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# What Is LGBTQ+ Conversion Therapy It and How Can We End It?

The movement to end the “barbaric practice” has gained momentum in recent years.

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LGBT refugees living in Kenya stand behind a rainbow flag outside an office of the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Nairobi, Kenya in May 2019. | LGBT refugees living in Kenya stand behind a rainbow flag outside an office of the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Nairobi, Kenya in May 2019. | Ben Curtis/AP

By [Joe McCarthy](#) and [Pia Gralki](#)

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## Why Global Citizens Should Care

*LGBTQ+ communities are disproportionately affected by poverty, and conversion therapy further marginalizes them by threatening the mental and physical health and well-being of LGBTQ+ people around the world. The United Nations Independent Expert is calling for a universal ban on the harmful practice. You can join us in taking action on this and related issues [here](#).*

**Editor's note:** This story contains details of violence.

A.O. was 13 when she was first beaten with a broom by a pastor as part of a so-called “conversion therapy” session in Nigeria. Then, at 15, her mother sent her to a church where she was locked in a room, forced to fast and pray, tortured, and humiliated for a month, all in an effort to “correct” her sexual orientation.

A.O. shared her story with the human rights organization [OutRight Action International](#). Her name was altered to maintain confidentiality. She is now 46 and identifies as a lesbian. But those early experiences of “conversion therapy,” consisting of

Her story is painfully specific yet disturbingly common. Millions of people who don't conform to narrow sexual orientation and gender identity norms have had their lives and well-being threatened in similar ways.

Conversion therapy is the pseudo-medical or religious practice of trying to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity to heterosexual or cisgender (non-transgender). It occurs in nearly every country in the world and often amounts to torture, according to Victor Madrigal-Borloz. Madrigal-Borloz is the United Nations independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IESOGI).

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Conversion therapy often masquerades as a legitimate collection of practices informed by scientific or religious principles. Marketing and misinformation campaigns have bolstered this view for years.

"The persistence of so-called conversion therapy is directly related to beliefs about LGBTIQ people and the degree to which we are accepted within our families, our faiths, and societies at large," Jessica Stern, executive director of OutRight Action International, told Global Citizen. "When homophobia and transphobia prevail, the consequences are stigma, discrimination, and violence."

As the nature and scale of conversion therapy become better known, scientific and religious organizations, governmental bodies, and survivor advocates have called for a universal ban on the practice and its promotion.

The continuation of conversion therapy is an ongoing human rights catastrophe that particularly threatens young people, according to the UN.

## **As a Doctor, Here's What We Need to Make Health Systems LGBTQ+ Inclusive**

Efforts to restrict and ban the practice have gained momentum in recent years. But conversion therapy still exists with little interference in much of the world. And the wide range of forms that it takes often undermine legal efforts to stop it.

Ending conversion therapy once and for all requires the public to fully understand the context surrounding the practice, its consequences, and how and why it persists.

"We have known for decades that when people recognize that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity is not a choice but a feature of who they are, the more likely they will be to support equal rights in general," said Casey Pick, senior fellow for advocacy and government affairs for the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ+ youth organization.

"So the extent to which conversion therapy continues to promote the idea that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity is something that can or should be changed, that idea undercuts our ability to win equality in other areas," she added. "It's also just an insult to the dignity of LGBTQ+ people and undermines our efforts to have societies accept us for who we are."

### **What does conversion therapy look like around the world?**

Conversion therapy has been documented in at least 68 countries. Surveys suggest it takes place in all regions of the world, according to a [report on conversion therapy](#) published by the UN in June. The practice occurs in institutional settings such as hospitals and churches as well as more informal circumstances, reflecting the cultural characteristics of a given community. As a result, conversion therapy varies widely around the world. The one abiding feature is that it seeks to alter the identity of LGBTQ+ people with techniques that harm, traumatize, and ostracize.

Conversion therapy exists because of the routine discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ people that takes place on a familial, communal, and systemic level, according to Stern.

"Entire systems and communities are involved in making conversion therapy happen," said Stern. "Everyone from your aunt to your religious leader to your neighbor."

## Mandate of the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity



Conversion therapy programs are often fraudulent money-making schemes. They exploit people's fears, prejudices, and misconceptions. Broadly speaking, they can be placed within three categories: psychotherapy, medical, and faith-based, according to the UN.

Psychotherapy programs rest on the assumption that LGBTQ+ people have had certain experiences — such as an unloving mother or an absent father — that explain their sexual orientation or gender identity. These programs insist that different sexual orientations and gender identities represent a character flaw stemming from a childhood trauma.

"The technique [of psychotherapy] might be legitimate but the objectives [of conversion therapy] are illegitimate," said Pick. "These techniques were never meant to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. That's why every major medical and mental health organization has condemned the practice as illegitimate at the least, and actively harmful at the worst."

Conversion therapy providers often subject a person to interrogative questioning about their lives to find potential "abnormalities" and then frame them in prejudiced terms. Aversion therapy, in which providers use painful or distressing stimuli to deter a person from thinking and feeling in certain ways, and behavioral training, in which providers seek to instill stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine" behaviors within a subject, are also common. In various countries, subjects are forced to masturbate while envisioning persons of a different gender, the UN reported.

Medical practitioners of conversion therapy believe non-heteronormative sexual orientations and non-cisnormative gender identities result from a biological dysfunction that can be corrected with pharmaceutical drugs or surgery.

In China, for instance, there are reports of subjects undergoing electroshock therapy and medical injections, while in India, doctors promote hormone therapy as a way to "cure" people, according to the UN. These methods are used around the world.

Faith-based programs often represent the most extreme form of conversion therapy. Practitioners tend to view LGBTQ+ identities as an inherently immoral "choice," or that subjects themselves are inherently immoral.

Subjects in these programs are often forced to pray, starved, yelled at and berated, beaten with objects, sexually assaulted, and more. Exorcisms, in which practitioners attempt to extract a demonic presence from a subject, happen frequently.

## **LGBTQ+ Indonesians Are Being Forced to Undergo Exorcisms as a 'Cure'**

Other faith-based programs force subjects to take a vow of celibacy. In this way, they're not trying to change a person's sexual orientation and gender expression so much as definitively suppressing it.

All of these methods have been widely discredited and condemned by medical experts and human rights activists.

"You can't change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity by giving someone a pill, or praying it away, or waving a wand," said Stern. "We are who we are, we can't change. The world around us needs to change."

Torture leaves indelible marks on survivors' body & mind. LGBT persons are exposed to specific acts of torture, such as conversion therapy. Today I honor the resilience & strength of all survivors and reinforce the call to ban conversion therapy and eradicate torture everywhere.

**IRCT** @IRCT

In honor of June 26, we stand together sending a clear message: We are here to eradicate torture, we are here to support life after torture & we'll continue our commitment to give a voice for the over 57000 survivors of torture we treat every year! 🙏 #SupportLifeAfterTorture

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### The effects of conversion therapy

All instances of conversion therapy "are inherently humiliating, demeaning, and discriminatory," according to Madrigal-Borloz. The consequences are magnified by the fact that the majority of conversion therapy subjects are young people.

An estimated 80% of people who undergo conversion therapy are under 24 years old, while half are younger than 18, the UN reported. Subjecting youth to these harmful practices can result in lifelong psychological and physical repercussions.

"It's so sad [that people] experience something this traumatic that young," said Stern. "It changes you for literally the rest of your life."

People who undergo conversion therapy report a wide range of consequences.

The UN reports that individuals experience "profound feelings of shame, guilt, self-disgust, and worthlessness, which can result in a damaged self-concept and enduring personality changes. The deep impact on individuals includes significant loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depressive syndrome, social isolation, intimacy difficulty, self-hatred, shame and guilt, sexual dysfunction, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as often significant physical pain and suffering."

## **This Trans Activist Fled Death Threats. Now She Wants to Overhaul Global Law.**

Survivors often drop out of school, lose their jobs, and can experience other material consequences such as homelessness due to the many effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Eating disorders can develop, as well as gastrointestinal problems and other health complications.

People who undergo forced hormone therapy can face lasting bodily harm, and those who have been beaten may face lasting physical injuries. Individuals often experience sexual assault during conversion therapy sessions that can cause lasting physical and psychological trauma.

These generalized consequences are broad strokes, but they're corroborated on the individual level by survivors who spoke with OutRight Action International.

"When I tried to kill myself, I didn't die," said Re. Nokuthula Dhladhla, a 46-year-old lesbian in South Africa, who was raped and tortured.

"My family disowned me," said George Barasa, a 28-year-old gay, gender-nonconforming Kenyan living in South Africa. "I was given a choice — change or be disowned. I chose to be disowned. I was so naive, depressed. Some people took advantage of this. In the process, I was infected with HIV. I attempted suicide ... and was found unconscious by neighbors who checked on me."

"I have tried to move on, but the religious counseling really affected me, and up to now, I have a hard time believing if there is even a God in the first place," said Jay Angwenyi, a gay man living in Kenya.

"At some point, I made a suicide attempt," K.A., a 23-year-old gay man in Jordan, told OutRight. "I ... didn't want to live like that. It seemed like [conversion therapy] wasn't going to work ... so I was blaming myself for not being good enough for it to work."

"[Conversion therapy] makes you feel disgusted about yourself," said Jamal Jonathan, a 28-year-old gay man in Tanzania. "It is very damaging. It makes you feel not like a human. It makes you lose your confidence. But we cannot talk about this