



# Defending Equality

**Why LGBTIQ+ rights  
matter for regional  
democracy and stability**

## Authors

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**Equality Australia** is a national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) organisation dedicated to achieving equality for LGBTIQ+ people. Equality Australia brings together legal, policy and communications expertise, along with thousands of supporters, to address discrimination, disadvantage and distress experienced by LGBTIQ+ people. Our international work aims to enhance Australia's role in foreign policy supporting LGBTIQ+ people in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.



**Global Philanthropy Project (GPP)** is a collaboration of 23 funders working to expand global philanthropic support to advance the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people in the Global South and East. As the first international cohort of LGBTI funders, GPP is recognised as the primary thought leader and go-to partner for donor coordination around global LGBTI work.

We acknowledge that our offices are on the lands of the Bunurong, Gadigal, Jagera and Turrbal peoples, and we pay our respects to traditional custodians.

## Endorsement

This report has been endorsed by the following regional partner organisations:



### About APCOM

APCOM is a leading Asia Pacific non-profit organisation working with community-based organisations across 35 countries in the region since 2007 on education and innovation, advocacy and research, and community engagement and empowerment. We highlight and prioritise issues that affect the lives of people regarding their sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics.



### About ASEAN SOGIE Caucus

ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (**ASC**) is a regional human rights organisation that is mandated to advocate for the inclusion of SOGIESC in the policies and programs of domestic, regional and global human rights mechanisms. ASC undertakes research, capacity-building and mainstreaming of SOGIESC in the work of civil society organisations in Southeast Asia. ASC provides technical support for local and unregistered LGBTQIA+ organisations in Southeast Asia. Since 2021 the organisation has a special consultative status with the ECOSOC.



### About ILGA Asia

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association Asia (**ILGA Asia**) is a regional chapter of ILGA World. It represents more than 190 member organisations across East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and West Asia. Our vision is a world where Asia is a safe place for all, where everyone lives in freedom and equality, properly informed in the nature of SOGIESC rights. All people should have access to justice and a respect for diversity, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, nationality, belief, language, class, caste, health and other statuses.



### About ILGA Oceania

ILGA Oceania is a regional chapter of ILGA World. As a sub-organisation, ILGA Oceania represents and supports LGBTIQ+ communities across Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and the Pacific Islands, serving as a powerful catalyst for systemic change across 24 countries and territories. By amplifying the voices of diverse SOGIESC communities including Takatāpui, Sistergirls, and Brotherboys, the organisation bridges the gap between local grassroots activism and global human rights mechanisms. These critical campaigns for decriminalization and legal protection transform the Pacific's legal landscape while fostering collective resilience via regional conferences and dedicated institutional support. Driven by this intersectional advocacy, ILGA Oceania dismantles structural discrimination and secures the fundamental rights, dignity, and equality of LGBTIQ+ individuals throughout the region.



### About Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN)

The Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN) is the regional network of LGBTIQI organisations and individuals in the Pacific. Established in 2007, the focus of PSGDN has in recent years been on growing the movement across the Pacific region and advocating for dedicated resources to progress the priorities of its members. PSGDN provides technical support to Pacific Islanders of Diverse SOGIESC+ (PIDSOGIESC+) and other relevant groups to advocate and educate other community members in the Pacific including government, parents of LGBTIQI people, teachers and faith leaders about the LGBTIQI community and related issues. PSGDN provides a mechanism for the exchange of information and technical expertise between and amongst its members. PSGDN acts as a regional forum providing its members with a collective voice to pursue its goals in regional and global settings.



### About APTN

APTN is a trans-led regional network working with Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) Communities both individuals and organisations across Asia Pacific Regions. The network was founded in 2009 and registered as a non-profit organization based in Thailand in 2016. APTN advances and protects the human rights of TGD people across Asia Pacific, who face criminalisation of their identities, systemic denial of legal recognition, and discrimination in healthcare and justice systems.



### About DIVA

DIVA for Equality (DIVA) is a feminist, LBTQ+ led CSO based in Nadi, Fiji with networks and social movement links from local to global. DIVA started in 2011 as a collective of local Fijian, intergenerational LBTQI+ feminists with a strong commitment to advancing gender, socio-economic, ecological and climate justice and universal human rights. DIVA for Equality works through embodied, intersectional and interlinked programmes by and for women and girls and gender diverse people, in all their intersectional diversity, living across 22 Pacific small islands and territories. DIVA works for justice on all territories, including the body.

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## Terminology

**LGBTIQ+** refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning and **LGBTQ+** refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. The plus (+) acknowledges the diversity of other gender identities and sexual orientations not covered by the other initials. We recognise that intersex is distinct, and refer to LGBTQ+ deliberately when the issue is not relevant to the intersex community in the context. In some cases it is difficult to ascertain whether intersex people are included in a law or policy, or the target of rhetoric. When quoting from a submission, external source, or providing the name of an organisation we use the terminology of the original source (e.g. LGBTQIA+ for the Australian Government's international LGBTQIA+ engagement, with the 'A' usually referring to asexual, aromantic and/or agender).

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# Executive summary

**'We can't just take the world as it is – we have to do what we can to shape it for the better, for all of us.'**

The Hon. Penny Wong, Australian Foreign Minister, Sydney WorldPride 2023 Human Rights Conference Opening Address

## Background

The human rights landscape for LGBTIQ+ people across Asia and the Pacific is shifting rapidly, with serious implications for Australia's foreign policy and its goal of a secure and stable region. Three years after the Australian Government committed to advancing LGBTQIA+ human rights in its foreign policy at Sydney WorldPride 2023, the region presents a stark contrast of hard-won progress alongside alarming regression.

Civil society groups have achieved historic gains: marriage equality in Thailand, the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Cook Islands and advances in legal gender recognition in Vietnam. At the same time, homosexuality remains criminalised in 11 countries in the region, and new laws and policies targeting LGBTIQ+ communities have been enacted in countries such as Indonesia and Vanuatu.

Despite being home to more than half of the world's population, Asia and the Pacific receive only a fraction of global LGBTIQ+ funding.<sup>1</sup> Many local organisations are unfunded or reliant on a single donor, limiting their ability to respond to escalating threats, or engage effectively in policy dialogue, service delivery or democratic processes. The recent withdrawal of major donors – particularly the loss of key US Government human rights and emergency response mechanisms – have created acute funding shocks and further weakened regional LGBTIQ+ movements.

These developments are unfolding against a global backdrop of democratic erosion, rising authoritarian populism and tightening restrictions on civil society. They are more than a bellwether: attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights are being strategically used as a central tool in authoritarian playbooks to consolidate power, weaken institutions and deepen social division. International and local 'anti-gender' actors,<sup>2</sup> backed by funding from American and Russian groups, are increasingly shaping domestic narratives and policy reforms, including through disinformation, hate speech, and appeals to 'traditional values'.

Sustained investment in human rights, soft power and locally led LGBTIQ+ civil society is a critical – but still under-resourced – element of Australia's strategic response to these challenges. Since 2023, the Australian Government's step-up on LGBTQIA+ rights in foreign policy and development assistance has positioned

<sup>1</sup> Global Philanthropy Project, 2021–2022 Global Resources Report: Government and Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities (Report).

<sup>2</sup> 'Anti-gender' actors include diverse, often transnational networks – including religious groups, right-wing politicians, and conservative organisations – that mobilise against gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, and comprehensive sexuality education.

Australia as a credible, constructive and locally attuned partner on LGBTQIA+ issues.

Looking ahead, long-term and consistent diplomatic engagement and funding for LGBTIQ+ civil society is essential as part of a broader strategy to address the growing threat posed by the anti-gender movement. Australia is one of the few actors with the credibility and regional standing to support this work in Asia and the Pacific, helping to counter democratic backsliding and strengthen inclusive, locally rooted movements for equality.

## About this report

In the lead-up to Sydney WorldPride in 2023, Equality Australia and Global Philanthropy Project released *Partnering with Pride: The case for Australian action on equality in our region*, setting out clear recommendations for how Australia could play a critical role in advancing LGBTIQ+ rights in Asia and the Pacific. Three years after Australia's announcement of its first-ever LGBTQIA+ human rights strategy and dedicated LGBTIQ+ human rights fund of \$3.5m annually, this report examines the significant shifts that have since unfolded across the region – not only in relation to LGBTIQ+ equality, but also the broader anti-democratic trends that threaten long-term prosperity and stability.

This report is based on interviews with LGBTIQ+ and human rights leaders in Asia and the Pacific, officials from several Global North governments responsible for international LGBTIQ+ funding and/or policy (including former Australian and United States Government officials), global LGBTIQ+ experts and a review of existing research.<sup>3</sup> *Defending Equality* demonstrates that a strategic and targeted focus on LGBTIQ+ equality in Australia's foreign policy is not only aligned with our national interests – it is an essential strategic contribution.

We explore the human rights challenges facing LGBTIQ+ people in Asia and the Pacific, and outline the progress made on LGBTIQ+ rights – which has been closely driven by the leadership of local LGBTIQ+ movements. We describe the troubling setbacks of recent years, marked by shrinking civic space as opponents of LGBTIQ+ equality weaponise our identities to consolidate political power, and a shifting funding environment that has led to major gaps and the resulting closure of organisations.

In this report, we set out the links between regression on LGBTIQ+ rights and democratic decline and instability in our region, and the contribution of the well-coordinated and resourced anti-gender movement to these trends. Finally, we examine the growing recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights as a foreign policy priority for Australia and highlight the strategic importance of sustained support for regional LGBTIQ+ movements in this challenging context.

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed explanation of the methodology behind this report is available on page 29.

# Key findings

The analysis undertaken for this report highlights 3 critical findings on LGBTIQ+ equality and its implications for democracy and stability across Asia and the Pacific. In response, Equality Australia and Global Philanthropy Project offer 6 recommendations to the Australian Government to address the challenges identified through these key findings.

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### FINDING 1

**Local LGBTIQ+ movements are the primary drivers of progress on LGBTIQ+ rights, but are now facing multiple, compounding challenges, including:**

- **a funding collapse** – the loss of funding and emergency response mechanisms;
- **restrictions on their ability to operate** – government bans on LGBTIQ+ advocacy and barriers to register and receive funding; and
- **escalating attacks on LGBTIQ+ people** – increasing state-sponsored and community violence, windbacks of basic rights and anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric (including moral panic narratives framing LGBTIQ+ people as foreign threats).

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the allocation to the Inclusion and Equality Fund from \$3.5m to \$15m per year.
2. Allocate a portion of key regional and thematic funds to LGBTIQ+ equality.

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### FINDING 2

**Anti-LGBTIQ+ attacks are being deliberately deployed as a tool to erode democracy and consolidate power across the region, with direct implications for regional stability and Australia's core interests.**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Maintain Australia's focus on LGBTQIA+ equality in the breadth of its foreign policy, including bilateral and multilateral engagement and the development program.
4. Increase Australia's diplomatic corps' familiarity with and commitment to LGBTQIA+ equality and its significance to Australia's national interests.

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### FINDING 3

**Australia has not adequately responded to the coordinated, well-resourced anti-gender movement, despite its growing impact on democracy, stability and the rules-based international order.**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Invest in coordinated, whole-of-government efforts to monitor, build internal understanding of and respond to the national security implications of the anti-gender movement, including dedicated funding to address the spread of misinformation and disinformation.
6. Commission a national and regional evidence gap assessment on the anti-gender movement (including actors, networks, strategies, financing and impacts), and fund a targeted research program to inform response measures, in partnership with experts and affected communities.

# LGBTIQ+ rights in Asia and the Pacific

Across Asia and the Pacific, LGBTIQ+ people experience significant and widespread human rights challenges deeply rooted in social stigma and institutionalised discrimination, although the nature and severity of exclusion varies between countries. These communities face disproportionately high levels of poverty, exclusion and barriers to essential services. This exclusion is further compounded during crises: for example, LGBTIQ+ people are hit harder by disasters, climate-related events and public health emergencies, often facing barriers to humanitarian preparedness activities, relief distribution and recovery systems that fail to recognise their needs.<sup>4</sup> Climate change impacts – especially acute in the Pacific – have been shown to disproportionately affect LGBTIQ+ communities due to entrenched exclusion from social and public services and higher levels of poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying these development and protection challenges is persistent social stigma. **Discriminatory and harmful laws exist across the region**, including criminalisation of consensual same-sex sexual acts, the absence of anti-discrimination protections, criminalisation of gender expression, restrictions on updating gender markers, inadequate safeguards for intersex people and punitive laws affecting LGBTIQ+ sex workers.<sup>6</sup> Even where inclusive laws exist, **LGBTIQ+ people continue to face violence, harassment, and discrimination** in families, communities, faith institutions, schools, workplaces and public spaces. In some cases, harmful government practices occur even where legal frameworks are not discriminatory.

**The extent and nature of discrimination is shaped by intersecting experiences of marginalisation.** Trans and intersex people, and lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women are particularly marginalised. LBQ women's experiences of gender-based violence and discrimination are shaped both by their gender and their sexual orientation, resulting in specific harms such as corrective rape and forced marriage.<sup>7</sup> In some countries, laws criminalising consensual sexual activity between people of the same sex are limited to men (although in some of these countries, laws are being amended to include women). LGBTIQ+ people with disabilities face profound levels of intersectional discrimination, including

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4 Emily Dwyer and Lana Woolf, *Down by the River: Addressing the Rights, Needs and Strengths of Fijian Sexual and Gender Minorities in Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Response* (Report, Oxfam Australia, 2018) <https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Down-By-The-River-May2018.pdf> accessed 22 January 2026. See also Devikara (Prim) Devakula, Elisabeth Dotter, Emily Dwyer, and Maria Holtsberg, *Pride in the Humanitarian System Consultation Report* (Report, UN Women, 2018) <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/pride-in-the-humanitarian-system-consultation-report>

5 Samuel Mann, Tara McKay and Gilbert Gonzales, 'Climate change-related disasters & the health of LGBTIQ+ populations' (2024) 18 *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* 100304 (doi: 10.1016/j.joclim.2024.100304) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667278224000075> accessed 22 January 2026.

6 Asian Development Bank, *Assessment of the Legal Status of Sexual and Gender Minorities in 17 Countries in Asia and the Pacific* (Report, 2024) <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/967091/legal-status-sexual-gender-minorities-asia-pacific.pdf> accessed 22 January 2026.

7 Human Dignity Trust, *Breaking the Silence* (2nd ed, Report, 2024) <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/resources/breaking-the-silence-2/> accessed 22 January 2026.

exclusion from both the disability and LGBTIQ+ movements.<sup>8</sup> Across the region, LGBTQ+ people are disproportionately forced into situations of displacement and to seek protection in other countries, and yet face particular barriers to accessing protection systems (including through the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)) due to their LGBTIQ+ status.<sup>9</sup>

Since the Australian Government made its foreign policy commitments on LGBTQIA+ issues at Sydney WorldPride in 2023, **the LGBTIQ+ rights landscape across Asia and the Pacific has been marked by both progress and regression.** Some experts interviewed for this report cautioned that progress should not be overstated and characterised the overall picture as deeply concerning. Significant progress milestones include the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Thailand, decriminalisation in Cook Islands, and emerging debates on gender recognition in Vietnam. Similarly, developments like Nepal’s recognition of a third gender in its census underscore increasing state engagement with LGBTIQ+ inclusion, even if implementation remains uneven.

### Progress in Asia and the Pacific

Asia and the Pacific are among the few regions in the world where progress continues to be made on LGBTIQ+ rights. Across the region, advances have been **closely driven by the leadership of local LGBTIQ+ movements** – a point consistently highlighted by the LGBTIQ+ leaders, experts and government officials interviewed for this report. Although there are numerous examples of progress, this section details 2 examples of success over the last 3 years: Thailand and Cook Islands. In both cases, change was achieved through sustained grassroots mobilisation and public engagement to shift public sentiment. This focus, spanning more than a decade, played a critical role in creating legitimacy for law reform and countering the conservative opposition that existed in both countries.

8 Dwyer and Woolf (n 2).  
9 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Call for Input: Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to forced displacement’ (Web page, 2 July 2025) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2025/call-input-protection-against-violence-and-discrimination-based-sexual> accessed 22 January 2026.



Kathmandu, Nepal, © fotoVoyager/iStock

### Cook Islands: decriminalisation

In 2023, Cook Islands became the ninth Pacific Island country to decriminalise homosexuality when it passed amendments to the *Crimes Act 1969*,<sup>10</sup> strengthening protections for survivors of sexual violence and removing criminal penalties for consensual same-sex relationships. The path to reform began around 2010 and was sustained by civil society organisations committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health and human rights. Led by groups such as Cook Islands Family Welfare Association, Te Tiare Association and Pride Cook Islands, advocates engaged the community by invoking national values and framing decriminalisation in the context of Cook Islands identity, enlisting allies, fostering grassroots dialogue, and engaging with traditional leaders and church leaders.

### Thailand: marriage equality

Thailand's Marriage Equality Act<sup>11</sup> amended the Civil Code to provide full legal recognition of same-sex marriages, replacing gender-specific provisions with gender-neutral language. The legislation received Royal Assent in September 2024 before coming into force in January the following year. This historic reform made Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia to legally recognise marriage between people of the same sex. The change was the result of sustained advocacy by civil society, led by the Rainbow Coalition for Marriage Equality, which united a broad network of LGBTIQ+ and human rights groups to press for equal marriage rights. By 2022, an estimated 60–80% of Thais supported marriage equality.

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<sup>10</sup> *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act (2023)* (Cook Islands).

<sup>11</sup> *Civil and Commercial Code Amendment Act (No. 24) B.E. 2567 (2024)* (Thailand) (Marriage Equality Act).



Bangkok, Thailand, © tawanlubfah/iStock

Like in Cook Islands, the Thai campaign built grassroots networks, but also included a much stronger and more visible celebration of LGBTIQ+ identity, such as the 2022 Bangkok Pride Parade – the first since 2006. Campaign organisers enlisted celebrities and members of parliament, and further amplified messaging on social media to create the groundswell of support for reform. The campaign deployed legal tactics including a formal complaint to the Thai National Human Rights Commission, a Constitutional Court petition and the preparation of model bills.

## Regression in Asia and the Pacific

Alongside progress, there have also been troubling setbacks in recent years. In Southeast Asia and the Pacific, 11 countries continue to criminalise homosexuality.<sup>12</sup> In the last 3 years, regressive changes to Indonesia’s criminal code and Vanuatu’s planned ban on LGBTQIA+ advocacy have typified the regional trend toward regression, often driven by religious conservatism, nationalism, and populist moral panic narratives. Even in ostensibly supportive countries like Thailand, there appears to be an emerging trend of police raids targeting gay spaces<sup>13</sup> and a recent proposed legal gender recognition bill has faced opposition.<sup>14</sup> These trends are occurring alongside shrinking civic space in many countries, as governments and other anti-gender actors are increasingly weaponising anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment as ideological cover for consolidating power. The latter trends are further discussed in the following section.

### Indonesia: autocratisation and criminalisation

In recent years, Indonesia has seen an escalation in anti-LGBTQ+ action, against a backdrop of gradual democratic backsliding and increasing influence from conservative Islamic groups. As of 2024, V-dem no longer classifies Indonesia as an electoral democracy but rather as an ‘electoral autocracy.’<sup>15</sup> The Asia Foundation has documented the dismantling of other key checks and balances such as consolidation of executive power and the weakening of anticorruption mechanisms.<sup>16</sup>

Anti-LGBTQ+ action has taken a number of forms. Since a wave of anti-LGBTQ+ campaigning in 2016, which included anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric from senior ministers, police have repeatedly invoked the Anti-Pornography Law,<sup>17</sup> which defines ‘deviant sexual acts’ to include same-sex sexual activity, to justify numerous raids on LGBTQ+ social gatherings and spaces.<sup>18</sup> In parallel, conservative Islamist organisations such as Aliansi Cinta Keluarga (ALIA) and Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) unsuccessfully sought through the courts to criminalise consensual sexual behaviour between unmarried couples, including a specific ban on same-sex relationships.<sup>19</sup>

At national level, Indonesian LGBTIQ+ organisations have begun reporting challenges to their freedom to operate since 2020, when

- 12 Brunei, Indonesia [at subnational level], Malaysia, Myanmar, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu. Note, levels of enforcement vary widely and some countries are considering decriminalisation.
- 13 Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM), ‘What the recent sauna raids reveal about our region’ (Web page, 2025) <https://www.apcom.org/what-the-recent-sauna-raids-reveal-about-our-region/> accessed 22 January 2026.
- 14 ‘Gender titles emerge as new battleground’, *Bangkok Post* (online, 27 January 2025) <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2948182/gender-titles-emerge-as-new-battleground> (accessed 5 February 2026).
- 15 Marina Nord et al, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (Report, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, March 2025) 10.
- 16 The Asia Foundation, *Navigating Policy Spaces: Civil Society and Policy Influence in Indonesia and the Philippines* (Report, 16 October 2025) <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/navigating-policy-spaces-civil-society-and-policy-influence-in-indonesia-and-the-philippines/> accessed 22 January 2026.
- 17 *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 44 Tahun 2008 tentang Pornografi* [Republic of Indonesia Law No 44 of 2008 on Pornography] (Anti-Pornography Law) (Indonesia) [tr author].
- 18 Andreas Harsono and Kyle Knight, ‘Scared in Public and Now No Privacy’: *Human Rights and Public Health Impacts of Indonesia’s Anti-LGBT Moral Panic* (Report, Human Rights Watch, 1 July 2018) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/02/scared-public-and-now-no-privacy/human-rights-and-public-health-impacts> accessed 22 January 2026.
- 19 James Guild, ‘Indonesia’s new criminal code: scaling up conservatism and watering down protections for critics and minorities’ (Web page, *Australian Outlook* (Australian Institute of International Affairs), 2023) <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australian-outlook/indonesias-new-criminal-code-scaling-up-conservatism-and-watering-down-protections-for-critics-and-minorities/> accessed 22 January 2026.

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20 International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), ILGA World Database (Database) <https://ilga.org/> accessed 22 January 2026.

21 SBS News, 'Indonesian city to fine LGBTIQ+ residents for being a 'public nuisance' (News article, 30 November 2018) <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/indonesian-city-to-fine-lgbtqi-residents-for-being-a-public-nuisance/gzhmcnb6j>, accessed 22 January 2026; Amnesty International, 'Indonesia: Caning of gay men an act of cruelty' (News release, 26 August 2025, updated 29 August 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/indonesia-caning-of-gay-men-an-act-of-cruelty/>, accessed 22 January 2026.

22 *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 1 Tahun 2023 tentang Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana* [Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code] (Penal Code) (Indonesia) [tr author].

23 Sana Jaffrey and Eve Warburton, 'Representatives into rulers' (Web page, New Mandala, 9 December 2022) <https://www.newmandala.org/representatives-into-rulers/> accessed 22 January 2026.

24 *Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act No 11 of 2024* (Vanuatu) art 6.

25 International IDEA, 'Vanuatu – October 2024' (Democracy Tracker event report, October 2024) <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/vanuatu/october-2024> accessed 23 January 2026.

26 Radio New Zealand, 'Vanuatu moves to ban LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (News article, 5 November 2024) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/532858/vanuatu-moves-to-ban-lgbtqia-advocacy> accessed 23 January 2026.

27 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News, 'Marginalisation fears, as Vanuatu amends constitution to ...' (News article, 24 August 2025) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-24/vanuatu-gender-law-constitutional-amendment/105641178> accessed 22 January 2026.

28 Global Philanthropy Project (n 1) 29

29 Ibid

30 Global Philanthropy Project (n 1)

the Indonesian Government informally instructed that registration names should exclude terms like 'transgender', 'lesbian', or 'transwomen'.<sup>20</sup> Some governments at provincial and city level have also taken more extreme steps, such as public caning of men convicted of consensual same-sex sexual activity, or through by-laws that fine people for 'acts that are considered LGBT'.<sup>21</sup>

In late 2022, the Indonesian national legislature (the People's Consultative Assembly) passed legislation to significantly overhaul the country's Penal Code,<sup>22</sup> which included many provisions dating from the Dutch colonial era. This legislation gives effect to the same objective pursued through the courts by ALIA and PKS – the criminalisation of sex outside of marriage. As Indonesia does not recognise same-sex relationships, this law means that LGBTQ+ people will be indirectly criminalised. The changes also re-criminalise 'insults' to state institutions and ban expression contrary to the official state ideology of Pancasila – steps that undermine freedom of expression. These provisions were inserted as part of a political compromise between nationalist elites and religious conservatives.<sup>23</sup>

### Anti-LGBTIQ+ policy in Vanuatu

Vanuatu has introduced multiple anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, including a ban on same-sex marriage<sup>24</sup> and a constitutional amendment stipulating there are only 2 sexes, as assigned at birth. A ban on LGBTQIA+ advocacy was announced in late 2024<sup>25</sup> and the Vanuatu Government has also signalled its strong opposition to any international support for LGBTQIA+ rights. These changes were supported by traditional cultural and Christian leaders who framed VPride and LGBTQ+ organising as a 'foreign' threat to 'Melanesian and Christian values'.<sup>26</sup> The Vanuatu government framed its constitutional amendment as a way to 'draw a line' against foreign influences.<sup>27</sup>

## A challenging and shifting funding environment

Asia and the Pacific was already one of the most under-resourced regions for LGBTIQ+ rights funding in the 2021–2022 *Global Resources Report*.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, the situation has been exacerbated by the significant cuts and shifts in international development cooperation.

According to the most recent *Global Resources Report*, Asia and the Pacific received US\$44.8m in funding for LGBTIQ+ issues in 2021–2022.<sup>29</sup> This represents just 5% of global LGBTIQ+ funding for a region representing 55% of the world's population and hundreds of LGBTIQ+ organisations. For example, across South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, at least 167 organisations received funding in 2021–2022 and many more unfunded organisations exist.<sup>30</sup>

In 2025, LGBTIQ+ organisations in the Global South and East lost an estimated 27% of their funding as a result of cuts by governments, including the US and the Netherlands.<sup>31</sup> The US was one of the largest funders of LGBTIQ+ rights worldwide.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the cuts, several significant LGBTIQ+ focused grant rounds were cancelled across Asia and the Pacific. The USAID cuts also affected many other areas that benefited LGBTIQ+ people in the region, such as HIV funding.<sup>33</sup>

According to an Outright International rapid assessment, by February 2025, the funding cuts had already resulted in widespread layoffs of staff or cessation of programs and services among 58% of respondents and, in some cases, closure of entire organisations. However, this early data does not reflect the full impact of the cuts (many of which had not yet become operational), and further cuts to government funding, including by the UK, are expected in 2026.

Cuts to emergency response funding is one of the more concerning impacts. The termination of US Government programs – most notably the Dignity for All consortium, which was housed at Freedom House – has severely undermined rapid-response mechanisms that protect LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders. Dignity for All awarded a larger number of LGBTIQ+ grants over 2021–2022 than any other funder in the world,<sup>34</sup> and the closure of that program, leaves significant gaps during a period of escalating crises.

<sup>31</sup> Global Philanthropy Project, 'Defending LGBTI Movements in the 2025 Funding Crisis' (Web Page, 5 March 2025) <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/coordinatedresponseodacuts/>

<sup>32</sup> Global Philanthropy Project (n 1)

<sup>33</sup> Outright International, *Defunding Freedom: Impacts of US Foreign Aid Cuts on LGBTIQ People Worldwide* (Report, February 2025) <https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/defunding-freedom-impacts-us-foreign-aid-cuts-lgbtqi-people>; Ari Shaw, *Impact of Executive Order Pausing US Foreign Aid on LGBTIQ+ People* (Brief, January 2025) <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/foreign-aid-eo-impact/>

<sup>34</sup> Global Philanthropy Project (n 1)



# LGBTIQ+ rights and democracy

## Democracy in decline in Asia and the Pacific

Democracy is under threat worldwide, including in Asia and the Pacific. The world has more autocracies than democracies for the first time in 20 years. Of the world's total population, 72% now live in autocracies – the highest number since 1978. In Asia and the Pacific, this figure climbs to 89%,<sup>35</sup> with the declining trend confirmed by several authoritative data sources including Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit and Civicus Monitor.<sup>36</sup>

V-Dem's 2025 report finds 'almost all aspects of democracy are declining in more countries than they are improving compared to ten years ago.' Democracy comprises a number of characteristics beyond elections, including freedom of association, freedom of expression and functional checks and balances. Some countries are experiencing democratic 'hollowing', where non-electoral aspects of democracy decline while elections remain. According to V-Dem, the dimensions of democracy experiencing the sharpest decline include freedom of expression (with media censorship and harassment of journalists particularly prevalent) and the repression of civil society.<sup>37</sup>

These trends are mirrored in recent waves of anti-corruption, anti-incumbent protests in countries like Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Philippines. While these protests are complex and varied in their origin and nature, a common theme is frustration (particularly among young people) with entrenched elites using political office for personal gain. There is a risk that in some cases, elites will respond by further limiting freedoms.<sup>38</sup>

## Anti-LGBTIQ+ action as part of democratic backsliding

LGBTIQ+ rights and liberal democracy are closely associated, with 47% of autocratic countries criminalising same-sex relations, compared to just 14% of democratic states; 88% percent of autocratic countries do not allow (or do not clearly allow) a change in gender markers, compared to 43% of democratic countries.<sup>39</sup>

This association exists because LGBTIQ+ rights and democracy are mutually reinforcing: on the one hand, democracy enables the LGBTIQ+ movement to advocate for rights. On the other,

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<sup>35</sup> Special Rapporteur (V-Dem Institute), *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (Report, 6 March 2025) [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr\\_2025\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf) accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>36</sup> See eg Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict* (Report, February 2024) accessed 11 February 2026; CIVICUS, 'Democracy: Regression and Resilience' in 2025 State of Civil Society Report (Web page, 2025) accessed 11 February 2026; Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Democracy Index 2024' (Web page, nd) accessed 11 February 2026.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>38</sup> 'Democracy on the edge in Asia' (Blog post, LSE Activism, Influence and Change, 23 September 2025) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/activism-influence-change/2025/09/23/democracy-on-the-edge-in-asia/> accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>39</sup> Global Philanthropy Project (n 1)

protecting LGBTIQ+ rights helps protect democracy,<sup>40</sup> because the rollback of LGBTIQ+ rights is not just a side effect of democratic backsliding: it is a deliberate tactic deployed in the service of the broader goals of undermining democratic institutions and consolidating power.<sup>41</sup>

Research by the Lowy Institute describes democratic erosion as comprising 5 reinforcing causal ‘loops’: anti-democratic actors consolidating power; weakening of balancing institutions; entrenched division; loss of faith in democracy; and the use of political violence.<sup>42</sup> Anti-LGBTIQ+ action is a key step in several of these loops. For example, in many countries, politicians and others have used anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric to sow moral panic and create a sense of threat and division. This rhetoric often frames LGBTIQ+ people as a ‘Western import’ and a threat to children, women, the family and national values as part of a broader conspiracy narrative.<sup>43</sup>

This type of rhetoric is widespread: in at least 51 of the 61 elections held in 2024, political candidates weaponised anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric for political gain.<sup>44</sup> For example, in Solomon Islands in 2024, then-Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare declared, alongside with his pivot towards China, that same-sex marriage and democracy were out of step with national Christian values.<sup>45</sup> During the 2024 Indonesian general elections, civil society groups documented an increase in anti-LGBTIQ+ language and statements from politicians and the media.<sup>46</sup> Similar issues were observed in other recent elections, such as in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.



<sup>40</sup> Saskia Brechenmacher, ‘Why Gender Is Central to the Antidemocratic Playbook: Unpacking the Linkages in the United States and Beyond’ (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 November 2024) <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/women-lgbtq-democracy-authoritarianism-trump?lang=en> accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>41</sup> Ari Shaw, ‘The Global Threat to LGBTQ Rights: The Fate of Legal Protections Is Tied to the Fate of Democracy’ (Snapshot, Foreign Affairs, 17 July 2025) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/global-threat-lgbtq-rights> accessed 22 January 2026; Graeme Reid, ‘Statement by Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity’ (Speech, United Nations Human Rights Council, 30 June 2024) 1.

<sup>42</sup> Lydia Khalil, Peter Woodrow, James Paterson and Robert Kaufman, *Understanding Democratic Erosion* (Interactive, Lowy Institute, August 2025) <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/democratic-erosion/> accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>43</sup> Saskia Schäfer, ‘Political homophobia: The rise of anti-queer rhetoric in Indonesia and Turkey’ (2024) (Article) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377286143\\_Political\\_homophobia\\_The\\_rise\\_of\\_anti-queer\\_rhetoric\\_in\\_Indonesia\\_and\\_Turkey](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377286143_Political_homophobia_The_rise_of_anti-queer_rhetoric_in_Indonesia_and_Turkey) accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>44</sup> Outright International, *Queering Democracy: The Global Elections in 2024 and How LGBTIQ+ People Fared* (Report, 26 September 2025) [https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/092625\\_Outright\\_Elections2024\\_online.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/092625_Outright_Elections2024_online.pdf) accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>45</sup> Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News, ‘Solomon Islands prime minister defends Chinese governance style’ (News article, 20 March 2024) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-20/solomon-islands-prime-minister-defends-chinese-governance-style/103606172> accessed 22 January 2026.

<sup>46</sup> Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia, ‘According to the Political Year, Online Media Coverage is Discriminatory Against LGBT Individuals’ (Web page, 20 March 2023) <https://aji.or.id/informasi/according-political-year-online-media-coverage-discriminatory-against-lgbt-individuals> accessed 22 January 2026.

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47 Maina Kiai, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai* (A/HRC/20/27, 21 May 2012) 17.

48 Human Rights Watch, 'Foreign Agent Laws: An Authoritarian Playbook' (News release, 19 September 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook> accessed 22 January 2026.

49 The New Humanitarian, 'How Philippines is using anti-terrorism laws to freeze disaster NGOs' (News feature, 30 July 2024) <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/07/30/how-philippines-using-anti-terrorism-laws-freeze-disaster-ngos> accessed 22 January 2026.

50 ILGA World, 'ILGA World Database' (Database, 2024) [database.ilga.org](https://database.ilga.org)

51 Re: China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, see [https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Outright\\_Right-ToRegister.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Outright_Right-ToRegister.pdf). Re: Bangladesh, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bangladesh-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-bangladesh-september-2023-accessible>. Re: Pakistan, see <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69285b30a245b0985f0341de/PAK%2BCPIN%2BSexual%2Borientation%2Band%2Bgender%2Bidentity%2Bor%2Bexpression.pdf>

52 Ministry of Human Rights (National Unity Government of Myanmar), 'Situation Report of the LGBTIQs after the Military Coup in Myanmar' (Web Page, 30 June 2021) <https://mohr.nugmyanmar.org/en/reports/elementor-2623/>, accessed 22 January 2026; see also CIVICUS, 'THAILAND: 'Part of our success in claiming LGBTIQ+ rights came from intersecting with the democracy movement'' (Interview, 27 June 2024) <https://civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/7116-thailand-part-of-our-success-in-claiming-lgbtqi-rights-came-from-intersecting-with-the-democracy-movement>, accessed 22 January 2026.

These anti-LGBTIQ+ arguments are used to justify measures that also consolidate power and roll back rights more broadly. For example, a growing number of governments are passing laws that restrict the ability of civil society and media to receive international funding, arguing that the international funding is a threat to national security. An independent UN human rights expert has stated that these restrictions violate the right to freedom of association.<sup>47</sup> These laws often include other measures to restrict civil society, such as heavy restrictions on registration of NGOs. A similar law in Russia has resulted in a severe decline in the activity of civil society organisations working on human rights, anti-corruption, environmental, HIV and media, among others. The law's scope has subsequently been widened to include any 'foreign influence'.<sup>48</sup>

In Asia and the Pacific, legal barriers to civil society funding or operation are in place or in development in Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines,<sup>49</sup> Singapore, Thailand, Vanuatu and Vietnam.<sup>50</sup> In multiple countries, governments have used registration and funding rules or administrative discretion in ways that restrict LGBTIQ+ organisations or otherwise limit LGBTIQ+ advocacy, including Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Singapore.<sup>51</sup>

LGBTIQ+ people are not the only community affected by the shift towards authoritarian populism, but they are among the earliest and most explicitly targeted groups. LGBTIQ+ movements are consistently part of broader movements to defend democracy, even though this sometimes comes at the cost of increased levels of targeting, as has occurred in Myanmar.<sup>52</sup>



## Impacts of US policy

Prior to January 2025, the US was a key diplomatic champion of LGBTIQ+ rights and its influence was critical in many countries across the world, including in Asia and the Pacific. The change of US administration in 2025 has seen a complete shift in foreign policy, with significant impacts on LGBTIQ+ rights in Asia and the Pacific. In addition to the funding cuts mentioned above, since inauguration of the new administration, it has actively campaigned against LGBTIQ+ rights, particularly trans rights, and to prevent US Government agencies from supporting LGBTIQ+ people.<sup>53</sup>

In January 2026, the US administration released 3 interim rules that prohibit the use of all non-military US foreign assistance for any activities related to abortion, ‘gender ideology’ (i.e activities related to gender identity and trans communities), and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The prohibitions apply to any US NGOs, international NGOs, foreign governments and UN agencies that seek or already receive US funding. Even if an organisation does not use US funds for a prohibited activity, the new interim rules may require them to avoid those activities entirely (including with income generated from other sources) as a condition of receiving US aid. As such, the rules are designed to go far beyond eliminating US funding to creating a chilling effect on funding for LGBTIQ+ and DEI across international development.

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<sup>53</sup> National Coalition for LGBTQ Health, *Overview: 2025 Executive Actions Impacting LGBTQ+ Health* (Advocacy Brief, 2025) [https://healthlgbtq.org/advocacy\\_brief/overview-2025-executive-actions-impacting-lgbtq-health/](https://healthlgbtq.org/advocacy_brief/overview-2025-executive-actions-impacting-lgbtq-health/)



Honiara, Solomon Islands, © Gilmore Tana/iStock

## The anti-gender movement

The recent rise in anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment around the world is **not accidental**, it is being driven by a well-resourced, coordinated international network often called the ‘anti-rights’ or ‘anti-gender’ movement. This movement promotes attacks on LGBTIQ+ people, helps push countries backwards on democracy and stability, and creates specific risks for Australia that require a strong and urgent response.

**The movement includes both international anti-rights organisations and local groups**, whose level of collaboration varies between countries and over time. International actors include Alliance Defending Freedom International, Family Watch International, the World Congress of Families, The Heritage Foundation and CitizenGO. Russian oligarchs and state-controlled Russian media organisations are also reported to be closely involved. Local partners differ in each country, but are often conservative religious leaders and organisations, populist politicians and/or extremist figures.<sup>54</sup>

**The anti-gender movement is already highly influential.** Generally, local groups and individuals are the public face, while international actors work in the background.<sup>55</sup> The movement targets different issues in different locations, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, opposition to women’s rights and/or efforts to build long-term influence, for example through Russian Orthodox Church missions in Papua New Guinea.<sup>56</sup> In Europe, its efforts have resulted in the passage of dozens of new laws.<sup>57</sup> In one interview conducted for this report, an overseas government official described its influence as ‘blossoming’.

**Across countries, anti-gender actors use very similar strategies.** International funding, training and convenings help create this consistency. Officials from 2 overseas governments interviewed for this report characterised these international activities as deliberate ‘infiltration’ of local institutions, while a human rights advocate (focusing on women’s reproductive rights) reported growing evidence that these transnational activities are an avenue for Russian state interference in the Pacific. Common anti-gender movement tactics include spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories; promoting hate speech; using and manipulating social media; and, in some cases, supporting or directly using physical violence.<sup>58</sup> These tactics are all underpinned by a public narrative that deliberately misuses human rights language, appeals to ‘traditional values’, and portrays LGBTIQ+ people and other targeted groups as a Western import and a threat to families and children’s safety, culture and national security.<sup>59</sup>

**The anti-gender movement is also working to weaken multilateral cooperation.** At the UN, some states, religious leaders and NGOs are coordinating to weaken existing human rights standards. Their focus includes proposing ‘pro-family’ amendments, removing

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<sup>54</sup> International Planned Parenthood Federation, *Unveiling Subversive Power: Shedding Light on Anti-Rights Actors in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Report, 2025) 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 56.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 6, 7, 28, 33, 66, 80.

<sup>57</sup> See, eg, Neil Datta, *Restoring the Natural Order: The religious extremists’ vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction* (Report, April 2018); ILGA-Europe, *Annual Review 2025: The Human Rights Situation of LGBTIQ+ People in Europe and Central Asia* (Report, February 2025); Neil Datta, *The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Regaining Power* (Report, 25 September 2025); Transgender Europe (TGEU), *Trans Rights Index & Map 2025* (Database, 14 May 2025)

<sup>58</sup> CIVICUS, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-Rights Groups* (Report, 2019) <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/action-against-the-anti-rights-wave/AgainstTheWave-summary-en.pdf> 3

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 3.

references to sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics and sexual and reproductive health rights, and adding vague language that can later be interpreted in exclusionary ways. Over time, small wins slowly accumulate that gradually shift international norms away from the long-standing human rights consensus. At the same time, these actors try to discredit human rights as a 'Western agenda'.<sup>60</sup> Some analyses argue that this trend threatens not only human rights and gender equality, but the wider rules-based international system.<sup>61</sup>

**The anti-gender movement is a key part of the global shift towards authoritarian populism.** The experts, government officials and LGBTIQ+ leaders interviewed for this report strongly agreed that the anti-gender movement is helping to undermine democracy. Anti-gender actors tend to be closely linked to conservative, populist and authoritarian political forces. Civicus Monitor, a research tool that provides real-time data on the state of civil society and freedoms, describes them as 'tightly enmeshed' with political parties and repressive states.<sup>62</sup> This relationship benefits political leaders, who use anti-gender ideas to justify restricting rights, to entrench their power, or to distract from corruption and other failures. The movement's tactics also damage democracy. The widespread use of mis- and dis-information erodes trust in public institutions, fuels polarisation and hostility in society and makes it harder to govern.<sup>63</sup>

The anti-gender movement is well-resourced, with evidence indicating links to funding originating from the Russian state and Russian-aligned actors, alongside other transnational sources. For example, in Europe alone, about US\$1.18 billion was spent on anti-gender activities between 2019 and 2023. Major cross-border funding sources include:

- **The US Christian right**, especially wealthy individuals using private foundations, public 501(c)(3) charities and donor-advised funds.<sup>64</sup>
- **Entities linked to Russian oligarchs**, although some evidence suggests Russian funding has recently been redirected to domestic campaigns.<sup>65</sup>
- **Private wealth**, including Catholic and aristocratic foundations in Europe.<sup>66</sup>

There is also emerging evidence and analysis suggesting possible links to funding originating from actors associated with from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).<sup>67</sup> Although less evidence is available, this is significant for majority Muslim countries in the region such as Indonesia, where Saudi Arabian funding has helped drive more conservative religious discourse and institutions.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Lourdes Peroni, 'Mobilising in Times of Gender Equality Backsliding: International Human Rights Responses to Anti-Gender Discourse' (2024) 20(3) *Utrecht Law Review* 43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36633/ulr.1080>

<sup>61</sup> Damjan Denkovski, *Disrupting the multilateral order? The impact of anti-gender actors on multilateral structures in Europe* (Report, 2022) 7.

<sup>62</sup> Civicus Monitor (n 42) 3

<sup>63</sup> IPPF (n 38) 6

<sup>64</sup> Neil Datta (n 41) 22

<sup>65</sup> Neil Datta (n 41) 33

<sup>66</sup> Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy, *The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection* (UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2023-06) 10 <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/278575/1/1853775924.pdf>; see also Neil Datta, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018* (Report, June 2021)

<sup>67</sup> Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy (n 50), 9

<sup>68</sup> IPPF (n 38) 62

# LGBTIQ+ rights in Australia's foreign policy

## Australia's historic announcement at Sydney WorldPride

In 2023, Sydney hosted the first WorldPride ever held in the Southern Hemisphere, bringing together LGBTIQ+ community members, activists and policymakers from across the globe to celebrate diversity and shape the future of equality. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Foreign Minister Penny Wong and other federal and state political leaders joined tens of thousands of locals and international visitors in a symbolic march for equality across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Minister Wong also made a historic speech at the opening of the Sydney WorldPride Human Rights Conference, marking a turning point in Australia's foreign policy and embedding LGBTQIA+ inclusion as a formal priority within its regional and global engagement.

Pledging practical support as part of Australia's advocacy and commitment to human rights and LGBTQIA+ equality, Minister Wong made 3 important announcements:

- 1.** The creation of a new Inclusion and Equality Fund, Australia's first dedicated fund to support LGBTQIA+ civil society organisations and human rights defenders, international partnerships and networks – helping address social stigma and legal discrimination.
- 2.** An initial commitment of \$3.5m to be distributed through the Fund, including an increased contribution to the Global Equality Fund for emergency assistance to human rights defenders and support to LGBTQIA+ organisations in Asia and the Pacific.
- 3.** The development of a dedicated LGBTQIA+ human rights engagement strategy – including bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, development and humanitarian assistance. To achieve this, the Foreign Minister committed the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (**DFAT**) to undertake a broad consultation process across the region and among LGBTQIA+

community stakeholders to ‘identify the areas in which we are best equipped to make a difference.’

The Fund aims to strengthen grassroots advocacy, amplify local voices, and provide crucial resources to LGBTQIA+ communities operating in restrictive or hostile environments across Asia and the Pacific. By focusing on partnership and solidarity, the creation of the Fund demonstrated Australia’s recognition that equality and human rights are integral to regional stability, prosperity, and sustainable development. It has also placed Australia among a growing group of nations – including at that time the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden – which had explicitly integrated LGBTIQ+ inclusion into their foreign policy and international development agendas.

The Australian Government’s announcement at Sydney World-Pride reflected an important alignment between Australia’s domestic achievements – such as marriage equality and anti-discrimination protections for LGBTIQ+ people – and its international commitments. By embedding LGBTQIA+ inclusion within its foreign policy, Australia affirmed that the pursuit of equality is not only a moral imperative, but also a cornerstone of its vision for a fair, open and inclusive Asia and the Pacific.

## **Australia’s role in the region and the world**

Minister Wong’s announcement has already led to a noticeable increase in engagement by Australia on LGBTIQ+ issues internationally, with many individual Australian missions increasing their advocacy. Experts interviewed for this report commented that this advocacy is characterised by close collaboration with local LGBTIQ+ groups, including to ensure careful approaches are taken in sensitive contexts.

At a multilateral level, the human rights experts interviewed noted that Australia has also increased its level of engagement on LGBTIQ+ rights and was one of the driving forces behind the first UN intersex rights resolution. Australia has taken care to include states from the Global South wherever possible when forming multilateral coalitions. Some human rights experts – who are less focused on LGBTIQ+ rights but on broader human rights more generally – commented that they do not perceive Australia as an LGBTIQ+ rights champion. Some LGBTIQ+ rights experts and regional LGBTIQ+ organisations considered that there have also been moments when Australia’s leadership was particularly needed, but Australia instead chose to stay silent. Those interviewees recognised constraints such as diplomatic bandwidth and the importance of quiet behind-the-scenes advocacy. According to one expert in the international human rights system, Australia’s engagement with the international human rights movement in Geneva has waned since the end of its Human

Rights Council term – in contrast to other like-minded states whose engagement remains consistent.

<sup>69</sup> Penny Wong, 'Australian Institute of International Affairs Gala Dinner Keynote Address' (Speech, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 17 November 2025); Australian Government, *Australia in the World: 2025 Snapshot* (Report, 2025) <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-in-world-snapshot-2025.pdf>; Darren Lim and Hannah Nelson, 'From Three Strands to Four Rs: The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy', *AIIA National Conference 2025 Analysis* (Blog Post, 21 November 2025) <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/from-three-strands-to-four-rs-the-evolution-of-australian-foreign-policy/>

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. Virdika Rizky Utama, 'Prabowo's first year: visibility without vision in Indonesian foreign policy', *The Interpreter* (Blog Post, 23 October 2025); Susannah Patton, 'Facts gone missing in Australia's debate about Indonesia-Russia basing deal', *The Interpreter* (Blog Post, 22 April 2025)

<sup>71</sup> Penny Wong (n 54)

## The strategic significance of LGBTIQ+ rights in Australian foreign policy

The rise of authoritarian populist and the anti-gender movement described in this report have significant implications for all 4 pillars of the Australian Government's foreign policy framework: region, rules, relationships and resilience.<sup>69</sup> Anti-gender actors are undermining peace and stability around the region by hollowing out democratic norms and institutions, exacerbating political polarisation, facilitating interference with domestic politics from hostile governments and stoking nationalist fears of foreign, particularly Western interference. This is a key aspect of a regional environment that risks pushing governments into more instrumentalist and volatile approaches to foreign policy, making it difficult for Australia to cultivate stable relationships.<sup>70</sup> Anti-gender actors and allied governments are instrumental in undermining the rules-based order. Although the focus of anti-gender actors has been on the human rights system, the current US administration exemplifies how the broader rules-based order is now under threat. Finally, Minister Wong has also named both democracy and public trust in institutions as core elements of resilience, with disinformation posing a key threat to these.<sup>71</sup> As discussed above,



the anti-gender movement is one of the key challenges to this aspect of resilience both domestically and around the region.

All experts interviewed for this report agreed that **Australia has not adequately responded to the threats posed by the anti-gender movement**. For example, one former government official said Australia is ‘not onto it enough at all’ and doesn’t ‘see the relationship and connection between geostrategic, military and security interests’. The dominance of China’s security and economic interests in Australia’s foreign policy misses the importance that the anti-gender movement’s undermining of human rights and civic space in the region has on Australia’s national interests. One overseas government official commented that if these issues are not addressed, they risk spilling over into security and defence cooperation, citing how Russia has used LGBTIQ+ issues to drive a wedge between traditional defence partners.

**The experts and leaders interviewed pointed to the need for greater investment in human rights, soft power and locally-led change (including support for LGBTIQ+ civil society) as a critical and underfunded part of Australia’s response to this strategic environment.** A few examples of such initiatives exist across the Australian development program, but one interviewee felt their value is often not understood, and at times has resulted in the premature closing of initiatives. This is partly because often



Australia's visibility in these initiatives – and therefore their direct diplomatic benefits – is limited as they are focused on supporting and fostering locally-led progressive change.

One LGBTIQ+ leader from the region emphasised that to succeed in this type of approach in the LGBTIQ+ space, Australia must demonstrate a long-term, consistent commitment and engagement, beyond the typical lifecycle of a diplomatic posting. This would require commitment not just from individual diplomats, but an institutional commitment from Australia's diplomatic service as a whole, recounting that 'it takes a long time for people to have faith that you will deliver because they're so used to people coming in and out.' The experts, leaders and government officials interviewed also noted that Australia is one of the few countries likely to invest meaningfully in this type of approach in Asia and the Pacific, making Australia's ongoing commitment critically important.

**Funding LGBTIQ+ groups helps to counter anti-gender movements and broader democratic backsliding.** LGBTIQ+ groups are often at the forefront of building movements, strengthening community and engaging with society more broadly. This creates a broader constituency, which counterbalances anti-LGBTIQ+ strategies directly (for example, highlighting the presence of local LGBTIQ+ communities helps counteract the narrative that LGBTIQ+ rights as a Western imposition) and indirectly (for example, by creating a groundswell of public legitimacy and support).<sup>72</sup>

An example of the advocacy work needed to counter anti-gender movements and build momentum for positive reform is set out in the below case study.

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<sup>72</sup> Lana Woolf and Emily Dwyer, *Managing backlash against women's and LGBT+ rights movements in the Commonwealth* (Report 2020)

### Babaylanes, the Philippines

Babaylanes is a Filipino LGBTQI+ organisation. Its work includes convening a national coalition for LGBTQI+ legislative advocacy called Lagablab and campaigning for the passage of several key bills that would advance LGBTQI+ equality, including the SOGIE Equality Bill which sought to introduce anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people.<sup>73</sup> Babaylanes is also supporting community-led local campaigns for LGBTQI+-inclusive ordinances in multiple cities and municipalities around the Philippines. Local-level reform is also a key focus area for the Philippines LGBTQI+ movement, as rights protections at this level are a valuable opportunity to advance LGBTQI+ equality in areas not addressed in national law. These local campaigns are fostering and supporting local leaders. Finally, Babaylanes is undertaking activities that support the broader LGBTQI+ movement in the Philippines, including a data and knowledge initiative, and community care and wellbeing initiatives.

The work of Babaylanes and its partners is critical in the context of the influence of conservative Christian churches in Filipino politics. These churches are closely tied to their counterparts in the US,<sup>74</sup> which as shown above, have a key role in spreading anti-gender strategies and funding anti-gender efforts internationally. Evangelical Christians have been central to the repeated failure of efforts to pass the SOGIE Equality Bill over multiple terms of Congress,<sup>75</sup> using tactics such as disinformation, consistent with above analysis of the tactics used by the anti-gender movement internationally.<sup>76</sup>



<sup>73</sup> Republic of the Philippines, Senate, SOGIESC Equality Act (Senate Bill No 218, 20th Congress, filed 7 July 2025) (SOGIESC Equality Bill) [https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lis/bill\\_res.aspx?congress=20&q=SBN-218](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lis/bill_res.aspx?congress=20&q=SBN-218) accessed 10 February 2026.

<sup>74</sup> Lisandro E Claudio and Aries A Arugay, 'Conservative and Religious: Filipino Evangelicals Go MAGA' (Web Page, *Fulcrum* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), 29 October 2025); see also Hannah Keziah Agustin, 'Colonialism Brought Evangelicalism to the Philippines. Churches Are Now Untangling the Two' (Web Page, *Christianity Today*, 28 June 2023) <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/06/philippines-church-us-colonialism-influence-evangelicalism/> <https://fulcrum.sg/conservative-and-religious-filipino-evangelicals-go-maga/>

<sup>75</sup> Jayeel Cornelio and Allan Benedict C Solacito, 'Moral Panics and the Struggle for Gender Equality: Evangelical Christianity in the Philippines' in Amalinda Savirani and Ken M P Setiawan (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Human Rights in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2025) 156.

<sup>76</sup> Don Kevin Hapal, 'Disinformation on SOGIE Bill Spreads As Filipino Queers Face Real-World Discrimination' (Web Page, *Pulitzer Center*, 12 February 2023) <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/disinformation-sogie-bill-spreads-filipino-queers-face-real-world-discrimination>

# The way forward: our recommendations

## The Australian Government should:

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### 1. Increase the allocation to the Inclusion and Equality Fund from \$3.5m a year to \$15m a year, by:

- continuing to provide long-term, unrestricted funding to LGBTIQ+ civil society organisations,
- extending funding to unfunded LGBTIQ+ groups, particularly in Southeast Asia,
- increasing the size of grants to better meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ groups, and
- supporting rapid-response crisis mechanisms for LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders.

### 3. Maintain Australia's focus on LGBTIQ+ equality in the breadth of its foreign policy, by:

- continuing to signal to Australia's diplomatic service, civil society and private sector partners the government's commitment to LGBTIQ+ equality in foreign policy (through bilateral and multilateral engagement and development assistance), even where public signals are not possible.

### 5. Invest in coordinated, whole-of-government efforts to respond to the national security implications of the anti-gender movement, by:

- strengthening Australia's security agencies' understanding of the linkages between anti-gender actors, attacks on LGBTIQ+ communities in the region, and national security,
- enhancing internal capacity to monitor the anti-gender movement, and
- allocating funding to addressing the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

### 2. Allocate a portion of key regional and thematic funds to LGBTIQ+ equality, by:

- identifying suitable programs, which likely include the forthcoming Civil Society Partnerships Fund, Climate Resilient Communities, Pacific Women Lead, the Mekong-Australia Partnership, and the Australia NGO Cooperation Program, and
- reviewing the gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) strategies attached to these programs to integrate a clear focus on LGBTIQ+ equality and an adequate funding allocation.

### 4. Institutionalise DFAT's approach to LGBTIQ+ equality, by:

- introducing an internal policy mandating a focus on LGBTIQ+ equality where possible,
- providing training to DFAT staff on LGBTIQ+ equality and its relationship to democracy, and
- providing internal technical guidance resources for DFAT staff.

### 6. Improve evidence about the anti-gender movement and its impact on LGBTIQ+ equality, broader human rights and democratic norms in Asia and the Pacific, including, by:

- commissioning a national and regional evidence gap assessment on the anti-gender movement (including actors, networks, strategies, financing and impacts), and
- funding a targeted research program and relevant capacity-building initiatives to inform response measures, in partnership with experts and affected communities.

# Methodology

This report draws on 2 sets of primary data: key informant interviews and re-analysis of *Global Resources Report* data and a targeted desk review of publicly available information. In addition, Babaylanes provided organisational information and consent for that information to be used.

Secondary data from the desk review was used to develop the overall research questions, interview guides, *Global Resources Report* data re-analysis and case study templates. It was then used to triangulate interview findings and form the country case studies.

## Key informant interviews

Nine key informant interviews were conducted over September and October 2025. Interviewees were purposively sampled for their expertise and diversity. The sample included heads of regional LGBTIQ+ organisations; experts in LGBTIQ+ rights, human rights and sexual and reproductive health rights; and officials from several Global North governments responsible for managing that government's international LGBTIQ+ funding and/or policy (including former Australian and United States Government officials).

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide to ensure consistency across interviews while tailoring interviews to the expertise of the individual informants.

Interviews were anonymised at the request of the informants, who were able to speak more frankly on an anonymous basis. Informed consent was sought from interviewees for the use of their interview data in this report.

## Reanalysis of 2021–2022 data from the *Global Resources Report*

The report is informed by analysis of 2021–2022 data from Global Philanthropy Project's *Global Resources Report*, which is a biennially collected global dataset on funding for LGBTI communities in the Global South East, comprising grantmaking data reported by philanthropic donors and donor governments and multilateral agencies. It contains data on the distribution of LGBTI funding by geography, issue, strategy, population focus, and type of donor. In this report, *Global Resources Report* 2021–2022 data is used to describe broad patterns and gaps in LGBTI funding in Asia and the Pacific (which are separate subregions in *Global Resources Report* data).



