



Clients and Staff at Jamaica AIDS Support for Life

## HIV and AIDS and homophobia: a lethal combination in Jamaica

*Julia Greenberg*

**“Know your epidemic” has long been a mantra of international AIDS organisations and it makes sense. In the Caribbean and other regions with concentrated epidemics, this mantra must mean not just understanding (and often blaming) those living with the disease, but knowing what makes certain populations, such as sexual minorities and women, particularly vulnerable to HIV infection.**

UN data on the Caribbean indicate that prevalence rates among men who have sex with men (MSM) are as much as 20 times higher than in the general population. In Jamaica and Trinidad, adult HIV prevalence rates are 1.6 percent and 1.5 per cent respectively, compared to 31.8 and 20 per cent among MSM.<sup>1</sup> Combine these figures with the fact that in the Dominican Republic, for example, where it is estimated that 11 per cent of MSM are living with HIV and AIDS, it is also estimated that 76 per cent of MSM report having sex with women.<sup>2</sup> What do we know about the epidemic in this setting? We know that many gay men who fear for their safety and lives may enter heterosexual relationships to hide their sexual identity. In the process, those that are HIV positive may spread the virus to women.

MSM are not to blame for the high prevalence rates in their communities:

the bigotry and legalised homophobia that drive them underground are. The world has always blamed the oppressed for their problems. MSM certainly do not want to contract HIV, but society often drives them underground and in the process marginalises them from prevention efforts. Research shows that when stigma is lowered, so are infection rates.

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### **Justifying harassment**

Jamaica’s laws (sections 76, 77, and 79 of the Offences against the Person Act) criminalise consensual sex between adult men, and are also used to criminalise consensual sex between adult women.<sup>3</sup>

Police use the laws to justify harassment of homosexuals, refusal to respond to attacks against them, and impede the work of HIV and AIDS educators and outreach workers.

On February 12 this year, Ernie Smith, a Jamaican MP, made bitter homophobic remarks before his colleagues in Parliament, declaring that gay men are the most violent element of Jamaican society, that they should not be allowed to bear arms, and that the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), Jamaica’s only such organisation, should be banned.

J-FLAG was founded in 1998 as the first human rights organisation working on behalf of gays and lesbians. It focuses on legal reform and advocacy, but also provides individual and family counselling, and runs community development programmes in the gay community.

A few days after Smith’s tirade, Jamaica’s Prime Minister Bruce Golding said in Parliament: “We are not going to yield to the pressure, whether that pressure comes from

individual organisations, individuals, whether that pressure comes from foreign governments or groups of countries, to liberalise the laws as it [sic] relates to buggery (slang for sodomy or homosexual sex).” He went further and suggested that he would consider stiffening the penalties for homosexual behaviour. Interestingly, in the same speech, he distanced himself from Smith’s comments, and affirmed that J-FLAG had every right to exist and advocate for legal reforms. These two statements have emboldened Jamaica’s civil society to fight even harder against the very law to which the Prime Minister so regrettably clings.

**One woman has stopped treatment because she was instructed never to take ARVs without food, and yet her drug supply is far more reliable than her food supply**

Smith and Golding unwittingly sparked a productive dialogue on one of the island’s most uncomfortable issues. Opinion pieces supporting the rights of homosexuals and repeal of the sodomy laws have appeared in the media, and rights groups have issued angry, lucid statements about the harmful effects of those laws, especially as they relate to HIV prevention.

In a March 5, 2009 press release, J-FLAG stated: “We wish to restate our problem with the buggery law as it applies to consenting adults. It is our belief that in a democracy, the definition of crime must relate to an act that creates a victim or victims. Consensual sex between men has no victims, which means that its criminalisation serves to protect no one.”

The statement added: “This makes men who engage in anal sex into unapprehended criminals as well as creates a hurdle for those working in the fight against HIV. If, as Mr Golding suggests, the maintenance of the provision is consistent with our values as a Christian society, he must explain why there are no laws to proscribe a number of other practices that Christians find offensive or sinful.”

### Responding to the homophobia crisis at the grassroots

Following Smith’s comments, officials from AIDS-Free World travelled to Jamaica to meet with HIV positive and lesbian, gay and transgender activists to hear their stories, learn about their strategies to address the impact of HIV in their communities, and carry their voices to meetings with ministers of Health and Justice and officials in the National AIDS Programme.

AIDS-Free World is an international advocacy group that speaks out on the most glaring failures in the global fight against AIDS. It pressures leaders — whether they are heads of state, heads of health ministries, or heads of UN or other multilateral agencies — to urgently address such failures. In the Caribbean, AIDS-Free World works to expose the ways in which legal and social discrimination against vulnerable groups — MSM, sex workers, migrants and drug users — is driving the region’s epidemics. The organisation’s advocacy is informed by the growing networks of activists representing vulnerable populations throughout the region.

Founded in 1991, Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JAS) is the country’s oldest AIDS organisation, with three branches and hundreds of volunteers. The atmosphere at the JAS office is reminiscent of NGOs

around the world run by communities under threat. As you walk through the dusty courtyard, you cross a queue for services that stretches out to the front veranda. Plates of food emerge from the kitchen at regular intervals, and sporadic laughter erupts from men and women whose lives outside this space are defined by silence and fear.

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JAS is in and of the community. Its programmes address the myriad ways AIDS affects Jamaicans. It runs community outreach and education programmes targeting the most vulnerable to HIV: sex workers, disabled people, MSM and women. Outreach volunteers do hands-on prevention education through ‘community walk and talks’ and staff host and generate content for three radio programmes that cover the island. JAS also offers voluntary counselling and testing alongside government surveillance programmes. It organises support groups for HIV-positive people and offers counselling, testing, and referral to foster care for orphans.



A women’s support group at Jamaica AIDS Support for Life

Photo: Courtesy of SAFAIDS



Women dialogue on HIV and AIDS issues

AIDS-Free World met a support group that JAS runs for HIV-positive women. The women have access to antiretroviral drugs (Jamaica has a successful national treatment programme), and yet the quality of their health and lives is rapidly declining. One woman has stopped treatment because she was instructed never to take ARVs

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without food, and yet her drug supply is far more reliable than her food supply. Another is homeless because she can no longer tolerate mistreatment from her family and neighbours following HIV diagnosis. All the women, except one, have abandoned their children because they feel they cannot raise them safely or happily.

JAS, recognising that MSM on the island are disproportionately affected by the AIDS crisis, works closely with J-FLAG, the first anchor of support for victims of homophobic violence. AIDS-Free World met with some of these individuals who had suffered such violence. The stories we heard were horrific. We heard from a brother and sister, both gay, who were shot several times in the

chest in their home in front of their children and from a transgendered female to male, unable to walk the streets of Kingston without constant physical and verbal harassment, so much so that, he sits on his front porch with a knife in his hand, tempting fate rather than living with fear. Several activists also recounted the humiliating experience of gathering to mourn the loss of a close friend, only to be met by an angry stone-throwing mob at his funeral, protesting at the burial of a homosexual in their community.

### Focusing on the human rights of vulnerable groups

The stories of JAS and J-FLAG clients are defined by an inconvenient and messy reality. "I am gay and my sister is a lesbian and is not into the feminine thing. They shot us in front of our siblings because we are gay... now we must live in hiding," a J-FLAG client said.

The virus is spreading in communities that are reviled by people whose hatred is fanned by bigoted and irresponsible politicians. Gay men, essentially living in a state of siege, yield to intense pressure to engage in heterosexual sex, and increase women's vulnerability to HIV.

The activists and clients at JAS and J-FLAG agree on the urgent need for honest

dialogue and research on how epidemics concentrated within vulnerable groups are spreading among the general population. They understand the risk: public recognition of the fact that many women are being infected by gay men stands to increase stigma against homosexuals. But the gay, lesbian and heterosexual women activists and clients we met also recognise their shared vulnerability and their shared responsibility to fight discrimination. They all agree that criminalising homosexuals is one of the greatest barriers to stemming the tide of Jamaica's epidemic.

It bears repeating that HIV prevalence among MSM in Jamaica is nearly 20 times the prevalence among the general adult population. Given the levels of stigma associated with minority sexual practices and the repressive laws that keep the oppression legal and acceptable, this is not surprising.

**They shot us in front of our siblings because we are gay... now we must live in hiding**

Will Jamaica's leadership be defined by the words of MP Ernie Smith or will the government repeal the sodomy law in the name of human rights and public health? The percentages say it all – this is not about morality or culture, it is about life and death. ■

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3. Human Rights Watch. 2004. *Hated to Death (report)*