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Here's why the Texas LGBTQ+ community is appealing to international law

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Over the past few years we've watched key rights be slowly stripped away. Abortion is a historical artifact here and in many places across the country, transgender young people and their families have lost the power to make their own medical decisions, and teachers' lessons on slavery and LGBTQ+ issues are rigorously policed by aggressive state legislatures and local school boards. Even the libertarian think tank Cato Institute ranks Texas last for personal freedoms.

Much of this has happened at the state level, leaving many of us in states like Texas wondering whether the supremacy clause has lost its potency or the federal government its appetite for enforcement of national values. Perhaps this state of affairs is less a reflection of the lack of political will and more a reflection of the decline of pluralism as an American value.

Some would point out that federal law is also lacking in many of these areas. Without passing the Equality Act, there is no national law that can prevent the onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that has swept through Texas. Yet, federal laws are not the only limitation on state power. The U.S. Constitution not only says that state laws must yield to federal legislation, but also to any treaties that the federal government has ratified.

Though we love to pretend our nation stands in the vanguard of human rights and personal freedom, we fall short of many global standards that have been part of American law for decades. That's why Equality Texas partnered with the Human Rights Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law to submit a joint allegation letter to the United Nations, outlining how Texas and the federal government have failed to guarantee the basic rights of LGBTQ+ Texans. The Human Rights Campaign, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas have also joined the petition.

The joint allegation letter calls on 17 different independent experts, working groups and special rapporteurs to investigate how the 7 recently passed anti-LGBTQ+ bills violate Texans' right to nondiscrimination, right to freedom of expression, right to privacy, right to health and right to education.

The ban on gender-affirming health care for transgender youths violates the right to nondiscrimination and the right to health by denying access to treatments for transgender patients that are still freely available to nontransgender patients.

The overbroad and vaguely defined label of "sexually relevant" materials in Texas House Bill 900, signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott and currently blocked under an injunction, empowers school boards to

remove books with LGBTQ+ themes, hindering many young people's right to education about their own communities.

After digging into how individual bills undercut certain rights, the letter steps back and considers the larger situation. Collectively, these bills target or disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ Texans, which means that Texas and the federal government have failed to secure the rights of a whole segment of the Texas population.

International law is hard won. Treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) are negotiated by people from all over the world who bring their own values and cultural outlooks. When such a diverse group of people manage to come to an agreement about what rights humans around the world deserve, what they've written may well be the closest we can get to a universal morality — principles that transcend stark cultural differences.

Our commitments under the ICCPR and other human rights treaties are binding, despite obstacles that the U.S. Supreme Court has placed in the way of enforcement. However, the failure to meet universal human rights standards is not merely an indictment on the inefficacy of our courts or the ineptitude of our executive, it is a reflection of the deterioration of our moral leadership on the global stage. Not only are we failing to lead, we fail to meet the minimum standards that we agreed to 20 years ago.

The moral issues at the heart of the modern debate around LGBTQ+ issues are not as complicated as some would have you believe. Should teachers fit students with blinders, preventing them from seeing any way of life that diverges from what they see at home? Or do we have a moral duty to prepare young people for life in the bustling, complicated and messy world they'll grow into? Should doctors and families be trusted to make their own health care decisions, or should medical practices be limited by legislators' political agendas?

These ideas are not new; rather, they are new incarnations of the same question: Are we willing to defend even those freedoms that make us uncomfortable?

You need not understand the intricacies of transgender health care to believe in medical freedom. You need not be a member of the LGBTQ+ community to stand against censorship. The beauty of international human rights law is that we once believed that we could find agreement even with those whose culture was shaped by different faiths, different traditions and different values. Today, factions within our society seem hellbent on asserting their own dominance over all other faiths, cultures and identities that hold a place in our society.

If we aim to hold onto the land of the free, we must have the courage to defend the diversity that freedom demands. The day our law ceases to embrace people of all traditions and identities is the day we cease to be a melting pot.

For those of us who believe in pluralism, unjust laws can feel like a hydra — no sooner have the courts struck one down than another crops up. By all means, we should keep fighting these laws and holding our lawmakers accountable.

But today, I have a smaller mission in mind: Challenge yourself to embrace someone whose life looks different than yours. Christians, go make friends at a mosque. Suburban families, volunteer at a

downtown shelter. Give to a nonprofit that supports people who look and live entirely differently than you.

Waiting for lawmakers to grow consciences is as tedious as waiting for Godot, but living our values is a choice each of us can make today.