

House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing
Advancing and Protecting LGBTQI+ Rights Abroad
June 24, 2021
Testimony of Julie Dorf, Senior Advisor, Council for Global Equality

Thank you, Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul and members of the Committee.

It's an honor to be part of the first ever HFAC hearing on the human rights of LGBTQI people today. As someone who has been advocating on these issues for the past 30 years, I am both delighted by our movement's progress, and still horrified by the omnipresence of abuses experienced every day by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex citizens in most countries around the world. The arc of the moral universe does bend toward justice, but very, very slowly and unevenly when it comes to the most marginalized populations around the world.

The power of the human rights field is in the universal buy-in of a value system that affirms that every human being is born with basic rights and freedoms. And this moment in time – 73 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed—minorities, especially the most marginalized, are more robustly claiming their own rights and pointing out the specific ways that their rights are uniquely denied. These are not new or special rights, they are basic human rights as they apply in particular ways to particular communities, including LGBTQI people, who are among the most persecuted in the world.

There are 70 countries with criminal statues against LGBTQI people, but more important than what's written in law, anti-LGBTQI stigma, discrimination, and violence are extreme and omnipresent. Often abuses against our communities are the proverbial “canary in the coal mine” signaling a broader human rights or rule of law deterioration. If you look around the globe this month alone, you'll find countries like Uzbekistan further criminalizing homosexuality and leaders of their legislature calling for the expulsion of LGBT people writ large. Or Ghana, where 21 human rights defenders were just accused of unlawful assembly when gathering for a training on how to *protect* LGBTQI Ghanians. Or 15 of the 41 gay youth recently arrested in Uganda who were forced to undergo anal exams while in jail— a practice we consider torture or rape. Or in Egypt where gay men and transgender women have been routinely entrapped on the internet by police or picked up on the street for supposed debauchery and stuck in unsafe prison environments for years. Or just two weeks ago right after Vice President Harris' return from Guatemala, local trans leader Andrea Gonzales director of OTRANS was murdered along with another trans activist – or a young Chechen lesbian was kidnapped by her family as she tried to escape the region and her whereabouts are completely unknown today.

No one can argue that this treatment runs counter to everything our country should stand for -- respect for individuals -- for their privacy, and their freedoms, and the spirit of inclusion. On top of the moral imperative to protect the basic human rights LGBTQI people around the world, we now know from recent studies that that greater legal protections against discrimination for LGBTQI people correlates to higher GDP and greater rights for all. Human rights are indeed

interrelated and indivisible. Even our former Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback near the end of his term said publicly that countries that treat LGBTQI people well tend to also afford greater religious freedom. If you really think about it, everyone should want to live in a society that protects and integrates its LGBTQI citizens because it makes everyone safer and healthier; it's good for democracy, and it is good for the bottom line.

How is our country supporting LGBTQI populations around the world? President Biden's Memorandum on the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ People on day 14 in office was a great start, mobilizing the various federal agencies to do their respective parts in protecting and promoting the rights of LGBTQI people. And members of this Committee – particularly Representatives Titus, Cicilline and Castro—have introduced the GLOBE Act, and advocated in various ways including ensuring part of our US budget funds the State Department's Global Equality Fund and USAID's Global Human Rights Initiative. But there is so much more we could be doing:

- **First, bring our domestic and our foreign policy more in alignment:** what happens here generally and for LGBTQI Americans (both the good and the bad) disproportionately impacts people around the world, as well as our reputation and credibility. Whether it's the BLM movement, the treatment of transgender Americans, what happens to intersex children in American hospitals, what happens in ICE detention to a Central American gay or trans asylum seeker, or whether big tech is held accountable for online harassment – it is noticed around the world. We have a moral imperative to further perfect our own democracy, including our treatment of LGBTI Americans in order to effectively lead on these issues abroad.
- **Secondly, work more multilaterally:** while we have scores of partner countries in the global north and global south that share our values and support for LGBTQI rights, most of them have fewer embassies around the world and fewer diplomats. So even the most friendly nations welcome U.S. engagement and indeed leadership on these issues. Use our leadership to leverage greater global engagement among the many supportive countries (as well as “moveable middle” countries). Not just at the UN or the OAS, but from our embassies – instigating joint demarches, sharing intel about quiet diplomacy, bringing together diplomats with local civil society and local authorities.
- **Third, please increase the funding:** The State Department's annual human rights reports have consistently pointed out a pattern of significant human rights abuses based on sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics every year for decades now. The 2020 reports detail a majority of nations in the world with clear wrongs to right. Yet despite the very demonstrated need and the excellent funding mechanisms at both State and USAID, the funding levels are woefully insufficient. It's time to properly fund this work at a base level of \$60M a year. The upcoming Summit on Democracy provides another opportunity for multilateral commitments to this agenda, including resourcing areas that haven't been done before such as anti-poverty programming specifically or LGBTQI people.
- **Lastly, make human rights – including LGBTQI rights – a bipartisan issue:** There is no reason that basic human rights and individual freedom issues should be split on a partisan basis. It's time to pass the GLOBE Act, the International Human Rights Defense Act, Global HER Act, and the Global Respect Act on a bipartisan basis.

Our country is firmly on the right side of these human rights issues, as evidenced by Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby's testimony earlier today. But we could be doing so much more with a little more political will and a little more financial commitment to live our democratic and human rights values. The Council for Global Equality and our 30 member organizations stand at the ready to collaborate with our government and with Congress in pursuit of equality and fairness for all. Thank you.