

Rainbow diplomacy: LGBTQ+ rights and everyday diplomatic practice at Pride

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This article examines diplomatic engagement on the part of western states (namely Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom and Sweden) with LGBTQ+ advocacy, support for local LGBTQ+ activism, and participation in LGBTQ+ Pride marches and associated events in China, Cuba, India, Russia, South Africa and Taiwan. We describe these practices as ‘rainbow diplomacy’. By drawing on ethnographic participant observation and field notes, as well as semi-structured interviews with diplomats and LGBTQ+ activists, the article explores interconnections and disconnections between high-level foreign and diplomatic policy discourses and local everyday practices by diplomats. The key questions it seeks to answer are as follows. How are foreign policy commitments to LGBTQ+ rights enacted in practice? What constraints and contradictions exist, and why? And what impacts do diplomatic interventions have for LGBTQ+ activists and rights discourses? We argue that a focus on rainbow diplomacy at Pride reveals the inconsistent and changeable application of high-level foreign policy commitments across time and place, illustrating the precarity and vicarious nature of human rights commitments in general and LGBTQ+ rights commitments in particular. Moreover, the article’s findings demonstrate the gap between effective LGBTQ+ rights diplomacy on the one hand and rhetorical or symbolic ‘rainbow-washed’ positions that belie a lack of material or consistent institutional support for LGBTQ+ issues on the other.

Our overall claim is supported through five themes that emerge in the research. First, when western diplomats engage in Pride and support LGBTQ+ activism, they are balancing different, and sometimes contradictory, goals and interests that can lead to the sidelining of LGBTQ+ rights commitments in favour of economic and security priorities. Second, diplomats negotiate a complex politics of visibility when supporting Pride, because although Pride epitomizes the struggle for visibility, which has been a longstanding priority for LGBTQ+ movements, visibility is not always desirable or legally possible. Third, Pride can be used as a potent political symbol in national identity construction, geopolitical claims and public diplomacy,

* Daniel Conway would like to acknowledge the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, where he is a Research Associate and the financial support of the Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship under grant number RF-2018-440. Emil Edenborg’s research was supported by the Swedish Research Council under Grant Number 2020-04003.

which adds additional layers of meaning onto LGBTQ+ rights claims. Fourth, while international actors now place a strong emphasis on following the lead of local activists, when diplomats choose to support one group of LGBTQ+ activists over another—or one cause over another—this can have significant ideological, cultural or material effects. A final theme emerging from the research is the importance of personal commitment on the part of individual diplomats. The positive impacts of such commitment notwithstanding, a lack of clear, consistent policy guidelines makes diplomatic involvement in LGBTQ+ rights advocacy inconsistent and precarious. Reliance on individual commitment renders LGBTQ+ rights work vulnerable to cessation following diplomatic staff rotations, which highlights the need for clearer and more consistent leadership on LGBTQ+ rights advocacy at the national diplomatic level. Thus, we engage in a broader conversation on political and institutional support for and participation in LGBTQ+ advocacy, most notably Pride events, and the symbolic, material and legal impacts.

The study contributes to research on the incorporation of LGBTQ+ rights in diplomacy and more broadly in foreign and development policy,¹ queer International Relations (IR) theorizations of how LGBTQ+ discourses are entangled in global hierarchies and geopolitical power relations,² and scholarship on Pride as a contested field of LGBTQ+ politics at local, national and transnational levels.³ Whereas the existing literature on LGBTQ+ diplomacy has examined how and why states adopt pro-LGBTQ+ positions and engage diplomatically in high-level forums, for example in shaping international rights frameworks, our study focuses on local everyday interactions. We identify several points of contention, including tensions between commitments and reality, unintended consequences of diplomats' pro-LGBTQ+ actions, a reliance on diplomats' personal commitment, and complex bargaining between different policy goals. We point to the need for more research on everyday diplomatic practices in LGBTQ+ rights, as well as on broader human rights, involvement and advocacy, to demonstrate the real-world impacts of foreign and diplomatic policy commitments. IR has traditionally considered diplomacy in elite-level, interstate terms with scant regard for the everyday working lives, experiences and identities of individual diplomats. There is a lack of critical

¹ Douglas Victor Janoff, *Queer diplomacy: homophobia, international relations and LGBT human rights* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Christine M. Klappe, 'Queering development in homotransnationalist times: a postcolonial reading of LGBTIQ inclusive development agendas', *lambda nordica* 22: 2–3, 2017, pp. 41–67; Elise Carlson Rainer, *From pariah to priority: how LGBTI rights became a pillar of American and Swedish foreign policy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021); Monika de Silva, 'Gender wars? Diplomacy as a depolarizing practice in international politics of gender and sexuality', *International Studies Quarterly* 68: 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae101>.

² Rahul Rao, *Out of time: the queer politics of postcoloniality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: sovereignty, sexuality and the will to knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ Daniel Conway, 'Conceptualising queer activist critiques of Pride in the Two-Thirds World: queer activism and alternative Pride organising in South Africa, Mumbai, Hong Kong and Shanghai', *Sexualities*, publ. online 22 April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607241248898>; Daniel Conway, 'The politics of truth at LGBTQ+ Pride: contesting corporate Pride and revealing marginalized lives at Hong Kong Migrants Pride', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 25: 4, 2023, pp. 734–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2136732>; Daniel Conway, 'Whose lifestyle matters at Johannesburg Pride? The lifestylisation of LGBTQ+ identities and the gentrification of activism', *Sociology* 56: 1, 2022, pp. 148–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211024072>; Mia Liinason and Olga Sasunkevich, 'Tensions and ambivalences of Pride politics in uncertain times', *lambda nordica* 28: 2–3, 2023, pp. 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.3404/ln.v28.895>.

research on diplomacy, with gaps in scholarship focusing on gender, sexuality and diplomacy.⁴ Neumann's ground-breaking ethnographic study of diplomats and diplomacy demonstrates the agency of individual diplomats and argues that researchers should be more curious about the everyday practices of diplomacy.⁵ As we show in our analysis, these everyday practices, including choosing to fund one Pride over another, defining which activist practices are desirable or undesirable, and prioritizing one LGBTQ+ rights claim over another, can significantly shape how foreign policy is conducted in practice and have an impact on the social and political communities with which diplomats work.

This article pulls together case-studies of diplomatic involvement in Pride events and engagement with LGBTQ+ activism between 2017 and 2024 in Johannesburg and Cape Town (South Africa), Taipei (Taiwan), Shanghai (China), Havana (Cuba), Mumbai (India) and Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Russia). Given Pride's multinational history and significance as a key platform for LGBTQ+ visibility, advocacy and activism, it is unsurprising that diplomats often focus on Pride parades and associated events to articulate support for LGBTQ+ rights, connect with and demonstrate solidarity with local activists and gather information on the issues faced by LGBTQ+ communities. Our research focuses on how and to what extent diplomats become involved in LGBTQ+ rights advocacy and support work in practice, diplomats' accounts of the opportunities and constraints they face in doing this work, and local activists' responses to diplomatic involvement. Researching diplomacy can be challenging because of its tradition of secrecy and diplomats' reluctance to be recorded and quoted publicly.⁶ In this article we quote directly from semi-structured interviews with seven diplomats from EU, Swedish and UK embassies and three LGBTQ+ activists in India, Russia and Taiwan. However, our research draws from a broader ethnographic approach including field notes from Daniel Conway's participant observation of western diplomats at Pride events and LGBTQ+ rights events either hosted by diplomatic missions, or where diplomats were present. Conway's collaboration with the UK High Commission in South Africa on LGBTQ+ rights advocacy between 2022 and the present and Emil Edenborg's engagement with Swedish civil society organizations and development practitioners from 2020 to the present have also generated insights on everyday diplomatic involvement in LGBTQ+ rights work.

We begin with exploring previous literature on LGBTQ+ rights and diplomacy, including queer critiques of the 'rainbow washing' of state identities and foreign policy. The article then thematizes the everyday practices of rainbow diplomacy, including weighing competing national interests, managing the politics of (in)visibility, negotiating the geopolitics of Pride, supporting activist groups and balancing individual agency against policy consistency. We conclude with a summary of our findings and their theoretical and practical implications.

⁴ Karin Aggestam and Ann Towns, 'The gender turn in diplomacy: a new research agenda', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21: 1, 2019, pp. 9–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1483206>.

⁵ Iver B. Neumann, *At home with the diplomats: inside a European foreign ministry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁶ Aggestam and Towns, 'The gender turn in diplomacy'.

Rainbow diplomacy

The inclusion and mainstreaming of sexual orientation and gender identity rights has become a defining—albeit a contingent and sometimes sidelined—feature of the foreign policies of several European, North American and Oceanic states.⁷ Sweden and the Netherlands have included LGBTQ+ rights among their foreign policy priorities since the mid-2000s.⁸ The United States adopted a commitment to LGBTQ+ rights as an international priority in 2011, with President Barack Obama pledging to ‘put American diplomacy at the service of the global promotion of gay rights’.⁹ The UK’s legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013 was accompanied by a pledge by Prime Minister David Cameron to ‘export gay marriage around the world’, with a new emphasis on LGBTQ+ diplomacy and a particular focus on the Commonwealth.¹⁰ The prioritization of LGBTQ+ rights can sit alongside the emergence of feminist foreign policies such as Canada’s feminist international assistance policy, announced in 2017.¹¹ In the global South, Brazil’s department of foreign affairs was the first country to propose a normative test on LGBTQ+ rights and was proactive in taking international leadership on LGBTQ+ rights promotion.¹² The Equal Rights Coalition was founded in 2016 by 43 states to help inform and coordinate pro-LGBTQ+ diplomatic work. Despite such foreign policy commitments, contradictions and policy reversals have been commonplace. Reversals of policy and funding commitments to LGBTQ+ rights advocacy have been implemented following changes of government in the US, UK and Brazil. Commitments to LGBTQ+ rights can belie a lack of actual funding and even rhetorical support can be reversed following changes of government or policy. This makes it important to trace the actual involvement of diplomats in actualizing LGBTQ+ rights support.

An emerging literature is focusing on LGBTQ+ rights diplomacy and diplomats who themselves identify as LGBTQ+. This research engages to a limited extent with the everyday practice and personal experiences of diplomats. Rainer argues that there is no common definition of ‘LGBTI rights diplomacy’ and that questions of LGBTQ+ rights are often articulated indirectly via broader human rights issues such as freedom of association and freedom from arbitrary arrest and

⁷ Anthony J. Langlois, *Sexuality and gender diversity rights in southeast Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Rainer, *From pariah to priority*; Jonathan Symons and Dennis Altman, ‘International norm polarization: sexuality as a subject of human rights protection’, *International Theory* 7: 1, 2015, pp. 61–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000384>.

⁸ Emil Edenborg, ‘Making sense of international LGBTI rights promotion’, in Catherine Goetze and Khushi Singh Rathore, eds, *The contemporary reader of feminist International Relations* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2025).

⁹ Omar G. Encarnación, ‘The troubled rise of gay rights diplomacy’, *Current History* 115: 777, 2016, pp. 17–22, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2016.115.777.17>.

¹⁰ Rao, *Out of time*.

¹¹ Stephen Brown and Liam Swiss, ‘Canada’s feminist international assistance policy: bold statement or feminist fig leaf?’, in Katherine A. H. Graham and Allan M. Maslove, eds, *How Ottawa spends 2017–2018* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 2017), pp. 118–32; Laura Parisi, ‘Canada’s new feminist international assistance policy: business as usual?’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16: 2, 2020, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz027>.

¹² Maria Beatriz Bonna Nogueira, ‘The promotion of LGBT rights as international human rights norms: explaining Brazil’s diplomatic leadership’, *Global Governance* 23: 4, 2017, pp. 545–63, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02304003>.

torture.¹³ Her study focuses primarily on the advocacy of the US State Department and Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs for LGBTQ+ rights at a global, rather than local, level. Janoff engages with his own experiences as a gay diplomat and notes that ‘not all straight diplomats are conservative’, while ‘not all gay diplomats are necessarily progressive’.¹⁴ His research also predominantly focuses on state officials’ engagement with ‘high-level’ interstate diplomacy and international legal frameworks. There is still a need, therefore, to analyse the everyday practices of diplomacy at a local level, and to trace how diplomats’ agency, identities and interests affect LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, activism and policy.

Pride offers a fruitful site to study everyday rainbow diplomacy. Since the first Pride march in New York in June 1970, LGBTQ+ Pride parades, marches and associated events—including afterparties, conferences and film screenings—have spread across the world and have become a defining feature of LGBTQ+ campaigning, visibility and community-building.¹⁵ Ayoub et al. argue that even in socially conservative societies ‘Prides represent powerful tools for mobilizing the recognition of political elites, who are then faced with the responsibility of addressing movement claims in the halls of government’, and that ‘Pride can legitimate a local context’s movement by drawing international attention to the surrounding status of LGBT+ politics’.¹⁶ While Pride can be adapted to local contexts, Liinason and Sasunkevich argue that ‘Pride as a profoundly Western idea has become implicated in a hegemonic progress narrative with postcolonial overtones’.¹⁷ In addition, queer activists and scholars have accused Pride of ‘pinkwashing’ or ‘rainbow washing’ through over-commercialization, as well as accusing Pride of white privilege and other exclusionary practices.¹⁸ Pride events are one of the most visible manifestations of international support for LGBTQ+ rights in local contexts; they provide a platform for states to construct and project their national identities and foreign policy priorities in highly visible terms. Tracing the everyday engagements by diplomats in Pride is therefore important, not only to understand their involvement in LGBTQ+ international advocacy but also to explore the ideological, financial and cultural impacts such practices may have on Pride, LGBTQ+ identities and the political or legal issues on which LGBTQ+ activists campaign in global contexts.

Attending multiple Pride events across seven countries in three continents between 2018 and 2024, Daniel Conway observed diplomatic engagement with,

¹³ Rainer, *From pariah to priority*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Janoff, *Queer diplomacy*, p. 153.

¹⁵ Katherine McFarland Bruce, *Pride parades: how a parade changed the world* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); Conway, ‘Whose lifestyle matters at Johannesburg Pride?’; Liinason and Sasunkevich, ‘Tensions and ambivalences’; Abby Peterson, Mattias Wahlström and Magnus Wennerhag, ‘“Normalized” Pride? Pride parade participants in six European countries’, *Sexualities* 21: 7, 2018, pp. 1146–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717715032>.

¹⁶ Phillip M. Ayoub, Douglas Page and Sam Whitt, ‘Pride amid prejudice: the influence of LGBT+ rights activism in a socially conservative society’, *American Political Science Review* 115: 2, 2021, pp. 467–85 at p. 469, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420001082>.

¹⁷ Liinason and Sasunkevich, ‘Tensions and ambivalences’, p. 12.

¹⁸ Conway, ‘Conceptualising queer activist critiques’; Katherine M. Franke, ‘Dating the state: the moral hazards of winning gay rights’, *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 44: 1, 2012, pp. 1–44; Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the queer international* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Jane Ward, *Respectably queer: diversity culture in LGBT activist organizations* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).

and support for, Pride. Activities included offering free diplomatic space to hold events, meetings and film screenings, offering programming advice and support to Pride organizers, providing limited funding and participating in the Pride parade itself.¹⁹ These engagements were inconsistent, even within one specific country, where an embassy may have been highly involved in a Pride event in one city and absent from Pride in a different city. Despite the increase of high-level commitments to LGBTQ+ rights in foreign policy, our research found no evidence of specific job roles in any diplomatic mission that were exclusively focused on LGBTQ+ rights. Instead, this work was done on an ad hoc basis and was either subsumed under human rights or development, or into other roles by the fact that, regardless of their main responsibilities, the individual diplomat was LGBTQ+.

Since 2012, US embassies have been required to engage with outreach and engagement, with Pride recommended as a focus. In 2017 the US State Department issued guidance saying embassies could recognize LGBTQ+ Pride month, and this continued even under the first presidency of Donald Trump.²⁰ Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and the EU have a visible presence at many Pride events internationally. In 2012 the British organization Stonewall, which represents LGBTQ+ people, produced a guide for UK diplomats recommending showing solidarity by flying a rainbow flag or lighting the embassy in rainbow colours, offering in-kind support and attending Pride. UK diplomats can draw from development funding focused on gender and human rights, the British Council's resources and the 'Britain is Great' branding to use 'Love is Great' and rainbow-branded UK flags.²¹ Participation in Pride parades by diplomats, accompanied by rainbow versions of their national flags and LGBTQ+ rights slogans, is a visual representation of support, but it can also happen without any financial or other diplomatic commitments to advance LGBTQ+ rights in the host society.

Western states' pro-LGBTQ+ diplomacy has been criticized by queer scholars pointing to the hypocrisy of many states' international stances. Criticisms have focused on the imperfect legal and social conditions for LGBTQ+ communities in global North states and the 'homocolonialist'²² implications of framing new standards of 'civilization' and 'modernity' by which to judge their former colonies and other societies in the global South.²³ For example, Encarnación argues that the

¹⁹ Daniel Conway's field notes.

²⁰ Cynthia Burack, *Because we are human: contesting US support for gender and sexuality human rights abroad* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), p. 570. The second Trump Presidency has been more proactive in prohibiting LGBTQ+ rights advocacy and support, having removed the requirement for embassies and the State Department to document LGBTQ+ rights progress and also cancelling USAID funding that support HIV treatment, prevention and LGBTQ+ focused projects: Nahal Toosi, 'Trump drastically cutting back annual human rights report', *Politico*, 9 March 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/19/trump-human-rights-report-00238581> (accessed 20 March 2025; unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Jan. 2025.).

²¹ Alysha Khambay and Kit Dorey, *Engaging with LGBTQ+ advocates: a guide for UK officials working abroad* (London: Stonewall, 2018), <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/engaging-lgbt-advocates> (accessed 20 March 2025).

²² Momin Rahman, 'Queer rights and the triangulation of western exceptionalism', *Journal of Human Rights* 13: 3, 2014, pp. 274–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919214>.

²³ Andrew Delatolla, 'Sexuality as a standard of civilization: historicizing (homo)colonial intersections of race,

US 'should not be the face of the effort to sell gay rights to the developing world' because of its own poor record on LGBTQ+ rights and the evidence of significant 'backlashes' which include a rise in homo- and transphobic legislation in the aftermath of US LGBTQ+ rights diplomacy.²⁴ Assuming that global North states are vectors of LGBTQ+ tolerance and rights advancement can overlook hostility to LGBTQ+ rights within such states²⁵ and the role of global North-based transnational conservative networks, such as the World Congress of Families and evangelical Christian churches, which advocate homophobia in the global South and often target Pride.²⁶ The practice of assessing LGBTQ+ progress based on the legal right to same-sex marriage has also been criticized for its reductionism and homonormativity.²⁷ For queer critics, judging LGBTQ+ rights performance on the basis of western norms of LGBTQ+ identity and legal codes of monogamous marriage typifies the colonial assumptions of western states.

Queer critics of the global North's LGBTQ+ rights have singled out Pride as an example of 'homocolonialism'²⁸ and 'homonationalism',²⁹ and as a vehicle for paying lip service to western norms of LGBTQ+ legal rights. As such, these critics argue that states use Pride and LGBTQ+ rights discourses to 'rainbow wash' their foreign and domestic policies. Franke and Schulman detail Israeli state sponsorship of and visible presence at North American Pride parades, alongside the heavy marketing of Tel Aviv as an international LGBTQ+ tourist destination.³⁰ This aimed to 'rebrand' Israel and distract from Israeli domestic and regional policies. Sloommaeckers documents how Serbia organized a 'ghost Pride' to portray the state as suitable for EU membership.³¹ Similarly, Franke discusses how Romania obscured its poor record on women's and Roma community rights when demonstrating its progressive 'Europeanness' by organizing a Pride parade.³² Canada's presence at Pride parades across the world and the flying of rainbow Canadian flags belie the fact that Canada spends less on development aid than the UN recommended goals, and barely more than the UK's modest budget on LGBTQ+ rights advocacy.³³ Canada's 2017 commitment to a feminist

gender and class', *International Studies Quarterly* 64: 1, 2020, pp. 148–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz095>; Rao, *Out of time*.

²⁴ Encarnación, 'The troubled rise of gay rights diplomacy', pp. 21–2.

²⁵ Katherine Browne and Catherine J. Nash, 'Resisting LGBT rights where "we have won": Canada and Great Britain', *Journal of Human Rights* 13: 3, 2014, pp. 322–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.923754>.

²⁶ Phillip M. Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl, *The global fight against LGBTI rights: how transnational conservative networks target sexual and gender minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 2024); Sarah K. Dreier, 'Resisting rights to renounce imperialism: East African churches' strategic symbolic resistance to LGBTQ inclusion', *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 2, 2018, pp. 423–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy012>.

²⁷ Delatolla, 'Sexuality as a standard of civilization'; Jessica Scott, 'The distance between death and marriage: citizenship, violence and same-sex marriage in South Africa', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15: 4, 2013, pp. 534–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.832891>.

²⁸ Rahman, 'Queer rights'.

²⁹ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

³⁰ Franke, 'Dating the state'; Schulman, *Israel/Palestine*.

³¹ Koen Sloommaeckers, 'The litmus test of Pride: analysing the emergence of the Belgrade "ghost" Pride in the context of EU accession', *East European Politics* 33: 4, 2017, pp. 517–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1367290>.

³² Franke, 'Dating the state'.

³³ Ross Othen-Reeves, *Leading the way: the role of global Britain in safeguarding the rights of the global LGBTI+ community* (London: The Baring Foundation, 2020), <https://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/leading-the-way->

international assistance policy was not met by an increase in funding and was contradicted by increases in defence spending and in arms sales to anti-LGBTQ+ states such as Saudi Arabia.³⁴ Delatolla witnessed the active encouragement of skilled immigration by the Canadian embassy at the Tokyo Pride event in 2018: Canada was promoted as an 'open and welcoming space for the LGBTQ+ community', yet Delatolla argues that this obscures Canada's hostile policies and practices towards LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.³⁵ Queer critics thus consider diplomatic involvement in Pride not as an example of the positive advancement of LGBTQ+ rights and protection of communities, but rather as homocolonial and homonationalist rainbow washing of global North states' poor record on LGBTQ+ and broader human rights.

A debate has emerged in response to these queer critiques of LGBTQ+ diplomacy. Burack argues that queer criticisms of diplomatic efforts to support and advance LGBTQ+ rights discount the genuine intentions that diplomats and policy-makers have to advance LGBTQ+ rights internationally.³⁶ Meanwhile, Rainer acknowledges that 'while American ambassadors march in foreign LGBTI Pride parades, the LGBTI equality movement faces powerful opposition at home', but argues that US diplomats listen to local grassroots activists on whether to speak out on LGBTQ+ rights or not, and can provide valuable funding and support when needed.³⁷ Rao acknowledges the structural constraints and limited agency that institutional LGBTQ+ advocates face, and that it is important to acknowledge and explore the constraints and agency such advocates can have.³⁸ Given diplomats' restricted agency, the complex interplay between personal beliefs, foreign policy priorities and limited budgets should be analysed in relation to the ideological, financial and symbolic outcomes created by rainbow diplomacy.

The individual agency, interests and identities of diplomats can lead to significant foreign policy change. As this article argues, individual prioritization of LGBTQ+ rights and civil society engagement are a key factor when diplomatic missions become involved in or demonstrate commitment to LGBTQ+ rights. These individual interventions can have a significant impact in a local or international context. Neumann writes that the mainstay of diplomacy is reporting back to the home foreign ministry and that 'different people, with different social traits, will report different things, so one key issue concerns in what measure such differences result in different outcomes'.³⁹ Individual diplomats have had significant impacts on national foreign policy. For example, Brazil's international leadership on sexual orientation and gender identity issues emerged somewhat unexpectedly

the-role-of-global-britain-in-safeguarding-the-rights-of-the-global-lgbti-community.

³⁴ Brown and Swiss, 'Canada's feminist international assistance policy'; Corinne L. Mason, 'Buzzwords and fuzzwords: flattening intersectionality in Canadian aid', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25: 2, 2019, pp. 203–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2019.1592002>; Parisi, 'Canada's new feminist international assistance policy'.

³⁵ Delatolla, 'Sexuality as a standard of civilization', p. 155.

³⁶ Burack, *Because we are human*.

³⁷ Rainer, *From pariah to priority*, pp. 31–2 and p. 83.

³⁸ Rahul Rao, 'Global homocapitalism', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 194, 2015, https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/wp-content/files_mf/rp194_article_rao_globalhomocapitalism.pdf.

³⁹ Neumann, *At home with the diplomats*, pp. 131–2.

following the individual initiatives of mid-ranking LGBTQ+ Brazilian diplomats at the United Nations, who had drafted an LGBTQ+ rights proposal that quickly gained international and high-level Brazilian support.⁴⁰

That moral, ethical and human rights commitments would be premised on individual conviction and belief is perhaps not surprising, but it can create inherently precarious foreign policy commitments, particularly towards LGBTQ+ rights. The Stonewall report on LGBTQ+ advocacy by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) quoted a diplomat who said: 'One of the challenges with all diplomatic missions is consistency. There is very little institutional memory that transfers with change in leadership, so we have to start from scratch.'⁴¹ This inconsistency is aided by frequent diplomatic rotations. When diplomats committed to LGBTQ+ rights move to a new post, the embassy's focus on LGBTQ+ rights can be lost, with financial and other implications for local civil society. The FCDO staff that spoke to Stonewall also said they needed more support and capacity to work on LGBTQ+ rights and that such work could feel like an additional 'task' on top of already heavy workloads. Without clear and consistent leadership from the national foreign ministry with the resources to support LGBTQ+ rights work, commitments to and involvement in rainbow diplomacy can quickly fall away.

The everyday enactments and contradictions of rainbow diplomacy

Weighing conflicting diplomatic interests

When western diplomats engage in Pride, and support LGBTQ+ activism, they are balancing different—and sometimes contradictory—goals and interests. Previous research has shown that despite rhetorical commitments to LGBTQ+ human rights on the part of states like Canada, UK and the Nordic countries, other strategic, military or economic priorities often override LGBTQ+ concerns, and relatively little money is spent on LGBTQ+ issues. According to the Global Philanthropy Project, funds directed to LGBTQ+ projects and organizations were equivalent to 4¢ out of every US\$100 (i.e., 0.04 per cent) of total worldwide official development assistance (ODA) in 2021–22.⁴² The two largest donors (in per capita terms) funding LGBTQ+ advocacy and support, the Netherlands and Sweden, spent only 0.47 per cent and 0.17 per cent respectively of their net ODA on LGBTQ+ funding in 2021–22.⁴³ Moreover, commitments to funding international LGBTQ+ advocacy and support may be cancelled following ministerial reshuffles or owing to political opposition to such funding. National and foreign policy claims to support LGBTQ+ rights must be assessed against the actual material commitments underpinning these claims for support.

⁴⁰ Nogueira, 'The promotion of LGBT rights'.

⁴¹ Khambay and Dorey, *Engaging with LGBTQ+*, p. 19.

⁴² Global Philanthropy Project, *Global resources report: government and philanthropic support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities 2021/2022* (Global Philanthropy Project, 2024), https://globalresourcesreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GRR_2021-2022_WEB-Spread-Colour_EN.pdf, p. 21.

⁴³ Global Philanthropy Project, *Global resources report*, p. 44.

Several interviewees mentioned budget limitations and economic competition with other priorities as an obstacle to maintaining a robust and consistent support of LGBTQ+ rights. A Brussels-based officer at the European Commission (Directorate-General for International Partnerships—DG INTPA) described this struggle:

The conflict is mostly in terms of financing, I feel in competition with other issues, some rights are more important sometimes than others. This is related to legislation in some countries. I'm in charge of [female genital mutilation] and child marriage, it is easier to work with the governments on those questions. When it comes to LGBTI it's difficult to impose something when it's illegal ... I wouldn't say there is a clash between different rights, more about distribution of resources. I'm the only one in INTPA in charge of LGBTI questions. There are many working on gender equality, we have more resources on children's rights than LGBTI.⁴⁴

Foreign policy commitments to LGBTQ+ rights can change rapidly or can be cancelled. A major LGBTQ+ funding initiative to tackle homophobia in Africa was announced by the UK government in 2018; the funding was abruptly cancelled in 2021.⁴⁵ In 2024 the German government's plans to devote funding to international human rights advocacy, including LGBTQ+ rights, were curtailed following a judgment by the German constitutional court cancelling the budget.⁴⁶

While the European Commission official described budget limitations, diplomatic balancing can be about competing policy goals. A diplomat at the Swedish embassy in Cuba, which had supported a Pride film festival in the country, spoke of why the embassy had funded an LGBTQ+ cultural event rather than, for example, LGBTQ+ groups with a more politically confrontational stance:

It is definitely a tough one for an embassy; we can't really take a stand on one of those issues ... of course we have to, in order to work here and in order to do all the different things that we do in Cuba, we do need to have good relationships. Good relationship with the Cuban regime—and good doesn't necessarily mean that we agree. It does mean that we need to be able to work and that does mean, also, cooperating with the [Cuban] culture ministry. We've been doing this film festival together with them. There are several advantages to that. They are the ones with access to all of the cinemas ... I'm very sure that good diplomacy can find ways to not only support one side and to manoeuvre a difficult situation like that. It takes some skills. It is challenging.⁴⁷

LGBTQ+ activists are aware of such competing priorities and are cognizant that these may overshadow LGBTQ+ support. In 2019 the UK parliament's Global LGBT Rights all-party parliamentary group held a special session on LGBTQ+

⁴⁴ Personal interview, officer at DG INTPA, 21 June 2022, Brussels, Belgium.

⁴⁵ Othen-Reeves, *Leading the way*; Matthew Waites, 'The international politics of development for LGBT+ inclusion: how the UK's Johnson government used crisis as a political opportunity', *International Politics*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00612-6>.

⁴⁶ An LGBTQ+ advocacy project involving Conway and the German Embassy in Pretoria was cancelled because this court ruling removed the budget; Martin Arnold and Sam Jones, 'German top court strikes down €60bn off-budget climate fund', *Financial Times*, 15 Nov. 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/e36830bf-0fb4-4878-944c-0bf9088478d2>.

⁴⁷ Personal interview, Swedish diplomat, 16 May 2019, Havana, Cuba.

rights in the Commonwealth, followed by a discussion at the FCDO. At the events, much was made about the 'leadership' the UK had ostensibly taken on tackling homophobia in Commonwealth countries. Yet on the walk between parliament and the FCDO, one of the activists who was based in a Commonwealth country where homosexuality was illegal explained that efforts to hold any event on LGBTQ+ rights at the UK High Commission in the country had been met with resistance and refusal from the diplomatic staff.

The cancellation of the UK's LGBTQ+ international funding commitments in 2021,⁴⁸ and the subsequent cancellation of an international LGBTQ+ rights conference due to be hosted by the UK government in 2022, caused consternation in LGBTQ+ activist communities, and several activists told the authors that they had lost confidence in the UK as a dependable ally. Relatedly, a Taiwanese LGBTQ+ activist expressed a sense that western allies could not be trusted to maintain their support if LGBTQ+ rights conflicted with other priorities: 'Unfortunately, we live in a capitalist world. Everything is about money, so I think the foreign affairs offices are still thinking about trade and economy a lot more than human rights, which is stupid of them'.⁴⁹

Thus, tracking actual financial commitments to these policies and exploring how consistently (or not) LGBTQ+ advocacy is applied across diplomatic missions reveals that when competing against other priorities, such as trade or security, LGBTQ+ rights can be easily sidelined. Furthermore, changes in government, or societal or political hostility to funding on LGBTQ+ rights, can lead to the deprioritization of LGBTQ+ diplomacy. Earlier efforts to make states consider feminist and gender concerns on a par and intersecting with other priorities such as international security have met with considerable success.⁵⁰ However, as shown here, LGBTQ+ rights are still not widely considered to be a priority; nor are they connected with other foreign policy and diplomatic goals by national foreign ministries, or by many diplomats.

Managing (in)visibility

Pride epitomizes the struggle for visibility which has been a longstanding priority for LGBTQ+ movements. Pride parades are credited with creating awareness, revealing LGBTQ+ lives and needs, and for making successful demands on government for change.⁵¹ However, visibility is not always desirable or legally possible,⁵² and can place LGBTQ+ individuals and communities at risk of hostile

⁴⁸ Waites, 'The international politics of development'.

⁴⁹ Personal interview, LGBTQ+ activist with Amnesty Taiwan, 3 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁵⁰ Jamie J. Hagen, 'Queering Women, Peace and Security', *International Affairs* 92: 2, 2016, pp. 313–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12551>.

⁵¹ Emil Edenborg, 'Russia's spectacle of "traditional values": rethinking the politics of visibility', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22: 1, 2020, pp. 106–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1560227>; Conway, 'The politics of truth'.

⁵² Anthony Oluoch and Monica Tabengwa, 'LGBT visibility: a double-edged sword', in Aengus Carroll and Lucas Ramón Mendos, *State sponsored homophobia 2017: a world survey of sexual orientation laws*, 12th edn (Geneva: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2017), pp. 150–5.

reactions from the state or other actors. LGBTQ+ activists often negotiate the benefits and dangers of visibility through multiple strategies, which may include 'strategic invisibility', as is the case in many African, Middle Eastern and Asian contexts.⁵³ International diplomats engaging in Pride negotiate complex dynamics of visibility and a lack of sensitivity or awareness can be counterproductive.

Diplomatic engagement in Pride can be very public, and visible diplomatic support for LGBTQ+ rights is controversial. Many embassies of European countries, the US and Canada have flown the rainbow flag during Pride, leading to reactions in the host state. When the US embassy in Moscow flew the rainbow flag to mark the (US) Pride month in 2020 it was mocked by President Vladimir Putin, who expressed his opinion that it 'revealed something about the people that work there'.⁵⁴ Encarnación argues that the US's advocacy of LGBTQ+ rights internationally was counterproductive because it endangered activists in Uganda and Kenya; justified the belief that LGBTQ+ identities are western and 'un-African'; and gave rise to homophobic legislation across a number of African states.⁵⁵ This claim is contested by other authors, such as Rainer and Burack, who argue that open diplomatic support for LGBTQ+ rights can provide a vital lifeline for grassroots LGBTQ+ activists.⁵⁶

At Taiwan Pride, a significant contingency from the European Union's office was present with EU rainbow flags, and the EU representative stood on the Pride float of a local non-governmental organization (NGO). Prior to the Pride event, the EU office published an article in a Taiwanese newspaper about its human rights work, encouraging people to come to Pride. According to an EU diplomat, the EU's visible participation in Pride was appreciated by local LGBTQ+ activists. 'People who are involved in this issue, they're very happy that we do things like this to help ... They are happy that there is an international community presence there'.⁵⁷

According to diplomats, visible manifestations in support of LGBTQ+ rights enacted by embassies were primarily intended to empower and inspire LGBTQ+ people locally, by showing that they have international backing. A Swedish diplomat in Cuba elaborated:

I do believe that what we've done is, we've shown that Sweden and Norway, we are committed to these issues ... We have managed to be a voice, especially on social media, for LGBTQ rights. I do think people have seen that on Facebook, for example, and hopefully people have felt that they're not alone in this. The LGBTQ community is local, but it's also a global one and we are fighting some of the same struggles and we can learn from each

⁵³ Ashley Currier, 'Representing gender and sexual dissidence in southern Africa', *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 463–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-011-9198-9>; Jakob Svensson, Emil Edenborg and Cecilia Strand, 'We are queer and the struggle is here! Visibility at the intersection of LGBT+ rights, post-coloniality, and development cooperation in Uganda', *Sexualities*, publ. online 6 Feb. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607241232556>.

⁵⁴ 'Putin mocks U.S. embassy for flying rainbow flag', Reuters, 4 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN24502A>.

⁵⁵ Encarnación, 'The troubled rise of gay rights diplomacy'.

⁵⁶ Rainer, *From pariah to priority*; Burack, *Because we are human*.

⁵⁷ Personal interview, EU diplomat, 4 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

other and we can help each other in these battles. Hopefully we've inspired a bit, and we've lightened a few hearts and shown that it might be very difficult now but keep fighting.⁵⁸

Visible support for LGBTQ+ rights from western diplomats can also have unintended negative consequences. It may reinforce and confirm narratives of LGBTQ+ identities as a foreign, western, phenomenon. Diplomatic pro-LGBTQ+ visibility may be perceived as illegitimate outside interference in domestic politics—something of which diplomats were cognizant. For example, an EU diplomat in Taiwan spoke about being surprised when the EU ambassador publicly encouraged people to vote in favour of two pro-LGBTQ+ bills in a 2018 referendum, as there had previously been internal hesitation about whether the EU could take a public position on how Taiwanese people should vote. The EU's representative changed her mind after speaking with local LGBTQ+ activists. The same diplomat argued that visible western pressure on LGBTQ+ issues can influence local legislators who want to be seen positively by the international community, but can also cement impressions that LGBTQ+ rights are imposed by western states in 'homocolonial' terms:

On our Facebook page, there's always comments that are very, very negative. Every time we post something on human rights, especially on the death penalty and on LGBTI, there will be comments saying it does not apply here. This is western, this is European and don't tell us what to do.⁵⁹

The visibility of rainbow diplomacy can create risks. Shanghai Pride, which ran from 2008 until 2021, often used the spaces and support of western consulates and cultural organizations, such as the British Council and Goethe Institute, for networking and discussion events, film screenings and exhibitions. For a long time, these organizations had provided a safe space free from official interference. However, in 2018 a Twitter account linked to the Chinese authorities had warned people not to attend LGBTQ+ events 'at foreign embassies', and the police arrived at an event hosted by an international consulate.⁶⁰

A Brussels-based officer at DG INTPA, coordinating LGBTQ+ support at EU embassies, spoke about ongoing delicate negotiations over visibility in diplomatic work:

Visibility is generally very important to the EU, the EU wants partners to communicate about its projects, but when it comes to LGBT we do not always put the EU flag, we do not do any publicity. My previous assignment was to [country in Sub-Saharan Africa], when I was there, I didn't publicize my agenda even to my local colleagues, we had to do everything very discreetly, this is usually at the demands of local activists. I've never seen LGBTI rights defenders wanting to be visible, they try to be effective in other ways. ... The ambassador had a low profile on LGBTI, I was critical of that then, but now I think he was right, we could do much more things than if we would have been visible. The US ambassador was expelled because he was too vocal on LGBTI rights.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Personal interview, Swedish diplomat, 16 May 2019, Havana, Cuba.

⁵⁹ Personal interview, EU diplomat, 4 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁶⁰ Personal interview, UK diplomat, 3 June 2018, Shanghai, China.

⁶¹ Personal interview, officer at DG INTPA, 21 June 2022, Brussels, Belgium.

There is an ongoing debate about the value and efficacy of Pride in creating visibility in global contexts, and diplomatic engagement in Pride can play a significant role in creating awareness around LGBTQ+ issues and augmenting the priorities of activists and communities. However, this engagement needs to be conducted with considerable local political awareness and sensitivity of the potential consequences of such visibility for grassroots LGBTQ+ communities.

Negotiating the geopolitics of Pride

Pride has become a potent political symbol in national identity construction, geopolitical claims and public diplomacy. Hosting Pride can be a way to manifest a 'modern' progressive, European or western identity to both domestic and international audiences, as shown in research on Israel and candidate EU accession states.⁶²

Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs encourages its international missions to publicize Taiwan Pride not only as evidence of the island's progressiveness, but to buttress more profound claims for the acknowledgement of Taiwan's international sovereignty and stress its difference from mainland China. Taiwan lacks recognized statehood at the UN and has few formal diplomatic ties. It legalized same-sex marriage rights in 2019 and has a ground-breaking Gender Equity Education Act. Taiwan Pride has grown to be the largest Pride event in Asia, with 140,000 people marching through the streets of Taipei. Despite the Taiwanese government periodically using LGBTQ+ rights as a means to attract the attention of international institutions and governments, Nai-chia and Fell argue that the country 'does not have a sophisticated ... LGBT rights foreign policy agenda ... it should be understood as the product of both government and non-governmental forces'.⁶³ A former Taiwanese diplomat explained how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would promote Taiwan Pride through their international missions' channels and that Taiwanese diplomats would tell their counterparts in Europe and North America, 'see, we're an open society, a free society. People can do whatever they want, we are different from China ... because we value freedom and we value human rights'.⁶⁴ This strategy has the support and significant participation of many in Taiwanese LGBTQ+ civil society. Yi, a human rights activist with Amnesty International, explained:

I personally think that human rights are a great way to distinguish that Taiwan is not part of China: 'We're very different. We are a lot more like you guys [the West] and so you guys should help us so we don't get bullied by China all the time.'⁶⁵

In the aftermath of a 2017 ruling by Taiwan's Constitutional Court instructing the government to legalize same-sex marriage, the Taiwanese government

⁶² Franke, 'Dating the state'; Schulman, *Israel/Palestine*; and Sloomaeckers, 'The litmus test of Pride'.

⁶³ Chen Nai-chia and Dafydd Fell, 'Tongzhi diplomacy and the queer case of Taiwan', in Mariah Thornton, Robert Ash and Dafydd Fell, eds, *Taiwan's economic and diplomatic challenges and opportunities* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 194–214 at p. 195.

⁶⁴ Personal interview, former Taiwanese diplomat, 4 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁶⁵ Personal interview, LGBTQ+ activist with Amnesty International, 3 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

sponsored a significant contingent of LGBTQ+ activists, including Jennifer Lu, a leading campaigner for LGBTQ+ marriage rights, to attend World Pride, held in New York City in 2019. In the parade, the activists carried a large banner proclaiming 'Taiwan: The First in Asia!'. Taiwan's DPP party government had also sponsored an exhibition held in Manhattan called 'The Wedding Banquet', that told the story of LGBTQ+ rights in Taiwan, alongside a number of public events to discuss LGBTQ+ rights progress in the country. Lu was sponsored by the Taiwanese government to speak at multiple international forums on LGBTQ+ rights; the Taiwanese LGBTQ+ contingent at World Pride made clear and bold visual and human rights discourse claims for Taiwan's recognition as an independent state in Asia—one that was part of the global North community, and not part of China.

Taiwan's presentation of itself as a vanguard of LGBTQ+ and wider human rights raised contradictions and criticisms. A former Taiwanese diplomat explained that when Taiwanese ambassadors used human rights to distinguish Taiwan from China, she had felt: 'They're not thinking about what it means' and gave the example that Taiwan not only continues to use the death penalty but has no plans to abolish it. She also worried that the ministry of foreign affairs' highlighting of Taiwan's LGBTQ+ rights record may make other human rights problems seem invisible: 'they [the international community] will think that there's nothing to worry about here, while there's still a lot to be worried about'.⁶⁶ For example, Taiwan has punitive laws criminalizing HIV+ people who engage in behaviours that risk transmission of the virus.⁶⁷ Despite the Constitutional Court ruling of 2017, the government of President Tsai Ing-wen had been slow to enact the legislation and the main conservative opposition party, alongside a campaign sponsored by US evangelical churches, had petitioned for an advisory referendum on both same-sex marriage and an amendment to the Gender Equity Education Act. At Taiwan Pride in 2018, many activists were angry with Tsai's government and believed high-profile activists had been too willing to collaborate with Taiwan's disingenuous rainbow diplomacy. A majority of those voting in the subsequent referendum rejected both the legalization of same-sex marriage and the Gender Equity Education Act. Although this did not prevent the passing of same-sex marriage into law the following year, it demonstrated a lack of societal support for LGBTQ+ and gender rights. Taiwan's self-presentation as a beacon of LGBTQ+ rights thus belies both contradictions in human rights law in the country and a lack of domestic political will and popular support for LGBTQ+ rights.

Some diplomats showed an awareness about critiques of western 'homocolonialism'⁶⁸ and a desire to refute the narratives of the West as imposing its own model of LGBTQ+ rights. A Swedish diplomat in Cuba, having arranged screenings of Swedish LGBTQ+ films, said:

That was actually very important to me to avoid that as much as possible. I really do believe that we are often seen, the Nordic countries are often seen as the blueprint and that

⁶⁶ Personal interview, former Taiwanese diplomat, 4 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁶⁷ HIV Justice Network, 'Taiwan (ROC)', reviewed Oct. 2024, <https://www.hivjustice.net/country/tw>.

⁶⁸ Rahman, 'Queer rights'.

goes for Europe and the West in general. ... I refuse to believe that and I refuse to see us as that blueprint. I think that we have so much to learn from others and how other countries have chosen, the paths they've chosen or been forced upon to go down ... To me it is very important to step out of that perfect picture of Sweden and Norway.⁶⁹

Such critical self-reflection and learning is also reflected in recent policy changes by western states—such as Canada's 'do no harm' principle—and an awareness that the West's open support for local LGBTQ+ activists can sometimes put the latter at risk, as illustrated by the 2016 murder of two Bangladeshi LGBTQ+ activists, one of whom was employed by the US embassy in Dhaka.⁷⁰ Whereas many diplomats were clearly aware of risks and expressed both modesty and self-reflection, we heard other western diplomats explain that 'we have a good story to tell about LGBT rights'. To some extent, much LGBTQ+ diplomacy is still implicitly guided by a 'leveraged pedagogy'⁷¹ in which LGBTQ+ rights promotion remains a mostly unidirectional process of transferring western experiences and supporting activists in accordance with western standards and expectations of LGBTQ+ liberation. While 'learning from each other' is an argument made by some diplomats, the focus of LGBTQ+ diplomacy is largely on the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights 'elsewhere', rather than developing genuine cross-dialogues, learning or applying experiences from other contexts in the diplomats' home state. Efforts of individual diplomats to make rainbow diplomacy a more egalitarian and mutual process were constrained by structural factors such as lack of leadership, funding and consistency over time.

Supporting activism and advocacy

The diplomats and foreign policy officials with whom we spoke placed a strong emphasis on the need for international actors to follow the lead of local activists. Diplomats' support and cooperation with local activist groups is therefore another important focus for analysis. While this was a shared discourse among western diplomats, it was particularly explicit in the case of Swedish LGBTQ+ diplomacy. As argued by Edenborg and Strand,⁷² the principle of 'local ownership' is considered central to Sweden's promotion of LGBTQ+ rights in foreign and development policy. The idea was emphasized by a diplomat at the Swedish embassy in Cuba, speaking about the embassy's support of a local LGBTQ+ organization:

Through a workshop with them [local activists] and through close collaboration with them, they've taken the reins and they've really been the ones leading this project ... To

⁶⁹ Personal interview, Swedish diplomat, 16 May 2019, Havana, Cuba.

⁷⁰ Dina M. Siddiqi, 'Exceptional sexuality in a time of terror: "Muslim" subjects and dissenting/unmournable bodies', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 20, 2019, pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.5069>.

⁷¹ Robert Kulpa, 'Western leveraged pedagogy of central and eastern Europe: discourses of homophobia, tolerance and nationhood', *Gender, Place and Culture* 21: 4, 2014, pp. 431–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.793656>.

⁷² Emil Edenborg and Cecilia Strand, 'Governing queer activism: power and visibility in state funding of international LGBTI organizations', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 8: 1, 2025, pp. 82–106, <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000041>.

me, it's been very important to make sure that there was Cuban ownership and there was a local ownership.⁷³

Similarly, a diplomat at the EU embassy in Taiwan spoke about the EU's funding of LGBTQ+ events, organized by local activists.

We have this budget for human rights issues and we would always use them to have events with the NGOs, with the local NGOs. We cannot do it by ourselves, we have to contract it to another party and do it together with them ... We're, in a way, helping the NGOs to amplify their voices.⁷⁴

The emphasis on local activists having agency and leading change reflects a more general discursive trend in international LGBTQ+ promotion. For some years NGOs, scholars and even states have stressed the need to move from top-down models, where donors decide the priorities, to supporting activists on their own terms. As expressed in a 2023 policy document from the US Agency for International Development: 'Follow the lead of local LGBTQI+ activists and groups and act with humility and in allyship'.⁷⁵ Following criticism that western states have been pushing their LGBTQ+ agendas onto global South contexts in neocolonial ways, recent reports have made recommendations as to how foreign policy and development frameworks can be made more inclusive and how LGBTQ+ activists can be supported.⁷⁶

The ambition to empower local activists presents its own challenges. Firstly, grassroots groups, without sophisticated governance and reporting structures, can be disqualified from obtaining diplomatic funding, and diplomats can be prevented from committing to open-ended funding, making meaningful and long-term support difficult. Decisions about which groups should be supported for funding and visibility rely on decision-makers having the time and expertise to develop knowledge of the local activist and NGO landscape. Even in contexts where LGBTQ+ activism is marginalized and small-scale, LGBTQ+ civil society is multivocal, heterogeneous and often conflictual. During our research, we were regularly asked for advice by diplomats about who to fund, which Pride events to attend and asked about our knowledge of the local context for LGBTQ+ organizing. We welcomed these requests and were often able to help, but it did reveal the partial knowledge diplomats often have about local LGBTQ+ civil society, as well as the limitations on their time and resources to gain a sufficient understanding.

⁷³ Personal interview, Swedish diplomat, 16 May 2019, Havana, Cuba.

⁷⁴ Personal interview, EU diplomat, 4 Nov. 2018, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁷⁵ US Agency for International Development, *LGBTQI+ inclusive development policy*, 2023, available at https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/USAID_LGBTQI_Inclusive_Development_Policy_August2023.pdf.

⁷⁶ Elise Rainer, Phillip Ayoub, Katie McLain and Karen Chen, *Guide to inclusion of LGBTI people in development and foreign policy* (Mountain View, CA: Outright International, 2021), https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/GuideToInclusionRevised_Revised_OutrightInternational_4.pdf; Andrew Park and Lucas Mendes, *Guiding principles on the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in development policy and programs* (Stockholm: RFSL—Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights, 2018), https://www.rfsl.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/RFSL_Guiding-Principles_final_digital.pdf.

When some activist groups are chosen for support over others, certain identities, political orientations and strategies are also privileged. Our research suggests that groups deploying language and strategies drawing on models of activism that are predominant in western countries, such as universal human rights discourse, public advocacy work and LGBTQ+ terminology, are more likely to be recognized and intelligible to western diplomats, and to receive support and funding. Groups lacking the resources to network with western actors, using vernacular terminologies or prioritizing questions that are not part of the western LGBTQ+ 'toolbox' may have a harder time finding allies among western diplomats. In Mumbai, longstanding caste divides have been reinforced by a new elite of high-caste and financially privileged LGBTQ+ activists.⁷⁷ An Indian LGBTQ+ activist explained:

These diplomatic partners privilege some people over others. Some of these organizations have become the Who's Who of queer movement in India and most of them are upper caste. ... If I give a proposal to the Canadian Embassy, I don't think my proposal will get accepted. What these people talk about is [which] LGBT rights in India are compatible with what these countries think of LGBT rights. So for example: marriage—caste is not an issue in the West. I don't think any of these issues would translate, the West wouldn't think of caste pitching in.⁷⁸

A UK diplomat in Shanghai suggested that there was a tension between local activists' priorities and what the UK government was willing to support:

They were mainly focusing on throwing parties and doing lots of fun stuff, but because of the nature of our funding, obviously as a government, we would want to have ... policy advocacy roles in the project. ... So, we had a chat and then kind of helped structure the Pride a bit more in-depth and into more panel discussions, film events, or different, more diverse programmes instead of parties ... I'd like to think we actually helped shape the Shanghai Pride in a way that [was] going towards more substance instead of parties. I'm not against parties, it's just that the UK government can't be supporting parties ... we do want to do more advocacy, not discussions, but 'changing minds' kind of events, instead of film screenings.⁷⁹

While the argument that 'UK tax money can't be used to throw parties in China' may sound reasonable, the above quote also expresses a clear standard for what 'real' LGBTQ+ activism is: privileging public opinion-shaping and visible advocacy work rather than activities aimed at strengthening the community such as creating safe spaces or making the everyday more liveable for LGBTQ+ people. A Russian activist running an LGBTQ+ community centre in St Petersburg criticized western actors for preferring western-style advocacy over grassroots-oriented work:

My feeling is that European donors are mostly interested in advocacy and lobbying, in bringing more visibility to the community. [International LGBTQ+ organization]'s last

⁷⁷ Srila Roy, *Changing the subject: feminist and queer politics in neoliberal India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁷⁸ Personal interview, LGBTQ+ activist, 4 Feb. 2019, Mumbai, India.

⁷⁹ Personal interview, UK diplomat, 3 June 2018, Shanghai, China.

call was focused on external communication, which is simply dangerous in a country like Russia ... Most money has been going to [two Russian LGBTQ+ organizations], who engage in advocacy. We received few grants. Donors probably felt: Why should we give twenty, thirty or forty thousand euros to people who are only living their own life?⁸⁰

As suggested by the Russian activist, as well as the previously quoted activist in Mumbai, western actors' support and funding of LGBTQ+ groups, under the banner of 'following the lead of local activists', may have the unintended consequence of increasing hierarchies and stratification among activist groups. Some activists' voices are amplified through western support while those of others are further marginalized and rendered invisible. How reliance on international funding may reproduce hierarchies and elitism among civil society groups is well established in development research.⁸¹ However, our findings indicate that such dynamics may affect LGBTQ+ activism in specific ways—for example, differently to environmental or women's rights groups—especially when it comes to adopting western identity categories and visibility strategies, and at the risk of further marginalizing alternative subjectivities and forms of politics.

Balancing individual commitments vs policy consistency

A theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of the personal commitment of individual diplomats, something which is also evidenced by Janoff.⁸² Diplomats who themselves identify as LGBTQ+, or have been involved in LGBTQ+ activism at home, are more likely to prioritize LGBTQ+ issues in their diplomatic capacities. Personal commitment can thus lead to a stronger and more visible emphasis on LGBTQ+ diplomacy in certain places, something which blurs the boundaries between official and unofficial diplomacy, and can make LGBTQ+ diplomacy inconsistent (even within the same country) and fragile.

The dependency on individual commitment was present even in cases where support for LGBTQ+ rights was clearly backed by official policy, such as Sweden's feminist foreign policy (in force between 2014 and 2022). A former officer at the Swedish embassy in Moscow, engaged in LGBTQ+ issues both at home and in Russia during his posting there, recounted how, when reports came in about an anti-gay purge in Chechnya in 2017, Russian LGBTQ+ activists requested support for evacuation and relocation of LGBTQ+ Chechens. However, he could not repurpose the funds he had at his disposal, as they were not earmarked for such crisis support, and no other emergency funds were available. Instead, he used his personal network, connecting Russian activists to a Swedish charity which collected donations in support of evacuation and an LGBTQ+ shelter. Having

⁸⁰ Personal interview, LGBTQ+ activist, 12 May 2022, online.

⁸¹ Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash, 'NGOization, foreign funding, and the Nicaraguan civil society', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 25: 2, 2014, pp. 487–513, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9348-z>; Yimovie Sakue-Collins, '(Un)doing development: a postcolonial enquiry of the agenda and agency of NGOs in Africa', *Third World Quarterly* 42: 5, 2021, pp. 976–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014336597.2020.1791698>.

⁸² Janoff, *Queer diplomacy*.

collaborated with the Russian activists, for example in staging joint cultural events, the diplomat guaranteed to the Swedish funder that they could be trusted.⁸³ The importance of individual commitment was also illustrated by a UK diplomat, who explained how he had subverted the UK government's lack of financial commitment to LGBTQ+ rights funding at a certain point in time by 'hiding' the money needed to run an LGBTQ+ grassroots activist event at the embassy via a different budget code unrelated to LGBTQ+ rights.⁸⁴

The interrelationship between personal identity, beliefs and policy commitment is symbolized in the emergence of governmental 'special envoys'. In 2021 UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson appointed Lord Herbert as the UK Government's special envoy on LGBT rights. The creation of this post mirrored other LGBTQ+ special envoys appointed by the US, France and Italy. However, despite having an office and a small team focused on LGBTQ+ rights in the FCDO, Herbert was neither a government minister nor salaried. Speaking at an event hosted by the Baring Foundation in 2023, Herbert was notably out of step with his Conservative party government colleagues when he denounced conversion therapy, transphobia and 'culture wars' discourses.⁸⁵ Senior FCDO staff at the event commented in private afterwards that it was difficult to work in the areas of gender and LGBTQ+ advocacy, because although Herbert was personally committed, there was no high-level leadership or commitment to these issues.

At Mumbai Pride in 2019, the first to be held after the decriminalization of homosexuality in late 2018 by a Supreme Court ruling, staff from the British consulate carried a large rainbow Union Jack flag and the UK government's 'Love is Great' branded banners. This was the first time the UK consulate had been involved in India's largest Pride parade and was at the behest of a gay consular diplomat who had been posted to Mumbai before homosexuality was decriminalized.⁸⁶ This was his first posting abroad and he arrived with his civil partner, who unlike heterosexual spouses, did not have diplomatic immunity under Indian law. Stories circulated about LGBTQ+ diplomats and their partners being harassed. Participating in Mumbai Pride and celebrating the decriminalization of homosexuality in India was therefore borne out of deep personal commitment. However, despite the visible presence of the UK at Pride, the UK High Commissioner had never raised the issue of LGBTQ+ rights formally with the Indian government because of the overriding diplomatic priority of UK–India trade relations.

In South Africa, the posting of diplomats committed to gender and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy led to a new desire to become involved in LGBTQ+ advocacy in

⁸³ Personal interview, former Swedish diplomat, 10 March 2022, Stockholm, Sweden.

⁸⁴ Conway, fieldnotes.

⁸⁵ Conway, fieldnotes; Amelia Hansford, 'Rishi Sunak still repeating anti-trans "a woman is a woman" statement', *Pink News*, 6 Dec. 2023, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/12/06/rishi-sunak-common-sense-statement-repeated/> (accessed 24 March 2025). Herbert's government colleagues had also manoeuvred to have him sacked because of his progressive policy stances, see, Glen Owen and Brendan Carlin, 'Head of a police training body is at the centre of a Whitehall power struggle over his "woke" beliefs', *Daily Mail*, 3 Dec. 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12818747/Head-police-training-Whitehall-power-struggle-woke-beliefs.html> (accessed 24 March 2025).

⁸⁶ Personal interview, UK diplomat, 6 Feb. 2019, Mumbai, India.

the country. Two mid-ranking diplomats worked with Daniel Conway and the Gay and Lesbian (GALA) Queer Archives of South Africa to collaborate on events in 2022 and 2023 with the organizers of Soweto and Ekurhuleni Prides. Despite South Africa's constitutional protections for LGBTQ+ people, these Pride events have sought to highlight high rates of homophobic and gender-based violence.⁸⁷ A large diplomatic contingency participated at Soweto Pride in 2022, and the UK, EU and Germany have developed an ongoing financial partnership with the event. However, the routine turnover of diplomatic staff, changes in government funding and political priorities make sustained diplomatic involvement in LGBTQ+ rights issues in South Africa vulnerable.

Conclusion

This article makes a case for the importance of observing, documenting and analysing the everyday implementation and impacts of rainbow diplomacy on the ground. Observing quotidian practices of diplomacy reveals the nuances and contradictions in commitments to LGBTQ+ rights in foreign policy, as well as their impacts. While the existing literature documents the growth of international LGBTQ+ rights policies and their adaptation in foreign policy, there is a dearth of research on the actual enactment of these commitments by diplomatic missions. Our analysis demonstrates that everyday diplomatic involvement in LGBTQ+ advocacy and LGBTQ+ civil society can have significant positive impacts, such as raising the visibility of Pride events, providing safe spaces, expressing solidarity and funding local activists and civil society groups. However, it can also reinforce divisions between elite and grassroots activists, rewarding those who conform to western concepts of LGBTQ+ identities, priorities and forms of advocacy, and obscuring grassroots activists and the issues they face.

The platform for civil society and LGBTQ+ individuals that Pride provides makes it 'easy' as both a focus for LGBTQ+ diplomacy and a venue for diplomats to participate in and support, but it is not always the right vehicle. Visibility can be counterproductive and dangerous for LGBTQ+ communities under certain circumstances, and even in less hostile environments there can be a complex local politics. Therefore, poorly judged visible interventions in LGBTQ+ advocacy by western diplomats can put local activists at risk and feed into local narratives that LGBTQ+ identities are 'western'. Choosing to participate in one Pride event rather than another can privilege one set of activists and issues over another; as we have shown, there is a perception in some global South contexts that western embassies privilege groups that emphasize 'homonormative' issues—such as same-sex marriage—rather than local issues such as intersections of caste and queerness. Financial accountability requirements and political norms can lead to shaping Pride events in ways that affect the ideological and cultural nature of those events, such as moving away from socially motivated parties to more 'serious' kinds of activism or policy discussions. Pride events can meaningfully engage with

⁸⁷ Conway, 'Whose lifestyle matters at Johannesburg Pride?'.

grassroots activists and issues, or they can be a one-day celebratory party for the privileged few. Engaging with LGBTQ+ grassroots across the year is therefore important.

Local sensitivity and knowledge are crucial, but obtaining sufficient local knowledge of LGBTQ+ groups and causes can be challenging for diplomats, given their busy working lives, competing priorities and the transient nature of their postings. As we have demonstrated, individual commitments to LGBTQ+ rights advocacy can be deeply felt by diplomats and they can make a real difference in terms of funding, providing a safe space and raising visibility, but these commitments can quickly fall away when these individuals are posted elsewhere, or when national governments deprioritize LGBTQ+ rights support. For this reason, and as diplomats working in gender and LGBTQ+ advocacy have told us, clear and consistent leadership from national foreign ministries and the material resources to match policy commitments to LGBTQ+ rights are vital. Such leadership has been demonstrated, albeit with varying levels of success, for gender mainstreaming in foreign, diplomatic, security and development policies.⁸⁸ States also need to articulate how rainbow diplomacy corresponds with other foreign policy priorities, such as trade and security, and can be supported in relation to them. Further research is needed to document the evolving terrain and enactment of rainbow diplomacy in international and local terms, to analyse its consequences and consistency, and to inform best practice. It is important to continue monitoring and evaluating the impacts of rainbow diplomacy in everyday terms to assess the effectiveness of feminist, LGBTQ+ and human rights commitments in real terms.

⁸⁸ Jacqui True and Antje Wiener, 'Everyone wants (a) peace: the dynamics of rhetoric and practice on "Women, Peace and Security"', *International Affairs* 95: 3, 2019, pp. 553–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz027>.