

THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA

WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018: A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

Canada as a leader for LGBTI rights at the United Nations

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Canada ought to build its multilateral leadership potential in areas where the country has already demonstrated the experience and capacity to be taken seriously. The federal government has taken steps in this direction regarding women's rights and related areas -- promoting women's empowerment and education; supporting the women, peace and security agenda; developing training for women in peacekeeping; and more. Another area where Canada has experience to share is in the identification, protection, and expansion of LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex) rights.

Canada has a strong legislative and rights framework in place, including the legalization of same-sex sexual activity, marriage, and adoption; allowing LGBTI individuals to serve openly in the military; and laws protecting sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. There is, of course, still room for improvements in, for example, police attitudes towards LGBTI communities and the ban on blood donations by men who have sex with men.

And, aside from these positive domestic improvements in LGBTI rights and protections, Canada has already begun to take steps internationally to promote and protect them.

Canada is currently a co-chair, with Chile, of the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) the first intergovernmental coalition dedicated to the protection of the rights of LGBTI people globally, which is currently comprised of 40 states. The ERC is intended to both advance LGBTI human rights internationally and be a multilateral organization that is flexible, integrated with civil society and responsive to new and evolving situations.

Additionally, the government is engaged in other bilateral and multilateral environments to promote such rights, sharing Canada's progress in protecting these rights and the resulting positive impact, and working with Canadian and international civil society organizations to promote these rights. Specifically, Canada encourages the decriminalization of same-sex conduct, supports grassroots LGBTI organizations, and condemns violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In No-

vember 2016, at the meeting of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said, “Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities suffer in too many countries, including certain members of la Francophonie who are here today” (<https://www.macleans.ca/news/trudeau-pushes-lgbt-rights-at-francophonie-summit/>). Canada has raised similar issues within the Commonwealth.

The government is also supportive of the growing inclusion of LGBTI issues broadly in various UN agencies and programs, such the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNESCO, and the World Health Organization, as well as in non-UN international organizations such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe.

So while we see that within the UN system there has been an increased recognition and understanding of the needs and rights of LGBTI communities, there is still a need for a strong voice for these communities at the Security Council to help normalize these rights more broadly.

In an article ahead of the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) conference in August 2018 in Vancouver, Olena Semenova and Brent Hawkes (<https://www.straight.com/news/1112396/olena-semenova-and-brent-hawkes-what-does-world-needs-more-canada-mean-when-it-comes>), discussed what it means for Canada to do more when it comes to LGBTI rights. Canada can support LGBTI human rights defenders, both through funding and diplomatic channels, and Canada can also provide funding to LGBTI organizations in Canada and around the world. They concluded by asking, “Why should Canada want to be a global leader in promoting LGBTI rights? Because respecting and protecting LGBTI people promotes inclusion and strengthens our society. Because LGBTI rights are human rights. Because we can’t pick and choose which rights we promote.”

Following the ERC conference, the government agreed to dedicate new funding for LGBTI civil society organizations in conflict areas, committed to updating their own guidelines for supporting human rights defenders, and pledged to meet soon with civil society organizations to identify domestic and international issues and needs. While these commitments are welcome, Canada is capable of more.

But what is Canada willing to do? If these are our values, if human rights are important to us, we need to stand up for them. How can Canada translate this experience and capacity into leadership within the UN system?

Canada has made progress on, or is in the process of addressing, most of the core issues and challenges facing LGBTI communities. Canada is generally supportive and practically has taken some steps. But Canada could be more vocal and forceful in raising awareness of LGBTI rights violations and encouraging stronger commitments to human rights for all within the UN.