

WorldPride Human Rights Conference

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Amsterdam, 5 August 2026

Dear friends,

At the outset I extend my deepest sympathy to the loved ones of the person killed in the attack at Berlin Pride, as well as my solidarity with all those who were injured, and all the participants in that Pride.

I also offer solidarity to communities in those many countries where Pride parades and gatherings have been banned, attacked, or are otherwise unsafe for participants.

Friends, for me, participating in this WorldPride in Amsterdam is deeply personal. It was to this city that I came in 1992 from Ireland, where homosexuality was still criminalised, to figure out my own identity as a gay man.

I remain deeply grateful for the acceptance that I found here.

It is no less personal for me that we meet on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the legalisation in the Netherlands of marriage equality. That act of global leadership began the impetus that allowed me, years later, to marry my own partner in Ireland – who, I should say, I met in Amsterdam.

There is one additional anniversary in my mind today. That is this year's twentieth anniversary of the Yogyakarta Principles. The Principles serve to map out the application of universal human rights law to the lived realities of LGBTI people. They were drafted by a group of human rights experts from across the world, and I had the honour to coordinate the drafting process.

The Yogyakarta Principles, and the additional elements drafted ten years later, proved to be highly influential at national levels, as well as within the Council of Europe, the United Nations and elsewhere. The Principles remain, for today, an important reference point in standing up for the human rights of everyone, in full respect of their sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics. They are also a template to assess the overall situation across the world. They allow us to identify astonishing achievements on the one hand, and dreadful gaps and challenges on the other.

What is more, very worryingly, they shine a light on reversals, regression, weakening of human rights protection in many places.

Much has already powerfully been said this morning about these achievements, the gaps and the setbacks. Rather than repeat any of them, please allow me just some observations.

First, in my work across the European continent, I see in country after country how far still that we have to go. On this continent, the challenges are not of the east or west, north or south. They are everywhere. Nowhere is there room for complacency. Even where we had seen deeply impressive legislative or judicial action, these can co-exist alongside deep prejudices in society.

Second, everywhere there is a deep intersectionality at play and every aspect of human wellbeing is impacted

Third, in addressing social prejudice and hatred, do not under any circumstances problematise a whole community. For instance, it is unacceptable to blame migrants, as some have sought to do in the aftermath of the Berlin attack. Europe's problem of LGBTI-phobia is not imported. It has deep home-grown roots.

Fourth, as you consider how best to engage the challenges, I encourage you to fully employ the international human rights legal system and its national and international protection mechanisms. Here again, the Yogyakarta Principles are a helpful guide.

But why do it?

It can never be over-emphasised that human rights legal claims trigger a duty for states. They are not just requests for fairer treatment. And they trigger an obligation for states to remedy violations and ensure non-recurrence.

Of course, I do appreciate that, for those of you coming from highly oppressive states, this can all sound very theoretical. Nevertheless, experience shows the power and the potential of the human rights legal toolbox to achieve meaningful progress over time.

Fifth and finally, on a daily basis, my work confirms what you already realise. That the pushback against the human rights of LGBTI+ people is part of a wider effort to unravel all that has been achieved since the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Here, I greatly appreciate the leadership shown by young queer activists. They remind us that we all share a common goal of honouring human dignity, and they are willing to build smart, new alliances towards that goal.

Dear friends, as I wrap up my remarks, I invite you to look around Amsterdam city centre during this week.

What we see is a place of astonishing diversity and a determination to honour and celebrate those differences that unite us as humanity.

This place, created by WorldPride – by you – over the course of these two weeks, in other words, is a microcosm of what we need to see everywhere.

Places where, in the words of the Universal Declaration, everyone is free and equal, in dignity and in rights.

Thank you.