LGBT: The Paradox of Growing Acceptance and Persecution

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“Human rights are gay rights and gay rights are human rights.”
U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (June 2011)

For the first time in history, on June 17, 2011, South Africa along with 40 other nations persuaded 85 members of the U.N.’s Human Rights Council to sign a resolution condemning persecution against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The dramatic resolution calls on the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a global study outlining discriminatory laws, practices, and acts of violence directed at LGBT individuals, with recommendations on how to put an end to egregious human rights abuses.

Human rights advocates everywhere celebrated this powerful, first-ever united expression of recognition of all sexual and gender minorities. In many ways it acknowledges and even celebrates the existence, dignity, and worth of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

What makes this path so much more remarkable is the proposal’s authorship by an emerging political force for social and political progress on the African continent—South Africa—rather than by what may be considered a more progressive society in Europe or North America for instance. By this step, it also signals that trends towards acceptance and engagement with LGBT people can be found today on every continent—evidence that all corporations and employers can acknowledge and embrace.

With rapid changes in digital communications and affordable accessibility, the world’s sexual minorities are fast becoming far more visible, more empowered, and surely more connected with one another. These advances are due, in no small part, to cutting edge technology companies and their innovations, that not only welcome contributions by their LGBT workforce, but who, in turn, helped evangelize their economic and social values. This is a platform that is shared by many giant multinational companies with progressive policies respecting the LGBT global community including Google, Intel, Microsoft, Apple, and Facebook, to name a handful.

Today, we see dynamic forces accelerating LGBT civil rights and acceptance in many developed nations while in other societies, we are bearing witness to cruel forms of stigma, isolation, and intolerant political and religious forces that instead wish to mask, suppress, and even extinguish sexual minorities. To quote Charles Dickens reflecting long ago on the French Revolution, for our world this also may be “the best of times and the worst of times” in terms of LGBT engagement and equality.
Despite political and social advances, throughout many highly diverse cultures today, LGBT people also remain stigmatized and among very hard-to-find populations especially in higher-risk societies in the Middle East and Africa, as well as parts of Asia. Yet, despite these harshly oppressive environments, the global face of same-sex attraction as well as gender-variant people is creating real opportunity for welcoming and open economies that are on the cutting edge of acknowledgement, trust, and acceptance.

Imagine a world today where a Latin American leader enthusiastically cheers her nation enacting the continent’s first same-sex marriage law (Argentina); where a lesbian proudly serves as the head of government (Iceland); where an openly gay man is elected to the parliament of his small Asian kingdom (Nepal); and an African nation embraces a new constitution that not only dismantles racial apartheid, but extends full civil and marriage rights to same-sex couples (South Africa).

Nonetheless, even with evidence of these historic milestones, we must also keep in mind a nightmarish, and sometimes parallel world that exists where homosexuality remains punishable by death, torture, or imprisonment in dozens more nations. There still remains a globe where many forms of activism, openness, and even the mere evidence of loving, committed human relationships can put LGBT individuals, their families, and their friends at grave risk of imprisonment, physical harm, and even death sentences.

This is the unfolding story today of tremendous social changes, using the lens of LGBT visibility, participation, and connections on five of the globe’s most dynamic continents: Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East/Asia, and North America.

Just as significantly, what do these trends and setbacks mean for employers and multinational corporations that do sustain their workforces and do business across societies, regions, and continents? How can they navigate and mirror these trends, while recruiting, retaining, and advancing the need and aspirations of their global labor pool?

**Benchmarking Progress in Global Attitudes**

In a unique approach to measuring acceptance from country to country, recently the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago examined reportable trends (over two decades between 1988 and 2008) and then ranked 31 countries according to their attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexual behavior. (Note that this overview did not touch on attitudes towards gender-variant and transgender people.)

The study showed that “overwhelmingly, societies have become more accepting of homosexual behavior.” Of those, approval of homosexuality increased in 27 countries and in only four countries did they disclose decreases in approval: Russia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Latvia. Most important, the growth in acceptance and approval, across-the-board, was stronger than the decline.

The NORC report also found, unsurprisingly, that acceptance and tolerance were found most among younger adults, those with more education, those who attended religious services less often, and residents of large cities, and to a lesser extent, among women.
This chapter will highlight the footprints of LGBT populations where we find both dynamic potential as well as significant risk and danger, by sketching a few country snapshots in Europe, Africa, the Middle East/Asia, Latin America, and North America.

**Europe**

In general, the nations throughout Europe today embody the most progress in the world on LGBT affairs. Consider that in the recent NORC study of attitudes cited earlier, the top five countries with the highest acceptance ratings concerning homosexuality are all found in Europe, including the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and Belgium-Flanders.

This year, in addition, marked the 7th year that the European Parliament has formally recognized the “International Day Against Homophobia.” Former Polish Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek, now serving as president of the European Parliament, declared under Europe's aegis, “a person has the right to be different.” By marking this international day each year in May, it becomes a profoundly teachable exercise about the European Union’s commitment to combat forms of discrimination on any ground including sexual orientation. In fact, the European Union enshrines protections for sexual orientation in two basic constitutional documents, its own Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Treaty of the European Union.

Consider also:

- Seven European nations have adopted marriage equality laws (Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.) Sooner than later, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and Finland are believed most certain to follow suit.
- Most of the remaining Western European nations have forms of same-sex partner registry or civil union options available, or unregistered cohabitation is permissible, with the notable exception of Italy (perhaps due to its closer association with Roman Catholicism and the cultural and political proximity of the Vatican.)
- Given the economic value and political desirability for European nations to join the European Union, it is important to emphasize that membership in the European Union not only requires repeal of anti-homosexuality legislation, the Treaty of Amsterdam also requires anti-discrimination legislation to be enacted.

**SOCIETY AND BUSINESS UP CLOSE: SPOTLIGHT ON UNITED KINGDOM, SPAIN, AND POLAND**

**United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom stands out as one of the gay-friendliest and most accepting societies in the world. It often is considered on a par or, in some ways, more advanced than the United States. British attitudes towards LGBT rights and homosexuality are regarded as
among the most liberal in the past two decades, which is a valuable ingredient for global workforces and their employers.

British law provides for equal ages of consent (16 years old), regardless of sexual orientation. Same-sex marriage is not yet legalized, even though polls suggest clear majorities of the electorate support it. However, in 2005, the Civil Partnership Act created a parallel legal structure to marriage, giving homosexual couples all the rights and responsibilities of marriage, including the eligibility to apply to adopt children. Sir Elton John and his partner, David Furnish, among other notables, have taken advantage of the reformed marriage laws to have their relationship acknowledged and formalized, and in 2011 became parents for the first time.

In addition, discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal in many fields, including housing, employment, and the provision of goods and services, and like most Western European militaries, openly gay and lesbian adults may serve in uniform.

There is a vibrant gay media presence across the nation, and there are large, visible openly gay communities in many U.K. cities, most notably in London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Brighton. The British Tourist Authority and major companies such as British Airways invest resources and budget in gay tourism marketing strategies targeted to the United States and Canada. There are growing numbers of openly gay office holders at the local, regional, and Parliamentary levels.

The United Kingdom’s leading gay civil rights advocacy group is Stonewall Equality Ltd. (whose name itself honors the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall gay bar in New York City, often considered the “birth” of the modern LGBT equality movement.) Like the U.S.-based Human Rights Campaign, Stonewall partners with leading employers, both private and public, to benchmark workplace practices that are aligned best with LGBT equality. Their Stonewall Index (in 2010) identified these top 10 corporations and public sector agencies as their “best” examples:

1 IBM
2 Hampshire Constabulary
3 Ernst & Young
4 Brighton & Hove City Council
5 Goldman Sachs
6 Home Office
7 London Borough of Tower Hamlets
8 Manchester City Council
9 (tied) Kent Police and NACRO

It also is intriguing in British society that among the top 10, only three are private sector leaders (the remaining ones are governmental and nonprofit employers.) By adhering and often exceeding best practices for LGBT workplaces in the United Kingdom, Stonewall points out several benefits to these employers: enhancing reputation, being considered an employer of choice in competitive markets, improving productivity, and by mitigating risks and managing costs (i.e. avoiding costly litigation and reducing employee turnover).
Spain

In contemporary post-Franco Spain, we find a nation that has strenuously hungered for personal freedoms and individual liberty for decades—including its own lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens. Despite its strong identity with the Roman Catholic Church, Spain also happens to be the first Mediterranean nation to enact marriage equality (in 2005).

Spain is a nation that not only decriminalized its same-sex intimacy laws 30 years ago, and conformed its sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws, but also allows LGBT citizens to serve openly in its military and permits same-sex couples to adopt children. Moreover, transgender citizens are entirely free to change their legal gender status.

For employers as well, Spain ensures a fair-minded and LGBT-accepting regime that governs its practices in commerce with anti-discrimination laws in employment as well as in the provision of goods and services. Human rights activists report that gays and lesbians as well as bisexual people are greatly accepted throughout Spain today, especially in the largest and medium-sized urban areas, although in rural Spain, there still exists some level of unfamiliarity, discrimination, and discomfort.

Spain's open society and respect for its own LGBT citizens and their families is transforming world perceptions of the nation, and today (along with its rich history and culture, outstanding destinations, and aesthetic appeal) help make it among the most popular destinations for LGBT tourism as well.

Poland

Poland today seems to lead and to mirror other swiftly transforming post-Soviet economies in Eastern Europe. It is seen often by the United States and Western Europe as a nation in a hurry to throw off its authoritarian past and become a full-fledged participant in the global economy. Through its robust climate for foreign investment and Western collaboration, it has unmistakable appeal for most far-sighted global enterprises and is attractive to employers in most sectors.

Regrettably, however, this strong thirst for freedom and abiding commitment to capitalism does not extend to the equal nor respectful treatment of Poland's own LGBT citizens. The nation does not permit any recognition of same-sex couples, and opposition to civil unions and marriage equality is believed to come primarily from the Roman Catholic Church (which includes nearly 95 percent of all Polish citizens). The Church also appears to play a very active role in the political life of Poland.

Opinion surveys in recent years reveal that a majority of Polish adults still consider homosexuality an “unnatural” activity. Many Poles say that it must not be tolerated, although these trends are evolving as Polish society becomes integrated with other European and American trends, especially among younger people. In large urban areas today in Poland, there are gay clubs and gathering places, and also a number of gay rights organizations, along with Polish gay web portals focused on dating, entertainment, politics, and academics. There seem to be no official forms of repression for these modest social activities. As in Russia, however, there always exists the potential for outbreaks of violence,
repression, and homophobic acts against public expressions such as gay pride marches and celebrations. Polish political life also cultivates and accepts hate speech and virulent proposals from a range of very conservative Polish political parties and public officials.

In commerce, Poland conforms to European Union human rights standards by establishing employment nondiscrimination laws; however, these statutes do not address other forms of sexual orientation discrimination outside the workplace, for example, those found in Polish life and civil status. (Efforts to specifically include sexual orientation, by name, in broad nondiscrimination statutes have failed because of strong Catholic Church objections. Therefore, the category is included generally based on “any reason.”)

Once Poland entered into the European Union, there are anecdotal reports that LGBT Poles in recent years frequently opt to emigrate rather than stay in a rigid society they find repressive. Given their newfound ability to choose more welcoming societies such as Britain, Spain, France, Germany, or Ireland, for example, they yearn for brighter economic choices as well as personal freedoms and more equal treatment under law and cultural norms.

**Africa**

Across the continent, most nations of Africa today present a formidable and united wall of unbending hostility to LGBT visibility, acceptance, and equal treatment under law.

With few exceptions, these African societies (36 nations) insist homosexual acts remain illegal, and some demand the penalty of death as punishment for homosexual acts. For multinational employers, keep in mind that only six African countries prohibit discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation: Botswana, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, and South Africa (and no nation in Africa includes gender identity nondiscrimination in their public laws).

According to the respected human rights network, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), in its overview of African laws, customs, and culture in 2011, concluded: “By far, it’s the continent with the worst laws on the books when it comes to homosexuality and other sexual minorities, a phenomenon which is in part rooted in bad colonial-era laws and political situations, religious autonomy, strong negative belief in cultural and family values, and the evil of patriarchy.”

As ILGA also observes, human rights observers and activists also face serious threats to their own lives and personal safety. Given the cruel risks and punishing climate in these African societies, it’s not surprising many choose to do their jobs from Europe and the United States. (Note also that in 2011, for the first time, by an historic U.N. vote, an LGBT human rights organization, ILGA, was given “consultative” and observer status within the U.N. structure despite strong objections by African and Islamic states.)

The spread of fundamentalist strains of Islam combined with rigid Christian evangelism amplify political clout in shaping hostile African cultures, laws, and practices in several nations. Corporate leaders and non-governmental organizations, moreover, are focused far more on regime stability in this part of the world along with lessening tribal and ethnic tensions that thwart opportunities for trade and resource development.
SOCIETY AND BUSINESS UP CLOSE: SPOTLIGHT ON SOUTH AFRICA AND UGANDA

South Africa

The contemporary multi-racial, ethnic, and tribal people of South Africa are the heirs to a reborn society that is still shedding its colonial residue. Given these seismic changes, LGBT South Africans also boast some of the most advanced legal and constitutional protections found anywhere on earth. Simply put, progress in gay rights in South Africa clearly parallels the nation's racial progress that contributed to tearing down legal apartheid in the 1990s.

South Africa, in fact, was the very first nation in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation (as well as sex and gender) in its constitution. In 2006, it was the first (and still only) nation in Africa to legalize same-sex marriages.

Like other African cultures, and despite its legal advances, homosexuality within South Africa is still frequently blamed on Western European influences and colonialism—and more recently on the intervention of technology. These modern skeptics, however, ignore the fact that throughout history, many African tribal cultures have acknowledged same-sex relationships. Given this deep-seated animus towards same-sex behaviors, it is not surprising how much this has complicated and even slowed South Africa's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, too.

In the workplace, it's important to recognize that South Africa adopted laws in 1998 to protect its citizens from labor discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (among other categories)—a leap forward that the United States has not yet achieved. Moreover, two years later, similar discrimination protections were extended to services and public accommodations (also lacking in the United States.)

LGBT professionals are open and visible on the job within many major corporations across South Africa, and gay households likewise are targeted through marketing campaigns (some of which tout the “Pink Rand,” for instance). Among the very prominent voices advocating equality for LGBT people are Anglican Church leader Archbishop Desmond Tutu and human rights activist Allan Boesak. Even the Dutch Reformed Church, which represents significant numbers of white Afrikaaner citizens, has ruled that its gay members should not be the targets of discrimination and affirmed that they may hold positions within their church hierarchy.

Given all of these tangible milestones in social and political equality, it remains highly disconcerting and deeply disturbing for LGBT South Africans (and visitors) that they remain targeted for many forms of abuse in all social strata. Most recent human rights reports gathered by the U.S. Department of State underscore that members of the LGBT community are frequently the victims of hate crimes, gender violence targeting lesbians, and killings.

Uganda

It is not possible to understate the terrible and unacceptable price that state-sanctioned repression and terrorism have imposed on Uganda's LGBT community. To begin, lesbian,
gay, bisexual, and transgender people have no sexual-orientation-related rights (or ones protecting gender identity) at all. All forms of same-sex activity in Uganda are illegal and frequently harshly punished.

A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes poll reports that 96 percent of Ugandans say homosexuality itself should be rejected—one of the very highest benchmarks for homophobia in the world.

While human rights activists, allied with many governments and international bodies, protest vehemently, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and his government still consider pushing even harsher laws than those already existing that impose life imprisonment for homosexual acts. Under new proposals, the Ugandan Parliament now deliberates whether to insist upon a death penalty for repeat offenders, as well as for members of their families.

All forms of discrimination in Ugandan society are not merely officially sanctioned but encouraged by many societal institutions including the police, teachers, and the media. The U.S. Department of State, and leaders throughout Europe, Latin America, and North America consistently condemn Uganda for its singularly cruel and discriminatory policies. Consider that just a few years ago, a Ugandan radio broadcaster was forced to pay a fine and to publicly apologize after merely hosting Ugandan homosexuals on a live talk show.

**Middle East And Asia**

In few spots in the world today do we witness such an extraordinary democratic surge of newly educated youth and emerging working-class and middle-class citizens than in the Middle East. As authoritarian and hierarchical societies in Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, and Libya either topple or struggle through regime change, reform, and armed revolt, many of these changes will have long-term implications for their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens.

Within nations like Iran, with a repressive and controlling regime, it is not surprising that its leaders maintain that homosexuality does not even exist. And in fundamentalist Islamic cultures such as Saudi Arabia or Yemen—and increasingly in both Iraq and Afghanistan—religious or sharia law demands corporal punishment and public execution for LGBT people.

Israel, on the other hand, is the only nation in the Middle East protecting LGBT citizens with sovereign anti-discrimination laws, and also by recognizing same-sex marriages performed abroad and by legalizing adoption rights for same-sex couples. The Israeli military, moreover, has openly LGBT soldiers serving in all military branches, where discrimination is barred. Tel Aviv is sometimes considered the gay capital of the Middle East. (Note that apart from Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Cyprus are the only other nations in the Middle East where homosexuality between consenting adults in private is not illegal and the law does not demand that homosexuals be prosecuted.)

Apart from more accepting Israeli society, there is no question that within the public sphere in the Middle East, homosexuality remains deeply ostracized, religiously condemned, and punished. This is especially true in states with explicit sharia laws,
which particularly govern families and relationships, and which officially deny even the existence of homosexuality. However, within somewhat more open and pluralistic societies such as Lebanon and Jordan, same-sex attractions and relationships can flourish in discreet subcultures while remaining nearly invisible to most.

Ironically, too, with western military forces serving on bases and in communities in the Middle East, openly gay men and lesbian soldiers are working, fighting, and serving side-by-side with their straight countrymen and women. With the lifting of America’s military ban on openly gay soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women, that experience will expand to many borders.

Throughout Asia, generally it can be said that homosexuality does not strictly face the same unyielding religious and cultural boundaries as it does in the Middle East, nor the powerful and unified forces of governmental repression; however across the board in most of Asia, tough laws still abound. Keep in mind, Asia not only is the most populated continent (with more than 60 percent of the world’s people, speaking hundreds of languages and dialects, representing all of the world’s religions), just over half of Asian nations today continue to criminalize homosexuality.

Across Asia, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) reports that “even in countries where homosexuality is legal, social and cultural attitudes towards Lesbian, Gay and Transgender people still force many to hide who they truly are and are being stigmatized and discriminated against, creating great concerns to the security and well being of the estimated 320 million LGBT people” living there.

There are rare exceptions, nonetheless. In societies such as those found in South Asia, the boundaries of gender and sexual orientation in fact appear to be quite fluid. For years, Thailand, Indonesia, the Maldives, and the Philippines have been frequently recognized as popular, exotic, and unique destinations for LGBT tourists and professionals. In addition, penal and criminal reforms have made major leaps forward in Indian society, including the 2010 ruling by the Indian Supreme Court striking down laws that criminalized homosexuality. Both Nepal and Pakistan recognize sexual orientation as a “third gender,” while the Nepalese legislature several years ago welcomed its first openly gay parliamentarian, Sunil Pant.

**SOCIETY AND BUSINESS UP CLOSE: SPOTLIGHT ON LEBANON AND INDIA**

**Lebanon**

Lebanon’s capital Beirut, when not riddled with sectarian tensions and violence, has often been labeled the “Paris” of the Middle East largely due to its culinary, social, and cosmopolitan buffet. Like Paris, Beirut is truly a global crossroads for many nationalities, religions, ethnicities, and races and paradoxically, therefore, it can be an oasis for inclusion, as well as a fertile battleground for political strife.

For Lebanon’s LGBT community, they may be just as likely to face ostracism and stigma as they are to find an inclusive and protective community, social connections, entertainment, and specialized media. Officially, homosexuality remains a crime and traditional social customs and religious beliefs (both Islamic and Christian) tend to equate homosexuality
along with cross-dressing) as signs of cultural infection and immorality. Despite these constraints, however, an LGBT rights movement continues to exist and private clubs and spaces may easily be found that welcome LGBT locals and foreign visitors.

Remarkably, given the social opprobrium that still exists throughout Lebanese society, combined with a Lebanese penal code that punishes sexual relations “contradicting the laws of nature” (such as homosexuality) with a year in prison, life for the LGBT community still shows a rare and relative openness and resilience. Consider for example that seven years ago, the path-breaking film, “Brokeback Mountain” was publicly screened in Lebanon movie houses, with only a few minutes deleted, provided that tickets could only be sold to adults to view the popular film about a gay male couple. Last fall, a symposium for worldwide travel professionals was organized in Beirut by the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, welcoming travel industry leaders from the United States, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Colombia, Chile, and Serbia. Clearly, there is an LGBT culture that defies boundaries and official condemnation.

Lebanon also is recognized as the first Arab nation with its own gay periodical, Barra (Out in Arabic), which appeared in 2005 and 2006. Along with other gay-themed web publications and book publishing, this trend represents a surprising and welcome liberalization and freer expression for the nation’s LGBT and LGBT-friendly communities.

India

In 2009, India’s more than one billion citizens felt a seismic cultural change when its highest court of law at last decriminalized homosexuality by overturning an 1860 British law. The judicial finding decreed, in part: “Moral indignation, howsoever strong, is not a valid basis for overriding individuals' fundamental rights of dignity and privacy. In our scheme of things Constitutional morality must outweigh the argument of public morality, even if it be the majoritarian view.”

Like comparable Asian societies, homosexuality is frequently considered taboo in India, along with other conversations about sexuality in general. However, as new generations emerge, along with updated depictions and more candid discussions about homosexuality in Bollywood products and in the media, the cultural consensus is clearly shifting.

Now that decriminalization has occurred, Indian human rights leaders and LGBT activists are moving towards achieving new forms of political equality and nondiscrimination reforms in other aspects of public life. Multinational employers doing business in India likely will be among those change agents whose workplace policies reflects this promising dawn of tolerance and inclusion.

As we see in other societies, religious beliefs and traditions also play a role in Indian life and culture but with different consequences. Hinduism, the predominant faith throughout India, is considered to have reflected all perspectives on homosexuality from aversion to neutrality to acknowledgement—and has never explicitly demonized or condemned homosexuals.

In the past two years, with decriminalization, there is growing evidence of an emerging gay nightlife in large cities such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, and Kolkota, to name
several—which may foster greater acceptance and understanding in society (and note that the same four cities also have sponsored gay pride parades and celebrations in recent years). Remarkably, the entertainment tabloid Time Out (Delhi) now offers a column covering gay events in Delhi every week. In 2009, soon after the court’s decriminalization decree, in fact, India’s first online LGBT magazine was released called “Pink Pages,” along with the reappearance of an underground gay magazine Bombay Dost.

A few years ago, in a somewhat unexpected yet splashy development, a royal Indian prince decided to come out of the closet, a step hailed worldwide as the first openly gay royal. Although immediately disinherited by his own family, he was later reported to have reconciled with his relatives.

**Latin America**

Outside of Europe and North America, a handful of leading nations in Latin America arguably represent the most promising next chapter in LGBT acceptance and civil equality.

This is a critical change of attitude given that the Brussels-based International Lesbian and Gay Association reported in 2005 that a gay man was killed every two days in Latin America solely because of his sexuality. (Regrettably, with rare exceptions such as Curaçao, with its familiar and tolerant Dutch traditions, many nations in the Caribbean region remain defiantly hostile and punitive towards their LGBT populations, as well as towards LGBT visitors.)

Homophobia and the commonplace incidence of violent hate crimes, it appears, may also parallel the growing visibility of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people throughout much of Latin society. Like Africa’s legacy, almost all nations of Latin America have complicated colonial heritages along with longstanding religious traditions associated with the Roman Catholic faith as well as Mormon evangelicals. Both faiths adamantly oppose any legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

Nonetheless, judicial and political trends are shifting with remarkable speed especially in trailblazing nations like Argentina and Brazil, the two largest republics on the continent. It is these two examples highlighted that not only reflect the most advanced political and social progress, but that are likely to have strong implications for their economic growth potential and tourism promotion.

**SOCIETY AND BUSINESS UP CLOSE: SPOTLIGHT ON ARGENTINA AND BRAZIL**

**Argentina**

While Argentina had legalized same-sex sexual activity between consenting adults in private in the late 19th century, for decades there were no modern civil rights protections in place for LGBT people. In fact, the awakening of the contemporary gay rights movement appears to be closely associated with Argentina’s democracy movement of the 1980s, when all Argentine citizens relished their newfound personal freedoms and individual autonomy.
Beginning at that time, Buenos Aires and other large cities began to welcome the introduction of gay bars, pride celebrations, community publications, and their own brand of political activism. Buenos Aires, in fact, enacted legislation to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation—a milestone that encouraged promoters of the International Gay World Cup to bring their global sporting competition to Argentina’s capital in 2007.

In the most profound milestone yet for Latin America, in July 2010, Argentina President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner signed into law that continent’s first marriage equality law. Kirchner’s government, and especially her Minister of Tourism, hailed the legislation as a beachhead for promoting the nation’s economic development and a strong boost to tourism and hospitality. The political establishment signaled its desire to frame the decision as added evidence that its society’s democratic roots today are deep and healthy.

While gay couples today may marry and adopt children in Argentina, the legislature is still considering further legislation to adopt non-discrimination laws in the areas of employment as well as in the provision of goods and services, which will go a considerable way to improving workplace environments and parity for Argentina’s workers and their families.

**Brazil**

Like contemporary Argentine society, the Brazilian LGBT community today enjoys most of the same civil status and legal protections that are available to all other citizens of Brazil. Since 2010, Brazilian law requires all health plans in the nation to extend benefits equally to same-sex couples as they do for other married couples, as well as equal tax benefits under law for both types of couples.

Remarkably, just in May 2010, Brazil’s highest court voted overwhelmingly in favor of treating same-sex couples equally with other married couples, effectively extending the same 112 legal rights to all adult unions. This ruling, though adopted in the courts rather than the legislature, effectively extends the same marital status to all Brazilian citizens.

These progressive leaps forward also mirror the growth of Brazil’s homegrown LGBT movement, which is working still to achieve protection from discrimination in workplaces, as well as in the provision of goods and services in the marketplace. In the early 1990s, some estimate there were fewer than 20 LGBT groups in Brazil, while today there are more than 300. Beginning in the mid-1990s with one or two gay pride marches, there are now more than 270 community-based gay pride celebrations and parades in Brazil. The annual Sao Paulo LGBT pride march by itself attracts not only millions of dollars to the local economy, but also three to four million celebrants from Brazil and overseas (and is now considered by the “Guinness Book of World Records” the largest celebration of its kind in the world today).

With this progress in visibility and equal treatment under law, it is unsettling to realize that Brazil also has a great deal of work left to do in terms of tolerance, and ultimately acceptance, of sexual diversity in its midst. Homophobia remains endemic in schools, smaller communities, and in workplaces with the knowledge that, on average, according
to NGO observers, one LGBT person in Brazil is murdered every two days because of his or her sexuality.

**North America**

**SOCIETY AND BUSINESS UP CLOSE: SPOTLIGHT ON THE UNITED STATES**

The dramatic pace of progress, acceptance, and change in the United States is accelerating for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. This is due, in no small part, to the policies and practices of major corporations and employers in most sectors and of all sizes that value their LGBT workforce, customers, allies, and partners.

This U.S. progress is measured through objective and transparent benchmarks such as those established by the nation's leading LGBT civil rights advocates, the Human Rights Campaign. The HRC Corporate Equality Index (CEI), for instance, over the last decade reported the swift spread of sexual orientation employment nondiscrimination policies, and tracked employee benefit coverage to determine whether same-sex partners are treated equally with married heterosexual couples.

Remarkably today, more than 75 percent of the nation's top corporations offer employment and workplace protections for their LGB employees. More than half of Fortune 500 companies also offer equal benefits to same-sex couples that formerly were available only to married heterosexual couples.

In the past year American policy took two giant steps forward with significant implications for all businesses and for its economy. The first step is the history-making repeal of the Defense Department's military ban, making it possible today for openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women to serve in uniform in the Armed Forces. This step alone is a seismic signal that the majority of the American people today acknowledge that sexual orientation is no longer a characteristic that disqualifies a person from serving the nation ably and courageously. With open military service, LGBT leaders and veterans will become integrated in leadership roles throughout the economy as well. Many of the best-qualified individuals will be recruited for management and senior positions in high performing companies.

The second step is the advancing footprint of marriage equality. New York enacted its own same-sex marriage law in June 2011, bringing the number of states where gay couples may now legally marry to six (plus Washington, D.C.).

Put another way, that means roughly 42 percent of all American people now live in jurisdictions where some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples exist—from marriage to civil unions, domestic partner registries, and other legal protections. If we consider also that New York is the nation's capital of commerce, this sea change will rapidly influence the way that many multinational employers consider marriage equality and the rising visibility of same-sex couples in their hiring and recruitment, in their benefits policies, and in their market strategies.
What of public opinion? Americans also express far more support for LGBT people and their issues. Consider that in 2001, only four out of 10 Americans considered same-sex relations to be morally acceptable. In 2011, that figure is 56 percent. Since August 2010, six national polls have found majority American support for marriage equality. A majority of all Americans consistently favor equal job opportunities, equal benefits, and equal access to leave for gay men and lesbians in the workplace.

**A World of Change and Growth for Business Leaders**

We see first-hand that global trends are unfolding swiftly. The contributions and influence of LGBT people on all continents are shaping everything we know about society, community, and family as well as households and markets. These are indisputable trends that encourage business leaders and visionaries to capture growing market share and to identify untapped sources of human talent and leadership.

These trends help explain why industry leaders like American Airlines, IBM, Google, Kimpton Hotels and other popular, global brands tend to inspire greater loyalty and affinity from LGBT households. With a projected U.S. LGBT buying power of $743 billion in 2010, it is not surprising that the competitive marketplace is paying closer attention.

At the same time, some of these market and cultural trends also expose geographic pockets of shocking bigotry, animus, legal barriers, and conflict that are troubling and far higher risk. In these societies, we can accept collective responsibility to shed light on the cruelest forms of abuse, degradation, and discrimination that stand in the way of human rights progress, and that also impede the barrier-free commerce of ideas, shared values, people, and resources.

In closing, the global road map on LGBT engagement and inclusion takes many paths that business leaders should recognize:

- Across most continents, lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transgender individuals are achieving historic thresholds of visibility, respect, and equal recognition in civil society. Their contributions now play a far more visible role in the world’s business fabric and in how leading multinational businesses think about their human resources and talents.
- Despite these milestones of acceptance, in some nations and societies there remain unacceptably high risks and dangers for LGBT people. With increased global visibility for the LGBT community, the forces of reaction and oppression keep surfacing to block this progress, and worse, to criminalize LGBT people and render them invisible and powerless.
- While most of these trends reflect long-awaited progress in the lives of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, there remains much more work to do across all societies to advance the rights and the respect for gender-variant and gender non-conforming people. For transgender people, the yawning gaps in education, sensitivity, and acceptance demand far more attention throughout the world.
- How have these trends towards acceptance and engagement been shaped? Simply put, these changes may be reflected best by greater education, the spread of digital
knowledge across societies, the sturdy influence of women and young people, as well as the contributions of secular leaders to overcome extreme forms of religious dogma (while respecting faith-based traditions).