

# EQUALITY RISING

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2015 GLOBAL EQUALITY REPORT



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN  
FOUNDATION<sup>TM</sup>



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## OVERVIEW

**2015** was a remarkable year for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people around the world. While there was unprecedented progress toward equality in a surprising range of countries, from the United States to Nepal, that same forward momentum also generated widespread backlash, often in places where deeply held religious beliefs were stirred up to slow down or reverse progress. The year was also marked by some of the most extreme barbarism toward LGBTQ communities in parts of the Middle East, and the vexing persistence of violence against transgender people across the globe.

Because of the extraordinary courage, creativity and dedication of advocates and allies worldwide, LGBTQ people enjoyed unprecedented visibility, accompanied by — and often driven by — groundbreaking political and legal achievements. Across Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America, there were advances in laws and policies, mostly reflecting changes in social attitudes but in some places, preceding or even precipitating those attitudinal shifts.

Increased global interconnectedness, especially through social media, created a sense of community among advocates. It enabled virtually instantaneous access to information about LGBTQ people and their rights, helping to build movements and solidarity across borders and across cultures. Encouraged and supported by legal progress and global visibility, more and more LGBTQ people came out, finding acceptance in their homes, workplaces, places of worship and other institutions.

Around the world, global leaders from U.S. President Barack Obama to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, spoke out for LGBTQ rights and equality. While some extremists used their distorted interpretations of religion as an excuse to justify discrimination and violence against LGBTQ people, other religious leaders, including Pope Francis, created space for a softening of attitudes towards them.

## PART I: MORE VISIBLE THAN EVER

### Larger Pride events in more places

In 2015, there were an unprecedented number of Pride celebrations and marches in every part of the world, including several in countries where LGBTQ people are criminalized and face violence and persecution. Attendance at these events ranged from a few dozen people to millions.

<sup>1</sup> This report is not an exhaustive review of progress or setbacks for LGBTQ people throughout the world during 2015. Rather, we have tried to present the broad directions and trends of where and how activists have achieved their victories, where and why they have faced backlash, and the impact of these events on the global equality movement.

In Brazil, there was once again a massive turnout of more than a million participants at both Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro Prides, following a pattern of huge parades that have grown exponentially over the last two decades. And despite the serious threats to their lives and an overwhelmingly homophobic social climate, hundreds of Ugandan activists gathered in August to celebrate Pride in a secret location outside Kampala.

The 13th annual Taiwan Pride Parade in Taipei in October set a record for the largest pride event ever in Asia, with more than 80,000 participants. Tsai Ing-wen, a candidate in Taiwan's upcoming presidential elections, announced her support of marriage equality on the day of the parade — and went on to win the presidency. In South Korea, in spite of efforts by anti-LGBTQ Christian groups to disrupt the parade as they had in previous years, Seoul Pride proceeded smoothly, with more than 20,000 marchers, including the U.S. ambassador and other diplomats, taking part.

## IDAHOT marks its 11th anniversary

On May 17, tens of thousands of activists in every region of the world gathered in more than 1,300 places for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT), the annual commemoration of the date in 1990 when the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder. They used the occasion to draw the attention of policymakers, the public and the media to the negative impact of homophobia and transphobia on health outcomes, educational attainment and employment prospects for young people.

In Cuba, Mariela Castro, daughter of the country's president, led a blessing ceremony of same-sex couples, and in Asia, activists in Laos celebrated IDAHOT for the first time. The United Nations Free & Equal campaign launched a video titled "Faces" to celebrate the contributions of LGBTQ people to their families and communities that was viewed online by millions around the world.

## Openly LGBTQ politicians take office

In Europe, a record number of openly LGBTQ people held public office. Xavier Bettel, the gay prime minister of Luxembourg, was the only openly LGBTQ head of government in office in 2015. He married his partner in May, after marriage equality came into effect in January. In the United Kingdom, a record-setting 32 openly lesbian, gay and bisexual candidates were elected in May to serve in the 650-member parliament. The U.K. Parliament now has the highest number of lesbian, gay or bisexual members of any national legislature in the world. However, in spite of several major parties fielding transgender candidates, no transgender person has ever been elected to the British parliament.

In Ireland, health minister Leo Varadkar came out as gay in January, becoming the country's first openly LGBTQ cabinet minister. He went on to play a key role in campaigning for the successful referendum in May that ushered in marriage equality.

In groundbreaking elections in Venezuela in December, Tamara Adrian became the first transgender person, and Rosmit Mantilla the first openly gay man, to be elected to the National Congress. Elsewhere in Latin America, Sandra Moran Reyes, an openly lesbian feminist and LGBTQ activist, was elected to Guatemala's Congress in September. And in Trinidad, Jowelle de Souza, a transgender woman, was defeated in her run for office, but opened doors as the first transgender person to stand for national election.

In India, Madhu Bai Kinnar won election as mayor of Raigarh in the central state of Chhattisgarh in January, beating out her rival from the popular ruling party to become the country's first transgender mayor.

## World leaders speak out

Prominent world leaders were outspoken in their calls for LGBTQ equality and human rights. In January, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to use the words “transgender” and “lesbian” in the State of the Union address when he condemned the persecution of LGBTQ people. He elevated the importance of protecting the human rights of LGBTQ people and other minorities around the world by saying that it was in U.S. national security interests to do so. While visiting Africa in July, Obama publicly spoke about the importance of equal treatment of LGBTQ people during a joint news conference with Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta. Kenyatta responded that LGBTQ rights “was not a priority” in his country.

The Obama Administration also appointed Randy Berry as the first Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI People, making the United States the only country to have a senior government official dedicated to protecting and promoting LGBTQ rights around the world.

Pope Francis, who leads a flock of a billion Roman Catholics worldwide, halted his predecessors’ longstanding practice of issuing blanket condemnations of homosexuality. In an interview in July, the Pope said, “People should not be defined only by their sexual tendencies: let us not forget that God loves all his creatures and we are destined to receive his infinite love.” But in later pronouncements, Pope Francis maintained his opposition to marriage equality, and the official Vatican position towards LGBTQ people remains far from welcoming.

## Transgender visibility

2015 was a banner year for transgender visibility and acceptance in much of Europe and the Americas. A massive generational shift in attitudes is underway as younger populations accept gender diversity and gender non-conforming people. Recognition and acceptance of gender fluidity and the repudiation of strict gender binaries is growing.

Highly visible transgender personalities played important public roles in the path to normalizing gender diversity. In the United States, Caitlyn Jenner, a former Olympics gold medalist made world headlines when she came out as transgender in April, and celebrities such as television star Laverne Cox from the hit series “Orange is the New Black” dominated popular media.

A survey in January found that the number of Americans who know a transgender person is growing rapidly, and that they are more likely to have a positive impression of them than those who do not. Between 2011 and 2015, the number of Americans who viewed transgender people favorably rose steeply from 26 percent to 44 percent.

Polling data released in Europe in October showed that acceptance of transgender people had increased across Western Europe since the previous poll in 2012. The United Kingdom led Europe in transgender acceptance, with 66 percent of British citizens indicating they would be comfortable with a transgender prime minister, compared to 43 percent in the European Union as a whole.

Other world cultures have historically had highly visible transgender or third gender populations such as *hijras* in the Indian subcontinent, *katoeys* in Thailand and *travestis* in Brazil. These gender non-conforming populations continued to enjoy visibility in 2015 and were increasingly tolerated. In India, transgender Bollywood actress and reality TV star Bobby Darling created headlines in October when she announced her impending wedding to a businessman. Darling, who has played more LGBTQ roles than anyone else in Bollywood, is a media star in an industry in which LGBTQ roles and especially transgender roles are still uncommon.

## UNPRECEDENTED LEGAL AND POLITICAL VICTORIES

**A**round the world, the efforts of LGBTQ advocates and allies resulted in groundbreaking legal and political victories, including marriage equality, transgender protections and non-discrimination legislation. These victories helped to secure LGBTQ human rights, while at the same time propelling momentum towards greater social awareness and acceptance.

In some cases, these victories were ahead of public opinion, such as when Nepal became the first Asian country, and one of a handful around the world, to provide constitutional protections for LGBTQ people when it adopted an inclusive new constitution in September.

In many other cases, legal and political reforms mirrored changes in attitudes that were already underway. Marriage equality in Ireland and the United States arrived once public opinion had firmly shifted in favor of it. And in still other countries, political leaders led the achievement of legal rights for LGBTQ people, such as the decisive role played by President Michelle Bachelet of Chile in enacting her country's civil unions law, in spite of significant opposition.

Mozambique became the only country in 2015 to decriminalize homosexuality with the revision of its penal code, even as its leading LGBTQ organization was still denied official recognition by the government.

### Relationship recognition

By the end of 2015, 19 countries had achieved full marriage equality at the national level, and another two had marriage equality in some jurisdictions.

The U.S. Supreme Court issued a sweeping ruling on June 26 legalizing marriage equality in all 50 states. This signal accomplishment reverberated across the globe, instantaneously lighting up social media and sparking international celebrations. Twenty-six million people superimposed rainbows on their Facebook profiles, including Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and celebrities from Hollywood to Broadway. Newspapers from Australia to Nepal featured front page photos of the White House lit up in rainbow colors. This ruling reflected popular sentiment in the U.S., with polls showing that a majority of Americans supported marriage equality. It also sparked intense reaction and debate about LGBTQ rights in places as diverse as Indonesia and Kenya.

Ireland gained the distinction of being the first country to introduce marriage equality through a popular vote when 62 percent of its citizens voted "yes" in a May referendum. Same-sex marriages began in November. Elsewhere in Europe, Slovenia briefly achieved marriage equality through a parliamentary vote in March but a referendum in December invalidated the vote and put an end to it.

In June, Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that state bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. However, this ruling did not invalidate existing state laws which prohibited same-sex marriages. Lesbian and gay couples still needed to file individual cases in court to be married. Some of Mexico's 31 states took matters into their own hands and introduced marriage equality. Chihuahua achieved it in June, through a gubernatorial decree, and Nayarit in December, by legislative statute. They joined Coahuila, Quintana Roo and Guerrero, along with Mexico City which already permitted same-sex marriages.

In addition, three countries passed civil union laws for same-sex couples in 2015, but for different reasons.



In Chile, led by President Bachelet, the National Congress enacted a civil union law in April, and civil unions began in October, thus opening the door to marriage equality. Cyprus and Greece also passed civil union laws for same-sex couples, but they did so under pressure to meet European Union obligations, making them among the last E.U. countries to extend some form of equal relationship recognition. In Cyprus, the parliament passed a law in November granting civil partnership rights to same-sex couples. In a December vote, the Greek parliament voted to extend existing civil partnership rights, introduced in 2008 for different-sex couples, to same-sex couples. Neither of these laws allow same-sex couples to adopt children, and they were passed despite vociferous opposition from Christian Orthodox leaders and disapproval from much of the public.

## Legal protections for transgender people

Five countries passed groundbreaking laws to protect transgender people. In April, lawmakers in Malta unanimously adopted the historic Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act which provides some of the world's most comprehensive protections for transgender and intersex people. Among its provisions, the law granted protections for transgender and queer people when accessing public services, and made it illegal to perform unnecessary medical treatment on the sex characteristics of a person without their consent.

Ireland passed legislation in July that allowed transgender people to change their gender without legal or medical intervention or certification, making it the third European country after Malta and Denmark to do so. However, Transgender Europe reported in May that 23 European countries still require transgender people to undergo sterilization in order to legally change their gender.

In September, Thailand became the first Southeast Asian country to provide legal protection for its transgender population when it passed a gender equality law which criminalized discrimination on the basis of gender identity. The law set Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country already well known for its acceptance of LGBTQ people, even more apart from its repressive neighbors such as Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Brunei which still criminalize same-sex relations.

Vietnam's National Assembly amended the civil code in November to legally recognize transgender people and, starting in 2017, to permit legal gender-reassignment surgery. An LGBTQ organization in Vietnam estimated that there are almost 300,000 transgender people in the country of 90 million.

In Latin America, Bolivian lawmakers passed a Gender Identity Law at the end of the year, allowing adult transgender people to legally change their name and gender on government documents that are necessary for voting, education, health, employment and housing.

## More protections for LGBTQ families

Colombia became the third country in Latin America to allow adoptions by same-sex couples when its Constitutional Court ruled to lift a ban that prevented same-sex couples and lesbian and gay individuals from adopting children. And the Portuguese parliament approved a bill to extend adoption rights to same-sex couples and allowing lesbian couples to conceive children through artificial insemination.

## LARGE COMPANIES STEP UP FOR LGBTQ RIGHTS

In January, the influential World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, organized the first-ever official event on LGBTQ issues — a session on LGBTQ equality through the lens of workplace inclusion.

A March report estimated that the global LGBTQ consumer market is annually worth \$3 trillion. Revenue generated by 'pink dollars' from LGBTQ tourism is also sizeable. In light of the large and growing LGBTQ consumer market, increasing numbers of major international corporations adopted LGBTQ-inclusive corporate policies, with more than two-thirds of U.S. Fortune 500 corporations affording explicit protections to their workers on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

For the first time in its 14-year history, the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index (CEI) — a tool that measures LGBTQ-inclusive policies among U.S.-based corporations — required top-scoring companies to have a global non-discrimination policy specifically prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Four hundred and thirty-seven corporations achieved a score of 100% on the 2015 CEI, including 165 of the Fortune 500 companies.

In September, a global business coalition was launched in New York City with 12 inaugural members committed to safeguarding workplace equality for LGBTQ employees across their global operations. Together, these companies employ nearly 1.4 million people in more than 190 countries and had a combined annual revenue of over \$500 billion.

Increasingly, businesses also became more involved in advocating for LGBTQ rights. Major U.S. corporations, including Facebook, Google, Nike and American Airlines, announced their support for the LGBTQ-focused Equality Act which was introduced in the U.S. Congress in July.

## LEADING INSTITUTIONS EVOLVE

### The Roman Catholic Church signals new openness

Conventional wisdom and history aside, countries with a majority Catholic population had some of the most LGBTQ-inclusive laws in the world. By the end of 2015, nine of the world's 19 countries with full marriage equality were Catholic-majority countries, including Ireland. Some of the recent easing of attitudes could be attributed to Pope Francis whose increased willingness to challenge traditional church attitudes and doctrine signaled more acceptance of LGBTQ people than ever before.

Pope Francis sent signals throughout the year that the Church should be more tolerant of its LGBTQ congregants. During his visit to the United States in September and at an international gathering of bishops in October, he alluded to this. However, he also held change in check. Limited by traditionalists and the conservative Vatican hierarchy, he was a high-profile supporter of the December campaign that overturned marriage equality in Slovenia, and he also made intolerant comments about transgender people.

### The United Nations elevates LGBTQ rights

Across the board, United Nations bodies stepped up their efforts to advance LGBTQ rights in programming and research, as well as creating inclusive policies for LGBTQ staff. In March, the U.S. along with a number of European and Latin American countries defeated a Russian proposal to overturn a staff policy of the Secretary-General that granted equal benefits to same-sex partners of U.N. staff.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched the second phase of its landmark “Being LGBTI in Asia” initiative, a \$10 million project to advance LGBTQ rights across Asia. It convened a regional dialogue in Bangkok on LGBTQ rights and health in February, and convened a group of experts in New York in September to launch a data collection effort about LGBTQ people.

In August, the U.N. Security Council hosted the first-ever session to discuss the extreme violence unleashed upon gay men in Iraq and Syria by ISIL in territories under its control, and in June, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights released a major report on the state of LGBTQ rights worldwide.

## PART II: BACKLASH AGAINST PROGRESS

The swift and substantial global progress on LGBTQ rights in 2015 continued, as in previous years, to unleash a ferocious backlash in many parts of the world. Not only did marriage equality in the United States generate a flood of anti-LGBTQ policy and legal initiatives based on protecting “religious freedoms,” but in certain African countries and the Caribbean, the chorus of anti-LGBTQ voices increased in volume around the rallying cry of “anti-imperialism.” LGBTQ rights were portrayed as a Western imposition and LGBTQ activists as agents of Western domination. Speaking at the U.N. General Assembly in September, longtime Zimbabwean strongman Robert Mugabe asserted that LGBTQ rights are “new rights” that run contrary to his country’s “values, norms, traditions and beliefs.”

This anti-LGBTQ backlash came in the form of stigmatization, discrimination and harassment as well as countless numbers of brutal murders. In countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, laws designed to restrict the freedoms of LGBTQ people were proposed or debated in legislatures. In other countries, such as Russia and Nigeria, state-sanctioned violence and legal persecution was rife. And in yet other places, LGBTQ people encountered extreme violence and even death at the hands of state and non-state actors because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

At the end of 2015, consensual adult same-sex relations were criminalized in 75 countries, and in up to ten countries, could be punished by death.

### Homophobia as a political weapon

Virulently anti-LGBTQ leaders such as Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni and Russia’s Vladimir Putin, among others, deliberately demonized sexual and gender minorities. Their fear-mongering was often cloaked in nationalistic and anti-colonial rhetoric but was more likely an effort to distract attention from bad governance, corruption and economic woes than to save their countries from alleged Western interference and cultural imperialism.

In The Gambia in May, authoritarian president Yahya Jammeh publicly threatened to slit the throats of gay men, setting off another round of global outrage and condemnation of his homophobic diatribes and actions. LGBTQ Gambians reported being arbitrarily arrested and detained, subjected to psychological abuse and tortured. In July, a Gambian court acquitted three men who had been detained at the end of 2014 on charges of “aggravated homosexuality.” These men, who had been held incommunicado and tortured, were the object of an international campaign on their behalf, which had led to the U.S. revocation of some of The Gambia’s trade privileges. Alagie Jammeh, an estranged nephew of the president, recounted at an event in Washington, D.C. in December how the Gambian government revoked his college scholarship and threatened him after he made a Facebook post supporting LGBTQ rights.

Uganda's draconian Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA) of 2014 had unleashed widespread assaults on the rights and safety of LGBTQ people. In spite of its invalidation by a court on a technicality, many Ugandans invoked it as a reason to discriminate against and persecute LGBTQ people. As a result, LGBTQ Ugandans were subjected to violence, societal rejection and threats to their lives. In November, Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) reported eight attacks targeting transgender people in under a week. LGBTQ Ugandans who fled to neighboring Kenya, hoping to escape persecution in Uganda, faced a difficult time in refugee camps where homophobia and transphobia amongst other refugees were rampant.

President Museveni actively exploited anti-LGBTQ sentiment to help prolong his three-decade rule by continuing his homophobic rhetoric ahead of February 2016 elections. He won handily.

Meanwhile, Kenya's top political leadership also continued its open hostility towards LGBTQ citizens. In a country where 90 percent of people disapproved of homosexuality, this profoundly impacted the LGBTQ community. During President Obama's visit to the country in July, President Kenyatta infamously retorted that LGBTQ rights were a "non-issue" in Kenya. That same month, Deputy President William Ruto declared that Kenya would not "tolerate gay practices" and that "homosexuality is against the plan of God." A report that focused on violence in Kenya's coastal regions found that organized anti-LGBTQ mob violence, described as "witch hunts," had occurred in February, forcing dozens of LGBTQ people to flee their homes.

In Egypt, while homosexuality was not explicitly criminalized, the government continued to use debauchery and prostitution laws to prosecute gay men. Despite the January release of 26 allegedly gay men who had been arrested in a widely publicized December 2014 bathhouse raid, the crackdown on LGBTQ Egyptians continued. This was part of a broader campaign against civil liberties and civil society organizations by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. While el-Sisi justified his crackdown on LGBTQ people on the grounds that it was needed to protect "traditional" values from Western encroachment, observers believed that the regime resorted to harassment, imprisonment and torture of activists and opponents to cement its grip on power and to win the support of conservative Islamist forces. Influential media outlets and personalities also piled on with homophobic rhetoric, and at least four foreigners accused of being LGBTQ were deported during the year.

## Legal restrictions on civil society

Some governments in Central Asia and Africa, in an effort to silence perceived opposition, clamped down on LGBTQ groups as part of their broader suppression of civil society, especially human rights advocacy organizations.

In February, the Kazakh Senate passed a so-called "anti-propaganda" bill, modeled on a similar Russian law, that would make it a criminal offense to provide information and health services to LGBTQ people. In May, the Constitutional Council declared the proposed law unconstitutional on technical grounds, but also left the door open for the government to re-introduce it later. The court ruled that there was nothing barring the passage of laws to protect "traditional" marriage.

Kyrgyzstan's parliament debated a draconian Russian-style "anti-propaganda" bill which mandated harsh penalties such as prison time and fines for LGBTQ people and their allies, as well as restrictions on freedom of speech, expression and assembly for activists. The bill sailed through its first two readings with near-unanimous support and by year's end awaited further action. Local LGBTQ activists reported that homophobic rhetoric and violence against LGBTQ people in Kyrgyzstan escalated after the introduction of the bill.

In Uganda, a so-called "NGO bill," which included some of the repressive elements of the invalidated Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, was introduced in parliament in May (and signed into law in January 2016). The bill allowed the state-run NGO Board to ban civil society groups for any reason, including if the government

decided that doing so was in the “public interest” or if the organization was not registered. As a result, some LGBTQ organizations in Uganda chose not to register out of fear that they could be shut down and their members persecuted.

## HATE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION

### ISIL unleashes barbarism against LGBTQ people

ISIL, also known as ISIS, Islamic State or Daesh in Arabic, the extremist militant group that controls large swathes of Iraq and Syria, engaged in barbarous violence against LGBTQ people and other minorities in its efforts to impose its distorted version of a Muslim state throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Gay men, in particular, were methodically hunted down by ISIL which advocates a radical strain of Islam in which homosexuality is not tolerated. Scores were tortured and murdered, although it was not possible to obtain a verifiable figure of the number of people killed. ISIL brutally murdered gay men by tying nooses round their necks and dragging them behind trucks, burning them alive and throwing them off buildings and stoning them to death. Gay men already faced arbitrary arrests, rape and torture by militias and the Iraqi Army, and the ascent of ISIL, beginning in 2013 and accelerating in 2015, put them in mortal peril.

Women, including LBT women, also faced harsh conditions in ISIL-controlled areas. Women from minorities, such as the Yazidis, were systematically raped, forced into marriages against their will and enslaved by ISIL.

LGBTQ refugees from Syria and Iraq who fled ISIL's advance were confronted with homophobic harassment and violence in refugee camps in the Middle East. Many LGBTQ refugees who were resettled in Europe had to be separated from their fellow refugees to ensure their safety.

### Increased radicalization in Southeast Asia

Radical Islamist politicians and activists fomented hatred towards LGBTQ people in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei — the three countries with Muslim majorities in Southeast Asia — as they wielded growing influence over governments and courts. Arrests of transgender people and an anti-transgender court ruling were reported in Malaysia. Brunei pressed ahead with plans to introduce the death penalty for LGBTQ people as part of its phased introduction of Sharia law. LGBTQ events and gatherings in Indonesia were disrupted and the province of Aceh continued its cruel and unusual practice of caning those convicted of “homosexuality.”

### The World Congress of Families IX

Three thousand people from all over the world gathered in Salt Lake City, Utah, in October for the ninth World Congress of Families (WCF) conference. The WCF is a U.S.-based organization that has been classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and this was the first time its international gathering of anti-family, anti-LGBTQ extremists was held in the United States. Participants at WCF IX insulted transgender people, labeled LGBTQ people as pedophiles and equated LGBTQ rights to terrorism.

## THE PERSISTENCE OF VIOLENCE

LGBTQ people in every region of the world faced high rates of violence. They generally fared worst in the 75 countries of the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Asia and the Caribbean which still criminalize LGBTQ people, and the three other countries that penalize LGBTQ advocacy. LBT women were the victims of so-called “honor killings,” and extreme sexual violence including so-called “corrective” rape. Homophobia and transphobia continued to be widely held and socially acceptable attitudes in virtually every country of the world, and daily attacks on LGBTQ people around the globe were routine.

### Transgender people most affected

Transgender people were most frequently victimized and subjected to the most extreme hate-motivated attacks. At least 200 transgender people were killed around the world in 2015, and a report released in May noted that 1,731 transgender murders were reported between 2008 and 2014.

In spite of its global leadership on LGBTQ rights, Brazil has the highest reported rate of violence against transgender and gender-nonconforming people, primarily transgender women and *travestis*. Other Latin American countries also reported shockingly high numbers of transgender killings.

A record number of transgender people — at least 21 — were killed in hate-motivated crimes in the United States in 2015. The intensity of violence was especially high against transgender women of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and transgender people were four times more likely than the general population to be living in poverty. In addition, transgender youth faced harassment and bullying, and were more likely than their peers to drop out of school without completing their education, putting them at increased likelihood of lifelong poverty and adverse health outcomes.

### Advocates under attack

LGBTQ human rights advocacy carried a heavy cost. For instance, activists in Kyrgyzstan were viciously assaulted while celebrating a private same-sex commitment ceremony in May. Members of two ultranationalist movements broke into the wedding venue, threatened guests and later posted videos on YouTube proclaiming the “dispersal of the gays” and “Kalys crushes the fags.” And in Turkey, riot police broke up Istanbul’s 13th Pride parade with water cannons and rubber pellets.

## LOOKING AHEAD

If 2015 was marked by forward momentum on LGBTQ equality, it was also a year when the backlash was swift and uncompromising. This was the case not just in countries and institutions which have traditionally been inhospitable to LGBTQ people, but also from new extremist sources, such as ISIL, and even in the United States where the advent of marriage equality generated a flood of anti-LGBTQ state-level legislation based on so-called “religious freedom protections.”

Halfway through 2016, the trends from the past year have continued. While one country — Colombia — gained marriage equality, other countries, including Chile, Taiwan and Australia, may follow. Protections for transgender people continue to increase in both number and scope, and LGBTQ visibility across the board continues to rise.

While the high public profile of extremist evangelicals who took their anti-LGBTQ message around the world subsided somewhat in 2015, they continue to be active in a wide range of countries such as Georgia and in Bermuda. And as ISIL and Al Qaeda and their extremist affiliates continue their march across a chaotic Middle East and elsewhere, it is likely that brutal persecution of LGBTQ people will continue.

However, the best bulwark against discrimination, persecution and violence is the continued strengthening of the international LGBTQ movement. And this is being done through the brave, untiring and innovative efforts of advocates in countries from Albania to Zimbabwe, supported and encouraged by an expanding global solidarity between LGBTQ people in every corner of the globe. Today, there is a dynamic shared commitment to create a world in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people are ensured equality and embraced as full members of society at home, at work and in every community.

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