

FROM THE UN

# INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA

Homosexuality remains a criminal offense in more than 70 countries and is an important human rights issue. Every year, on May 17th the UN marks the day as International Day. This year the focus is on the rise of hate crimes against Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals and Transgender people, in many parts of the world, from New York to Brazil, from Honduras, Turkey to South Africa. May 17 was selected because on this date in 1990 the World Health Organization no longer classified homosexuality as a diagnosis condition. The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders much earlier in 1973.

A word wide survey, in 2013, by the Pew Survey, reports that anti-gay sentiment exists and persists in much of the world. Not surprisingly, the results of the PEW survey demonstrate a division in acceptance of gays: countries in Africa and the Middle East strongly oppose any tolerance, while at the same time tolerance is growing in Europe, the US, Canada and parts of Latin America.

An expected result is that acceptance of homosexuality is much higher where religion is less central in peoples lives. Whereas, in poorer countries with high levels of religious belief, few believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society. In Russia and China, ,

FROM THE UN

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on the other hand, where religion tends to be less central, gays have yet to gain acceptance. In Russia 16% and in China 21% of people show acceptance.

In a recent report entitled “ Making Love a Crime” produced by Amnesty International, homophobic attacks in Sub Saharan Africa have reached dangerous proportions. Homosexual acts are increasingly criminalized across the continent with some governments seeking to impose harsh penalties.

In the last five years, South Sudan, Burundi have introduced harsh laws against homosexuality. In Uganda, Liberia and Nigeria there are bills before Parliament that ask for increasing existing penalties. In Nigeria, where sodomy is punishable by jail, the House of Representative passed a bill criminalizing gay marriage, same sex ‘ amorous relations’ and even membership in a gay rights group.

An alarming human rights violation is developing in Russia where President Putin has essentially declared war on homosexuals. He has signed many anti gay laws; e.g., allowing police officers to arrest tourists and foreign nationals they suspect of being gay or ‘pro gay’ and detain them for up to 14 days. Earlier, Mr. Putin signed another anti gay bill, that classifies ‘ homosexual propaganda’ as

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pornography. The law is broad and vague inviting misuse and harassment.

Punitive laws and discrimination have serious health consequences. The executive Director of The UN program on HIV/AIDS said that the stigma and discrimination faced by Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender was hampering an effective medical response to the disease. When people are stigmatized because of sexual orientation they are less likely to access the HIV services they need, leading to new HIV infections and Aids deaths.

The UN has initiated a major education campaign 'Free and Equal' to combat violence against gays and the widespread discrimination in the workforce, education and health sectors. A number of celebrities have pledged their support. The campaign will release a variety of material in multimedia. Changing attitudes is never easy but it is possible. Hopefully, this campaign will begin the process. It is important to support Amnesty Internationals' campaign to combat anti gay discrimination and promoting laws against human rights violations.

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