

Conversion therapy: understanding the GALOP survey

Parliamentary briefing from Sex Matters, February 2024

The [Conversion Therapy Prohibition \(Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity\) Bill \[HL\]](#) is scheduled to have its second reading in the House of Lords on 9th February 2024.

One piece of evidence referred to by those proposing a ban is the 2023 report by Galop based on a survey undertaken by YouGov of 2,042 LGBT+ adults [“There was nothing to fix”: LGBT+ survivors’ experiences of conversion practices”](#).



As part of the survey, respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced someone taking any action to try to change, cure or suppress their sexual orientation or gender identity. **Galop says the report “shows the high rate at which our community has experienced people trying to change, ‘cure’ or suppress their sexual orientation or gender identity” (18%) – but the examples it quotes do not provide evidence of anything that justifies a new criminal offence.**

The most common stories concerned conflict and lack of acceptance of sexual orientation within families

56% of those who said yes to the question of experiencing “conversion practices” were referring to interpersonal relationships within their family. The comments included are:

“My parents’ homophobia and homophobic verbal abuse forcibly re-closeted me after I attempted to come out as a teenager.”

“My family, except my mum, do not accept my sexuality. They all had parts to play in years of physical and mental abuse, telling me I was wrong and sick.”

“My mother tried to exorcise me and recommended I go to conversion therapy after coming out with my first girlfriend at 16.”

“I told my parents that I wasn’t my agab [assigned gender at birth] when I was a child and they told me I was wrong and stupid. When I expressed attraction to women they started forcing me to wear dresses and set me up on dates with teen boys they knew. It was crushing and I became an alcoholic when I was 17.”

“My father made constant references to how disgusting it was to be gay, quoting the bible, despite not being a believer.”

“Was told it was wrong, an abomination, against God’s word, would ruin my life, humiliate my family [...] it would make me ugly, that I needed to do the ‘right’ thing, mustn’t talk about this to anyone ever again, must behave, [and] I was a disappointment.”

“Family member limited internet access so [I] wasn’t able to see anything relating to my sexuality.”

“My mother tried to make me date men when I was dating a woman, exposed me to images of male genitalia and heterosexual sex acts and pornography in an attempt to ‘fix me’, and threatened to poison my food on a regular basis when I refused to break up with my girlfriend.”

“Family threat to disown me – and on one occasion when I was living at home, I was told to leave immediately and not return.”

“I was told that I couldn’t be gay whilst living under [my father’s] roof, and was thrown out of home the week I turned 16.”

“My parents started phoning around and tried forcing me into conversion therapy. I actively resisted and disowned my parents as a result.”

“When I came out as being attracted to women I was repeatedly told that it wouldn’t be accepted under my parents’ roof and that I just needed to find my faith to fix the problem. I was pressured into therapy to cure me and was controlled and followed to ensure I wasn’t being deviant”

Our view: Physical and mental abuse of children is already covered by the provisions for safeguarding children, and the criminal sanctions for child abuse and neglect. While estrangement between parents and their adult children is distressing, it is not something that can or should be criminally prosecuted, or that would fall under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights as something that the state has a positive obligation to ban.

Some of the stories concern differences of opinion, and estrangement between friends, or bullying at school

“I was actively told by a friend of mine at the time that I wasn’t really trans and that I was doing it for the attention and that they’ll never see me as trans and will actively go against it and tell people I’m lying.”

“I was outed at a young age (~12/13ish) by a friend I had confessed feelings to. I went to a religious school and the gossip spread quickly. One of the other pupils advise I attend her church to help me become straight. I was confused and so agreed to go.”

“I came out as bi to some friends at secondary school, someone told some other people and by lunch that day the whole school knew. There were no other out LGBT+ people in the 1200 students at our rural secondary school, and bullying & abuse quickly started. No teachers did anything, and when my younger sister told my parents that she was being bullied because her sister was a dyke they forced me to deny my sexuality. Pretend I’d made it up for attention. And go back in the closet. It was made very clear that I had no place staying in the house or family if I was going to make choices that hurt other family members. [...] I went back in the closet for 8 years, 5 of which found me terrorised by an abusive partner that both hypersexualised and hated my bisexuality.”

Our view: These young people are describing upsetting personal experiences. It would not make sense to involve the police in criminal prosecution of friendship breakdowns, and schools already have anti-bullying policies.

Some respondents mention prayer or involvement with religious leaders

“My partner ended our relationship because of God and then the people from church prayed for us to become straight.”

“Growing up I had expressed my gender dysmorphia, my family were conservative in their beliefs around LGBTQ+ and so my mum took me to church to have the father convince me that I was wrong, it was the devil, it was a sin, it was unnatural and that if I continued in this way I would be cast from the family, the church and the community and that I had expectations placed upon me because of how I had been assigned at birth.”

“My mother sent me to see her Catholic priest with the hope that he would convince me it was just a phase or that if I continued to explore my sexuality I would be damned for eternity.”

“Brought up in a Christian household, I was reminded often by a parent that being gay meant I would go to Hell. Only a few years ago I was casually asked if I would consider conversion therapy (I am in my forties).”

Our view: These examples fall within the sphere of private life, and none of them describe the type of violent or abusive exorcisms or religious practices which might be assault. It is not for the state to limit what people pray about or talk about as part of their religion.

Some of the stories concern clinical practice

“I had been seeing [a] counsellor for a couple of years [...] Over the course of our sessions the counsellor didn't help much, tried to convince me I was straight.”

‘I was sent to a private counsellor/therapist in my home country after my relatives decided that I must have other issues which have caused my sexual orientation/gender identity’

‘I went to a professional hypnotist to deal with behaviour not connected with my sexuality, but the hypnotist focused his ‘treatment’ on attempting to change my sexuality.’

“Doctors and therapists insisting that my asexuality was a medical condition that could be fixed.”

“I was encouraged to subscribe to a ‘porn addiction’ online service called Fortify and met regularly with an accountability partner to see whether I was viewing pornography or masturbating. My accountability partner was five years my senior and frequently aired homophobic views.”

“Being sent to a therapist to try and make me not trans. [It] Scarred me and destroyed the relationship with my parents.”

“Parent took me to a psychologist to ‘fix’ my sexual orientation.”

Our view: These short accounts may or may not be accurate, and are not complete. They do not describe the other issues that led the person to seek therapy or diagnosis. No further details are given about the therapy. There are no examples of the dramatic outdated “aversion therapy” approaches involving electric shocks, vomit inducing substances, or other treatments that could amount to assault, or torture and degrading treatment breaching ECHR Article 3.

The problems described include lack of sexual interest, porn addiction and gender dysphoria are not simple matters. Pronouncing clinicians to be undertaking conversion therapy because they considered other causes or courses of action than affirmation of an identity is an ideological position. This approach would class any medical professional or therapist not immediately affirming a person's self-identity as the cause of their unease as a "conversion therapist".

There are six accounts that include assault

"Regular beatings by father and other children from a very early stage, extending to beatings from my brother and continuing through university. I have multiple old breaks in ribs, nose, cheekbone etc. Several hospital stays. Two suicide attempts."

"Being beaten by parents as a young teenager."

"My brother constantly beat the life out of me while shouting homophobic slurs. He also got his friends to do the same and one of his friends even sexually assaulted me."

"Punishments; attempts at exorcism; physical restraint; being kept alone in a locked room for two days and nights; prevented from socialising with others in the group; being expelled from the organisation."

"Actual rape, attempted rape, serious sexual assault, name calling, frigid, beaten up. [...] Police said by the time they could get to my village they'd be too late and it would be over. So why would I ask for help again?"

"I was raped by men who told me I wouldn't like it (be gay) anymore after that."

Our view: Assault, kidnap, rape and sexual assault are already criminal.

Conclusion

The Galop report:

- does not offer evidence of 18% of respondents experiencing anything that could be described, on the basis of the short accounts given, as "torture" or degrading treatment in which the state has a positive obligation to intervene. Most people who answered "yes" to the question of "whether they had ever experienced someone taking any action to try to change, cure or suppress their sexual orientation or gender identity" did not describe something recognisable as conversion therapy.
- offers no evidence that there is a problem which requires a new criminal law.
- in order to report high numbers experiencing "conversion practices", extends the definition to include parents expressing religious views, interpersonal conflict and ordinary exploratory therapy.

Seeking to criminalise shame or exclusion among families, friends or religious groups, or banning any form of talking therapy, pastoral care or prayer on the basis of a broad definition of conversion therapy will be an unworkable offence, and it will have a chilling effect on parents, teachers and therapists, and be a breach of Article 8, Article 9 and Article 10 in relation to family life, freedom of speech and freedom of religion.