

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

End Conversion Therapy/Practices Virtual Engagement Session in private with the Committee and Individuals with lived experiences

26 October 2021

Participant (W): Trans man who previously identified as a lesbian. First time sharing experience. Survivor from England.

Committee Member: Karen Adam (KA)

(W): Banning Conversion Therapy is the first step, but its a much broader issue. Like my home environment, school environment and church environment all had the impact of conversion therapy. Are you guys in the process of developing the law yet, because the language its written in needs to cover this?

(KA): No legislation as yet, scrutiny on Petition for the legislation. It needs to be fit for purpose.

(W): Feels really good to be able to do this, to get a bit of power back.

I wanted to talk about my experiences...homophobia and transphobia are so entrenched in evangelical Christian communities and family.

Gay and trans people being a result of sin in the world was directly preached at Church, any mention of LGBT issues at home would make the atmosphere so icy. It was impossible not to internalise the intense shame, and whenever I had feelings for a girl, or found one attractive, I would hate myself. This made me really disconnected from my body and feelings, something I am still trying to recover from.

Even when made illegal - leaders will find a way of continuing these practices. Evangelicals already have a persecution complex and talk about how hard it is to be a Christian these days because everyone thinks you're homophobic. So its essential that children are given LGBT education and support groups in school and anywhere else they are out from the influence of religious community. Even just seeing a rainbow flag in a shop when I was a kid meant so much. It made me think, even though I know my parents wouldn't go to my wedding some people would, some people are safe, one day I can be safe.

On the surface it looked like I was consenting to being in those churches or being prayed for 'to be healed'. But my acceptance from my family and membership of my main community was dependent on meeting their expectations which included repressing my queerness. So it was coerced, and I only realised this once I'd moved to University and my food and shelter wasn't conditional on being 'a good Christian'.

Evangelical Christianity is full of manipulation and abuse, that environment of conversion practises can't be consented to.

Attended a licenced counsellor – turned out it was conversion therapy. Counsellor said if we talked about my trauma and experiences of men then you will change orientation.

I was already self-harming and suicidal! He reaffirmed everything that my depression was telling me. Really bad.

There needs to be a better way of vetting people as above.

It has divorced me from knowing what I feel.

So many years of telling myself what I **had** to feel rather than what I felt.

It long term fucks you up.

Attended a non-denomination Church, when I came out to my Youth Pastor. Was told God loved me, was welcoming and accepting. But then another gay person was kicked out of the worship team for being in a relationship. It is still conditional, despite their positive image. Its a trap. They asked if people wanted to be prayed for for 'healing' and I stood up to be prayed for orientation change, so even that outwardly accepting environment had the same impact on me. I had a lot of breakdowns and was self-harming during that time.

Then Pentecostal Church – zero safeguarding structures. They told me I was possessed by demons of homosexuality.

Pressured into coming out to youth leader. Was told I had misdirected attraction to women due to trauma with men. When I went up for general prayer they tried to exorcise me without my consent. Was physically jabbed at my wrists in front of the whole congregation. Pressure points on my body and pushing on my forehead. It was declared the demons had gone, but I was still gay. I left that Church after that experience.

Next Church was a Church of England (CofE). Wouldn't let women preach. But said they loved gay people and just wanted God's plan for them, which was to be single.

I wasn't feeling safe at home. At this point I had come out to my Mum. But it was more Mum saying "Look I am a good person for forgiving me for being gay." I didn't feel safe at home anymore because I never knew when she would say something that would send me into a mental spiral.

Spent a lot of time with my best friend who happened to be my Vicar's daughter, and the family. I realised they knew I was gay and hadn't treated me any differently – it was the first time it hadn't happened as an adult. I cried for 12 hours and didn't self-harm after that.

It took one adult who didn't treat me any differently to stop me from self harming.

JUST ONE PERSON CAN MAKE SUCH A DIFFERENCE. IF I HAD HAD THAT AT SCHOOL, THAT COULD HAVE HELPED ME YEARS EARLIER.

Before that I would run until I threw up as self harm. I only realised that my happiness actually mattered once I left home because in my family and church everything was about 'glorifying God' which meant not questioning authority and gender roles. Leaving home and making queer friends at Uni completely changed my outlook on life, my depression is gone and I'm so much happier and more confident as a person. Even my homophobic parents have acknowledged this.

School was another issue. Secondary school was a CofE and knew they would get into trouble if they were openly an active ally of gay students, and would lose support of parents. This should not have been allowed to exist. Queer kids I knew were trying to commit suicide in year 11.

I counted 'gay' being used as a slur or general word for anything that was shit over 10 times in one day. That was typical. But I was too closeted to call people out on it.

Then I went to a college an hour away. LIFE CHANGING. I'd never met a trans person before then who was happy. And going to Uni, gave me even more of that. Just being around queer people who were allowed to be themselves helped me so much.

Back to family – Vicar/daughter. Like a second family to me. But still conditional love, which I later learned. They believed I could only please God by not being with anyone and not showing I was gay. Presented themselves as accepting queer people but still with conditions and extremely harmful.

I read a lot about Queer theology. And realised they were deliberately misinterpreting passages and I told them. I read about the historical suppression including executions and torture of queer people by the church. Studying for a degree in Theology now.

I explained to the Vicar that I believed the Bible did support gay marriage after this research. He took me out for coffee and said Christians can disagree on minor issues like infant baptism, but we can't disagree on whether Jesus is God or gay marriage because those are fundamental to what it means to be a Christian. He told me I was going to hell because I disagreed with their theology. I felt really betrayed and stopped going to Church.

My best friend who was their daughter told me what they were saying about me after I left the church. Completely demonised me because to acknowledge that my motives were seeking the truth they would have to question their whole world view. So much gaslighting.

If you are not from that evangelical experience it is really hard to understand how harmful it is. There needs to be more education about the ways cults work and what emotional and mental abuse and manipulation looks like in religious settings. I didn't recognise how abusive my church was because it was totally normalised.

Social media had a really positive influence on me because it was the first place I heard about LGBT people and saw anyone celebrating us rather than hating us.

Diary entry from 14. I first mentioned being gay. Immediate assumption was it is a demon tempting me because, that is what I had been taught. That it was inherently predatory and will ruin my friendships. Just what I have been told my whole life.

Really scared – I daren't write this down – this is terrifying, what is happening to me. I'm a good Christian girl!

Quote from letter I came out to my mum in: "I heard everyone has that same sex attraction to some extent...don't blame yourself or Dad...don't think I am more broken than I already am." Shows the extent to which I had internalised the shame and hate directed at queer people.

Met a boy who kept my secret in his heart. Wanted to spend our lives together. Even if it meant sleeping on the sofa. First time I felt safe. He was in love with me. Got warned by at least 4 people on a forum for gay Christians. Very hard to marry a man as a lesbian.

I got so close to staying in a serious relationship with a guy who I wasn't attracted to but was close friends with. I chose his university as my first option on UCAS. We dated for two years even though I knew I was head over heels for my female friend in college. I saw that as a 'temptation' and a sexless marriage with him as God's plan. The adults around me encouraged my relationship with him because finally I was conforming to their hetero idea of what I should be.

The first lockdown in 2020 gave me space to think and I realised to marry him would end up in being raped. Not because he had any intention to harm me, but because I had been indoctrinated to think I had to marry a man and would then have a duty to him. I broke up with him and came out as a lesbian (previously had said I was bi).

(KA): what I am hearing is the psychological damage from societal and cultural pressures. You were battling. Doubting yourself still, and the impact it has had on you.

(W): I feel lucky how easily I have been able to come out of it. I no longer hate myself or want to kill myself. I don't talk to my parents unless I need to because I'm in the lowest income bracket so my loan gives me financial independence.

I have friends still in crippling depression because they have to stay in contact with their families. It is really really damaging.

Recommendation re legislation – more funding for people moving out. Support to leave home. Still trapped in that situation. They can't get trans health because their parents would notice (for example).

If you (education/Uni) reject people who need financial help because they can't get the support they need – they would need to come out to their parents even if not ready.

(KA): so as well as a ban – this goes hand in hand to offer an escape to a safe space?

(W): Yes, people living in an unsafe place is just as damaging as conversion therapy. People are still killing themselves. And I have gotten very close to that.

Mum told me one morning – queer people can't glorify God. But that was all I wanted to do because it was all I thought mattered since my happiness didn't. So the logical conclusion in my mind was suicide.

I was sent to the Safeguarding lead at college after this incident– they had a Stonewall poster on the wall. I wasn't ready to come out but it showed me there was a safe space.

(KA): The important thing I have taken from this is you spoke about children and education. Inclusive education in Scotland. Psychological harms and coercive practices. Teach children skills to recognise these behaviours.

(W): I understand the need for freedom of religion, but this has to be balanced with the harm it causes. Currently there is not enough protection for children from manipulative and controlling religious communities.

(KA): acknowledging sharing today. I will remember you. Reach out any time.