

WorldPride Washington, DC 2025: Human Rights Conference and Legislators' Programme (3–6 June 2025)

International Travel Report

Washington does not mind a little theatre; it was built for it. But in June 2025—under the bright, unapologetic canopy of WorldPride—the city offered something more useful than symbolism: a concentrated effort to turn solidarity into operating practice. The WorldPride Human Rights Conference carried a theme that sounded like branding until the context made it literal: *Freedom to Empower*. It sat within the capital's wider WorldPride programme and the 50th anniversary of Pride celebrations in Washington, DC—an anniversary that arrived, tellingly, amid renewed argument about what “freedom” is supposed to mean.

I attended as a representative of the Senedd, participating in the Global Equality Caucus legislators' programme and in sessions at the Human Rights Conference. The purpose was threefold: to strengthen Wales's international parliamentary engagement on human rights and equality; to gather insights on defending LGBTQ+ rights during periods of backlash and polarisation; and to identify approaches relevant to devolved responsibilities in Wales—public health, education, housing, community safety, public services, and civic cohesion.

The context: when borders become part of the agenda

This conference did not take place in a neutral international moment. Among delegates, two currents were particularly present.

The first was administrative: widespread uncertainty about how identity documentation and official recognition of gender would be handled in practice for international travel to the United States, and the downstream effect this has on who feels able to participate openly and safely. The second was political: a sense that LGBTQ+ rights—especially trans and gender-diverse rights—have become a high-value target in a transnational culture war, with arguments and tactics replicating across borders at the speed of social media.

The conference's own programme illustrated the point. Lady Phyll (Phyll Opoku-Gyimah), CEO and co-founder of UK Black Pride, had to participate remotely rather than in person due to her visa being refused. When a human-rights gathering cannot reliably get human-rights defenders into the room, the room itself becomes part of the evidence.

A legislators' programme built as infrastructure

The legislators' schedule—coordinated by the Global Equality Caucus with partners including the LGBTQ+ Victory Institute, the Council for Global Equality and Parliamentarians for Global Action—was social on the surface, but purposeful beneath it. Dinners and receptions were used as working sessions: spaces where

elected representatives could compare notes candidly, test ideas, and build the personal trust that makes future collaboration possible.

Tuesday 3 June – dinner hosted by the US Congressional Equality Caucus

The week began with a dinner hosted by the US Congressional Equality Caucus. I addressed the dinner as a Senedd Member and used the opportunity to position Wales as a constructive partner: a devolved parliament that can pilot ideas, embed rights in public services, and contribute to international norms through practical demonstration.

I met and spoke with **Representative Mark Takano**, Chair of the Congressional Equality Caucus, and discussed how caucus structures provide continuity and mutual support during hostile cycles. I spoke with **Representative Sarah McBride** about the possibility of a future visit to the Senedd, and with **Representative Becca Balint** and **Representative Julie Johnson**. I also spoke with **Ulrike Westerlund** (Swedish Riksdag) and **Jack Lewis** (Massachusetts House of Representatives), comparing approaches to sustaining cross-party support and communicating reforms in environments being primed for suspicion.

A particularly pragmatic conversation was with a representative of **Grindr**, who expressed interest in partnering with Welsh Government on **HIV prevention**. The proposition is worth treating seriously precisely because it is current: public-health outcomes increasingly depend on whether prevention and signposting reach people where they actually are—on phones, on platforms, and in the micro-decisions of everyday life. Digital partners cannot replace public services; but they can strengthen them when objectives are clear and safeguards are robust.

Wednesday 4 June – political participation and the machinery of election

On Wednesday afternoon, I attended the launch of the Victory Institute and partners' report, **Mapping LGBTQI+ Political Participation in the Americas and Caribbean**, based on insights from nearly **5,000 respondents**. The report's deeper lesson was not simply about representation; it was about pipelines. Political participation does not materialise on its own. It is recruited, trained, funded and defended. I discussed with **Ambassador Eric Nelson** the possibility of expanding elements of this work into a wider European context—an area where Wales, as an outward-facing devolved institution, can play a useful convening role.

That evening, the **Equality PAC National Pride Gala** provided a different kind of education: how equality work is resourced. Equality PAC exists because seats determine laws, and laws determine lives. I spoke with **Senator Tammy Baldwin** and **Representative Robert Garcia**, and with legislators from outside the United States including **Susel Paredes** (Peru) and **Jaime López Vela** (Mexico). The conversation repeatedly returned to a shared practical reality: opponents of equality are often more disciplined than their targets assume; supporters must therefore be organised, not merely correct.

Thursday 5 June – caucus diplomacy and the economics of community space

A breakfast briefing hosted by the Congressional Equality Caucus, opened by Representative Takano, reinforced the caucus model as a form of institutional resilience. We discussed the potential for a future Equality Caucus visit to Europe

and the UK, potentially including the Senedd—an example of parliamentary diplomacy that is more than ceremonial. In difficult times, alliances that are already built can stabilise norms when public discourse becomes volatile.

At the Irish Ambassador's residence later that day, in a reception co-organised by the Global Equality Caucus and partners, I met members of the **Berlin Landtag**. One conversation crystallised a shared concern across jurisdictions: physical LGBT+ community spaces are under intense strain from the cost-of-living crisis and changing patterns of socialising. We discussed, in exploratory terms, whether governments should consider mechanisms—levies, negotiated contributions, social-value requirements, or other tools—through which dating apps and adjacent platforms might contribute to sustaining physical community infrastructure. The idea is politically awkward, which is often a sign that it touches something real: community spaces generate public value, but struggle to survive on market logic alone.

The Human Rights Conference: a programme that read like an operating manual

The Human Rights Conference itself (4–6 June) was expansive. Its virtue was not that it tried to say everything, but that it tried to equip people to do something—an event that read less like an academic symposium and more like an operating manual for rights under pressure. Plenaries set the moral frame; breakouts handled implementation; networking was treated as a tool, not a perk.

A notable feature was the conference's practical attention to human capacity. Alongside policy sessions, the programme embedded continuous **wellness and counselling support**, a **Peace and Prayer Room**, and a **Sensory Escape** space. This was not softness; it was realism. Many delegates were operating under intense political and personal strain. The conference treated care as part of the infrastructure that makes advocacy and public service sustainable.

Opening plenary – Wednesday 4 June

The opening plenary at the National Theatre was hosted by **Rayceen Pendarvis** and featured a set of voices that framed the conference as global, intersectional and consciously political. **Jessica Stern**—who served as the US Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons—brought the lens of diplomacy and international accountability. **Lady Phyll (Phyll Opoku-Gyimah)** grounded the discussion in race, community-building, and the lived consequences of exclusion. **Jen Deerinwater** spoke from an Indigenous and disability-justice perspective, insisting that human rights cannot be separated from the realities of colonialism and health inequality. The contributions were different in register, but aligned in message: equality is not a single-issue agenda; it is a test of whether societies can keep promises to those most easily marginalised.

In conversation with Jessica Stern, I discussed Wales' interest in aligning domestic policy with international human-rights norms and the potential for devolved institutions to act as credible partners in a wider pro-equality ecosystem—particularly when national politics elsewhere becomes unstable.

Boomerang advocacy – learning to borrow pressure

I attended a keynote on “**boomerang advocacy**”, a concept associated with human-rights campaigning when domestic routes are blocked or hostile: activists harness international institutions, overseas allies and external scrutiny to apply pressure back onto resistant governments. What made the session unusually arresting was its inversion. The strategy is often described in relation to authoritarian contexts; here it was being discussed in the heart of a long-established democracy, as a response to the possibility of rapid regression.

For Wales, the relevance is not that we anticipate the same institutional dynamics, but that we should recognise the strategic value of international networks for devolved democracies. When rights come under rhetorical attack, external validation and partnership can help stabilise norms at home. Parliamentary diplomacy is sometimes dismissed as soft. In truth, it is often how standards are defended.

Economics and equality – what discrimination costs

I also attended “**Bridging Economics & LGBTQIA2S+ Human Rights**”, delivered by **M. V. Lee Badgett**, an economist known for quantifying the cost of discrimination and the economic benefits of inclusion. The argument was not that rights should depend on economic utility. It was subtler: opponents often claim equality is an elite preoccupation, detached from “real life”. An economic lens punctures that claim. Discrimination affects labour markets, health outcomes, productivity, education and social mobility. Inclusion is not a cultural extra; it is an enabling condition for broader prosperity.

The Welsh application is immediate. Wales already frames its public policy around prevention, well-being and reducing long-term harm. Badgett’s framing suggests a further step: treat LGBT+ inclusion as a measurable component of economic strategy—through workforce health, mental health support, anti-bullying interventions in education, and inclusive public services that reduce costly downstream impacts.

Law as a living instrument – and a Welsh question about CEDAW

One of the most fertile sessions for me was a discussion of the **global legal landscape** led by **Paula Gerber**, whose work spans international human-rights law and LGBT+ equality. A theme that recurred was the importance of legal frameworks that are not merely declaratory but operational—rights that are enforceable, institutions that have duties, and clarity about remedies.

This prompted a question from the floor from me and a specific Welsh line of thought: the potential for stronger and more explicit integration of international conventions—such as **CEDAW**—into Welsh legal and policy architecture, particularly where trans equality intersects with sex-based protections and the design of public services. The point is not to import legal arguments wholesale, but to ensure Wales has a principled, rights-based method for resolving tensions that others seek to inflame. In a world of polarised narratives, process matters: clear duties, clear standards, and transparent decision-making.

A local model with export potential – the DC Human Rights Act

The programme included a session on the **DC Human Rights Act** as a model. Separately, I met individuals connected to this work, and the takeaway was straightforward: comprehensive equality frameworks matter most when they are integrated into the day-to-day machinery of enforcement and service design. A rights statute is not merely text; it is training, guidance, complaint-handling, oversight and cultural expectation.

For Wales—where debate continues about how to strengthen a distinct human-rights approach within devolved competence—the DC example usefully reframes the question. The goal is not a symbolic “Welsh version” of something else. The goal is to create an ecosystem where rights shape decisions in housing, education, health and local services, and where enforcement mechanisms are understood and accessible.

Democratic resilience – conversation at the National Democratic Institute

Beyond the conference venues, I met at the **National Democratic Institute** to discuss global political participation projects involving LGBT+ communities. I used the meeting to raise awareness of the Senedd’s work on democratic health, including our focus on standards and political integrity (notably the question of deliberate deception in politics). The link between these topics is sometimes missed: anti-rights movements thrive in environments where disinformation is normalised and trust collapses. Defending rights therefore requires not only policy and law, but democratic hygiene.

Friday: legislators on the frontline, and visibility with a price tag

Friday’s programme brought together two forms of politics: the legislative and the cultural. It treated both as serious.

I attended **On the Frontlines of Equality – Legislating to Defend LGBTQ Rights Across the Globe**, moderated by **Evan Low** (LGBTQ+ Victory Institute), with panelists **Susel Paredes** (Peru), **Jaime López Vela** (Mexico), **Julie Johnson** (US House of Representatives) and **Alessandro Zan** (European Parliament). The discussion was frank about escalating hate speech, proliferating anti-rights bills, and the vulnerability of HIV-related funding and programmes when politics hardens. Several themes had immediate relevance for Wales: the value of organised legislative networks; the importance of treating public health—particularly HIV prevention and health equity—as central to equality; and the need for preparedness rather than improvisation when backlash is coordinated.

The conference then moved—by design—from statute to story. The **Drag Takes a Stand** panel with **Bob the Drag Queen**, **Courtney Act**, **Mrs Kasha Davis** and **Peppermint** treated drag not as entertainment pleading for tolerance, but as civic expression—satire, dissent, community storytelling, and a deliberately visible refusal to shrink. The point was not that culture replaces policy. It was that culture changes the emotional weather in which policy becomes possible.

What sharpened that argument further was another spotlight session in the programme: **The Power and Duty of Visibility in Human Rights**, moderated

by **Wilson Cruz**, with participants including **Raven-Symoné, Trace Lysette, Laith Ashley**, and **Brian Michael Smith**. Its usefulness lay in complicating the easy platitude that “visibility is always good”. Visibility can be empowering; it can also be a vector for targeting. The session framed public visibility as a responsibility and a risk—an insight that matters for legislators, public institutions and communities in a media environment where attention can be weaponised.

What this week offered Wales

America is not Wales, and Congress is not the Senedd. But the week in Washington clarified several transferable truths.

- **Rights can regress faster than institutions expect.** Many delegates spoke with the realism of people who assumed progress was durable until it wasn't. The correct response is not fatalism, but sturdier systems.
- **Institutions beat heroics.** The most effective work on display—caucus organisation, candidate pipelines, funding machinery, cross-border networks—was designed to outlast individuals.
- **Public services are where equality becomes real.** Health equity, school safety, housing stability, cultural confidence and competent frontline provision are the material expression of human dignity—and Wales has meaningful levers here.
- **Democratic integrity and human rights are linked.** When politics rewards deliberate distortion, minority rights become easier to undermine. Strengthening democratic standards is therefore part of rights protection.

Conclusion: freedom as fabric

WorldPride DC spoke of “the fabric of freedom”. The Human Rights Conference made the metaphor practical. Fabric is not a trophy; it is a material. It frays when neglected, strengthens when reinforced, and holds best when it is woven with redundancy—many threads, not one.

The week in Washington was, at its most persuasive, an argument for that kind of weaving: legislatures working with civil society; culture buttressing policy; evidence strengthening moral clarity; and care treated as part of the infrastructure of endurance. Wales should be one of the hands that helps keep the stitching tight.