

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Suzuko Hirschmann - Kidnapped, Detained, Deprogrammed in Japan

Knut Holdhus  
June 18, 2024



Suzuko Hirschmann in June 2024

### Japanese woman recounts frightening ordeal her sister and others went through being kidnapped, forcibly detained, and deprogrammed

A longer version of a testimony by Suzuko Hirschmann, member of the [Family Federation](#) (FFWPU), on 13th June, the second day of the 2024 CESNUR Conference, during session 8 (plenary, chaired by Dr. Eileen Barker), which had the theme "The Unification Church and Japan: What Is Exactly Happening?" The longer version was kindly made available for [News and Insights](#) by Suzuko Hirschmann.

The 2024 CESNUR Conference was held from 12th to 15th June at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne in Bordeaux, France with the theme: "[The Contribution of Minority Religions to Society](#)". The conference was co-organized by: [Center for Studies on New Religions](#) (CESNUR), Université Bordeaux Montaigne - CLIMAS (Cultures et littératures des mondes Anglophones), and [International Society for the Study of New Religions](#) (ISSNR).



*More victims: Four of the 4,300 Japanese members of the [Family Federation](#) who became victims of kidnapping, forcible detention and attempted deprogramming (faith-breaking). Here at a conference in Tokyo 10th September 2023. From left: [Toru Goto](#), [Hirohisa Koide](#) (medical doctor), Ms. S, Hiromi Nakajima*

My name is Suzuko Hirschmann. I was born and raised in Japan and have been living in Austria for 40 years. I would like to thank you for allowing me to speak at the conference about the violent kidnapping and deprogramming of my sister because of her religious beliefs. Her story is one of thousands in Japan.

I stand here to raise awareness of the reality of [Unification Church](#) members who are victims of criminal deprogramming tactics. This reality is mostly unknown, even in Japan where it is still a common practice. Deprogramming is a violent tactic used to break families apart and force people to abandon their faith against their will.

I am deeply distressed by the extraordinary persecution of the [Unification Church](#) in Japan by the media and the government. Despite volunteer work in society and sending countless missionaries around the world to promote educational opportunities in developing countries, persecution has dramatically increased since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The [Unification Church](#) has committed no crimes. Since its compliance in 2009, there have been almost no new civil trials against the [Unification Church](#) in Japan. This leads me to wonder why the Japanese government is trying to dissolve the [Unification Church](#). And why have more than [4,300 cases](#) of kidnapping and deprogramming not been talked about until now?

There are two main reasons for this. The families of the victims are cooperating with deprogramming experts. It would have meant for the victims to sue their own parents in court, which ultimately push them to keep silent. Second, the media are intentionally not reporting about these crimes.



Map of Japan with Gifu prefecture highlighted

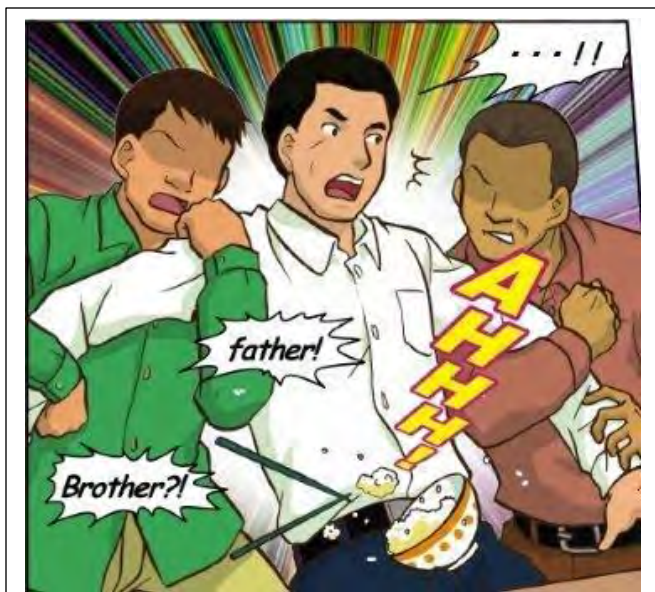
I now would like to tell you the story about the violent kidnapping of my elder sister. I was born in Gifu, Japan, the fourth of five children. We grew up in the Buddhist tradition. My second eldest sister met the [Unification Church](#) and found answers in its teachings to her questions about life. She then introduced it to the rest of our family.

In the beginning, my father was supportive, but through the influence of the media and contacts with an anti-[Unification Church](#) group, he began to oppose the [church](#). As a high school student, I did not want to cause my parents any grief, so I decided not to visit the [Unification Church](#). In 1974, because of my studies, I joined my sister and my brother who lived in an apartment in Tokyo. They were secretly visiting a CARP [the student movement of the [Family Federation](#)] center where college-age

[Unificationist](#) youth met.

One day, I read a book about the true story of a Christian believer who jumped under a train on a mountain pass to save the lives of dozens of passengers. When I finished reading, I could not stop crying. I thought, "Until now, I have lived my life thinking only about myself. From now on I want to live for others."

The story took place in the beginning of the twentieth century, when Christians in Japan were still being persecuted. The protagonist was disowned by his Buddhist father. The story had deep parallels to my sister's situation with my family. I thought I should not oppose my sister without first listening to her beliefs. Long story short: I ended up joining CARP, too.



From another kidnapping of a [Family Federation](#) member in Japan, [Toru Goto](#) being abducted

In 1976 something shocking happened. My two eldest sisters were living back at my parents' house and commuting to work every day. One day, I received a phone call from my third eldest sister saying, "It seems that our sister has been kidnapped and confined somewhere."

My second eldest sister told us later what had happened. While she was sleeping at home, four unknown men entered her room, bound her hands and feet with duct tape, covered her mouth with anesthetic cloth, and took her by car to a confinement house in Tokyo, which was called Association of New Birth (新生会). The four unknown men communicated with each other in Korean, not Japanese.

My brother-in-law (the husband of my eldest sister), who had no contact with the [Unification Church](#), was asked by my father to accompany

the men to the deprogramming (faith-breaking) house. He observed the situation and began to distrust their violent methods. He secretly advised my kidnapped sister, "You should pretend to have lost your faith and leave this house as soon as possible."

While she was in the deprogramming house, my sister witnessed another [Unification Church](#) member being taken to a different flat, where the deprogrammer (faith-breaker), Takashi Maruyama (丸山隆), was living. It was later discovered that this woman had been repeatedly raped by him for more than two months.

After her escape from confinement, this woman filed criminal complaints but later dropped the case out of fear and shame. Her father committed suicide out of agony for causing this tragedy. Although my sister

was held captive only for days, she could not sleep and prayed every night, because she didn't know what would happen to her. About 20 kidnapped members were held in this deprogramming house. Every day, new people were brought there.



*Takashi Maruyama*

Maruyama was already known within the [Unification Church](#), so I went to the nearest police station and explained the situation to the police officers, giving them the address and phone number of the deprogramming house. The police immediately called Maruyama warning him, "Bring this woman (my sister) to the police station right now, otherwise, we will come to your house".

On the fourth day, my sister was rescued from the deprogramming house, when the police conducted a detailed investigation, they discovered that my father had commissioned the kidnapping of his own daughter. The police officers changed their attitude and told us, "You have to follow your parents." Sensing the danger, my sister and I immediately left the police station and lived in Tokyo for two years without giving our parents our address.

Even after being rescued from the deprogramming house, my sister suffered for many years in fear. It took her a long time to trust our parents again. She would only meet with our parents if her husband or her parents-in-law were there with her.

The violent kidnapping and forced deprogramming were criminal, but as mentioned before, if a victim denounces these criminal acts, they must denounce their own parents in court as well. It is a very difficult decision. Ten years later my father fortunately realized through the teachings of another religion that children's lives are decided by themselves, not by their parents, and that violent methods would destroy trust between parents and children. He in the end recognized our beliefs and supported us.

Because many [Unification Church](#) victims of kidnapping had no support from their relatives, like my sister, they were confined for months or even years. There are two ways to be freed from confinement: escaping by risking your life or forcing yourself to lose faith and denounce the [Unification Church](#) in court. Imagine yourself having to make that choice.

I hope that you can get a clearer picture of the desperate situation regarding the kidnapping and deprogramming of [Unification Church](#) members in Japan.

Thank you for your attention.

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## Japan: 4300 Abductions And Forcible Detentions

February 1, 2023 • Knut Holdhus

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### Unification Church in Japan suffered 4300 abductions and forcible detentions for faith-breaking purposes

Willy Fautré, CEO and director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, presented grim facts about Japan's bad human rights and religious freedom records. The Belgian human rights expert told the audience at the UN Office in Geneva 31<sup>st</sup> January, of 4300 abductions and forcible detentions, how 4 300 members of the Unification Church, over a period of 45

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4,500 members of the [Unification Church](#), over a period of 40 years, had been forcibly abducted and held in confinement for faith-breaking purposes.

Fautré also explained about the more than 400 violent attacks on churches and members of the [Unification Church / Family Federation](#) during the two months after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July. The Japanese authorities are actually worsening the hate speech situation by seeking the removal of the movement's Religious Corporation Status, forbidding church members to contact members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the national parliament and not mentioning any of the good works of the [Family Federation](#) and its members.



Willy Fautré

Here is Willy Fautré's address:

## The right to retain one's religious beliefs and the [Unification Church in Japan](#)

*An address by Willy Fautré, CEO and Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, at an information meeting on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in Japan at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UPR Working Group at the UN Office in Geneva (Palais des Nations), Switzerland 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023.*

"No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice," says Art. 18.2 of the ICCPR [International Convention on Civil and Political Rights].

Freedom of religion or belief includes the right to have, not to have, to change but also to retain one's religious beliefs.

This last aspect of the individual right to keep one's religious or non-religious beliefs despite forceful attempts to change this choice, whether the individual belonging is new or not, is usually underreported and is therefore insufficiently defended.

Several actors can threaten this right:

- a state exclusively supporting and promoting one official religion or non-religious worldview such as atheism
- state and non-state actors creating a hierarchy of religious and belief groups with unequal rights, especially in the lowest category including non-traditional or non-historical movements usually of foreign origin and recently established in a country
- families and the broader social environment of converts
- extremist groups or mobs incited by political parties or nationalist movements

The objectives of these actors are

- either to create unity and uniformity in the national population
- or to preserve the existing identity of a social or ethnic group
- or to protect the existing cohesion of a family
- or to forcefully deconvert individuals or groups who changed their religion.

A few concrete examples.

In China, the official ideology is atheism and violent policies, including in school education, have been put in place to make the current and future generations of Buddhist, Muslim and Christian Chinese citizens more and more atheist.

Other states having Islam as the official religion imprison converts to another religion and sentence them to prison terms if they do not recant their new religion.

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and Christianity have increased since radical Hindu groups launched a campaign in 2020 to stop the mass conversion wave of those populations and to forcefully deconvert them.

Most tribals do not identify as Hindus because they have diverse religious practices and many worship nature, but Hindu extremists believe that all Indians should be Hindus and that the country should be rid of foreign religions. They use extensive violence to achieve this goal, particularly targeting Christians from a Hindu background accused of following a 'foreign faith.'

### Hate speech against the Unification Church

In Japan, thousands of converts to the Unification Church and about 200 to the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses have during four decades been victims of abduction and attempts of forced deconversion in long-term confinement conditions: weeks, months and sometimes years. The Japanese media outlets always kept



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silent about these massive violations of human rights but were very prolific in their politically motivated campaigns stigmatizing the Unification Church as a dangerous cult. This is again the case with the current intense campaign against the Unification Church in the Shinzo Abe case.

Hate speech is at the heart of the current stigmatization of the Unification Church by the media.

In the period from Abe's assassination to the end of August 2022, the Unification Church in Japan documented more than 400 hate incidents against its churches, organizations, and individual members. But they continue, and the number is probably higher now, since not all local incidents are necessarily reported to the headquarters. The human rights magazine Bitter Winter investigated the issue and revealed it is mainly a group of lawyers and leftist media outlets sharing the Communist ideology that is behind this campaign of hate speech.

The Japanese government, of course, did not instigate the hate speech but it has gone along with it and acted in so many ways to exacerbate it and to take what can only be described as "hate-filled actions", including seeking the removal of its Religious Corporation Status and forbidding its members to associate with LDP Diet members, etc.



Akiko Hozan. Photo: WFWP

One concrete consequence of this hate speech was the Foreign Ministry's cancellation of an award given many years ago to Mrs. Hozan [Akiko Hozan]. This Japanese lady, a member of the Church was working for The Women's Federation for World Peace-Japan in

Mozambique. Under that organization's auspices, she set up a school for hundreds of local children who would not otherwise have had access to any schooling. This fostered considerable goodwill towards Japan and the Ambassador there gave her the award.

The confiscation of that award is the kind of mean, petty, and spiteful action that the Japanese government has stooped to while not denying either the great benefit of the project to the local children or to Japan's reputation in Africa. But trying to artificially blacken the name and reputation of a group, one must also deny or suppress any evidence that they may have

must also deny or suppress any evidence that they may have done good for people in Japan and around the world. This is part of the stigmatization campaign against the **Unification Church**.

On the other hand, when thousands of people converted to the **Unification Church** were victims of family abduction, forced confinement for long periods and violent attempts to deconvert them in such conditions, the media, the Japanese government and relevant state institutions kept silent and passive, turning a deaf ear to their complaints and privileging impunity.

### **The deconversion campaign of Unification Church members**

In 2011, I spent two weeks in Tokyo to meet and interview 20 members of the **Unification Church** and a few Jehovah's Witnesses who had been victims of parental abduction and attempted forceful deconversion in confinement conditions.

On another fact-finding mission, I also met a dozen members of the Japanese Diet, lawyers and journalists and I discussed with the authorities of a police station confronted with the abduction of a member of the **Unification Church**.

Parental abductions and forced deconversion attempts under confinement conditions concerned 4300 adult members of the **Unification Church**. They were perpetrated by the family, usually one or both parents, at the instigation of and with the help of Protestant pastors, from the mid-1960s to about 2010.

During that long period, both the police and the judiciary failed to follow up with these massive violations of human rights and to put an end to them. All cases of criminal complaints filed by the victims were dismissed, 24 in total. All civil cases were dismissed, 5 in total.

It is already difficult for the victims to file a complaint against a close family member, as in all the cases of domestic violence. An overwhelming majority of them had psychologically not managed to take this decisive non-return step against a father or a mother. Last but not least, the passivity of the police and the judiciary finally discouraged other victims to try to go to court. Moreover, the successive Japanese governments kept silent and passive, the Japanese media kept silent, the Japanese human rights NGOs kept silent and inactive. Consequently, the international community was not aware of this situation in Japan.

Such a situation is hardly understandable for a Westerner. That is why it is important to stress two points related to the Japanese culture.

First, parents keep their moral authority over their children, whether they are adult, more intelligent or in a superior social position, and they expect them to be obedient in return for giving them access to education or other facilities.

Second, there are many parental abductions in the context of marital separation or divorces in Japan, and ... there is no law criminalizing such acts. They are considered private family matters and so are family abductions for deconverting one of their members. Bringing back a lost sheep to the flock.

The US Department of State was the first to mention this sort of forced change of religion in its annual report in the first decade of this century. This was the very beginning of a process which led to a solution of the **Unification Church** problem. Instrumental was the famous case of Toru Goto, who was kidnapped and confined for 12 years and 5 months.

### **The case of Toru Goto**

In 1986, Toru Goto, then twenty-three years old, became a member of the **Unification Church**.

In 1987, the first attempt of abduction and confinement by his father and other relatives was unsuccessful, as he managed to escape about a month later. In order to avoid another similar experience, he cut off all the links with his family.

Eight years later, in



*Toru Goto after more than 12 years of forcible confinement.*

September 1995, Mr. Goto's parents, his elder brother and his sister-in-law kidnapped him from their home in Hoya City (currently West Tokyo City). They carried out his abduction under the instructions of a deprogrammer, Takashi Miyamura, and an Evangelical minister, Pastor Yasutomo Matsunaga, as they called themselves. Mr. Goto was then confined in an apartment in Niigata City for approximately one year and nine

months. During this period, Pastor Matsunaga regularly came to this apartment to urge him to leave the [Church](#).

Between 1997 and 2007, Mr. Goto was confined in several apartments in Tokyo where a so-called exit counselor regularly visited him together with former members of the [Unification Church](#) (UC) in order to forcibly convince him to leave the [Church](#).

During his confinement, Mr. Goto attempted to escape several times but every time he was caught and held by his relatives. He also held three hunger strikes of three to four weeks. To no avail.

Around November 2007, it seemed as though the family members had started arguing about whether to continue his confinement or not, due to the financial burdens it imposed.

On 10 February 2008, at around 4:00 PM, his brother, sister-in-law, mother, and sister suddenly ordered him to leave the apartment. He was then emaciated and suffering from a serious state of starvation. Dressed in his lounge wear, he was thrown down on the floor of the concrete corridor in front of the entrance without any belongings or identification documents.

On his way to the [Unification Church](#) headquarters, he came across a member of his church who gave him money so that he could take a taxi to reach a safe haven. That evening, he was diagnosed with malnutrition and admitted to a hospital. For a while, he could barely stand on his feet.

### **The legal battle of Toru Goto**

After his release in 2008, Toru Goto filed complaints against his family members, his kidnappers and unwelcome exit counselors. His criminal complaint was rejected but six years later, he won a civil lawsuit against them at the Tokyo High Court.

All the accused but one had to pay financial compensation for damages:

- 150,000 EUR for the brother and sister-in-law
- 75,000 EUR for the exit counselor Takashi Miyamura
- 30,000 EUR for the Evangelical Pastor Yasumoto.

There was no media coverage of this landmark victory in Japan but this decision had a deterrent effect on the actors making financial and spiritual benefits from the exploitation of parents' concerns and fears intensified by media hype about so-called heretical movements labeled 'dangerous cults'.

After Toru Goto's victory in court, the sole lawsuit accepted by the judiciary in 50 years in Japan, the Protestant pastors and other actors abusing the psychological weakness of vulnerable



families quickly put an end to their lucrative business. According to some testimonies I collected from the victims, their parents paid between 40,000 EUR and 100,000 EUR for a so-called 'rescue operation'."

Featured image above: Willy Fautré at the UN Office in Geneva 31st Jan. 2023. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission.

More about 4300 abductions: [Father Tricked by Deprogrammers to Kidnap Son](#)

Mr. Willy Fautré is CEO and Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers. He is a member of the International Consortium on Law and Religious Studies. He was chargé de mission at the Cabinet of the Belgian Ministry of Education and at the Belgian Parliament.

He started defending religious freedom of Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox in communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War in the mid-70s.

In December 1988, he founded Human Rights Without Frontiers. He is a lecturer in the field of human rights and religious freedom. He develops advocacy in international institutions, UN, OSCE, EU. He has published many academic articles.

Mr. Fautré is also press correspondent and member of the editorial board of the European Times in Brussels, a member of the Press Club and contributor to various media in Brussels, and associate editor on the editorial board of Bitter Winter, a magazine on religious liberty and human rights.

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