

DEFENDING QUEER DIGNITY

STOP
HURTING
US!

A Global Analysis of Conversion Therapy

LISA KIM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Kim

DOUBLE MAJOR:
Political Science (Hon.)
Criminology

Lisa Kim is a fourth-year Political Science (Hon.) and Criminology double major, with an International Studies and Public Policy double minor.

Her interests span across Canadian politics, policy analysis, and East Asian domestic politics.

Introduction: A Harmful Practice

Despite growing support for LGBTQ+ individuals around the world, practices that aim to find a 'cure' to sexual and gender fluidity persist in many countries. Conversion therapy leads the attack against individuals who identify outside of the hegemony of heteronormativity (Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2020). This practice is used as an umbrella term that can describe a wide-range of operations which aim to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) (Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2020). Perpetrators of this practice can range from family members, servants of faith, or agents of the state themselves (Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2020). Many practices include the use of physical abuse, electro-shock therapy, 'corrective' rapes, and pseudo-medical procedures (Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2020). Conversion therapy disproportionately targets youth in adolescence and childhood.

In an analysis centred on the practice in the United States, over 698,000 of LGBTQ+ adults received conversion therapy, in which 350,000 had gone through the 'treatment' when they were considered legally as youths (Williams Institute, 2019). This is because youths lack the personal autonomy to opt out of these treatments, mainly due to their legal, societal, and familial dependence on guardians which limits their ability to refuse or exit such interventions. Multiple studies confer that children who are subjected to these treatments are at a higher risk of suicide, substance abuse, and self-harm (Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2020). A study that examined over a 1,000 health surveys from midlife and older adult men that received conversion therapy earlier in their lives has discovered that the primary outcomes for the practice result in an increased disposition towards depression and internalized homophobia (Meanley et al., 2020). There is overwhelming evidence that details the negative effects of these treatments, with little research done to prove that these methods reduce same sex attraction or gender fluidity within an individual (Meanly et al., 2020).

As of March 2025, conversion therapy remains legal or unregulated in over 60 countries, reflecting the absence of a consistent international standard prohibiting the practice. By mobilizing organizations and states to action, the harms of the practice can be recognized as a human rights violation in need of international response. Ultimately, a global standard can be created to ensure that the livelihoods and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals around the world continue to be upheld (Outright International, 2019).



The Key Issue: A Lack of Consistency at the World Stage

Countries around the world have continued to allow the practice to persist despite the staggering amount of evidence on its harm (Outright International, 2019). The central problem revolves around consistency in instituting an international standard that protects all LGBTQ+ individuals from this practice (Davids, 2024). As a result, several concerns are raised from conversion therapy supporters that create difficulties in creating the aforementioned standard.

Within the medical aspect of the practice, scientists in support of the treatment have followed outdated methodology that still considers homosexuality as a disorder or disease that needs pathways for treatment (Davids, 2024). This has led supporters of the practice to cite practitioners and pseudo-scientists on the benefits of keeping the practice alive, despite the overwhelming data on the long-term psychological harm conversion therapy can inflict onto an individual (Outright International, 2019).

Additionally, many practitioners argue that conversion therapy has given individuals a sense of belonging in a specific faith or culture or argue that the administration of the practice is within their duty to their religion or culture (Przeworski et al., 2021). This has led to supporters arguing that banning the practice can infringe on their freedoms to practice religion, or that it goes against the nation's identity (Davids, 2024).

Backlash from conversion therapy supporters has shifted the conversation into battles of identity. Ultimately, this causes intense legal confusion from country to country, allowing the practice to continue flourishing states across the world.

Analysis/Key Research Findings:

Quantitative Data

Methodological Data

Outright International is an LGBTQ+ activist organization that has collected extensive methodological data that demonstrates the prevalence and impact the practice has on individuals in their 2022 report of harmful treatment (Outright International, 2019).

Qualitative Data

The report outlines results from in-depth interviews that captured the experience of individuals that have received conversion therapy at some point in their life. Key themes from the 19 interviews were that 16 individuals overall went through conversion therapy due to religious condemnation (Outright International, 2019). Various forms of 'therapy' were administered with threats of violence and familial/social rejection, and family members would encourage individuals to continue treatment despite the severe psychological harm (Outright International, 2019). Respondents also noted that failed attempts would lead to individuals identifying with suicidal ideation and feelings of self-hatred (Outright International, 2019). For example, an excerpt from an anonymous individual has been taken to fully envision the harms this practice can cause:

“He removed the alligator pepper and then he touched my feet, left foot (instep), right foot, left ankle, right ankle, left knee, right knee, left waist, right waist, left shoulder, right shoulder, and then circled around my head twice. So, the alligator pepper was meant to complete the ritual. However, the peak of the ritual was the slaughter of a spotless black chicken (a rooster) that was brought to the traditional healer. The traditional healer said that apart from peeing out the negativity, other spiritual elements were cast out of my body and into the rooster. The rooster was slaughtered after the ritual and thrown into the river the following morning. That was the end of that conversion ritual. It was supposed to “repair” or reverse what someone else had done in the spiritual realm. But it did not change anything...”
- M.A., gay/transgender man, Nigeria (Outright International, 2019, p. 52).

Within the same report, the organization conducted an in-depth online survey to encompass a holistic view of the situation in areas excluding North America and Europe. A survey in both English and Mandarin (mainly to target Mainland China respondents) reached 489 respondents from 80 different countries (Outright International, 2019). As a result, the survey had found that the frequency of conversion therapy remained very common within states in Africa, while numbers vary within Asian and Latin American regions (see Figure 1).

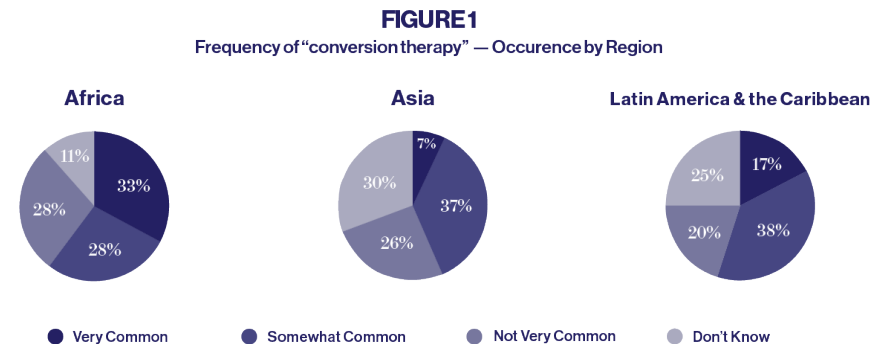


Figure 1. Frequency of “conversion therapy occurrence by region.”

Additionally, reasons for why individuals were subjected to conversion therapy were also documented. Religious reasons or duty prevailed in Africa and Latin America, while family honour remained as a primary reason for individuals within Asia (Outright International, 2019).

Medical Status

Within psychological and medical fields, homosexuality and gender fluidity have had a long and tumultuous history (Davidson & Walden, 2024). When the first version of the Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-1) was published, homosexuality was regarded as a ‘personality pattern disturbance’ and listed under a subcategory of ‘sexual deviation’ (Davidson & Walden, 2024). At a sociological level, this meant that homosexuality was placed on the same rung as paedophilia

or antisocial behaviour (Przeworski, Peterson & Piedra, 2021). Now that the manual has reached its fifth edition, the DSM-5 has acknowledged the classification of sexuality as one that was influenced by social standards of the past (Meanley et al., 2020). The manual further states that there is no official nomenclature for sexual or gender fluidity, marking institutional progression (Meanley et al., 2020). Continual research on the effectiveness of conversion therapy has outlined the increased psychological stress put onto an individual once going through treatment (Przeworski, Peterson & Piedra, 2021). Experts also outlined that treatment can cause harm such as shame, anxiety, depression, and suicide, with no valid study outlining the long-term effectiveness of treatment or that it can even change one's sexuality at all. These outcomes and data presented by psychologists have aided in the eventual policy changes that have happened in countries such as Canada, Germany, or Spain (Davidson & Walden, 2024).

Legal Status

Despite immense medical data and articles supporting the erasure of conversion therapy, the legality of the practice remains prevalent (Fleck, 2023). It is important to note that while some countries have not outlined any legislation to cover the topic, other countries have actively supported institutionalizing conversion therapy (Fleck, 2023). For example, Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act that was passed in 2023 condemned homosexuality as a sin, outlawing gay marriage and allowing for active discrimination against members of LGBTQ+ (Madowo, 2023). The law also prescribed 'rehabilitation' for convicted LGBTQ+ individuals to change their sexual orientation, and understand the 'harms' homosexuality brings to their society (Madowo, 2023).



Recommendations:

Calling for the United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT) to include conversion therapy as a form of torture either through amendment or general comment:

Given the central problem revolving around a lack of consistency with conversion therapy laws, the first step to increase bans on the practice worldwide is getting an international body such as the UN to recognize conversion therapy as a form of degradation and torture. While conversion therapy can be interpreted into the UN's definition of torture, interpretation leaves room for countries to distinguish whether this practice is inhumane or humane on their own. Two key paths can be taken to see this occur:

Formally amending UNCAT to explicitly include conversion therapy as a specified and targeted form of torture. Currently within article 1 of the UN torture convention, torture is listed as:

“any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.” (United Nations Convention Against Torture, 1994, pp. 1-2).

An amendment to this article (and thereby every following article mentioning torture) must include a clause that lists enumerated or analogous grounds to what discrimination can mean in the context of torture (United Nations Convention Against Torture, 1994). In this context, discrimination must include discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, as recognized by the UN's LGBTQI+ group (Paletta, 2020). While this method is preferable for long-term change, a formal amendment is difficult to achieve due to international standards (United Nations Convention Against Torture, 1994). Not only must there be a two-thirds majority of 174 states, but individual states must also ratify the amendment into their own laws.

Pushing for an ‘Informal’ Interpretation using General Comments:

This path would require the UNCAT committee to issue a general comment that constitutes conversion therapy as a method of torture used by groups and individuals to cause harm against a discriminated group (Lesch & Reiners, 2023).

General comments are legally non-binding clarifications to treaties that have shown influence over the development of international law (Lesch & Reiners, 2023). In practice, general comments have become the means in which UN experts and committees have distilled their views on issues within their purview (Lesch & Reiners, 2023). These comments require no authoritative state or council in approval of the comment, and the decision on when they are needed is ultimately left to the specified committee (Lesch & Reiners, 2023).

For example, general comment no. 15 made by the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) began the pathway for water becoming a fundamental human right (Lesch & Reiners, 2023). While this pathway would avoid the political hurdles needed to amend a treaty in full, informal general comments can also be seen as a ‘weak’ form of regulation that policy and lawmakers pursue in desperate or time-sensitive situations (Lesch & Reiners, 2023).

These methods of legal advocacy must also be followed with recommendations to continue building political support and advocacy. LGBTQ+ activist organizations simply cannot stop at banning conversion therapy, however,

can use the opportunity of banning the practice to leverage advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in additional critical issues. Supplementary recommendations include but are not limited to:

Uplifting Regional Civil Societies and Human Rights Activists to Spread Awareness and Resources:

By supporting local organizations that aim to provide a voice and remedial resources to individuals affected by conversion therapy, LGBTQ+ communities can work to continue moving forward from this practice. Raising awareness can include mobilizing technology in order to spread awareness on the topic or putting pressure on regional bodies or officials to release a statement condemning or calling to ban the use of conversion therapy for its harmful effects (Outright International, 2022). Providing remedial resources can include building a network of recognized practitioners that specialize in affirmative care, supporting and facilitating survivor groups, and creating a strategy to reform medical education so that learning encompasses the dangerous harms of conversion therapy (Outright International, 2022).

Expansion of resources could also include establishing networks of affirmative care. A robust infrastructure of support is essential for supporting survivors of the practice and involves building the professional capacity of the community around them. Certified practitioners and clinics within a state may want to build quiet referral networks alongside international NGOs that can signal safety to LGBTQIA+ individuals. For example, before LGBTQ+ rights were decriminalized in Singapore in 2022, civil society organizations such as Pink Dot played a key role in increasing the socialization and social acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities. Substantial efforts from civil society groups aided in the greater acceptance of queer folk by the public, having been confirmed in a national survey launched by the government in 2022.



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