

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Monday 20 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Dr Ahona Guha.

The CHAIR: Good morning. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this hearing of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I am joined today by my fellow committee members: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; and Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran is online as well with us.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control and report back no later than 30 September 2026.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on are the behaviours of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours.

Today our committee is joined by Dr Ahona Guha. Dr Guha, thank you for making the time to speak to the committee today. We recognise the significance of you coming here today and acknowledge that sharing your experience and trauma may be emotional.

All evidence given today is being transcribed by Hansard. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript that you can review and then advise us if you are comfortable for the committee to decide for it to be made public with your name or with any identifying details removed or to keep it private.

Dr Guha, I now invite you to make a brief opening statement of around 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Ahona GUHA: Thank you. I have prepped for approximately 5 minutes because I was told that it was between maybe 5 to 10 minutes, and I have provided a brief written submission. I have tried to keep it reasonably succinct, so I am just going to be speaking to some clear points from that.

I suppose just in terms of introducing myself first, I am an endorsed clinical and forensic psychologist with a doctorate within the field of trauma. Within more professional work, I work on treating complex trauma but also assessing high-risk behaviours including violence, sexual violence and coercive control. I also work with those who have been radicalised by extreme ideologies.

I think the most important thing to note is that I speak to you today not just as a clinician but also as a cult survivor. Between the ages of 17 and approximately 23 I was a member of a global cult led by [REDACTED], with different spellings – which operated under a few key names because they kept changing their names. I am not sure if this cult has come before the inquiry; it has certainly flown underneath the radar, largely because of the threats of legal action. I think at peak they operated in multiple countries. Within Australia they had centres in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth, and they were opening fringe groups in satellite cities like Geelong. [REDACTED]

Like many who joined, I was a highly vulnerable young person. I was living in India at that time and found this group online. I should say that they also had a lot of global centres, including in the UK, the States and Greece, and they also ran courses online. At peak they probably taught about 100,000 people. I was drawn in by their free online courses, and these were courses on spirituality, with things like meditation and astral projection. As is common with most cults, the true nature of the cult in terms of some of the high-risk and high-control

behaviours only became real once you progressed to approximately the third or fourth course within the sequence, by which time you had usually spent about six months within the cult. Then I started to learn some of the key phrasings and some of their theories about the fact that it was only people who passed certain spiritual tests who chose to stay; the rest were all spiritual failures and left.

I think the key mechanisms of control were probably similar to what you have seen. I will say that this cult was not as coercive externally as a lot of the other cults that I have heard and read about and that members lived independently. They largely worked at normal jobs. Many people were involved with education, so there was not a commune and strict rules on having to reside within certain parameters that we saw, but there was still a lot of ideological control. The key belief was obviously that [REDACTED] was the only living god. He claimed that he was [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. The lower you fall, the higher you rise in their theology, so he claimed that he was the only living master and that all of the other religions and all of the other spiritual paths were all demonic in nature. A key part of this was that any betrayal of the living master led to eternal damnation in the afterlife.

There were very, very significant lifestyle restrictions, so there were strict rules on things like sex. Apart from non-orgasmic sexual practice, you were not allowed to have any sex, and that had to be with a certain partner who you were engaged to. Consumption of certain foods was absolutely prohibited – and alcohol as well as entertainment. As an example, you could not go to places like swimming pools and cinemas. There were no prohibitions around work and around study, but you were generally told that none of that mattered and that it was the spiritual work that counted; everything else was just entertainment that would take you away from the spiritual work. A lot of people, including me, dropped out of university for that. That led to significant loss of my own financial capacities, especially over that key period of my early 20s.

There was a lot of psychological manipulation, so control was really maintained through the repetition of key messages and discouragement of debate by claiming that if you did have doubts, those were your ‘egos’ – and I am using egos in scare quotes because that was the word that they used, but it essentially meant emotions and thoughts. How you had to manage that was by killing your egos through prayer. Any doubt was essentially either your egos or a demon, so it was a very effective way of silencing.

Sleep deprivation was a very key thing and also having to make donations, because this organisation was tax exempt. The leader and his then wife did not work. They claimed that that was because it was important for them to do this spiritual work and offer it without any payment. They only relied on donations by volunteers and also significant amounts of work. I think I have spoken a little bit to that in my statement, but most people worked full time, and then they were spending about 4 or 5 hours a day and also most of the weekend engaging in other voluntary work for this cult.

I think another key thing I noted was the weaponisation of the legal system, which is a point I want to raise especially. I left the cult in 2010, and then when I started speaking out against it in 2011, my former husband – because I was married within the cult, and the key reason our relationship broke up was because he continued to stay in it, and he still is to this day, even though it has effectively closed down – threatened to make public my own mental health history and my child abuse history, which I will say were key reasons that I joined the cult, to prove that I was unreliable and crazy. At that time it was my final year of undergraduate psychology study, and that was a very important threat for me because it felt like anyone who looked me up would not want me to go further within the psychology program. When I told him he could not do that and I refused to be silenced, he used an intervention order application to claim that I was infringing on his religious freedom and that I had made threats to his meditation business. This tactic was also used very, very successfully against multiple people, essentially meaning that all of us who were speaking about the cult publicly to try to warn other people within it were shut down.

The main impacts for me were obviously financial. I lost some very key educational as well as earning years, and then a lot more when I went back to retrain as a psychologist – though I am very, very grateful to have had Commonwealth support so I could do that. There was also an emotional and very profound psychological impact. I had significant symptoms of what I would probably consider complex post-traumatic stress disorder, including intrusions, hypervigilance, anxiety and depression. At one point I was highly suicidal, both due to leaving the cult and also the intimidation I faced when I spoke up and the lack of support around that. I have spent probably tens of thousands of dollars in therapy and have made an excellent recovery, but I have had to

look very hard to find a suitable psychologist who could work with me. My first experience was quite poor because I started seeing a clinical psychologist who was not affiliated with the cult – I did not know that she had any religious beliefs. She ended up being quite Pentecostal and offered to cast demons out of me. That was resolved through an AHPRA complaint in 2012, which was the same time I was going through this matter of intervention order based silencing. So there were a lot of stressors at that time.

I will not speak more about the impact on me, but I am happy to. I certainly know that my own trajectory is very, very similar to other people who have left this cult and others. In some ways I have probably made a better recovery than most, largely because of my capacity to leave the cult behind without being scared that I was actually going to hell. However, I still remain highly anxious about it, which is part of the reason why I have asked for this to be kept closed, because I do not know what the possible consequences are. Even though the cult is closed down, they are very trigger-happy with attacking people who speak up.

In terms of my recommendations for action, I have got a few, and I would like to very respectfully extend those. The first is to ensure that religious control and coercion are embedded within existing family violence and coercive control legislation. I think this is the key one for me because one of the other things to note is that when I realised the cult was a cult, I was actually on a temporary permanent residency visa, and to continue with my residency pathway – by that time I had spent about six years here and had established a life here – I needed to stay with my ex-husband until permanent residency came through. There were provisions to leave under domestic violence legislation, but I do not think that religious control at the time was fully recognised as part of this, so it left me trapped in what was a very, very difficult and life-endangering – from a psychological perspective – situation for another six months, even after I recognised for myself that it was a cult and wanted to escape. There was no support around that.

I suppose I would also recommend appropriate training for legal and court staff so that processes like intervention orders cannot be weaponised and used to silence people. I think this is a very complex question, and I certainly work with a lot of family violence victims who have experienced similar things, but the intervention order system is very open to abuse at the moment, as is the Family Court.

I also think it is important to perhaps consider specific legislation involving specific sanctions for those who do engage in religious coercion. At the moment, the person who ran the cult has decided to withdraw from public life. He said that was because the cult members did not support him adequately, which meant they betrayed the one living master, [REDACTED]

I think support and funding for people who leave cults is really important, so a one-stop shop model, probably website-based, would be adequate, similar to Orange Door although it probably will not have such wide uptake; providing additional funding for mental health support, maybe through the VOC/FAS system, because the current Medicare limit of 10 funded sessions is entirely inadequate; and possibly considering a one-off payment, mirroring those available to those escaping family violence, to support the material aspects of trying to rebuild a life. I think prevention and accountability are really important as well, so ensuring better scrutiny of organisations which claim tax-exempt status I think is key and possibly launching Victorian government-led information campaigns to try to disseminate accessible information about the warning signs, recruitment methods and the key characteristics of cults and leaders. I think it is especially important to maybe implement frameworks in spaces where there is high recruitment activity, like university campuses, to assess organisations that want to operate there. I think that is probably all I have to say. I just want to thank you for holding this inquiry, because it is not a subject that has come to attention before and I think it is one that certainly causes a lot of harm to many people.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that, Dr Guha. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us and trusting us with that. Just in terms of confidentiality, I do want to assure you that if you want to keep this transcript completely confidential and private to the committee, that is completely fine; we can do that. How the transcript is treated, whether it is made public or not, is completely up to you. So we will have a conversation about that following today's session.

You have given us a lot to think about. But one thing I would like to focus on today is, I guess, your professional lens and your thoughts and views as a professional in this space and how we can better support survivors of cults in Victoria. You have stated that the support systems for cult survivors are inadequate. Can

you speak to what specific services or referral pathways are missing in Victoria and what your recommendations in this space would be?

Ahona GUHA: Sure. Look, I suppose the key question to note is that there are no specific referral pathways. I think when I was looking for help, I went to the GP, who then referred me to a couple of psychologists, and I started seeing someone through my own workplace EAP. But very few psychologists that I have encountered have professional expertise with religious coercion control and trauma, so it is often left to cult survivors to be able to look for that support. A key question is that they may not have at the time recognised that they are in cults, and most cults, certainly mine, very, very strongly discourage support. So I think establishing a clear referral pathway is probably going to be really important just so that there is information about how to access supports, which does also, I think, require additional training maybe for key clinicians who work in this space. At the moment those of us who work with religious trauma are probably those who have had our own experiences of it or people who are interested in it and have gone off to seek additional training, but it is certainly not a part of any key psychological curricula, unlike, say, family and domestic violence and child abuse. There are significant similarities with the different types of trauma, but there are some specific peculiarities, like it is very hard to treat intrusions because the intrusions are quite diffuse and it is hard to work with the sense of hypervigilance because there can be so many triggers around this.

There are also the ongoing legal difficulties and financial difficulties many cult survivors experience. I think in terms of what the referral pathways might look like and what the service systems might look like, I would probably have to go away and think about that a little bit more because I do not want to give you an answer that is half baked.

Essentially, I think we need a clear referral system and pathway with information for people who have left these high-control groups. I would probably say low-cost services are going to be quite important as well, because most people who leave cults are trying to establish life again and do not have a lot of additional funding. I think I was very lucky in that I left the cult in 2010 when the cost of living was a lot lower. I certainly would not be able to afford the same psychological services now if I were on a part-time wage when I was studying.

The CHAIR: It would be great to hear your further thoughts around what a referral pathway looks like in practice – for example, whether it is a website or a phone line or a physical place.

Ahona GUHA: I think a website and a phone line would be appropriate. I was thinking it would not have to be a physical service, because I do think you would probably be capturing a low number of leavers, though it depends on the scale of the problem. Cults are so secretive that it is very hard to know exactly how many cult leavers there might be. I would probably say a website is a very appropriate place to start, just with a clear ‘If you’ve experienced cult-based abuse/coercive control within a religious organisation, these are the options open to you. This is a list of people who work in this space.’ Maybe even an online module, I think, could be quite helpful as a beginning port of call with some initial psychoeducation about ‘These are the things you’re probably experiencing and these are some beginning ways to start to deal with that before you’re able to find a professional.’ I think that could be a really nice low-cost option as well for the [Zoom dropout]. But I am happy to make a note of that and think of other possible pathways.

The CHAIR: That would be great, thank you. On that topic, you have also called for the creation of guidelines for providers working with those suspected to be in cults. Can you speak to some of the key elements that these guidelines could include and who should lead the development and implementation of the guidelines?

Ahona GUHA: Okay. I will have to put my public policy hat on. In terms of the guidelines, I think there is no clear understanding about what religious trauma involves – the different types of clinical disorders that might come about afterwards – because we are looking at things like anxiety, depression, possibly PTSD and maybe complex PTSD. I would say sexual difficulties are probably really common, as well as eating disorders and social anxiety disorder, as you are starting to make your way back into the world. I think it is going to be really important to draw together the broader clinical literature on the difficulties cult survivors experience, maybe an established a body of work around what it would look like to treat people and the specific things providers need to be aware of. I think part of that is probably going to be helpful in terms of thinking through what the referral pathways are for any material supports needed as well.

I think there are some really great guidelines for ADHD and for autism that have been recently put out by AADPA, so that might be a reasonable guideline, just in terms of looking through it as an example. In terms of implementation, I think that will be tricky, but I think that development and maybe hosting that on a key website would be quite appropriate – possibly thinking of a training module for certain providers who want to work in the space, partnering with key organisations like the APS as well as the college of GPs. Essentially, treating this in the way family violence has been treated is probably going to be a helpful mechanism.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Amazing. Thank you, Dr Guha. I will try and look at you in the eyes, if possible. From your clinical experience, what are the most significant long-term psychological effects of coercive control within cults?

Ahona GUHA: I think anxiety is probably the key feature that I notice. I think a really key thing to keep in mind is that every cult presents itself as being the only way – that is essentially one of the key defining features of cults – and most cults seem to operate under a threat-based model, which has some significant existential fears, so if you do the wrong things, you are going to be excommunicated and you are going to go to hell. So shaking that anxiety is a very significant task.

I think social anxiety is also very common, because a lot of people within cults are quite isolated, and if you have spent a long time within a cult – and especially for kids who have grown up in cults, you have not had any normal developmental experiences. So your capacity to do things like just engage with people in the world and maybe go to work or know how to engage with mainstream education is very stunted.

I think depression and grief are certainly key things I have noticed, because there is a lot of grief, and there was for me, with having realised that some very key developmental years I had sacrificed to this cult, and I got out relatively quickly for a cult. I have certainly known other people who were in the cult that I was in for about 15 years and spent their entire 20s and part of their early 30s there. Coming to terms with that has been very significant, and depression is a key feature of that. I think a sense of shame is really common as well, especially around the fact that people were gullible enough to be drawn into this. And some people leave with full-blown PTSD, especially with cults that are more coercive, that maybe have physical punishment or sexual violence as part of that. There was certainly sexual coercion within the cult that I was in, because of this sexual practice, but they were not the key criteria around (A) PTSD features, which means that things have to be violent or life-threatening, but a lot of cults will have that as part of their typical practices.

Those were the key features I noticed. I think less common may be eating disorders as a form of control. I think a sense of existential questioning can be very common, the sense of ‘What does the world mean?’ And there have certainly been a couple of suicides that I am aware of because of this question and a sense of not being able to grasp what reality looks like now.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I have got two more questions, but how does that compare to, I guess, the trauma of a victim-survivor of family violence?

Ahona GUHA: It is very, very similar. I think what I would probably note is just the existential arm that comes with a cult, because you believe that this person is essentially a god, which I think is the feature of most cults, and that if you do something wrong you are going to be cast out and you are maybe going to go to hell forever, which is not the case with family violence. But I think there is still a sense of questioning what you have been taught, coming to terms with maybe some of the more manipulative messages, which happens across both. So I would probably compare the two situations as being relatively similar but maybe with some additional existential questions for cult leavers.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You mentioned a few times the secretive behaviour of cults. In your view, are there any laws that are protecting and enabling that secretive behaviour that we could be looking at, like charity status?

Ahona GUHA: I think there is another one. I am sorry; I am just making notes on my phone as I go so I can think about this a little bit more after as well.

Annabelle CLEELAND: If you just say you want to take it on notice, then we have a wonderful team that can do that for you.

Ahona GUHA: That would be great. Thank you.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Wonderful. Thank you. I will share your time with my colleagues.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you so much for your time today, and your contribution via your submission, but also being here to contribute. I like looking at people when I am speaking to them; it is very difficult to do this. What role could public policy play in raising awareness of cultic abuse without stigmatising religious or spiritual communities more broadly?

Ahona GUHA: I think this is a very complex question, because essentially by its nature, in my view, any extreme belief which says that this is the only pathway leaves the possibility open to cultic-type behaviour. So I am glad that I am not the one sitting in your seats, because it feels like quite an impossible dilemma. I do think public policy has a very significant role to play in terms of disseminating knowledge, having some significant structures just around monitoring the work of religious organisations, so things like the tax-exempt status. There is some very important work I think that can be done there just around frameworks that organisations have to meet before they can apply for that, and maybe an accreditation process around that relatively regularly. It would certainly be quite labour intensive, but I do know that the cult I was in was able to use that very successfully to be able to put a lot of money into its coffers, which supported the leader.

Better accounting scrutiny I think would be really important, but also policy for spaces like universities, where like I have said, there is very high cult activity. At the moment my understanding is that that is entirely unregulated and people can just set up shop on, say, Melbourne Uni campus. I think that is quite a large safeguarding failure. I suppose I see the role of public policy as with knowledge-based dissemination, maybe monitoring as well and the creation of policy frameworks just around safeguarding of vulnerable people and support for when people leave, because all of what we have talked about in terms of referral pathways will fit very well under a broader policy framework around both the restriction of practice for cults but also management of people who leave cults. I do not think that that will clash with people's religious freedom, because essentially I was told that I was in a cult by my family, and I said, 'No, it's not.' People will still have to go through their pathways and probably their time in cults, but I think if there are some checks and balances and some information, it will probably reduce the number of people who are able to get swept up in these organisations.

Chris COUZENS: What are your thoughts about implementing something like mandatory reporting, for example?

Ahona GUHA: Mandatory reporting is a really tricky one. I certainly have to do a lot of that in my own role as a psychologist. It does mean that sometimes people do not come forward with their concerns because they are scared about a report being made. I think it would be very difficult to implement as well because it would be hard for, say, a psychologist to be able to differentiate between maybe a Pentecostal church versus something that is more sinister and cultic. I think there are a lot of holes that would probably appear in the process, but I think a framework around encouraging reporting might be a good place to start.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you. We have heard from others, and they have suggested dedicated research into coercive groups and their associated harms. Do you think this would be valuable?

Ahona GUHA: Absolutely. I think some of the problems that I have come up against when looking at my own experiences and even preparing for this and thinking through the key features of cult leaders is that there is no research about it because it is very rare for cult leaders to submit themselves to be examined. I do think you could do some good retrospective research drawing from focus groups as well as interviews with people who have left cults, which probably does give you enough information to be able to start to build a bit of a psychological profile. But there is very limited research on this and on the experiences and the clinical problems cult leaders face, so I think that is really vital.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am just going to ask a follow-up question on the research question, Dr Guha. This is one you can take on notice too if you want to go away and have a bit of a think. What would be helpful to know is what some of those research priorities might be from your perspective: for example, research into the experiences of people while they are in a cult or the experiences of people as they are leaving a cult, the short-term impacts and the longer term impacts. These are just a few of my ideas, but we would really appreciate to hear your ideas about what some of those research priorities are, because this is a very broad area. There has been very, very limited research into it, so a question is also where to start with that research.

Ahona GUHA: I might take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Please. That would be great. Thank you. I will hand over to Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you very much. Thank you for presenting today and your submission. Can you first of all just give me a bit of an idea about the numbers in the cult? Do you have any feel for that?

Ahona GUHA: I think within Australia there were probably about 150 teachers, trainees and students who were at the higher levels, and there were probably thousands of people attending the courses.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you.

Ahona GUHA: They ran about four or five courses on a rotating basis, and they say they trained up about 90,000 people over the course of the time that the cult ran.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you. So how was it that you were able to move between the courses online and into the cult per se? What happened there? You know, you are sitting at home doing online courses. Did you then go to places to meet people? You said you got married within the cult. I was wondering if you had events where everyone got together and did whatever.

Ahona GUHA: People who were at the centres met very often. They did a lot of work together, so they would do what they call 'postering', which is essentially going out to spread posters to share the teachings.

[REDACTED] It was once I came out here to be with him that I started to see the reality of what the cult was like. I think when you are online a lot can be hidden, but I could essentially live my own life without the strictures, without the monitoring, without all of the gender-based coercion which happened within the cult. When I came out here I saw the reality, started to see the sleep deprivation, the increasing paranoia, the financial pressure, and that was what helped me recognise that it was a cult.

Cindy McLEISH: How often did they have get-togethers?

Ahona GUHA: The advanced training teachers and teachers probably met about three times a week to run courses, because they ran courses on the different nights, and outside of that they had social get-togethers approximately, I would probably say, once every two or three weeks, and the advanced trainees were always coming together for additional practices, all-night practices, all-night prayer rituals and for most of the weekend as well. So all up people probably met, if you were at the advanced level, about four or five times a week.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. And just finally, you mentioned earlier that the cult, a couple of times actually, has effectively closed down. What does that mean? How did that happen?

Ahona GUHA: [REDACTED]



Cindy McLEISH: So the police were never involved?

Ahona GUHA: A few of us did make reports. I certainly went to speak to the police when my ex-husband was making threats to me, to kind of speak about me publicly, and they said, 'This is just a civil matter – nothing we can do, sorry.'

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you very much.

Ahona GUHA: So the police have not been involved, no.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cindy. I will hand over to Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much, Dr Guha. I very much appreciate the detail which you are providing and the intellectual rigour in which you are giving us information and an analysis of your situation. I am interested in just touching on something that you mentioned when you were introducing yourself about meeting your husband through the cult and how you joined online. You spoke about PR and the elements of bringing in perhaps religious control into one of the possible areas for allowing people to remain in Australia if they are in a relationship where there is religious control. Did you feel that there was any form of migration fraud going on and an encouragement of relationships to develop the sponsorship of individuals coming in from another country?

Ahona GUHA: No. You were very much encouraged to try to find a partner within the cult. A lot of people did find partners overseas, but that was simply because it was a smaller group and very hard to explain some of the practices that I have just talked about to people who were not in the cult. So that was reasonably common, but it was still a small group, and there was certainly not any type of fraud or coercion around the intimate relationship with the migration status.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. The other question I have is in regard to women. You mentioned that there were restrictions regarding intimacy, but I am wondering if there was anything specific that treated women differently to men and if you could elaborate on that, please.

Ahona GUHA: There were lots of themes around the role of women. Women were meant to support the partner. The partner was, you know, the head of the household, who was often the one teaching. Certainly there were lots and lots of female teachers. It was not overly coercive in that realm, but there was a general sense, especially when you look at some of the religious texts that the cult was built on, that women had a very different role. You were generally seen as being a support for your partner. I think that it was pretty common for men to make some of the key decisions, but I think it is also important to recognise the intersectionality of power. They were often men who were higher in the organisation, so it is hard to know whether that was a gender issue or whether it was because of the status of being in the cult. There were specific prohibitions on things – like, you could not get wet during your menstrual cycle, so that obviously applied just to women. It was quite a strongly coercive practice I think and just very, very painful for hygiene.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much. I really appreciate those answers. I do have to excuse myself shortly, but I will be speaking to my colleagues about it in more detail. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Rachel. John.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Dr Guha, for appearing today and for the work that you are doing, not only from your own experience but also as a practitioner as well. I want to touch on something that stretches across both your experience as a professional and your own personal experience. What sort of clinical work have you done since you have been practising in psychology? What sort of work do you do?

Ahona GUHA: Are you talking about my work as a patient or as a therapist?

John LISTER: As a therapist.

Ahona GUHA: Okay. I work within the public forensic mental health system, so I work [REDACTED] as a senior clinical and forensic psychologist. I do that two days a week now, and I also run my own private practice doing a lot of work in the trauma field but also your standard anxiety and mood disorders, as well as other forms of things.

John LISTER: From that experience, from working particularly in the forensic field as well, who are the vulnerable groups who may be caught up in this coercive group behaviour? What do they look like? Who are they? Where are they coming from? Yes, I know it is probably a lot.

Ahona GUHA: Look, no, I think it is a very, very good question. I think people who join cults are probably very similar to people who get radicalised online. I certainly see some very key demographic features, but again, this has not been studied. So I would say younger people, those who have any pre-existing mental health issues or possibly trauma histories, those who are isolated, those who feel disenfranchised and those who do not have access to the things that we normally take for granted in terms of material success. I would probably say people who are lonely as well, so international students might be a specific cohort, and those with poor science and health literacy.

John LISTER: Thank you. That was all.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Dr Guha. I just have one question: how can Victorian government policy better identify and address harm arising from high-control or coercive groups? I know you have discussed a bit about that, but if there was anything else you wanted to touch on.

Ahona GUHA: I think my answers largely probably sum up what I have proposed to date. I think essentially monitoring the tax-exempt status is going to be really important and having a well-articulated policy framework, just around management but also support for cult leavers. I do think that there is very important safeguarding work to be done in this space, and that is something that has been neglected even though it is such a vulnerable group of people.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Dr Guha. Just a quick follow-up on that: if there was one thing that you believe the Victorian government could do in its jurisdiction, what would you recommend? Obviously there will be a range of recommendations, but if there was one thing, the most powerful thing, the Victorian government could do within its control based on the recommendations this committee may make, what do you believe that thing should be?

Ahona GUHA: A one-stop website to share information with people about cults and for people who are maybe thinking that they might be in one or who want to leave but do not have support.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you very much, doctor. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine, you had another question.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. Look, just a quick question. I do not know how long it is going to take you to answer, but I was just interested to hear about – you mentioned all the courses that the cult was running – what was actually being taught? What were the teachers telling participants?

Ahona GUHA: Actually, look, it was very basic information, just about meditation and self-knowledge, so a sense of looking at yourself, starting to understand your own emotions and thoughts is key, so reasonably innocuous practices that were probably lifted straight from, say, Buddhism. There was also astral projection, which was the practice which hooked me in. So for a young vulnerable woman who was very controlled by her own family, the thought of being able to be free and leave my body was very exciting. I think that is probably one of those things that drew a lot of New-Age seekers into the cult. Those were the two introductory courses, and they were the most innocuous. And then you did the third course, which was essentially where they laid out their entire theology, where all of the things I have spoken about in terms of [REDACTED] being the only living god, having a certain number of life cycles, talking about having to die for your emotions, this sexual practice, all of this was truly stepped out. Then you did further courses to work with some of these topics

further, and then you trained to become a teacher yourself, which was the final course. So it was a well-curated pipeline.

Chris COUZENS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. I have just got another couple of things to touch base on. So you met your husband within the cult. Are there children now being born into the cult and living these practices? What is that like for a kid?

Ahona GUHA: Yes, there were a few people who had children within the cult, people who have since left and whose children seem to be thriving and doing relatively well. I have not actually spoken to any of these kids. I definitely know that there were a fair few divorces within the cult by people who found the cult after the marriage and tried to indoctrinate their own children. I know of a few Family Court battles. As far as I know, because of the more diffuse nature of the cult and that you were not living together, there was usually a protective parent who was often able to end the marriage and leave. It was very difficult in terms of Family Court, because any mention of coercive control within the religious space was shut down and very strongly protested against. That is probably all I have to say around that. I do not think there were too many children, because you are very strongly discouraged to procreate.

Cindy McLEISH: Thanks. I know you said it has effectively shut down and he might be starting something else up. Can I still do an online course, those ones that you first found?

Ahona GUHA: No. But if you want any of the course files, I can send them all to you.

Cindy McLEISH: I was sort of more seeing whether or not somebody could stumble on those and still end up in the same –

Ahona GUHA: No. Look, they do have books available at the moment where they actually step through this ideology, but they seem to have morphed into a religion now. It is called [REDACTED] or something like that. I think it has expanded, so you could maybe find certain parts of this, but I do not think that you could find the full information.

Cindy McLEISH: And do you know where the money went?

Ahona GUHA: No. As far as I know, when the cult folded a significant proportion of money was still in the bank accounts. Obviously having left and being a person – you did not talk to someone who was influenced by the demons. I was not told where the money went.

Cindy McLEISH: Was there an expectation that you gave 5 per cent or 15 per cent of your wage or anything that you earned?

Ahona GUHA: There were constant donation drives, and there was an expectation for people who were higher up in the organisation to be putting in a certain percentage. I was never coerced into that, but I had friends who were sat down with their bank account details, and they said, ‘Where is your weekly donation?’ There were always donation drives. They tried to buy property for retreat projects, and I think one of those was sold to the cult leader, who then sold it back to the organisation. There were a lot of fraud allegations around all of that, and yes, there was certainly some financial coercion.

Cindy McLEISH: Do you think that they own any assets now?

Ahona GUHA: Probably. I would not be surprised if they do. I think a title search could be quite interesting. I know there was a property that they owned at [REDACTED], in rural [REDACTED] and that was one of the key ones there was a stoush about when people left and spoke up about the misappropriation of funds. So I would not be surprised. I do not know where any of that has gone.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks. All right – just a couple more from me if I may. If you are comfortable, could you explain whether the coercive behaviour or restrictions that were used by this group had a disproportionate impact on women?

Ahona GUHA: Look, I think it probably impacted people reasonably equally. I have spoken to both men and women who have left. In terms of women, those who had children before joining the cult probably found that incredibly hard, and they often tended to leave, which might have been protective for them, because they were not able to meet their cult obligations because of caregiving responsibilities. Otherwise, I think there was quite an even gender split and we were all equally distressed.

The CHAIR: You have spoken about your experience of seeking help from a counsellor after you left the cult. How can therapists avoid inadvertently reinforcing trauma as occurred in your own case? Do you have any recommendations around that?

Ahona GUHA: I think that is a very complex question, because the psychologist I saw made some very deliberate choices around the way she practised. It was very inappropriate. She was sanctioned by AHPRA for this type of practice. There was not retraumatisation because she did not know; I think it was retraumatisation because she chose to work within this religious framework, despite knowing that it was not accepted clinical psychological practice. I think any good psychologist who works within a trauma-informed framework and has some training in trauma will be able to work with cult leavers successfully. That is not where I see the key risk of harm, though I do think that people who leave cults are quite vulnerable and, like me, might fall into the rooms of the wrong people who maybe promise help or who are very confident, because they are looking for someone to attach to to help them get through this destroyed attachment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Guha, before we finish today, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Ahona GUHA: I think not. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Dr Guha, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for sharing your experience. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence, and we also acknowledge the significance of the evidence that you have provided today.

You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, together with the questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to any questions on notice may be published on the committee's website, but as I said, we will have that conversation with you about whether you are comfortable with this being made public, made public with your name withheld or kept confidential and private. Once again, thank you so much for your time today. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witness withdrew.