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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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## **Mexico sees deadliest year for LGBT+ people in five years**

***In 2019, 117 lesbian, gay, bi and trans people were killed in Mexico.***

By Oscar Lopez

Thomson Reuters Foundation (15.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2ZBiPA2> - Mexico is seeing a surge of extreme violence toward LGBT+ people in its deadliest year in half a decade, a leading rights group said on Friday, citing cases of victims brutally stabbed and brazenly killed in public.

In 2019, 117 lesbian, gay, bi and trans people were killed in Mexico, up almost a third compared with 2018 and the highest number since 2015, according to LGBT+ advocacy group Letra S.

Overall in Mexico, last year was the deadliest on record, but the increase among the gay and trans community was more severe, said Alejandro Brito, Letra S director.

"We've documented that victims are subjected to multiple forms of violence, before or even after they were murdered," Brito said.

"There is a cruelty towards the victims," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Victims have been found handcuffed, stabbed repeatedly and in public places, he said.

A lesbian woman was killed while out one night with her girlfriend in the city of Cuernavaca, and the bodies of several murdered trans women were found on the streets.

Amid widespread gang violence and drug trafficking groups in Mexico, more than 34,500 homicide victims were reported last year, according to official data. But while the number of murder victims was up 2.5% in 2019, the number of gay and trans people killed was 27% higher than in 2018, said Letra S.

More than half the victims were transgender women, while nearly a third were gay men. At least 441 LGBT+ people were murdered in Mexico between 2015 and 2019, the group said.

LGBT+ rights have grown stronger in Mexico, with discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation outlawed since 2003. The country was the second to implement such a law in Latin America after Ecuador.

More than half of Mexico's 32 states recognize gay marriage, and the nation's top court has ruled that trans people have a legal right to change their gender identity on official documents.

Brito said the increasing visibility afforded by advances in LGBT+ issues may have contributed to the surging violence.

The violence "is specifically directed at LGBT people," he said.

"The greater visibility ... has led macho groups, fundamentalist sectors to reject this public presence of gays, lesbians and trans people."

Gay and trans people still face societal prejudice in the predominantly Catholic country where religious groups frequently criticize LGBT+ rights.

In a 2017 government survey, about a third of Mexicans said they would not rent out a room to a gay or trans person. Lawmakers welcomed the data for highlighting the often underreported violence faced by LGBT+ people in Mexico.

"Hate crimes due to homophobia and transphobia are generally made invisible," said Patricia Mercado, a senator with the opposition Citizens' Movement party. "We have to continue working to prevent all forms of discrimination that can lead to a hate crime."

The data on murders was based on news reports of LGBT+ killings, but the actual number could be much higher, according to Letra S.

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## **Queer couples stage kiss-in protest in shopping mall after security banned two gay men from holding hands**

***Unfurling a sprawling LGBT+ Pride flag, protesters packed a shopping mall in Mexico on Sunday after security staff banned a gay couple from kissing and holding hands.***

By Josh Milton

Pink News (02.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cOsqHK> - "Love is love!" the demonstrators chanted as they walked by luxury fashion stores and coffee house chains, kissing one another and waving flags as shoppers exchanged quizzical looks.

The Besotón vs Homofobia 2020 march was held in defiance after Galerías Monterrey, Monterrey, security officers demanded a gay couple stop kissing in the plaza.

Jorge and Iván were waiting in the square until a movie started in the cinema nearby when the patrolling guards cornered them and asked them to leave.

Officers asked if the couple "could not be groping" outside in case children see them, Jorge, one half of the couple, claimed in a viral Facebook video.

Regias del Drag, a drag queen collective in the northern city, organised the protest to openly defy the guards who, Jorde said, claimed they were "only following orders".

At around 3pm, the shopping center of the plaza was paralyzed by the impassioned protesters, who rolled out rainbow banners and draped flags around them as capes. Some hoisted poles with unmissable trans-inclusive gender symbols on top.

Chants of "education is the option", "no to discrimination" and "not a step back" echoed across the canyon of shops as protesters descended down the escalators.

The group, which included Jorge and Iván alongside dozens of supporters and drag queens, later spilled into one of the major walkways of the shopping mall and kissed and embraced one another. A circle of supporters cheering each on.

### ***LGBT+ rights in Mexico***

Mexico City, a liberal island in the vastly conservative United Mexican States, first paved the way for marriage equality and a seismic shift towards acceptance in Latin America in 2009.

In breaking long-held taboos around homosexuality, the jurisdiction became the first to legalise same-sex marriage.

Years on, and each of the 31 states of Mexico have unique codes around marriage, forming a patchwork of states that have various degrees of marriage equality but, overall, it is not illegal.

Moreover, LGBT+ citizens enjoy study anti-discrimination laws and acceptance is on the up. Although, rights around parenthood and the military remain in limbo.

Some bills are still pending, clogging the Congress of Mexico, while others, such as banning conversion therapy, are proposed.

Furthermore, in 2019, Mexico was considered the world's second-deadliest country for trans people.

A study by Mexican LGBT+ rights organisation Letra Ese has shown that, between 2013 and 2016, at least 473 LGBT+ people have been killed in the country, and 261 of these were trans women.

According to the report, the last two years have been the most violent, with a 30 per cent increase in the number of murders in relation to the average of previous years.

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