

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-historied woman. Has shared story before. Survivor from England.

Committee Member - Karen Adam (KA)

(KA): I want it to be intuitive chat. Listen to your experience.

(W): In my professional career, I was a Headteacher for almost twenty years. Despite being an unsuccessful student when I was at school, leaving school at 16 with minimal qualifications to work in the building trade, I changed track to become a teacher and ended up as a Head after getting an Open University degree and a Masters Degree.

I am 74 years old, married with two children and a granddaughter.

My academic studies at College were Mathematics and Divinity - I joked that if I couldn't calculate an answer, I could pray!

In talking about the treatment I had inflicted on me, I'm not looking for sympathy, I'm looking for ACTION. Governments and changes of legislation can't undo what happened to me but it can help this and future generations.

I will explain my conversion practice experiences as calmly as possible without too much emotion.

From the age of 3 or 4, I felt uncomfortable with my gender. I had no idea that anyone else felt as I did and didn't know that 'trans' existed. The pressure in my emotions and thoughts increased to the extent that I became suicidal in my teens. My attempts to kill myself, thankfully, were unsuccessful – what a waste that would have been.

Aged 17/18, my Vicar found me in a distressed state when he called to my house unexpectedly and I spoke with him through painful tears. We both, at the time, thought God had sent him to find me that day. Seeing my desperation to be 'cured', he recommended that I talked to a psychiatrist who was known to the Vicar and worked at a local mental health hospital. I was, to all intents and purposes, functioning well outwardly other than this gender dimension.

There was no compulsion involved but they, like I did, thought that I could be 'cured' and, of course, I needed to be 'cured' because I was "wrong, dirty, evil,..."! I went

voluntarily to the psychiatrist who listened carefully and kindly. He recommended treatment by the NHS at a hospital in a neighbouring town.

At the hospital, I had all the details explained to me. The treatment was electro-aversion 'therapy' which involved being strapped to a wooden chair with electrodes, soaked in brine, attached to my arm and I would receive painful electric shocks. Despite it sounding horrific, I was desperate to rid myself of my feelings and these doctors believed it would work and "make me better".

Each session, I was ushered into a darkened room and strapped into the chair. Flashing images of women were shown on the screen in front of me and then the switch was thrown and an electric current passed painfully through my body. The rationale they had was that being electrocuted in this way would make me associate pain with my wish to be female. The pain was such that, for most of the session, I cried copious tears. I have said previously that the worst part was not the horrendous pain or the humiliation. For me, the worst thing at the time was simply that it didn't work in the way they envisaged. However, I physically shivered for the next 40 years after that treatment every time I thought about it, which was very frequent.

That diminished and now disappeared after 2002 when I finally aligned my gender presentation with my gender identity. In the intervening years, I endured bulimia and self-harm. I had sought help from Charing Cross Gender Identity Clinic via my GP but over 15 years their strategy was to deter me from what many call 'transition'.

My treatment those years ago was inhumane, barbaric, torture and needs to stop as soon as possible.

It was not just the event itself; it was the imbuing in me self-hatred and suppression of feelings and, even now, I have difficulty in experiencing any positive emotion.

Even after 2002, that lack of positive emotions still continue. I had hoped it would give me an opportunity to change and be more positive and I'm still working at it.

That type of 'therapy' no longer takes place but so-called Conversion 'Therapy' still takes place with psychological and physical pressure being applied. It must stop!

I was giving a talk to an audience of NHS staff about 10 years ago on LGBTQI+ issues and my own life. In the audience, unbeknown to me, was the daughter of one of my former Deputy Heads. In the Q&A after I'd spoken, she said she knew that I was highly regarded, highly respected and very successful as a Headteacher. Her question was how could it have been better for me if I had been allowed to be 'myself' earlier.

My answer was simple and succinct, "I could have been happy".

And, that is what banning needs to be about. It needs to be about recognising individual people as individuals. **EVERYONE IS UNIQUE.** What joins us together is far more than what separates us.

It was emphasised to me that I should feel that there was something wrong in me that needed to be treated and cured. NO! The natural part of me and all people is what needs to be recognised. Being left handed was once considered unnatural and treated with punishment. It is natural. We recognise that now. Children were forced to use their right hands and it worked but only in changing their behaviour, not their innate being. Damage was often apparent in those children even into adulthood.

(W): Laughing) A former colleague, meeting me late in 2002, said: “We should have known you were a woman”. I was flattered until, “Why?“, I asked. **(W):** Further laughter!) “Because you had nice nails and talked a lot.” My gender for me has never been about clothes, make-up etc. It is something far, far deeper. It is my identity.

(KA): What you described as electrocution practices. Along with these practices, not allowed now, the fact that people aren’t allowed to be who they are is still damaging.

(W): Conversion practices of many kinds are still taking place today. Aggressive/religious settings/heavy praying. The belief is that there is something wrong with you that needs to be fixed. Needs to be cured. It does not need ‘curing’ and cannot be ‘cured’ – you can change my behaviour, you can’t change me!

We need legislation to STOP conversion practice taking place. The message has to be that you are allowed to be who you are. To be nurtured.

Despite first being treated at Charing Cross Gender Clinic from 1987, the first professional who said to me that it was okay to be as I am took place in 2000 – I was 53 years old at the time! It was a local psychiatrist who was the first to say that were I to chose to align my gender identity and gender presentation he would help me. There was no pressure from him for any decision but he would help me whatever. It made such a difference. I never understood why I felt the way I did. Maybe it isn’t a case of understanding, maybe it is simply a case of acceptance. I want acceptance for me, not for what I do.

(KA): what is apparent to me is the psychological harm it does is very long-lasting and the cultural aspect of it; if these practices are still happening, it is still allowing society to be accepting of it. If there was a hard line, it might help a societal/cultural shift? Do you think?

(W): Yes, I think very much so. To give an example of how we need a shift in approach to acceptability: On starting today, one of the Members said “welcome, ladies and gentlemen” – language is powerful and any non-binary people, for example, may feel excluded. The person saying it didn’t mean to give that impression, but it can instantly exclude people.

Some people say that by helping someone align their gender identity with their gender presentation is still a form of conversion practice. I would argue strongly against that view. It could have helped me enormously at 17 and beyond if anyone had been even neutral about it. I understood the strategy of clinicians – it was to make it as difficult as possible to accept myself.

Of course, the arguments of freedom of speech, especially regarding religious beliefs come into the argument as well. My studies in Divinity allow me to counter most arguments but, of course, people can have their own beliefs, but when it impinges on someone else to acute detriment, that is when legislation needs to come in. In some presentations I do I quote Deuteronomy 21:18-21 where it says that an unruly son should be stoned to death outside the city walls. We have a law to prevent that! The needs of the individual should be paramount alongside humanity, kindness and civility.

I went voluntarily to the aversion/conversion 'therapy' and I shouldn't have. I was vulnerable and subjected to societal pressures and peer group preference. I should not have been offered this quack treatment and shouldn't have accepted it. However, as many have found, you can be ostracised by your family, your community and your religion.

Banning Conversion 'Therapy'/Practice can provide a foundation for a more gentle, supportive society.

(KA): you said you went in voluntarily. This insight is important to have. Why do they go in voluntarily and a feeling that people have to change? There is something underlying that we are not getting that shift culturally yet for people to be allowed to be who they want to be. If I could do anything in my position to help inform/take forward, what would it be?

(W): There are two quotes which come to mind:

"All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to remain silent?" And the second is that, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends." By continuing the work you are doing, your words and actions will help good triumph and we can ban this abhorrent practice in all its forms.

The acceptance by UK Governments of the need to ban conversion practices has been going on for more than 3 years. There are people being damaged daily. There are people dying because of conversion practice. It is that important for us all to keep going until a full, comprehensive ban is put into legislation. No opt outs; no permission being allowed – it must stop!

Please keep up your excellent work!

(KA): I feel privileged for you sharing your story.

(W): Thank you for listening.

[shared tears of action and resolve at this point].

(W): We must help future generations to grow up unquestioned about who they are.

I have been damaged but not defeated. I have not only survived, I have succeeded. That keeps me going! Thank you, again.