Working & Visiting Where You Might Not Feel Safe
Posted: 29 Nov 2010, 12:44PM

Two years ago, two lesbian tourists in Dubai were imprisoned for one month for showing affection on a beach. Dubai is part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country governed by Islamic Sharia law. Punishment for same-sex love-making is imprisonment for UAE citizens, and deportation for foreigners.

Abu Dhabi, another member of the UAE, has recently announced plans to build three large, expensive museums, one an extension of the Louvre, and another of the Guggenheim. The project is requiring input and services from thousands of people from across the globe, most of whom excel in the arts. A short distance away from the museum sites, New York University is establishing a campus. Luxury hotels are being built to accommodate the large number of expected tourists.

Five years ago, 26 young men were arrested at an Abu Dhabi hotel for cross-dressing and/or having gay sex. They were all given a five-year prison sentence. The Minister of Justice was quoted as saying, "There will be no room for homosexual and queer acts in the UAE. Our society does not accept queer behavior, either in word or in action."

There are several Western-owned global corporations that have offices in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and throughout the Middle East. The vast majority of them have policies that guarantee their gay and transgender employees a workplace in which they feel safe and valued. How do these companies navigate the mine-filled cultural waters of religiously conservative Muslim countries?

A couple of days ago, I received this e-mail inquiry: "Do you have any favorite sources of information relating to current realities of life for GLBT people in different countries? I'm working with clients in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia where we know that both legal and social norms vary dramatically. I'm just wondering whether there is any organization keeping an up-to-date picture of what the mosaic looks like?"

There are four organizations I recommended: the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), the Council for Global Equality, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and Out and Equal Workplace Advocates. Each of these groups has focused its attention on the issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees across the globe.

According to the ILGA, as of May 2010, there are five countries, out of the 192 in the world, that impose the death penalty for gay sex—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, and Mauritania, as well as parts of Somalia and Nigeria. Seventy-five countries prescribe imprisonment. The ILGA, which is located in Brussels, Belgium, monitors cultural conditions, and works through its members to eliminate such discrimination.

In their report, *Anchoring Equality: How U.S. Corporations Can Build Equal and Inclusive Global Workforces,* the Council for Global Equality, says that there are 24 countries that provide their citizens the right to bring their same-sex partner into their country legally, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Israel, and France, but the United States and 167 other countries do not. The Council was founded in 2008, and seeks to ensure that the United States uses diplomatic, political, and economic leverage to end discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people internationally.

The *International Business Equality Index*, issued in July 2009 by the International Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, revealed that only 27% of the multinational corporations surveyed offered partner benefits to their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees in all countries of operation. The Human Rights Campaign stated that of the 590 companies which replied to their Corporate Equality Index, 60% have employees working abroad. Yet, most don't have global human rights policies per se, but rather country-specific policies. That means the corporation may allow gay employees to form an Employee Resource Group in Japan, but not in Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

The fourth group I recommended, Out and Equal Workplace Advocates, attracts 2,000 gay, straight, and transgender employees from around the world to their annual Workplace Summit. At that gathering, companies that have addressed the challenges of assigning gay and transgender employees to religiously conservative Muslim countries share their insights and best practices. Cisco, for instance, allows their gay employees to refuse to travel to a country in which they would be put in danger. Shell allows employees one week at home for every three weeks they are away from their partners.

Despite the possible penalties of imprisonment or deportation, gay and lesbian employees from Western countries sometimes fall in love with foreign nationals they meet on assignment, and then want to return home with their mate. An organization that can help deal specifically with the issue of bringing a same-sex partner from another country into the United States is Immigration Equality, headquartered in New York. Their primary focus is the passage of the Uniting American Families Act, which would allow U.S. citizens to sponsor their foreign-national partners for legal residency, such as a same-sex partner met in the UAE by an American sent to work there.

I would love to work in the UAE, and bring Ray with me to see the art museums being built there, but I would want to feel safe speaking as an openly gay man in the corporate auditorium on gay and transgender issues, and Ray and I would want to feel safe as a gay couple walking on the streets, and staying in the hotels of Abu Dhabi.