

Viewpoint: There's a growing gap between countries advancing LGBTQ+ rights, and those going backwards

April 11 2023, by Dennis Altman



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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong joined 50,000 people to march in support of queer rights across the Sydney Harbor Bridge for World Pride in early March. A week earlier, Albanese became the first sitting prime minister to march in Sydney's Mardi Gras, something he's done over several decades.

And yet at the same time, in another part of the world, Uganda's parliament passed a string of draconian measures against homosexuality, including possible death sentences for "aggravated homosexuality." Any "promotion" of homosexuality is also outlawed.

Seven years ago, I co-wrote a book with Jonathan Symons called "Queer Wars." Back then, we suggested there was [a growing gap](#) between countries in which sexual and [gender diversity](#) was becoming more acceptable, and those where repression was increasing.

Sadly, that analysis seems even more relevant today.

A growing gap

Some countries have been unwinding criminal sanctions around homosexuality, which are often the legacy of colonialism. This includes, in recent years, former British colonies [Singapore](#) and [India](#).

But others have been imposing new and more vicious penalties for any deviation from stereotypical assumptions of heterosexual masculine superiority (what Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell [terms](#) "hegemonic masculinity").

Anti-gay legislation is currently pending in Ghana, which led US Vice President Kamala Harris to [express concerns](#) on a recent visit.

These moves echo the deep homophobia of Russian President Vladimir

Putin, who has [bizarrely linked](#) intervention in Ukraine to protecting traditional values against LGBTQ+ infiltration.

Meanwhile, reports from Afghanistan suggest that anyone identified as "LGBT" is [in danger of being killed](#).

Indonesia recently passed legislation [penalizing all sex outside marriage](#). This follows [years of anti-queer rhetoric](#) from Indonesian leaders and crackdowns in regional areas.

And while the Biden administration is supportive of queer rights globally, the extraordinary hysteria [around trans issues in the Republican Party](#) reminds us the West has no inherent claim to moral superiority.

Where to next?

Speaking at the World Pride Human Rights Conference, both Wong and Attorney General Mark Dreyfus made it clear Australia would press for recognition of sexuality and gender identity as deserving protection, as part of [our commitment to human rights](#).

Wong also announced a [new Inclusion and Equality Fund](#) to support queer community organizations within our region.

Australian governments have usually been wary of loud assertions of support for queer rights. This is partly due to a reasonable fear this merely reinforces the perception that such language reflects [a sense of Western superiority](#), unwilling to acknowledge other societies may have very different attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

Australia is part of the Equal Rights Coalition, an intergovernmental body of 42 countries dedicated to the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, and has supported sexual and gender rights in the

[country reviews](#) undertaken by the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

Australia has a minimal presence in Uganda, and direct representations are unlikely to have much effect. Uganda is a member of the Commonwealth, as are Ghana, Kenya and Zambia, where official homophobia appears to be increasing. But there's little evidence the Australian government sees this as a significant foreign policy forum, or is prepared to push for sexual rights through its institutions.

As persecution on the basis of sexuality and [gender identity](#) increases, more people will seek to flee their countries. Queer refugees face double jeopardy: they're not safe at home, but they're often equally unsafe in their diasporic communities, which have inherited the [deep prejudices of their homelands](#).

The UN's refugee agency [reports](#) that most people seeking asylum because of their sexuality are unwilling to disclose this, because of discrimination within their own ethnic communities. This makes it impossible to have accurate numbers. But a clear signal from Australia would be a powerful statement of support—that it understands the situation and welcomes people who need flee because of their sexuality or gender expression.

An official Canadian government document [states](#):

"Canada has a proud history of providing protection to and helping to resettle the world's most vulnerable groups. That includes those in the Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and additional sexually and gender diverse community."

Theirs is a model worth following.

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