



BASELINE STUDY ON LGBTQAI+ NEEDS IN DOMINICA

Final report

For MiRiDom and Lawyers without Borders
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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the Baseline Study on LGBTQAI+ Needs in Dominica, conducted under the ARCENCIEL project funded by Global Affairs Canada. The study was undertaken in the context of the April 2024 High Court ruling that decriminalised consensual same-sex relations, a landmark step for human rights in Dominica. However, the study finds that legal reform has not yet translated into meaningful improvements in lived experiences, access to services, or protection from discrimination.

Methodology: the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining 17 key informant interviews (KIIs) with LGBTQAI+ individuals and allies, and survey data collected during prior doctoral research on Gender and Sexual Minorities (GSM) participation in disaster and development processes. While planned focus group discussions could not be conducted due to low participation, reflecting broader issues of fear, stigma, and limited visibility, the available data provides a clear picture of lived realities and systemic gaps.

Key Findings:

- Persistent stigma, discrimination, and violence: GSM continue to face harassment, family rejection, and exclusion from employment and housing. Gendered patterns are evident, including heightened exposure to violence and sexualised stigma for women.
- Gap between legal reform and access to justice: awareness of the 2024 ruling remains uneven, and there is widespread misunderstanding of what legal changes mean in practice. Fear of exposure, mistrust in institutions, and weak reporting mechanisms continue to limit access to justice.
- Significant service and protection gaps: access to psychosocial support, safe spaces, and survivor-centred GBV services remains limited. Existing services are often perceived as unsafe or inaccessible due to stigma and confidentiality concerns.
- Economic and social exclusion: many individuals engage in self-censorship or withdraw from opportunities due to anticipated discrimination. Sexuality is often not the primary identity lens, which affects participation in advocacy and community structures.
- Fragile community infrastructure: Support systems rely heavily on informal networks and a small number of actors, leading to burnout and fragmentation.
- Institutional invisibility: GSM issues remain largely absent from policy frameworks. Existing programmes do not translate into broader rights-based inclusion.
- Compounded vulnerabilities in disaster and climate contexts: pre-existing exclusion is often exacerbated during crises, with limited consideration of LGBTQAI+ needs in resilience and response systems.

Recommendations

The report proposes a set of context-sensitive, advocacy-oriented recommendations focused on:

- Strengthening community-based safe spaces, psychosocial support, and leadership
- Improving access to inclusive, confidential health, social, and protection services
- Expanding practical rights awareness and legal literacy
- Supporting incremental institutional change through engagement with service providers and policymakers
- Integrating GSM inclusion into national priorities on gender equality, resilience, and social cohesion
- Advancing targeted legal and policy reforms, including anti-discrimination protections
- Building toward longer-term legal recognition and equality, through phased and strategic advocacy

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	5
2. Country context and problem framing.....	6
3. Legal and policy landscape	7
3.1 Current legal context: what has changed and what has not	7
3.2 Rights protection gaps	8
3.3 Institutional mandates and accountability	8
4. Methodology and approach.....	9
4.1 Contextual considerations	9
4.2 Data collection methods	10
4.3 Data analysis	10
4.4 Ethical considerations	11
5. Findings: lived realities, rights, and inclusion	11
5.1 Stigma, discrimination, and violence.....	11
5.2. Legal awareness and access to justice	13
5.3 Services and protection gaps	13
5.4 Economic and social (ex)clusion	14
5.5 Community infrastructure, leadership, and internal dynamics	14
5.6 Institutions and policy visibility	15
5.7 Disasters, climate stressors, and compounded vulnerability	15
6. Synthesis: what the evidence says	16
7. Recommendations for advocacy.....	18
7.1. Advocacy entry points	18
7.2. Advocacy agenda and recommendations.....	18
8. Conclusion	21
Annexes	22
Annexe 1: Anonymised KII interview list	22

Annexe 2: Key Informant Interview (KII) guide	23
Annex 3: Recruitment posters for the online survey	24

1. Introduction

The legal landscape for sexual and gender minorities in Dominica has shifted significantly in recent years. The April 2024 High Court ruling, which struck down provisions criminalising consensual same-sex relations, marked an important milestone in advancing human rights and dignity. However, LGBTQAI+ individuals (thereafter Gender and Sexual Minorities or GSM) in Dominica continue to face persistent issues and challenges in their everyday lives.

This report presents the findings of the **Baseline Study on LGBTQAI+ Needs in Dominica**, implemented under the ARCENCiEL project, funded by Global Affairs Canada. The study was designed to generate evidence and community-informed insights to support advocacy, policy reform, and programmatic action. It focuses in particular on the experiences of women and other vulnerable groups within the LGBTQAI+ community, while situating these findings within broader national priorities around gender equality, social cohesion, and resilience.

Importantly, the study aligns with Dominica’s Climate Resilience and Recovery Plan (2020–2030), which emphasises “leaving no one behind,” strengthening communities, and promoting dignity and respect¹. This study also builds on the current draft of the national gender policy. While both these policies provide a strong foundation for equity and inclusion², gender and sexual diversity remain largely absent from existing policy frameworks. This report therefore seeks to bridge that gap by documenting lived realities, identifying systemic barriers, and proposing actionable recommendations to support more inclusive policy and legal environments.

The findings are based on a combination of key informant interviews and existing survey data, and are intended to inform both national advocacy efforts and broader regional dialogue. Ultimately, the report aims to support a shift from symbolic legal progress toward practical, enforceable inclusion, ensuring that rights are not only recognised, but realised in everyday life.

¹ Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica (2020). Climate Resilience and Recovery Plan (2020-2030). Available here: <https://odm.gov.dm/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CRRP-Final-042020.pdf>

² IRFC (2021). Integrating CCA and DRR laws and policies towards a climate-resilient development. Lessons from The Commonwealth of Dominica. Available here: https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster_law/2021-04/20210407_Dominica_Policy.pdf

2. Country context and problem framing

Across the Caribbean, the legal and social landscape for gender and sexual minorities (GSM) has changed over the past few years. The changes have been important, but uneven: while the extent of formal legal inequities has declined in several some area, GSM populations continue to experience fewer legal protections and benefits than heterosexual and non-gender-variant populations³. These gaps are not only legal, but are also reinforced by social norms, institutional practices, and governance systems that shape access to rights, services, and opportunities.

In Caribbean countries, sexuality is treated as a private matter, with cultural expectations around discretion and respectability⁴. For GSM, this norm translates into an invisibilisation in both public life and policy processes. As a result, GSM populations remain largely absent from national data systems, development planning, and sectoral policies, including those related to health, social protection, disaster risk management, and climate change adaptation. This invisibility has direct implications for legal recognition and service provision, as well as the allocation of resources to address these related issues.

The legal and political landscape of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean is mostly shaped by colonial legacies and the religious influence emerging from them. However, across the Region, legal contexts remain heterogeneous. In Cuba, same-sex relations were decriminalised in 1979, and the 2022 Family Code introduced recognition of same-sex marriage, civil unions, and adoption rights. In contrast, while same-sex activity has long been legal in the Dominican Republic, there is no formal recognition of same-sex relationships or associated rights. In English-speaking Caribbean countries, anti-buggery laws, many of which are still in place or were only recently repealed, originate from Section 377 of the British colonial legal code. These laws criminalised consensual same-sex intimacy and were historically justified through moral frameworks based in Victorian-era norms reinforced by Christian doctrines⁵. Beyond their legal function, such laws have played an important role in legitimising stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion.

In recent years, there has been a wave of legal challenges and reforms across the region. Anti-buggery laws have been repealed in Trinidad and Tobago (2018), and more recently in Antigua

³ Malta, M., Cardoso, R., Montenegro, L., De Jesus, J. G., Seixas, M., Benevides, B., Das Dores Silva, M., LeGrand, S., & Whetten, K. (2019). Sexual and gender minorities rights in Latin America and the Caribbean: A multi-country evaluation. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 19(1), 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-019-0217-3>

⁴ Agard-Jones, V. (2009). *Le Jeu de Qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean*. 19.

⁵ Harris, L. A., & Pires, R. G. (2015). "It's always a means to an end": Queering the Caribbean Literary Space in *Valmiki's Daughter*. *Ilha Do Desterro*, 68, 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2015v68n2p103>

Thomas, D. A. (2004). *Modern blackness: Nationalism, globalization, and the politics of culture in Jamaica*. Duke University Press.

and Barbuda, Barbados, and Saint Kitts and Nevis (all in 2022)⁶. In Dominica, similar provisions under the Sexual Offences Act were challenged before the High Court in September 2022, with a landmark ruling repealing these 2 laws done in September 2024. These rulings represent significant progress in aligning national legal frameworks with constitutional protections and international human rights standards.

Despite these legal advances, gaps persist between legal reforms and the everyday lived experiences. Legal change has not automatically translated into improved safety, inclusion, or access to justice for GSM across the region, and particularly in Dominica. This disconnect highlights the importance of understanding stigma not only as a social phenomenon but more widely, as a governance issue. Informal norms, such as expectations of heteronormativity, moral judgments informed by religion, and the politics of respectability⁷ continue to shape how social institutions function in practice. These norms influence the behaviour of public officials, the responsiveness of services, and the willingness of GSM individuals to seek support or report abuses.

In Dominica specifically, this dynamic is particularly important. While legal reform has started, GSM individuals continue to navigate a context where visibility carries risk, and where social and institutional protections remain limited. The absence of explicit anti-discrimination protections, combined with limited institutional capacity, lack of political and social will for change and social stigma, contributes to barriers in accessing healthcare, justice, employment, and social services. These challenges are further reinforced in contexts of crisis, including climate-related disasters, where pre-existing inequalities can be amplified and where informal networks often determine access to assistance⁸.

3. Legal and policy landscape

3.1 Current legal context: what has changed and what has not

Dominica has experienced a significant legal shift with the repeal of provisions under the Sexual Offences Act that criminalised consensual same-sex relations between adults⁹. This reform

⁶ Dickson, A., Loft, P., Robinson T., Walker N. (2022). LGBT+ rights and issues in the Caribbean. Commons Library Research Briefing. Retrieved from: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9436/CBP-9436.pdf>.

⁷ See Agard-Jones, V. (2009). *Le Jeu de Qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean*. 19.

⁸ Hill, L. S. (2025). Identities in Disasters: opportunities and challenges for developing inclusive disaster risk governance networks for gender and sexual minorities in Dominica and neighbouring small Caribbean islands. *Queering Disasters, Climate Change and Humanitarian Crises*, 313-333

⁹ Human Rights Watch (2024). Dominica High Court Decriminalizes Same-Sex Conduct. Article available at : <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/24/dominica-high-court-decriminalizes-same-sex-conduct>

removes the legal basis for the criminalisation of same-sex relations and, in principle, reduces the risk of arrest and prosecution on the basis of sexual orientation.

However, the scope of this reform is limited. The repeal does not, in itself, establish protections for GSM. There are currently no comprehensive legal provisions that explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. The reform also does not address the broader issues related to the recognition of relationships, family rights, or legal gender recognition. As a result, while decriminalisation removes an important legal barrier, it does not guarantee protection from discrimination, violence, or exclusion in everyday life. The gap between legal reform and lived experience is still significant.

3.2 Rights protection gaps

Despite progress in decriminalisation, important gaps persist related to the protection of rights. First, the absence of explicit anti-discrimination legislation leaves GSM individuals without clear legal option in cases of unequal access in employment, housing, education, or services. Discrimination do occur in practice (with several cases informally recoded by MiRiDom) but remains difficult to challenge formally.

Second, gender-based violence (GBV) frameworks do not systematically recognise or respond to the specific risks faced by GSM individuals. Existing GBV policies and services are mostly designed around assumptions of gender binary and heteronormativity, which often exclude or inadequately support LGBTQ+ survivors, particularly transgender individuals and lesbian or bisexual women facing “corrective” violence or intimate partner abuse.

Third, there are limited protections against hate speech, harassment, and other forms of targeted abuse. While general provisions related to public order or assault may apply, they do not capture the specific nature or impact of identity-based violence, nor do they provide specific mechanisms for reporting and addressing these cases.

Finally, structural barriers, such as fear of outing, stigma, and overall lack of trust in institutions, further limit access to justice. Even where potential legal avenues for support might exist in theory, they could be underutilised in practice due to these intersecting constraints.

3.3 Institutional mandates and accountability

Responsibility for advancing equality and protection for GSM should be spread across several institutions, including the Bureau of Gender Affairs, the Ministry of Health, social services, and the justice sector. However, in practice, institutional responsibilities related to sexual orientation and gender identity remain either implicit or absent. Institutions that are positioned to address aspects of GSM inclusion, such as gender equality bodies or GBV response systems, often lack the policy guidance, technical capacity, willingness or political mandate to do so explicitly. At the same time, accountability mechanisms are weak or inexistant on these aspects. There are few formal

processes to monitor discrimination, track cases, or ensure that public institutions uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination in their service delivery.

This institutional vacuum creates a situation where support for GSM individuals is often informal, dependent on individual allies within the system rather than embedded in standard procedures. As a result, responses are inconsistent and difficult to scale, and individuals have limited avenues to seek support and justice when rights are abused.

4. Methodology and approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data to generate a better understanding of the lived realities GSMs in Dominica. The methodology was designed to capture diverse perspectives across stakeholder groups while ensuring the safety, confidentiality, and meaningful participation of individuals in a difficult context.

The approach was guided by principles of inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and “do no harm,” using an intersectional and rights-based framework. A particular attention was given to the ways in which gender, sexuality, and other social factors interacted to shape experiences of exclusion, access to services, and engagement with institutions.

4.1 Contextual considerations

Dominica’s small island context significantly shaped both the research process and the findings. With a population of approximately 70,000¹⁰, social networks are highly interconnected, and individuals often occupy overlapping roles across family, professional, and community spheres¹¹. While this can foster community cohesion, it also increases risks related to visibility, confidentiality, and social repercussions for GSM.

In this context, participation in research on LGBTQ+ issues carried potential risks, including exposure, stigma, and social exclusion. These dynamics influenced both the design and implementation of this methodology. In particular, they contributed to limited participation in group-based data collection methods and reinforced the need for more individual, confidential and flexible approaches. As a result, the study prioritised methods that allowed for anonymity and one-on-one engagement, while still capturing a range of perspectives.

¹⁰ According to the 2011 census. Available at <https://stats.gov.dm/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2011-Population-and-Housing-Census.pdf>

¹¹ Hill, L. S., Pittman, J., & Armitage, D. (2025). Fostering effective intersectional disaster risk governance in Dominica: the role of social networks and trust in information dissemination. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 126, 105612.

4.2 Data collection methods

The methodology initially proposed a combination of focus group discussions (FGDs), individual interviews, and surveys. However, due to low participation in group settings, potentially reflecting concerns around confidentiality, FGDs could not be conducted as planned. The methodology was therefore adapted to rely on individual interviews and existing survey data.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): a total of 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, civil society actors, and allies. These interviews provided detailed insights into lived experiences, perceptions of legal and social change, access to services, and priorities for advocacy. The use of one-on-one interviews enabled participants to share more openly in a confidential setting.

Survey data (secondary use): to complement qualitative findings, the study drew on survey data collected as part of prior doctoral research on LGBTQ+ participation in disaster risk governance in Dominica¹². The online survey was created on the platform Qualtrics and was disseminated by social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat) and local formal and informal LGBTQ+ organisations' WhatsApp groups. The survey (n=38) was conducted to elicit insights specifically from GSM in Dominica (n=17) mainly and the Caribbean Region more widely (n=11) and understand their involvement within disaster governance processes in the region¹³. This dataset provided additional quantitative and perception-based insights, from both community members around the island and GSMs, particularly in relation to social inclusion, participation, and experiences of exclusion in institutional processes. The integration of this dataset strengthened the triangulation process and provided analytical depth of the study.

Adapted engagement approach: while broader public perception surveys and structured group discussions were initially envisaged, participation constraints highlighted the challenges of conducting open discussions on sensitive topics in Dominica. This limitation was itself treated as an important finding, reflecting the broader climate of caution and invisibility that shapes SGM engagement in public and research spaces.

4.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data from KIIs were analysed using a thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns, divergences, and key narratives across respondents. The analysis focused on understanding not only individual experiences but also the structural and institutional factors shaping these experiences. Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends

¹²The original research received formal ethics clearance from Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo (ORE# 42692).

¹³ Hill, L. (2024). Understanding island-wide intersectional disaster risk governance: the place of social networks in the Commonwealth of Dominica. University of Waterloo Doctoral Thesis. Available here: <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstreams/57179e1f-3f98-495f-b97e-94bed17b6878/download>

and complement qualitative insights. The combination of these methods enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both lived realities and broader social dynamics.

All findings were interpreted through an intersectional and rights-based lens, with attention to how different identities and social positions influenced exposure to risk, access to resources, and engagement with institutions. The analysis also drew on existing research conducted by the author, including prior work on LGBTQ+ participation in disaster governance, to contextualise findings within broader governance and resilience frameworks.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, strict ethical protocols were followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity, and identifying information was removed from all analysis and reporting.

Data were collected and stored securely and were used solely for the purposes of this study and associated advocacy efforts. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the process. The study adhered to ethical standards aligned with human rights-based approaches and international best practices for research involving marginalised and at-risk populations. Particular care was taken to minimise harm, avoid unintended disclosure, and ensure that participation did not increase vulnerability for any individual involved.

5. Findings: lived realities, rights, and inclusion

5.1 Stigma, discrimination, and violence

Across both the interviews and the survey data, stigma remains one of the key factors shaping the lives of GSM in Dominica. While the legal context has changed, the everyday experiences of discrimination, stigma and exclusion stay the same. The following key insights emerged from both discussion with and from the online survey:

Managing everyday discrimination: KII respondents consistently described a context where being openly LGBTQ+ is still perceived as risky. While some KII mentioned that this perception could also stem from self-censorship, many highlighted the need to “manage visibility” in daily life: at work, within families, and in public spaces. This aligns with findings from the survey in previous research where 72% of the GSM respondents have indicated that they have to hide some or all

aspect of their gender and/or sexual identities in order to live and cope within their respective communities¹⁴.

Public harassment was described as frequent but often normalised. Verbal abuse, ridicule, and social exclusion were reported across multiple interviews. This was echoed in the survey: GSM cited that they have faced emotional abuse (19%), financial abuse (19%) psychological abuse (15%) and verbal abuse (12%)¹⁵. Further, these experiences rarely escalate into formal complaints, reinforcing a cycle where discrimination remains both visible and not addressed.

Another aspect of the stigma express relates to family rejection and housing insecurity. Several KII participants highlighted family rejection as a key issue, particularly for younger individuals. This can lead to housing instability or, here again, forced concealment of identity. Similarly, informal conversations with GSM insecurity due to limited work opportunity, especially for members our choose to openly express their gender and sexual identities. While not always resulting in homelessness, it creates conditions of dependency and vulnerability.

In addition, discrimination in employment and economic precarity emerged both as experienced and anticipated. Respondents reported avoiding certain jobs or workplaces due to fear of discrimination, which is consistent with the survey findings showing reduced participation and visibility in formal institutional spaces.

Finally, gendered patterns of violence and stigma are also prominent. The data and the KII interviews also show differentiated experiences across gender identities:

- Gay and bisexual men reported higher exposure to public harassment and policing of behaviour.
- Lesbian and bisexual women highlighted risks of sexualised stigma, including threats of “corrective” violence.
- Trans individuals faced compounded stigma, particularly linked to visibility and non-conformity to gender norms.

These patterns reflect how stigma is widespread but structured through gender norms and expectations.

¹⁴ Hill, L. S. (2025). Identities in Disasters: opportunities and challenges for developing inclusive disaster risk governance networks for gender and sexual minorities in Dominica and neighbouring small Caribbean islands. *Queering Disasters, Climate Change and Humanitarian Crises*, 313-333

¹⁵ Hill, L. (2024). Understanding island-wide intersectional disaster risk governance: the place of social networks in the Commonwealth of Dominica. University of Waterloo Doctoral Thesis. Available here: <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstreams/57179e1f-3f98-495f-b97e-94bed17b6878/download>

5.2. Legal awareness and access to justice

There is a limited understanding among participants regarding the implication of legal change. While some respondents were aware of the repeal of anti-buggery laws, many respondents expressed uncertainty about what this change means in practice and in their every days lives. The perception that “nothing has really changed” was common, reflecting a disconnect between legal reform and lived experience.

Discussion with KII revealed key gaps in the community’s awareness of their rights. In general, GSMs indicated that they have limited knowledge of their rights and protections available to them. Respondents were often unsure:

- what constitutes discrimination legally,
- where to report incidents, and
- what outcomes to expect.

This lack of clarity reduces the likelihood of seeking reparation. In addition, several barriers exist regarding reporting issues and accessing justice. In fact, even where individuals were aware of potential recourse, multiple barriers prevent engagement with formal systems:

- Fear of being outed or exposed, especially since communities are small and that “everyone knows everyone”
- Mistrust of institutions, particularly law enforcement
- Perception that complaints will not lead to meaningful action
- Practical constraints (time, cost, accessibility)

KII respondents emphasised that reporting discrimination could “make things worse,” especially in a small island context where anonymity is difficult to maintain. As a result, most incidents of discrimination and violence remain unreported, reinforcing institutional invisibility.

5.3 Services and protection gaps

Respondents from both the KII and the survey point to a significant lack of services specifically designed for LGBTQ+ individuals. Where services exist (e.g. health or GBV support), they are not consistently inclusive, and here again, anonymity is difficult to maintain.

Another recurring theme in the KIIs and the surveys was the absence of safe, confidential spaces for support or even just for community building. Mental health needs were highlighted, particularly in relation to stigma, isolation, and identity concealment. However, support systems remain largely informal and rely on trusted individuals rather than structured services.

Gaps in GBV and protection pathways: Existing GBV frameworks do not adequately capture or respond to LGBTQ+ experiences. Respondents noted:

- lack of recognition of same-sex intimate partner violence
- discomfort accessing services perceived as heteronormative
- absence of survivor-centred referral pathways

Younger LGBTQ+ individuals were also identified as particularly at risk, with limited access to safe spaces, information, and protection mechanisms. Overall, protection systems are not designed with LGBTQ+ realities in mind, resulting in exclusion even where services formally exist.

5.4 Economic and social (ex)clusion

Findings indicate both direct and indirect forms of economic exclusion. While open discrimination is not always reported, many individuals anticipate negative consequences and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This creates situations of self-censorships that includes avoiding certain sectors or roles for employment and/or concealing their gender and sexual identity in professional settings with the consequences of potentially limiting career aspirations. Further, responses to the survey also show lower levels of participation in community and national formal governance processes and institutions among GSM.

The findings also highlight that sexual orientation is not always the primary lens through which individuals understand or prioritise their identity. Some respondents emphasised the multidimensional nature of their experiences, noting that sexuality is only one aspect among others such as gender, socioeconomic status, or social roles. In some cases, individuals rejected or distanced themselves from the LGBTQ+ label altogether, framing their identity instead in terms of personal autonomy and privacy, for example, as “the freedom to sleep with whoever they want” (GSM respondent, male, Dominica).

Overall, the social stigma that GSM face also drives social withdrawal. Respondents described sometimes limiting participation in community events to avoid negative attention. This potentially leads to reduced social capital, isolation and limited access to opportunities and support networks¹⁶. In practice, exclusion is often internalised and self-reinforcing.

5.5 Community infrastructure, leadership, and internal dynamics

In the absence of formal services, GSM individuals rely heavily on informal networks; mainly trusted friends, community leaders, or allies¹⁷. they have indicated that these “go-to” individuals play a critical role in providing support and guidance. However, this model is not sustainable:

¹⁶ Kempadoo, K. (2009). Caribbean Sexuality – Mapping the Field. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, (3).

Agard-Jones, V. (2009). *Le Jeu de Qui?/1 Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean*. 19.

Dunn, L. (2016). Integrating men and masculinities in Caribbean disaster risk management. In *Men, Masculinities and Disaster* (pp. 209–218). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678122-18>

¹⁷ Hill, L. S. (2025). Identities in Disasters: opportunities and challenges for developing inclusive disaster risk governance networks for gender and sexual minorities in Dominica and neighbouring small Caribbean islands. *Queering Disasters, Climate Change and Humanitarian Crises*, 313-333

community leaders, advocates and the more visible members of the GSM community reported high levels of fatigue, burnout and limited resources. Much of the work is voluntary, with little institutional or financial support.

The data also points to fragmentation within the community and advocacy space. This affects the coordination of efforts, the ability to engage with institutions and visibility of issues at the national, regional and international levels. As a result, advocacy remains limited in scale and impact.

5.6 Institutions and policy visibility

A consistent finding across for both KIIs and survey respondent is that LGBTQ+ issues are largely absent from national policies. Where inclusion is referenced in policies, strategies and plans, it is often implicit or general, rather than explicit and actionable. Some respondents identified individuals within government or services who are supportive. However, this support is still very much informal, inconsistent and not institutionalised. This creates uneven access to services and reinforces dependence on personal relationships rather than rights-based systems.

Specifically, regarding HIV prevention programing, several respondents noted that existing engagement with LGBTQ+ populations is largely limited to HIV-related interventions. While important, this does not address broader issues of rights, protection, and inclusion.

5.7 Disasters, climate stressors, and compounded vulnerability

As an Island, Dominica increasingly faces the impact of climate change and climate-related hazards. Findings highlight that LGBTQ+ individuals face additional barriers in disaster and climate-related contexts¹⁸. Survey data shows limited participation of LGBTQ+ individuals in disaster planning and response processes. This reduces their ability to influence decisions that affect them. Further, KIIs and prior research point to concerns around safety in shelters, discrimination in relief distribution and reliance on informal networks for support

¹⁸ Dunn, L. (2016). Integrating men and masculinities in Caribbean disaster risk management. In *Men, Masculinities and Disaster* (pp. 209–218). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678122-18>

Hill, L. S. (2025). Identities in Disasters: Opportunities and challenges for developing inclusive disaster risk governance networks for gender and sexual minorities in Dominica and neighbouring small Caribbean islands. In D. Dominey-Howes, A. Rushton, W. Leonard, M. Cianfarani, L. Overton, & H. Wu (Eds.), *Queering Disasters, Climate Change and Humanitarian Crises* (pp. 313–333). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-3857-4_20

Haworth, B. T., Barros Cassal, L. C., & de Paula Muniz, T. (2022). ‘No-one knows how to care for LGBT community like LGBT do’: LGBTQIA+ experiences of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom and Brazil. *Disasters*, n/a(n/a). <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12565>

Fordham, M. (2012). Gender, Sexuality and Disaster. In *Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction*. Routledge.

In addition, pre-existing stigma and exclusion are amplified during crises¹⁹. When access to resources becomes more limited, those already marginalised are more likely to be excluded.

6. Synthesis: what the evidence says

Taken together, these findings point to a clear conclusion: legal reform has not yet translated into meaningful improvements in the safety, dignity, or overall inclusion for LGBTQ+ people in Dominica. While the recent repeal of anti-buggery laws represents an important milestone, it has had limited impact on everyday realities. As highlighted by respondents, the change is often misunderstood, unevenly known, and disconnected from how people experience discrimination in their daily lives. This reflects a broader structural gap where laws change, but the systems, social norms, and institutions that shape GSM's lived experiences remain largely intact.

At the core of this gap are a set of reinforcing drivers of exclusion. First, embedded social norms, including religious values and the politics of respectability (Agard-Jones, 2009) continue to define what is considered acceptable visibility. Across interviews, acceptance was often conditional: individuals may be tolerated “as long as they are not too visible.” This creates a system where rights exist in theory, but whose application is limited in practice. However, this yields a conundrum: if “everyone knows everyone”, why the fear of being outed is so important in the community? Second, institutional ambiguity and weak mandates mean that no single entity is clearly responsible for advancing GSM inclusion or at the very least, recognition. Support, where it exists, is often informal, dependent on individuals or single organisations rather than systems, and therefore inconsistent and not sustainable. Third, weak reporting and accountability mechanisms, combined with fear of exposure and mistrust of institutions, result in widespread underreporting of discrimination and violence. Finally, fear itself operates as a structural barrier, shaping behaviour, limiting participation, and reinforcing self-exclusion even in the absence of direct and open discrimination.

These dynamics do not affect all individuals equally. The evidence highlights clear patterns of differentiated vulnerability. Men, particularly those perceived as visibly gay, face more direct and public forms of harassment, while women experience more sexualised forms of stigma and increased risks of gender-based violence, including “corrective” violence. Youth emerge as a particularly vulnerable group, navigating identity formation in a context of strong social control,

¹⁹ King, D. (2022). Hearing Minority Voices: Institutional Discrimination Towards LGBTQ in Disaster and Recovery. *Journal of Extreme Events*, 2241005. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2345737622410056>

Yamashita, A., Gomez, C., & Dombroski, K. (2017). Segregation, exclusion and LGBT people in disaster impacted areas: Experiences from the *Higashinohon Dai - Shinsai* (Great East-Japan Disaster). *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(1), 64–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276887>

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and SEROVie. (2011). The Impact of the Earthquake, and Relief and Recovery Programs on Haitian LGBT People. Retrieved from: <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/504-1.pdf>

limited support systems, and fear of family rejection. At the same time, visibility itself becomes a key determinant of risk: those who are more visible or perceived as non-conforming face higher exposure to discrimination (Haworth et al., 2022; Hill, 2025; King, 2022). Socioeconomic factors further shape vulnerability, as individuals with fewer resources have less ability to mitigate risks, relocate, or access alternative support systems.

At a systems level, the findings also highlight how exclusion is reproduced through invisibility. GSM are largely absent from policy frameworks, data systems, and institutional mandates across the country, and more widely, across the English-Speaking Caribbean²⁰. Where engagement exists, mainly regarding HIV programming, it remains narrow in scope and does not translate into broader rights-based change. This invisibility limits both recognition and resourcing and reinforces the perception that GSM issues are marginal or secondary.

However, the evidence also shows that there are foundations that can be built upon to strengthen the community. Informal support networks play a critical role in protecting members of the community, with individuals relying on trusted community members for guidance, information, and support. While fragile and under-resourced, these networks demonstrate existing forms of leadership and solidarity. More broadly, the research highlights the importance of kinship, belonging, and community-based trust in shaping access to information and support systems, particularly in times of crisis. The “Koud’min” ethos—mutual aid and collective support—can, in some contexts, transcend identity-based divisions and provide entry points for more inclusive approaches (Hill et al., 2025).

There are also emerging opportunities within the broader policy environment. National commitments to resilience, social cohesion, and “leaving no one behind” create a foundation that can be leveraged to advance inclusion, even where explicit references to GSM are currently absent²¹. Similarly, sectoral entry points, such as the gender policy review and update process, GBV frameworks, health systems, and disaster risk management, offer practical pathways to integrate inclusion without necessarily relying on highly politicised debates.

From an advocacy perspective, these findings also suggest that the challenge is not only legal, but systemic. Efforts focused solely on legal reform are unlikely to deliver meaningful change unless they are accompanied by clear institutional mandates and accountability mechanisms, practical and accessible rights awareness, safe and trusted reporting pathways, and investment in community-level support systems. More importantly, the data also points to the need for a strategic and context-sensitive approach to advocacy. Several respondents cautioned against approaches that are perceived as externally driven or disconnected from local realities and

²⁰ Dickson, A., Loft, P., Robinson T., Walker N. (2022). LGBT+ rights and issues in the Caribbean. Commons Library Research Briefing. Retrieved from: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9436/CBP-9436.pdf>.

²¹ See for instance in IFRC, 2021.

emphasised the importance of adjusting progress between visibility and reform to avoid pushbacks. Framing advocacy around dignity, safety, and economic participation, rather than identity alone, could be more effective and more aligned with broader societal priorities.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that advancing GSM inclusion in Dominica requires shifting from a focus on legal recognition to a broader agenda of institutional change, social norm transformation, and practical access to rights. Without this shift, the gap between formal equality and lived reality is likely to persist.

7. Recommendations for advocacy

7.1. Advocacy entry points

Despite these challenges, several policy and institutional entry points offer opportunities to advance GSM inclusion in Dominica.

The ongoing development and revision of the National Gender Policy represents a key opportunity to explicitly integrate sexual orientation and gender identity within broader gender equality frameworks. Aligning GSM inclusion with national commitments to equality and non-discrimination can provide a legitimate and strategic pathway for policy reform.

Human rights mechanisms, both national and international, also provide entry points for advocacy. Engagement with constitutional protections, as well as regional and international human rights reporting processes, can help strengthen accountability and visibility of SGM-related issues. In addition, sectoral policies offer practical avenues for integration. Health strategies, particularly those related to mental health, HIV, and primary care, can incorporate non-discrimination principles and inclusive service delivery standards. Similarly, disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation policies which are central to Dominica's development agenda, present an opportunity to address the specific vulnerabilities of SGM populations, particularly in relation to access to shelters, relief services, and recovery support.

Taken together, these entry points suggest that while comprehensive legal reform remains a longer-term objective, there are immediate opportunities to advance inclusion through policy integration, institutional strengthening, and targeted advocacy across sectors.

7.2. Advocacy agenda and recommendations

1. Strengthen community-based safe spaces and support systems

The first priority is to invest in safe, discreet, and community-led spaces where GSM, in particular for particularly women and youth, can access psychosocial support, share experiences, and build trust. The findings show that because support currently relies on essential but informal networks,

they are overstretched and unsustainable. Strengthening these spaces through small, sustained funding and partnerships with trained social workers can improve mental health outcomes, reduce isolation, and reinforce community cohesion. To minimise risks, these spaces should remain low-visibility, trust-based, and embedded within broader wellbeing or community initiatives, rather than explicitly labelled. This approach aligns the urgent protection gap identified in the research.

2. Expand access to inclusive and confidential services

Second, improving access to health, social, and protection services is a practical and immediate entry point for change. Rather than creating parallel systems, the focus should be on strengthening existing services and making them safe, confidential, and non-discriminatory in practice. Key entry points include primary healthcare services (including sexual and reproductive health, HIV services, and mental health support), social welfare and counselling services, and protection systems such as police services, community policing units, and GBV response mechanisms. In addition, youth services and school-based counselling, as well as legal aid and paralegal support services, represent critical access points, particularly for younger and more vulnerable individuals.

Improving access within these services involves strengthening confidentiality protocols, ensuring respectful and non-judgemental interactions, and enabling individuals to seek support without fear of exposure or discrimination. This can be achieved through targeted capacity building and engagement with service providers, supported by simple guidelines as well as formal and/or informal training. Finally, framing these efforts as improving service quality, trust, and accessibility for all users, rather than targeting a specific group, can help reduce resistance while delivering tangible benefits. This approach directly supports national commitments to “leaving no one behind” in service delivery, while strengthening the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of public institutions.

3. Build practical, community-based rights awareness and legal literacy

There is a clear need to improve understanding of rights and available protections, but this must be done in a way that is practical, relevant, and grounded in lived realities. Rather than formal legal education, efforts should focus on accessible, scenario-based information e.g. what to do in case of discrimination, where to go for help, and how to navigate institutions safely. This can be delivered through trusted community networks, peer-to-peer approaches, and low-visibility communication channels (e.g. website and social media). Strengthening legal literacy in this way supports access to justice without increasing exposure, and reinforces the role of the law as a tool for empowerment, in line with ARCENCiEL’s objectives.

4. Support and sustain community leadership and collective organising

The study highlights both the presence of leadership and the limitations caused by burnout, fragmentation, and lack of resources. Strengthening the community's ability to organise, coordinate, and engage in advocacy is therefore critical. This includes providing core support to community leaders and organisations, facilitating coordination and trust-building within the community, and supporting the development of a more cohesive advocacy voice. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that women, youth and other underrepresented groups are supported within leadership structures. A stronger, more connected community base will improve both service access and advocacy effectiveness, while reducing reliance on informal and inconsistent support systems.

5. Engage institutions through incremental and relationship-based approaches

Rather than relying solely on formal reform, there is an opportunity to work with existing institutions through gradual engagement. While there is official pushback from the government, the findings show that informal allies already exist within government and services, but their efforts are not institutionalised.

Building on these entry points, for instance through dialogue, joint activities, and practical collaboration, can help incorporate inclusive practices over time. This includes working with actors in health, gender, youth, and social services to integrate inclusion into their existing mandates. Positioning this engagement around improving service delivery, strengthening communities, and enhancing resilience, rather than identity-based advocacy, can reduce resistance and create space for more open discussion and progress.

6. Advance legal and policy change through phased and context-sensitive advocacy

While immediate priorities should focus on improving safety and access to services, addressing key legal protection gaps remains essential for long-term change. Advocacy efforts should prioritise the progressive introduction of non-discrimination protections in employment, housing, and access to public services, as well as the strengthening of protections against gender-based violence, harassment, and hate-motivated incidents within existing legal and policy frameworks. In the short to medium term, this can be pursued through sectoral policy reforms (e.g. labour policies, GBV frameworks, service delivery standards) and the adoption of confidentiality and non-discrimination protocols within public institutions. Over time, these efforts can lay the groundwork for more comprehensive legal protections. At the same time, there is a need to strengthen access to justice in practice, including through support to legal aid services, community-based paralegal initiatives, and the capacity of civil society to document cases and accompany individuals in seeking support.

7. Advance anti-discrimination protections and, over time, legal recognition of relationships

While immediate efforts should prioritise safety, services, and community strengthening, the absence of explicit legal protections remains a structural barrier to equality. Over time, this gap will need to be addressed through the introduction of anti-discrimination protections covering key areas such as employment, housing, and access to services.

Advocacy in this area should be phased and strategic. In the near term, efforts can focus on building the case for non-discrimination through evidence, policy dialogue, and integration into existing frameworks (such as gender policy, social protection, and labour standards). This helps establish the principle of equal treatment in ways that are aligned with national priorities and reduces the risk of social and government backlash.

In the longer term, and as social and institutional readiness evolves, advocacy can extend to the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, including marriage equality. This represents an important dimension of full legal equality, particularly in relation to family rights, inheritance, and social protection.

However, given the current context, progress on this issue will require careful sequencing, sustained dialogue, and broad engagement, including with civil society, legal actors, and regional human rights mechanisms. Positioning this within a broader human rights and development narrative will be critical to its feasibility, rather than as a standalone issue.

8. Conclusion

The repeal of discriminatory legal provisions in Dominica marked an important step forward for GSM. However, this study shows that legal change alone has not translated into safety, inclusion, or equal access in everyday life. GSM individuals continue to face stigma, limited protection, and uneven access to services, often relying on informal networks to meet basic needs.

At the same time, the findings highlight that pathways for progress exist. Emerging institutional allies and alignment with national priorities on social cohesion, resilience, and “leaving no one behind” provide a strong foundation for action. The challenge now is to harness these entry points and move from symbolic progress to practical, system-level change. This can also strengthen services, support communities, and progressively decrease protection gaps.

However, doing so requires an approach that is incremental, context-sensitive, and grounded in lived realities. By prioritising safety, dignity, and access to services, while building toward stronger legal and policy protections, Dominica has an opportunity to advance inclusion in a way that is both effective and sustainable. Ultimately, ensuring that all individuals can live free from discrimination and access the support they need is not only a human rights imperative, but a necessary condition for building stronger, more cohesive, and resilient communities.

Annexes

Annexe 1: Anonymised KII interview list

Qualification to participate.

- Citizen and Resident in Dominica
- Knowledgeable and active in Dominica's social life

KII#	Age	Gender	Category
1	40- 50	Male	Psychologist
2	60-70	Female	Sociologist
3	60-70	Male	Taylor
4	40- 50	Female	Journalist
5	60 - 70	Male	Education
6	30 – 40	Female	Social Worker (Youth)
7	60 - 70	Female	Artist
8	15 - 25	Female	Youth
9	15 - 25	Male	youth
10	30 - 40	Male	Youth
11	60 - 70	Female	Community Development
12	70 - 80	Female	Community Development
13	60 - 70	Female	Health Administrator
14	30 - 40	Male	Farmer
15	70 - 80	Female	Administrator
16	40 - 50	Male	Manager
17	60 – 70	Female	Social Worker (Religious)

Annexe 2: Key Informant Interview (KII) guide

- Introduction and consent
 - Explain purpose of the study (baseline on LGBTQ2+ lives in Dominica, focus on women).
 - Reassure confidentiality, voluntary participation, right to skip questions/withdraw.
 - Obtain informed consent.
- Background information
 - Can you tell me about your role/position and your connection to LGBTQ2+ issues in Dominica?
 - In your opinion, what are the main challenges faced by LGBTQ2+ individuals, particularly women, in Dominica today?
- Human rights & legal environment
 - Are you aware of recent legal changes related to LGBTQ2+ rights (e.g., repeal of anti-buggery laws)?
 - From your perspective, how has this legal change affected LGBTQ2+ individuals in practice?
 - Do you think LGBTQ2+ persons (especially women and youth) know their rights? Why or why not?
- Social, economic, and cultural inclusion
 - How would you describe public attitudes toward LGBTQ2+ individuals in your community or sector?
 - What forms of discrimination or stigma do LGBTQ2+ women/youth face in daily life (e.g., family, work, health care, education)?
 - Are there differences in how LGBTQ2+ women and men experience discrimination?
- Institutional & policy landscape
 - Are there existing government policies, programmes, or services that support LGBTQ2+ rights and inclusion?
 - Where do you see gaps or barriers in current laws/policies?
 - How do you see your institution/organization's role in advancing LGBTQ2+ inclusion?
- Recommendations & future actions
 - What would you recommend as priority actions to improve the lives of LGBTQ2+ individuals, especially women?
 - What partnerships or initiatives could strengthen LGBTQ2+ rights and inclusion in Dominica?

- Closing
 - Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't asked about?

Annex 3: Recruitment posters for the online survey

WHO YOU KNOW MATTERS!

Participate in a research on the networks of LGBTQ+ people in disaster contexts in the Caribbean

This PhD research aims to understand the networks of people in the Caribbean, particularly the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Caribbean people, in the face of hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural hazards.

TO PARTICIPATE, YOU MUST:

- Be 18 or older
- Be from the Caribbean (independent and non-independent countries and ideally live in the Region)
- Ideally identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or other non-confirmist sexual orientation
- Able to communicate in English, French or Spanish
- and have 15 min to spare!

Participation to this research is anonymous and voluntary

Please scan the following QR code to anonymously fill the survey or use the following link:

https://uwaterloo.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_a4YsiUomfH2sjps

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE# 42692). If you have questions regarding this research, please contact Lowine Hill, PhD Candidate, University of Waterloo: lowine.hill@uwaterloo.ca



