraged or punished. Children are taught that the cult leader or doctrine holds the ultimate truth, and any questioning or independent thought is framed as rebellious, disloyal, or even



Olive Leaf Network

evil, leading to severe consequences. Gaslighting about external realities or past events is common.

- **Induced Debilitation and Exhaustion:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Weakening resistance through physical and mental strain.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children in cults may experience chronic sleep deprivation due to long hours of cult activities, communal living arrangements, or constant fear. Nutritional deficiencies can be common, especially in cults with strict dietary rules or limited resources. They may be subjected to excessive labor, whether it's farming, construction, or child-rearing for younger siblings. The constant pressure to conform, fear of punishment, and lack of genuine rest contribute to profound physical and psychological exhaustion, making them highly susceptible to cultic influence.
- **Threats:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Creating anxiety and despair through outlining costs of non-compliance.
 - **Children in Cults:** Threats are pervasive. Children may be threatened with physical punishment, withdrawal of affection or food, public shaming, or even spiritual damnation for disobedience or questioning. They are often told that leaving the cult will result in eternal suffering, separation from their "true" family, or catastrophic events. Threats against their parents or other loved ones are also used to ensure compliance.
- **Occasional Indulgences:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Providing positive motivation for compliance, creating false hope.
 - **Children in Cults:** This often manifests as periods of praise or special attention for conformity, or promises of a utopian future within the cult. After intense periods of control or punishment, there might be moments of apparent kindness or leniency from leaders or parents, offering a deceptive sense of security and reinforcing the idea that the cult is fundamentally good, despite its abusive aspects. This creates a powerful "trauma bond" with the cult and its leaders.
- **Demonstrating "Omnipotence" (and "Omniscience"):**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Suggesting futility of resistance by showing complete control.



Olive Leaf Network

- **Children in Cults:** The cult leader or the cult's doctrine is presented as all-knowing and all-powerful, with control over every aspect of life, from destiny to daily routines. Children are taught that the leader can read their thoughts, that their actions are constantly observed (perhaps by a divine entity or the leader themselves), and that resistance is futile and will only lead to negative outcomes. This creates a sense of profound helplessness.
- **Degradation:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Destroying self-esteem, reducing individuals to "animal-level" concerns.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are often subjected to constant criticism, public humiliation, and shaming for any deviation from cult norms. Their individual identity is systematically stripped away, replaced by the collective cult identity. They may be forced to confess "sins" publicly, endure demeaning rituals, or be told they are inherently flawed or evil outside of the cult's salvation. This erodes their self-worth and autonomy.
- **Enforcing Trivial Demands:**
 - **Original/Domestic Violence Context:** Developing a habit of compliance through forced writing or enforcement of minute rules.
 - **Children in Cults:** Cults often impose an enormous number of arbitrary and often illogical rules governing everything from how a child dresses, speaks, or eats, to how they play or interact with others. Punishment for even minor infractions reinforces a state of hypervigilance and absolute obedience, teaching children to comply without question and further stifling their developing sense of self and independent thought.

Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform and Children in Cults:

- **Milieu Control:**
 - **Definition:** Control of communication and information within the environment, leading to isolation.
 - **Children in Cults:** This is the bedrock of cultic control over children. As mentioned under Biderman's "Isolation," children's access to outside information (books, TV, internet, non-cult members) is severely restricted or entirely absent. Their education is controlled, and their worldview is entirely shaped by the cult's teachings. They exist within a "thought-tight" environment.



Olive Leaf Network

- **Mystical Manipulation:**
 - **Definition:** Manipulation of experiences that appear spontaneous to demonstrate divine authority or special insight of the leader/group.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are taught that the cult leader has special divine connections, prophetic abilities, or unique insights. Any seemingly coincidental or positive event is attributed to the cult's "truth" or the leader's power, while negative events might be seen as tests of faith or consequences of disobedience. This instills a sense of awe and fear, making the leader seem infallible.
- **Demand for Purity:**
 - **Definition:** The world is viewed as black and white, and members are exhorted to conform to the group's ideology and strive for perfection.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are indoctrinated into a rigid "us vs. them" mentality. The cult is "good" and "pure," while the outside world is "evil" or "corrupt." Any deviation from the cult's strict moral code or ideology is framed as impure and met with guilt and shame. This creates an intense pressure to constantly monitor their own thoughts and actions to align with the cult's definition of purity.
- **Cult of Confession:**
 - **Definition:** Sins (as defined by the group) are to be confessed, often publicly, with no confidentiality.
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are often forced to confess their "sins," doubts, or perceived transgressions to parents, leaders, or even the entire group. Confessions in some cults are obtained during one on one interrogation, video recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions are preserved on record by the cult indefinitely. These confessions are then used by the cult to further control and manipulate them, highlighting their perceived flaws and reinforcing their dependence on the cult for "salvation" or "correction." This can be deeply shaming and traumatic. Recorded confessions in some cults are kept by the cult indefinitely, which the child can not consent to and which can cause later torment and distress for the violations of privacy which occurred at a vulnerable age and over which they have no power or ownership. The ownership and control of the private information remains with the cult whose information practices are not regulated. **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that no child shall be subjected to**



Olive Leaf Network

arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, or unlawful attacks on their honour and reputation and that the child has the right to protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

- **Sacred Science:**
 - **Definition:** The group's doctrine or ideology is considered the ultimate Truth, beyond all questioning or dispute.
 - **Children in Cults:** The cult's teachings are presented as absolute, undeniable truth, often framed as divine revelation or the sole path to enlightenment/salvation. Children are taught that there is no truth outside the cult, and questioning the "sacred science" is seen as heresy or a sign of weakness. This stifles critical thinking and intellectual development.
- **Loading the Language:**
 - **Definition:** The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways, often creating "thought-terminating clichés."
 - **Children in Cults:** Cults often develop their own unique jargon, slogans, and phrases that simplify complex ideas and shut down independent thought. Children grow up speaking and thinking in this "loaded language," which makes it difficult for them to articulate doubts or criticisms, or to even comprehend alternative viewpoints. It reinforces the cult's narrative and worldview.
- **Doctrine Over Person:**
 - **Definition:** Members' personal experiences are subordinate to the sacred science; any contrary experiences must be denied or reinterpreted to fit the group ideology.
 - **Children in Cults:** A child's personal feelings, experiences, and observations are deemed invalid if they contradict the cult's doctrine. If a child experiences abuse within the cult, they are often taught to reinterpret it as "discipline," a test of faith, or a consequence of their own "sins." Their subjective reality is denied in favour of the cult's imposed "truth."
- **Dispensing of Existence:**
 - **Definition:** The group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist, usually meaning those outside the group are "unworthy" or "unsaved."
 - **Children in Cults:** Children are taught that those outside the cult are "worldly," "lost," or condemned. This creates an existential fear of leaving the group, as it implies losing their "right to exist" in any meaningful or spiritual



Olive Leaf Network

sense, and being eternally separated from their community and possibly even a deity. This fosters intense loyalty and fear of excommunication.

Albert Biderman's Chart of Coercion: Original Source: Biderman, A. D. (1957). Communist Attempts to Elicit False Confessions From Air Force Prisoners of War. The Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine, 33(9), 616–625. Applications to Domestic Violence: Many scholarly articles, legal analyses, and domestic violence support organizations have adapted and applied Biderman's Chart to understand coercive control in abusive relationships. While there isn't one single "original" application to domestic violence, the concept is widely recognized. Examples of resources that discuss this application include: Hill, J. (2019, June 23). 'It's like you go to abuse school': how domestic violence always follows the same script. The Guardian. Stark, E. (2007). Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life. Oxford University Press. (While not exclusively about Biderman, Stark's work heavily influences the understanding of coercive control in domestic violence, which aligns with Biderman's principles).

Robert Jay Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform: Original Source: Lifton, R. J. (1961). Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China. W. W. Norton & Co.

Appendix D: Modern Slavery Act

The **Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Cth)** in Australia primarily focuses on requiring large businesses and other entities to report on the risks of modern slavery in their operations and supply chains. While it doesn't directly target cults as a specific entity, its definition of "modern slavery" is broad enough to potentially capture situations involving children in cults if certain exploitative elements are present.

Here's how the Act and other relevant Australian laws might apply to children in cults:

1. **Definition of Modern Slavery under the Act:** The Act defines "modern slavery" by referencing the Commonwealth Criminal Code and international law. It explicitly includes:



Olive Leaf Network

- **Human trafficking:** Moving people to exploit them. This could involve children being moved within or between cult compounds, or even across borders, for the purpose of exploitation.
 - **Slavery and slavery-like practices:** This is a broad category that can encompass:
 - **Forced labour:** Making people work under threats or coercion, where they are not free to leave. Children in cults might be compelled to perform excessive labour, farm work, or other duties without pay, under threat of punishment, shunning, or spiritual repercussions.
 - **Servitude:** Similar to forced labour, where a person's personal freedom is severely restricted and they are not free to stop working or leave their place of work. This aligns strongly with the isolation and control tactics used in cults.
 - **Debt bondage:** Making people work to pay off unfair or inflated debts. While less common for children, if cults impose "debts" on families that children are then forced to work off, this could apply.
 - **Forced marriage:** Marrying someone without their free and full consent. This is a significant concern for children, particularly girls, in some cultic environments.
 - **Deceptive recruiting for labour or services:** Deceiving individuals about the nature, duration, or conditions of work. This might apply if children are raised with false promises about their future roles within the cult that turn out to be exploitative.
 - **The worst forms of child labour:** This specifically includes situations where children are subjected to slavery or similar practices, or engaged in hazardous work. This is highly relevant to children in cults if they are forced into dangerous work or exploited in ways that are harmful to their physical or mental health.
-



Olive Leaf Network

Appendix E: Examples of Closed Communities

The groups on this list are included based on credible public information (including media investigations, court records, and survivor testimonies) indicating a high degree of psychological control, social isolation, exploitation, and/or other harmful, cult-like dynamics.

Definitely Closed Communities (High Degree of Physical, Social, and/or Informational Closure):

- AGAPE Ministries – Led by Rocco Leo in South Australia; an apocalyptic group that faced major police raids.
- A Girl Called Hope
- Bruderhof Communities – Inverell
- Children of God / The Family International
- Church of the Sons of the Holy Redeemer
- EMC (Elmore Ministry Centre) / Beth-Biri – A reclusive community in Victoria linked to allegations of control and abuse.
- Exclusive Brethren (now known as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church)
- FLDS – Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
- Gloriavale – NZ
- Ideal Human Environment – James Salerno
- Kenja Communication – Sydney-based group founded by Ken Dyers and Jan Hamilton, subject of long-standing cult allegations.
- Kwasizabantu
- Lighthouse – Toowoomba
- Magnificat Meal Movement – Debra Burslem (Toowoomba)
- Order of Saint Charbel – Little Pebble
- Pascha Centre – Christchurch, NZ
- QLD Jesus – AJ Miller
- Rajneesh/Osho (some phases/communities)
- Revival Centres International (RCI) / Geelong Revival Centre – A network of Pentecostal churches known for authoritarian leadership, extreme social and informational control, and shunning of non-members.
- Scientology (specifically the Sea Org and some facilities like the RPF)



Olive Leaf Network

- The Body – Tamut
- The Brotherhood – Victoria
- The Family – Anne Hamilton Byrne
- The Jesus Christians – Dave McKay
- The Saints – Brendan Luke Stevens
- Twelve Tribes
- Universal Medicine (UM) – Founded by Serge Benhayon; a NSW Supreme Court jury found it to be a "socially harmful cult."
- The Word of Life / Elijah House – Toowoomba-based group under John & Judy Bell with numerous reports from ex-members alleging extreme control.

Often Exhibit Characteristics of Closed Communities (Moderate to High Degree of Social/Informational Closure, sometimes Physical):

These groups may not always live in physically isolated communes but often exert significant control over members' social interactions, information intake, and internal culture, leading to effective social closure.

- Brahnmites – William Branham
- Chrisadelphians
- Christian City Church (C3 Church Global) – An Australian-founded Pentecostal network that has faced criticism regarding "heavy shepherding," financial pressure, and high-control leadership structures.
- Devine Truth – Brian Golightly (Yaweh)
- Free Reformed
- Hillsong Church – While a global megachurch, numerous reports, documentaries, and survivor accounts allege a high-demand culture, financial exploitation, and severe control within its leadership, college, and volunteer structures.
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Molokans
- Mormons – Mainstream (LDS Church)
- Moonies – Unification Church
- Potters House – Toowoomba (and other branches)



Olive Leaf Network

- Shincheonji – A South Korean group with an active and deceptive recruitment presence in Australia.
- Sydney Church of Christ / Melbourne Church of Christ / ICOC
- The Jesus People of North QLD
- Two by Twos – The Truth
- World Mission Society Church of God
- Zion Ministry (Zion Full Salvation Ministry) – A South Korean group with branches in Australia, facing allegations of extreme control and exploitation.



Olive Leaf Network

Statement of Dr. Jill Aebi-Mytton

To: The Legal and Social Issues Committee, Parliament of Victoria

Regarding: Inquiry into the Activities of Fringe Groups and Cults in Victoria

Date: July 15, 2025

Introduction

My name is Dr. Jill Aebi-Mytton. I am a Counselling Psychologist and the author of the doctoral thesis, "A Narrative Exploration of the Lived Experience of being Born, Raised in, and Leaving a Cultic Group: The Case of the Exclusive Brethren."¹ I am a Research Associate of the University of Salford.

I submit this statement to the Committee not only as a researcher in this field but also as someone who was born and raised within the Exclusive Brethren. My professional work is inextricably linked to my personal history; a journey to understand the profound and often damaging experiences of children who, like me, are born into high-demand, high-control groups.

My research aims to break what I describe in my thesis as an "oppressive silence" and to give voice to the lived realities of this unique and vulnerable population. It is my hope that my findings can provide this Committee with a clear, evidence-based framework for understanding the harms inflicted on children and for developing meaningful protections.

The Unique Vulnerability of Children

In my research, I focus on a critical distinction: unlike adults who may convert, children born into these groups have no choice and no external frame of reference. Their entire world, their sense of self, and their moral compass are constructed within the confines of the group's ideology. On leaving, usually as adults, this population in the cultic studies field has for a long time been termed Second Generation Adults (SGA). During my doctoral research I came to realise that many who are born in cultic groups like the Exclusive Brethren and Jehovahs' Witnesses are born to families with a long familial generational history of the group. These I termed Mult-Generational Adults (MGA).

My work reveals that while this population is critically under-researched, their stories show a consistent and disturbing pattern of psychological harm and developmental disruption.

As I recount in my thesis, my own first experience with a therapist was marked by my profound inability to answer the simple question, "So what do the Brethren believe?" The beliefs were so much a part of me that I had no perspective from which to describe them. This is the reality for these children: the group is not a belief system they adopt through choice; it is the very fabric of their being.



Key Areas of Harm to Children

My research has identified several key areas where children are systematically harmed within groups like the Exclusive Brethren.

1. Coercive Indoctrination and Psychological Control

The process children are subjected to is not one of education using benign, beneficial and choice respecting influence but one of "**coercive indoctrination**" that can violate human rights and is not choice-respecting. Its purpose is to undermine personal autonomy and enforce absolute compliance. In my analysis, I found that the methods used align directly with key features of Robert J. Lifton's model of thought reform:

- **Milieu Control:** A child's environment is completely managed. In my doctoral research with leavers of the Exclusive Brethren (also known as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church), participants described attending group-run schools with heavily censored books to exclude the stimulation of fiction literature. I was told by participants that they were taught "there's demons in novels" and that state schools were used by the devil. This starves the childhood imagination of the ability to fantasize about many of the possibilities open to the normal child growing up in today's society.

The curriculum is also reduced in exercises designed to sharpen critical thinking skills. Reduction of critical thinking skills is key in increasing a child's acceptance of the "group think" that comes with high control religions. In reducing critical thinking lessons a child's ability to question the beliefs thrust upon them is lessened.

Quote from leaver: We were told in various interviews with school personnel that lessons focused on critical thinking skills were removed from the curriculum completely. I don't believe all teaching re: critical thinking skills could be removed. CTS is integrated into the curriculum. From what the school staff told us- one school executives were removing lessons just focused on reinforcing CTS.

Now that the Exclusive Brethren have their own schools, the child is starved of the intellectual and cultural exposure necessary for healthy development in all developmental domains. Further education is limited with attendance at a university forbidden. The highest level of education or qualification they can study for, is an Advanced Diploma in Accounting or Business Administration. Only selected utilitarian subjects are allowed.

- **Fear and Guilt:** The doctrine is built on a foundation of fear. Children live with the terror of hell, damnation, and the "secret rapture," where they could be abandoned by their parents at any moment. As one of my participants, [REDACTED] recounted, she felt



Olive Leaf Network

she had to choose between staying and "going mad" or leaving and facing an eternity in hell—a place she was taught was not metaphorical, but tangible and real.

Confession is used to induce guilt – confession can be seen as a symbolic act of surrender. ██████ said "I just couldn't be good enough. This sense of self doubt and shame and guilt within me was just so deep and solid by the time I was 11 or 12 years old".

Reality is the exclusive possession of the group, the child ceases to struggle in their search for understanding and meaning. Autonomy is surrendered to the brethren and self-questioning ceases. Confession is used to induce guilt – confession can be seen as a symbolic act of surrender.

- **Suppression of Self:** Participants described the enforcement of "**trampling on the natural,**" which demands the repression of their own feelings, desires, and thoughts. ██████ another former member of the Exclusive Brethren, wrote powerfully that children are taught "their whole natural personality is corrupt" and that "self-respect is wrong." This psychological assault leads to a deeply ingrained sense of being flawed, worthless, and fundamentally wrong.

2. Social and Emotional Isolation

The doctrine of "separation from evil" in the brethren is, in practice, a tool of extreme social isolation. Similar doctrines in other high demand groups follow along similar lines.

- **Family as a Weapon:** The most brutal consequence I observed in my research but also on a personal level, is the destruction of the family unit. The practice of shunning means that if a child leaves, usually in the late teens or as young adults, or even questions the doctrine, they face being completely cut off from their parents, siblings, and their entire community. I have seen and experienced this devastation firsthand. This constant threat of total abandonment is the ultimate tool of control.
- **Developmental Deficits:** Social isolation and other forms of coercive control can lead to developmental deficits in all the domains: cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, moral, and identity development. Growing up without any contact with "worldlies" or those outside the group, also means children do not learn basic social skills. One person I spoke with described leaving as an "**amputation**"—a sudden, violent removal from their entire social body, leaving them unable to form new relationships or navigate the outside world.
Children raised in cultic groups are rarely educated about modern society's norms and expectations in matters such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and how to interact socially and/or intimately with members of the opposite sex. On leaving, many have little idea on how to find accommodation, how to apply and interviewed for a job, even how to open a bank account.

3. Documented Psychological Trauma



Olive Leaf Network

My research provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of serious and lasting psychological harm. In addition to the qualitative doctoral research, I have been involved in carrying out two quantitative studies.

- a) The first between 2010-2012 exploring the psychological health of leavers of the Exclusive Brethren.
- b) The second is a large-scale study investigating psychological harm in former members of cultic groups launched May 2024 at the University of Salford (led by researchers there). Note that unlike my doctoral thesis and previous quantitative studies, this study is not focussed only on the Exclusive Brethren but on leavers of any cultic group and, for comparison, also non-cultic groups. Data is still being collected, but preliminary analysis was presented at the ICSA Conference in Montreal July 2025.

Findings from both these studies showed that:

- former members suffer from **clinically significant higher levels of mental distress**—including anxiety, depression, and trauma symptoms—than the general population.
- In terms of interpersonal problems, former members also scored higher than the general population indicating considerable interpersonal difficulties.
- The group environment itself can be described as a source of "**disorganised attachment**." The caregivers and the group—the supposed sources of safety and love—are also the source of threat and fear. This paradox creates what is termed "fear without solution," leading to dissociation and complex trauma. The childhood memory of one of my participants ████████ of feeling like an unreal "robot... made of metal," is a chilling testament to this psychological fracturing.

3. Documented child sexual abuse

The incidence of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is being investigated in the University of Salford study. Please note that the results described below are preliminary and may change when the survey finally closes.

	Entire Global Sample n = 1162 Total %	Australian Sample n = 113
Percentage of sample reporting CSA.	54.3%	53.4%
Percentage of sample reporting CSA perpetrated by member of group	32.5%	41.7%

Preliminary results suggest that this population is experiencing higher than normal rates of child sexual abuse (CSA) than in the general population. In the sample as whole of 1162



Olive Leaf Network

former members of cultic groups, 54.3% reported child sexual abuse. Screening of this sample of 54.3% indicated that not all this CSA was perpetrated by other members of the group. However, 32.5% reported that this CSA was perpetrated by other member(s) of their group.

In the sample of 113 Australian former members from various cultic groups, 55 (53.4%) reported child sexual abuse with 43 (41.7%) of these occurring with other members of the same group. The main groups reporting CSA perpetrated by other members of their group in Australia are the Exclusive Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some groups such as the Children of God are currently underrepresented in the main sample.

	Australian Sample of Leavers reporting CSA	
	Frequency	Percentage
Alleged CSA occurred age of 10 or under	23	56.1%
Perpetrator was less than 5 years older	17	40.5%
Alleged CSA lasted 1 year or more	14	35%
Participant discussed with another at the time	8	19%
Participant reported the alleged CSA as an adult	6	14%
Incidence of legal or disciplinary action	4	9.3%

Staying with the Australian sample, 56.1% alleged the CSA occurred when they were 10 years old or less with 40.5% reporting that the perpetrator was less than 5 years older than them. Of the sample, 35% reported that the abuse lasted one year or more. This could indicate systemic abuse rather than isolated incidences. Only 19% at the time discussed or reported the alleged CSA with anyone else and only 14% reported it later as an adult. In only 4 cases (9.3%) was any legal or disciplinary action taken.

The Trauma of Leaving

When a person born into a group leaves, they step into what they have been taught is an evil, alien world. They have no previous identity to return to. They have lost everything: family, friends, home, and their entire worldview. Some former leavers have referred to this as a 'lifequake'. Leavers are often financially destitute and lack the most basic life skills. The experience is not only one of freedom, but also of profound loss and fear. As one participant (former member of the Exclusive Brethren) told a journalist, leaving is like dying: "They will remove all the traces that you once existed... It's as though you never existed".

In the current study of leavers drawn from a wide range of cultic groups and countries, of those born in and/or raised in where n = 938, preliminary data indicates that 49.3% meet the diagnosis for PTSD via self-administered tests and 59.5% meet the diagnosis for Complex PTSD. Selecting those born in Australia only (n = 113), the figures are 52.4% and 64.1% respectively.

Please note that the sample size is small so these results should be viewed with caution.



Olive Leaf Network

Further information on this research can be obtained from contacting Jill Aebi-Mytton on [REDACTED]

Recommendations

Based on the stark findings of the above reported research, I implore the Committee to consider the following actions:

1. **Acknowledge the Nature of the Harm:** It is crucial to officially recognise that the systematic practices within these high-control groups constitute a form of child abuse. The language of "religious freedom" must not be used to excuse psychological manipulation, educational neglect, and the destruction of family bonds.
2. **Specialised Support for Leavers:** I recommend the funding of specialised mental health services for former members. As my work shows, therapists require specific training to understand the complex issues of cultic abuse, including trauma, identity construction, and the unique grief of being denounced, ostracised and shunned by one's own family as well as the 'cult family'.
3. **Rigorous Educational Oversight:** I urge the Committee to ensure that all educational institutions, including those run by religious groups, are subject to stringent oversight. They must be required to provide a broad, critical, and empowering curriculum that prepares children for full participation in society, not just for a life of compliance within the group.
4. **Educate Frontline Professionals:** Public awareness initiatives are needed to educate teachers, social workers, doctors, police, legislators and family courts about the indicators of coercive control and psychological abuse, enabling them to recognise and support vulnerable children.

The children I have spoken with as adults, and the child I once was, were raised to be silent. This inquiry is a profound opportunity to amplify their voices and to ensure that the State of Victoria meets its obligation to protect every child within its borders, regardless of the beliefs of their parents. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jill Aebi-Mytton, MSc., CPsychol., DPsych.

1. Aebi-Mytton, J (2017) *A Narrative Exploration of the Lived Experience of being Born, Raised in, and Leaving a Cultic Group: The Case of the Exclusive Brethren*. Unpublished DPsych Thesis. Middlesex University & Metanoia Institute. <https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/88199>



References

Legislation and Conventions:

- **Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic).**
- **Family Law Act, 1975.**
- **Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic).**
- **Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Cth).**
- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).**

Academic and Research Works:

- **Biderman, A. D. (1957).** Communist Attempts to Elicit False Confessions From Air Force Prisoners of War. *The Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 33(9), 616–625.
- **Lifton, R. J. (1961).** *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China.* W. W. Norton & Co.
- **Spencer, J. (1975).** The mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 126(6), 556–559. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.126.6.556>
- **Stark, E. (2007).** *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life.* Oxford University Press.

Other Relevant Resources and Publications:

- **Report of the Inquiry into Scientology, 1965.**
- **U.S. Supreme Court, Prince vs Massachusetts (1944).**
- **Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Australia).**
- **Report of the Royal Commission Inquiry for Abuse in Care (NZ).**
- **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.** (Latest publication of "Child Protection Australia" report - specific year to be cited upon inclusion in appendix).
- **Hill, J. (2019, June 23).** 'It's like you go to abuse school': how domestic violence always follows the same script. *The Guardian*.



Olive Leaf Network

- **National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence.** (Specific publication details to be confirmed if a formal document exists, otherwise cited as an overarching policy approach).
- **Remini, Leah.** (Various episodes of *Leah Remini; Scientology and the Aftermath* as general context, for lived experience stories).
- **Let's Talk About Sects (Podcast).** (Specific episodes discussing Mirriam Francis and Maria Esguerra's experiences).