

**Remarks at the International Lesbian & Gay Association (ILGA),
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It's a privilege to be here with you today and to strengthen the partnership between ILGA and Amnesty International. LGBT rights are Human Rights. It's a great day today - two days after Human Rights Day and it's 12/12/12.

As an Indian, I have seen at close quarters of what discrimination against lower castes, against religious minorities and against women has done to individuals, communities and the country as a whole.

Being dark skinned, despite all the privileges I enjoy, I have faced discrimination inside and outside India. Being an immigrant in the west for the last 15 years, I deal with discrimination on a routine basis, not least as I go through airport security screenings.

The tone and colour of our skin should not matter. Neither should our sexual orientation nor gender identity. Neither should our religious beliefs nor our scepticism. I could keep going with the endless criteria which our societies use to categorize and judge us.

I don't need to tell this audience that what should matter – first and foremost is our shared humanity and our desire to live in dignity and enjoy our rights and the equal protection of the law. Instead we are forced to grapple with how our identities are used to demonize us and exclude us from human rights protections.

I believe the Amnesty International Movement has an important role to play in ensuring that no person is subjected to discrimination, violence or persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

I believe it is imperative that Amnesty International address these issues at every opportunity and that the struggle to end these abuses be seen as absolutely integral to building respect for human rights – not as peripheral issue within the human rights discourse.

Slippery slope:

Because once you start making exceptions, you are going down a slippery slope. Yes, we are for human rights, except when it comes to terrorists, is a phrase we increasingly hear.

It is a struggle that continues in virtually every country in the world – people are excluded, imprisoned, and attacked because of their sexual orientation and their gender identity. The consequences are devastating – at times deadly.

There is no question that the struggle to promote the inherent dignity and equality of all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity is one of the most fiercely contested.

It is one of the few issues that has African traditionalists joining forces with western religious groups to attack lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex Africans. Religious fundamentalists of every persuasion find common cause in proclaiming that homosexuality subverts the “natural” order of things.

Even though I grew up in a cosmopolitan city in Bangalore, in South India in a family that was liberal minded on most issues, it took me a long time to fully understand why this issue was important at so many levels.

In many developing countries, the default position on this issue is that this is a western imposition of an extreme notion of exercising individual freedom at the cost of social good -- notwithstanding ongoing homophobia in western countries.

Exceptions apart, that this issue is fundamentally linked to discrimination and marginalisation is a long way from being understood even by otherwise progressive people around the world.

Forces against gay rights use specious arguments to create a climate of hostility in which personal attacks on individual lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender and intersex people are inevitable.

When a magazine in Uganda published the pictures and addresses of gay and lesbian activists in Uganda and called for them to be hung, David Kato – whom I had met when I visited Amnesty International’s Kampala office – was murdered. David was a man of small physical stature but with the courage and integrity of a person whose heart and commitment made him a giant among activists.

When we spoke he acknowledged the dangers of being out in Uganda. But he knew it was an even greater danger to allow the government and the larger society to force people to deny their sexuality, or to conform to mainstream concepts of “masculinity” and “femininity.”

He knew how soul destroying it is to be forced to live in the closet and hide one’s light under a bushel. And we know he would have wanted us all to pull together globally to counter the atrocious anti-homosexuality law on the table in Uganda again just this week.

But David's murder – though widely reported in the mainstream press – was not unique. We have been working on the murder cases of five lesbians in South Africa in the last six months and the murders of transgender people in Turkey.

In fact, not a week goes by without us being contacted about the murder of a transgender person or a lesbian or gay man from some corner of the world. These killings must stop – but they won't stop until we address the underlying human rights abuses that encourage these attacks. We must ensure that those who commit these attacks are brought to justice.

It is incomprehensible that there are people who believe that it is legitimate to attack and kill someone whose "crime" is being true to his or her self. Yet vilification of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and intersex people is all too common – in almost every part of the world.

Tip of the iceberg:

But this vilification is just the tip of the iceberg of other human rights violations visited on these communities.

- Governments restrict freedom of expression and freedom of assembly based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Governments discriminate by denying lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and intersex people the right to marry and found a family.
- Governments maintain laws on forced sterilisation of transgender people or deny access to legal and/or medical changes altogether.
- And governments and communities ignore rampant attacks on children in schools who are deemed to be "non-conforming."

By the way, as many in this room will know, the Russian parliament is considering introducing a bill that would ban the promotion of "homosexual propaganda" throughout the country. Nine regions have already introduced similar legislation. If passed, the bill would adversely impact the freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI individuals. As we have done with some of the regional laws in Russia, Amnesty is planning to campaign against this Bill, and I encourage all of you to share our actions with your networks.]

As we fight to make the dream of equality become a reality – I am proud that Amnesty International is standing side by side with activists from queer communities around the world.

Whether we are campaigning for freedom of expression and assembly in Russia, marriage equality in Australia, freedom from violence in Uganda, freedom of assembly in Belgrade, or gathering activists across Europe to support as many prides at risk as we can muster – Amnesty International is engaged on these crucial issues.

We are proud of the work that we do supporting Prides at Risk.

To be clear – far too many governments, and religious and community institutions teach both children and adults to hate and fear those who are different. Governments have many different ways of discriminating against a group of people –

- gagging people from speaking to claim their rights or celebrate their culture,
- prohibiting them from teaching in school
- making their relationships criminal,
- force-sterilising them,
- altering genitals after birth without their ability to consent,
- denying people the right to be recognised in their gender
- or denying them the right to marry and found a family –

With each and all of those actions, they are sending a message that this group and any one who is a member of this group – is less than human.

Amnesty International firmly stands for both freedom of religion and expression. I personally know of so many faith leaders and groups that have fought for justice and the human rights of marginalised communities. But it is equally true that too often religious and other community institutions or organizations reinforce anti gay rights messages through their own actions. While some religions embrace members of myriad communities – others preach against.

Sadly, it is common knowledge that some faith groups are pouring money and other resources into Africa to promote the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Africa. This deadly export not only is having devastating consequences for individuals but is undermining the conversations that every society must engage in as it grapples with defining its values.

The consequences of these lessons for children are huge: those who are questioning and exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity quickly learn that they will be targeted if they do so openly. Others are being taught that to be different is to risk being excluded, bullied and demeaned.

Too often, the way school administrators and others address these threats against kids is to demand that they hide their questions and mask their identities. In many countries, students who are suspected of being gay or lesbian or transgender are simply expelled. They are trying to force children to hide, lie and conform rather than teaching all children not to mock, bully and exclude those who are different.

In conclusion:

We have to respect the fact that each society is different and is not at the same starting point. But imposing prejudice on children is the antithesis of

building a rights respecting society. In fact, such policies empower those who are privileged, make excuses for their abusive behaviours and blame the victim.

At Amnesty International we have a very different vision of the world that we want to build. We want to live in a world in which every human being is valued and in which our diversity is celebrated.

We must not stop until we have achieved this. If, as a human rights movement, we leave any group behind, we have betrayed the promise of human rights – the promise to respect and promote the inherent dignity and equality of every human being.

Failure is not an option. So Amnesty International stands with you as we continue this critical struggle around the world.

Thank you.

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