

# **The Most Homophobic Place on Earth? A Look Into the Anti-Homosexuality Culture of Jamaica**

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Throughout most of Jamaica's history, the island has been plagued with widespread violence directed towards the LGBTQ community. In recent years, the violence has become so alarming that human-rights organizations, as well as *Time* magazine, dubbed the nation as the most homophobic place on earth.<sup>1</sup> Mob violence, denied access to basic rights and services, and dancehall music that promotes the killing of gay and lesbian individuals are a few of the backlashes homosexual Jamaicans face everyday.<sup>2</sup> Jamaican culture forces homosexuals to decide between living a life masking who they really are, or facing the consequences of being their true selves.

Penalizing homosexuality in Jamaica dates as far back as 1864. In 1864, Jamaica enacted the "Offences Against the Persons Act," which states that those convicted of buggery should receive a punishment of up to ten years of hard labor.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that a crime of buggery does not necessarily ban citizens from being homosexual; but rather bans the occurrence of same-sex intimacy.<sup>4</sup> However, the widespread violence perpetrated by traditional Jamaicans could be referred to as attempting to ban homosexuality, or at the

very minimal intimidating homosexuals to hide their true identities.

Mob violence against the LGBTQ community is one of the most frequent consequences homosexuals are faced with. In a 2015 J-FLAG survey of three-hundred and sixteen homosexual Jamaicans, forty-three percent reported being threatened with violence in the last five years.<sup>5</sup> When attacked, these individuals are often left to fend for themselves, as the Jamaican government and police system continually fail to prevent and punish violent attacks such as mob violence.<sup>6</sup> In 2009, Ernest Smith (a politician who is a member of the Jamaican Labour Party), publicly denounced homosexuals by explaining, "We're not saying that gay people should be obliterated from the face of the earth ... but because your behavioral pattern is in breach of all decency ... do not try to impose your filth on others, and don't force others to accept you and your filth."<sup>7</sup> It is attitudes such as Ernest Smith's, and other politicians and people in power, that cause and allow the widespread violence against homosexuals. These individuals are often chased out of their communities, shunned by their families and loved ones, and condemned to a life of homelessness, many often living in storm drains (referred to as the gully.)<sup>8</sup>

My interviewee, a Jamaican heterosexual named Julian, recounted witnessing such attacks, even playing a role in them himself. He explained to me that

Jamaica is a highly religious nation.<sup>9</sup> Julian believes the religious nature of the country is a huge influence on the mob violence against homosexuals. He told me that the “bible made Adam and Eve; not Adam and Steve. Nobody wants their children to grow up around perverse men and women, as children are easily influenced.” He thinks communities have a right to chase these individuals out, as they look at it as protecting their children. He recounted numerous stories to me about stoning homosexual men to death in his Kingston community.

One story he shared was horrifying: his local community found out that one of Julian’s best friends was gay. He told me the entire community, including women, children, and the elderly, all charged at this man's home. They repeatedly stoned and beat him until they were sure he was either hurt enough that he would never come back, or that he was dead. He ended up dying alone in the street, eventually found by his mother. Julian showed little remorse when describing this story to me. He compared Jamaica’s homophobic attitude to a racist household, telling me “when you grow up your entire life hearing that something is wrong, it becomes a part of who you are. If your parents dislike black people, you would not bring a black man or woman home. Homosexuals in Jamaica should know their best bet is to stay away.”

When homosexuals in Jamaica are faced with violence, they often have no one to turn to; police are often noted as perpetrators of violence, or they refrain from intervening and potentially saving lives.<sup>10</sup>

An example of police failing to intervene during a violent attack lays in a January 2013 mob violence case. Roughly thirty community members, all armed with knives, machetes, or sticks, attacked a gay man while hurling homophobic insults. The police arrived, and watched for about twenty minutes before intervening. When they did intervene, they placed the victim in a cop car to separate him from the violence. Rather than remove him from the situation, they handcuffed him and began taking turns beating him themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The police also failed to protect Jamaican homosexuals by refusing to act against violent attackers. In August of 2012, a lesbian couple arrived at the Greater Portmore police station to report that they had been raped at gunpoint inside their home. While filing the complaint, a police officer asked if the two women were related; they lied and said they were just friends who shared a home. The police officer responded by calling them sodomites and asking why they would even come to the police station. The officer also insinuated that the rape was consensual. No charges were filed on behalf of the women.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, there are thousands of similar cases.

I thought it would be interesting to share cases such as these with Julian, as his brother is a police officer. He verified hearing many of the cases, and offered his own experiences. He explained that homosexual citizens, most of the time, will not even jeopardize themselves further by reaching out to the police. This view was expressed at a focus group held in Kingston in 2015, with a group of ten homosexual or

transgender citizens present. These ten LGBTQ community members expressed their fear in reaching out to police, saying they would be unresponsive to them based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Julian told me that he does not often witness police commit violence themselves, although he has seen it a few times, but more commonly witnesses them fail to intervene when watching violence against these individuals. Again, Julian offered no remorse.

During our interview, Julian's brother came home from work. I asked him a few questions to gain perspective from a police officer's view. He told me that he, and most other officers, do not fail to intervene because they are evil, but rather are protecting themselves. He continued, "when you arrive and there's a mob of forty, fifty, maybe even sixty people expressing their anger, and there are only one to two police officers on scene, what would you do? We cannot jeopardize our own safety. Often, we fail to intervene, so we appear to be on the mob's side. We let them get a few hits in, then we intervene. If you intervene too soon, they will take it as you protecting them, and you will be on the ground with the battyman" (a word used to describe homosexual men.) He did agree with the notion that there is less sense of urgency when dealing with violent cases pertaining to homosexuals.

Mob violence and a lack of assistance from police are not the only threats to homosexuals in Jamaica; they face discrimination in healthcare as well. This is extremely dangerous, as approximately

thirty-two thousand adults in Jamaica carry the HIV virus.<sup>14</sup> Many homosexuals began refraining from receiving treatment for AIDS and HIV due to the discrimination faced in health care settings. Out of three-hundred and sixteen homosexual Jamaicans interviewed by J-FLAG, an alarming fifty-two percent said they had been forced to undergo unneeded psychological or medical testing when seeking necessary medical treatment.<sup>15</sup> A third of the participants in the same study had said they also experience far too much curiosity from healthcare professionals regarding their sexual identity. Due to the discrimination and violence faced by homosexuals, it is obvious that most would not want to jeopardize their true identities coming into public view by visiting healthcare professionals, which can prove to be both dangerous and deadly to homosexual individuals facing health problems. The discrimination faced in the healthcare setting denies homosexual Jamaicans basic rights and services.

Julian, and many other Jamaicans, believe this discrimination is fair. He does not believe that homosexuals should be allowed in public spheres; such as a doctor's offices. Julian continuously referred to the belief that allowing homosexuals around children would taint them; "we must look out for the children. It is a known fact that homosexuals are perverse beings; I don't want my son or daughter around none of that. They could be touching little kids, telling them it's okay to be gay.... just keep all that in the gully where it belongs."<sup>16</sup> This is a widespread view held by many other

Jamaicans; many believe homosexuality is contagious and comes from abroad.<sup>17</sup> Julian and his brother broke out in laughter at the thought of homosexuals no longer facing discrimination. At the same time, they both expressed that it would “never happen.”

One of the most interesting aspects of my research and interview related to the differences in treatment between homosexual men and women. Although homosexuality of any kind is, for the most part, not tolerated, there are many instances of homosexual men facing harsher treatment and discrimination. Violence against gay men in particular is widely advocated.<sup>18</sup> Dancehall music that often encourages violence against homosexuals tends to only discuss the top of homosexual men as well.<sup>19</sup> While conducting my research, I found hundreds of cases demonstrating police violence against gay men, but I could not find a single case of police beating lesbian women (with the exception of male-to-female transgenders who had not undergone gender reassignment surgery).<sup>20</sup> I also found very minimal examples of “true” mob violence against women. Lesbian women are chased out of communities, but they are not necessarily beat or hit with weapons, whereas men are deliberately beaten and tortured to death. Although I found some examples of women being stabbed or murdered, they are much more difficult to find compared to violent cases against homosexual men. Lesbians, however, are often faced with sexual violence, with many lesbians reporting they have been raped as a means of turning them “straight.”<sup>21</sup>

Julian also expressed the belief that homosexual men are treated much more harshly than women. He told me he would feel much more comfortable with children being around homosexual women than men. He believes this difference in treatment results from the way lesbian women carry themselves. He described them as being much more difficult to observe than gay males: “They often look like ‘normal’ females. They dress and speak normally, they follow their expected gender roles. But when you are in the presence of a gay male, it is much more visible. I consider gay male females rather than males.” Interestingly, I did come across some research that argues that homosexual women do fare better due to them being much more discreet about their sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

How did anti-homosexuality become so ingrained in Jamaican culture? I believe the answer lies in three important social domains; religion, politics, and the Jamaican music scene. As Julian previously expressed, Jamaica is a highly Christian nation, and it has a large influence on Jamaican culture.<sup>23</sup> Many politicians refer to Jamaicans as being “god-fearing people,” which leads many citizens to combine religious rhetoric with homophobia.<sup>24</sup> As recent as 2014, a group of religious organizations (Churches Action Uniting Society for Emancipation) organized a large rally, with twenty-five thousand attendees, in which they marched against the repealing of the buggery law and “homosexuality agenda.”<sup>25</sup>

Throughout my research I have discovered that politicians do not seem to be

in support of LGBTQ community members. For example, Bruce Golding of the Jamaican Labour Party, has publicly denounced homosexuals on multiple occasions. In 2008, Golding expressed that he would not allow homosexuals in his cabinet.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, Golding stated “The encouragement or recognition of the appropriateness of the homosexual lifestyle is going to undermine the effectiveness of the family ... and, in that process, undermine the basic fabric of a society.”<sup>27</sup> The prevalent, anti-homosexual rhetoric has even poured into the education sector. Thomas Thwaites, the Education Minister in 2013, stated that the launch of the new teachers’ manual (released that year) promoted tolerance, but would not begin grooming children for homosexual behavior because wholesome and joyous relationships are shared between men and women.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in 2016, the Jamaica Teachers’ Association said it would not call for training of guidance counselors to be better equipped to deal with gay students.<sup>29</sup> As recent as last year, guidance counselors in Jamaica were refusing to help students who identified as gay.

The final public sphere I believe further perpetuates the violence and discrimination faced by homosexuals in Jamaica is the music scene; specifically, dancehall music. Many Jamaican performers have produced music that promotes violence towards homosexuals. One of the most famous of these musicians is Buju Banton, who wrote the song “Boom Bye Bye.” In this song, Banton states homosexuals should be shot in the head, with lyrics like “it’s like

boom bye bye, inna batty bwoy head, rude bwoy nah promote no nasty man, dem haffi dead.” Banton stood by his lyrics, stating he wrote it in response to a man in his neighborhood being discovered molesting young boys.<sup>30</sup> Recently, more dancehall musicians with similar lyrics have rose to fame, including; Beenie Man, and Vybz Kartel, and Sizzla Kalonji. Julian agreed that music has immense influence over the culture in Jamaica, specifically with the youth. He personally believes that the music scene has more influence over anti-gay hysteria than the media, politics, and religion combined. He explained to me that everyone in Jamaica knows these songs; these are considered to be classics, similar to Bob Marley. Julian concluded by saying, “These musicians, these are the role models of our culture. Not the politicians.”

Recently, human-rights organizations have set their sights upon Jamaica for reform. Surprisingly, they have had some successes. One such success relates to the increasingly influential music scene. In 2007, dancehall musicians signed the “Reggae Compassionate Act,” which stated that they pledged not to promote hatred and violence towards LGBTQ people in their music.<sup>31</sup> Although the reviews about this pact have been mixed, it has led to other Jamaican artists, such as Mista Majah P, to come out in support of equality. However, most critics argue that it did little. In 2013 at a music festival held in Jamaica, Sizzla Kalonji, who is one of the musicians who signed the agreement, was still performing homophobic songs publicly.<sup>32</sup>

The buggery statute is one of the remaining legislative pieces holding homosexual citizens back from living normal lives. In a huge surprise to Jamaicans, in 2011, Prime Minister Portia Miller called for government to revisit the buggery laws. There was a huge backlash from Jamaicans, with a 2012 poll demonstrating that citizens believed the government would be negatively impacted by reviewing or changing buggery laws.<sup>33</sup> Two years later in 2013, Miller said she planned to call for a parliamentary vote on the buggery laws. However, there was no vote. In 2014, Miller changed her tune, saying that repealing the law was not a priority for government at the time.<sup>34</sup> Although the repeal of a vastly discriminatory law did not take place, the Jamaican government has begun changing the way it responds to human rights abuses against the LGBTQ community. Government ministers have expressed their willingness to partner with donors, agencies, and civil societies to push for the necessary social and political changes for equality, which is a step in the right direction.<sup>35</sup>

In 2015, the LGBTQ community won a huge victory; the first ever gay pride celebration in Jamaica would be held in the capital of Kingston. Members of J-FLAG, a gay rights organization, described it as a huge turning point in Jamaican history.<sup>36</sup> Although a flash mob gathered in a nearby park, the celebration continued. Politicians even spoke out in favor of the event; Kingston's mayor and the Justice Minister publicly supported the pride activities that

took place,<sup>37</sup> demonstrating change may be on the horizon.

Although the battle for equality in the LGBTQ community in Jamaica is far from over; the country is beginning to progress slowly. However, there is much more legislative and social progress to be continued. I believe the biggest obstacle Jamaica is currently facing is swaying public opinion in a less discriminatory direction, with much of what Julian expressed to me during our interview reflecting this belief. There is no doubt that the discrimination and violence against homosexuals and transgenders is prevalent and widespread; although the murders and mob violence have decreased, there is still far too much violence persisting.<sup>38</sup> I believe Jamaica needs to open room for discussion and education on these matters; rather than ignoring them and turning a blind eye. If politicians and human-rights social organizations continue to work together, I think Jamaica will be headed in the right direction. Just two short years ago, the first pride celebration was held; ten years ago, something of that magnitude would not have even been considered. Unfortunately, as it stands now, the LGBTQ community is still forced to live in silence, fear, gully's, or behind a mask of who they truly are.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jackson, Angeline Jackson. "Is The Most Homophobic Place On Earth Turning Around?"

<sup>2</sup>J-FLAG. "Homophobia and Violence in Jamaica."

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>4</sup>Kimberly Engels. "With anti-gay laws, the state is complicit in violence against LBGT people."

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Law, the University of the West Indies. "Human Rights Violations Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People in Jamaica: A Shadow Report."

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Deborah Almond. "Gay in Jamaica: J-FLAG talks impacts on LGBT health and rights."

<sup>8</sup>Priscilla Frank. "These Are The Fearless LGBTQ Youth Who Live In Jamaica's Sewers."

<sup>9</sup>According to the U.S. Department of State "International Religious Freedom Report" of 2008, 64% of Jamaicans identify as Christian.

<sup>10</sup>Faculty of Law, the University of the West Indies. "Human Rights Violations Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People in Jamaica: A Shadow Report." 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>"Not Safe at Home- Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in Jamaica." Human Rights Watch., 2014. 29-30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup>"Not Safe at Home- Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in Jamaica." Human Rights Watch., 2014, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>16</sup> Storm drains where many homeless homosexuals reside.

<sup>17</sup>"Jamaica to hold its first gay pride celebration in the islands capital." Guardian News and Media., 2015

<sup>18</sup>Equipe Alterheros. "Homosexuality in Jamaica: The Views, The Harsh Realities."

<sup>19</sup>"Jamaica to hold its first gay pride celebration in the islands capital."

<sup>20</sup> "Not Safe at Home".

<sup>21</sup> Faculty of Law, the University of the West Indies. "Human Rights Violations Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People in Jamaica: A Shadow Report." Pg. 5.

<sup>22</sup>"Not Safe at Home."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The Gleaner. *Homosexual Acts Are Illegal, Guidance Counselors Cannot Break The Law.*

<sup>30</sup>"Not Safe at Home".

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>"Jamaica to hold its first gay pride celebration in the islands capital."

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Not safe at home."