Overlooked and at Risk
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in the Caribbean

The Caribbean region is made up of twenty-seven territories, with a population of 35 million people of which approximately eight million are youth between the ages of 10 and 24. Located southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and North America, the Caribbean boasts a diversity of languages and cultures.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) individuals living in the Caribbean have had a long struggle for acceptance and equal rights within society. Many countries have laws against “buggery/sodomy”, “gross indecency,” or homosexual behaviour. Socio-cultural and religious taboos in many countries deny the existence of LGBT individuals and discourage any tolerance for their diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, regarding them as a threat to deep-rooted social norms of heterosexism and heteronormativity. LGBT people, including LGBT youth, undergo significant levels of stigma and discrimination and in extreme cases, acts of violence, which sometimes result in death. For the health and well-being of these young people, activists must work to end homophobia and transphobia in the region.

Secrecy and Struggle: LGBT Existence and Identity in the Caribbean

- Despite high levels of intolerance towards LGBT people in the Caribbean, most countries have communities that engage in same-sex behaviours and non-conforming gender norms. Research in the region shows that same-sex relations are not a primary identity but rather an activity, as people who engage in same-sex behaviour may not regard themselves as homosexual, queer, gay, lesbian or transgender.

- The majority of studies on Caribbean men who have sex with men (MSM) show that many men also have sex with women. Similarly, women who have sex with women (WSW) often engage in heterosexual relations to avoid stigma and discrimination, or for childbearing purposes. Additionally, available research is largely focused on MSM sexual behaviours and the implications of repressive buggery/sodomy laws on HIV, often ignoring WSW and transgender persons.

- Due to high levels of intolerance towards LGBT people in the Caribbean, many are forced to hide their behaviours and/or identities in order to avoid social exclusion, criminalization and/or harm enforced by laws. In some Caribbean countries, such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas, the LGBT community enjoys some degree of rights to security, sex and gender identity.

- There is a lack of data on the LGBT community within the region. Trends are based on limited existing research, which is particularly scarce for lesbian and transgender communities. Young LGBT individuals in the region are further marginalized by the lack of age-disaggregated data within the LGBT data that is available. Where there are significant gaps in data, country plans are not able to be fully responsive to the needs of LGBT youth because they are not known.

Criminalization laws are inconsistent across the region and continue to be highly problematic despite commitments for change at the regional level

- In many countries in the region, the LGBT community, including LGBT youth, are marginalized by outdated, repressive laws against “buggery/sodomy” and “gross indecency” that are still in effect in the majority of the islands. In Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and St Lucia all acts of same-sex activities are illegal, while the Guyanese and Jamaica laws forbid MSM relations but are silent on same-sex relations between women.
The Facts

In some countries, these laws have been nullified or amended. In the Bahamas, the law proscribes consensual same-sex activity between adults in public but not in private. In Anguilla, Turks & Caicos, the Cayman Islands and other British Overseas Territories, an order repealing the buggery law was issued in year 2000 by Britain. Laws to protect LGBT youth from violence and discrimination are also lacking in the region. The impunity of offenders who commit violent crimes against LGBT further legitimizes the stigma and discrimination that they experience. Very few cases of these abuses against LGBT people are reported or treated with importance by law enforcers.

Cultural and social factors contribute to the stigmatization of LGBT people, including LGBT youth.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth face tremendous difficulties growing up in a society where heterosexuality is often presented as the only acceptable orientation, and homosexuality is regarded as deviant.

- Pop culture, including music, such as the “murder music” that is popular within the region, encourages violence against LGBT youth. Jamaica is the source of many of the “murder music” artists’, of which the most popular proponents are Capleton, Bennie Man, Elephant Man, Buju Banton, Bounty Killer, Vybz Kartel, Sizzla Kalonji and the group, TOK. Buju Banton---their 1993 hit song “Bom-bye-bye” is a popular ‘murder music’ anthem. In fact, over the past fifteen years, homophobia and transphobia, has been replete in Jamaica’s popular dancehall music among other music genres that are channeled across the region.

- Stigmatization of LGBT youth is further promulgated by some religious communities within the region. Conservative religious leaders frequently express their aversion to LGBT behaviours and describe them as sinful. Rarely, do they contest discrimination and violence towards LGBT individuals as unjust. Such intolerance among religious leaders extends to their followers. When there are attempts within religious communities to demonstrate tolerance or inclusion of the LGBT community, that support is often rejected.

- In the Bahamas, an entire congregation aligned to a Scottish church renounced their membership after a gay preacher was transferred to their local church.

- In May 2005, Senior Bishop, Rev. John Gladwin, who had been invited to speak at a Family Day service in Trinidad, was “un-invited” after he signed a letter in The Times stating that the ordination of an openly gay bishop should not cause a division in the Church of England, encouraging the church to have a dialogue with LGB people.

In addition, there are widespread misconceptions about gender roles and practices in the Caribbean that further contribute to an environment of stigma and discrimination of the LGBT community, including youth.

- Several studies have found that males are expected to be “macho,” and that promiscuity is an element of being a “man”? Many young men engage in high-risk sexual activities, putting themselves and their sexual partner in danger of contracting STIs including HIV, in order to conform to these gender norms.

- Young women also experience pressure to conform to gender norms, experiencing significant pressure to initiate sex at a young age and have children in order to exemplify their prescribed gender identity.

HIV is a major concern in the Caribbean and LGBT youth are at risk

- Worldwide, the Caribbean is the second most-affected region by HIV/AIDS. In 2008, UNAIDS estimates show that 230,000 people in the Caribbean were living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). There were also approximately 20,000 new HIV infections and 12,000 deaths due to AIDS in the region that year. The majority of these cases are found in Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. However, due to lack of disaggregated data by sexual orientation and gender identity, information is lacking on the proportion of PLWHA or young PLWHA who are from the LGBT community.

- UNAIDS data from 2008 reports that, “In the majority of countries [in the region] the percentage of young females and males aged 15-24 years who both correctly know HIV prevention measures and reject myths surrounding its transmission is below 60 percent.” Such a result indicates that a significant proportion of youth in the region still lack information about how to prevent HIV, but how many of those are LGBT is not known.

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“Murder music” artists here are cited as dancehall and reggae artists in Jamaica whose lyrics are homophobic and call for the assault or even murder of GLBTQ people. Reference: “Can music incite murder?”, The Black Music Council Site at the Internet Archive. Report Date:15 Dec 2004.
Research shows that LGBT youth are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Furthermore the lack of LGBT-friendly and targeted information and services to safeguard the sexual and reproductive health and rights of LGBT individuals, also puts LGBT youth at high risk of HIV, as well as other STIs and pregnancy.

- Men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Caribbean are significantly more vulnerable to HIV than the general population.
  - In Trinidad and Tobago, HIV prevalence among MSM is 20 percent versus the national HIV prevalence of 2.6 percent.\(^{10}\)
  - In Guyana, the prevalence among MSM is 21.3 percent, while the national average is 2.4 percent.\(^{10}\)
  - In Jamaica, HIV prevalence among MSM is between 25 and 30 percent versus the national HIV prevalence 1.5 percent.\(^{10}\)
  - HIV prevalence rates among MSM in other countries within the region include 8 percent in the Bahamas, 11 percent in the Dominican Republic, and 6.7 percent in Suriname.\(^{9}\)

- Criminalization of homosexuality contributes to the stigma faced by those who contract HIV. But even where LGBT behaviors and identities are not criminalized, most-at-risks populations, such as MSM, are still at risk of sexual transmission of HIV. For example, the Bahamas, where same-sex activities have been decriminalized, only 56 percent and 48 percent of MSM, respectively, are reached with HIV prevention programs.\(^{9}\)

- Unlike MSM, “women who have sex with women” do not appear prominently in interventions, due to the perception that they are a “low risk” population.\(^{11}\) However, since many women don’t have sex exclusively with women, they, too, need HIV prevention interventions.

- The fear of stigma, discrimination and disclosure dissuade LGBT youth in the region from seeking HIV testing, counselling, care and treatment. In addition, many LGBT youth, particularly men who have sex with men (MSM), do not believe they are at-risk of contracting HIV. Homophobia and transphobia makes it difficult for outreach workers to identify and reach LGBT youth who often remain nameless and placeless.

**The pervasiveness of intolerance towards LGBT youth has allowed high rates of sexual assault, physical violence and even death**

Law enforcement often fails to protect LGBT youth and in some cases, even contributes to the violence against them. The “Hated to Death” report by Human Rights Watch (2004) highlights that police in Jamaica continuously ignore the beatings and murder of lesbians and gays.\(^{4}\) The report revealed that the police had developed a code to authenticate their claim that beatings and murders had not actually happened. The code assumes, for example, that multiple stab wounds to a man’s body is an act of “a gay crime of passion.” Police also ignore and in some cases participate or encourage angry mobs of people chanting anti-gay lyrics to beat or murder gay men.

Gay rights activists are also not safe. Brian Williamson, founder of the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (JFLAG) was murdered in his home in 2004. His death was referred to as a robbery despite a “jubilant crowd” outside his home.\(^{12}\) Additionally, Gareth Henry, former co-chair of JFLAG, fled to Toronto in February 2008 after surviving homophobic violence in Jamaica.\(^{13}\)

**Civil society, governments, and members of the international community are working to support LGBT youth’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in the region**

Being an advocate for the community is challenging in the region. One expert observes: “Only a handful of activists can be found who are working in almost secrecy to secure the most basic level of rights and to end violence perpetrated against LGBT people.\(^{14}\) But there have been some notable victories.

- In Cuba, the rights of transgender individuals to change their name and identity documents are recognized. The government recognizes same-sex partnerships and free sex-change surgery and hormones on demand.\(^{15}\)
- Similarly, gay pride has been celebrated for over a decade in Puerto Rico. Homosexuality was legalized in 2005 with approval of a new Penal Code. Local government officials often publicly support LGBT rights in political campaigns.\(^{16}\)
- In April 2010, Guyana’s Ministry of Health (MOH), through the Adolescent Health and Wellness Unit, began to address homophobia in the public health sector by focusing on training and the promotion of a manual designed to eliminate existing barriers to care offered to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) communities.\(^{17}\)
The National HIV/STI Program in Jamaica has repeatedly called on the government to amend the laws that not only criminalize same-sex activities, but also prohibit the Ministry of Health (MOH) from offering programs and services to Jamaica’s LGBT community. However, the Ministry has supported the Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over the years to provide the services and information needed to the LGBT community.4

Activists Must Work to Eradicate Homophobia and Transphobia

As long as criminalization of homosexuality and stigma, discrimination and violence against LGBT individuals continues in the Caribbean, the emotional and physical health of LGBT young people is at risk. All young people have the right to be treated equally under the law and to live free of discrimination and harassment. Organizations, governments, and individuals must work toward full acceptance and recognition of LGBT people, including young people.

References


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