

# Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: written evidence from Coalition for Marriage

Submitted by: Coalition for Marriage (C4M)

To: The Committee for Communities, Northern Ireland Assembly

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## Summary

1. Coalition for Marriage exists to uphold marriage as the voluntary, exclusive, lifelong union of one man and one woman. This Bill goes to the heart of the freedom to say so. Its memorandum says it won't criminalise the expression of belief. But it would put at risk the parent or minister who teaches that belief to someone in their care, and teaching is how a belief is handed on.
2. The Bill's case also rests on a claim its sponsor put plainly to the Assembly, that sexual orientation is "innate". It's the claim that people are "born this way", and we heard it throughout the redefinition of marriage. The science doesn't support it. Yet the Bill protects only those who affirm a person's present sense of their orientation, and exposes those who counsel otherwise.
3. The Bill fills no real gap in the law. Violence and abuse are already crimes, and the serious cases are punishable far more heavily than this Bill allows. What it adds is a crime of conversation.
4. We ask the Committee to recommend that the Assembly does not proceed with the Bill. It should be withdrawn, not improved.

## About Coalition for Marriage

5. Coalition for Marriage is a grassroots campaign founded in 2012 to defend marriage as the voluntary, exclusive, lifelong union of one man and one woman. Our published work is at <https://www.c4m.org.uk>

## The freedom to teach marriage

6. The Bill never mentions marriage. It doesn't need to. For Christians and many others, the belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman goes with a second conviction, that sex belongs within marriage. To teach the one is to teach the other.
7. The Bill protects belief only while it stays a statement. Clause 7(1)(b) provides that there is no intent to change or suppress where "the intent is solely to express beliefs or opinions, without directing a victim towards a particular sexual orientation or gender identity". The Bill is at <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/non-executive-bills/mandate-2022-2027/conversion-practices-criminalisation-bill/conversion-practices-criminalisation-bill---as-introduced---fpv.pdf> The memorandum says "It is not the intent of the Bill to criminalise the expression of moral/ religious beliefs on these matters", and adds: "The intention of the Bill is to target conduct which extends beyond the expression of beliefs into directive practices." It is at <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/>

8. A mother or father who teaches a son or daughter what marriage is, or a minister who counsels a church member asking how to live by it, is doing more than stating a belief. So is a friend or minister who urges a married man to stay with his wife rather than leave her for a same-sex relationship. Each is guiding a particular person, and that goes beyond the expression the Bill protects. On 15 September Jon Burrows told the Assembly that “a parent would, in effect, need a KC at the kitchen table before having conversations with their child”, at <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2026/09/15&docID=497468>

9. Once guidance goes beyond expression, the Bill's terms are wide. Conversion therapy includes “counselling or any form of talking therapy” and “coaching or instruction” (clause 4(1)). The Bill never says what it means to “suppress” a sexual orientation. Under clause 8, “psychological harm includes fear, alarm or distress”, which a young person may well feel when told something unwelcome. The ordinary law of assault counts a recognisable psychiatric illness as bodily harm, but not, in words the House of Lords approved in 1997, “mere emotions such as fear or distress”, at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199798/ldjudgmt/jd970724/irland01.htm> This Bill makes distress enough. Consent is no defence (clause 1(3)), and there's no right to claim trial by jury (clause 9). The only defence is for the accused to show that what they did “was reasonable in the particular circumstances” (clause 1(2)), and the memorandum records the sponsor's view that “such a circumstance is unlikely to occur”. The sponsor told the Assembly on 28 September that “both the police and the Public Prosecution Service would have to deem there to be a probability of prosecution, so reasonableness would be tested not just at the very end of the process, in the courts”. That still leaves the parent or minister to face the investigation.

10. The question was put to the sponsor directly. On 28 September Mr Gaston asked: “Does it include teaching that sexual relations belong exclusively within marriage between one man and one woman?” The sponsor gave no direct answer. In winding up he said: “The concern addressed by the Bill is not voluntary abstinence, celibacy, ordinary prayer or religious observance but practices that exert pressure, coercion, manipulation or other forms of harm.” That protects the person who chooses to live by the teaching, not the person who teaches it. A parent's urging is easily called “pressure”, and under clause 8 a child's distress is harm. None of the sponsor's assurance is in the Bill. The Official Report is at <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2026/09/28&docID=500209>

11. Nor will the sponsor exempt the places where that teaching is done. He noted that “some Members have called for exemptions in the home, churches and elsewhere”, and said “we have taken the right decision not to do those carveouts on the basis of settings”. In the same debate the Minister for Communities stated the principle the Bill leaves out: “Parents have the duty and the liberty to guide their children according to their values, and Churches and communities have the liberty to teach according to their convictions.”

12. A belief about marriage that may be stated, but not safely taught to your own child, isn't free.

The claim beneath the Bill: “born this way”

13. On 15 September the sponsor told the Assembly: “There is a difference between a sexual orientation, which is innate, and an impulsive sexual disorder, which people of any sexual orientation can experience.” On 28 September he said that those taking part in conversion practices are “misled into believing that that change is possible”. A Member supporting the Bill put it most bluntly on 15 September: “You cannot change your sexuality any more than you can change the colour of your skin”. The Official Report for 15 September is at <https://aims.niasembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2026/09/15&docID=497468>

14. That’s the claim that people are “born this way”, and that sexual orientation is like race. We heard it throughout the redefinition of marriage, and laws like this follow from that redefinition. Once the law denied that marriage is the union of a man and a woman, it was only a matter of time before teaching that truth was treated as a wrong for the State to stamp out. The claim isn’t what the science shows.

15. The largest genetic study of same-sex sexual behaviour, published in Science in 2019, covered 477,522 people. Its authors found that “In aggregate, all tested genetic variants accounted for 8 to 25% of variation in same-sex sexual behavior”. The variants “do not allow meaningful prediction of an individual’s sexual behavior”, and “there is certainly no single genetic determinant”. Genes play a part, but no gene decides it. The study is at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7082777/>

16. Studies of twins point the same way. If orientation were fixed by genes, identical twins would always match. A 2016 review of the twin studies found that identical twins matched in 52% of cases in samples of volunteers but in 24% in samples drawn from population registries, and judged that “the latter figures provide better estimates of the true concordances”, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1529100616637616> On the better estimate, identical twins share their orientation about a quarter of the time. They share the colour of their skin.

17. Sexual attraction can also change over a life. Lisa Diamond and Clifford Rosky, writing on the legal case for gay rights, reviewed the long-term studies and concluded that “it is not scientifically accurate to describe same-sex sexual orientation as a uniformly immutable trait”. They report that “Rates of change in attractions among same-sex-attracted men ranged from 26% to 45%, and rates of change in same-sex-attracted women ranged from 55% to 60%.” Their review is at

<https://dc.law.utah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=scholarship> In the United Kingdom, a study surveyed 22,673 people twice, six years apart. It found that “a significant minority of 6.6% changed their reported sexual orientation”, and 7.9% of those aged 16 to 24, at <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/sociology/news/one-in-15-in-changed-reported-sexual-identity-over-a-six-year-period-new-uk-survey-study-finds>

18. The professional bodies don’t claim otherwise. In 2013 the American Psychiatric Association said that the causes of sexual orientation “are not known at this time” and “may even vary over time”, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250319172434/https://www.psychiatry.org/file%20library/about-apa/organization-documents-policies/policies/position-2013-homosexuality.pdf> The Royal College of Psychiatrists, which favours a ban on conversion therapy, still

said in 2014 that “It is not the case that sexual orientation is immutable or might not vary to some extent in a person’s life”, at [https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/position-statements/ps02\\_2014.pdf](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/position-statements/ps02_2014.pdf)

19. Nothing in our case depends on whether therapy can change a person’s orientation. The point is narrower. The Bill defines a person’s sexual orientation as “what the victim considers it to be” (clause 6(1)(a)). It protects those whose intent is “to affirm a sexual orientation or gender identity which the victim considers is, or may be, their sexual orientation or gender identity” (clause 7(1)(c)), which the memorandum calls “affirming the victim’s choice of identity”. So the Bill takes a young person’s present sense of their orientation as settled. It protects everyone who confirms it and exposes the parent or minister who counsels patience. Yet the evidence says that sense can change, and 16 to 24 year olds change it more than any other age group, 7.9% of them in six years.

No gap in the law

20. Violence and abuse are already crimes. The memorandum concedes that “some actions may already be captured by existing criminal offences, such as those involving physical assault or domestic abuse”. The only other option it considered was “Do Nothing”.

21. The serious cases are already covered, and more heavily. The offence of threatening or abusive behaviour under section 2 of the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 can be committed by “a single act”, whatever the relationship, and is punishable by up to five years, at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/17/section/2> Where conduct causes a recognisable psychiatric illness, actual and grievous bodily harm are each punishable in Northern Ireland by up to seven years, at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2004/1991/article/4> This Bill’s maximum is two.

22. What the Bill adds is conversation. The memorandum expects “a low volume offence with a strong deterrent effect”. Victoria, in Australia, banned conversion practices in 2021, and its Law Reform Commission has reported: “To date, there have been no criminal prosecutions under the Act.” That’s at <https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/publication/change-or-suppression-practices-ban-consultation-paper/4-effectiveness-of-criminal-offences/> A law that works by deterrence rather than prosecution works on the people who stay silent, the parent and the minister who decide that a conversation isn’t worth the risk.

23. The only Northern Ireland study the memorandum cites rests on ten interviews, and its authors say that its findings “do not represent findings that can be generalised”, at <https://www.rainbow-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conversion-Practices-Research-Report.pdf>

What we ask

24. The Committee should recommend that the Assembly does not proceed with the Bill. Amendment can’t mend it, because its purpose is the problem. It would make guidance a crime in one direction only, in the home and in the church, on the strength of a claim about human nature that the science doesn’t support. It should be withdrawn, not improved.

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