CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE OF CARIBBEAN LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER & QUEER WOMEN

THE 2ND CARIBBEAN WOMEN AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY CONFERENCE
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<td><strong>Asexuality</strong></td>
<td>A sexual orientation generally characterized by either not feeling sexual attraction or a desire for having an intimate partner. Asexuality is different from celibacy, which is the deliberate abstention from sexual activity. There are diverse ways of being asexual [i]; some asexual people do have sex or may still be romantically attracted to others.[ii]</td>
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<td><strong>Bisexuality</strong></td>
<td>An individual who is physically, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to men and women. Bisexuals may or may not have had sexual experience with both men and women to identify as bisexual.[iii]</td>
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<td><strong>Biphobia</strong></td>
<td>Fear of bisexuals often based on stereotypes, such as inaccurate associations with infidelity, promiscuity and transmission of sexually transmitted diseases.[iv] Individuals of any sexual orientation can feel and express biphobia.</td>
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<td><strong>Cisgender</strong></td>
<td>An individual's experience of their gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth.[v]</td>
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<td><strong>Coming Out</strong></td>
<td>A lifelong process of self-acceptance. People make meaning a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity for themselves and may decide to reveal it to others. Publicly identifying one’s orientation may or may not be part of coming out.[vi]</td>
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<td><strong>Conversion (Reparative) Therapy</strong></td>
<td>A form of therapy based on the belief that homosexuality is an illness. It aims to cure LGB people by repairing their sexual disorder or converting them to heterosexuality. It is an unscientific approach often based on a religious ideology that all people should be heterosexual.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gay</strong></td>
<td>The adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex[viii]</td>
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<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>This refers to complex systems of personal and social relations of domination and power through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access to, or are allocated status, power and material resources within society.[ix]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender vs Sex</td>
<td>‘Gender’ refers to differences in social roles and relations, while ‘sex’ refers to biologically determined differences. Gender roles are learned through socialisation and vary widely within and between cultures. Gender roles are also affected by age, class, race, ethnicity, and religion, as well as by geographical, economic, and political environments. Moreover, gender roles are specific to a historical context and can evolve over time[x].</td>
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<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>A term used by some individuals who identify as neither entirely male nor entirely female, or both [xi].</td>
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<td>Gender Expression</td>
<td>How a person represents or expresses their gender identity often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles or voice [xii].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth. It includes the personal sense of the body (which may involve), modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical, or other means, and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech, and mannerisms [xiii].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Non-conforming</td>
<td>A term for individuals whose gender expression is different from societal expectations of gender [xiv].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heterosexism</td>
<td>The socio-cultural, institutional and individual beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuality and subordinate and denigrate lesbians, gay men and bisexual/pansexual people. Institutional power and state authority are used to support prejudices and enforce discriminatory behaviors in systematic ways, often with far-reaching outcomes and effects [xv].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>People who have intimate relations with and/or are attracted to people of the opposite sex [xvi].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heterosexual Privilege</td>
<td>The benefits and advantages that heterosexuals receive in heterosexist cultures. It also refers to the benefits that lesbians, gay men, and bisexual/pansexual people receive as a result of claiming a heterosexual identity and denying a lesbian, gay, or</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Homophobia</strong></td>
<td>A range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). It can be expressed as antipathy, contempt, prejudice, aversion, or hatred—often in the form of stigmatizing attitudes or discriminatory behavior—and may be based on irrational fear, and is sometimes related to religious beliefs.</td>
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<td><strong>Homosexuality</strong></td>
<td>Derived from the Greek word ‘homos’ meaning ‘same’. It refers to a sexual attraction to or a desiring for people of the same sex.</td>
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<td><strong>Lesbian</strong></td>
<td>A woman whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction is to other women.</td>
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| **Sexual Orientation** | 1. Refers to each person’s profound emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with individuals. Usually defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, or asexual. 
2. Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay or bisexual. For example, a trans woman who was assigned male at birth and undergoes gender affirmation surgery may be attracted to other women. She would be identified as a lesbian or a gay woman. |
| **Stigma and Discrimination** | Stigma is derived from the Greek meaning a mark or a stain. Stigma can be described as a process of devaluation that significantly discredits an individual in the eyes of others. Within particular cultures or settings, certain attributes are defined by those with power as discreditable or unworthy. When stigma is acted upon, the result is discrimination that may take the form of actions or omissions. Discrimination refers to any form of arbitrary distinction, exclusion, or restriction affecting a person, usually (but not only) by virtue of an inherent personal characteristic or perceived belonging to a particular group. |
| **Transgender** | A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. “Trans” is shorthand for... |
“transgender.” (Note: Transgender is correctly used as an adjective, not a noun, thus “transgender people” is appropriate but “transgenders” is often viewed as disrespectful) [xxvi].

| Transition | 1. The time when a person begins to live as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth. Transitioning may or may not also include medical and legal components such as taking hormones, having surgery, or changing documents which are often used as identification (e.g. driver’s license or passport) to reflect one’s gender identity. Medical and legal steps are often difficult for people to afford [xxvii].  
2. The period of time in which a person begins to live in a gender role that is in accordance with their internal gender identity. Transition is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a period of time. Transition may include some or all of the following cultural, legal and medical adjustments: informing one's family, friends and/or co-workers; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; undergoing hormone therapy; and/or seeking gender affirmation surgery [xxviii]. |
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<tr>
<td>Transphobia</td>
<td>Fear, rejection, or aversion towards transgender people [xxix] or gender non-conforming behavior. It often manifests in the form of stigmatising attitudes or discriminatory behavior [xxx].</td>
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INTRODUCTION

This report offers data and firsthand accounts of Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LBTQ) women’s lived experiences across the region as they navigate social, legal and ideological terrains that contest their presence, stigmatize their identities and challenge their continued existence. The Second Caribbean Women and Sexual Diversity Conference, hosted in Suriname from October 5 – 12, 2014, proved to be an ideal forum for the exploration of LBTQ women’s concerns. It was born out of the recognition that LBTQ women continue to face violence, discrimination, marginalization and a lack of inclusion in various social movements. The conference was organized by Caribbean LBGT advocacy groups:

- United and Strong

United and Strong is a member organization of the Caribbean HIV/AIDS Partnership which is a network of groups focused on LGBT and other marginalized communities in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) with the vision of equality and human rights for all by working to eliminate stigma and discrimination, reduce inequality and protect human rights and lives.

- Women’s Way

Women’s Way (WW) is dedicated to creating a platform for women who (also) Love women in Suriname and the rest of the CARICOM. Founded in 2009, WW aims to strengthen the emancipation of women who (also) love women, promote and stimulate the wellbeing and health of women who have sex with women (WSW) and advocate for social acceptance.

The need for a focus on LBTQ women’s issues was articulated at the women’s caucus during the International Dialogue on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) Human Rights, co-hosted by United and Strong of Saint Lucia. At this meeting, it was underscored that LBTQ women must assist in efforts to affect legislation and public attitudes towards LGBTQ people. The IGDS: NBU made the decision to work with the coordinators of the conference to devise a strategy to address the paucity of data on LBTQ women’s experiences in the Caribbean.

This project also formed part of the Human Rights, Sexual Equality and Youth (HRSEY) initiative of the IGDS: NBU. HRSEY is an advocacy, outreach and research project which has been supported by the British High Commission.
Two primary aims have been accomplished between July 2014 - October 2015:

1. To assess the vulnerabilities of LGBTQ youth to violence, discrimination and victimization. The assessment will aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges discrimination poses to LGBTQ youth and implicit costs to individuals, families, communities and the nation.

2. To conduct a thorough review of laws, regional agreements and international treaties that clarifies the Caribbean’s human rights obligations with regards to sexual equality and anti-discrimination.

HRSEY is expected to promote legal reform by informing the removal of the buggery laws and helping to secure protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. It seeks to enhance access to services for the LGBTQ community by increasing sensitization of key service providers including health care professionals, police officers and members of the judiciary. Finally it aims to challenge the status quo by situating gender identity and sexual orientation as a human rights obligation of the government as well as directing advocacy around the government’s potential role as a human rights champion in the region.

While investigating the ways in which stigma and discrimination heightened the vulnerability of LGBTQ youth, we recognized the lack of theorizations on LBT Caribbean women’s sexuality and the ways in which their experiences are shaped by race, gender, sexuality, nationality, class and positioning as part of the developing world.

Notably, our preliminary regional study intended to gain a comprehensive understanding of challenges discrimination poses to LBTQ women and the implicit costs to individuals, families, communities and the nation. We assessed the social capital and security as citizens and investigate their vulnerability to violence, discrimination and victimization; examine their access to necessary services and protection; interrogate the role of social, religious, political and economic structures as well as record the lived realities of these women. The research project was devised in collaboration with the LBT community to allow us to explore the ways in which individuals employ strategies to minimize the impact of stigma and discrimination in their daily lives.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers from the Unit employed a Participatory Action Research Methodology. Questions were devised by the researchers and tested at an LGBT focus group in Barbados in June 2014 through the Human Rights, Sexual Equality and Youth project (HRSEY). The IGDS: NBU worked with participants to refine the interview tool so that the instrument adequately reflected key areas of concern in their lives. The interview tool covered nine main themes, ranging from family and support systems to legislation and policy. A modular approach was then adopted for
the interview structure in order to capture all relevant information. This modular structure also
allowed focus groups and individuals to select two to three key topics to explore in depth.

Using qualitative methodology, the IGDS: NBU collected data through three focus groups and
individual guided narratives as well as data through our written survey instrument. This
methodology resulted in rich data focusing on safe spaces, support systems, multiple forms of
violence that LBTQ women experience and their relationship to family, community and the state.
By the end of the workshop, the IGDS: NBU had gathered data from 28 women from 11
countries across the region: Trinidad, Dominica, Suriname, St Lucia, Jamaica, Grenada, St Kitts
and Nevis, St Croix, Guyana, St Martin and Barbados.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, the region was divided into five broad categories
for reporting: Lesser Antilles, Greater Antilles, Mainland Caribbean, Wider Caribbean and
Diaspora. Additionally, pseudonyms are used in relaying the narratives and descriptors.

DEMOGRAPHY

Over 28 participants from 11 countries attended the Second Caribbean Women and Sexual
Diversity Conference. While the participants primarily shared a history of activism in LGBTQ
issues, there was a diversity of gender expressions and sexual orientations, ages, races, religious
practices, occupations and life experiences.

Based on the sample, half of the participants (46.4%) were in their twenties; 25% of participants
were in their thirties; 10.7% of participants were in their forties; 14.2% of participants were in
their fifties; and 3.5% did not report their age.
Age Range of Participants

- Twenties: 46.43%
- Thirties: 25.00%
- Forties: 14.29%
- Fifties: 10.71%
- Unreported: 3.57%
Additionally, 35.7% of participants were from the Lesser Antilles 25% from Mainland Caribbean, 17.9% from the Greater Antilles and 14.3 % from the Wider Caribbean and Diaspora.

Geographical Location
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This report examines the experiences of LBTQ women in the Caribbean. It is important to centre the narratives of these women in documenting their accounts of strength and resiliency in wanting to live and love freely in the face of opposition and unjust treatment within a heteronormative environment. Essentialist notions of gender and sexuality restrict the intersectional identities and multiple experiences of LBTQ women (Harding 2003). In turn, they may be marginalized with mainstream gay and feminist movements, whereby the homosexual male is privileged in the former and sexuality and heteronormativity is not fully addressed in the latter. Thus, lesbophobia (sexism and homophobia) and transphobia make LBTQ women doubly and triply vulnerable to the manifestations of gendered and sexual inequalities and harms, as compared to other social groups.

While some scholars (Alexander 1991; Robinson 2003; Richardson 2000) have rightfully critiqued the marginal sexual citizenship rights assigned to LGBTQ individuals that police and delegitimize their intimate life in the areas of the erotic, socio-sexual unions, family, health and reproduction, others have challenged the limitations of formal rights claims in effectively overturning liberal principles of inclusion based on a prototypical citizen – white-male-heterosexual-affluent-able-bodied - and instead have proposed narratives forged “from below” or outside the system to resist oppression (Sheller 2012). Participants discussed their “outsider” status within their societies as they raised a range of concerns about having to deal with the challenges of employment and family life along with harassment, discrimination, abuse and violence with limited legal and/or state protection.

At the root of these concerns is the perceived transgression of gender stereotypes, expectations and norms embedded in heteronormative cultural and political systems. While there is a diversity of sexual experiences in the Caribbean, and scholars have investigated same-sex female desire and the cultural and racialized dimensions of it (Wekker 2006; Silvera 1992; King 2011), Kempadoo notes that heteronormativity persists because “sexual practices and arrangements are held to be operational around a gender binary that firmly attaches the biological to the social, and where heterosexuality is seen as the only form of legitimate sexuality” (2009: 9). LBTQ women are vulnerable to multiple forms of violence which are due to them transgressing both gender and heterosexual norms.

In discussing how lesbophobia is manifested through contempt and attacks against lesbians in the media in Barbados, Crawford argues that, “lesbians or women who do not conform to heterosexuality as a compulsory or standard way of life, or those women who challenge rigid gender codes of femininity, sell their sex for money or do not adhere to heterosexual monogamy are viewed as disruptive to the dominant hetero-patriarchal order” (2012:10). As a consequence,
male perpetrators may use both physical and sexual violence to control and put LBTQ women in their place. Some participants noted this reality: Annette, a woman from the Greater Antilles in her late 40s, reported that when her NGO canvassed women who were survivors of sexual assault, “twenty-five percent those [assaulted] said they believe it was because of their sexual orientation.” Therefore, when it comes to gender-based violence a more nuanced understanding of its occurrence must be considered in accounting for individuals who are violated because of their gender, gender identity/expression and/or sexual orientation, and whose bodies do not match the typical cisgender heterosexual female victim. It is crucial that domestic violence laws and gender-based violence policies take in to consideration different types of intimate socio-sexual unions regardless of gender and sexual orientation.

Public perceptions and stereotypes of LBTQ women as being sick or deviant, for transgressing gender and sexual norms prevail. The state is also complicit in reinforcing these sentiments through policing women’s bodies and criminalizing perceived homosexual activity (Alexander 1991). Participants shared that they do not feel respected as a result of them being perceived as different. Marcia, a woman in her mid-fifties from the Lesser Antilles, noted: “At one point, when they see you differently as LGBT, everything changes for you. You don’t have rights again.” Unlike other individuals who may look to the state, advocacy groups, the community or the family for support, LBTQ women frequently experience exclusion and rejection. Violence is often perceived or coded as corrective and morally justified by the immediate family, wider society, religious and community leaders and representatives of the state. These actors denounce LBTQ women’s sexuality and/or gender identities as unnatural, undesirable and at odds with a ‘Caribbean identity’. This is etched in law as CARICOM countries maintain antiquated colonial-era buggery laws through Sexual Offences Acts that criminalize non-procreative sexual activity.

Strategies are employed to “pray away the gay” or to intimidate LBTQ women to return to their assumed natural (and original) state as cisgender heterosexual individuals cast in the mould of hetero-femininity (Crawford 2012). Confronting these obstacles often bears a toll on individuals and heightens their fears of coming out or telling others about their sexual orientation. One participant noted that, “I wish I could be out, and in the media and whatever. Then I have to think about safety, generally, like I…Well I wouldn’t say I could get killed, but at the end of the day, you know, you could be victimized, you could be targeted.” Moreover, participants noted that stigma and discrimination negatively affected their mental and emotional health, which can lead to higher levels of stress, anxiety and self-harming behaviors such as suicide.

Additionally, gender identity and expression have a significant impact on employment as some employers are reluctant or unwilling to hire qualified applicants with non-traditional gender expression. Workplaces typically lack policies to address discrimination on the basis of gender
identity. When discrimination is on the basis of gender identity, it is difficult for LBTQ women to earn a living, it exacerbates their vulnerability and narrows their choices.

Moreover, LBTQ women’s experiences will be reviewed in the following areas: 1) socio-cultural environment; 2) equality and discrimination; 3) family and support system: and resistance and empowerment.

I. SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

LBTQ participants discussed how heteronormativity, lesbophobia and transphobia are operationalized with their socio-cultural environment. While there is a diversity of cultural forms and identities in the Caribbean across linguistic, national and geographical boundaries, Smith cautions that “notions of sexuality are deeply inflected by colonial and imperial inheritances that have framed nationalism’s discourses and silences and continue to inform, more or less, the structures of feeling of the region’s people” (2011:2). While this latter point is not sufficiently investigated in this report, it is nonetheless instructive in setting the stage for how divergent understandings and meanings of gender and sexuality have emerged in the region out of clash and mixture of European/African/Asian cultures and worldviews influence by conquest, colonialism and neo-colonialism with creolized resistance in quick pursuit.

Heteronormativity

Some LBTQ women shared their experiences of growing up in an environment where dominant norms on gender and sexuality prevailed. During 1980s, the AIDS epidemic was embedded in people’s minds as a homosexual disease and any engagement with non-heterosexual intimacy was not only pathologized as a “sickness” but, as Kempao adds, also required state control of ‘high risk groups through “surveillance, education, and behavioural change programmes”’ (2009:5). Suzanne, a middle-aged activist from the Lesser Antilles who came of age in the 1980s shared her experience:

The discovery of my sexuality in the time of AIDS [in the] early 80’s was quite traumatic. Generally the world associated gay, homosexual, with AIDS. So I was sick, perverted, diseased and the worst would come to me…Also the family, led by my grandmother, raised her children in a culture where men were better than women.

Unfortunately, this participant could not embrace her sexual identity because of heterosexist and homophobic beliefs about her perceived “sickness,” which challenged her sense of self, agency and belonging. The medicalization of homosexuality in Western culture has been purposeful in the state and other institutions in deeming queer bodies as sick, diseased or undesirable, and in
need of policing and disciplining, in order to normalize and institutionalize heterosexuality bolstered by capitalistic interests (Foucault 1978).

Some participants internalized their oppression which contributed to them having anxiety and engaging in self-loathing. They were unable to reconcile how they saw themselves, and felt about same-sex desire, with the heteronormative standards that sought to oppose and denigrate their sense of being, especially in the absence of LBTQ role models and advocates. Not surprisingly, compulsory heterosexuality was enforced as LBTQ women were encouraged to engage in opposite-sex relationships as a rite of passage, even though their deeper interpersonal, romantic or sexual needs went unmet. Doreen—now in her early 50s—identifies as a lesbian and a LGBT activist. She relayed the story of her initial marriage to a man and then coming out later on in her life:

I was 10 when I met my boyfriend who later [became] my husband for almost 30 years . . . All [that] time I knew that I like women best. But because of my upbringing in an environment with no examples of gay or lesbians, I lived my 30 first years of with a man. Even though I did not love or was not in love with him, I always did my best to be as normal as all heterosexual couples. Nuff years ago after I broke up with my husband I came out of the closet and now living with a woman…living happy and totally in love.

Doreen’s story is reflective of how some LBTQ women may mask their true feelings about loving women. They may do so by conforming to hetero-patriarchal norms, especially in early adulthood, to avoid backlash or ostracism from their families and communities as well as to maintain some semblance of respectability. Moreover, “passing as straight” or engaging in gender-normative behaviour is a strategy employed by some LGBTQ individuals for protection and safety (Crichlow 2004).

When individuals were courageous enough to be open about their sexuality, they were often made to feel guilty about it by family members who felt that they were disgracing or dishonoring the family’s name. Annette shared her story about her mother trying to police her sexuality:

When I was asked by my mother if I was gay and I told her yes, she told me I was not brought up like that and that people would ridicule her and I should and could not be public [about my sexuality]. I had by this time been out to the majority of my friends and had started become active within the LGBT movement.

The decision that LBTQ women have to make about being true to themselves is often a difficult one because of familial ties, which can be easily broken if they publically challenge the status-quo.
Homophobia is also manifested through language or words that harm LBTQ individuals. Heather, a black lesbian in her early forties from the wider Caribbean, recalled her story of growing up in an environment of intense homophobia:

I remember how afraid I was to let anyone know about my sexuality. I knew that I liked girls when I was about 14 years old. I did not know if there was a name for people like me. I remember feeling alone. The messages that I received culturally about lesbians and gays were very negative. Words like “anti-man” and “manwoman” were used to describe same-sex orientation. Additionally, the church messages I received were very negative. I wondered about how God could create me and yet condemn me.

Heather’s account reveals how homophobia and transphobia go hand in hand. Objections about same-sex desire often lead to gender and sexual orientation being seen as one and the same. Thus, individuals who deviate from normative notions of masculinity and femininity, regardless of their sexual orientation, are seen as homosexual. Hence, derogatory gender-inverted references are used as descriptors and indictment against homosexuality.

Homophobic slurs and epithets are operationalized on the personal level to attack or demean LGBT individuals. Prejudice is also produced through discourses about gay/queer subjectivities in the popular media, particularly the print media in the Caribbean (Murray 2012; Crawford 2012). Monica, a young leader in the youth movement in her small island in the Lesser Antilles, added,

It’s normalized to hear them, because if it’s a part of your music, it’s like… everybody listens to it, like it’s nothing, it pretty normalized in festivals, and on the radios, at events. And that’s the thing, these are not people, you now… you need to continue discriminating against them and put it in your music. It’s part of your culture, you’ve internalized it. Don’t ever try to acknowledge them as people because there is something else from people that we should burn. Yeah, that’s how I see it in our culture. That’s one aspect of culture.

Homophobic lyrics in some popular Caribbean music, especially Jamaican dancehall, is well documented and demonstrates how heterosexual hyper-masculine angst about homosexuality gets produced, disseminated and celebrated (Hope 2010).
Religion

Participants held different religious and spiritual beliefs and tried to reconcile their sexuality with their faith. Some individuals challenged homophobic dogma and tried to establish new ways of worshipping, while others embraced spiritual traditions they thought were more inclusive.

Religious hetero-patriarchal ideologies reinforce dichotomous relations between men and women premised on the gender inequality, heteronormativity and procreative sexual relations through the institution of marriage. Colonial Christian religiosity is etched into the inherited anti-buggery laws that seek to regulate same-sex bodies and punish so-called “unnatural” homosexual acts deemed to be immoral and non-life producing (Alexander 1991; Robinson 2003). Religious fundamentalism adhering to homophobic tenets make it difficult for some individuals to speak out against victimization and discrimination because of indoctrination and fear of ostracism (Silvera 1992).

Hilda – an agnostic advocate in her late twenties whose father is a pastor – also noted that discrimination took the form of direct denunciation from authority figures in the church:

Before I ever came out to anyone in my church, I was approached by the assistant pastor who accosted me saying that I was going to hell. She accused me being a ‘stink lesbian’ and [said] I should repent because I am a disappointment to my father’s ministry and god is disgusted with my lifestyle. She then banned my participation on the worship team saying that my sinful lifestyle was blocking the blessing the congregation would receive.

The lesbophobic comments about the participant being a “stink lesbian” reflects the belief that lesbianism is an aberration and morally corrupting to other women, and to others in general. It is ultimately seen as threatening to a heteropatriarchal religious order grounded in the subordination of women and men’s claims over women’s bodies and sexuality through the institution of marriage (Rich 1995; Crawford 2012). Ultimately, the emotional and psychological pain caused by those you care for, all in the name of religion, is debilitating.

Ann, an agnostic women’s rights advocate in early twenties, relayed a case in which a family member employed emotional coercion to convince her to receive religious counseling:

Having been raised in an average, traditional Roman Catholic, middle-class nuclear family, it was expected that I would grow up to be a practicing heterosexual. I however realized that I was a lesbian –or at least felt uncomfortably attracted to girls – at 11. I suppressed this because of cultural conservatism until I attended university at a neighboring Caribbean island and began engaging in public activism. On finding out I was forced into corrective religious counseling by my mother at the hands of religious fundamentalists. This created a huge feeling of violation of my trust and space.
In this case, corrective religious counseling demonstrates how lesbianism is seen as a pathology that needs to be cured. Crawford (2012) notes a similar account when newspaper article in Barbados focused on how lesbians can be saved from their sinful ways by finding God. The article also shared stories of women who supposedly went down the wrong path, by loving or having sex with women, but then were saved and converted to heterosexuality.

Some participants were hopeful in resisting against religious bigotry and finding new ways to worship. Lotta, a young woman in her early thirties, is more focused on her personal relationship with a divine power (God) rather than attending church. She explains:

My family was never really religious, but the few times that I’ve been to church and heard preachers refer to persons who are gay as sinners, and refer to Sodom and Gomorrah. Even as a child, I knew that God loved everyone and that there was something wrong with the message, which didn’t encourage me to return as an adult unless it’s for a family function.

Kerry, a practicing Buddhist from the Lesser Antilles, emphasized the importance of changing the narrative that pitted all religion against LBTQ women. Noting that church, state and the recognition’s of one’s rights were intimately intertwined, she urged participants to create a counter-narrative.

I think that because culture and religion are important. Especially in terms of our government officials and stuff, that then we have to start tackling those things, or countering those things in showing that LGBT people are not, like in opposition or against the culture of the Caribbean. That we’ve always been, that we’ve always participated, and so in order to do that we have to actually go back—record history that was erased for LGBT people, and then use that to also like, reconstruct ourselves as viable players in Caribbean life.

Caribbean culture is not homogenous or monolithic and neither is religion and religious experience (Wekker 2006). It is clear that LBTQ women have religious needs that go unserved by mainstream conservative religions. As Cora, a self-identified Metaphysical Christian in her late 30s, noted, “I grew up in a traditional Christian family, however, I have chosen to be more of a metaphysical spiritual person because of my sexual orientation and the teaching and practices of the traditional church.”
II. VISIBILITY, DISCRIMINATION AND EQUALITY

Visibility, Coming Out and Public Perception

Since the homosexual/heterosexuality binary presupposes homosexuality as being less than or lacking compared to heterosexuality, or disruptive to the status-quo, the metaphor of the closet has been used in Western sexual politics to denote the hidden and marginal sexual identity of LGBTQ individuals. Since LGBTQ intimacy has been relegated to the private sphere or behind closed doors, their claims to sexual citizenship rights are often not recognized. The participants complicated the closet metaphor by showing that it is not fixed or a monolith but dependent on temporality and spatial locations.

Visibility was a central theme of the participant’s lives, affecting their self-perception and position within their family, community and culture. Participants reflected on attempts to erase or silence LBTQ women’s narratives, the cost of this forced invisibility on themselves and their wider community, the mutability of visibility and the functions that visibility served.

The participants found different ways to negotiate their sexual identity amidst fear of homophobia. In reflecting on the varied ways in which the public responded to LBTQ women, participants noted that these interactions communicated exclusion or inferior status on one hand or support on the other. These messages could be communicated at any point during their daily life: at home, at work, while socializing or traversing the street—and can have a meaningful impact on the individual’s sense of safety, wellbeing or acceptance. As Gwendolyn, an advocate for LGBT rights in her late thirties from the wider Caribbean noted:

They want us to sit small- to be quiet - to understand that we ‘ain’t nobody’. They yell things at us from cars and buses. Sometimes we feel threatened by other drivers in the street who intentionally create dangerous situations. We also get random support and love though too. Support from people, young and old, in grocery stores, on the street and in the political [arena] although that one is rare, [it] does happen at least once a day.

There are spaces in their communities where LBG individuals can gain support. There is a contradictory way in how LGBTQ people negotiate their sexual identity in the Caribbean. On the one hand, there is a dominant narrative that seeks to delegitimize their worth and silence them while on the other hand, kinships and affective bonds are established with others whereby they received care. Participants also understood how invisibility, as well as visibility, can make them vulnerable. Therefore they weighed the benefits or costs of staying in the closet or coming out. As Margaret, a young social worker from the Caribbean diaspora noted in discussing the cost of invisibility: “[It means that I’m] not able to express myself. Not able to feel comfortable in my own body, spirit and mind. Not able to grow as a person.”
As the narratives reveal, however, visibility is not fixed. The politics of location comes into play as individuals may choose to be more visible in one space, while employing strategies to ensure one remains less visible as a sexual or gender non-conforming subject in another. Cheryl, a young student activist from the Greater Antilles offered an example that demonstrates the mutability of visibility:

I think I feel as if I can be more visible [in the island] where I go to school than [the island] where I live. It’s mostly safe on campus and on the hall of residence. At home I tend to shy away from the spotlight regarding my sexuality because I have religious friends, insecurities, religious family who I am not out to (except my mother and aunt). So when I’m home I tend to be invisible.

While cisgender LB women may be able to strategically negotiate visibility and invisibility in concealing their sexual orientation, it may be more difficult for trans or gender non-conforming women to do so. Their visibility heightens their sense of vulnerability in being doubly judged and targeted because of difference.

Furthermore, as individuals pursue personal and romantic development, visibility may become inevitable. LBTQ women who seek to maintain sustained relationships with their same-sex partners may find that they involuntarily become the object of familial or communal scrutiny as a result. Paula, a lesbian student designer from the Greater Antilles, noted

Being in a stable relationship really made me feel visible. The times [where] I spent my days being or feeling invisible was owing to the fact that I did not have that personal support that I needed. Therefore after getting with my partner, I was surrounded by love and support that boost[ed] my confidence and made me very visible in my eyes, not only that but I became visible to those in and around my grounds.

As LBTQ women mature, they may feel more secure about themselves and relationships, allowing them to go about living their lives as they choose regardless of what others think of them. Discussions about the invisibility/visibility of LBTQ women reflect how their bodies have been marked as “Other”. Accordingly, heterosexual privilege enables straight men and women to publically celebrate and discuss their partnerships and intimate life, but LGBTQ intimacies generally are relegated to the realm of the private. This in turn reduces LGBTQ intimacies to simply sexual acts or more discursively as a “homosexual lifestyle.”

Finally, an individual’s sexuality or gender expression may place them at the margins within both the public and the LBTQ community. Queering gender and sexuality allows for binaries to be broken down in promoting a more nuanced and fluid understanding of gender identity and sexual relations that are not mutually exclusive, ie man versus woman or heterosexual versus homosexual (Bulter 1990; Epstein 2002). Thus, coming out as a bisexual may make an individual vulnerable to discrimination in the gay community and the wider society. Monica, a self-identified queer woman in her twenties, described the negative effect of biphobia and the ways in which it can undermine inclusion:
It is even more difficult for persons that identify as queer or bisexual. People from both the heterosexual community and the gay/lesbian community discriminate or make you feel like you don’t belong. I feel like there is so much pressure on us, even more, as we are not taken seriously. It does not matter how sure we are of ourselves, we are not taken seriously.

**Discrimination, Equality and Equity**

Robinson (2009) discusses the limitation of sexual citizenship rights for women and non-heteronormative sexualities in the law. She rightfully argues that “we should be free to define our own identity and concept of life and self – including our sexuality – without compulsion of the state. When the state insists, through law or otherwise, that we must be sexed in a specific way – be it heterosexual, monogamous, nuclear family-oriented, married, or mother- it strikes at the heart of dignity as human beings, and treats us as unworthy as persons *and as citizens*” (2009:3).

LBTQ women expressed that they feel marginalized with society and their sense of belonging is marred by the fact that they do not have full rights. Discrimination is common place as they are not valued and accorded the same rights as others. Whether it is exclusionary measures to restrict the appearance or activities of LBTQ women or violence; the psychological, physical and financial costs are high.

For instance, Lotta notes the transphobia against a transwoman friend was manifested in the form of verbal attacks and physical assaults. She noted that the attacks may occur at any time, have happened in a public space and are intended to intimidate the transwoman:

> On her way to work, as soon as she got off the bus to head out of the bus park, some young bus conductors proceeded to shout obscenities and hurl bottles at her. This friend usually dresses in female clothing, so her life is in constant danger but she refuses to be anything but who she is. I admire her bravery.

The bodies of transgendered women are doubly marked as “unnatural” or an “aberration” so senseless acts of violence are perpetuated against them. Victims are usually afraid to seek legal recourse for assault and other acts of violence because they fear they may be re-victimization, or even criminalisation for engaging in behavior that violates gender and sexual norms. But transgender individuals are fighting back. In a lawsuit launched by Mc Ewan et al vs. the Attorney General of Guyana (2013), male cross-dressers challenged the law in Guyana which makes it a criminal offence for a man to wear ‘female attire’, and for a woman to ‘male attire’, in public, for an ‘improper purpose.’ Ironically, although transgender individuals were ultimately recognized as persons in the case, the law was not overturned.

Discriminatory acts can occur against LGBTQ individuals in many ways. While individuals are usually on guard against physical attacks, they also have to deal with malicious behavior that could negatively affect their status and reputation, leading to termination in the workplace.
Gwendolyn shared a story about her colleague being “outed” at work and then losing his job. She notes,

> We’ve had a colleague who was recently outing on national radio. And he subsequently lost that post. [My country] is a free-to-fire state, so it’s important to know where you’re working, who you’re working for, what the legal context is, and who the HR professionals are.

With limited or no human rights or equity policies to protect LGBTQ individuals in employment, or in general, they are at the mercy of employers who can fire them at will. In such a case, individuals will more likely stay closeted to ensure their livelihood and career are not jeopardized.

Participants raised concern about the bullying and violence that LGBTQ women and youth face. Erseline posited that the level of harassment increased when harassers were in a like-minded group:

> You can’t make racial slurs anymore but it’s still okay to... make disgusting comments to LGBT people or harass them just for being, you know so… I’ve heard them say nasty things about women who present a certain way, you know, under their breath, you know. Or if they’re, like in a group, like eight year olds like, talk a little bit louder. Because they’re in a gang, you know. So I think our safety and respect and dignity is a major issue.

**Crime, Violence and Safety**

Safety continues to be a primary concern for LGBTQ women. A typical source of reprieve for the public—the police—is less straightforward for LGBTQ women. The participants reported differing experiences with police. Some members noted that while some police were sensitized to the needs of the LGBTQ community, this was not the norm and LGBTQ women could not assume that their needs would be met. However, Paula praised those who were the exceptions:

> Where the police are concerned, that’s kind of an iffy situation in [my country]. Cause you have a whole set of policemen who really abuse LGBT persons. As well as you have those who really support LGBT community. Like I could recall an incident that happened in June... where a gay guy was bombed in the store... I was so proud that the policemen took the initiative... to clear the scene.

LGBTQ women described experiencing discrimination while reporting crimes, seeking protection or being arrested. They noted that police officers could be aggressive, abusive or lascivious, leading them to feel violated in multiple ways. When Brenda, a young woman in her late twenties, sought protection from an abusive female partner, she was met by sexually suggestive comments as she reported the crime:

> The response of the police was, ‘Oh, you’re a lesbian. I just want to see how you guys are doing it.’ Even listening to the story, or helping the person, they just want to see, or [ask if] can we have trio, or something.

LGBTQ women who are not the subject of sexual harassment may still face harassment and abuse on the basis of their sexuality. As Annette relayed:
After conducting a stand for visibility in [the capital city of my country] one of our participants—a masculine-identified woman—was arrested and charged for possession of an offensive weapon (a knife). When she was carried to the station she [was] verbally abused by the officers, she was called ‘it’ ‘sodomite’ and ‘duty lesbian’. Her young son was present. He was 11 [and] she told the officers but they gave no regard to her concern.

While the participants relayed the ways in which LBTQ women were discriminated against in their engagement with the police, some connected this treatment to wider patterns of inappropriate/illegal behavior and inefficiencies in police departments across the region. As a vulnerable segment of society, their experiences reflect the cracks within this arm of the state’s protection framework. The police departments appear ill-equipped to address and remedy the crimes committed against vulnerable, stigmatized populations—in this case, LBTQ women—whether as a result of internal bias, a lack of competency for engaging vulnerable populations or a lack of capacity to stop crimes of harassment fueled by prejudice.

The participants agreed that there is an urgent need for legislation to protect against discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Further, there is a need for proactive legislation and policy that enables individuals to live full lives whatever their gender identity, expression or orientation.

III. ACCESS AND RIGHTS

While discussions on sexuality in the Caribbean tend to shy away from identity politics related to sexuality identity and rights based claims and instead focus on sexual practices, some participants vocalized the needs to politicize the fight for sexual equality. Participants wanted to be afforded the opportunity to have their basic needs met without sacrificing their identity. As Deborah, a healthcare facilitator stated,

I have to remind myself often that I was born with the same rights as everyone for many years. Although I was active in the women’s movement I did not include my sexual orientation. Yes, I’ve helped to organize activities for lesbian women but they were focused on creating a safe place to bring L and B women together. I simply had made my world ‘smaller’. [I] did not think of fighting for equal rights. Until a few years when I followed a human rights course I realized how much stigma and discrimination I had internalized. Realizing that made me cry…It was after that moment I pledged that I would integrate a rights-based approach in everything I do. Since then I became a more visible activist and helped knock on doors by those who are in decision making positions.

LBTQ women are also engaging in consciousness-raising activities to help educate others about the unfair treatment that they are experience. This is important in ensuring that their cause is not simply seen as an individual or a personal matter but instead a societal issue.
LBTQ women are also concerned about health services and the accessibility of services, especially related to mental health services. Jennifer connected the lack of familial support, pervasive cultural stigma, persistent messages of decreased worth tied to one’s sexual identity, threats of violence to mental health, stating,

It might start to help with this psychological health crisis that LGBT youth face. And I think that a lot of it is based on the non-acceptance, the early discrimination, and stigma, and shame, and people calling you disease and disgusting and so forth. Or the violence that is perpetrated upon these youth by family and friends.

LBTQ women might be apprehensive to seek out a counselor or psychologist as they are feared of either being judged or misunderstood in relation to their experiences. Additionally, medical and healthcare providers have to be sensitized to the needs of LBTQ women especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health. Cheryl was afraid to go to the gynecologist because she feared she would be treated differently if she revealed her sexual orientation. She explains: “I feel like I’m not sure how to tell doctors or nurses that I sleep with women because I’m afraid I will be treated differently, so that stops me from getting adequate health care. Last time I went to the gyno I said I wasn’t sexually active – that wasn’t true.”

Given the personal and intrusive nature of medical examinations, sex, gender and sexual orientation are factors in how LBTQ women may have concerns in sharing personal and medical information with doctors due to heteronormative and biological assumptions about sexed and gendered bodies that correspond to heterosexual cisgender women.

In terms of reproductive health, lesbian women may not be seen outside the capacity of motherhood-based biological determinist understanding of reproduction (Crawford 2012). Paula notes that, “it is assumed that you don’t need urgency or advice on how to take care of yourself because you are a lesbian. I remember going to the doctor once and after making my sexual identity known, she went on to ask if I didn’t want to have children.”

Some members of the LBTQ community have begun to fill the dearth of health care providers by creating safe spaces, pursuing training or advocating for better health care provision. However, this activism can place a toll on an individual’s mental health. As Heather stated, “its reminding us that this work is heavy and the importance of us taking care of ourselves...
Education and Information

Participants identified education as key in educating and raising people’s consciousness about LBGTQ issues and promoting tolerance and eventually acceptance of gender and sexual difference. Doreen noted,

Education and information is the foundation for knowledge. As we are all being born by heterosexual parents, we are being fed with hetero-norm. By giving education and information about sexual issues generally and different sexual orientation [this] will give the children and teachers the tools to respect and understand LGBT issues. We need to work for a snowball effect by teaching, educating to the foundation of the society we will establish a mind shift in the community. This will take a long time but [these are] steps in a good direction.

LGBT groups, feminists and other social justice activists have been proactive in educating and training individuals in the area as well as to affect public policy decisions.

Participants identified the centrality of information regarding sexual diversity and diverse gender expressions (particularly when framed in terms of respect, agency and tolerance) to preventing isolation, ostracism and rejection. Further, they related their own varied experiences in the educational system. While some participants noted that they never experienced bullying in school despite people being aware of their same-sex attraction, others relayed experiences of discrimination at the individual and institutional level.

At the institutional level, trans women were identified as particularly vulnerable as there were few policies to protect them or ensure their basic needs (such as access to bathroom facilities) were met. In the absence of formal policies, the women were forced to rely on the judgment of institutional authorities. The authorities were either had inconsistent protocol decisions or refused to help the student. Joan shared a story about a transwoman who had challenges in post-secondary institution.

Well I know one person [who] reported it to the university, and, you know, she asked for assistance. There wasn’t anything then that they could do really, because they don’t have any kind of policy in place to protect transgendered students, so...

[Moderator: That’s why I think they should have a diversity policy just to cover...]

They're dismissive, they tried to [argue], ‘well why we should make special provisions for you when this is your choice. You wanted to transition. You should deal with the ramifications and the consequences on your own.’

Tertiary institutions need to be committed to promoting a safe and accessible environment for all students. Diversity and non-discrimination policies should be established to ensure equity and equality are upheld for students and staff alike and that mechanisms for redress are in place.

Participants also explored the ways in which class affected their acceptance in society, noting that attributes associated with being of a higher class standing permitted them a greater degree of
acceptance within society, in spite of their sexuality. Cora noted, “[Education] plays an important role in people’s acceptance of my sexuality. I find that many of my friends who are not university graduates aren’t that easily accepted by society as a LGBTQ person.”

**Employment**

The impact of cultural stigma and discrimination can be seen related to employment whereby visibility as an LGBTQ advocate or member of the LGBTQ community severely disadvantaged both job seekers and those who were employed. Individuals who gained visibility for their advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ community could find it difficult to gain employment or advance in their careers. Participants from different islands relayed their experiences with the LGBTQ glass ceiling.

> I work with youth and children. I volunteer with several NGOs that host programs with children and youth. I also assist with several environmental programs. I am often scared that the directors/coordination find out about my sexual orientation because I think they will look at me differently or cease engaging me in programs. I think this because I heard them making strong statements about gays; they do not like them! (Monica)

The participants also reported that individuals with nontraditional gender expressions faced discrimination in the job market and a lack of protection in the workplace. Further, gender stereotypes worked against women with nontraditional gender expression who sought to enter jobs that were traditionally considered to be feminine (where they were pushed to conform) or masculine (where they were often denied entry). As Olivia notes,

> There are many ‘butch’ lesbians who suffer from discrimination from acquiring a job that they can perform in but is male dominated. Employers believe that because they are females they shouldn’t be given the job but rather should work in a more female oriented job. Also they face the struggle of getting the job, [and having] to dress ladylike in order to work. For example if a butch gets a job as a [bank] teller, that may not necessarily work since they dress tomboyish. I [find] this disrespectful and not giving them the chance to prove themselves on the job. Gender identity should not be an issue when employing someone.

Where employment was secured, women might still find themselves subject to scrutiny and reproach on the basis of their expression. Joan added,

> I know a few lesbians who are more male presenting. They would go to the interview in their normal esthetic. You know the way they usually present themselves, which is more male presenting. And further down the line, they would be asked to tweak here and there, just this and that, and they are like, no. This is my esthetic, and if you had a problem with it initially you should have said so.

[Moderator: And are they... do you know if they were terminated for...?]

They were not terminated, at the time they were reprimanded.

This reproach was not limited to women with non-traditional gender expression. Feminine presenting LGBTQ women could be vulnerable to similar scrutiny and subtle discrimination in instances where they revealed their sexuality, gender or affiliation. However, some women have
been able to employ advocacy on their own behalf. In Joan’s case, she had been working for her employer for three months when she was asked to update the employment policy. In crafting the anti-discrimination clause, she included protection for sexual orientation and gender identity. Her boss asked her to remove the clause, adding that the company did not hire LGBTQ individuals. She countered by stating that she was gay and had been hired. After this, he began to critique her appearance as non-professional, although it was unchanged from the prior months, and then began to question her regarding her sexual orientation. As a cisgender feminine presenting lesbian, Joan was initially perceived as heterosexual. Once her boss discovered her sexuality, he began to critique the elements of her appearance that could be regarded as non-normative, namely her piercings. This began symbolic of her ‘otherness.’

Other LGBTQ advocates have created alternate means of employment to circumvent unemployment or underemployment. As Gwendolyn added,

> My girlfriend will not be employed by anyone in country [because of her visibility], so we started a company, a for-profits and for-purpose company—a business that serves our advocacy and supports us financially. I would probably not be employed because I am her [girlfriend] or I would have to accept severe underemployment.

Where discrimination frustrates the ability of LGBTQ individuals to earn a living, it typically exacerbates their vulnerability and narrows their choices. Further, most islands fail to offer protection to employees who are subjected to discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender identity. Thus, as LGBTQ activists push for change, these alternative paths for self-sustainment are important.
IV. SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Heteronormativity also occurs in the way we view family in the Caribbean. While a lot of research has been done on Caribbean families, particularly working-class African-Caribbean families, limited work has been done on LGBTQ individuals and their intimate lives and families.

Participant longed for the care, support and protection of their families. Familial attitudes toward LGBTQ women differed and depended on a variety of factors. While some individuals were able to get the eventual support from family members when they discussed their sexual orientation, other individuals were not as fortunate. They experienced abuse, ostracism and eviction from their homes. Gwendolyn, an Afro-Caribbean self-described ‘woman who loves women’ in her late thirties, said,

> When I came home from college and refused to be closeted for even a month, my mother scheduled a “surprise intervention” exorcism that traumatized my claustrophobic self even further. It was awful. My brother tried to warn me but I was stuck – blocked in by cars and people who ‘loved’ me. They prayed over, on and through me for like two hours. I was able to disassociate and watch from across the room ‘til they were done. It didn’t work. Today, I am very lesbian and very, very fabulous. They said I should know better. My extended family just ignores me, but they do not influence my day to day and I don’t influence theirs. If I see them in the street some are cordial, some are hostile and I respond in kind or as I would to anyone on the street – mean or kind.

Gwendolyn’s account demonstrates that family may not be a safe haven for LGBTQ women. Sometimes psychological and emotional abuse endured is too much for individuals to handle, resulting in them becoming depressed. Luckily, this participant was strong enough to withstand the ridicule and pressure and go on with her life.

Conversely, some participants, Monica, an advocate for LGBT and women’s rights in her mid-twenties, experienced acceptance from her family.

> My immediate family accepts me for who I am. My mother approached me to ask about my sexuality actually. I didn’t go to her and that helped. My brothers are feminists and also support my choices. I honestly also believe that my father is happy that I have relationships with females because he knew who he was.
Creating a Family

While LBTQ women wanted to established families of their own, they understood that their social partnerships would not be recognized like heterosexual unions. This frustrated them because they do not have access to the civil rights and social benefits in legally establishing families.

Joan, a participant in her twenties from the Lesser Antilles shared her frustration of the challenges she faces with simply cohabiting with her partner:

When you fall in love with someone and you start to cohabitate, building a life together, quite naturally you begin to look forward to be afforded the same opportunities as heterosexual couples. Although, for my partner and myself, it was apparent that this wouldn’t be possible. We experienced several homophobic landlords who had problems with the fact that we were same-sex partners. It led me to question what unnecessary hindrances I would end up facing in the future in building my relationship with my partner. Sadly, it’s a depressing reality for many non-heterosexual couples.

More research needs to be conducted on LBGTQ individuals and their families in order to identify some of the key issues that affect them as well as to find ways to mitigate some of the challenges that they are experiencing. Both the stability and the longevity of relationships for LGTQ women are sometimes compromised by strategic goals of custody or adoption of children, joint ownership, insurance and passing on of the estate.

The absence of a process to legally recognize same-sex unions or marriage, as well as the issue of custody and adoption were flagged as key issues. Lotta shared her experience,

My partner and I have been fostering two children for three years. The issue that we’re facing is that we’re in the process of adoption and are unable to do so jointly because of the situation in my country where same-sex couples are unable to marry. I’m currently listed on the paperwork and will have to wait until the process is completed before we figure out our next step, legally.

While sexual citizenship rights for sexual minorities are usually framed as decriminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity, it also extends to other legal reforms and economic distribution of property and wealth in order to cover reproduction, care and lineage.

Additionally, LBTQ women who have endured abusive same-sex relationships are often unable to seek legal protection through the legislation governing domestic violence. In Barbados, however, gay and feminist activists advocated for more inclusive language in the revised domestic violence legislation to include the occurrence of violence in visiting unions and other socio-sexual unions.
V. RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT

Self-empowerment and resistance against homophobia, transphobia and discrimination were also explored. Since the conference attendees comprised of activists and individuals interested in activism in the LBTQ community, their responses were rooted in the belief that empowerment and education were critical to securing human rights. Self-empowerment was viewed as a significant mode of resistance. This could include gaining knowledge of one’s rights and cultivation of technical and life skills, to the development of supportive networks among the LBTQ community and allies. Annette explained the ways in which her personal visibility served to empower her community: “being visible is most important to me because you become a representative for a group that many in Jamaica say does not exist. I also have become an example for the LBT community and what can be accomplished.”

Alternately Deborah, a woman in her early fifties from the Greater Antilles, chose to form a small organization that collectively advocated for the rights of LBTQ women

We started off as [an] initiative of three or four women. We were scared too, we had this organization, we wanted to start this group. But no, no, no publicity… And little by little, by little by little… others came, and look where we are now. . . We are out there.

Kerry, a civil servant from the Eastern Caribbean promoted non-traditional forms of advocacy. She emphasized the importance of using existing cultural forms and forums such as performing in calypso tents with songs that support LBTQ women. Further, she suggested that LBTQ women could change the existing cultural discourse by engaging with different art forms and producing cultural works that more accurately reflected their lives:

[My] wife is gonna sing calypso, and I’m very happy because she is gonna at least sing one song. Even if she doesn’t go all the way, and you know… she gonna sing one song, at least that’s about our reality. And I think we have to start doing it more and more. If you’re a poet, if you’re a rapper, if you’re a whatever… create our own thing and put it out there, put it out there.

CONCLUSION

While LBTQ women in the Caribbean continue to face systemic and intersecting forms of violence, they have found ways to resist and find empowerment for themselves and community. Their resistance is as multi-faceted and complex as their identities. Despite these differences, participants’ reports suggest that visibility is the factor that simultaneously renders them most vulnerable to violence and best equipped them to empower their communities and counter harmful conceptions of LBTQ women.
Additionally, as LBTQ women grapple with the cultural stigma and discrimination in the family, religious and cultural spaces, employment, healthcare, and educational environments, they rely on resources and networks to support their empowerment. The women’s narratives reveal that access to education and information proved foundational to understanding, acceptance and progress. Information about LBTQ women’s lives, experiences and needs proved critical to their own self-acceptance, acceptance from their parents and children, and acknowledgment by friends.

Further, where traditional networks of support—such as the family, community, church and state—failed to meet the needs and rights of LBTQ women, there was the possibility of creating alternative networks of support with allies and each other.

Additionally, language, religion and culture played a critical role in shaping the national and regional discourse around gender expression and sexual orientation. While these had traditionally been used in ways that undermined LBTQ women, participants revealed the ways in which they were attempting to reclaim some of these spaces. Notably, participants were engaging with cultural art forms to articulate the realities of their lives.

While transphobia, lesbophobia and sexism continue to render LBTQ women in the Caribbean vulnerable to harm, LBTQ activism offers evolving ways to resist and empowerment of self and the LBTQ community—a resistance that is vital to LBTQ women’s existence and acceptance.


[iv] Ibid.


[viii] Ibid.


[xii] Ibid.


[xvi] “UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines.”

REFERENCES


