Working with Faith Communities to End Religious Child Maltreatment

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ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches of protecting children from abuse or neglect in authoritarian faith communities or high-control religious environments have been only mildly effective. A new approach is needed. This paper proposes a solution that promises to significantly reduce the number of religious child maltreatment (RCM) cases by educating faith communities about this issue. This approach is modeled after the relatively quick abolition of the abusive and long-held practice of Chinese foot-binding. It could be taken up by all faith communities, even those that are not perpetrating RCM. The end result would be to spur a "child-friendly faith" movement that would benefit both children and religious organizations. Meanwhile, it could help weaken religious authoritarian communities, in which children are at the greatest risk for RCM.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM RCM

RCM has long been a prevalent problem in the United States and around the world. In addition, there is growing awareness that most cases occur in ultra-conservative faith communities, also known as religious authoritarian cultures or high-control groups. Traditional efforts to protect victims have proved largely unsuccessful as long-term solutions. Those approaches usually involve law enforcement and child welfare workers conducting investigations which may result in the arrest of perpetrators and perpetrators or victims being temporarily or permanently removed from the home.

While authorities must be involved when cases of RCM arise, this reactive approach has largely not proved effective at preventing cases in the long-term for numerous reasons. First, most authoritarian communities are socially separatist and it can be extremely difficult for outsiders to learn about cases so that investigations can begin. Second, members of these communities usually do not cooperate with investigations making it extremely difficult to uncover useful evidence. Third, this approach often leads members of such groups to feel even more distrustful of outside authorities and then work harder to hide cases of RCM. Fourth, such raids (which are often made public) are usually unpopular in the eyes of the public and fear of scrutiny can negatively affect how investigations are conducted.

A 2008 case exemplifies how such an approach can fail victims. After the Texas Rangers and the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (TDFPS) learned that a polygamous Mormon community located in Eldorado, Texas, was sexually abusing girls by forcing them "spiritually" marry older men, they raided the group. Despite the fact that members were extremely uncooperative during the investigation, eleven men of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) ultimately were convicted on charges of child sexual abuse, including the sect's leader Warren Jeffs. TDFPS removed more than 400

children from the community and placed them in temporary foster care.

The effectiveness of the 2008 raid to end child sexual abuse through underage "spiritual" marriage among the FLDS was marginal at best. While it may have raised awareness of the illegality and immorality of child sexual abuse among members—some women and girls took classes on sexual abuse offered by TDFPS—it's questionable whether the practice of underage "spiritual" marriage came to an end. TDFPS returned all but one of the children to their homes and then stopped monitoring the actions of their families. The agency also allowed all caretakers—even those who had been convicted of sexual abuse—to retain custodial rights. No women who were accomplices in encouraging or forcing girls into the marriages or even present during a sexual assault were arrested. Furthermore, it's been reported that Warren Jeffs continues to control members from prison and could reinstate underage "spiritual" marriages at any time.

THE ABUSIVE PRACTICE OF CHINESE FOOT-BINDING

The abusive and long-held practice of binding the feet of young girls in China lasted for nearly a millennium. However, in the mid-1800s, Christian missionaries from the United Kingdom worked toward ending the practice by collaborating with key individuals within China's borders. Largely as a result of these efforts, the practice of foot-binding came to an end within one generation.

Like many customs and traditions that harm children, foot-binding was ingrained in much of Chinese culture. In this extremely hierarchical society, foot-binding was a sign of status, particularly in the middle and upper classes. The bound feet of a girl or woman were considered beautiful, tiny, erotic, and classy and were often referred to a "lotus." Women with bound feet were thought of as chaste, honorable, and sexy while women with natural feet were mocked. Foot-binding was tightly connected to a girl's ability to marry into a good family.

Much attention was paid to "lotus" shoes—beautiful, colorful, embroidered footwear, each one about the size of a cell phone. Lotus shoes were a source of pride for females with bound feet. Different shoes were worn for different occasions based on their color. Prior to marriage, a girl brought a set of lotus shoes to the home of her husband-to-be where his mother scrutinized their quality.

Girls as young as three-years-old were forced to undergo the excruciatingly painful procedure. The goal was to make the feet as small as possible—the ideal length being three inches. To accomplish this, each foot was wrapped in such a way that it was made into a sort of fist. Multiple bones were broken as the foot was forced to form a high, unnatural arch. With the feet folded into themselves, they were impossible to keep clean and emitted a terrible odor. Girls suffered ulcerations, gangrene, loss of toes, and death due to infection. Walking on bound feet was extremely difficult and led to longterm back problems.

The Chinese were well aware of the abusive nature of foot-binding. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), a Chinese intellectual wrote that "children not yet four or five years old, innocent and without crime, are caused to suffer limitless pain." During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), there were attempts to ban the practice but they were unsuccessful. Families continued to bind their daughters' feet for the social gains it promised, as noted by Amanda Foreman in an article she wrote for *Smithsonian Magazine*. According to Foreman,

> A small foot in China, no different from a tiny waist in Victorian England, represented the height of female refinement. For families with marriageable daughters, foot size translated into its own form of currency and a means of achieving upward mobility. The most desirable bride possessed a three-inch foot, known as a "golden lotus." It was respectable to have four-inch feet—a silver lotus—but feet five inches or longer were dismissed as iron lotuses. The marriage prospects for such a girl were dim indeed.

A "SHAMEFUL" PRACTICE COMES TO AN END

It was not until the mid-1800s that advocates against foot-binding began to make progress, efforts that were helped by economic and cultural globalism. China was opening its borders to trade, and many Chinese became enthralled with Western customs, ready to let go of their own traditions. Simultaneously, China was allowing in European Christian missionaries, which included women determined to emancipate Chinese females and end the practice of foot-binding. Church organizations discouraged mothers from binding their daughters' feet and required them to unbind their own feet.

One notable missionary was Rev. John Mcgowan of the non-denominational Protestant London Missionary Society. In 1875, Macgowan and his wife called a meeting of women in China and convinced nine of them to sign a pledge opposing foot-binding. The gathering marked the beginning of what would become the Quit-Foot-binding Society, an organization made up of mothers who stated they would not bind the feet of their daughters and would undergo the painful process of unbinding their own feet.

McGowan and other missionary leaders also appealed to the highly respected Chinese scholars, the literati, to publicly oppose foot-binding. The missionaries' justification—that foot-binding made China appear backward in the eyes of the rest of the world—resonated with the literati who wrote essays that described the practice as shameful and cruel. One of those scholars was Kang Youwei who had been distressed by the pain his female relatives had underwent when their feet were bound. He allowed his own daughters' feet to be left natural and, in 1898, sent a memorandum to the Chinese emperor in which he tried to shame the leader into opposing the practice. Kang wrote, "There is nothing which makes us objects of ridicule so much as foot-binding."

Meanwhile, the grass-roots movement—led principally by mothers—solidified a justification for allowing girls' feet to be left natural. These women not only pledged not to bind their daughters' feet, they also forbade their sons to marry women with bound feet. Foot-binding was losing value as a gateway to marriage, as women with bound feet were becoming less eligible for marriage and more stigmatized. Cultural events focused on glorifying foot-binding, such "small foot" contests, were replaced which those that mocked it. Examples included public rallies where women burned their foot wrappings and sang "letting-feet-out" songs.

Finally, in 1911, the Chinese government banned the practice as unhealthy and cruel, although women in small villages continued to secretly bind their daughters' feet for some years. The last lotus shoes factory closed in 1999.

To summarize, anti-foot-binding advocates in the late 1800s and early 1900s in China employed four key strategies:

GOAL	HOW MANIFESTED
The movement was catalyzed by advocates on the outside who worked behind the scenes.	Christian missionaries (as well as wives of ex-pat businessmen) entered China determined to end foot-binding.
Advocates first appealed to "low hanging fruit" leaders who lent credibility to protecting children and laypeople who initiated a grass roots movement.	The elite literary and other powerful figures wrote editorials condemning the practice of foot-binding. Chinese mothers began the Anti-Foot-binding Society and other organizations.
Those harming children had motivation to change.	Girls with natural feet became eligible for marriage and families who continued to bind their daughters feet risked being stigmatized.

LEARNING FROM A SUCCESSFUL END TO AN ABUSIVE PRACTICE

Despite the cultural differences, a strategy similar to that which was employed by the anti-foot-binding advocates in China should be taken up by child advocates today to end the practice of RCM. Like the Christian missionaries, child advocates or child advocacy organizations (CAOs) come from the outside of problematic communities and should work behind the scenes toward change. This work should entail allowing those in powerful positions (such as religious leaders) and laypeople (such as congregants) to be the "face" of a "child-friendly faith" movement by encouraging their own faith communities and others to ensure that their faith practices are aligned with current healthy child

development models. More specifically, religious organizations should participate in educational programs that allow for discussions and trainings to occur in churches, synagogues, and mosques "behind closed doors." The content of these sessions would include child development, the positive and negative impact of faith teachings, RCM, mandatory child abuse reporting laws, and guidance toward setting up effective, child abuse prevention policies. Participating religious organizations would be designated by the CAOs as "child-friendly faith communities (CFFCs)," thus beginning a movement in which faith communities are seen as role models in nurturing children and protecting them from maltreatment. CPPCs should promote their new status and CAOs should help in this effort. For example, CAOs can offer them a Child-Friendly Faith Community logo to be used on their websites, worship guides, and marketing material and promote them through social media and other digital marketing channels.

Faith communities would agree to participate for numerous reasons. In addition to learning about RCM and being better able to address child maltreatment cases, they would be able to expand their memberships, as adults looking for a place to worship that understands children's needs would be most likely to choose one that is a CFFC. In much the same way that families who chose not to bind their girls' feet gained status and those who continued to bind lost status, CFFCs would be perceived favorably by the wider community while religious organizations that are not designated would be stigmatized for not prioritizing children's needs and possibly condoning harmful childrearing practices. Ultimately, this movement would lead a growth of CFFCs and a decline of authoritarian communities who refuse to be designated. It emulates the anti-foot-binding movement in the following ways:

GOAL	HOW MANIFESTED
The movement will be catalyzed by advocates on the outside who work behind the scenes.	CAOs will develop an anti-RCM curriculum to be offered exclusively to faith communities.
Advocates will first appeal to "low hanging fruit" leaders to credibility to protecting children and to laypeople who will initiate a grass roots movement.	Faith leaders will publicize the need to protect children from RCM and agree to have their organizations be designated. Congregants will urge religious leaders to have their organizations participate in the program; parents will get involved.
Those harming children will be motivated to change.	Faith communities will grow as a result of learning about children's needs and being designated; those not designated will be stigmatized and lose members.

CONCLUSION

Historically, cultures have been loath to end certain childrearing practices, even when those practices are severely abusive. However, the abolition of Chinese foot-binding is somewhat of an exception in that outsiders (Christian missionaries) were able to spur a movement that ultimately led to the practice stopping in a relatively short period of time. In the same way, child advocates today can teach faith communities about healthy childrearing practices while religious leaders and congregants become the "face" of the a Child-Friendly Faith movement. Such an approach would offer a more effective, longterm solution to ending RCM than conventional approaches that involve public raids by authorities. Faith communities that participate would be expected to grow as result of being designated as being "child-friendly," while authoritarian or high-control groups (those most likely to perpetrate RCM) would be stigmatized and decline in numbers.

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