

The UN as a Power System for Human Rights and LGBTI+ Rights: Challenges and Opportunities in a Changing Global Landscape



Acknowledgements

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About Kaleidoscope Trust

Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK-based international charity fighting for a future where LGBTI+ people everywhere can live free, safe and equal lives. We are building a global movement to create this world for LGBTI+ people everywhere.

We work with political leaders in the UK and beyond to ensure global LGBTI+ issues are a priority. We ensure that activists have the resources, skills, and training they need to learn from one another in order to create an enabling environment and change hearts and minds. We bring together grassroots organisations with those in power to create that change.

Kaleidoscope Trust is a founding member of The Commonwealth Equality Network

(TCEN) and provides the operational and financial base for the network's Secretariat as its host. We have engaged in Commonwealth processes and with Commonwealth institutions, as a priority, for over a decade in support of our shared objectives with TCEN's other members.

We also host the Secretariat to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global LGBT+ Rights, which emerged from the Parliamentary Friends of Kaleidoscope Trust, established in 2013. Kaleidoscope Trust was also a civil society co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition from 2019-2022 and is a founding member and former co-chair of the UK Alliance for Global Equality.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Report

The international human rights system is undergoing profound and disruptive shifts. The resurgence of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the emboldenment of far-right actors – often with explicitly anti-rights agendas – are challenging multilateral institutions and the overall global understanding of the need for universal rights. Within this volatile context, Kaleidoscope Trust, as a UK-based international organisation working to uphold the human rights of LGBTI+ people, recognises both the urgency to raise the right questions and the opportunity to re-evaluate how global systems, particularly the United Nations (UN), can be used more strategically and effectively in defence of equality.

This report aims to critically examine the UN as a 'power system' for the advancement of LGBTI+ rights globally. This is not

a technical audit nor a comprehensive institutional review; rather, it is an institutional outline with elements of political analysis – rooted in advocacy practice – of the ways in which the UN both enables and constrains the work of civil society, and of how its potential can be leveraged by movements and their allies. In a moment where existing protections are being openly challenged, the need to reinforce and reimagine international mechanisms is more pressing than ever.

This research also reflects Kaleidoscope Trust's broader commitment to shaping, not just responding to, global policy environments. As advocacy becomes more contested and spaces for LGBTI+ organising are shrinking in many parts of the world, the UN remains one of the

last remaining multilateral arenas where civil society voices can still influence outcomes, norms, and states’ obligations. Understanding the dynamics of this arena, and where openings lie, is central to long-term coalition building.

Overview of the UN as a Human Rights Power System

Since its founding in 1945, the UN has played a central role in the evolution of international human rights frameworks. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and subsequent conventions and mechanisms have shaped the normative foundations of rights-based governance globally.¹ In recent decades, gradual but significant progress has been made in recognising the rights of LGBTI+ people at the UN level – through statements, resolutions, independent mandates, and treaty body recommendations.

However, the UN has never been a monolithic or neutral actor. It is a political ecosystem shaped by competing interests, ideological contestation, and geopolitical shifts. The rise of anti-rights coalitions within the UN Human Rights Council, the increasing decisiveness of authoritarian states in multilateral diplomacy, and the continued preference of some for bilateral relations over international co-

operation, combined with the strategic weaponisation of human rights language by both state and non-state actors, have turned the UN system into a new arena of contestation. Moreover, while many governments engage in international diplomacy around LGBTI+ rights, civil society organisations remain the driving force behind ensuring these issues stay on the agenda.

For LGBTI+ advocacy, the UN has provided both opportunities and challenges. Mandates such as the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (IE SOGI) have been crucial in elevating LGBTI+ issues within global human rights discourses. However, the UN’s consensus-driven approach often means that progress is slow, but most importantly vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and subject to backlash from anti-rights states.

Despite these challenges, the UN continues to serve as a key terrain for agenda setting and diplomatic negotiation. Its influence extends far beyond Geneva and New York – it filters into national laws, donor funding frameworks, and international civil society strategies. For LGBTI+ advocacy, engaging with the UN is not only about protection – it is also about participation: shaping how rights are defined, whose voices are heard, and which futures are imagined.

Conceptualising the Report

The question we ask ourselves is: why now? The global surge of far-right populism brings the need for a critical reassessment of human rights advocacy, particularly for LGBTI+ communities. Defined by ultranationalism, nativism, and opposition to liberal democratic norms, far-right movements are reshaping the global landscape in new ways.² Their electoral successes and growing influence underscore a regressive shift in the global landscape, where the far-right ideologies create frameworks to undermine democratic institutions, promote discriminatory policies, and scapegoat minorities, creating hostile environments for marginalised groups.³

LGBTI+ communities face new, advanced risks, with better organised far-right rhetoric vilifying their identities as threats to ‘traditional values’ and driving rollbacks of legal protections.⁴ These developments signal a global regression in human rights progress, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of far-right dynamics and their impact on multilateral spaces. As a cornerstone of human rights

governance, the UN must navigate these challenges to uphold its inclusive mandate.

This report examines the implications of far-right populism, including its attempts to influence international multilateral fora, and explores how the human rights community can respond. It also analyses challenges to LGBTI+ rights advocacy and identifies opportunities for the UN to strengthen its mechanisms and alliances. Through this framework, the report aims to foster strategic dialogue and proposes solutions to defend human rights in an era of populist resurgence, ensuring LGBTI+ inclusion remains a global priority.

The report adopts a dual lens of challenges and opportunities to analyse these dynamics. It explores how far-right ideologies erode human rights protections – particularly for LGBTI+ communities – while assessing the UN’s capacity to counter these threats through strengthened mechanisms and alliances. While examining the far-right infiltration of UN processes, the report also aims to provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders.

1 United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

2 Mudde, C. (2019). The far right today. Polity Press.

3 Human Rights Watch. (2025). World report 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025>

4 ILGA-World. (2024). Trans legal mapping report 2024. <https://ilga.org/report/trans-legal-mapping-report>



The UN System and Human Rights: Foundations and Mechanisms

The UN serves as a cornerstone for global human rights advocacy, with a substantial system of bodies and instruments designed to uphold the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).⁵ Despite resistance from certain Member States, for LGBTI+ communities, these mechanisms have been pivotal in challenging discrimination and advancing inclusion. This chapter examines the key UN human rights bodies – the Human Rights Council (HRC), Treaty Bodies, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as the role of the Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (IE SOGI), and

Special Procedures, highlighting their roles, achievements, and limitations in promoting human rights, particularly LGBTI+ rights, in a global landscape marked by rising far-right populism.

Human Rights Council (HRC)

The HRC, established in 2006, serves as the United Nations' principal intergovernmental body for human rights. With 47 Member States elected directly and individually by the UN General Assembly, members serve three-year terms, with one-third of seats renewed annually. Membership is distributed equitably

among the UN's five regional groups to ensure balanced representation.⁶

The HRC addresses human rights violations through resolutions, investigative mechanisms, and dialogues, making it a vital platform and an entry point for LGBTI+ advocacy. For instance, a significant milestone was the adoption of the 2016 resolution establishing the mandate of the IE SOGI.⁷ This mandate, renewed in both 2022 and 2025, has brought international attention to practices such as conversion therapy and the criminalisation of same-sex relationships, contributing to policy shifts in countries like Namibia.

Despite these advancements, the HRC faces persistent challenges. States with anti-LGBTI+ policies, including Russia and Saudi Arabia, routinely attempt to block or dilute attempts for progressive resolutions, reflecting the broader influence of ultra-conservative ideologies within the Council. Furthermore, the HRC's dependence on state cooperation for implementing its recommendations limits its enforcement capacity, making it vulnerable to government changes. This reality underscores the critical importance of forging strong alliances with civil society actors to amplify LGBTI+ voices and to safeguard human rights gains.

Treaty Bodies

The UN's ten core human rights treaty bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Human Rights Committee, monitor state compliance with treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁸ These independent expert panels review state reports, issue recommendations, and interpret treaty obligations, offering a legal framework for human rights more generally.

An illustrative example is from 2019, when the Indian government passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act.⁹ The legislation introduced duties for ensuring the welfare, education, health-care, and social protection of transgender (including *hijras*) and intersex individuals, alongside safeguards against workplace discrimination. Additionally, it mandated the formation of a National Council for Transgender Persons, which officially came into existence in August 2020. Because of this, violations of the Act were subject to penalties, including monetary fines and imprisonment ranging from six months to two years. The Human Rights Committee's interpretation of the ICCPR's anti-discrimination provisions has been a key reference point for advancing de-

5 United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

6 United Nations Human Rights Council. (n.d.). About the Human Rights Council. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/about-council>

7 United Nations Human Rights Council. Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 30 June 2016. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g16/154/15/pdf/g1615415.pdf>

8 OHCHR. (n.d.-a). Human rights treaty bodies. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies>

9 Government of India. (2019). The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Ministry of Law and Justice. Retrieved from https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/13091?sam_handle=123456789/1362

criminalisation of same-sex relations and protecting sexual orientation and gender identity, as seen in the influence it had on legal reforms in countries such as India.¹⁰

Treaty bodies also engage with LGBTI+ issues through general comments, such as CEDAW's guidance on gender-based violence, which includes trans and non-binary individuals. However, their impact is constrained by inconsistent state implementation and limited resources, particularly for addressing intersectional LGBTI+ issues in humanitarian crises where far-right rhetoric often exacerbates exclusion.

An excellent example of the influence treaty bodies can have is from March 2022, when the CEDAW issued a landmark ruling, determining that Sri Lanka had breached the rights of a lesbian and prominent LGBTI activist who faced discrimination, harassment, and threats because of the country's Penal Code criminalising same-sex sexual relations.

"I think anything such as the CEDAW recommendations or even recommendations from other treaty bodies, does put a certain pressure on governments to seem to be doing the right thing in their countries. And I think we have to take all of these opportunities to

be able to make changes in countries such as ours that are stubbornly holding on to old British colonial laws. I believe that this particular set of recommendations and the CEDAW findings is extremely important. And it is a point of reference because there is now an international treaty body, an international convention that has actually ruled in favour of LGBTIQ rights in all countries and in particular, in this instance, lesbian, bisexual, women loving women rights."

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, Executive Director of Equal Ground (2022)

The complaint was filed by Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, Executive Director of Equal Ground. The decision sets an important legal precedent, affirming that the criminalisation of lesbian and bisexual women is incompatible with the obligations of the CEDAW Convention. As indicated in the decision, the State party did not take any measures "to eliminate the prejudices to which she has been exposed as a woman, lesbian and activist, and therefore, the Committee finds that the State party has breached its obligations under article 5 (a), read in conjunction with article 1, of the Convention."¹¹

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The OHCHR, led by the High Commissioner, coordinates UN human rights efforts, providing technical assistance, monitoring violations, and mainstreaming human rights across UN programs.¹² For LGBTI+ rights, the OHCHR's Free & Equal campaign, launched in 2013, has raised global awareness through public education and policy advocacy, contributing to milestones like Thailand's marriage equality law in 2024.¹³ The OHCHR also supports LGBTI+ inclusion in humanitarian and development frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and ensures issues like healthcare access for trans individuals are addressed.

Yet, the OHCHR faces funding shortages and political pushback from states opposing LGBTI+ rights – or others who silently withdraw from their obligations – often quoting the political cost that comes when they speak about human rights. Strengthening OHCHR's capacity cannot be materialised without increased donor support and collaboration with LGBTI+ organisations to counter these rollbacks.

Special Procedures

Special Procedures, comprising independent experts and working groups, are

in place to investigate specific human rights issues or country situations more specifically. While they do not have set timelines and schedules, they can offer valuable flexibility in addressing emerging concerns, such as LGBTI+ rights. The SOGI Independent Expert has documented global trends and has engaged with states to repeal discriminatory laws. A powerful example is when, in 2024, the Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution – the first of its kind at the United Nations – urging Member States to strengthen their efforts to combat discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against intersex individuals. The resolution also called on governments to tackle root causes such as stereotypes, misinformation, stigma, and social taboos, and to promote the full enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health for people with innate variations in sex characteristics.¹⁴

However, the work of the Independent Expert has never been without challenges. From its inception, the mandate has faced resistance from a bloc of Member States within the UN system. A closer look at the vote that led to its establishment reveals this dichotomy: the mandate of the Independent Expert was created through the resolution 32/2 (30 June 2016), which passed with a narrow margin – 23 votes in favour, 18 against, and 6 abstentions.¹⁵

10 Human Rights Watch. (2019). India: Supreme Court strikes down sodomy law. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/06/india-supreme-court-strikes-down-sodomy-law>

11 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (2022). Communication No. 134/2018: Views adopted by the Committee under article 7 (3) of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication No. 134/2018 (CEDAW/C/81/D/134/2018). United Nations. <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/CEDAW-C-81-D-134-2018-English-clean-copy.pdf>

12 OHCHR. About us: What we do. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/what-we-do>

13 UN Free & Equal. About the campaign. <https://www.unfe.org/about>

14 OHCHR. (2024). Intersex rights: UN resolution marks historic progress. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/04/big-victory-intersex-people-and-their-rights>

15 Human Rights Watch. UN Makes History on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/30/un-makes-history-sexual-orientation-gender-identity>

In this context, sustaining engagement with the UN Human Rights Council and securing the renewal of the mandate of the Independent Expert on SOGI becomes increasingly strategic. The global mobilisation of civil society – over 1,200 organisations across more than 150 countries have already voiced their support and outlined coordinated advocacy efforts to counter hostile amendments. These efforts have focused particularly on diplomatic engagement with key states across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Special Rapporteurs, including those addressing health or violence against women, increasingly incorporate LGBTI+ perspectives by tackling issues such as forced

sterilisations of transgender individuals.¹⁶ The strength of Special Procedures lies in their independence and ability to engage directly with civil society, elevating marginalised voices in global human rights dialogues. This approach has been vital for highlighting LGBTI+ rights abuses in regions resistant to change.

However, the non-binding nature of their recommendations, coupled with the lack of follow-up mechanisms and dependence on state cooperation, restricts their effectiveness. This is particularly evident in areas where far-right populism and inconsistent rule of law undermine human rights commitments, limiting the impact of Special Procedures on LGBTI+ protections.



Challenges in the Context of Far-Right Populism

The UN's dynamic human rights system faces unprecedented challenges from the global rise of far-right populism. While authoritarian governments have long hindered global progress, this current wave of resistance marks a new development. For the first time, these regimes are coordinated, well-funded and promote a unified message to obstruct international advancement. Due to the UN's complexity and the political changes worldwide, it's challenging to identify the exact forces driving this process.

The LGBTIQ+ Equality and Rights Internal Resource Guide of the UN Women had clearly raised the alarm as far back as

2022: "Increased surveillance, populism and rising xenophobia, coupled with the introduction of greater enforcement of punitive laws and practices are severely threatening LGBTIQ+ rights."¹⁷

The Political Shift: How Far-Right Populism Has Reshaped the UN and Global Human Rights Discourse

Far-right populism has significantly reshaped the UN's human rights discourse by challenging its historical foundations and amplifying marginal narratives. Leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro have leveraged

¹⁶ Amnesty International. (2024). The state of the world's human rights 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/7200/2024/en/>

¹⁷ UN Women. (2022). LGBTIQ+ Equality and Rights Internal Resource Guide

anti-elitist, nationalist rhetoric to portray the UN as an intrusive globalist entity, undermining its legitimacy to prioritise national sovereignty.¹⁸ This has led to disruption of consensus-building, with many states opposing LGBTI+ inclusive policies by citing cultural relativism and national particularities.

In addition to this, the UN's increasing politicisation, driven by far-right influence, has shifted its traditionally technocratic focus toward ideological grounds. Admittedly, the United Nations historically has served as a meeting point of different ideologies and political perspectives. However, in recent years, a new dynamic has emerged: a growing dichotomy driven by a divide between defenders of multilateral institutions and those who challenge their legitimacy.

While multilateralism is essential for tackling global challenges – including peace and security, climate change, sustainable development, and human rights, particularly LGBTI+ rights – we are seeing a complicated relationship between far-right populism and multilateralism. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to understand how this discourse normalises exclusionary narratives, with far-right networks funding campaigns to delegitimise UN human rights mechanisms.

Attacks on Multilateralism and Human Rights Institutions: Nationalist Rhetoric, Funding Cuts, and UN Scepticism

Multilateralism faces systematic targeting by far-right movements due to its dual role as both a guardian of the postwar human rights order and a constraint on nationalist agendas. First, multilateral institutions embody treaties and norms (e.g., ICCPR, CEDAW) that directly challenge the far-right's vision of unrestrained state sovereignty. Second, dismantling multilateral systems creates strategic vacuums where anti-rights actors can advance policies without international oversight.

This hostility is not incidental but ideologically foundational: by rejecting human rights as 'universal,' far-right movements seek to replace collective governance with transactional bilateralism that prioritises nationalist interests over shared obligations.¹⁹ For example, gender equality commitments, such as those included in CEDAW, are frequently weakened by inconsistent compliance among Member States. The lack of enforcement on behalf of the UN undermines the credibility of international treaties, prompting states to deprioritise their global obligations in favour of domestic norms and political costs. These shortcomings weaken the UN's ability to counter nationalist narratives framing these rights as elite or

Western impositions, threatening global human rights frameworks and security.

For example, in January 2024, Senegal's Minister of Justice, Aïssata Tall, visited the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to reaffirm the country's stance on LGBTI+ rights: "I wish to solemnly reiterate Senegal's position: we categorically reject any legalisation concerning LGBT matters," he said.²⁰

Far-right movements emphasising national sovereignty over international cooperation often view UN-led multilateralism as an infringement on national autonomy, accusing it of imposing globalist agendas like LGBTI+ inclusion. This scepticism fuels resistance to UN human rights mechanisms. For instance, leaders like Donald Trump and Argentina's Javier Milei have framed the UN as an elitist entity, fuelling mistrust about its role.²¹ These actions have encouraged states like Hungary, Russia, Uganda, and others to resist UN oversight on LGBTI+ rights, citing sovereignty.

However, there is another side to the story. Some governments pragmatically engage with multilateralism as a means to advance their own national interests, with countries in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia often adopting it to amplify their voices on issues such as inequality and development. These nations often use UN platforms to advocate

for equitable human rights frameworks, including gender equality protections. The far-right's selective rejection of multilateralism undermines these efforts, polarising UN discourse and weakening global cooperation.

Moreover, we are also seeing the instrumentalisation of the multilateral framework by global powers. Despite international law playing a foundational role in upholding human rights and shaping civil society, in practice, state behaviour often diverges from these ideals. Scholars and analysts observe that governments – even those outside the populist wave – frequently prioritise national interests and ideological priorities over legal or moral obligations, selectively applying international law in ways that erode its legitimacy. As John Mearsheimer highlights: "International law is basically a weapon that powerful states use to advance their interests, and they ignore it when it gets in their way. [...] The United States and its allies are not serious about international law except when it serves their purposes."²²

This instrumentalisation of legal norms has created fertile ground for far-right populism. By exposing the hypocrisy and failings of established powers in multilateral fora, populist movements exploit public confusion to frame international institutions as tools of elite manipulation rather than guardians of justice.

18 Abrahamsen, R., Adler-Bell, S., Vucetic, S., & Williams, M. C. (2024). *World of the right: Radical conservatism and the global order*. Cambridge University Press.

19 Krastev, I., & Holmes, S. (2019). *The light that failed: A reckoning*. Penguin Books.

20 Press Afrik. (2024). Conseil des droits de l'homme de l'Onu à Genève: le Sénégal rejette encore l'idée de légalisation de l'homosexualité [UN Human Rights Council in Geneva: Senegal still rejects the idea of legalizing homosexuality]. Press Afrik.

21 Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Polity Press.

22 Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The liberal delusion*.

Funding cuts, a key populist strategy, have weakened UN operations as a direct result; “as of 30 April, the United Nations’ regular budget collections have trailed estimates and fallen significantly below last year’s levels, the Organisation’s top finance official reported to the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) today, urging Member States to expedite their payments and communicate their payment plans promptly.”²³

Chandru Ramanathan, UN Controller and Assistant Secretary-General in the Office of Programme Planning, Finance and Budget, stated: “As we have said on several occasions in recent years, predictability in the timing and amount of collections is critical for managing the Organisation’s cash outflows and planning spending properly and safely without risk of payment default.”²⁴

He also noted that only 104 of 193 Member States had paid in full, adding: “So far in 2025, collections have trailed estimates [...] We are targeting a spending reduction of approximately \$600 million until we have certainty that we will have enough cash to meet our obligations through December.”²⁵

Institutional papers highlight how nationalist rhetoric frames UN recommendations

as threats to cultural identity, thus limiting compliance.²⁶ Because of this, the UN faces a severe fiscal crisis, compelling deep budget reductions and operational restructuring that have triggered significant staff dissent and service disruptions. This financial strain has generated internal conflict and necessitated difficult prioritisation decisions across the organisation.

From what we know, monthly regular budget contributions continue to vary significantly from year to year, creating challenges for timely and efficient budget implementation. In 2023, collections were 42%, rose to 52% in 2024, but fell sharply to 40% in 2025 – the lowest level in the past seven years. Regarding unpaid contributions, the United States currently owes \$1.5 billion, the Russian Federation \$72 million, Saudi Arabia \$42 million, while China’s outstanding amount stands at \$597 million.

UNICEF, a key UN agency, exemplifies these challenges through its Future Focus Initiative. This restructuring mandates at least a 25% reduction in core budgets, consolidates seven regional offices into four Centers of Excellence, and phases out programs in high-income European nations.²⁷ While acknowledging how cuts are becoming the new norm, UNICEF staff and regional representatives have

urged leadership to explore less disruptive cost-saving alternatives. the UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell said in an internal May 22 memo to staff, seen by Lynch on behalf of Devex.: “I know this is a difficult time for all staff – the funding situation we are facing, as you all know, continues to be challenging.”²⁸

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 budget proposal eliminates all US funding for global family planning programs, including UNFPA contributions, and seeks to rescind previously allocated funds for FY2024 and FY2025. This move threatens UN programs supporting reproductive rights, which are critical for LGBTI+ communities facing intersectional discrimination.²⁹

Anti-LGBTI+ Narratives in the UN: Religious Conservatism and State-Sponsored Homophobia

The UN has increasingly become a battleground for antagonistic values. In recent years, anti-LGBTI+ narratives rooted in religious conservatism and nationalist movements have gained traction within UN spaces. These narratives are not mere-

ly symbolic but instead they reflect and reinforce broader state-sponsored efforts to roll back human rights globally.

Leaders like Poland’s Law and Justice party have used ‘traditional values’ to oppose LGBTI+ rights, framing them as threats to national identity and family structures. This rhetoric, often rooted in religious conservatism, has infiltrated UN debates, with states like Russia and Uganda citing Orthodox and Christian values to justify anti-LGBTI+ laws.³⁰ For example, Hungary’s 2021 “anti-gay propaganda” law³¹, inspired by Russia’s 2013 legislation, conflates homosexuality with pedophilia, thus undermining UN human rights norms.³²

Based on recent evidence, we are confident in saying that disinformation is among the main drivers behind anti-LGBTI+ discourse.

Anti-gender campaigns, supported by transnational conservative networks, challenge UN resolutions on gender equality and SOGI global protections, portraying them as Western impositions, or, in the case of Western countries, as liberal ideals that need to be condemned.

23 UN. (2025). Regular Budget Collections Trailing Expectations, UN Controller Tells Fifth Committee, Urging Member States to Expedite Payments amid Worsening Liquidity Crisis.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Thakur, R. (2017). The United Nations, peace and security: From collective security to the responsibility to protect. Cambridge University Press.

27 Lynch, C. (2025). Scoop: Funding cuts at UN children’s agency fuel intense staff pushback. Devex.

28 Ibid.

29 Human Rights Watch. (2025). World report 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025>

30 Ayoub, P. & Stoeckl, K. (2024). The Global Resistance to LGBTIQ Rights. Journal of Democracy. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-global-resistance-to-lgbtiq-rights/>

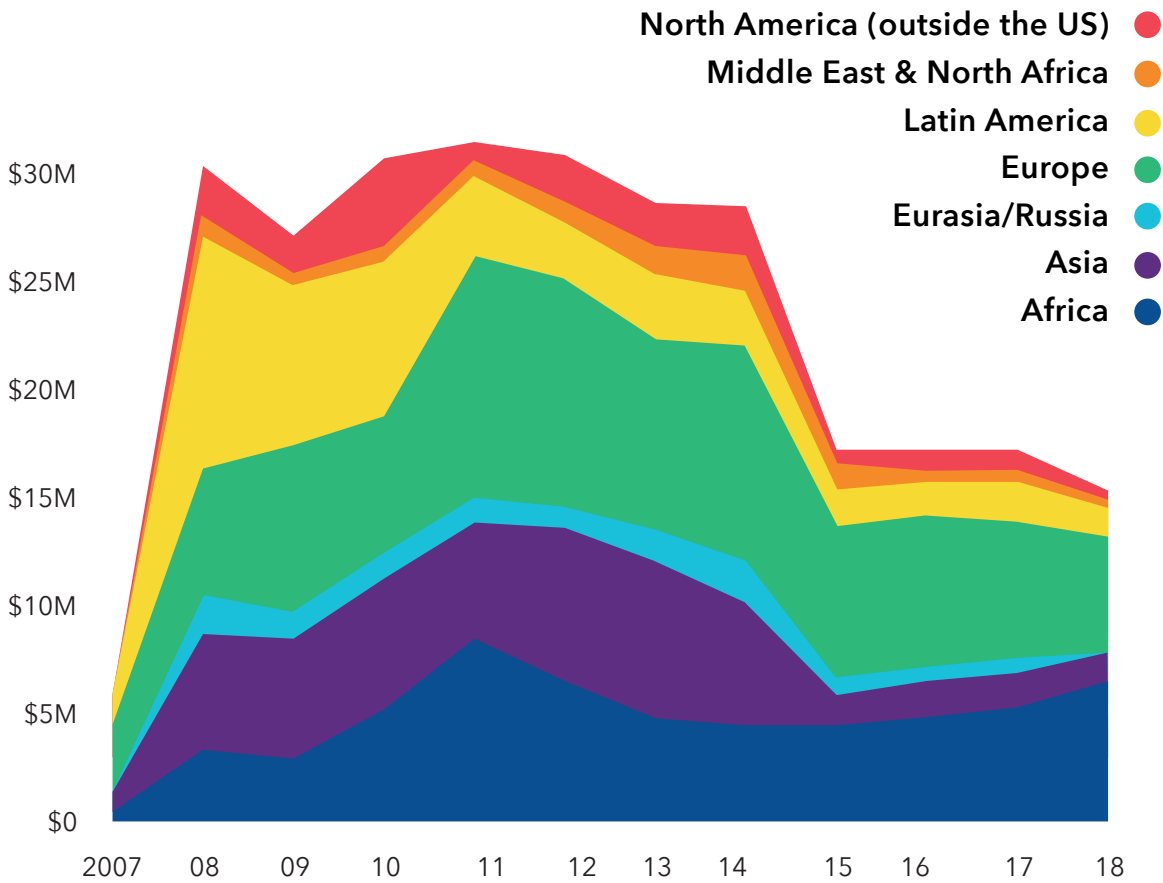
31 In June 2021, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a law titled “Act LXXIX of 2021.” Widely referred to in English as Hungary’s anti-LGBTQ law, the act consists of legislative amendments to multiple laws, which prohibit the sharing of LGBTQ-related information with minors in advertising, media, schools, bookshops and in family interactions.

32 Grzymała-Busse, A. (2023). The global resistance to LGBTIQ+ rights. Journal of Democracy. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-global-resistance-to-lgbtiq-rights>

The Mechanics of Religious-Sponsored Alliances

Religious conservatism is a key driver of anti-LGBTI+ narratives within the UN, with certain Member States leveraging cultural and religious values to oppose LGBTI+ rights initiatives. For instance, during the adoption of the 2016 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) resolution, Morocco, a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), expressed “sadness and bitterness” and argued that the resolution was “against the values

and the beliefs of at least 1.5 billion that belong to one civilisation.”³³ This reflects a broader trend where religious beliefs are invoked to justify discrimination. Such narratives often frame LGBTI+ rights as incompatible with faith-based norms, creating deadlocks in UN Human Rights Council (HRC) discussions. This can be seen, for example, in the formation of the Group of the Friends of the Family,³⁴ comprising countries like Belarus, Russia, and Egypt. This group promotes traditional family values excluding LGBTI+ individuals.



33 ILGA-World (2016). Compilation of the Adoption of the 2016 SOGI Resolution. <https://ilga.org/news/compilation-adoption-2016-sogi-resolution/>

34 Uniting Nations for the Family. <https://unitingnationsforthefamily.org/>

State-sponsored homophobia is further amplified by extreme amounts of funding from religious ultra-conservative networks. The ADF, Heritage Foundation, and CitizenGO have lobbied the UN to reject SOGI mandates, while financing anti-LGBTI+ campaigns in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe.³⁵ Open Democracy, back in 2020, spoke about “the \$280 million ‘dark money’ global empire of the US Christian right.”³⁶

Moreover, the Geneva Consensus Declaration, signed in 2020 by more than 35 states including Brazil, Hungary, and Egypt, weaponised UN platforms to declare that there is no international right to abortion³⁷ and to reject sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) protections as “ideological colonisation”, according to the American Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam).³⁸ This coalition:

1. Manipulates human rights language: co-opts terms like “family sovereignty” and “natural law” to oppose SOGI mandates.
2. Blocks institutional mechanisms: Russia and Saudi Arabia routinely veto

35 OpenDemocracy. (2020). Explore US Christian Right ‘dark money’ spending globally.

36 Ibid.

37 Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family (2020) <https://www.theiwh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Geneva-Consensus-Declaration-GCD-English-2024.pdf>

38 The Center for Family and Human Rights (2021). The Significance of the Geneva Consensus Declaration. <https://c-fam.org/definitions/the-significance-of-the-geneva-consensus-declaration/>

39 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Belarus to the UN (n.d.). https://un.mfa.gov.by/en/un_initiatives/family/

40 Al Jazeera. (2023). Russia limits women’s access to abortion, citing demographic changes. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/28/russia-limits-womens-access-to-abortion-citing-demographic-changes>

41 Amnesty International. (2021). Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention rallies the fight for women’s rights across the world. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-rallies-the-fight-for-womens-rights-across-the-world-2/>

the UN Independent Expert on SOGI’s mandate renewal.

3. Creates parallel frameworks: the “Family Rights Caucus” (led by Qatar and Belarus) promotes resolutions defining the “natural family” in accordance with the definition of the family as reflected in intergovernmentally agreed documents.³⁹

Far-right and ultra-conservative actors who oppose women’s rights frequently target LGBTI+ communities, driven by a shared commitment to enforcing patriarchal norms and rigid gender roles. In Russia, the 2013 law banning “gay propaganda” coincided with stricter abortion regulations, both defended as safeguarding “traditional family values.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Turkey’s 2021 exit from the Istanbul Convention, designed to combat violence against women, was justified by demonising gender equality, women’s and LGBTI rights.⁴¹ These coordinated attacks weaken UN human rights frameworks, bolster anti-multilateralism narratives, and erode social cohesion by marginalising vulnerable populations.

State-Sponsored Homophobia and Its Manifestation in UN Initiatives

Perhaps the most dangerous actors leading on this effort are the states themselves, through state-sponsored homophobia. This is reflected in governments that enact laws criminalising same-sex relations and that actively oppose UN initiatives to protect LGBTI+ rights. For example, the 2016 vote on the SOGI resolution saw 18 countries, including China, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, voting against it, mirroring their domestic discriminatory practices. The African Group of States and OIC have

historically worked together to block the SOGI mandate, inducing state-sponsored homophobia rooted in cultural and political resistance.

These states often justify opposition by claiming LGBTI+ rights threaten national sovereignty, a narrative supported by analyses, like that performed by think tank Chatham House,⁴² which links backlash to rising authoritarianism. This resistance undermines UN efforts to address violence and discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals, as documented by Human Rights Watch.⁴³

Narrative Type	Example	Impact on UN
Religious Conservatism	Morocco’s opposition to 2016 SOGI resolution	Deadlocks in HRC debates, marginalizes LGBTI+ rights
State-Sponsored Homophobia	18 countries voting against 2016 SOGI resolution	Weakens UN initiatives, reflects discrimination back home.

These narratives collectively challenge the UN’s human rights framework – particularly for LGBTI+ communities – by fostering polarisation and resistance to inclusive policies. Despite this, the establishment and renewal of the SOGI Independent Expert mandate, supported by civil soci-

ety and progressive states, demonstrate ongoing efforts to counter these narratives by the OHCHR. Continued advocacy, as emphasised by civil society, is crucial to ensure the UN upholds universal human rights, free from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

42 Chatham House. (2023). The global assault on LGBTQ rights undermines democracy. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-06/global-assault-lgbtq-rights-undermines-democracy>

43 Human Rights Watch. (2025). World report 2025 on LGBT rights. www.hrw.org/world-report/2025

Case Studies:
Examples of how Far-Right Actors Have Influenced UN Decision-Making

A. United States: Institutional Sabotage as Foreign Policy (2017-2021)

- Tactic 1: Budgetary Coercion

- The USAID has cut \$377 million worth of funding to the UN reproductive and sexual health agency.⁴⁴
- UNFPA defunding (\$32.5 million/year): justified via fabricated claims of forced abortions in China.⁴⁵
- Global gag rule expansion: blocked \$12B in health aid to organisations mentioning abortion/gender diversity. Mechanism: required NGOs to denounce ‘LGBT ideology’ to receive US funds.⁴⁶

- Tactic 2: Norm Subversion

- Geneva Consensus Declaration (2020): framed LGBTI+ rights as threat to women’s rights. Signed by 33 states.
- During Trump’s presidency, the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), a US-based anti-LGBTI+ organisation with consultative status at the UN, gained significant access to US policy at the UN. C-Fam works to sway policymakers and promote a hetero-centric, patriarchal concept of the “natural family,” while staunchly opposing UN language and measures that advocate for gender equality and diversity.⁴⁷

- Tactic 3: Networked Repression

- Heritage Foundation’s and C-Fam’s UN playbook: trained diplomats and policymakers⁴⁸ to stall SOGI resolutions and set up UN side-events with “family values” panels.⁴⁹

44 MSF. (2025). Attacks on reproductive health will have devastating consequences worldwide. <https://prezly.msf.org.uk/attacks-on-reproductive-health-will-have-devastating-consequences-worldwide>

45 BBC World. (2017). US withdraws funding for United Nations Population Fund. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-39487617>

46 Guttmacher Institute. (2023). Evidence for Ending the Global Gag Rule: A Multiyear Study in Two Countries. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/evidence-for-ending-global-gag-rule>

47 Ipas. (2023). False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights.

48 The Heritage Foundation. (2023). No More U.S. Diplomats Who Hate the U.S. <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/no-more-us-diplomats-who-hate-the-us>

49 C-FAM. (2025). Events. <https://c-fam.org/event/>

B. Hungary: Illiberal Norm (2015-Present)

- Tactic 1: Budgetary Coercion

- Selective funding: Hungary's Fidesz government reduces support or in some cases bans Human Rights Organisations receiving foreign funding by using the "2017 NGO Transparency Law."⁵⁰
- Pressure mechanism: uses donor status to push UN agencies to dilute LGBTI+ inclusive language, framing such rights as sovereignty threats and undermining human rights frameworks. For instance, Hungary blocked ratification of the Istanbul Convention (violence against women) in 2020, citing objections to references on gender and asylum for LGBTI+ individuals.⁵¹

- Tactic 2: Norm Subversion

- Anti-LGBTI+ declarations: Hungary was one of the original five co-sponsors of the 2020 Geneva Consensus Declaration, along with the United States, Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, and Uganda.
- The Washington-based homophobic Institute for Women's Health has pointed out that the international coalition would not have survived without Hungary because, following Brazil's withdrawal from it, it was Hungary that offered to host their office in Budapest.⁵²
- NGO influence: the Hungarian Prime Minister welcomed the World Congress of Families to Budapest in 2017, where opposing same-sex marriages was on the agenda.⁵³

- Tactic 3: Networked Repression

- Many US Christian right-wing groups that oppose sexual and reproductive rights are linked to a global network of ultra-conservative activists and organisations with links to far-right politicians and movements in a number of European countries, including Hungary.⁵⁴
- Hungary follows the US's example in pulling out of the UN migration pact.⁵⁵

50 UN. (2021). Compilation on Hungary. Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/39/HUN/2>

51 The Guardian. (2020). Hungary's parliament blocks domestic violence treaty. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/05/hungarys-parliament-blocks-domestic-violence-treaty?utm_source=chatgpt.com

52 Hungary's role could expand in wake of US rejoining Geneva Consensus Declaration. (2025). <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungary-s-role-could-expand-in-wake-of-us-rejoining-geneva-consensus-declaration>

53 International Organisation for the Family. (2017). World Congress of Families XI. <https://profam.org/wcfxi/wcf-xi-description/>

54 Institute for Human Sciences. The U.S. Funding Behind the Anti-Gender Movements in Europe. <https://www.iwm.at/publication/iwmpost-article/the-us-funding-behind-the-anti-gender-movements-in-europe>

55 Al Jazeera. (2018). Hungary follows US in pulling out of UN migration pact. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/18/hungary-follows-us-in-pulling-out-of-un-migration-pact>



Opportunities for LGBTI+ Advocacy within the UN

The United Nations' system presents multiple strategic avenues for advancing LGBTI+ rights globally, despite ongoing political challenges and resistance from some Member States. Discussions of LGBTI+ rights at the United Nations have included resolutions and joint statements in the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). There are also opportunities through the expert-led human rights mechanisms (such as the United Nations Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures) as well as by wider UN agencies.

This chapter examines four key opportunities for effective LGBTI+ advocacy within the UN framework, providing practical strategies for civil society organisations, advocates, and allied governments seeking to advance equality and non-discrimination on the global stage.

Strengthening Coalition-Building: The Role of Like-Minded Governments and Civil Society Networks

Coalition-building remains the cornerstone of successful advocacy within the UN system, creating the political momentum and the necessary majorities to overcome institutional resistance and build consensus among diverse Member States. The effectiveness of LGBTI+ advocacy significantly increases when civil society organisations work in strategic partnership with progressive governments and build broad-based coalitions that transcend traditional geographic and political boundaries. But it's also about finding the right entry points, to draw connections between equality and other issues that might be relevant to the fight against homophobia and discrimination.

The Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) serves as an intergovernmental platform that brings together governments committed to LGBTI+ rights with civil society partners. The ERC is currently co-chaired by the governments of Colombia and Spain, for the 2024-26 period.⁵⁶ The State Co-Chairs are supported by Civil Society Co-Chairs, demonstrating the institutionalised partnership between governmental and non-governmental actors that strengthens advocacy efforts. This space has been proven multiple times to be a platform for coordinating diplomatic initiatives as well as for sharing best practices and presenting unified positions in UN forums. However, many governments have deprioritised their participation at the ERC, leading often to limited results.

International civil society networks play a crucial, complementary role in this ecosystem. Organisations like ILGA World have established themselves as key intermediaries between grassroots movements and international institutions. Similarly, Outright International leverages its global reach to amplify local voices and engage within the UN system.

For any organisation to develop effective coalition-building strategies within the UN context, it is required to explore several key approaches.

- First, advocates must develop relationships with mission staff from supportive countries, understanding their diplomatic priorities and constraints while providing them with credible evi-

dence and narratives. Those narratives should not just speak to the ongoing priorities but should also consider the domestic debate those representatives are faced with.

- Second, coalitions should have intersectionality at the core of their strategy. This implies including diverse voices beyond traditional LGBTI+ organisations, incorporating women's rights groups, youth organisations, faith-based allies, and human rights defenders to broaden the coalition's appeal and political leverage. Beyond that, justice movements like the ones around climate issues, are important in making a unified case on human rights.
- Third, successful coalitions must be truly international, meaning that they should be in a position to invest in relationship-building across regional divides. This implies recognising that sustainable progress requires engagement with countries across the Global South, where many of the most restrictive laws currently exist.
- Fourth, it's important to emphasise the value of civil society when they play the role of a neutral convener by offering platforms that like-minded missions often lack. These platforms provide the essential space for Member States to engage in dialogue, build trust, and coordinate responses away from the constraints of official protocols. Their value lies precisely in their

ability to operate outside traditional power structures, fostering connections where governments cannot – or will not – engage directly.

The value of coalition-building goes beyond individual advocacy campaigns to create sustained institutional change. When like-minded governments own a consistent and coordinated approach across the UN bodies, they help fence-sitting states to engage constructively and become part of winning coalitions rather than vote defensively.

Engaging with UN Special Mechanisms: How to Use Special Rapporteurs, UPR, and Treaty Bodies for LGBTI+ Advocacy

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) represents perhaps the most accessible and impactful mechanism for LGBTI+ advocates. UPRs are a mechanism that's part of the United Nations Human Rights Council, which allows scrutiny of the human rights standards and records of all UN States.⁵⁷ The UPR is a valuable tool for addressing shortcomings as well as challenging and encouraging states to do more to protect the LGBTI+ rights.⁵⁸ The UPR's peer-review structure offers opportunities for LGBTI+ organisations to influence both the state under review and the reviewing states, thus maximising pressure.

Effective UPR engagement is not easy, and in many cases it requires the organisations to have essential training before they choose to engage with this process. For instance, civil society organisations should submit comprehensive stakeholder reports that document specific violations, highlight gaps in legal protection, and propose concrete recommendations for government action. These submissions become part of the official UPR documentation and help the reviewing states to inform their questions and recommendations. Moreover, activists are also encouraged to engage directly with diplomatic missions to encourage them to raise LGBTI+ issues during interactive dialogue and include specific recommendations in their statements.

When it comes to the Special Rapporteurs, they can provide an additional valuable avenue for advocacy, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the right to health, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, and thematic rapporteurs addressing issues like freedom of expression and assembly. These independent experts can conduct fact-finding missions through country visits, issue urgent appeals regarding specific cases, and develop thematic reports that establish international standards and best practices.

"UN experts issue joint statement on defenders of LGBT people's rights," demonstrating how Special Procedures

⁵⁶ Equal Rights Coalition. (2021). Equal Rights Coalition. <https://equalrightscoalition.org/>

⁵⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Basic facts about the UPR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/basic-facts>

⁵⁸ Arc International. Universal Periodic Review: A Guide for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Advocates. https://arc-international.net/global-advocacy/universal-periodic-review/upr-guide_en/

can amplify advocacy messages and create spaces for voices supporting LGBTI+ rights.⁵⁹

Despite the short- and medium-term engagements organisations can develop on the above-mentioned bodies, there are also opportunities for longer-term strategies to be explored. The Human Rights Committee, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and Committee Against Torture have all developed institutional analysis recognising various aspects of LGBTI+ rights.⁶⁰ Advocates can submit shadow reports during state party reviews, providing alternative information that supports – or challenges – government narratives and highlights ongoing violations. The role of those bodies is to produce observations and general comments which can carry significant legal weight and provide decisive interpretations of international human rights law that domestic courts and other international bodies often use as their basis.

The use of these mechanisms has not always been easy or accessible to organisations with limited resources. Engagement requires understanding different timelines, procedures, bureaucracy, and various advocacy targets. For instance, the UPR processes follow four-year cycles, allowing for advance planning and follow-up advocacy interventions. Special Procedures can respond more quickly to

urgent situations but depend on the availability and priorities of individuals holding the mandate. Treaty body reviews take place on various schedules but provide opportunities for detailed legal analysis and the development of binding jurisprudence.

Leveraging UN Political Processes: Influencing General Assembly Debates, ECOSOC Participation, and Side Events

The fora mentioned in the title of this chapter require different tactical approaches to the ones previously discussed, but they also provide opportunities to build political support, challenge homophobic positions, and establish international norms that influence domestic policy development.

General Assembly (GA), undoubtedly the most high-level space within the UN, debates both opportunities and challenges for LGBTI+ advocacy. While the GA’s consensus-based decision-making often limits the scope for progressive resolutions, these debates provide global platforms for documenting state positions on key issues. Successful advocacy in this context requires the right timing, messaging, and coalition-building to maximise support while minimising backlash. The annual Third Committee (formally known as the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee of the UN GA) discussions

on human rights provide opportunities to raise LGBTI+ priorities, while thematic debates on related topics like youth, aging, or sustainable development can offer alternative entry points for advocacy.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and its subsidiary bodies offer more technical – but potentially more productive – avenues for LGBTI+ advocacy. The Commission on the Status of Women, Commission for Social Development, and other functional commissions address issues directly relevant to LGBTI+ rights while operating in less politicised environments than the General

Assembly. These bodies’ focus on implementation and best practices creates opportunities for advocates to present evidence-based arguments and build coalitional support around specific policy recommendations.

Side events represent crucial – but often underutilised – opportunities for LGBTI+ advocacy within UN political processes. These events allow advocates to convene Member States, UN officials, and civil society representatives in informal settings that encourage genuine dialogue and build trust. Successful side events often combine:

Type of engagement	Description	Expected result
Presenting activists’ testimonies.	Share first-hand accounts from affected communities alongside data-driven, technical evidence.	Offer both emotion, impact and credibility – strengthening arguments with practical policy solutions.
Launching reports or new initiatives.	Unroll new research, campaigns, or partnerships at the UN level and/or beyond.	Produces momentum, impacts public debate by attracting media, and influences the current policy agenda.
Celebrating positive developments of historical moments.	Drive the discussion by acknowledging progress and successful policy changes.	Reinforces positive storytelling, spotlighting partners as drivers of progress and encouraging further action from decision-makers.
Criticising decisions or inaction.	Publicly challenge harmful actions taken by states and/or influential actors.	Mobilises allies, increases accountability.

59 Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. (2022). UN experts issue joint statement on defenders of LGBT people’s rights. <https://srdefenders.org/information/media-advisory-un-experts-issue-joint-statement-on-defenders-of-lgbt-peoples-rights/>

60 Sexual Rights Initiative. UN Mechanisms. <https://www.sexualrightsinitiative.org/un-mechanisms>

Anti-rights groups have become increasingly active around UN spaces, especially during the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), where they work to undermine queer agendas. They often host parallel events – sometimes just steps away from UN headquarters – framing their efforts around “family values” and traditional gender norms.⁶¹

Strategic Litigation and International Legal Frameworks: The Role of Legal Challenges in Pushing for Accountability

Strategic litigation represents an increasingly important tool for LGBTI+ advocacy within the international system, providing mechanisms for establishing binding legal precedents, holding states accountable for violations, and creating domestic pressure for legal reform.

With courts like the European Court of Human Rights establishing extensive jurisprudence that creates binding precedents and influences both UN bodies and domestic courts worldwide, strategic litigation requires careful case selection and long-term planning to maximize systemic impact. The cases brought forward must present clear violations while simultaneously offering opportunities to debate new legal standards.

However, strategic litigation presents significant difficulties and limitations for

organisations attempting to engage in this work. The process demands substantial legal expertise and long-term financial commitment, since organisations must invest in cases that may take years to resolve, and therefore require sustained funding and specialised knowledge of complex international legal systems. The need for careful case selection creates additional complexity, as not all violations make good test cases, forcing organisations to focus on short-term engagements instead.

Finally, regardless of the obvious legal angle, litigation strategies are heavily-dependent on broader political coalitions. This adds another layer of complexity to the process. Legal merit is not enough, and impactful cases often require broad alliances that extend beyond the legal community.

Conclusion

The complexity of the UN system presents both challenges and opportunities for LGBTI+ advocacy. To navigate it effectively, strategies need to be well-organised and well-funded in order to leverage multiple mechanisms and foster broad, diverse coalitions. Success often hinges on a deep understanding of the unique features and entry points of various UN processes. At the same time, because of the intergovernmental nature of the UN, long-term political trends play a critical

role in shaping the broader context and determining the potential for systemic change.

The current global context presents both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for LGBTI+ focused advocacy. “State and non-state actors in many countries are attempting to roll back hard-won progress and further entrench stigma, endangering the rights and lives of LGBTIQ+ people,” states the UN Women.⁶² As a result, two parallel dynamics are unfolding. On one hand, the grow-

ing international recognition of LGBTI+ rights – bolstered by stronger civil society networks and expanding governmental support – provides a solid foundation for continued progress through sustained and strategic engagement within the UN system. On the other hand, anti-rights actors are gaining momentum, positioning themselves as the voice of anti-establishment resistance. They are weaponising the very gains of the human rights movement to undermine the broader architecture of international rights and accountability.

61 Rutgers. (2023). Dealing with the anti-rights movement Opposition in international spaces. <https://rutgers.international/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Rutgers-toolkit-Dealing-with-anti-rights-movement-in-international-spaces.pdf>

62 UN Women. (2024). LGBTIQ+ communities and the anti-rights pushback: 5 things to know. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2024/05/lgbtiq-communities-and-the-anti-rights-pushback-5-things-to-know>



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a Pathway for LGBTI+ Inclusion

The SDGs (also known as the 2030 Agenda) were established in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people have access to fundamental rights. The SDGs comprise 17 goals and 169 targets, aiming to address the world's most pressing issues. What those goals emphasise is the need for a holistic approach to international development, one that addresses social, economic, and environmental issues simultaneously, ensuring a sustainable future for all.

Why the SDGs Matter for LGBTI+ Rights: The Shift from Traditional Human Rights Frameworks to Development-Oriented Inclusion

While LGBTI+ communities are not explicitly mentioned in the SDG framework, the goals emphasise reducing inequalities as well as promoting the health and well-being of all people. However, SDGs can become a critical tool for achieving gender equality.

Unlike previous development agendas that focused primarily on economic growth and poverty reduction, the 2030 Agenda commits explicitly to ensuring “that no one is left behind.”⁶³ This commitment offers a clear entry point for LGBTI+ advocacy, both within the development and human rights frameworks.

Because the human rights language is often politically and ideologically contested, a development-focused approach can offer strategic advantages for promoting equality of all forms. While human rights commitments may not initially seem to offer measurable outcomes, it's essential to note that – for some Member States – gender equality can serve as a stepping stone to opening up the debate around other indicators, such as social cohesion or economic participation.

Furthermore, the SDGs' focus on evidence-based and data-driven monitoring aids LGBTI+ movements in making the case for the development costs of exclusion and discrimination. There is extensive research showing that LGBTI+ exclusion undermines economic growth and limits human development, while reducing social cohesion at the same time. For example, a series of studies by Open for

Business estimating the cost of LGBTI+ discrimination find that – both at regional level (in the Caribbean and in Central and Eastern Europe) and at country level (in Kenya and Uzbekistan) – the foregone economic potential due to SOGI exclusion ranges between 0.4 percent and 6.0 percent of GDP and costs billions of dollars every year.⁶⁴

At the same time, given the systemic lack of hard accountability mechanisms in the UN system, the SDGs provide an opportunity for a global point of reference, as the goals create universal obligations for inclusive development.⁶⁵

It's important to underscore that gender equality isn't just a standalone goal (SDG 5); instead, it is a cross-cutting issue that impacts and is impacted by the other goals. The pioneering element the SDG framework brought into public institutions is that it recognises the interconnected nature of social, economic, and political exclusion that LGBTI+ people often face. This holistic approach creates opportunities for comprehensive advocacy strategies that address multiple dimensions of LGBTI+ marginalisation simultaneously through coordinated interventions across different SDG areas. Below we will analyse how.

63 United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1.

64 World Bank. (2018). Sexual orientation and gender identity in development: Challenges and opportunities.

65 ILGA World. Lucas Ramon Mendos, Kellyn Botha, Rafael Carrano Lelis, Enrique López de la Peña, Ilia Savelev and Daron Tan. (2020). State-Sponsored Homophobia 2020: Global Legislation Overview Update.

Mapping LGBTI+ Issues Across SDGs: How Different SDGs Intersect with LGBTI+ Rights

- **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)** presents perhaps one of the most well-documented connections to LGBTI+ rights and inclusion. LGBTI+ people face significant health disparities across multiple indicators, including higher rates of mental health challenges, substance use, and infectious diseases. These are often exacerbated by discrimination in healthcare settings and legal barriers to accessing services.⁶⁶ The HIV epidemic's disproportionate impact on queer communities directly links to SDG target 3.3, which aims to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Additionally, target 3.8's commitment to achieving universal health coverage cannot be realised without addressing the barriers faced by LGBTI+ communities.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** offers complex but crucial connections to LGBTI+ inclusion, particularly for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. While the goal's primary focus on women and girls does not explicitly include broader gender identities or expression, it can be argued that target 5.1's commitment to ending discrimination against women and girls also covers discrimination against all women and girls regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Target 5.2's focus on eliminating violence against women and girls in public and private spheres provides entry points for addressing violence against transgender women and gender non-conforming individuals, who face exceptionally high rates of violence in most states across the world.
- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)** is directly linked to LGBTI+ economic inclusion and the significant employment discrimination that LGBTI+ people face in many contexts. Target 8.5's commitment to achieving full employment and decent work for all – including equal pay for work of equal value – cannot be achieved without addressing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁶⁷ Target 8.8's focus on protecting labor rights and promoting safe working environments for all workers – including migrant workers – creates opportunities to address the specific vulnerabilities that LGBTI+ workers face, particularly those who may lack legal recognition or protection.
- **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)** provides the most explicit framework for addressing LGBTI+ exclusion through its commitment to reducing inequality within and among countries. Target 10.2 specifically aims to “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status,” with “other status” providing space for interpreting sexual orienta-

tion and gender identity as protected characteristics.⁶⁸ Target 10.3's focus on ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities through eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices directly addresses the legal and policy barriers that LGBTI+ people face in many jurisdictions.

- **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)** offers critical entry points for addressing the legal and institutional frameworks that either protect or persecute LGBTI+ people. Target 16.1's commitment to significantly reducing all forms of violence everywhere directly relates to addressing the high rates of violence that LGBTI+ people face globally, while target 16.2 focuses on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children, thus intersecting with the specific vulnerabilities that LGBTI+ youth face. Besides that, probably the most important commitment deriving from SDG 16 is about promoting and enforcing non-discriminatory laws and policies. This provides a direct framework for challenging the criminalisation of same-sex conduct and advocating for comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation.

Overall, the holistic and interconnected vision of these SDGs reflects nothing less than the reality; the exclusion of LGBTI+ voices takes place across multiple levels and facets of life simultaneously. Effec-

tive advocacy strategies must, therefore, adopt intersectional approaches that recognise how discrimination in one area – healthcare, for example – reinforces marginalisation in others – such as education or employment.

Gaps and Challenges in LGBTI+ Data Collection: Addressing the Lack of Visibility in SDG Indicators

Despite the significance of the SDGs, we must also be honest in recognising their limitations – particularly in how effectively they can be implemented in practice. The SDGs' emphasis on evidence-based monitoring and “data revolution” promises to improve development outcomes through better measurement and accountability; yet, LGBTI+ people remain largely invisible in official statistics and SDG monitoring frameworks.⁶⁹ This reality comes hand in hand with a cycle of exclusion where the absence of LGBTI+ focused data reinforces the perception that sexual orientation and gender identity inclusion is not a development priority, while simultaneously making it almost impossible to track progress toward inclusive development goals.

For instance, it's evident that the design of SDG indicators rarely include sexual orientation or gender identity as disaggregation variables. Among the 232 official SDG indicators, none explicitly demand data collection on LGBTI+ populations, and very few provide opportu-

⁶⁶ World Health Organisation. (2015). Sexual health, human rights and the law.

⁶⁷ International Training Centre of the ILO. Promoting Equal Pay. <https://www.itcilo.org/resources/promoting-equal-pay>

⁶⁸ M.V. Lee Badgett, Waaldijk, K., & van der Meulen Rodgers, Y. (2019). The relationship between LGBT inclusion and economic development: Macro-level evidence. *World Development*. 120: 1-14.

⁶⁹ United Nations Trade and Development. Data revolution. *SDG Pulse*. <https://sdgpulse.unctad.org/glossary/data-revolution/>

nities for such disaggregation even when it would be closely relevant.⁷⁰ This omission reflects broader institutional biases within international development systems that have historically overlooked LGBTI+ issues, as well as technical and political challenges associated with collecting sensitive demographic data.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening LGBTI+ Inclusion in SDG Implementation: Practical Steps for Governments, the UN, and Civil Society

Achieving the promise of the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind” practically means that the inclusion of LGBTI+ people across all stages of SDG implementation should be intentional and, first and foremost, systemic. To close this gap, targeted actions are needed from governments, the United Nations system, and civil society – guided by principles of equity, evidence, and intersectionality.

1. Recommendations for Governments

Governments play a central role in embedding LGBTI+ inclusion within national development priorities. To that end:

- **Member States can go beyond the existing UN approach and integrate LGBTI+ inclusion into national SDG frameworks**, development strategies, and budget planning. This includes identifying measurable targets within SDG implementation plans and ensuring policy coherence across sectors.

- **Establish and enforce anti-discrimination laws** protecting individuals based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment.
- **Data collection is instrumental to any successful policy launch. Member States can improve national data systems** by developing methodologies for disaggregated data collection by SOGIESC.
- **Strengthen partnerships with LGBTI+ civil society organisations**, recognising them as essential stakeholders in policymaking and monitoring processes.

2. Recommendations for the United Nations System

- **Develop appropriate toolkits to mainstream LGBTI+ inclusion in SDG monitoring, implementation, and reporting processes**, including through the development of inclusive indicators – particularly for SDGs 3 (health), 5 (gender equality), 10 (reduced inequalities), and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).
- **Provide robust technical support to Member States** to design and implement inclusive development programming, while taking into account varying cultural and political contexts.
- **Create space by bringing forward meaningful LGBTI+ participation**

in global and regional forums, including the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), and support safe civic space for advocates from all regions.

- **Allocate adequate and sustained funding** to LGBTI+ focused programmes and grassroots development efforts, especially in under-resourced regions and through UNESCO.

More specifically, about the work of the IE SOGI:

- First, the mandate should be expanded to include formal investigative powers and direct engagement mechanisms with Member States, moving beyond the advisory nature of the role toward accountability followed up with actionable measures.
- Second, the IE SOGI could move beyond ad-hoc fact-finding country visits to develop standardised monitoring protocols and reporting procedures. This would enable consistent data collection across regions, producing evidence-based advocacy and more targeted interventions.
- Third, an increased coordination with other UN special procedures and human rights bodies would create collective approaches to addressing intersectional discrimination. Additionally, developing dedicated funding streams would ensure sustained engagement with civil society partners and enable

comprehensive follow-up on recommendations.

- Finally, an increased budget for the mandate would allow for expanded country visits and greater support to local LGBTI+ civil society, helping to overcome the current shortfall that limits the above-mentioned areas of work. Collaborating with civil society through regular, structured dialogues and consultations would amplify marginalised voices and counter far-right narratives within the UN.⁷¹

These reforms would transform the Independent Expert role from a symbolic position into a substantive mechanism for advancing LGBTI+ rights globally.

3. Recommendations for Civil Society and LGBTI+ Movements

LGBTI+ civil society organisations (CSOs) are on the frontlines of development and accountability efforts. Their leadership is vital to ensure that global goals respond to real-world needs:

- **Produce shadow reports and community-led data** to document the lived realities and barriers faced by LGBTI+ people in accessing development opportunities.
- **Build broad coalitions** linking LGBTI+ inclusion to wider SDG efforts – such as economic justice, climate action, disability rights, youth engagement, and feminist movements.

70 World Development. Badgett, M. V. L., Waaldijk, K., & Rodgers, Y. M. (2019). The relationship between LGBT inclusion and economic development: Macro- and microeconomic evidence.

71 UN LGBTI Core Group. (2023). Third Committee Interactive Dialogue Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. <https://unlgbticoregroup.org/2023/10/26/third-committee-interactive-dialogue-independent-expert-on-protection-against-violence-and-discrimination-based-on-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/>

- **Empower LGBTI+ people to hold their governments to account** – particularly at the local level where services are delivered and policy is implemented.
- **Forge cross-sectoral partnerships** with academic institutions, private sector actors, and faith-based organisations to broaden resource bases and amplify advocacy.

LGBTI+ inclusion in the SDGs is not just a matter of visibility. It is a precondition for a much needed shift in embedding gender equality within the global development system. Progress requires political courage, coordinated action, and deep partnerships with affected communities. By advancing the recommendations above, governments, international institutions, and civil society can help ensure the 2030 Agenda delivers on its core promise: a world where no one is left behind.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings

This report has examined how the UN functions both as a catalyst for human rights reforms and as a platform for the anti-rights movement globally, actively working to dismantle decades of hard-won progress. As a power system, the UN is not neutral; it reflects shifting geopolitical dynamics, ideological divisions, and the strategic use of multilateral platforms by both pro- and anti-rights actors.

Key findings of this report include:

- The UN remains one of the few truly global spaces where LGBTI+ civil society can participate in norm-setting. Mechanisms like the Human Rights Council (HRC), Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer multiple, yet unequal, entry points for advocacy.
- The rise of far-right populism has introduced new challenges, from funding threats and anti-gender rhetoric to the deliberate occupation of UN spaces by anti-rights actors who are now better coordinated and internationally connected.
- The anti-rights movement has evolved from isolationism to strategic engagement within multilateral bodies. To them, it's more about hijacking those spaces rather than dismantling them. These actors seek to roll back LGBTI+ progress by normalising homophobic narratives and disrupting consensus on human rights language.
- Despite the backlash, opportunities remain. Coalition-building, strategic litigation, effective engagement with

UN monitoring processes, and alignment with the SDG agenda all provide viable routes for advancing equality.

- The UN's influence, despite threats to multilateralism, filters into national laws, funding priorities, and public discourse – and therefore, it matters. For this reason, the strategic value of UN engagement remains high.

Strategic Priorities for LGBTI+ Advocacy in the UN

Looking ahead to the next decade, civil society and progressive governments must recalibrate their engagement with the UN to respond to both old and new forms of resistance. Several strategic priorities should guide this work:

- **Secure the renewal of mandates.** The Independent Expert on SOGI has become a crucial mechanism for visibility and accountability. Its periodic renewal must remain a top priority, especially amid growing opposition.
- **Expand the use of Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).** These spaces offer procedural consistency and legal weight. Advocates must invest in training and coordination to ensure more regular and effective submissions.
- **Leverage the SDGs as a depoliticised entry point.** While the human rights track faces backlash, development-focused processes are often less politicised and more about quantifiable metrics and indicators. Integrat-

ing SOGIESC language into national development plans and UN agency programming can sidestep ideological obstacles.

- **Counter the anti-rights movement with coordinated strategies.** Anti-rights actors are now transnational. Advocacy must respond with equal force – through global coordination, resource-sharing, and a clear counter-narrative based on democracy, human dignity, and shared development.
- **Invest in the participation of under-resourced regions.** Civil society in Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Asia-Pacific must be better supported to engage in UN processes. This includes funding, technical assistance, and safe spaces for participation.
- **Maintain and grow government coalitions.** Governments must be equipped with narratives and evidence that enable them to respond effectively to domestic pushback while remaining aligned with their international commitments. This includes building cross-regional alliances to avoid being isolated by blocs like the OIC or the African Group.

Final Thoughts

Engaging with the United Nations has never been a neutral act. It is political, often slow-moving, and at times frustrating. Yet, it remains one of the most visible arenas where global norms are contested, reframed, and often advanced. In an

era marked by democratic backsliding, geopolitical fragmentation, and hostility to human rights, the multilateral system – despite its institutional limitations – still offers a critical space for resistance, alliance-building, and long-term change. It is a platform where collective pressure can be applied, where global scrutiny still matters, and where narratives can be brought to light to be celebrated or challenged. Nonetheless, it demands clarity of vision, strategic discipline, funding stability, and the stamina to stay engaged even when outcomes are slow or uneven.

There are several emerging themes and research questions that could be part of future investigation. The question of how in the era of emerging technologies – such as AI and biometric identification systems – LGBTI+ rights are impacted remains one for which we have insufficient information.

Another research-worthy aspect of this debate is the influence of non-state actors. Transnational religious networks, digital platform companies, big businesses, as well as other groups continue to shape

human rights in ways that often bypass the traditional routes.

For Kaleidoscope Trust and its partners, the United Nations is not the final answer to LGBTI+ equality – but it is an essential part of the path forward. Used effectively, it can amplify marginalised voices, hold governments to account, and provide a framework through which LGBTI+ rights can be interconnected with development, democracy, and the international rule of law. What's needed now is proactive engagement – not just responding to crises but shaping the agenda.

This requires investment and coordination, not only from civil society but from states willing to lead by example. The stakes could not be higher. The choices we make in this decade will help determine whether the international system remains a viable force for justice or eventually becomes irrelevant. More importantly, they will determine whether the promise of human rights, dignity, safety, and equality for all remains something real and reachable or slips further into the realm of lost ideals.

