

Defunding Freedom

Impacts of U.S. Foreign Aid Cuts on LGBTIQ People Worldwide

February 2025



OUTRIGHT
INTERNATIONAL



Outright International. Together for better LGBTIQ lives.

Outright International works with partners around the globe to strengthen the LGBTIQ human rights movement, document and amplify human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality.

Founded in 1990, Outright works with civil society organizations, the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, governments, humanitarian and development institutions, and philanthropic and corporate partners to create lasting change. With staff in twenty countries, Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations, where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

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Cover Image: Couple of queer people holding a pride flag facing the U.S. Capitol
Source: Midjourney
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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

“More than funding has been taken away from us. Hope, belief, and a chance to pursue happiness was snatched away.” – Caribbean LGBTIQ activist¹

Within the course of a week following President Donald Trump’s inauguration in January 2025, the United States government reversed a decade and a half of support for advancing the safety, equality, and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people.

On his first day in office, Trump claimed that trans and intersex people didn’t exist, erased non-discrimination provisions, and branded work with marginalized communities in the U.S. and abroad as un-American. Four days later, on January 24, Trump issued a 90-day freeze on nearly all foreign assistance. Organizations around the world that received U.S. government funds for work with LGBTIQ communities began to receive stop-work orders instructing them to immediately halt all programmatic work and cease all expenditures on their grants. LGBTIQ organizations and their allies were forced, with no notice, to shut down programs, lay off staff, suspend crucial research and advocacy work, and turn away beneficiaries from services. By February 7, some recipients of U.S. funds began to receive termination notices from the U.S. government, cutting off their U.S.-funded programming entirely.

The foreign assistance freeze and the subsequent attempts to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have affected civil society groups and development efforts in all sectors. U.S.-funded projects that were forced to grind to a halt ranged from building police stations to preventing malaria, from improving agricultural production to removing landmines.

While the impacts are being felt in every sector, there are at least two ways in which LGBTIQ people are particularly vulnerable. First, many of the LGBTIQ organizations that received support from USAID or the U.S. State Department are unable to fundraise locally, a result of criminalizing or discriminatory laws or entrenched societal stigma; unlike organizations in other sectors, few can expect their own governments or private donors in their countries to fill any portion of that gap. Second, LGBTIQ organizations are losing funding at precisely the moment that their communities are facing an upsurge in vitriol from unscrupulous politicians, increasing the risks of violence and exclusion.

¹ Response 75, English survey.

² Global Philanthropy Project, Global Resources Report 2021/2022 (Global Philanthropy Project, 2023), 10, https://globalresourcesreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GRR_2021-2022_WEB-SinglePage-Colour_EN.pdf.

Many LGBTIQ organizations operate on a shoestring, effecting life-saving development and human rights work with limited financial and human resources.² Over the last 15 years, larger global and regional organizations have worked with both the US State Department and USAID to construct trusted networks that allow funds to be disseminated through intermediaries, including Outright International, to organizations that may lack the capacity to apply for and manage the large grants government agencies typically make available. Outright — one of many such intermediaries — was forced to suspend 120 grants to organizations in 42 countries as a result of the aid freeze. These grants ranged from USD \$9,000 to \$180,000, reaching nascent grassroots organizations as well as organizations working nationally or regionally with decades of experience delivering services or advancing equality.

This rapid assessment presents a snapshot of **how LGBTIQ organizations in every region of the world have been impacted by the US foreign assistance freeze**. These organizations work to prevent homophobic and transphobic violence, protect LGBTIQ people from arbitrary detention and torture, provide healthcare services, propel legal reform, and develop income-generation opportunities for populations that are often relegated to the margins of society. For LGBTIQ people who may face state-sponsored violence and discrimination or widespread public rejection, these organizations are often the only source of institutional support.

This rapid assessment is intended for multiple audiences:

- Members of Congress and other policymakers in the United States, who must defend foreign assistance and stand as a bulwark against the Trump administration's lawlessness and its targeting of marginalized communities.
- Other bilateral and multilateral development partners, who should step in to fill the gaps left by the foreign assistance freeze for crucial LGBTIQ human rights and inclusion work.
- Media outlets, which should eschew sensationalist clickbait and ensure evidence-based coverage of the harms that LGBTIQ people will experience due to the aid freeze.
- Advocates in the LGBTIQ movement and throughout other sectors, who should find common cause to defend inclusive democracy and development.

More than 80 years ago, then-US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt articulated a vision for "four freedoms": freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. He argued that people everywhere in the world should benefit from these freedoms and that promoting them was both a moral imperative and in the US national security interest. These "fundamental freedoms" have been adapted and adopted in the US and globally, echoing in frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and informing the policy³ priorities of institutions such as USAID. This briefing paper relies on a reconfiguration of the four freedoms as freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of speech and conscience, and freedom to live in dignity to articulate the multiple ways in which LGBTIQ communities around the globe have been impacted by the foreign assistance freeze and the initial phases of an apparent full-fledged US retreat from its decades-long global human rights leadership role.

² Global Philanthropy Project, Global Resources Report 2021/2022 (Global Philanthropy Project, 2023), 10, https://globalresourcesreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GRR_2021-2022_WEB-SinglePage-Colour_EN.pdf.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "State of the Union Address," January 6, 1941, Voices for Democracy, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/fdr-the-four-freedoms-speech-text/>.

Recommendations

Recommendations

To the United States Congress

- **Defend the Integrity and Independence of USAID**
 - Halt unconstitutional efforts to dismantle USAID, an independent agency established by executive order in 1961 and granted autonomy by Congress in 1998. Attempts to undermine its independence violate the separation of powers and weaken U.S. leadership in global development and humanitarian assistance.
- **Ensure Congressional Funding Reaches Its Intended Recipients**
 - Exercise oversight to guarantee that funds appropriated by Congress are delivered to their designated programs and beneficiaries without political obstruction.
- **Uphold Fundamental Freedoms as a Pillar of U.S. Policy**
 - Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the fundamental freedoms as formulated by President Roosevelt as the cornerstone of the U.S. domestic and foreign policies and interests.

Photo: Cell phone with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) seal
By: sauloangelo
Source: Adobe Stock
Asset ID#: 1242166844



To Bilateral Development, Humanitarian, and Diplomatic Partners in Countries Outside the U.S.

- **Fill Critical Funding Gaps**

- Urgently mobilize resources to compensate for the loss of U.S. funding to global LGBTIQ equality and inclusion efforts, ensuring sustained support for vulnerable communities and frontline organizations. Take immediate steps to fill the gaps left by the loss of U.S. funding to global LGBTIQ equality and inclusion efforts.

- **Unblock Non-U.S. Funds Blocked in U.S. Administration Accounts**

- Apply diplomatic pressure to release non-U.S. funding frozen in U.S. administration accounts so that these resources can be swiftly redirected toward their intended purposes in advancing global LGBTIQ equality.

- **Strengthen Coordination Through International Mechanisms**

- Work jointly through international platforms like the Equal Rights Coalition and the UN LGBTI Core Group to strategize and coordinate a joint response towards the escalating threats that LGBTIQ movements and communities are facing. These mechanisms bring together influential governments that can drive meaningful impact when working closely together on diplomatic efforts, financing, and coordination.

- **Hold the U.S. Accountable for International Commitments**

- Use all diplomatic means to hold the U.S. accountable to the international agreements signed and ratified by the country as well as its duty to uphold and adhere to international law.

- **Safeguard Democratic and Open Societies**

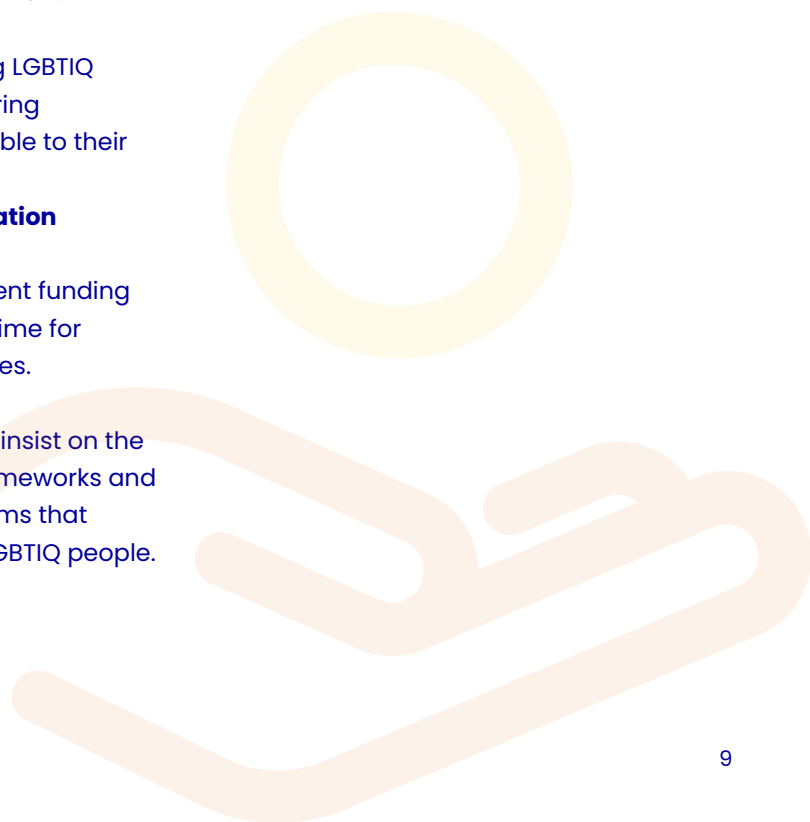
- Reinforce the essential role of civil society—including LGBTIQ movements—in upholding democratic values, ensuring representation, and holding governments accountable to their commitments to all citizens.

- **Ensure Responsible Transitions in International Cooperation Funding**

- Reconsider planned cuts to international development funding and, if reductions are unavoidable, allow transition time for organizations to adapt and find other funding sources.

- **Leverage Multilateral Development Banks for Inclusion**

- As shareholders of multilateral development banks, insist on the full implementation of environmental and social frameworks and promote the further development of lending programs that support the economic livelihoods and inclusion of LGBTIQ people.



To Private Funders

• **Integrate LGBTIQ Rights into Broader Funding Strategies**

- Recognize LGBTIQ rights as fundamental human rights and ensure their inclusion in broader funding strategies. Private funders who do not specifically focus on LGBTIQ communities should integrate these issues into grantmaking across human rights, economic inclusion, public health, and democracy programs. A rights-based approach is essential—without it, these initiatives risk failing to meet the specific needs of LGBTIQ people and falling short of their intended impact.

• **Make Immediate Strategic Investments in the Global LGBTIQ Movement**

- Prioritize funding that sustains core advocacy, visibility, fundraising, and grassroots efforts for LGBTIQ people worldwide. Support a strong ecosystem, including regional and international organizations that can help maintain stability and resilience, particularly those best positioned to withstand reductions in overall funding.

• **Direct Funding to Strategic Opportunities**

- Target funding to LGBTIQ organizations in places where progress is possible or where immediate support is needed to resist setbacks. Investing in both defensive and proactive strategies—building firewalls against regression while driving forward positive change—can have a catalytic impact both locally and globally.

• **Expand Beyond Traditional Funding Areas**

- While continuing support for HIV/AIDS and advocacy, broaden funding to include innovative programs that directly impact LGBTIQ safety, well-being, and economic stability. Support initiatives focused on economic livelihoods, inclusive democracy, and crisis response, which have been disproportionately affected by U.S. aid cuts.

• **Direct Funding to High-Risk Contexts**

- Prioritize funding for LGBTIQ organizations operating in criminalized, conflict-affected, or highly stigmatized environments, where local fundraising is particularly difficult due to criminalization, restrictive laws, or social discrimination. Prioritize organizations with strong grassroots connections.

• **Invest in Data Collection and Research**

- Support ongoing research and documentation of the impact of the U.S. funding halt and the broader gaps left by the U.S. withdrawal from global LGBTIQ leadership. Data-driven insights will strengthen both advocacy and funding strategies.

• **Support Organizations Exploring Partnerships and Mergers**

- Invest in organizations considering strategic partnerships, mergers, or collaborative models to sustain operations and increase efficiency in response to an increasingly restrictive funding environment.

• **Coordinate a Joint Response Among Private Funders**

- Recognize the collective responsibility of private funders in addressing the growing crisis facing LGBTIQ movements worldwide. Develop shared funding, advocacy, and visibility strategies while maintaining diverse approaches to support the movement.

• **Sustain LGBTIQ Movement Building, Political Organizing, and Advocacy**

- Fund efforts to protect and advance LGBTIQ rights, ensuring that past progress is not lost. Adopt an intersectional, long-term grantmaking approach, balancing flexible funding for movement-building with rapid-response grants for urgent crises.

• **Increase Support for Developing Economic Independence**

- Expand investment in flexible funding models that strengthen movement resilience, promote autonomous resourcing, and enhance the economic independence of LGBTIQ organizations.

• **Develop a Long-Term Financing Plan for the LGBTIQ Movement**

- Collaborate with key LGBTIQ organizations to design a 5- to 10-year financing strategy that ensures the sustainability of critical global and regional structures advancing LGBTIQ equality and inclusion.

To Corporations

- **Continue to invest in diverse workplaces and perspectives, including through recruitment and retention of LGBTIQ people.**
 - Investing in diversity, equity, and inclusion is a proven business strategy that enhances employee engagement, attracts top talent, and drives innovation. Businesses should continue these practices while adhering to international norms and standards such as the UN Standards of Conduct for Business.

To the Media

- **Amplify LGBTIQ Perspectives in Coverage of the U.S. Funding Freeze**
 - Ensure that reporting on the impacts of the U.S. funding freeze and cuts includes the voices of LGBTIQ people and organizations from around the world.
- **Combat Misinformation with Responsible Journalism**
 - Fact-check and actively counter misinformation about LGBTIQ people and about U.S. development and human rights funding.
- **Reject Sensationalism and Clickbait**
 - Refrain from publishing inaccurate, sensationalized, or misleading content about funding for global LGBTIQ work. Ensure that all reporting is evidence-based, contextually accurate, and grounded in ethical journalism standards to foster informed public discourse rather than amplify controversy.

To LGBTIQ Movement Funders and Strategic Partners

- **Foster spaces for mutual support and exchange among LGBTIQ organizations and allied movements.**
 - Use convening powers to enable organizations to share strategies for resilience, adaptation, and sustainability in the face of funding cuts.
- **Document and amplify best practices in navigating hostile environments.**
 - Create opportunities for organizations to learn from each other's experiences in security, advocacy, and service provision.




Image: Circle of Colorful Figures Symbolizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
By: MOTOKO Stock
Source: Adobe Stock
Asset ID#: 1032173564
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Methodology

Methodology

On January 24, 2025, Outright International was among many non-governmental organizations that received stop-work orders requiring us to halt all ongoing work with grantees receiving U.S. government funding. As we informed partners of the decision, we began to receive spontaneous feedback regarding the funding freeze's impact on their crucial work to save lives, defend human rights, and advance LGBTIQ inclusion within their societies.

As the magnitude of the crisis became clear, Outright staff members reached out to other partners proactively to understand what programming they would need to cut, what impact funding shortages would have on staffing, and how LGBTIQ communities as a whole would be affected. On January 30, we launched a global survey, targeting not only Outright grantees but any organization that had received U.S. government funding for work on LGBTIQ issues. The survey included questions about the types of work impacted, the impacts on the organization, and the broader impacts on LGBTIQ people, along with an optional question about the amount of funding or percentage of the respondent's budget that was frozen. The survey was published via Google Forms in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Ukrainian. We distributed the survey link directly to our grantees and other partners, shared it on listservs, messaging apps, and social media, and made it available on Outright's website.

By February 10, we had received 125 complete survey responses from organizations directly impacted by stop-work orders related to the funding freeze. Most respondents were from LGBTIQ organizations, while some were from non-governmental organizations that included LGBTIQ issues in their broader work on topics such as democracy, women's rights, and humanitarian assistance, and several were academic researchers. Responses came from at least 59 UN member states, representing every continent and nearly every major sub-region in the world.

While the survey allowed for anonymity, some respondents provided their contact information for follow-up. We conducted nine key informant interviews with twelve people, targeting both survey respondents who had shared their contacts and other individuals known to us in the LGBTIQ movement who we believed had been affected or had valuable information about the impact of funding cuts.

A team of seven Outright researchers and program officers analyzed the data and identified prominent themes as well as specific cases to share in this report. The team also conducted desk-based research to provide context for the findings.

The research has several limitations. As a rapid assessment, the data produced does not allow us to draw statistically significant conclusions regarding, for instance, the most affected regions or areas of work. The survey was initially published in English, with versions in other languages less widely circulated. As of February 10, most responses received were in English, with only a handful in other languages, meaning our findings overrepresent respondents from Anglophone countries or those who had personal or educational backgrounds that allowed for greater fluency in English.

During the period that the research was conducted, most organizations had not yet received information clarifying whether their funding was “terminated” or simply “frozen” for 90 days. Outright intends to conduct subsequent research on the longer-term impacts of the funding terminations that we and other organizations were beginning to receive at the time of writing.



Photo: Activists holding peace signs protesting in street
By: Cultura Creative
Source: Adobe Stock
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Background

Background

On January 20, President Trump issued an executive order imposing a 90-day pause on foreign aid to assess “programmatically efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy.”⁴ On January 24, Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued guidance that operationalized Trump’s directive as a stop-work order for nearly all existing grants and programs.⁵ By February 7, a number of State Department foreign assistance programs had officially been terminated.

The initial stop-work orders freeze a number of programs that had operated under three presidential administrations, Republican and Democrat, since 2011. In December 2011, the State Department launched the Global Equality Fund, a public-private partnership of roughly thirty resource partners that distributed over US\$100 million in its first ten years to civil society movements working to achieve LGBTIQ equality in more than 100 countries.⁶ The Global Equality Fund was established to provide “critical resources and diplomatic support to civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders working to advance and protect the fundamental principle of human rights for all, including LGBTI persons. These rights include the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression.”⁷ While it was hosted within the U.S. State Department, the Global Equality Fund aggregated contributions from other public and private partners, allowing smaller contributors to most effectively maximize their contributions to global LGBTIQ equality. Partners of the Fund, as of 2024, included the governments of Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United States of America, and Uruguay, as well as the Arcus Foundation, Bloomberg L.P., Deloitte LLP, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the John D. Evans Foundation, the M-A-C AIDS Fund, Marriott International, Out Leadership, Royal Bank of Canada, and the Thomson Reuters Foundation.⁸

The GEF’s grantmaking for global LGBTIQ human rights work grew from US\$3 million in 2011 to over US\$17 million in 2021, about US\$10 million of which was provided by the U.S. State Department.⁹

A number of initiatives were launched under the auspices of GEF:

4 Donald J. Trump, “Executive Order 14169, Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid,” January 20, 2025, The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/>.

5 Michael Igoe, “Exclusive: State Department Issues Stop-Work Order on USAid,” Devex, January 24, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/exclusive-state-department-issues-stop-work-order-on-us-aid-109160>. The order includes carve-outs for aid to Israel and Egypt.

6 Global Resources Report 2021/2022, 10.

7 “About the Fund,” USDepartment of State, accessed February 9, 2025, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/globalequality/about/index.htm>.

8 Global Equality Fund, Global Equality Fund 2020-2021 Report (Global Equality Fund, 2021), 4; communication from a source familiar with the GEF to Outright International, February 11, 2025.

9 Ibid, 10, 31. All currency amounts in dollars provided in this report are in U.S.dollars.

- In 2012, the State Department launched the Dignity for All program, providing emergency response and assistance to LGBTIQ human rights defenders.
- The Equal Rights in Action fund was launched in 2018 to provide small grants to grassroots organizations.
- The Global LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Democracy and Empowerment (GLIDE) Initiative, a GEF initiative, was launched in 2023 to stimulate the participation and engagement of LGBTIQ people and organizations in democratic spaces and processes.

At about the same time as the launch of the GEF, USAID launched the LGBTI Global Development Partnership, a public-private partnership involving governments, corporate partners, and NGO resource partners. The goals included grantmaking, research, media training, and democratic participation training. In the first five years of the Global Development Partnership, it provided over US\$3 million to 65 organizations in 12 countries, more than 85 percent of which was leveraged from outside the U.S. government.¹⁰ In 2024, the LGBTI Global Development Partnership provided US\$25 million to address the development needs of LGBTIQ communities.¹¹

The approach that USAID has taken to global LGBTIQ funding has been guided by several benchmark policy documents. In 2014, USAID issued an LGBT Vision for Action.¹² In 2023, USAID published its first LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Development Policy.¹³ This was followed, in 2025, with Sectoral Guidance on Integrating LGBTIQ+ Communities into Economic Growth Programming.¹⁴

USAID funding included a number of initiatives, such as the Alliance for Global Equality. The purpose of the Alliance, a five-year (2022–2027) collaboration between Outright International and the Victory Institute, is to build partnerships with private foundations, country-level civil society organizations, and community-based organizations to strengthen the resilience of LGBTIQ movements in 18 countries.¹⁵ The Alliance’s technical assistance and grantmaking were supported by USAID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), with matched private funding from Oak Foundation, Dreilinden, and other donors.

10 NORC, Evaluation, LGBTI Global Development Partnership, rev. 2 (NORC, 2018), on file with Outright International, 2.

11 “Exit Memo: United States Agency for International Development,” (official memorandum, Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, January 2025), on file with Outright International, 26.

12 “USAID LGBT Vision for Action. Promoting and Supporting the Inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Individuals,” United States Agency for International Development, May 2014, on file with Outright International; “Alliance for Global Equality. Fact Sheet,” United States Agency for International Development, https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Alliancefor_Global_Equality_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

13 USAID, LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Development Policy, August 2023, on file with Outright International.

14 USAID, Sectoral Guidance on Integrating LGBTIQ+ Communities into Economic Growth Programming (USAID, 2025), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/USAID-LGBTIQ-Economic-Growth.pdf>.

15 “Outright International and Alliance for Global Equality Renew Quest for LGBTIQ Rights,” Outright International, March 16, 2023, <https://outrightinternational.org/USAID-pressrelease>.

Findings

Findings

Our rapid research suggests that the impact of the loss of U.S. funding on global LGBTIQ organizing is catastrophic. Based on Outright’s decades of experience in global LGBTIQ advocacy, we know that while funding loss hurts all sectors, the impact on LGBTIQ movements around the world is often disproportionately devastating. The U.S. has recognized over the last 15 years that LGBTIQ people are often left behind in government-led human rights, humanitarian, and development initiatives. Unlike activists in many other sectors, when international funding dries up or is nonexistent, many LGBTIQ activists cannot turn to their local governments or local communities for support — indeed, 62 countries around the world criminalize consensual same-sex conduct. In some countries, LGBTIQ people are prohibited by law from appealing to the state or the public for any assistance at all.

US government funding generously filled the gaps on a wide range of issues: economic empowerment, health care, shelter, documentation of human rights violations, humanitarian inclusion, and gender-based violence. Its withdrawal leaves gaping holes in the often fragile support structures for vulnerable communities.

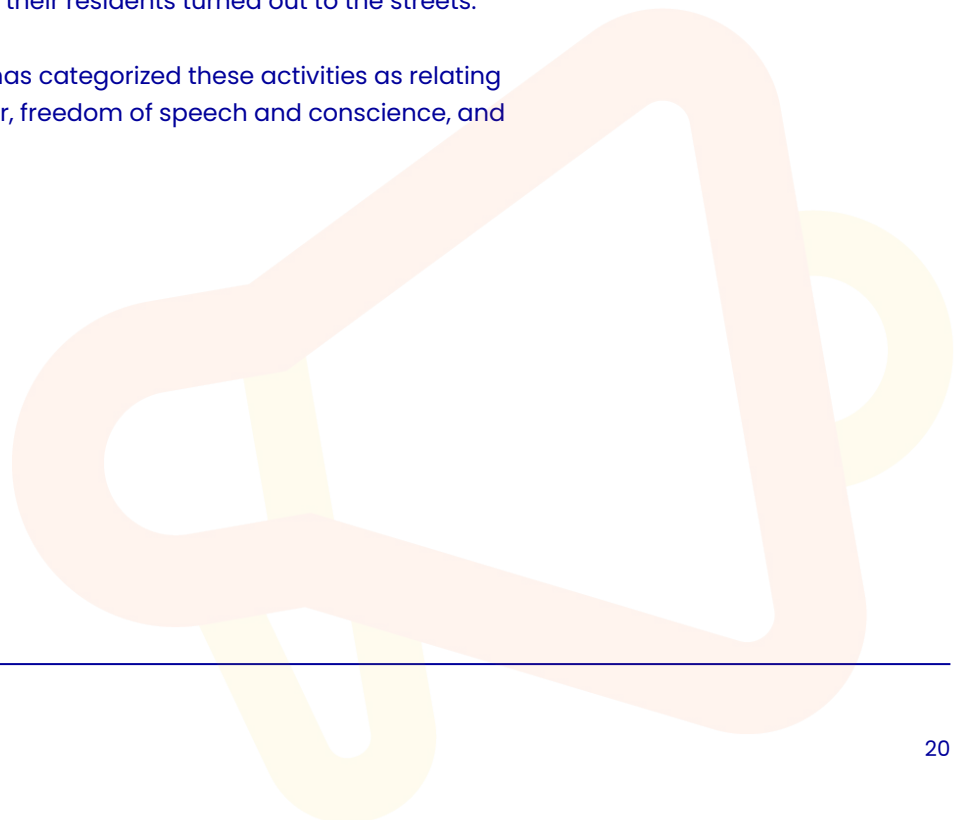
Photo: Person holding transgender flag
looking at the camera
By: Mariano
Source: Adobe Stock
Asset ID#: 1071097090



The 125 initial respondents to Outright’s survey represent 59 UN member states, along with several regional projects involving more than one country. Among them:

- 72 respondents in 35 countries said their organizations have had to lay off staff and/or stop programs entirely.
- 55 respondents in 28 countries and three broader regions reported that their work responding to violence against LGBTIQ people is compromised by the stop-work orders.
- 38 respondents in 16 countries and at least one broader region said that their livelihoods and income-generation work was impacted by the stop-work orders, amounting to thousands of LGBTIQ beneficiaries whose opportunities to escape poverty are now jeopardized.
- 37 respondents in 22 countries said that the orders impacted their work providing mental health care and psychosocial support, while 30 respondents in 14 countries were carrying out medical initiatives, including HIV prevention and treatment, that have been suspended or curtailed.
- 30 respondents in 17 countries and three regions said that the orders impacted their ability to provide legal aid to LGBTIQ people.
- 20 respondents in at least eight countries reported that they will struggle to continue work supporting humanitarian assistance for LGBTIQ people in conflict and crisis settings without U.S. funding.
- 17 respondents in 12 countries and three regions relied on U.S. funding to document human rights violations, work that will be challenging to continue without support.
- 13 respondents in nine countries and one region had used U.S. funds to provide emergency shelter to homeless or displaced LGBTIQ people. In several cases, shelters have closed, their residents turned out to the streets.

For the purposes of this report, Outright has categorized these activities as relating to freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of speech and conscience, and freedom to live with dignity.



Freedom from Want

An enduring principle of American development assistance has been that the U.S. and the world benefit when no one is arbitrarily denied access to economic opportunity. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in describing “freedom from want,” noted that “freedom cannot exist without economic security.” He promoted international cooperation to address poverty and material deprivation in the form of “economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peace time life for its inhabitants.”¹⁶ Only in recent decades were LGBTIQ people included in those economic understandings. Now, the U.S. aid freeze has cut off many LGBTIQ people’s pathways to economic empowerment and healthy lives.

Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination can cripple LGBTIQ people’s life chances from childhood: LGBTIQ people face bullying and discrimination in school, rejection from families, and discrimination in the job market and in accessing housing, often leaving them at the margins of society. The international development sector had only begun to grapple with the extent of LGBTIQ economic marginalization in recent years, investing in programming that wrapped LGBTIQ people into the economic mainstream by addressing these challenges holistically. The termination of U.S. funding will not only impair the livelihoods of LGBTIQ people – it will also stunt a growing global effort to address poverty and unemployment faced by LGBTIQ in low and middle-income countries. It has also jeopardized LGBTIQ people’s access to physical and mental health services and other social services.

The programming of many organizations that focus on economic well-being is multifold, and its abrupt cancellation leaves LGBTIQ people in a state of utter abandonment. The scale of economic “want” that developed overnight as a result of the funding freeze is staggering. A major LGBTIQ organization in a Latin American country informed Outright that as a result of the freeze, “6000 people won’t have access to services,” including “medical and psychological services, legal assistance, [and provision of] livelihood tools.”¹⁷ An organization in South Asia said it had to lay off 100 staff engaged in livelihoods, health, and human rights programming and that 20,000 people would lose access to services.¹⁸

The following subsections zero in on two aspects of the Freedom from Want: economic livelihoods and the right to health.

¹⁶ “Freedom from Want,” Carnegie Council for International Affairs, accessed February 11, 2025, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/explore-engage/classroom-resources/lesson-plan-ideas-film-reviews-syllabi-and-more/fourfreedoms/5226>.

¹⁷ Response number withheld at respondent’s request, English survey.

¹⁸ Presentation by a representative of an organization in South Asia, name and country withheld, virtual meeting hosted by Outright, February 11, 2025.

A Death Knell for LGBTIQ Livelihoods?

In 2010, a year before the U.S. government initiated programs to fund LGBTIQ issues globally, only a handful of LGBTIQ organizations globally focused on economic inclusion. Global funding for these issues was less than US\$100,000 a year, or 0.17 percent of LGBTIQ funding in the Global South/East.¹⁹ Most foreign funding for LGBTIQ issues was focused on human rights and HIV prevention, treatment, and care.

USAID brought a new development lens to LGBTIQ funding, precipitating a significant shift in global attention to the needs of LGBTIQ people in poverty. Consistent with USAID's mission to address poverty and economic inequality, USAID funding included support for programs that provided direct assistance for LGBTIQ people seeking economic advancement. This programming recognized that communities suffering from violence and discrimination would have better outcomes if they were financially independent. It also recognized that everyone benefits when those on the margins of society can move closer to the center through gainful employment. LGBTIQ livelihoods programs funded by USAID between 2011 and 2024 have included:²⁰

- A labor market analysis to identify employment options for trans people (Cameroon)
- Seed capital for entrepreneurship programs (Colombia, Nigeria, Philippines)
- Training in economic resilience and mental health for cooperative leaders and members (Indonesia)
- Entrepreneurship training (Colombia, Nigeria, Philippines, Suriname)
- Entrepreneurship credit (Pakistan, Ghana)
- Vocational training (Pakistan)
- Job and shelter helpline (North Macedonia)
- Job-seeking skills training (Kiribati, Colombia, Ghana, South Africa)
- Financial literacy (Kenya)

For many LGBTIQ groups taking on this economic empowerment work, it was a first. The breadth and innovation of these projects is striking:

- Teaching food-handling skills (Colombia, Fiji)
- Providing small trades training for those transitioning out of shelters (Cameroon)
- Setting up a business selling traditional dolls (Indonesia)
- Running an agribusiness (Nigeria)
- Setting up beauty salons and teaching management and finance (Philippines)
- Providing computer programming classes for lesbian and bisexual women (Benin)
- Setting up an LGBTIQ-led radio taxi service (India)

¹⁹ Robert Espinoza, A Global Gaze, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Grantmaking in the Global South and East (LGBT Funders, 2010), 14, https://igbtfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/A_Global_Gaze_2010.pdf

²⁰ Information regarding these grants is drawn from Outright International's grants management data.

USAID gave this focus even more visibility and credibility when it issued sectoral guidance—that is, guidance to its own staff, other implementers, and civil society in general—on how to integrate LGBTIQ communities into economic growth programming.²¹ USAID also became a significant supporter of LGBTIQ Chambers of Commerce, supporting their efforts to increase the employment of LGBTIQ people through the training of corporate managers, advocacy for diversity among private businesses, and various other strategies for creating job opportunities. For instance, USAID supported the Cámara de la Diversidad’s certification with the Colombian Ministry of Labor to operate a job application program matching employees and LGBTIQ applicants.²²

Though USAID maintained a dominant funding role, these projects also attracted contributions from other donors, including the private sector. By 2020, combined USAID, corporate, and private funding for the economic inclusion of LGBTIQ persons was roughly US\$2 million, increasing to US\$9 million in 2022.²³

The impact of the potential loss of this funding on LGBTIQ livelihoods is devastating. While other programs focused on supporting livelihoods may resume, even with funding from the U.S. government, many are typically not welcoming to LGBTIQ people. Given USAID’s role of anchoring this work, this sector may not recover, leaving LGBTIQ people around the world in a worsening situation of economic precarity.

For example, an organization in Ukraine that works with internally displaced LGBTIQ people told Outright that U.S. funding allowed it to provide career consultations, professional courses, and psychological support for LGBTIQ people who had lost their jobs due to the ongoing Russian aggression, helping them re-establish their lives in a new part of the country.²⁴ As a result of the freeze, staff will lose their jobs, and the organization will have to shut down these services, depriving displaced Ukrainians of new job opportunities.

In the Caribbean, an organization was working on a project geared towards creating “an agro-processing facility to create sustainable employment for vulnerable and marginalized women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence.”²⁵ With US\$129,000 frozen, the organization “had to stop all payments even to vendors and/or service providers who have already provided the services.”²⁶ As a result, survivors of gender-based violence in search of an economic lifeline may now be unable to extract themselves from violent situations.

21 USAID, Sectoral Guidance on Integrating LGBTIQ+ Communities into Economic Growth Programming (USAID, 2025), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/USAID-LGBTIQ-Economic-Growth.pdf>.

22 Evaluation, LGBTI Global Development Partnership, 13.

23 Global Resources Report 2021/2022, 57.

24 Response 46, English survey.

25 Response 58, English survey.

26 Ibid.

A transgender-focused organization in another Caribbean country was using U.S. funds to help trans people become gainfully employed. It was “creating a database of employers who would be interested in promoting [diversity, equity, and inclusion] in their workspaces, by hiring sexual and gender minorities. The organization reported that trans people in job training courses and those who were just in the process of starting their own businesses were among those affected by the freeze:

The psychosocial programs will be discontinued. The [database] collection will be stopped and remain incomplete. Students who were waiting to start classes this semester can no longer register for classes or pay for the courses. Participants who have started up businesses – or were about to – no longer have access to funding to promote their entrepreneurship.²⁷

The freeze on USAID funding is particularly hard-hitting in regions affected by armed violence and shadow economies. In a South American country impacted by violence, two organizations supporting LGBTIQ people had planned an economic inclusion projects for highly vulnerable individuals, mostly trans migrant women, in two different cities.²⁸ Now completely halted, the projects were meant to provide livelihood opportunities, social empowerment, and entrepreneur training.

The funding freeze has left these vulnerable women with no alternatives but to turn to survival strategies that expose them to further violence and exploitation. The director of one organization told Outright:

It's a grim scenario. We are devastated, trying to keep calm. This aid is being cut, but the needs of the population are still latent and will continue to grow. We are pushing extremely vulnerable people towards violence—drug trafficking, human trafficking, crime. This won't just affect individuals; it will shape this community's future.²⁹

Local authorities are likely to offer little support, deepening the crisis. “Those in power here hate diversity and migrants. They will not step in,” warned the director.³⁰

Organizations in West Africa, where sexual and gender minorities face severe state-sponsored homophobia and transphobia, have also sought to provide livelihood support to LGBTIQ people. One respondent told Outright that their organization had

²⁷ Response 75, English survey.

²⁸ Response 52, English survey; Response 116, English survey.

²⁹ Outright interview, name withheld, virtual, February 5, 2025.

³⁰ Ibid.

*...provided seed funding to program beneficiaries who successfully completed our entrepreneurship training and digital rights workshops. This support enables them to start their individual businesses, empowering them to achieve financial independence and stability... This initiative not only enhances their economic resilience but also strengthens their position within the community, helping to combat stigma and promote acceptance... To hear that these efforts would be abruptly halted was devastating, not just for our team but for the entire community that relies on our support... Many were looking forward to the resources and training we had planned, which were designed to empower them and improve their quality of life. The sudden cessation of these activities has left them feeling abandoned and vulnerable, exacerbating the discrimination and stigma they already face.*³²

In one Southeast Asian country LGBTIQ people do not face criminalization, but no laws protect them from discrimination in the education sector or employment. U.S. government funds have sought to combat the resultant economic precarity through both livelihoods and workplace equality initiatives. The work was effective. One activist told Outright that their organization had been “achieving cross-movement building with these funds and finding more allies from various sectors and thematic areas to advance truly inclusive development.”³³ That work has ground to a halt. A project that relied on U.S. grants to establish collaborations with labor unions and corporate employee resource groups, resulting in the development of campaigns for LGBTIQ workplace equality, is now facing challenges in retaining staff. As a result, they fear that discrimination in the workplace will intensify.³⁴

Groups that face specific vulnerabilities, such as older LGBTIQ persons, are among those most likely to suffer as a result of the program shutdowns. An organization that builds the livelihood skills of older LGBTIQ persons in Southeast Asia told Outright it would be unable to provide any salaries until it gets new funding. The funding freeze forced it to use its little savings to keep its office space and continue providing some services.³⁵

Deprivation of Health

As the World Health Organization has acknowledged,

*LGBTQI+ people... are less likely to access health services and engage with health care workers due to stigma and discrimination, resulting in adverse physical and mental health outcomes. They can also experience human rights violations, including violence, torture, criminalization, involuntary medical procedures, and discrimination. In addition, they can face denial of care, discriminatory attitudes, and inappropriate pathologizing in health care settings based on their SOGIESC [sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics].*³⁶

³² Response 71, English survey.

³³ Response 61, English survey.

³⁴ Response 111, English survey.

³⁵ Response 114, English survey.

³⁶ “Improving LGBTIQ+ health and well-being with consideration for SOGIESC,” World Health Organization, accessed February 11, 2025, <https://www.who.int/activities/improving-lgbtqi-health-and-well-being-with-consideration-for-sogiesc>.

In countries where health care systems discriminate against LGBTIQ persons or do not provide LGBTIQ-inclusive care, LGBTIQ organizations that fill such critical gaps have had to halt or scale down their operations.

For example, in Uganda, LGBTIQ people cannot safely seek health services in government hospitals as a result of the draconian Anti-Homosexuality Act. Community-based clinics were often their only source of care. A Ugandan organization providing “free quality health services” relied on U.S. funding to make their office rent, pay six staff members, and provide critical health care services.³⁶ Now, in addition to the inability to care for target populations, “our landlord is chasing us out of his building.”³⁷

In another country in sub-Saharan Africa where discrimination in mainstream health care facilities necessitates inclusive facilities for sexual and gender minorities, due to the freeze, an LGBTIQ organization is “unable to provide service as our wellness center has closed down. Staff have been laid off as we won’t be able to pay the staff costs...There is fear in the community of what will happen when they cannot access services from the general clinic.”³⁸

Intersex people are particularly vulnerable not only to discrimination but also to medical violence in the health sector. Intersex people are routinely subjected to intersex genital mutilation as infants or young children to force their bodies to conform to a binary understanding of sex. A nascent movement has made great strides in recent years to address medical harm and social stigma against intersex people, but its progress is now at risk. An organization that provides medicine and other forms of support to intersex persons who underwent intersex genital mutilation in West Africa has “canceled plans to extend medical support we provide to our community.”³⁹ Meanwhile, an organization defending the rights of intersex people in another West African country faces the risk of “total shut down of the organization if we do not urgently find alternatives.”⁴⁰

Numerous LGBTIQ organizations have received support for health programming for a decade or more through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an initiative launched by former U.S. President George W. Bush in 2003, which is largely implemented by USAID and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). For two decades, PEPFAR received bipartisan support and was credited with saving more than 26 million lives.⁴¹ That work is now in peril.

In a West African country, a PEPFAR-funded organization said it lost US\$60,000 in funding for HIV care and treatment. Overnight, community health workers were left without jobs, and services were at risk. A respondent reported:

36 Response 67, English survey.

37 Ibid.

38 Response 36, English survey.

39 Response 118, English survey.

40 Response 76, English survey.

41 “The United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief,” U.S. Department of State, accessed February 11, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/pepfar>.

If funding for LGBTIQ+ health programs is cut off entirely, the communities we exist to support will not survive the ripple effects of this crisis. Without [our] clinics, many will be forced to seek care at general hospitals, where they risk stigma, discrimination, and even exposure to violence. The fear of being outed, harassed, or denied care will discourage many from accessing life-saving medication.

Other organizations working in the HIV prevention and treatment space and serving key populations, including men who have sex with men, transgender people, and sex workers, have also been affected. An organization in Southern Africa that conducts HIV education for key populations and runs stigma reduction programs told Outright that it had been partially funded by PEPFAR. With U.S. support, the organization had made striking gains in a criminalizing context; it reported: “We managed to bring different stakeholders and government ministries, including the presidential office, to understand [sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics] through the support of PEPFAR.” As a result of the U.S. funding freeze, the respondent said, “we were forced to close and stop operations to do with PEPFAR” and to lay off 24 staff members; in addition, most of the nurses the organization had trained, who were working at HIV clinics funded by USAID, had also lost their jobs.⁴³

An organization in another Southern African country that provides health care and advocacy services for the protection of transgender people reported that before they obtained U.S. funding,

...[T]here was no programming for trans and gender-diverse persons [in the country]. The coming of [the fund] provided a leeway for trans programming . Since 2018, [our country] has reached to thousands [of] transgender women with HIV interventions... Beyond the [fund], partners continued to implement activities through [another fund], where among other interventions, was to create an enabling environment for trans people to access services. We conducted [sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics] trainings to raise awareness on [the] existence of LGBTIQ persons.⁴⁴

Another organization in the same region has lost access to “over \$200,000” used to support policy advocacy, sexual and reproductive health services, and addressing the HIV epidemic. The respondent shared that, among their target beneficiaries, there is an ongoing perception that the freeze is the staff’s fault for associating with LGBTIQ associations, causing “general populations” who also need these services to have no access, showing the bias against LGBTIQ people in the country.⁴⁵ Consequently,

42 Response 89, English survey.

43 Response 23, English survey.

44 Response 142, English survey.

45 Response 149, English survey.

Our office has been closed. [We] fear that Key Populations who were accessing HIV drugs through our peer-led approach might default on treatment and eventually have devastating impacts on their well-being... Recovery will not be easy. Our dependency on foreign aid has existed for many years.⁴⁶

While the majority of responses that Outright received related to HIV and health impacts on LGBTIQ people were from sub-Saharan Africa, the freeze has also disrupted essential health care services for LGBTIQ migrants in South America leaving many without medical and psychological support. Most critically, access to HIV medication has been interrupted, putting lives at serious risk.⁴⁷

Freedom from Fear

“We are also afraid that this move will embolden and inspire other far-right governments to follow a similar path, further jeopardizing LGBTQI+ rights and advocacy efforts globally.”

– Activist from Southeast Asia⁴⁸

“[There will be] deaths, more intolerance against LGBTIQ persons, and emboldened actions such as further criminalization and arrests.”

– Activist from East Africa⁴⁹

LGBTIQ civil society organizations engage in crucial work protecting people from violence driven by prejudices around sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics. This work ranges from providing emergency shelter to combating hate crimes to documenting human rights violations. For nearly 15 years, with varying levels of direct engagement, the U.S. government has supported that work. In its 2021 report, the Global Equality Fund, launched by the U.S. in 2011 and housed within the State Department, made no bones about the urgency of addressing violations of LGBTIQ people’s human rights. “LGBTQI+ communities continue to live with unacceptable violence and discrimination,” wrote former Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. “Countries are stronger when all people – regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics – are fully recognized as free and equal members of their society.”⁵⁰ The U.S. and other members of the Global Equality Fund committed to supporting LGBTIQ movements through various measures to address human rights violations, including the establishment of the Dignity for All program, which provided emergency support to LGBTIQ human rights defenders at risk. Now, with this crucial human rights vehicle upended, millions of people are left at risk of grave rights violations and life-threatening violence.

46 Ibid.

47 Outright interview name withheld, virtual, February 5, 2025.

48 Response 27, English survey.

49 Response 137, English survey.

50 Global Equality Fund 2021, 2.

Imperiling Peace and Security

Ukraine was one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid in 2024, and some of that assistance reached LGBTIQ people who were at heightened risk of violence as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion.

One Ukrainian organization worked specifically on issues impacting LGBTIQ soldiers and veterans. The U.S. government froze US\$100,000 of grants to this group. The organization reported to Outright that “without legal and psychological help to members of our LGBTIQ+ veteran community, their lives and security are at risk.”⁵¹ Among the activities that had to be halted was a “medical fund for wounded LGBTQ+ veterans in need.”⁵² Prior to the order to stop work, the organization’s “unique community opened doors to [advocacy for non-discrimination laws] in the Parliament in time of war. Without [our organization’s] existence and stable function, it would be very hard to tackle homophobia in times of militarization of society.”⁵³

Another LGBTIQ organization in Ukraine was able to use U.S. government funds for safe housing, protection from violence, and support groups. It now has 90% of its funding frozen—funding that ensured “the operation of a safe space for LGBTIQ+ people,” used for security and self-defense training, mental health care, and creating “a safe place to stay during power outages [with] centralized heating, charging phones and gadgets, warming up and getting a hot drink, etc.”⁵⁴

In Myanmar, where a military dictatorship has been intensifying the crackdown on LGBTIQ and pro-democracy activists, the withdrawal of U.S. assistance means the abandonment of torture survivors. U.S. funding allowed an organization to provide “legal aid services for LGBTQ individuals who were arbitrarily arrested and tortured” as well as “legal aid, psychosocial support and emergency assistance for LGBTQ individuals facing threats and displacement.”⁵⁵ The organization also documented human rights violations. “Without funding,” its representative wrote, “we are unable to provide emergency assistance to those facing immediate threats, forcing many to navigate dangerous situations alone.”⁵⁶

In a country experiencing armed conflict in Africa, an activist shared the ways that U.S. funds had saved lives:

*One of the most urgent services we provided was emergency legal and medical support, both inside [our country] and for those who had fled to neighboring countries. [We] facilitate the safe relocation of at-risk LGBTIQ+ individuals and refugees, ensuring they could escape immediate threats to their safety.*⁵⁷

51 Response 48, English survey.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Response 55, English survey.

55 Response 124, English survey.

56 Ibid.

57 Outright interview, activist, name withheld, virtual, February 10, 2025.

She added:

*This freeze does not just impact funding—it actively endangers lives, leaving one of the most at-risk communities without any support or protection in an already bad situation.*⁵⁸

Another respondent notes that in humanitarian contexts, the abrupt halt of services can leave vulnerable communities feeling particularly betrayed. When news of the freeze hit, a university program was embarking on a pioneering research initiative on LGBTIQ refugee children and youth's protection and mental health needs in four countries. A stop-work order forced one researcher conducting interviews in-country to "fly home the same day or risk paying out of pocket for her travel expenses."⁵⁹ The respondent felt their program had broken the trust of such a vulnerable group:

*In our work with LGBTIQ+ refugee youth, young people have repeatedly told us that they feel unseen and abandoned. Many told us through tears that our research was the first time anyone has held space for them in their fullness and listened to their stories, needs, concerns, and dreams. Being forced to end this work feels like abandoning them yet again. Meanwhile, terminating this research means that there will continue to be no meaningful research with LGBTIQ+ refugee youth on this topic for some time, and that service providers attempting to serve this population in humanitarian settings will continue to do so without guidance, education, or support on how to do this work safely and meaningfully.*⁶⁰

Closing Down Emergency Shelter and Assistance

Uganda passed the world's harshest anti-LGBTQ law in 2023. The Anti-Homosexuality Act subjects LGBTQ people to the death penalty for some consensual same-sex sexual acts. The administration of former U.S. president Joe Biden fought hard to use diplomacy to prevent its passage and to mitigate its impact on queer Ugandans' lives.

The passage of the law was accompanied by an uptick in vigilante violence along with an increased risk of arrest and torture at the hands of state law enforcement officials. U.S. government funding helped Ugandan organizations keep people safe, including those who had to flee their homes due to violent attacks and death threats. An organization in rural Uganda told Outright that vulnerable community members will now be unprotected from violence: "It has become extremely difficult to continue offering the much-needed emergency security to affected community members, hence compromising their safety and security."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Response 117, English survey.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Response 31, English survey.

Malawi is another country that criminalizes same-sex intimacy. Its Supreme Court recently ruled against petitioners seeking to overturn its “unnatural offenses law.”⁶² There, an organization ran a safe house to provide temporary shelter to homeless lesbian, bisexual, trans, and intersex women who were facing “evictions by parents and landlords” or “high levels of violence or are at risk in their communities.”⁶³ The organization has been forced to turn people out onto the streets:

*Due to the funding cut, we were forced to close one of our safe houses, keeping 15 LBTI people at risk. This decision means that individuals who relied on this safe space have to leave, even though many of them are not yet secure or found a secure space in other environments. This decision puts these individuals at further risk and undermines the immediate protection we strive to provide for our beneficiaries.*⁶⁴

An organization in a South American country provides shelter to trans women and girls who are homeless, migrants, or victims of violence and trafficking. It lost 100% of its funding. Its director explained that the organization can no longer afford to cover the house’s expenses or continue providing meals. As a result, she said, “This is forcing many trans women back into sex work under extremely precarious conditions just to survive.”⁶⁵

Abandoning Gender-Based Violence Survivors

LGBTIQ people face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence due to the enforcement of rigid gender norms, targeted discrimination, and systemic barriers to protection and support. The interruption in services will put LGBTIQ victims of gender-based violence in all regions further at risk.

An organization in Southeast Asia providing comprehensive support services to LGBTIQ survivors of gender-based violence and legal assistance to LGBTIQ persons feared that:

*With mental health services and crisis support suspended, individuals who experience domestic violence, [sexual and gender-based violence], or discrimination in healthcare settings now have nowhere to turn, exacerbating their vulnerability.*⁶⁶

In West Africa, an organization relied on U.S. funding to provide legal aid and emergency assistance to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. A respondent told Outright that these programs had been suspended and that “our organization will shut down if we don’t get alternative sources of funding for operations.”⁶⁷

62 Michelle Yesudas, Thiruna Naidoo, and Neela Ghoshal, “Breakthroughs and the Bench: What We Can Learn From Last Year’s Rulings on Queer Rights in Ghana, Malawi, and Namibia,” Outright International, January 23, 2025, <https://outrightinternational.org/insights/breakthroughs-and-bench-what-we-can-learn-last-years-rulings-queer-rights-ghana-malawi-and-namibia>.

63 Response 146, English survey.

64 Ibid.

65 Outright interview, names withheld, virtual, February 6, 2025.

66 Response 103, English survey.

67 Response 74, English survey.

Emboldening Human Rights Violators

In an Asian country that criminalizes both same-sex intimacy and transgender identities, an LGBTIQ organization that provides legal aid has had its core and operational funding frozen. As a result,

*Our inability to monitor, document, and report human rights violations could lead to reduced visibility and diminished accountability for state actors and institutions responsible for abuses. This lack of oversight may embolden perpetrators, increasing the frequency and severity of violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals.*⁶⁸

A group in South Asia providing "emergency assistance to individuals facing security threats or displacement" to trans and gender nonconforming persons was forced to scale back on essential services.⁶⁹ The respondent from the organization added, "The freeze has further complicated our efforts to provide necessary legal and medical support, potentially leaving communities more exposed to violence, discrimination, and human rights violations."⁷⁰

The funding cut takes place in a context in which many countries have seen increased violence against LGBTIQ people, including murders. In Colombia, a respondent observed that "The increase in murders against LGBTIQ people is on the rise, with a total of 23 people nationwide. We are concerned that the closure of actions [to support LGBTIQ people] will further enhance violence."⁷¹

Ceding Space to Russia

A small queer feminist organization filling a critical information and rights-awareness gap in the Caucasus region told Outright it was concerned that the U.S. back out on aid would pave the way for harmful Russian influence:

*We expect to see a rise in homophobic narratives, as the lack of financial support will hinder efforts to combat misinformation and raise awareness. This could also lead to an increase in hate speech and hate crimes. On a regional level, we're also concerned that the influence of Russia will grow stronger, especially as there will be fewer organizations and voices challenging that power. With less resistance and fewer alternatives, the space for LGBTIQ+ rights and gender equality will shrink, making it harder to push back against harmful policies and practices that threaten our communities.*⁷²

This was also affirmed by an organization in Ukraine documenting violence against LGBTIQ persons in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion. "Ceasing funding of such a work would undermine these long-lasting efforts and strengthen Russian influence both in Ukraine and worldwide," its representative warned.⁷³

68 Response 27, English survey.

69 Response 104, English survey.

70 Ibid.

71 Response 52, English survey.

72 Response 140, English survey.

73 Response 125, English survey.

Freedom of Speech and Conscience

Originally framed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as two distinct freedoms—the freedom of speech and the freedom of worship—Outright understands a third principle of U.S. development assistance to be rooted in the protection of expressive and associative freedoms. All people, including LGBTIQ people, should have the freedom to practice and express their beliefs, including in association with others. Outright has long documented how LGBTIQ people are routinely deprived of the rights to freedom of association, assembly, and expression, including when governments forbid LGBTIQ organizations from legally registering, ban LGBTIQ advocacy, and shut down Pride events.⁷⁴ Successive U.S. governments from both major political parties have defended these rights until the present.

In an African country impacted by armed conflict, U.S. support had contributed to LGBTIQ activists' advocacy efforts to ensure adequate humanitarian responses. An activist interviewed by Outright said,

*The freeze has silenced critical work that aimed to push for policy change and protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals, both regionally and internationally. Given [our] current war and humanitarian crisis, this lack of advocacy means that LGBTIQ+ voices are being excluded from urgent humanitarian discussions, further marginalizing an already vulnerable community.*⁷⁵

In South Africa, an organization combatted discrimination against LGBTIQ populations, particularly transgender and intersex people, by engaging with their parents and families on LGBTIQ diversity and equipping these groups “to be public advocates for the dignity, equality and social inclusion of their loved ones.”⁷⁷ Non-discrimination is a fundamental human rights principle that applies to all individuals, yet the directive to stop work means that they cannot continue this work to “eliminate discrimination, hate, and violence that is directed to LGBTIQ+ people from homes, in schools, in churches, and other spaces.”⁷⁸

Working to run an independent media platform that provides positive coverage of LGBTIQ people and issues in East Asia, a small organization relies on foreign funding because “our local government has little interest in LGBTQI issues.”⁷⁹ The organization “engages in media advocacy by producing news reports, feature articles, and an LGBTQI issues database to enhance visibility and influence,” along with commentaries on social justice issues from an LGBTIQ perspective.⁸⁰ The respondent explained further that:

⁷⁴ Outright International, *The Global State of LGBTIQ Organizing: The Right to Register and the Freedom to Operate 2023*, September 14, 2023, <https://outrightinternational.org/right-to-register2023>; Outright International, *Beyond the Rainbows and Glitter: Pride Around the World in 2023*, June 10, 2024, <https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/beyond-rainbows-and-glitter-pride-around-world-2023>.

⁷⁵ Outright interview with an activist from Sudan, virtual, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁶ Response 147, English survey.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Response 136, English survey.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

As an organization with a relatively long history in the local community, our closure would be a significant blow to local activism, leaving young activists with fewer opportunities for growth and experience... Many LGBTIQ organizations, especially those that are non-project-based, non-service-based, or not directly related to LGBTIQ survival, will close down. Activism will also become less diverse and creative than it has been in the past.⁸⁰

An organization working in the Southwest Asia and Northern Africa (SWANA) region shared that they published research reflecting “the lived experiences of queer individuals in this region, as well as those in exile. Sometimes, we write reports about nationwide movements or structural shifts that demand for change and provide recommendations.”⁸¹ This group created a safe space for queer people experiencing persistent hostility to host discussions and have cultural events. However, with US\$150,000 frozen and limited hope of gaining other resources, they will resort to “either temporary volunteer-based work or the complete shutdown of our work. This will depend on whether we are able to secure funding from other sources.”⁸² Such a drastic loss will leave many at increased risk to their lives, health, well-being, and the enjoyment of other human rights.

In the Pacific, an organization utilized funding to protect the right to freedom of expression by organizing a Pride march, sports games for the visibility of LBQ women, and advocacy on the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities. Pride events are crucial for marginalized populations to advocate for rights protection, resist oppressive regimes, connect communities, and create public awareness. Its representative stated that the freeze would cause them to shut down their organization and “will increase more stigma, violence and cyberbullying for our LGBTIQ individuals.”⁸³

A Southeast Asian organization had U.S. government funding to support Pride events, advocacy for marriage equality, and advocacy to counter conversion practices and non-consensual medical interventions on intersex people, among others.⁸⁴ The freeze order means that 95% of their funding has been frozen and “that USG has refused to reimburse our organization for work performed prior to the freeze, resulting in staff being laid off without January pay.”⁸⁵

The freezing of funds has had a direct impact on the promotion of LGBTIQ people’s political rights. In Colombia, Caribe Afirmativo has seen its operations affected by 37%, leaving fourteen workers in uncertainty and significantly impacting two key areas: urban mobility and political advocacy. All political advocacy had to be suspended, leading to two direct negative consequences. The first is the closure of the political leadership school, which aimed to train fifty LGBTIQ politicians to run for elected national offices in next year’s elections. The second is the termination of advocacy efforts with openly LGBTIQ parliamentarians in the Colombian Congress — just as debates on legislating to eradicate conversion practices and to advance legal gender recognition are set to begin in March. The freeze has also impacted Caribe Afirmativo’s electoral observation campaign Voto por la Igualdad (“Vote for Equality”).⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Response 143, English survey.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Response 120, English survey.

⁸⁴ Response 145, English survey.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Outright interview, virtual, February 6, 2025.

Freedom to Live with Dignity

Governments and international institutions committed to global LGBTIQ equality have recognized that the ability to be oneself – and to live free from stigma and repression – is a matter of human dignity. A commitment to dignity requires the decriminalization of consensual same-sex intimacy and gender nonconformity, the advancement of legal gender recognition, and the enactment of policies that contribute to equal treatment. But the U.S. government has now abdicated its longtime commitment to the dignity of LGBTIQ people.

The process of suspending aid, in itself, was an affront to dignity. An activist from South America, whose organization provided food assistance, legal aid, psychological support, and health care services for transgender women, told Outright, “The funding freeze felt like a punch in the face.”⁸⁷

Activists in two countries where petitioners are seeking to overturn colonial laws prohibiting “unnatural offenses” through the courts, had hoped that U.S. funding would bolster their advocacy to end criminalization, eventually contributing toward legal victories.⁸⁸ In another country that recently decriminalized same-sex intimacy, USAID funding had contributed to essential work to successfully reverse colonial-era laws and educate the public about the importance of decriminalization:

*The USAID fund was the first time [our organization] received a grant to do advocacy work. We have been operating since 2021, and this was the first time we had any funds whatsoever to do our campaigns. This has helped us change hearts and minds and garner support for the decriminalization of the sodomy law. This never promoted homosexuality but helped us create an inclusive society. Now, our activists have to do this work unpaid.*⁸⁹

In Southeast Asia, a respondent observed that the U.S. pullout was likely to entrench discrimination and hamper access to justice:

*A key long-term impact will be the erosion of legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals. With reduced capacity to provide legal aid and advocacy, fewer individuals will have access to the justice system to defend their rights. As discriminatory laws remain unchallenged, the legal environment will become increasingly hostile, perpetuating systemic oppression...Policy change, especially in contexts where LGBTQI+ identities are criminalized, requires sustained, long-term advocacy. The freeze will limit our ability to engage policymakers, advocate for legal reforms, and challenge human rights violations. As a result, legislative gains may be delayed or stalled, and declining political will could leave discriminatory laws and policies intact for years to come.*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Outright interview, virtual, February 6, 2025.

⁸⁸ Responses 86 and 146, English survey.

⁸⁹ Response 83, English survey.

⁹⁰ Response 27, English survey.

Numerous programs supported by U.S. government funding advanced LGBTIQ people's dignity through the provision of affirming mental health care and psychosocial support. The executive director of an LGBTIQ rights organization in Europe stated that as a result of the U.S. funding freeze, a new project seeking to uphold trans people's dignity ground to a halt before it could even begin:

Trans people did not receive psychological help: we did not even have time to start individual consultations for people, and four online self-help groups were also canceled, which are group work in different regions for trans people.

Trans people are in a difficult psychological state, there is currently a double marginalization of our community. [now] there is no opportunity to get work in projects with US money, [and] it is impossible to receive psychological support.⁹¹

A director at a Caribbean organization defending the rights of transgender and gender-diverse people explained:

Trans people are barely existing on the margins of society, and even further removed from income-making opportunities. A horrible societal underbelly marked by poverty, violence, discrimination, stigma, and minority stress creates a less-than-humane existence for most trans people. Our project was a pilot and intended to be the first of many to improve the lived experiences of trans people through economic viability. We have many talented persons in the community who are creative and imaginative and need support and a means to turn their talents into financial sustainability. Stigma, discrimination, homelessness, and bullying have cheated this community out of opportunities to live life with access to the basic resources of the average citizen. This program was developed with the ambition to right that wrong and provide our brothers and sisters with a chance, an opportunity to be better-contributing members of society to earn a sense of accomplishment and self-respect. More than funding has been taken away from us. Hope, belief, and a chance to pursue happiness was snatched away.⁹²

91 Response 70, English survey.

92 Response 75, English survey.

Creating the Conditions to Exercise All Freedoms

“It will be difficult for the LGBTIQ community to breathe.”

– Activist in rural Uganda⁹³

The recent suspension of U.S. international aid deepens an ongoing shift away from multilateralism and toward growing national isolation. This retreat reduces international support for democratic values and creates spaces for both authoritarian regimes and fragile democracies to erode checks and balances, restrict civic space, and curtail fundamental rights under the guise of democratic governance. The consequences of this shift are particularly severe for marginalized communities, including LGBTIQ people, whose ability to fully exercise their citizenship often depends on international support for human rights protections. As the U.S. pulls back from global engagement, it weakens broader efforts to uphold democratic principles, leaving a void that non-democratic actors can exploit to reshape governance norms in ways that serve their own interests.

Across the world, LGBTIQ organizations have been part of movements defending democratic gains from the rise of authoritarianism and advocating for inclusive civic spaces. An organization in Europe has been using U.S. funding to engage political parties and elected officials on LGBTIQ issues and encourage LGBTIQ persons to actively participate in the 2025 parliamentary elections. This election comes at a key moment as the country is in the process of negotiating its accession to the European Union. “This project was a perfect example of democracy in action, where groups of all positions were able to make their voices heard and debate in public,” a representative of the organization told Outright.⁹⁴

However, since the freeze, the organization has had to stop implementing one of its main projects. The freeze has not only interrupted their work on inclusive democracy but may have also emboldened anti-democratic forces as right-wing media and political figures were quick to celebrate the funding freeze and President Trump’s anti-LGBTIQ executive orders. The right-wing opposition, driven by the same ideological agenda, reflected these positions in the draft law they recently presented in parliament. The organization’s representative told Outright that the freezing of funds not only affects concrete projects in various areas of the country but also weakens confidence in the United States as a traditional partner. This is critical because in the country’s democratization process, the United States has been seen as a reference for democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and the promotion of human rights. “The US has been a solid partner of [our country’s] democratization efforts since the early 1990s, and this felt much worse than a betrayal of the long-lasting partnership,” the representative said.⁹⁵

93 Response 31, English survey.

94 Outright International interview, virtual, February 10, 2025.

95 Response 129, English survey.

A Declining Global Commitment to Human Rights

LGBTIQ activists and service providers around the world fear the further implications of a declining commitment to human rights, fueled by the U.S. administration and other anti-rights and anti-democratic actors around the world. The representative of an organization in Ukraine shared,

...[T]here are frightening trends in the United States that diversity and inclusion are no longer a priority and are even prohibited. We can't understand what to fight for and who will support us in this....We are worried that there will be a rollback in human rights, and in particular in our fight for LGBT rights and civil partnerships. As now it is easy for opponents, especially among politicians, to manipulate the US position.⁹⁶

Tamara Adrián is a Venezuelan activist and the first trans woman to be a parliamentarian in Latin America. She told Outright that the funding freeze, along with the rhetoric that has been fueled against civil society organizations, helps to legitimize anti-rights positions in Venezuela:

In Venezuela, measures against LGBT people are increasing. Not only is the identity of trans people or same-sex couples not recognized but there are also limitations on civil society organizations. Today, it is not possible to register an NGO for LGBT rights issues in Venezuela because the registrar prevents you from doing so. Most LGBT collectives do not have legal status, and this makes it very difficult to get funding from outside. So, in this context, it serves the Venezuelan government very well that there is a government like the American taking these policies.⁹⁷

The representative of a large service provision and advocacy organization in East Africa said:

In one fell swoop, the diabolical side of humanity and all it presents/represents has not only been reawakened but has been exponentially empowered to wreak unprecedented havoc and devastation on everything that it is not. Apt reference points for what the future holds can be found in any/all historical records of religious crusades, tyranny, genocide, and 'witch-hunting.'⁹⁸

Noting that the stop-work order signifies the U.S. Government's retraction of support for human rights, especially minority people's rights, a respondent in Uganda foresees that:

96 Response 46, English survey.

97 Outright interview with Tamara Adrián, virtual, February 9, 2025.

98 Response 28, English survey.

*We are bound to see more harmful laws passed by African states because now the US is clear, and (as if) it encourages countries to handle their affairs without interference. More trouble ahead. The US has been a strong ally in challenging the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 and in highlighting its dangers through these high-level dialogues and trainings. With the support gone, it will be difficult for the LGBTIQ+ community to breathe.*⁹⁹

A Colombian activist shared his concern about the “cascading effect” that the funding freeze could generate. He mentioned that he has already received messages from donors in other countries who are suspending projects or requesting their reevaluation. Likewise, women’s organizations that work on human mobility issues have told him that their donors have asked to ensure that LGBTIQ issues are not explicitly mentioned in their projects.¹⁰⁰

Another organization in Colombia providing livelihood, psychosocial support, and other services to LGBTIQ people and migrants reported that, following the freeze, “Conservative and far-right politicians feel more comfortable with hate speech” against LGBTIQ people.¹⁰¹

The sentiment that trans people, in particular, face a rollback in rights was widely shared. According to an organization focused on trans women’s rights and safety in Latin America, “With the anti-trans discourse at a global level, violence, stigma, and discrimination against trans women will increase.”¹⁰²

An activist in Peru summed up the sense of imminent regression:

*We feel like we’re in danger as if we were back in the 1980s. It feels like, in just a few days, we’ve been pushed 40 years backward.*¹⁰³

99 Response 31, English survey.

100 Outright interview, virtual, 6 February 2025.

101 Response 133, English survey.

102 Response 139, English survey.

103 Outright interview, virtual, February 6, 2025.

Personal Impacts on Organizations and Individuals

The catastrophic impact of the foreign assistance freeze and subsequent award terminations on individuals and organizations will be difficult to quantify in the months ahead. Activists shared some of the ways in which they and their organizations have been personally affected thus far.

Some of them described financial hits. An organization in South Asia that provided both skills training and legal awareness programs faced a freeze of \$152,000 in U.S. grants. Its executive director told Outright that they had to pay staff salaries for two months out of their own pocket:

I've been forced to sell personal belongings to ensure that our staff are paid for both this month and their notice period. Despite receiving unsatisfactory responses, we can't abandon our people and let them suffer as we have.¹⁰⁴

A small non-profit organization in the SWANA region reported its request for reimbursement for four months of expenses incurred prior to the freeze, which were all in accordance with a signed contract, remains pending. The organization fears it will have to carry this debt, which it cannot afford.¹⁰⁵

Many other organizations hit by the freeze are equally small and grassroots, without alternative sources of income or extra cash on hand. A representative of an organization in Latin America pointed out: "We are not large organizations with multiple projects running at the same time. We are self-managed grassroots groups, fighting for the survival of many of our community members."¹⁰⁶

A West African organization that promoted LGBTIQ livelihoods and income generation and also advocated for equal rights shared a laundry list of impacts for its staff and the broader community it served:

The uncertainty surrounding [staff members'] employment status has created a tense atmosphere within our organization as we navigate the legal complexities and emotional fallout of this situation... The aid freeze has severely impacted the safety, health, and well-being of our staff, partners, and the LGBTIQ+ communities we serve. With critical support systems halted, many individuals now face heightened risks of violence and harassment, feeling isolated and vulnerable without access to essential legal and protective services. Our cessation of health-related programs has compromised healthcare access, increasing risks of physical and mental health deterioration among already marginalized individuals. The emotional toll on our staff and community is profound, leading to anxiety and despair, while our advocacy momentum for LGBTIQ+ rights risks being lost and further exacerbating discrimination and marginalization. This situation underscores the precarious nature of rights and support for LGBTIQ+ individuals in the absence of sustained funding and advocacy.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Response 68, English survey.

¹⁰⁵ Response 108, English survey.

¹⁰⁶ Outright interview with Miluska Luzkiños and Alejandra Fang, virtual, February 6, 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Response 71, English survey.

A Russian diaspora-based organization that “monitors and researches human rights violations, provides legal aid to those persecuted or facing risks, raises awareness on LGBTQ+ issues and needs, advocates for change,” and publishes materials and reports on LGBTQ people’s rights, issues, and experiences has stated that it is catastrophic to be left without this support:

The team is now under extreme stress as no one knows what’s going to happen to them and their programs’ beneficiaries. Also, we can see that the whole sector is in great stress, which makes it a bit more challenging to continue partnerships and implement joint activities... We are truly concerned that there will be dramatically negative trends in LGBTIQ people’s human rights defense and gender equality in Russia (and worldwide), as a major part of activities aimed at those two directions have been frozen and may be even canceled for an undetermined period of time.¹⁰⁸

A respondent from Southern Africa reported how the funding freeze may reverse years of progress by disrupting the fragile and hard-won trust it had built with embattled communities:

The funding freeze has crippled our capacity to extend services to hard-to-reach rural areas where the need for raising awareness and advocating for LBTI rights is the greatest. It has killed our momentum in advocacy because we can no longer push our campaigns and community engagement initiatives as vigorously as before. It has destroyed the progress and inclusivity we have worked to build over the years as we also have learned during the crisis that some of our allies have been fired, and for the ones that are still working they are showing resistance to collaborate with LBTI groups anymore. The freeze has directly affected our current projects and has undermined the trust and relationships we have cultivated with communities over time, potentially reversing years of progress.¹⁰⁹

These impacts, in Outright’s analysis, are not accidental casualties of a U.S. drive for austerity. They are part of a calculated effort to extinguish social trust, destabilize movements, and hamper social justice organizing.

¹⁰⁸ Response 148, English survey.

¹⁰⁹ Response 146, English survey.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The U.S. commitment to advancing the basic human rights and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer people around the world, from 2011 through 2024, was in line with what leaders in the U.S. across the political spectrum have always described as fundamental American values: Fairness. Non-discrimination. The right to privacy. Support for democracy. An end to violence based on hate.

And that work made an impact. As Jessica Stern, the former U.S. Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTIQ+ Persons, said:

I know the power of the Global Equality Fund. I have seen the clear impact this funding mechanism has made in supporting and empowering civil society activists, including in some of the most challenging operating environments in the world. It allows brave activists to continue working for change and to create more inclusive democracies. GEF support makes a difference and saves lives.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Global Equality Fund 2020–2021 Report, 16.

U.S. support for global LGBTIQ movements prevented harm. It allowed LGBTIQ activists to combat torture, access health care, and get jobs. Yet as we write this report, false narratives are circulating, suggesting that spending on human rights and inclusion – and in particular, spending to counter the harmful gender norms that underlie bias-motivated violence—is “wasteful” or even contrary to U.S. values. These narratives must be shut down, including by amplifying the stories of the courageous LGBTIQ activists and service providers represented in this report. The media should not be an uncritical mouthpiece of the current Trump administration and its allies, and those who have pledged solidarity with LGBTIQ communities in recent years must help ensure that the voices of our communities around the world are heard.

It is crucial that the politics of hate and exclusion that have dominated recent policy decisions in the U.S. do not result in the relegation of LGBTIQ people to the world’s margins. Decision-makers in the U.S. and those who can influence political decision-making should urgently speak up in support of all marginalized and vulnerable people who are currently being subjected to harm due to this draconian global funding withdrawal. Members of Congress, who control appropriations, have an obligation not to stand aside as the separation of powers that undergirds U.S. democracy is undermined—with vulnerable populations as just the first of an impending avalanche of casualties.

Governments outside the United States, including members of the Equal Rights Coalition and the UN LGBTI Core Group, should not stand silent as the world’s superpower turns its back on the communities whose rights these governments have defended collectively for over a decade. Bilateral development and humanitarian partners should urgently step in to fill the gaps, and all countries that stand for the universality of human rights should vocally condemn the funding cuts and work together to identify solutions. Private philanthropy, including in the corporate sector, has a crucial role to play: it is efficient and agile, with private funders having the capability to rapidly direct funds where they are needed most.

The modern LGBTIQ movement was birthed from a riot: as the blows of U.S. law enforcement officers at Stonewall rained down on the backs of people whose only crime was existing, our proud queer and trans movement pioneers fought back, determined that they would no longer be silenced, although virtually no government in the world was on their side. Half a century later, LGBTIQ people have come to expect that despite persistent bias and discrimination, a critical mass of key decision-makers recognize that we are “born free and equal” and have our backs. It is time to stand by that commitment.

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