



African LGBTQ+ communities battling harms of dangerous conversion therapy

Johnson Mayamba*

Abstract: For generations, African families, schools, religious sects and peer groups have tried to 'convert' those who identify as LGBTQ+ in an effort to force them to conform to the heterosexual narrative promoted as 'homogeneous'. However, individuals undergo serious physical and psychological suffering in the name of this pseudo-therapy.

Fake therapy causes widespread harm. Uganda recently passed the [Anti-Homosexuality Bill](#), 2023, aimed at further restricting already limited rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and other non-heterosexual individuals (LGBTQ+). Besides imposing the strictest penalties, including the death penalty or life imprisonments in certain cases, the law suggests that there should be

*Johnson Mayamba is a Ugandan human rights journalist and media trainer. He has a Master's in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa ([HRDA](#)) from the Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria. He was a 2021-2022 Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow at Arizona State University and 2023 Chevening Fellow at the University of Westminster.

facilities for the '[rehabilitation](#)' of same sex people who come 'to seek help', namely conversion therapy.

[Conversion therapy](#), also known as 'corrective rape' or 'reparative therapy' or 'sexual orientation change efforts', refers to a range of discredited and harmful practices that aim to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. These practices typically involve the use of psychological or spiritual interventions, such as talk therapy, prayer, hypnosis but can include physical intrusion, for example, electric shocks, to try to 'cure' or 'repair' individuals who are attracted to the same sex or identify as transgender. The practice is based on the false premise that being LGBTQ+ is a mental disorder or a choice, and that it can be changed or suppressed through therapy. However, there is no [scientific evidence](#) to support this claim, and all major medical and mental health organisations have condemned conversion therapy as ineffective, unethical and potentially harmful.

Even so, proponents of this practice are either oblivious or indifferent to the harm this has on the victims and survivors. [Studies](#) have shown that individuals who are forced to undergo conversion therapy are at an increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. This can lead to suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and, in worst case scenarios, death. Moreover, the physical harm inflicted during conversion therapy can be extreme. In 2013, a [South African court](#) heard how a teenage boy died from severe injuries sustained while allegedly being beaten, starved, and forced to eat his own faeces at a camp linked to conversion therapy. The various methods used in conversion practice can leave individuals feeling ashamed of their sexuality or gender identity, leading to low self-esteem and internalised homophobia. It is also important to note that family and social rejection is a given. Conversion therapy creates a divide between individuals and their families or social networks, leading to feelings of isolation and rejection, not forgetting that this practice has been shown to be ineffective in changing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. For these reasons, many professional organisations, including the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the World Health Organisation, have [condemned](#) conversion therapy as a harmful and unethical practice that should be banned.

Curbing conversion therapy in Africa: progress and challenges

Some African countries have taken steps to ban or restrict the practice of conversion therapy. For example, in 2019, the [government of Angola](#) approved a law that criminalises discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The law specifically prohibits 'any practices, including medical or psychological, that aim to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of a person'. In [South Africa](#), the Health Professions Council of South Africa has issued guidelines stating that conversion therapy is unethical and prohibited. The

[Seychelles](#) has also issued ethical guidelines prohibiting use of conversion therapy by licensed medical or mental health professionals.

However, in some cases, conversion therapy is explicitly or implicitly allowed by laws or cultural practices that discriminate against sexual minorities. For example, of the 69 countries that criminalise same sex relations, [33 are in Africa](#), which creates a hostile environment for sexual minorities and makes them vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Additionally, religious or cultural beliefs may be used to justify the use of conversion therapy or other harmful practices against LGBTQ+ individuals.

Significantly, the legal framework on conversion therapy in Africa is rapidly evolving, and there is growing awareness of the harms of conversion therapy among policymakers, human rights organisations, and civil society groups. There is increasing recognition in some parts of the continent that [LGBTQ+ rights are human rights](#) and that efforts to promote tolerance and inclusion are essential for building more just and equitable societies. Many activists and organisations are working to promote greater legal protections for sexual minorities, including through advocacy, legal reform, and public education.

Also noteworthy is that the experiences of sexual minorities in Africa are diverse and varied and there is no single 'African' perspective on conversion therapy or other LGBTQ+ issues. While there may be testimonies from conversion therapy victims and survivors in Africa, it is likely that they may not have been widely reported due to the social and legal stigma surrounding homosexuality in these African countries.

For example, in 2022, [Human Rights Watch](#) published a report documenting experiences of LGBT+ individuals in Cameroon who had been subjected to violence and discrimination, including forced anal examinations and other forms of abuse by police and other authorities. While not specifically conversion therapy, these practices represent a similar attempt to control and change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Additionally, organisations such as the Pan-African ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) and the African Human Rights Coalition have [reported](#) on cases of individuals who have been subjected to conversion therapy or similar practices in African countries. However, due to the sensitive nature of the issue and the legal and social challenges facing sexual minorities in many African countries, it can be difficult to obtain detailed and reliable information on this topic.

Way forward

One key strategy to avert conversion practices is to promote legal and policy reforms that explicitly prohibit it and other harmful practices against LGBTQ+ individuals. This may involve lobbying for the adoption of new laws or regulations that explicitly prohibit conversion therapy, as well as working to ensure that

existing laws and regulations are enforced in ways that protect the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Public education and awareness-raising to promote greater understanding of the harms of conversion therapy must be emphasised as well as efforts to challenge cultural and social norms that may contribute to the stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ individuals. This would involve working with religious leaders, community groups and other stakeholders to promote greater acceptance and tolerance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Support and resources must be provided for LGBTQ+ individuals who may be affected by conversion therapy or other forms of discrimination and stigma. This may include access to counselling and mental health services, as well as legal and other forms of assistance to help individuals assert their rights and protect themselves against discrimination and harm.

Medical and mental health professionals can help prevent conversion therapy by adopting ethical standards and best practices that prioritise the well-being of LGBTQ+ patients while rejecting the use of harmful and discredited practices. Professional associations and regulatory bodies can also play a key role in promoting these standards and ensuring that they are adhered to by their members.

Finally, the growing pan-African movement of LGBTQ+ activists and organisations working in solidarity to promote greater visibility, representation and empowerment for sexual minorities can take the community a long way. This includes efforts to build networks of support and advocacy, challenge stigma and discrimination, and promote greater legal and social protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. Overall, combating conversion therapy in Africa requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort involving a range of stakeholders and strategies. By working together, it is possible to promote greater acceptance and inclusion for LGBTQ+ individuals and to kick this harmful practice off the African continent.