

European Parliament: HRWF debate on child marriage on EU REPORTER TV

– Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/wg0K0_XA6Vg

Panelists

Elisa Van Ruiten, a Gender Specialist at Human Rights Without Frontiers International;

Mohinder Watson, a researcher and activist against child marriage, who escaped a forced marriage of her own as a teenager;

Emilio Puccio, the Coordinator of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights, which is a cross-party and cross-national group comprising over 90 MEPs and 25 child-focused organizations.

The presenter was EU Reporter's Jim Gibbons.

“Every day somewhere in the world, 39,000 young girls are married before they reach the age of majority; more than a third of them are younger than 15, according to the Council of Europe. We may be well into the 21st century but too many girls are still forced to live in a bygone age of male dominance. Human Rights Without Frontiers has just produced a report on women's rights and the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.”

EU Reporter – <https://bit.ly/2CTvNPh>

Next Programme about North Korea (November) –

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INDONESIA: Transgender Indonesians bear brunt of rising intolerance

The Malay Mail Online (09.10.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2d76vjS> – A handful of Muslim transgender women wash their faces, put on white robes and begin to pray, an act of quiet defiance after their study centre in Indonesia was shut by hardliners.

Al Fatah, which claimed to be the world's only Islamic boarding school for transgender students, was long regarded as a symbol of the tolerant brand of Islam widely practised in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

But several months ago, amid a sudden backlash against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, a local hardline group called Islamic Jihad Front forced the school to close.

Despite the risk of retaliation, a small group of former students continue to quietly gather at the school building in the city of Yogyakarta every week to pray and study Islam.

"We want to prove that Islam accepts transgenders, that Islam is a blessing for all mankind," Shinta Ratri, the leader of the prayer group, told AFP.

The closing of the school, which was founded in 2008, is one of the most visible signs of an alarming wave of intolerance sweeping across Yogyakarta – the country's cultural heartland which had long been regarded as an open-minded, accepting city.

In recent times Islamic hardliners have halted a festival focusing on women's issues and have targeted the Christian minority, seeking to close down churches and stop their community work.

Local police have sometimes been accused of standing back and letting hardliners carry out acts of intolerance, or even of working with them to do so.

'Unity in diversity'

"Unfortunately in recent years, intolerant groups have been imposing their rigid beliefs on people," said Agnes Dwi Rusjiyati, the local coordinator of activist group Bhinneka Tunggal Ika National Alliance.

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Indonesia's national motto, means "Unity in Diversity", and is intended to show that the vast archipelago takes strength from the myriad different ethnic, cultural and religious groups living within its borders.

But there has been a growing pushback against this long-cherished belief.

Observers say the trend in Yogyakarta is an acute example of creeping conservatism across the country, that has targeted everything from the gay community, to drinking alcohol and pornography.

The Indonesian constitution officially recognises six different religions. Most of its 255 million inhabitants practise a moderate form of Islam, often infused with influences from local ethnic groups, and no one believes the country is likely to be transformed into a state ruled by sharia law.

But critics say the influence of fringe hardline groups, and the authorities' unwillingness to tackle them for fear of being labelled anti-Islamic, has fuelled a dangerous increase

in intolerance.

The targeting of the transgender community around Yogyakarta, who were previously allowed, by and large, to quietly get on with their lives, stands out as an example of this disturbing trend.

The Al Fatah school, sitting in a labyrinth of alleyways in the historic Kotagede district of Yogyakarta, is a converted house with a main room that has been turned into a place for praying and reciting the Quran.

Three preachers continue to teach about a dozen out of the 42 former students who head there every week since its closure in February.

'Part of God's creation'

"It's so difficult for these transgenders to pray in the mosque because of the stigma," Arif Nuh Safri, a 32-year-old preacher, told AFP.

"So when I came to this school the first thing I told them is they have the right to pray, because they are part of God's creation."

Prior to the closure there had been little sign of resistance to the school in the surrounding area.

"They want to learn to recite the Quran, they want to be good people, and that's better than drinking," said one neighbour, Aris Sutanto.

But Abdurahman, the leader of Islamic Jihad Front, was unapologetic.

"We can't be tolerant towards something that is bad," he said, adding that the hardliners always coordinated with police before taking actions against activities they considered immoral.

Police insisted Yogyakarta was still a tolerant city and said they had only taken action against events when there were objections from people in local neighbourhoods.

Cases of intolerance have escalated in Yogyakarta since 2011, when hardliners began targeting churches. But there has been a sharp increase in recent times as Islamic groups have grown bolder.

In an alarming episode in April, Islamic hardliners and police together allegedly stopped a women's arts festival from going ahead, with organisers claiming they were verbally harassed and some attendees briefly detained by authorities.

The trend has sparked concern among the large community of local artists, who have expressed their frustration in graffiti that questions whether Yogyakarta is still an accepting place, such as: "City of tolerance?".

Ahmad Suaedy, a researcher on Islam appointed by the government as an ombudsman on religious and cultural issues, said the authorities' failure to stop acts of intolerance was causing minorities to suffer.

"This is a political strategy of politicians so they can be seen as taking the middle ground," he said. "But it is at the expense of minority groups."

**AUSTRALIA: Marriage
equality: Christian lobby**

backs legal help for businesses refusing gay couples

ACL-founded Human Rights Law Alliance is seeking private contributions for a 'fighting fund' to run cases that may arise if marriage equality is legalized

The Guardian (05.10.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2dsaS8f> – An organisation founded by the Australian Christian Lobby plans to bankroll legal cases for business owners who refuse to provide services to gay couples should marriage equality be legalised.

The Human Rights Law Alliance, set up in Canberra last month with seed funding from the ACL, is seeking private contributions for a “fighting fund” to run cases that may arise if changes to the Marriage Act are passed.

The managing director of HRLA, Martyn Iles, said the alliance would “only support cases where people have a conscientious objection to participating in a same-sex wedding”.

“We would not support anybody who was discriminating against anyone because of who they are, that is, because they’re gay,” he told Guardian Australia.

“It’s got to be sincerely held religious belief or conscientious belief and it has to be expressed in good faith.

There's a few requirements there so you would have to have some evidence that that is in fact what they believe.

"It wouldn't be a situation where it's arbitrary or someone just claims religious belief because they don't like a customer."

The Queensland anti-discrimination commissioner, Kevin Cocks, predicted that most business owners refusing same-sex couples as customers would not be explicit about their reasons, meaning it would be difficult to muster evidence for a discrimination complaint.

"There may be some groups that want to make a point and push things, so therefore if you're refused service and treated unfavourably because of your [sexuality] then people could make a complaint [but] it would depend upon the context," he told Guardian Australia.

Iles acknowledged that those refusing wedding customers for religious reasons were more likely to trigger a discrimination complaint because taking a stand would involve giving reasons.

The HRLA is crowd-funding \$120,000 to launch, with contributions "over and above that" to help establish casework by a volunteer network of like-minded lawyers and barristers.

"Justice is expensive in this country and if you have a few cases running, you can exhaust a lot of money very quickly. It

all depends on what people are willing to give and how successful we are getting established," Iles said.

For now an arm of the ACL, the HRLA would look to register separately as a charitable organisation.

Iles said it was not clear whether future donations would be tax-deductible, as the alliance was yet to establish whether it would qualify for deductible gift recipient status.

"That's a question for us in the future. Once we've got some work happening, then we will look into incorporating separately, getting charitable status and going out for DGR," he said.

In a public statement calling for donations the managing director of ACL, Lyle Shelton, said: "This team of Christian lawyers will fight to protect your religious freedom and fundamental rights in the courts of Australia."

"As you know, it's becoming harder for Christians to live out our most fundamental convictions in public and social life. There's an agenda to silence our voice."

Shelton said last month there was "a long list of people in the US, UK and Canada who have been fined, hauled before courts and demonised out of their jobs for their belief that marriage is between one man and one woman".

“Cake makers, florists, wedding-chapel owners and photographers are among the many people who have had legal action taken against them,” he said.

Cocks said the difficulty proving discrimination by business providers according to sexuality was similar to proving age discrimination against job applicants, where other reasons for refusal were almost always given.

“To be quite honest there may be some businesses that will refuse [same-sex couples seeking wedding services] but I don’t think they’ll let it be known why they refused,” he said.

“They’ll say they’re booked out, or they’re not working that weekend or ‘we just can’t supply you because we’ve got a number of orders on’.”

A discrimination complaint would usually need to entail an explicit statement from the business owner that a customer’s sexuality was why they were being refused business, Cocks said.

Business owners who withheld their reasons would “have to be a little bit careful of course” as they could be caught out providing the same service to a straight couple after refusing a same-sex couple, he said.

“That could happen but to be quite honest, same-sex couples would want [their wedding] to be a happy time and smart business people will go after their trade. Personally, I don’t think they’d want to prove a point.”

Cocks said it remained open to a “conservative-minded government” to pass a law to allow refusal on the grounds of opposition to marriage equality.

Among the 12 or more cases currently funded by HRLA is the defence of Melbourne anti-abortion activist and mother of 13, Kathy Clubb, who was charged in August under new Victorian laws banning protests near abortion clinics.

The HRLA is also involved in cases of “doctor’s conscience” before the Medical Board of Australia, as well as out-of-court negotiations over alleged cases of religious discrimination in workplaces and a university.

Iles declined to say whether the HRLA had gained the assistance of prominent legal figures among the five or so lawyers working on its cases pro bono or cheaply.

“Exactly who helps out will become clear because those cases will come to light,” he said.

Iles has indicated the HRLA sees itself as filling a void left by the Australian Human Rights Commission and human rights legal centres, which it believes have neglected to uphold

freedom of religion, speech, conscience and association.

Its agenda has prompted scepticism from others in human rights advocacy, with lawyer Duncan Fine accusing the HRLA of believing “the worst discrimination imaginable is to curtail their right to discriminate”.

Iles said the alliance was “not here to promote discrimination or to over-promote religious freedom, we’re here to find balance”.

“We believe in the right to non-discrimination, we believe in the right to equality but we believe the right to freedom of conscience, thoughts and religion or belief is not appropriately balanced against some of those equality and non-discrimination rights.

“The great thing about it is this has to be tested in court. Ultimately [a judge] has to decide where the balance is to be struck.”

**SOUTH AFRICA: Southern Africa
Anglican Province rejects**

blessings for same-sex marriages

Adapted from Anglican Communion News Service (03.10.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2d0w6v6> – The provincial synod of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa has voted against the introduction of blessing services for same-sex marriages. The motion required a simple majority in all three houses of the synod (laity, clergy and bishops) along with an overall two-thirds majority of the whole synod. But it was rejected in all three houses and failed to get anywhere near the two-thirds overall majority.

“From those figures you will see the strongest support, albeit a minority, came from the clergy, and the least strong from the bishops,” the Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, said afterwards “We live in a democracy, our Church has strongly advocated democracy, and people on all sides of the debate have to accept the result.

“At the same time, the debate is not over. Without trying to predict its ultimate outcome or to suggest what that should be, it was notable that a number of opponents of the motion did not reject it out of hand, but suggested instead that opinion in our Church was not yet ready for such a move.”

Archbishop Makgoba, the Primate of Southern Africa, said that support for the motion was “quite substantial” when compared with other African Anglican provinces “most of which are vigorously opposed to same-sex unions in any form.”

He said that the debate at last week’s Synod was “the first time this issue has been seriously debated by our Church” and stressed that it wasn’t necessarily the end of the debate, because “representatives are free to raise it again at future synods.”

In his comments, Archbishop Makgoba recognised the pain that such debates cause people on both sides of the debate and said that it was “palpable”, and said: “no one celebrated or applauded the outcome,” he said. “There are no winners or losers in the Kingdom of God, and we recognised that whichever way the vote went, there was going to be pain.”

He added that he was personally “deeply pained” by the outcome, adding: “If one of you, my church members, is in pain, then I am in pain too.”