Thinking LGBT human rights in Guyana
A conversation with the British High Commissioner to the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, Jane Miller, OBE

Jane Miller, OBE, and Amar Wahab

Jane Miller, OBE, is the British High Commissioner to the Co-operative Republic of Guyana and Her Majesty’s Non-Resident Ambassador to the Republic of Suriname. Amar Wahab is professor of Gender and Sexuality in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at York University, Canada.

ABSTRACT
Scholar Amar Wahab, co-editor of the Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies, interviews British High Commissioner to Guyana, Jane Miller, OBE, about her perspectives on LGBT human rights in Guyana. They discuss issues related to the legacies of the colonial regulation of gender and sexuality, the inclusion of diverse identities, and collaboration with LGBT activist organizations in Guyana.

KEYWORDS
Guyana, LGBT, human rights

AW: Thanks so much for agreeing to meet with me for the interview. I’m one of the co-editors of the Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies, together with Professor David Dabydeen and Maria del Pilar Kaladeen. While scholars have published on indentureship in many academic journals, there
is no one space to do so on a sustained basis. We are currently focusing on the topic of sexualities and queer studies in relation to indentureship and its legacies. In addition to articles, the journal also features visual works and poetry, as well as interviews with folks working on indentureship, but also with folks who are working on sexualities and sexual politics, etc. This is the reason why we are interested in some of the recent work you’re doing in Guyana, some of which has received press coverage.

JM: It is a pleasure to meet you. LGBT rights are really important to me and I regularly meet with the community, host events and advocate for their rights. But there is still so much more we could be doing.

AW: I wonder if we can start off with a bit of background, in terms of your work in human rights, not just in Guyana, but also prior to coming to Guyana.

JM: My career over the past 30 years has been in Africa and mostly development focused. I’m sure you’re aware that FCDO – the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office – is a new department within the UK government. It brings together the amazing world-class diplomatic staff we had under the Foreign Office together with the incredible thought leadership and development workers from within the Department for International Development (DFID). So, my career history has been with DFID and my personal expertise and experience has been heavily focused on human development. You probably noticed after my name I have the letters ‘OBE’, an honour from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for my work in Africa, but particularly focusing on ending female genital mutilation. So the issues of rights are important to me. I think, they are an incredibly important part of making the world a better place, whether that be issues of gender rights, whether it be issues of disability rights, whether it be issues of ageism, whether
it be LGBT rights. I think all these things make the world a better place as diversity makes organizations and society work better — make better decisions.

I’m coming here to Guyana with a much broader portfolio: promoting trade and business opportunities in this incredible country, one of the fastest growing economies in the world; climate change and environmental protection, with its stunning biodiversity, forests and low levels of deforestation. And now becoming an oil-producing state with opportunities now to develop this country and diversify the economy; and finally working on democracy, strengthening institutions and protecting rights. So my work on LGBT rights falls within this third important cluster of my work.

AW: It seems like your work on the African continent was very integrated, taking an intersectional approach to thinking about gender and sexuality. Within the context of Guyana, there may be different kinds of intersections, around trade and climate change, etc., that may have specific implications for how we think about gender, sexuality and human rights in a much broader and more comprehensive manner.

JM: Absolutely. You’re absolutely right about the intersection of sexuality with all these different issues. In fact, I think it may well be through the private sector that we start having more progressive policies on LGBT rights. It may not be the government or legislative change that is the first mover. At the moment, it’s illegal for a man in Guyana to have same-sex intimate relationship. Maybe it’s my background and 30 years of living in Africa, but I’ve found Guyana to be incredibly tolerant. I’ve come from Africa, where the stigma and discrimination are common, and where gay people sometimes end up beaten or put in jail for loving the wrong person. So, I’ve come to Guyana and, yes, there is more progress to be made, but I find it incredibly
progressive. I’ve had events and parties here for the LGBT community and this seems to be positively received. Now, that is not to say there is no discrimination, there is, and there is still a long way to go. But I am not seeing the level of discrimination or legal prosecution that I have seen in some other parts of the world. We need to remember, it wasn’t overnight that the UK changed social attitudes and legislation. It takes time. In my view, it is about normalizing differences between people and bringing together all those different communities, including government, civil society, private sector, academics and the religious community. This will not happen overnight. A rapid change in legislation, without understanding various group reaction, could actually create a backlash, could actually do harm to the community. I’m regularly talking to civil society, to religious leaders, private sector and government on LGBT rights. I do not expect that there will be a sudden change. Wouldn’t it be lovely? I’d be delighted if it was. But we have to bear in mind the way society changes, and particularly the way change happens for these type of deeply held social norms and values. But bit by bit, change happens in an incremental way.

AW: Definitely, and I think that also means looking for spaces of conversation or debate, but also for negotiation around or through some of these tensions. You mentioned that you’ve noticed examples of tolerance; would you be able to share some of these examples, to the extent that you can share?

JM: I have been to clubs and events with people that are openly gay, who don’t seem to be worried about showing who they are, and who they love. I am aware the situation is not perfect, and people have told me stories of discrimination, for example in the workplace and getting employment. But I don’t feel that depth of stigma that I’ve seen elsewhere. On my social media, I have also seen support for LGBT events
I have done, and very minimal negative reaction. Overall, I see more tolerance than I had expected.

**AW:** It’s interesting because spaces in the Global South tend to be automatically read or framed as highly intolerant, centering discourses about intolerance and homophobia. Yet you are observing this other narrative being played out and mapped out on the ground, about different kinds of everyday spaces and practices of tolerance in Guyana.

**JM:** And you know cross dressing has now been decriminalized. That’s just an incremental step by step in the right direction.

**AW:** It seems that you’ve been able to pick up and engage quite a bit with some of these issues. You’re able to kind of feel the pulse on the ground, which is great for informing the kinds of responses you mentioned.

**JM:** I have travelled all over the country, but because of the nature of my work, I’ve spent the majority of my time in Georgetown. And like in any country, LGBT issues will be more sensitive in some parts of the country, maybe within the hinterland or peripheral towns, more than it is here in Georgetown. But as we’ve seen in other countries, progression on LGBT rights often starts with a centre, with things becoming more liberalized around stigma, more normalized, with more tolerance, and then it diffuses across the country.

**AW:** You mentioned different players, like the state, the government, the non-governmental organizations, etc. I remember reading in one of the news reports that you had committed to working with some of these NGOs that deal with LGBT issues. Can you talk a little bit about your work with these NGOs or what you envision?

**JM:** I’ve been meeting the various LGBT groups here in Guyana to get a sense as to what the big issues are for them, for example tolerance as well as discrimination. I am interested in hearing what they say in terms of progress, as well
as bottlenecks? I’m interested to hear how I can support them and what could potentially do harm. Sometimes, having a nice white person from overseas can actually be unhelpful. So, I’m very keen to be led by them as to how we can encourage Guyana to become a more tolerant country.

As you will be aware, there are 71 jurisdictions around the world that criminalize same-sex intimate relationships. We have a lot to learn from elsewhere.

**AW:** I’m glad you actually raised this issue. One of the things that actually comes up in the context, for example, with LGBT criminalization in India, is that a lot of these laws in post-colonial Commonwealth states were originally colonial laws.

**JM:** What an awful story! Part of our legacy that we should not be proud of. These discriminatory laws were wrong then and they’re wrong now.

**AW:** And I wonder how these post-colonial governments and societies – the people who live in these spaces – how do they begin to see that some of the homophobic discourses that they are continuing to mobilize are the very same discourses that were used to exploit them or control them in the past? Yet they continue to take ownership of these discourses.

**JM:** How do you unravel that? One strategy is partly about breaking the silence on these issues. It is about having healthy dialogue about colonial LGBT legislation and being clear that it was wrong. The UK has now changed its legislation, but even in the UK this did not happen overnight. There are some groups that wish to keep discriminatory legislation in place. From my experience, it can be religious groups that wish to keep this legislation in place, and they can represent large numbers of voters, therefore providing no incentive for politicians to change this legislation.
AW: In your discussions around LGBT human rights, have you had an opportunity to have dialogue with some of these religious groups in Guyana?

JM: No, not with the ones that actively oppose LGBT rights. Those I have spoken to have been progressive, tolerant and support the de facto moratorium on a prosecution. But I am aware there are some evangelical Christian groups who are less tolerant.

AW: I’m going to shift a little bit into thinking about how we connect this conversation with indentureship, especially given the demographic context of Guyana, with a large percentage of Indo-Guyanese who share that colonial history with Afro- and mixed-race Guyanese, with Chinese Guyanese and also connected to enslavement, and as well as the colonial history of exploitation of indigenous peoples. Are there any particular issues that might help us to shed light on the Indo-Guyanese experience in relation to LGBT rights? I know that you been in this role for only eight months.

JM: To be very honest with you, I have not seen any difference between the way in which LGBT issues are expressed amongst the Indo-Guyanese versus the Afro-Guyanese. I think about the people I’ve had at my home who I’ve been discussing LGBT issues with. There have been as many people from the Indo-Guyanese community as there have been from the Afro-Guyanese community. You may need to speak to somebody who has spent a lot more time with the community. In my experience to date, I haven’t heard LGBT individuals from either the Afro-Guyanese or Indo-Guyanese saying they have been singled out because of their ethnicity. They’ve talked much more generically about being Guyanese and gay. Is this something you have seen? Is there literature on this because it’s not something I have seen yet?
AW: I’m glad you asked that, because we’re trying to think about how issues of race and ethnicity might cross-cut or intersect with issues of sexuality and, of course, Guyana – similar to Trinidad and to a lesser extent, Jamaica – has those entangled histories of slavery and indentureship which have set up racialized ethnic tensions or fractures or distinctions within the society. I think the current generation of scholars is beginning to think about what is distinct about this history of indentureship in terms of gender and sexuality. For example, what constitutes the archive of same-sex sexuality and relations specifically in the context of indentureship, given than only one record of same-sex intimacy in the 1800s can be found at the British National Archives in London?

JM: Documentation.

AW: Lack of documentation. So, how do we begin to think about same-sex relationality across the history of indentureship, in spite of that lack of documentation?

JM: Would you expect to see a particular group more discriminated against? I’m just interested to hear your theory of change.

AW: I don’t know if it’s only an issue about more or less discrimination. I do a creative reimagining of archives, so I engage artwork to rethink of what was/is possible. Much of my work is anchored in the National Archives at Kew, where I pull together bits and pieces and hints of possibilities from the archives to generate more imaginative spaces. So I’m trying to intervene in that silence around same-sex loving and same-sex intimacy in ways that may provide hope for all queer communities, but especially for Indo-Caribbean communities to ponder.

JM: Indo-Caribbean – why do you single them out? I hear sometimes racism is sometimes used in Guyana as a political tool. And to start saying it’s worse or better or different
being Indo-Caribbean or Afro-Caribbean can actually be played out in a way that can actually be unhelpful. In other words, if somebody is Guyanese and they’re gay, regardless of the skin tone, and they’re discriminated or they’re tolerated, regardless of their skin tone or their history. What I am saying is that discrimination is wrong and harmful to a country regardless of whether the discrimination is because of their ethnicity, their sexuality, their gender, their disability, their religion, their age… . It’s just thinking about people and tolerance, overall, as opposed to, because the colour of their skin or their history.

AW: I think this is something that scholars are grappling with: on one hand, these histories actually matter to how different groups are inflected by issues and discussions around rights and tolerance, etc., and then you also do have that push to create more lateral lines of connections that move beyond rights and very siloed ways of thinking. We kind of live within that tension of when to think about the ‘One Guyana’ model and when to not disavow the politics of difference. It’s about trying to find ways to live productively and generatively within that tension of the push and pull. Nation-making projects also pose a challenge in terms of how different groups angle politically, because, at times, you may have ethnic solidarity within LGBT politics and at other times there may be issues that fracture that solidarity. We tend to see these fractures or tensions as unproductive and sometimes these tensions are the very kinds of things that we must embrace – not to reinforce them, but to basically see them as places of becoming; that we can become through these tensions in very refreshing and productive ways.

JM: Yes, particularly when it opens up the dialogue and opens up the opportunity to discuss things.

AW: I agree. I want to come back to something you raised, and something that I’m also thinking of in my teaching and
research: what does it mean to think about LGBTQ justice, in any national context, but specifically in Guyana and the wider Caribbean? We can have the more institutional reforms, like the reform of the law, removal of certain homophobic or transphobic laws, etc., but at the same time, there is a larger project of change that needs to happen on the ground. You mentioned, for example, the religious organizations, etc. In your work through the High Commission, to what extent are you supporting these processes in terms of legal reform, but also broader social and political reforms? I don’t know if you have already envisioned what your work to support that change might look like.

JM: In terms of legal reform per se, we know that in reality there’s a de facto moratorium on LGBT prosecution. There hasn’t been any LGBT prosecution for some years, and I think that is an important baseline to be talking about. In terms of legal reform, I think it’s more likely you’re going to have social reform happening first. So it’s about working toward tolerance and normalizing LGBT persons within the communities and workplaces. So, I will carry on working and be guided by the LGBTQ+ community. I will be guided by where they feel we can make the most progress, and I will regularly raise this with government. I do not think it is likely that it’s going to be a quick reform of legislation. That has not been experienced in other countries, it tends to be that you see a social movement first, where you’ve got a very clear backing from society for that change, and then the law comes next. You very rarely get the law changing first and then the law changes society. So that is where I’ll be working; guided by the community as to where I can be most useful. As the UK government here in Guyana, we don’t have significant finance to give out to organizations, but we have some very
good organizations back in the UK that can provide support. They can provide toolkits, whether that’s in terms of anti-discrimination in the workplace or whether it’s about assertiveness and how to organize communications and celebrate being gay. So those are the types of things I’m thinking about the moment.

**AW:** Right, really nourishing and helping to foster that platform for a bit more political space. There are two things I want to raise, which came out of my research in St Lucia and Uganda. In the context of Uganda, a similar thing happened in 2014 with the anti-homosexuality bill. It was very interesting studying the kinds of movements that were taking place, especially US-based evangelical groups that were anchored in the country, helping to mobilize the bill. So, there is this transnational influence. And, while we are seeing an increasing trend in LGBT activism across the globe, we are also seeing parallel movements by some more conservative religious groups that actually help to nourish state-sponsored homophobia, transphobia, etc. What was really interesting in the Ugandan context is that while global LGBT organizations were in solidarity with community-based LGBT NGOs – fighting for LGBT rights in Uganda – the Ugandan government responded that these interventions are a new form of imperialism, whereby LGBT organizations in the Global North are imposing ideas of what it means to be modern and progressive on the Global South. These kinds of conversations are organizing many of the debates and exchanges, you know, so I wondered if you had any reflection on this?

**JM:** Yes, so you’ve got these two sides of global intervention and influence. In my time in Africa I have also witnessed international homophobic religious influence, as well as international progressive LGBT support. To date, I have not seen international religious homophobic influence in
Guyana. It may be happening, but I have not seen it. I don’t know if this may be happening elsewhere in the Caribbean. And I’m also not seeing at the moment, discussions about LGBT as being seen as a Western intervention or Western propaganda as I sometimes heard in Africa. I’m not seeing that yet, but maybe when I’ve been here longer. That goes back to my ways of working as I was saying earlier. I believe the most important thing is to listen to the local communities. If they feel that I could do harm, I will step back. Sometimes a nice white, well-intentioned girl from England talking about LGBT can do harm. It is important to listen, and know when to step back, despite my personal views.

**AW:** Yes, it’s a kind of tension. In Uganda, when the anti-homosexuality bill was tabled, some European countries threatened to withdraw aid or certain kinds of support. This was used by the Ugandan government to reinforce its claim that this was a new kind of colonialism, through LGBT rights. So this is a continuing line of tension. But there is another issue. In my work on LGBT issues in St Lucia – interviewing those who identified as part of the queer community in St Lucia – one of the respondents identified black working-class men in St Lucia as being the source of homophobia and patriarchy. For me I wondered whether there was a way for these differently marginalized groups – that have come to see each other as each other’s enemy – whether they realize that it’s the very same colonial histories and structures that have actually produced and enforce their marginality. This brings me back to the issue around intersectionality. In the Global North we think about sexual rights as human rights in a very single-issue way. I wonder if we need to think about sexuality as much more complex and layered, as people cannot separate their sexual identities from their gender identities,
their racial identity, their class identity, etc. And is the rights-based approach of the Global North enough to deliver justice in light of these complexities? I think this is really crucial for the kinds of solidarity that we want to and can build.

**JM:** This is not literature I’m aware of. But I think we always need to be challenging our approaches. Clearly these are complex issues, and seeing the multiple layers is important as we work toward any change. You talk about the rights-based approach. However, we can also look at these issues from an effectiveness perspective. If you’re going to make effective decisions, the more diverse the group you have around you, the better the decision is going to be, whether it’s about having women around the table or having people of colour around the table, people of different ages, different sexualities. This makes good business sense. It makes good government sense. If you are going to make good policies, you need to have that diversity. If not, it is like an echo chamber. And echo chambers rarely are innovative or creative. They rarely come up with a decision that has a transformative impact. Societies and communities are diverse, so those making decisions need to have diversity. So yes, diversity is about rights, but it is also about effectiveness and impact. In an economy like Guyana that is economically growing so fast, they need all the innovation that it can get. They really need to be thinking creatively about how those resources are going to be effectively used and not go the route of so many countries in the world where they’ve gone down the route of the oil curse.

**AW:** This helps me understand some of the concrete issues around justice, in terms of what justice means in the context of Guyana, in terms of what does it mean to bring justice, for example, for one group but not attend or address the issues of other groups. Perhaps we need a more
collaborative space for opening up difficult dialogue, for example, between the religious groups and other groups. I wonder if these could be useful pathways into rethinking justice. Is there anything else you wanted to add at this point, about LGBT human rights in the Guyanese context?

JM: I will continue working on LGBT rights as well as others that are sometimes excluded, whether this may be women, people with disabilities, or ethnicities, or whoever is being left behind. It’s about making sure that we have an inclusive society that can provide the rights for everybody. And that’s certainly what one of the agendas I will continue to work on while I am here in Guyana.

AW: And there is a long history of feminist and gender-based initiatives and organizations in Guyana. I think these passionately sustained projects can share lessons about their activism and their work across the many decades. This could help inform LGBT activism in terms of tactics and strategies.

Thank you so much for your time and thanks for sharing.

JM: It’s been a pleasure meeting you. Thank you very much indeed.

This interview reflects the personal opinions and perspectives of Jane Miller, OBE and not a statement of UK Government Policy.