

# The Global Future of LGBT Human Rights



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The LGBT human rights movement has made tremendous progress, yet much remains to be done. Starting with the Netherlands in 2000, Belgium in 2003, and Canada and Spain in 2005, many liberal democracies around the world now legally recognize same-sex relationships, providing marriage rights to gay couples. Last year Mexico and Ireland became the latest to join that list of 21 countries.

In the United States, last summer's Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples must be granted the right to marry in every state was momentous, but the fight is far from over. Even though the gay rights movement started here, we are still catching up

with other developed nations with regard to extending federal civil rights protections in employment, housing and public accommodation. We are also seeing a flood of proposed religious exemption legislation aimed at blunting the marriage ruling in conservative states.

Progress is taking place in the developing world, as well. For example, last June, Mozambique decriminalized homosexuality. Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay led a joint effort in the United Nations to pass a resolution condemning violence and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. These advances are

significant and may help to open doors in other developing nations where LGBT populations still face serious, and sometimes deadly, prejudice.

“Many challenges lie ahead,” says Graeme Reid, LGBT rights director for Human Rights Watch. “In countries where repressive governments attack civil society organizations and prevent them from operating freely and openly, LGBT people will be forced to live a shadow existence.”

More than 75 countries still criminalize same-sex sexual conduct, including Morocco, Pakistan and India. In eight countries, Saudi Arabia among them, it is punishable by death. Russia, with the help of some countries in the Middle East and Africa, continues to spin anti-gay resolutions in the U.N. In fact, when South Africa, Brazil and Uruguay attempted to broaden the definition of family to be more inclusive toward LGBT people, Russia blocked the attempts.

Yet despite the challenging road ahead, most human rights leaders are confident the movement will progress, and that a century from now, LGBT rights will be more broadly upheld and protected. Professor Kenji Yoshino of NYU Law School and Sylvia Ann Hewlett of the Task Force for Talent Innovation recently argued in a report that the movement for global LGBT rights has reached a tipping point, where the characteristics that previously hindered progress — gay invisibility in society generally coupled with diffuseness across populations — now drive it forward, as more people come out.

## So what needs to be done?

### 1

#### **Business must keep leading the charge.**

The global business community remains one of the most effective advocates for LGBT rights (and strong evidence that the movement is gaining ground). Ninety-three percent of global Fortune 500 companies prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and 75 percent protect the expression of gender identity. Individuals have a role to play, too. Business leaders who are LGBT need to come out, and their allies at work need to speak up.

Randy Berry, U.S. State Department special envoy for LGBT human rights, recently said, “Businesses with global exposure have long been at the forefront of LGBT-friendly policies in the workplace, not only because they believe it’s the right thing to do, but because they also know — as we do — that being inclusive, and valuing the types of contributions that diversity brings, just make good business sense, period.”

### 2

#### **Corporations need to come together.**

Multinational corporations play an indisputable and integral role in advancing LGBT rights around the world. For example, organizations like Out Leadership have assembled coalitions of companies committed to not only fair LGBT workplace practices but, more broadly, to championing human rights where

they do business. Open For Business, another coalition of global companies, including American Express, AT&T, Brunswick, EY, Google, IBM, LinkedIn, Linklaters, MasterCard, RBS, Standard Chartered, Thomson Reuters and Virgin Group, issued a comprehensive report arguing that “inclusive, diverse societies are better for business and better for economic growth.”

### 3

#### **We need to support and expand programs like the Global Equality Fund.**

We need more partnerships like the Global Equality Fund. Created in 2011 by the U.S. State Department, it brings together governments, companies and NGOs with the objective of empowering LGBT persons to live freely, without discrimination. The fund provides vitally needed grants, emergency protections, technical assistance and programming to more than 50 countries around the world to advance and protect human rights for LGBT people. Multinational coalitions like these are our best chance at driving meaningful, global change.

In many respects, the corporate world has moved faster than governments to provide equal protections to LGBT people. It not only set an example but helped pave the way for last year’s U.S. Supreme Court ruling and other advances. As progressive businesses and multinational coalitions continue to press forward, and as we push for the end of repressive regimes more generally, it’s easy to imagine a future where, in most places, sexual orientation and gender identity are non-issues.