

Gays can marry, but they can't kiss in public

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By Melanie Judge

I recently participated in the World Outgames in Copenhagen, Denmark. Themed "Love of freedom, freedom to love", the World Outgames is a week-long international sporting, cultural and human rights event during which the talents, contributions, rights and responsibilities of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people are acknowledged and celebrated.

In 1989, Denmark became the first country in the world to legally sanction partnerships between two people of the same sex. In 2006, South Africa became the first country in Africa to grant full marriage rights to same-sex couples. The respective contexts in which these formal rights were won couldn't be more different.

Chatting one evening at the games with three fellow LGBT activists from South Africa, we shared how the safety of Copenhagen's streets was made tangible for each of us. We lamented that the most basic freedom - to walk the streets without fear - still evades us in this country.

In Copenhagen, the city hall sported the rainbow flag (an international symbol of LGBT freedom) and Mayor Ritt Bjerregaard addressed the opening and closing ceremonies in front of thousands at the city's central square, proclaiming that "we celebrate who we are, to love who we want to love. Nobody should have to be in the closet".

Numerous out activists took the stage. The Outgames culminated in Copenhagen's 2009 Pride march where tens of thousands of marchers were cheered on by the city's citizens, many heterosexual couples, who lined the streets waving and singing.

This is not to suggest that there aren't bigots in Copenhagen. In fact, two recorded hate crimes occurred during the games.

But, unlike in South Africa, this prejudice was publicly denounced and also trumped by the overwhelming support expressed by the city's residents. LGBT couples were projected on big screens on piazzas and in street art, and musical performances provided a powerful counter discourse to bigotry. For me, it served as a stark reminder of how far we have yet to go on this score here at home.

Lesbians continue to be punished through rape, sexual violence against women is epidemic, and foreigners are easy targets for displaced anger.

Despite laws to the contrary, the vast majority of South Africans are not able to lay full claim to the resources of citizenship.

There is legislation that protects LGBT persons but there is not a vibrant social movement to counter deeply prejudiced social attitudes.

While legal gains can aid shifts in attitude, which are central to the public expression of sexual and gender diversity, more is needed.

Perhaps we have vested too much power in the law as the bearer and withholder of entitlement. The systemic fractures between formal and substantive equality; between legal rights and sexual

freedom; and, for LGBT people more specifically, between the desire for "sameness" and the expression of "difference", continue to undermine the extent to which we can claim the rights we have formally won.

Ironically, discrimination shaped by homophobia and patriarchy remains our shared currency. Homophobia serves not only to silence and attack LGBT people but also polices and regulates heterosexuals.

Diversity specialist Professor Melissa Steyn calls this "group forming and group preserving dynamics". This reproduces the homogenisation of racial, sexual and gender identities that were so central to the apartheid mythology. These identities craft the enduring contours of "self" and "other".

A step in this direction would have been for Cape Town to have accepted the Outgames invitation to host a stage in Copenhagen showcasing music and performance from the city.

Helen Zille, mayor of the city at the time, declined the invitation on the grounds that "the City currently has difficulty meeting its constitutional obligations in terms of critical service delivery as a result of insufficient resources/ manpower". Is a demonstration of the embrace of diversity not a constitutional obligation? This was a missed opportunity.

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