Welcome to Jamaica – no longer 'the most homophobic place on Earth'

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A country where violence against the LGBT community was once rife is increasingly adopting a more liberal outlook

Early one late summer morning, more than 200 people gathered under the lush canopy of Hope Gardens in Kingston, Jamaica, for a breakfast party.

The revellers ate – ackee, saltfish, fried plantain – and swayed to a soundtrack of dancehall and soca.

Same-sex couples danced together. A transgender woman strutted by in a flowing white dress adorned with a sash bearing the words: "Miss Supermodel Intl 2018". The park was strung with rainbow banners for the fourth annual Pride JA celebrations. At about midday, the party wrapped up. A light rain eased the heat and the dancers went home to sleep.

It was all a far cry from the country that Time magazine called "the most homophobic place on Earth" in 2006. Yet that label has clung to Jamaica ever since, and with good reason. In a 2013 survey of 71 LGBT people conducted by Human Rights Watch, more than half said they had been victims of homophobic violence. Non-violent discrimination is even more pervasive, with bullying and exclusion faced in education, healthcare and within local communities.

The change has come through the dedication of activists, including the work of Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-Flag), the country's largest LGBT rights organisation, which this month celebrates its 20th anniversary.

When the organisation launched on 10 December 1998, it caused outrage. A journalist in the Gleaner wrote at the time: "We are being prepared to accept seeing two men kissing, holding hands or sharing popcorn from the same bucket at the movies. Public reaction has, however, been hostile … for the next few years, at least, gay rights in our society, as far as road marches or public appearances are concerned, is a very dim possibility."

Less than two decades later, J-Flag has made this "dim possibility" slightly brighter. Three years ago, the country held its first pride event when a flashmob of 15 LGBT people gathered in Kingston's Emancipation Park, dressed in the colours of the rainbow. Since then, pride week has grown: a beach party last year attracted 1,200 people.

Pride celebrations have brought unprecedented visibility to the community. So has social media, which has allowed the organisation, and other groups campaigning for LGBT rights, to "humanise" gay people.

As a result, the former minister for justice and the mayor of Kingston have both spoken out publicly

in support of the group. Policy change has not followed, however. Under the country's colonial-era "buggery law", anal sex is criminalised (sharing a legal clause with bestiality), as are acts of intimacy between two men.

But attitudes are changing. The first time J-Flag addressed parliament calling for changes to these laws, in 2001, they were not taken seriously or treated with respect. But the second time, in 2017, politicians listened courteously.

"That's a huge step forward," says Glenroy Murray, former associate director of programmes at the organisation. "People are willing to engage us, have us at the table and listen to our concerns."

Jaevion Nelson, J-Flag's executive director, says there has been a "public awakening" following two homophobic attacks in 2013 – one of them the murder of Dwayne Jones, who attended a party in women's clothes. The 16-year-old's death forced the discussion of LGBT rights into the public sphere.

The organisation itself has grown considerably since Nelson joined in 2010, aged 24, when there were just three employees. J-Flag now employs 14, with more than 200 volunteers recruited to help coordinate their growing number of events and activist programmes.

But, says Nelson, the lingering Time magazine headline is a hindrance. "It's an unfair label," he says, one that ignores the complex realities of discrimination and downplays the emergence of greater tolerance across the country. "It creates a lot of fear in people and paralyses the community. You think of yourself as the next victim of murder, rather than seeing yourself as an individual with agency."

Before Jamaica could get to that point of tolerance, however, J-Flag activists had to learn to latch on to bigger themes. Their manifesto, the Gay Agenda, was aligned with the government's Vision 2030 development plan. The organisation works to reduce the spread of HIV across the island, and campaigns for the environment.

"We try as best as possible to interrupt our voices in those broader discussions, and not just about LGBT issues, because we exist outside of that community, too," says Suelle Anglin, J-Flag's associate director of marketing, communication and engagement.

Murray echoes these sentiments. "It's not about the trajectory of decriminalisation, anti-discrimination legislation and then marriage," he says. "It's about looking at the ways in which LGBT people aren't able to live their best lives."

This means prioritising changes to anti-discrimination laws, which don't protect Jamaicans on the basis of sexual or gender identity, over the "largely symbolic" repeal of the "buggery" laws. It means promoting the LGBT message while presenting that community as part of wider Jamaican society, he says.

That's why J-Flag held a breakfast party to celebrate pride in a uniquely Caribbean way. "It's about placing queerness in Jamaican-ness," says Murray, "and showing that the two can exist and have co-existed for years."

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