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## The gay uprising in the Caribbean

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Excerpt:

[ST GEORGE'S](#), Grenada (CMC):

Fingers pointing to the sky are shaped in the form of guns. Imaginary triggers are squeezed as crowds of partygoers react with approval to a popular song by Jamaican dancehall icon Buju Banton at Grenada's top nightclub, Fantazia.

*"Boom bye bye in ah b---- boy head/Rude boy nah promote dem nasty man/Dem ha fi dead"* Banton's controversial homophobic lyrics blare from the speakers.

This scene could very easily be anywhere in the [Caribbean](#) or the diaspora.

While the plethora of homophobic reggae songs might have contributed to a subgenre of its own, it seems to underline the region's strong resentment to the gay lifestyle.

But Grenadian sociologist Claude Douglas argues that the Caribbean's attitude to homosexuality is changing.

Douglas, a lecturer at St George's University, says tolerance has increased significantly in recent years and partly blames the United States' cultural invasion of the Caribbean.

"Yesterday's deviants will become today and tomorrow's norms. Let us take, for example, the wearing of earrings by men. This was actually taboo in Grenada many years ago. Today, there are men who appear almost feminine," Douglas said in an interview with the Caribbean Media Corporation.

"As the society evolves, people become more accepting of certain behaviour, and we see the trend developing right now in Grenada."

Douglas makes his case in his new book, **Homosexuality in the Caribbean - Crawling Out of the Closet**, which examines the rise of this alternative lifestyle in the region.

In his 60-page book, Douglas explores issues ranging from biological origins and the "gay-tourist phenomenon" to the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality in the region.

The university lecturer argues that there is not a tremendous increase in the number of homosexuals in the Caribbean, but that more people are finding the courage to "come out".

"You had a lot of people in the closet, but today many, many people are coming out and at least affirming their sexuality through organisations and through protest marches."

Douglas's book narrows in on some of the key factors affecting this lifestyle, including religious values and the campaign of the gay-rights movement.

Although the former chair of the Social Sciences Department at the T.A. Marrayshow Community College does not believe people like to hear his argument, he envisages in his book that "homosexuality is becoming an alternative and acceptable form of human sexuality in the Caribbean".

Persistent struggle

"The disturbing and agonising truth is that homosexuality would crawl out of the closet with pomposity and there would be an alarming incidence of homosexuality in the Caribbean."

Despite strong opposition by the religious community, the gay-rights movement is reported to be making considerable progress in the Caribbean.

From The Bahamas in the north to Guyana in the south, there has been a persistent struggle for equal rights.

Puerto Rico, an overseas department of the [United States](#), is considered by many to be the most tolerant Caribbean country where gays, lesbians, [bisexuals](#), transgender and transsexual groups march openly in the annual gay parade.

Fidel Castro's niece and sexologist, Mariela Castro, is leading a new revolution in Cuba, a country in which homosexuality is becoming increasingly recognised.

"I am not an advocate of homosexuality, but of equal rights. Everybody has a right to be respected as a human being and treated equally. Nobody should be defined solely on their sexuality," declared Nigel Mathlin, chairman of GrenCHAP, an organisation in Grenada that looks after the interests of homosexuals on the [island](#).

"Homosexuality has been around for a very long time now and will continue, but we still pretend that it is something that can be cured or is not an issue, thus driving people underground, regardless in what context, which festers destructive and dangerous behaviour."

To some extent, it appears that the struggle for homosexual rights is helping to remove laws considered oppressive.

In 1997, legislative changes in Cuba effectively decriminalised homosexuality and have paved the way for gay and lesbian couples to enjoy the same civil rights as heterosexual couples.

The gay community in the United Kingdom continues to pressure the Caribbean to change laws forbidding homosexual practices.

The British homosexual organisation, Outrage, has been working closely with Caribbean groups like Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-sexuals and Gays (J-flag) and Barbados Gays and Lesbians Against Discrimination (BGLAD).

In 2001, the United Kingdom forced the repealing of laws in overseas dependent territories such as The Turks and Caicos Islands, The Cayman Islands, Montserrat and Anguilla.

"I have no doubt we will see changes to the laws of Jamaica. It will take time, but it will require a gradualist approach," said a Jamaican homosexual who resides in Barbados.

"The brash, in-your-face approach is likely to only make the situation less secure."

Among those who agree that a change in attitude is needed at the highest levels of society is former Barbados attorney general and present opposition Leader Mia Mottley.

"A government in a pluralistic society must accommodate and respect the human rights and dignity of each individual.

"To that extent, a law, which seeks to discriminate in a society whose history has been scarred with the cancer of discrimination, has in fact, to be reformed."

Testing and counselling

In the meantime, public-health authorities continue to advocate for the decriminalisation of homo-sexuality as a key strategy in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean.

In 2004, a joint United Nations and World Health Organisation report estimated 350,000 to 590,000 infections in the Caribbean.

In 2005 alone, around 37,000 people in the region became infected with HIV and more than 27,000 died of AIDS.

It is against this background that the call for the decriminalisation of homosexuality was made, which, advocates believe, would allow homosexuals to come out and receive testing and counselling.

"There is a rampant homophobia in the Caribbean; a lot of it has its origins in the concept that HIV/AIDS was a disease of homosexual males, which of course it is not," declared health expert Sir George Alleyne, who believes stigma and homophobia are obstacles in the fight against HIV/AIDS.