

Writing Rights into Law – National Reform in Bhutan, Malaysia and Sri Lanka’s HIV Response

Across Bhutan, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, social and legal barriers push the communities most affected by HIV underground, limiting outreach and compromising the quality of care. But all three Governments have begun to respond. In Bhutan, the country's only sex worker-led network, the Red Purse Network, was established in 2019. In Malaysia, Drug Policy Program Malaysia (DPPM) was set up in 2023 as the Ministry of Health turned its attention to drug policy reform. And in Sri Lanka, a landmark 2023 Supreme Court ruling affirmed the constitutional rights to dignity, equality and privacy for all LGBTIQ+ Sri Lankans. The rights of these communities have now become part of the national conversation.

Health Equity Matters has worked to embed those rights in national HIV responses through the Sustainability of HIV Services for Key Populations in South-East Asia-2 (SKPA-2) program in Bhutan and Sri Lanka since 2022 and in Malaysia since 2023. In Sri Lanka, the work centres on reform of Penal Code Sections 365/365A, which would decriminalise adult, consensual same-sex relationships and reduce the legal and reputational risk organisations face in providing HIV services to men who have sex with men and transgender people. The Human Rights Defenders Against 365 Network, a coalition of more than 40 activists and organisations, has kept the reform in front of parliamentarians, including a meeting with the Opposition Leader in July 2026.

In Bhutan, the focus is gender-based violence and the rights of female sex workers, transgender women and men who have sex with men. A community needs assessment in early 2025 found demand for healthcare, counselling and legal support, and the program is extending the gender-based violence service desk run by the Bhutanese organisation RENEW to these groups, alongside sensitisation work with police.

In Malaysia, DPPM helped establish the National Task Force on Decriminalization in 2024, whose year-long review of the country's drug laws is shaping a road map for decriminalisation. SKPA-2 has also backed MyINCLUSION, a community-led chemsex initiative run by the Malaysian AIDS Council, which has trained 133 community health workers and HIV-prevention peer navigators – more than half of them current or former chemsex users – in harm reduction and peer counselling.

‘We introduced and popularised the saying, “Nothing about us without us,” and we empowered MASAC [the network of organisations led by people who use drugs] to be at the table and to consistently demand the rights of people who use drugs.’

– Palani Narayanan, Director, DPPM

Turning laws that criminalise and exclude into laws that protect takes sustained political engagement, not a single ruling. Continued funding lets Health Equity Matters keep backing the parliamentarians, reformers and community organisations doing that work, so people can reach HIV services without fear of the law itself.