

His Excellency Kamallesh Sharma  
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9 March 2015

Your Excellency,

We write to you on Commonwealth Day as a network of civil society organisations concerned with the promotion of equality and dignity for all citizens in the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Equality Network (TCEN) brings together organisations from more than 30 Commonwealth countries and represents every region of the Commonwealth.

This Commonwealth Day, as we mark the contribution and potential of young people, we want to highlight the fact that not all of the Commonwealth's youth have equal access to dignity and rights. In 41 of the 53 Commonwealth member states individuals, young and old, continue to be criminalised because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Many of these laws date back to the era of the British Empire. In every Commonwealth country young people face social discrimination because of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression that obstructs their potential and limits the vital role they have to play in the future of their communities, countries and the Commonwealth.

We acknowledge the progress that the Commonwealth has made on this issue. We know it is a sensitive one for many Commonwealth countries. We applaud your statements that criminalisation is contrary to Commonwealth values and your commitment to encourage member states to take seriously the recommendations of the upcoming UNHRC report on this issue. These statements have marked important steps in the recognition of SOGIE rights in the Commonwealth. The implacable opposition to all forms of discrimination - stated in the Commonwealth Charter - means that members of the Commonwealth must now work together to ensure that equal access to rights and dignity is afforded to all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

So as we celebrate Commonwealth Day, and as we approach the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta later this year, we ask that the Commonwealth, in its institutions, its member governments, and civil society take the following actions:

- the Commonwealth Secretariat should do more to identify and support good practice amongst member states
- member states should engage more with their own civil society, in particular the groups which comprise The Commonwealth Equality Network who have knowledge and expertise on the challenges presented by discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and how those challenges can be effectively and sensitively addressed
- the Commonwealth institutions should give better support to civil society, that has led the way in promoting human rights in the Commonwealth.

We continue to believe that the Commonwealth, with its unique shared values and history, its voluntarism and its respect for difference and diversity, can become a place where the rights and dignity of all its citizens are championed and their equality protected.

Warm wishes,  
The Commonwealth Equality Network