

## **Conversion therapy- a violation of Iranian gay men's human rights**

Although, the stigma of homosexuality has reduced over the last 20 years the stigma of being gay persists worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Now accepted in many countries, homosexuality, was removed from the DSM-III and ICD 10 in 1973 and 2017, respectively, however, it carries the death penalty in but in Iran, in accordance with the Islamic penal code (clauses 108 to 126). Religious institutions are opposed to homosexuality leading to rejection of gay men by families and society, the promotion of internalised stigma and the development of pseudo-scientific therapies by health professionals. Under the control of religious institutions, the Ministries of Health and Medical Education, Science, Research and Technology and the Psychology and Counseling Organisation of Iran, under the control of religious institutions have condemned homosexuality. The attitude of the Iranian medical profession poses a threat to the health of sexual minorities.<sup>2</sup> Based on AK's clinical experiences, the coordinated activities of therapists, physicians, religious institutions, and parents of gay men have commonly promoted conversion therapy to change one's sexual orientation. This situation is more common in adolescents who cannot legal decisions independently.

Conversion therapy is based on an unscientific assumption that people with non-traditional sexual orientation are psychologically damaged and changing their sexuality orientation will benefit not only the individual themselves but also society. In Iran, conversion therapy can include counselling, prayers, aversion therapies, drugs or hormone injections, electroconvulsive therapy and at the extreme, sex reassignment surgery. Most of these so called treatments for homosexuality including conversion therapy, are now banned in many parts of the world as being inhumane and unscientific<sup>3</sup> while damaging the health and well-being of sexual minorities.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in Iran therapists and religious institutions continue to believe that same sex attraction is harmful and should be changed. The prevalence of the practice of conversion therapy in Iran is unknown. AK's clinical observations suggests that this type of therapy has reinforced the belief in Iran that sexual orientation is changeable; therefore, gay men refusing therapy pose a threat to their lives for resisting cure. Additionally, AK has observed that this belief is one of the main reasons for family members killing their own gay relatives. Sexual orientation is inherent and irreversible and conversion therapy violates ethical practice.<sup>3</sup> Thus, any attempt to change one's orientation, contrary to their desire, violates their basic human rights and urgently needs be banned.

We suggest several actions. First, accurate and unbiased research be undertaken on the extent and practice of conversion therapy across Iran. Second, WHO and Human

Rights Groups should adopt a strong stand against Iran for allowing the practice of conversion therapy. Third, punitive sanctions be imposed on therapists who practice any form of therapy designed to change sexual orientation. Finally, we call for international pressure on creating LGBT friendly organisations in Iran that will educate the community, family and friends about LGBT community.

Amir Kabir\*, M.Sc.,<sup>1</sup> & Irwin Nazareth, MBBS, PhD<sup>2</sup>

1- School of Psychology, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran.

(\*Due to personal danger from my work and this paper I am obliged to use my pseudonym)

2- Professor of Primary Care & Population Sciences, University College London, Royal Free Campus, Rowland Hill Street, London NW32PF

**Competing interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## **References:**

1- King M. Stigma in psychiatry seen through the lens of sexuality and gender. *BJPsych international*. 2019 Nov;16(4):77-80.

2-Kabir A. Medical profession bias against sexual minorities threatens the health of Iranian sexual minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry*. 2021 Nov 9:48674211057072.

3- Asch BJ. APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response>. Pdf

4- Salway T. Opinion: To end conversion therapy, we must understand what it actually means—The Globe and Mail. The Globe and Mail. 26 May 2020. Available: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-to-end-conversion-therapy-we-must-understand-what-it-actually-means/>.