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Canada's Foreign Policy on Global LGBTIQ+ Rights

A Summary of a 10-Year
Assessment (2016-2025)



About This Summary

This summary is based on findings from the *Advancing Dignity* research report, ***Canada’s Global Support for 2SLGBTIQI People: Assessing the Implementation of Canada’s Foreign Policy (2016–2025)***, commissioned by **Dignity Network Canada (DNC)** and completed in November 2025. The full report provides the first comprehensive, independent assessment of how Canada’s pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy has been implemented in practice over the past decade.

The research was conducted by an independent academic team with internationally recognized expertise in global LGBTIQ+ rights, foreign policy, and international development:

- **Professor Momin Rahman** (Trent University)
- **Professor Stephen Brown** (University of Ottawa)
- **Bartosz Neumann** (Concordia University)
- **Dr. Morgane Rosier** (Université du Québec à Montréal)

Their analysis draws on policy review, academic and grey literature, and in-depth interviews with Canadian government officials and civil society organizations, alongside sustained engagement with DNC and its members. This summary translates the core findings, evidence, and recommendations of that research into accessible language for a broad audience.

Note on Terminology: This summary uses the acronym LGBTIQ+. The acronym is used internationally as an inclusive umbrella term to refer to people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. Where relevant, the report and this summary acknowledge that different institutions, communities, and regions use varied terminology, and that language continues to evolve. The 2SLGBTIQ+ initialism is used in domestic contexts, as it is standard across the Canadian Government and in much of Canadian civil society but it is important to note that the “2S” refers specifically to traditional gender diversity within various North American Indigenous populations. As such, this identity marker is not used at the global level and this is reflected in the report where we keep to the initialisms used by policy documents we discuss or global communities who use LGBTIQ+ or some variation thereof.





A Decade of Progress

Policy, Partnership, and Civil Society Leadership

Over the past decade, Canada has emerged as one of the world's most consistent and visible champions of LGBTIQ+ rights in its foreign policy. This progress reflects not only political leadership within government, but also **sustained advocacy and partnership from Canadian civil society, particularly Dignity Network Canada and its member organizations.**

For more than ten years, DNC has served as a leading Canadian civil society voice on global LGBTIQ+ issues. Working alongside its more than 60 member organizations, DNC has played an important role in helping shape Canada's international engagement by:

- Advocating for the creation of Canada's first explicit pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy
- Pressing for dedicated international assistance funding, including Global Affairs Canada's LGBTIQ+ International Assistance Program
- Providing policy expertise grounded in the lived realities of partners in the Global South
- Acting as a trusted interlocutor between Canadian officials and global movements
- Convening dialogue, learning, and coordination through roundtables and communities of practice

The research makes clear that many of the advances achieved since 2016—particularly the articulation of a coherent policy framework in 2019 and the expansion of development assistance—were direct responses to sustained, coordinated civil society advocacy. Canada's progress is therefore best understood as a shared achievement: the result of constructive engagement between government and civil society.





Canada's Global Leadership on LGBTIQ+ Rights

From Emerging Support to a Coherent Policy

Canada's engagement with global LGBTIQ+ rights predates 2016, but the past decade marks a qualitative shift from sporadic action to a more intentional and institutionalized approach. Early efforts—supporting UN statements, condemning violence, and funding targeted initiatives through embassy funds—laid important groundwork. The period following the 2015 federal election accelerated this trajectory.

Between 2016 and 2019, Canada joined and co-lead international coalitions such as the Equal Rights Coalition, supported the establishment of the **UN Independent Expert on SOGIESC**, joined the **UN LGBTI Core Group** and embedded sexual orientation and gender identity within the **Feminist International Assistance Policy**. Since 2019, these efforts can be summed up in the articulation of Canada's first explicit pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy, spanning diplomacy, development, and multilateral engagement.

This evolution positioned Canada among a small group of states willing not only to speak out, but to invest diplomatically and financially in advancing global equality for our communities.

2016

Canada joins Equal Rights Coalition and supports the establishment of the UN Independent Expert on SOGIESC.

2017

Canada begins 2-year (2017-2019) co-chair role with the Equal Rights Coalition and embeds sexual orientation and gender identity within the Feminist International Assistance Policy.

2018

Canada joins the UN LGBTI Core Group.

2019

Launch of the IAP; Canada's first dedicated international assistance mechanism for LGBTIQ+ rights.

2021/2022

Canada had become the third-largest government donor globally supporting LGBTIQ+ rights.

2025

5 year mark of IAP, approximately \$37M in total funding had been allocated.



What Canada Has Achieved (2016–2025)

This section draws directly on the findings of the *Advancing Dignity* research to highlight the most significant areas where Canada's pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy has produced demonstrable progress. While the researchers note important gaps and limitations, the overall evidence points to substantial achievements across diplomacy, development assistance, and protection pathways.

Global Diplomacy and Multilateral Leadership

Canada has become a reliable and respected advocate for LGBTIQ+ rights in international spaces where these rights remain deeply contested. Since 2016, Canada has consistently used its diplomatic voice to normalize sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) as legitimate human rights concerns.

The research highlights Canada's active engagement in multilateral forums, including the United Nations, the Equal Rights Coalition (which Canada co-chaired from 2017–2019), the Organization of American States, the Commonwealth, and the World Bank. In these spaces, Canada has supported resolutions, statements, and agenda-setting efforts that have helped sustain international attention to LGBTIQ+ issues during a period of increasing global backlash.

Importantly, the report notes that Canadian diplomacy increasingly operates at the intersection of LGBTIQ+ rights and broader concerns about democratic erosion and shrinking civic space. In multilateral settings, Canadian officials and like-minded partners have had to navigate coordinated resistance not only to gender and



Vancouver 2018 Equal Rights Coalition Conference

sexuality language, but to human rights frameworks more broadly. Canada's continued engagement in these forums has therefore contributed to defending the integrity of multilateral human rights mechanisms themselves.

One of Canada's most significant diplomatic contributions was its early and sustained support for the creation and renewal of the UN Independent Expert on SOGIESC. While Canada alone cannot claim responsibility for policy change within international institutions, the research underscores the importance of visibility, coalition-building, and persistence in forums where many states continue to reject or resist LGBTIQ+ inclusion.

At the bilateral and mission level, Canadian embassies have played a quiet but influential and important role. The report documents embassy engagement through Pride participation, cultural events, discreet advocacy with host governments, support for local civil society organizations, and the provision of safe convening spaces. These actions, sometimes undertaken without public visibility, have helped sustain local movements, protect civic space, and reinforce Canada's credibility as a trusted ally on human rights for our communities.





Development Assistance with Tangible Impact

The research identifies international development assistance as one area where Canada's pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy has had its most tangible and measurable effects. Since 2019 in particular, Canada has moved from limited, project-based support to a more structured funding ecosystem.

By 2021–2022, Canada had become the **third-largest government donor globally** supporting LGBTIQ+ rights. While this funding still represents a small proportion of overall Official Development Assistance, the scale and consistency of Canada's contributions mark a significant shift compared to the pre-2016 period. The impact of this funding is significant for the global movement, especially at a time when we are facing growing challenges, the rise of authoritarian governments who use fear and misinformation to target LGBTIQ+ communities.

*By 2021–2022, Canada had become the **third-largest government donor globally** supporting LGBTIQ+ rights.*



Key Funding Mechanisms

1 LGBTIQ+ International Assistance Program (IAP)

Launched in 2019 with a commitment of \$30 million over five years, followed by \$10 million annually, the IAP represents Canada's first dedicated international assistance mechanism for LGBTIQ+ rights. The research finds that the IAP enabled new programming across regions and thematic areas, supporting human rights advocacy, socio-economic inclusion, and community resilience. At the 5 year mark of the funding in 2025, approximately \$37M in total funding had been allocated. Although public evaluations remain limited, interviews with civil society organizations confirm that the program made a meaningful difference in enabling sustained queer-focused work.

2 Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI)

The CFLI emerges in the research as one of Canada's most effective and valued tools. Managed by Canadian embassies, CFLI allows for small, flexible, and locally responsive grants to grassroots organizations. The report highlights CFLI's alignment with embassy priorities, its accessibility relative to larger funding streams, and the critical role of locally engaged staff in ensuring its success. While modest in scale, CFLI funding often reaches organizations that would otherwise be excluded from international assistance.

3 Act Together for Inclusion Fund (ACTIF)

ACTIF, one component of the LGBTIQ+ IAP, managed by Equitas in partnership with Dignity Network Canada, has supported capacity-building, training, and partnership development between Canadian and Global South organizations. The research identifies ACTIF as a key mechanism for expanding access to funding, including for francophone organizations, and for fostering longer-term organizational sustainability.

4 Global and Regional Partnerships

Through the LGBTIQ+ IAP, Canada has supported international and regional partners, including ILGA World, Kaleidoscope Trust (UK) OutRight International (USA), the Global Equality Fund, and regional-specific initiatives in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. These partnerships have enabled emergency assistance, research, advocacy, and network-building in particularly hostile environments.





Protections and Pathways for Refugees

The research places particular emphasis on Canada's role in protecting and resettling LGBTIQ+ individuals fleeing persecution. Through partnerships with civil society organizations—most notably Dignity Network Canada member organization **Rainbow Railroad**—Canada has helped thousands of people escape situations of extreme violence, criminalization, and repression.

Canada's approach combines diplomatic engagement, funding, and immigration pathways. Government-assisted refugee programs and private sponsorship initiatives such as the Rainbow Refugee Assistance Partnership have expanded access to safety for LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers. Canadian embassies and consular services increasingly serve as critical first points of contact, providing information, referrals, and coordination with trusted partners.

The report also notes Canada's growing investment in research and coordination on forced displacement, including funding for international networks and data gathering. While gaps remain in transparency and interdepartmental coordination, the overall trajectory reflects a sustained commitment to protection grounded in partnership with civil society.

What the Research Tells Us at 10 Years

Strengths and Challenges

At the ten-year mark, the *Advancing Dignity* research presents a nuanced but largely positive assessment of Canada's pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy. The findings underscore both the significance of what has been achieved and the importance of consolidating gains.

Key Strengths Identified by the Researchers

- **Clear political commitment and international credibility**, particularly since 2019.
- **Institutional footholds** created through dedicated programs, guidelines, and funding streams.
- **Strong and sustained partnerships with civil society**, especially Dignity Network Canada and its members.
- **Embassy-level innovation**, driven by committed diplomats and locally engaged staff.
- **Leadership through presence**, coalition-building, and persistence in multilateral spaces.





Challenges Framed as Opportunities

The researchers also identify areas requiring further attention: coordination across government departments, transparency of funding flows and outcomes, and over-reliance on individual champions rather than institutionalized mandates. Importantly, **these challenges are framed not as failures**, but as indicators of a policy area that has expanded rapidly and now requires consolidation, learning, and long-term resourcing.

*...attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights frequently serve as an **early warning sign of democratic backsliding**... Supporting LGBTIQ+ rights is not a niche or identity-based concern, but a core component of **defending democratic norms, pluralism, and the rule of law**.*

A particularly important opportunity identified in the research is the need to **more explicitly link Canada's pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy to broader efforts to protect democratic governance, civic space, and human security**. The report documents how anti-LGBTIQ+ backlash is rarely isolated; rather, it is often part of wider authoritarian, anti-democratic, and anti-rights projects that seek to weaken independent courts, restrict civil society organizations, silence journalists, and roll back gender equality more broadly.

Interviewees emphasized that attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights frequently serve as an early warning sign of democratic backsliding. Criminalization campaigns, restrictions on queer organizations, and moral panics around gender and sexuality are increasingly used to justify expanded state control and repression. From this perspective, supporting LGBTIQ+ rights is not a niche or identity-based concern, but a core component of defending democratic norms, pluralism, and the rule of law.

The research suggests that Canada is well positioned to strengthen this linkage. Its existing work on human rights defenders, inclusive governance, peace and security, and feminist international assistance provides a strong foundation for integrating LGBTIQ+ inclusion into democracy-support and civil society-protection strategies. Doing so would not only enhance policy coherence, but also reinforce the strategic relevance of LGBTIQ+ programming at a time when governments face pressure to narrow the scope of human rights engagement.

Seen in this light, the challenge is also an opportunity: **by situating global LGBTIQ+ rights firmly within efforts to protect democratic governance, civic space, and security, Canada can amplify impact, build broader coalitions, and ensure that this work remains central—rather than peripheral—to its foreign policy priorities.**





Looking Ahead: A Positive Agenda for the Next Decade

Drawing on the evidence and insights gathered through the research, the report outlines a forward-looking agenda that builds on Canada’s achievements while responding to an increasingly challenging global environment.

Priority Directions Include:

- 1 **Strengthening coordination and leadership** across diplomacy, development, trade, and immigration
- 2 **Enhancing funding quality**, including greater flexibility, longer-term support, and emergency mechanisms.
- 3 **Improving learning and accountability**, through shared data, evaluation, and knowledge exchange
- 4 **Empowering embassies and locally engaged staff** as long-term partners and institutional anchors
- 5 **Sustaining Canada’s leadership voice**, while adapting diplomatic strategies to counter anti-gender movements and protect partners on the ground

The research emphasizes that continued collaboration with civil society—particularly Dignity Network Canada and its members—is essential to advancing this agenda and ensuring that Canada’s actions remain grounded, credible, and effective.

Why Canada’s Leadership Matters More Than Ever

The Advancing Dignity research situates the next phase of Canada’s engagement within a rapidly deteriorating global context for LGBTIQ+ human rights. **Across multiple regions, there is a growing and increasingly coordinated backlash against gender equality and sexual and gender minority rights**, driven by well-resourced anti-rights actors operating across borders. These movements have succeeded in rolling back legal protections, shrinking civic space, criminalizing advocacy, and placing activists and organizations at heightened risk.

At the same time, the international landscape has shifted in ways that amplify the importance of Canada’s role. The partial retreat of United States diplomacy and international assistance on human rights and gender equality has created gaps in funding, leadership, and political cover for global LGBTIQ+ movements. In this environment, the research underscores that middle-power countries with strong domestic legitimacy—such as Canada—play an outsized role in sustaining international norms, resourcing frontline actors, and maintaining multilateral pressure.

Canada’s credibility as a consistent, principled, and pragmatic ally makes it particularly well positioned to respond to this moment. Its emphasis on partnership, capacity-building, and a “do no harm” approach offers an alternative to both disengagement and coercive diplomacy. As the report makes clear, **continued Canadian leadership is not simply additive**; it is increasingly essential to preventing further erosion of rights, sustaining hard-won gains, and ensuring that LGBTIQ+ communities and movements are not left isolated in an increasingly hostile global environment.





A Call to Action for DNC Members and Global Partners

For **Dignity Network Canada members**, this moment calls for renewed and coordinated leadership. The gains of the past decade were not inevitable; they were achieved through persistence, collective action, and principled engagement with government. Protecting and extending these gains will require continued advocacy, strategic collaboration, and a willingness to hold Canada to its commitments—especially as global pressures intensify and political priorities shift.

For **our partners across the international LGBTIQ+ community**, this summary is also a statement of accountability. Canada's role on the global stage has been shaped by your courage, expertise, and lived experience, and DNC's work is accountable first and foremost to you. As backlash grows and resources shrink in many contexts, the need for solidarity, shared learning, and mutual responsibility becomes even more urgent. DNC remains committed to amplifying your voices, advocating for your priorities, and working alongside you to ensure that international support is principled, responsive, and grounded in local realities.

Together—Canadian civil society, international partners, and allies within government—we have demonstrated what is possible. The task ahead is not simply to defend past progress, but to deepen it: to sustain movements, protect communities, and advance dignity, equality, and human rights for LGBTIQ+ people everywhere.

Conclusion

Ten years on, Canada's pro-LGBTIQ+ foreign policy represents a significant shared achievement. In a global context where equality is increasingly contested, Canada has chosen engagement, investment, and partnership. The progress documented in this summary underscores a central lesson of the Advancing Dignity research: **sustained, evidence-based advocacy works, particularly when grounded in trust between civil society and government.**

