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# **‘My spirit broken’: Mexicans battle to ban conversion therapy**

*In Mexico, LGBT+ people often are subjected to conversion therapy aimed at trying to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, but now lawmakers want it to stop.*

By Oscar Lopez

Thomson Reuters Foundation (17.08.2020) – <https://bit.ly/32maakF> – When she was 15 years old, Paola Santillan was raped by two men who claimed they would “take

the lesbian" out of her. She kept the experience a secret for 10 years.

"I lived that stage of my life in confinement. I lived it in fear, with uncertainty, with the promise of having my spirit broken," the 27-year-old said. "Everything changed in that moment."

Santillan is one of an untold number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Mexico who have undergone traumatic experiences aimed at altering their sexual orientation or gender identity in what is known as conversion therapy.

Widely condemned by leading medical groups, including the World Psychiatric Association, conversion therapy can range from psychological counseling to religious practices and even sexual abuse in an effort to change someone from gay to straight.

Official statistics on conversion therapy in Mexico are not widely available, but mental health experts and rights activists say the practice is widespread.

"This has become fairly normalized in our society," Ivan Tagle, director general of advocacy group Yaaj told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Up to six out of every 10 young people who come to Yaaj have endured conversion therapy, he said.

The United Nations has called for a global ban on the practice, but worldwide, only a handful of countries – Brazil, Ecuador and Malta – have nationwide bans.

This month, Queensland became the first state in Australia to outlaw conversion therapy, and in July, Mexico City became the country's first jurisdiction to do so, with providers facing up to five years in prison.

But now supporters are pushing for Mexico to take the law nationwide.

A bill to ban the practice nationally was approved by Senate committees earlier this year, and lawmakers say a vote by the full chamber will take place next month.

“When I found out that these tortuous and inhumane practices existed ... I decided work on the issue,” said Citlalli Hernandez, a senator with the ruling Morena party who has championed the bill.

If the measure is approved by the Senate, Hernandez said she hopes it will pass to the House of Deputies by November. Then it will need approval from the Morena-controlled lower chamber before moving to the president's desk for signature.

***'A good Christian'***

In a socially conservative country where the Catholic church is often critical of gay rights, LGBT+ issues are divisive and for many, being gay or trans in Mexico means enduring violence and discrimination.

According to a 2016 study from Yaaj, more than a third of Mexican LGBT+ young people had experienced psychological abuse, while a fifth had suffered physical violence.

Facing a life of difficulty, many young LGBT+ people seek out conversion therapy themselves or are forced into such treatment by their parents, according to mental health experts and rights advocates.

Conversion therapies are often offered by religious groups in Mexico, where 80% of the population identifies as Catholic. Many others are members of evangelical Christian churches.

“In Mexico it works because of the guilt ... of not being a ‘good Christian’,” said Jonathan Silva, a psychology professor at the IBERO University who treats conversion therapy survivors.

Carmen Francisco, 33, said she started going to conversion therapy 10 years ago at an evangelical church because of the guilt she felt being in a relationship with another woman.

“Being a Christian ... I felt bad, like I was doing something wrong,” she said.

At times, she said she thought the process was working, and she went four years without dating women.

But she paid a steep price, particularly when sessions devolved into exorcisms with her ‘therapist’ speaking in tongues.

“I would ask God to change me,” Francisco recalled. “I remember sessions where I would end up kneeling on the floor crying, and I even remember times when I would end up vomiting.”

According to Silva, many interventions take place at intense weekend religious retreats.

“Having three days where someone tells you that ... your life identity is nothing more than a sin, a piece of shit, the scum of humanity, has very long-term implications,” he said.

Trans woman Jazz Bustamante said despite surviving an earlier experience with conversion therapy at a Pentecostal church, she went on a religious retreat at age 21 in her own “spiritual quest”.

Over three sleepless nights, Bustamante was told to write down her whole life story on pieces of paper.

On the final night, someone identified as a “godfather” took her aside for a ceremony with candles and incense, where she was told to burn every page and ask God for forgiveness.

The experience proved traumatic.

“The depression and anxiety attacks worsened,” Bustamante said. “There were emotional complications.”

### ***‘The survivors’***

LGBT+ people are also sent for conversion therapy at Mexico’s church-funded addiction treatment and rehabilitation centers, rights advocates say.

“They might not promote it in their advertising, but there are these networks for admitting people for (being LGBT+),” said Alex Orue, executive director of youth suicide prevention group It Gets Better Mexico.

In places with actual drug addicts and often administered by men, young LGBT+ people, especially lesbian and bisexual women and girls are “easy prey,” said Orue.

“There are many reports of these ‘corrective’ rapes.”

Mexico’s rampant machismo can make such sexual abuse seem permissible, mental health experts say.

“There is a certain ‘authorization’ for men ... to impinge on the life and the body of a woman,” said Silva, the psychology professor.

But whether the intervention is sexual, psychological or spiritual, the consequences can be devastating.

“Everything points to a destruction of any possibility of an identity for a person,” Silva said.

For Santillan, after getting raped for being a lesbian, it took a decade before she could talk about it.

Now sharing her story and campaigning for a conversion therapy ban has given her new purpose.

“I made the personal political,” Santillan said. “Now it’s me who also listens to other testimonies and gives a voice to the survivors that we are.”

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