

Gender conversion 'therapy' made me suicidal. I fear for other young Nigerians

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A survivor warns against the harmful practices many are forced to undergo to try to change their sexuality or gender identity

When I was nine, my parents took me to a traditional healer. He used a razor to make three incisions on the insteps of my feet, my wrists, my elbows, my forehead and on the back of my neck. As blood started to flow, the healer rubbed a concoction of herbs into the incisions and gave me a potion to drink. He took alligator pepper and rubbed it on various parts of my body. There was a rooster, into which he cast the "demon" inside me. The rooster was slaughtered and thrown into the river, supposedly taking my sexuality with it.

In boarding school, I met a boy who I would say was my first love. We talked about everything and liked to take long walks. But he struggled. I watched him struggle to accept his sexuality. He felt there was something wrong with him but I didn't know how to help him. For me it was different. It wasn't just about sexuality; it was also about gender. I was born male but I have never felt like a man.

When I was 22, in university, I met a transgender woman. She was a lot more open, more cosmopolitan, more upfront about what she wanted. I'd never met anyone like her. We had a sisterhood -- fun, graceful, pure. It was as if the scales fell from my eyes.

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- Anonymous

My family was not happy about our friendship. They said I was bringing shame to the family. They took me to a Catholic priest to cast away the stubborn spirit that made me different. The priest told me that God had intended a great path for me, but some negative force had diverted me from it. He made me believe I could change. For a year, I fasted, I went to mass and took communion. I recited all the prayers as though my life depended on it. And it felt as if it did, you see, with the way everyone treated me.

But I was all right. I always was. The main issue with conversion therapy is that victims don't talk about it. It tends to make something that is so wrong look right. The worst part is when they are able to convince you that change can happen, that there is indeed something wrong with you, that you are a mistake of nature, an anomaly. It messes you up.

The encounter with the healer was many years ago, but the memory is still harrowing. What part of me has been lost in an effort to make me fit a heteronormative, socially acceptable form? I'm 43 now. Still gay, still a trans woman. Still looking over my shoulder fearing that someone might want

to hurt me. I'm much more scared than the average person. And I'm not the only one. Exposure to gender identity conversion efforts can have [severe adverse](#) effects on mental health. There are thousands of young people in Nigeria being subjected to these dangerous practices in a bid to "cure" them.

There are no structures in Nigeria to deal with these psychological scars. That's why we need our community. We need to have conversations about safety and security, especially with regard to familial relationships and dating. We need to openly talk about the devastating impact of conversion therapy. I have contemplated suicide several times. I attempted it once; relieved that it failed.

I've noticed that when people have a personal experience -- they find out their partner or friend or child is LGBTQ+ -- they become less aggressive. I think my mother always knew, even as she went through the motions of trying to convert me. At some point she realised it wasn't something she could struggle against. My father never accepted my reality, even until he died. He didn't know how to deal with it. People need to realise that the world is not black and white; it's in colour.

Many people, like my friend in university, left for other countries where they thought they could live freely. But nowhere is safe. Brazil, Ecuador, Taiwan, Malta and [Germany](#) are the only countries in the world that have banned conversion therapy. Nigeria is a hostile place. The [Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act](#) makes our existences illegal. I have not been able to undergo surgery here because there's no access to medical care to support transitioning.

I know that if I look after myself, I will be fine. I'm concerned about the younger ones. The [Commonwealth Equality Network](#) is working towards decriminalisation of homosexuality in Commonwealth countries. I look forward to freedom. It may not be in my time. But we must keep fighting. Just so future generations will not live through the same things I have lived through.

- *The author, from [Nigeria](#), wished to remain anonymous to protect her safety*

Anonymous, as told to Kemi Falodun

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/28/gender-conversion-therapy-made-me-suicidal-i-fear-for-other-young-nigerians>