



# Religion, Hate, Love, and Advocacy for LGBT Human Rights in Saint Lucia

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## Abstract

**Introduction** This article explores how religion and religious institutions affect the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people living in Saint Lucia.

**Methods** Drawing on thirty-three interviews conducted as part of an international human rights project, we explore the role that religion can play in both reinforcing marginalization and promoting human rights for sexual minority people.

**Results** Thematic analysis of interview data reveals ways in which religion is the foundation for life in Saint Lucia and both marginalizes and sustains sexual minority lives.

**Conclusions** Although churches are often viewed as major opponents to LGBT human rights, participants discussed hopes and strategies for churches to become allies in advocating for inclusion.

**Policy Implications** We conclude that Saint Lucia is a context in which work toward human rights for sexual minority people must include attention to religion as a powerful and meaningful component of peoples' lives.

**Keywords** LGBT · Religion · Oppression · Homophobia · Saint Lucia · Caribbean · Human rights

Although human rights for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT<sup>1</sup>) communities have increased globally, several African, Caribbean, Asian, and Pacific nations still criminalize same-sex relationships (Gerber, 2014; Mendos, 2019). Attention usually goes to the outlawing of sex between men under “sodomy laws” but the seventy-two countries that

penalize same-sex relationships include forty-five nations where consensual sex between women is also punishable (Duncan, 2017). Just over half of the countries in which same-sex relationships are criminalized are former Commonwealth nations that have retained homophobic legislation put in place during British colonial rule (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Saint Lucia is one of those nations.

In Saint Lucia, buggery is defined as “sexual intercourse per anus by a male person with another male person” and it is a crime prohibited by law (*Chapter 3.01—Criminal Code, 2005*). Penalties range from five years to life imprisonment, based on whether the act is considered consensual and whether the act is completed. “Gross indecency” is also named in the criminal code, defined as “an act other than sexual intercourse (whether natural or unnatural) by a person involving the use of the genital organs for the purpose of arousing or gratifying sexual desire (*Chapter 3.01—Criminal Code, 2005*).” The penalty for this act is five to ten years imprisonment. The existence of these laws in the Anglophone Caribbean reinforces their connection to the period of expanding British imperialism; however, writers studying the region also link homophobic legislation to the contemporaneous spread of Christianity, particularly Catholicism, throughout the West Indies (Anthony, 1998; Corrêa, Petchesky, and Parker, 2008; Jackman, 2016). One indicator of the ongoing influence of

<sup>1</sup> The language of “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender” and the LGBT acronym are used here because it was the chosen language for the Canada-based research project. The acronym LGB (Lesbian Gay Bisexual) is used elsewhere in the paper to reflect language used by participants in Saint Lucia.

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both colonial and religious rule in Saint Lucia is that these laws continue to regulate the behaviour of its citizens despite being in direct contradiction to the Constitution that declares every person has the fundamental right to liberty, personal privacy, protection of the law, and equality (*Chapter 1.01—Constitution of Saint Lucia*, 2006). Wahab (2018) points out, however, that gender and sexuality are excluded from all its clauses, including those guaranteeing fundamental rights, freedoms, and protection from discrimination.

## Historical Context

Saint Lucia's colonial history unfolded as a battle for dominance between imperial powers of France and Britain. The French settled in Saint Lucia in 1650, but between 1660 and 1814, ownership shifted fourteen times between them and the British (Anthony, 1998). During that period, Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island, initiated during French occupation, retained through British rule, and persisting to contemporary times (Anthony, 1998).

There are many ways in which these colonial and Afro-Caribbean indigenous histories are felt in everyday Saint Lucian life. For example, the influence of France is visible in the predominance of French place names, the dominance of Catholic religious institutions, and the speaking of Kwéyòl, a language with both French and Afro-Caribbean indigenous origins (Hilaire, 2009). Yet British influence is also visible in the official and higher status of English language on the island; Kwéyòl is spoken colloquially, but its use is actively suppressed in institutional spaces (Hilaire, 2009). Although Saint Lucia became an independent nation in 1979, its culture and social structure reflect past and present influence from the outside (B. Wood & Nero, 2005).

According to Human Rights Watch (2008), the British introduced the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in 1860, dictating severe penalties for “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”, specifically, “non-penovaginal sex”. The British used section 377 of the IPC as the basis for similar legislation throughout the British empire (Corrêa et al., 2008; Ireland, 2013; Long, 2009; Sanders, 2009). Colonial legislators empowered local authorities to persecute and arrest offenders based on claims that same-sex intimate relations were unnatural. The resulting sodomy laws disseminated throughout the empire asserted British standards for sexual morality as superior to those of native cultures (Corrêa et al., 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2008). In the post-colonial Caribbean context, new power structures retained the heteropatriarchal ideologies inherited from colonizers, using them to exert social control over not-heterosexual bodies (Campbell, 2005).

As already noted, religious institutions arrived in the Caribbean with the colonizers and there is a long history of religion being used to support the edicts of those in power. The

pairing of religious and political aims began with the churches' dissemination of codes for morality and servitude to regulate the behaviour of enslaved persons, and continued with the promotion of family-based reproduction to aid colonial administrators reconfiguring the captive population into a labouring population dependent on colonial enterprise (Noble, 2008; T. Robinson, 2013). The current homophobic rhetoric delivered from church pulpits continues the work of imposing sexual control over the population and, in contemporary times, that influence is augmented by American religious groups stoking anti-homophobia rhetoric as part of their spread into the Caribbean region (J. Corrales & Combs, 2013).

According to Corrales (2017), religious ideologies and strong ties between political parties and Christian institutions in the Caribbean are the most significant obstacles to advancing decriminalization or human rights for LGBT people. The links between religion, government, and the social marketing of homophobia in Saint Lucia are visible in events like the 2017 World Congress of Families recently hosted there. Organized by the Minister for External Affairs and attended by the Acting Prime Minister, the event themed “Family Development—Strong Families, Prosperous Nations” evoked Biblical tenets and nationalistic fervour in its exhortations to stand firm against extending social citizenship to sexual minorities (Charles, 2017a). Similar ties between nationalism, religion, and resistance to LGBT human rights are visible elsewhere in the world. Writing on areas of “homophobic exceptionalism” in Africa, Ireland (2013) hypothesizes that LGBT persecution is reinforced by intertwined threads of religious fundamentalism, authoritarian leadership, and post-colonial and anti-Globalization resentments that equate LGBT identity politics with Western/Global North immorality and domination. Looking to that example raises awareness of how Saint Lucia government leaders can use events like the World Congress of Families to conflate suppression of LGBT human rights with moral superiority and nationalist sentiments about a strong, prosperous, independent Saint Lucia.

The purpose of this paper is to bring attention to the consequences of ongoing criminalization of LGBT lives and assert the necessity for context-specific human rights advocacy in this area. This paper is also written to call particular attention to the experiences of sexual minority communities in Saint Lucia. Although there is well-known hyperbole about the Caribbean being “the most homophobic place on earth” (Padgett, 2006), realities in the region are undoubtedly more complex. In addition, most of what is known about LGBT experiences in the Caribbean is derived from research and reporting in Jamaica (Couzens, Mahoney, & Wilkinson, 2017). Saint Lucia has a distinct history and the foundations for contemporary homophobia and anti-homophobia activism lay in a unique configuration of intra-island cultural influences, Eastern Caribbean politics, and international economic

relationships (Couzens et al., 2017). Filling the gap in specific knowledge about LGBT realities in Saint Lucia is essential to formulating effective, respectful alliances for human rights in that nation.

This paper narrows focus to the challenges and the opportunities that may lie in engaging directly with religion as part of seeking social justice for sexual minority communities in Saint Lucia. The inevitability of contending with religious institutions and practices in that context (Anthony, 1998) makes it important to explore religion as an important, local influence on the negotiation of a human rights agenda for LGB communities in that country.

## Methods

### Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights

The interviews presented in this paper were conducted in Saint Lucia as part of a larger study of international LGBT human rights and activism. *Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights* was a participatory community-based project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to document anti-homophobia activism and depict LGBT lives under criminalization at sites in the Caribbean, India, and Africa. The project also examined experiences of LGBT people seeking asylum in Canada and the work of advocates advancing sexual orientation and gender identity rights at the United Nations.

Saint Lucia was one of four Caribbean sites for the project, based on a partnership with a local advocacy organization, United and Strong (U&S). Staff and advocates from U&S collaborated in planning and implementing the project, recruited participants for the study, and conducted all interviews. The Caribbean segment of the study was approved by institutional research ethic boards at both York University and the University of Toronto in Canada. Details of the project's inception, governance, and activities are presented in Nicol, Gates-Gasse, and Mule (2014) and Nicol (2018a, 2018b). The book *Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights: (Neo)colonialism, Neoliberalism, Resistance and Hope* (2018) details work from all of the project sites and is available with other project artefacts at the website <http://envisioninglgbt.blogspot.com/>.

### United and Strong

United and Strong (<https://unitedandstrongstlucia.wordpress.com>) is a non-governmental organization that has been promoting the rights of sexual and gender minority communities in St. Lucia since 2001 (Charles, 2017a). United and Strong is part of a network of human rights organizations working in the Organization of East Caribbean States (OECS) islands. Its

work and mission has developed over the past eighteen years toward active international engagement beyond the Caribbean, and expansion of the mission to foreground stigma and discrimination facing multiple marginalized communities.

### Recruitment

Research team members based in Saint Lucia at United and Strong recruited participants for the interviews. Some of the participants were public figures known for their work advancing human rights for the sexual minority community or work in HIV/AIDS service organizations and they did not prioritize anonymity as part of their participation. Others did not disclose their affiliation with LGB communities openly, and therefore, they were recruited through community networks with great care to preserving their privacy and anonymity. Participants were offered the option of being anonymous or identified in study documents and in the interviews.

Individuals were eligible for the study based on the following criteria: adults over the age of 18; capable of providing informed consent; self-identifying as members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or other sexual or gender minority communities; and/or service providers working with these communities.

### Participants

This paper reports on interviews with thirty-three individuals living in Saint Lucia. Twenty participants identified as men and thirteen identified as women; no participants self-identified as transgender. Eleven individuals described themselves as gay, four identified as lesbian, and another two identified as bisexual. An additional sixteen participants chose not to specify their sexual orientation. It is possible that living in a country where self-identifying with some of these categories could result in imprisonment, harassment, and other forms of social exclusion contributed to reluctance to name sexual or gender identities; however, there may have been cultural or other considerations that made these categories an ill fit for lived experiences in Saint Lucia. Aware of these nuances, the *Envisioning* project used multiple and variable identifying terminology to be inclusive of international human rights nomenclature, diverse, location-specific naming practices, and individual agency in choosing to embrace or reject identity categories.

### Data Collection

Interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide developed by the team to address issues like daily experiences of discrimination, the context for LGB life in St. Lucia, and how sexual minority identity was navigated in relationships with others. In addition, the interview guide prompted the

interviewer to ask participants about local activism and advocacy activities and recommendations for achieving human rights for LGB communities in St. Lucia. Interviews ranged from one to two hours and were conducted at locations chosen by the participants, to ensure their comfort and safety. All interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the interviews were uploaded to Dedoose®, a web-based data management application, for analysis. Each transcript was reviewed several times by the research team, and overarching themes were discussed to develop preliminary ideas for categories and themes. The recurrent accounts of oppressive and discriminatory experiences prompted the development of a coding manual that included constructs from the Five Faces of Oppression, a conceptual model developed by Iris Young (1990). The model directs attention to the manifestation of oppression through practices and processes of marginalization, exploitation, disempowerment, cultural imperialism, and violence. Marginalization refers to practices that exclude people from participation in social life. Exploitation refers to practices in which the labour of one group is used to benefit the powerful and bolster their dominance. Disempowerment refers to practices that bar certain groups from making decisions that affect their lives. Cultural imperialism is implemented through practices that promote and universalize the experiences of elite groups so that others are rendered invisible or hyper-visible as embodiments of deviance. Violence points to practices that put certain groups in situations of risk and harm. This framework was selected because of its capacity to capture the everyday experiences of oppression and surface responses of resilience and resistance. The use of Young's framework also aligned the analysis with a critical epistemology that called attention to how "daily lives are shaped by social, economic, political and historical contexts that privilege the cultural, social and economic wellbeing of some groups at the expense of others (Williams, 2018, p. 81)." A recurrent concern with work conducted within this paradigm is identifying indicators of oppression, surfacing the ways in which oppression reinforces dominance, and recognizing capacities for resilience and resistance.

Analysis proceeded using a template approach to text analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1992), applying the developed coding manual to data and modifying or adding codes based on what surfaced in analysis. Multiple team members read interviews, applying the codes and comparing across interviews and team members to ensure consistency and agreement about applications of coding. Religion was a code that emerged in the process of analysis, revealed to be a significant component of the social context for LGB life in Saint Lucia.

### Findings

Although there were a number of participants who identified themselves as public figures that did not require anonymity, there were several that identified the need to be anonymous or spoke of complications around how and where identities could be known. This may allude to island-specific dynamics that afford differing levels of privilege and risk to sexual minority people depending on class, skin colour, and region, compelling individuals to modulate the visibility of sexual identity as they move through social and geographic contexts (Couzens et al., 2017). Accordingly, we have chosen to proceed cautiously with identifying information in this paper, mindful of potential consequences for people if they are associated with the information presented. Participants are distinguished based on self-identified gender and a letter (e.g., Woman A, Man A). Some of these participants are identified fully in video portraits from the project that can be viewed at <http://envisioning-tellingourstories.blogspot.com/p/st-lucia-2.html>.

### Religion as a Foundation of Life in Saint Lucia

Participants in the study asserted that religion is pervasive in Saint Lucia, permeating government, health, and education systems. Although Catholicism dominates, for example, multiple participants spoke of being educated in Catholic schools, other denominations are on the rise that similarly espouse conservative religious views. Some participants made connections between the churches and the island's business and finance infrastructure as well, noting the influence of prominent church members was linked to both political and economic power, and the churches themselves are driven by economic interests: "Religion as it exists is probably the greatest source of disunity that we have, you know, and a lot of it is the, the avarice nature of the ministers who want to get bigger flocks to get bigger donations (Man F)". One woman's summary was, "Churches have the money. Money is power (Woman I)." She went on to say that churches were in the background of all interfaces with community members and institutions, so in everyday life, "people still want to be quoting the Bible about how I should live."

International LGBT human rights work understandably gives much attention to a decriminalization agenda, but the laws were not viewed as the main factor constraining peoples' lives. As one health provider indicated, "It hasn't had any impact on my work. It's just legislation. You know, I'm just here to treat any person that comes in with a STI or HIV (Man E)". Instead, powerful church interests that use the laws to further an agenda of LGB exclusion are viewed as a bigger problem, keeping the laws in place despite general public indifference to criminalizing same-sex relationships. Several participants asserted that most Saint Lucians had little interest in upholding buggery laws, but the religious institutions

around them did: “I don’t think the culture has any—negative impact on LGBT in St Lucia. I just believe that—it’s Christianity... There’s a government in Saint Lucia, but I think the Christians are the ones who are really running the country (Man G).” Another respondent confirmed, “The various churches would object to removing [the laws] (Man H).” Well-placed church members empowered by wealth, political power, and Biblical rhetoric were seen as the main barrier to social inclusion for members of sexual minority communities, with buggery and gross indecency laws one of many tools they used to maintain control over the population.

### Religion and Power over LGB Lives

Participant narratives suggest churches have power over the law, but they further speak to how this relationship is more complex. The control that religious institutions have over Saint Lucian citizens, starting from birth, later enables the furthering of their agenda. Children taught hate become adults prepared to act on hate, or to not act against hate. Police officers were named as particularly dangerous in this regard, as

“The country we live in and what has been instilled in them by their family and the church, that allows the policemen to deliver [harassment]. After all, they grow up in a society where people say you know, being gay is wrong, it’s against the law of Christ, it is immoral, it is an abomination, and all this bullshit for the lack of a better word (Man J)”

The police, however, are only one group of many that may act on religiously inspired hostility: “The religious leaders conveniently use the Bible to condemn gay persons, and as result members of their congregation now filter the attitude right... And every so often what happens is that some persons are, some persons supposedly take it further (Man C).” Another added “If you’re a church leader, and you have a congregation that’s supposed to be following you, whatever you say, it actually impacts those persons (Man G).” People will not oppose harassment or discrimination because the churches tell them anything aside from heterosexuality is morally wrong, and further, “they justify their position because of the, because, you know, we have that criminal sanction (Woman A).” Therefore, churches influence the laws but the laws also influence the attitudes of people in churches.

Religious interpretations are used to reinforce hate. As one participant noted “We conveniently quote different parts of the Bible to make our point... when we cast out another human being simply because of their sexual orientation, we know that’s not loving, we know that’s not right. We know it is not right, but we have to justify somehow (Man N).” Further, religious teachings provide justification for discrimination in other areas of life, as described in an example where a participant recalled a woman who said her religious beliefs meant “She would not counsel anyone that was gay. She said she’d rather leave the services as a counsellor, rather than

counselling anybody who was gay (Woman H).” According to these participants, church doctrine is used to justify legal and social injustice and empowers people to act on hate or remain passive while others do.

Power over LGB persons is also exerted within churches because many members of sexual minority communities wish to remain connected to religious communities. Churches are not necessarily seeking to expel LGB members, but instead, they allow them to remain under conditions of harassment and psychological abuse with persistent threat of expulsion. Participants spoke of church members attempting to shame and “counsel” them toward heterosexuality, for example, one woman spoke of frequent challenges from church members: “They kept calling these meetings... As long as I’m going to church, I will still have that, you know, regular confrontation (Woman B).” Family members could also face threat because of their association with LGB people. Woman B shared that her mother paid money to someone to prevent disclosure of her daughter’s sexuality to church members. Another woman recounted a story from when she was in a Catholic school and the teachers confronted her family: “They made a big deal out of it. There was even an incident, the other tomboy at her school, her mom was on the PTA, Parent-Teacher Association. And they were trying to get the two of us out of the school (Woman C).” Those wishing to remain in the Church and their families contend with various forms of harassment and shaming.

Yet, harsher consequences are possible. A respondent told a story about a homeless gay man who was taken in by Seventh Day Adventists and “when he couldn’t conform to the standards they wanted him to, they dropped him like a hot potato (Man F).” This respondent also spoke of other, psychologically damaging consequences for people identifying as sexual minorities who tried to retain connections to their churches:

“People who were gay men but religious men would go and sit in a church and listen to a minister talk shit about their sexuality for an hour and a half on Sunday morning. And it’s like, why do you go there? Why do you listen to this? And then of course in my head I’m thinking, okay, and then what? You go out and get drunk afterwards because you can’t deal with, you know, this.”

This participant shows us how homophobia has consequences for the overall well-being of those targeted for hate. Another consequence of church-sponsored homophobia is the loss of spiritual community for LGB people:

“They are pushing us away from, not the word of God, because God lives within all of us, but they are pushing us away from being able to harmonize, being able to sit under the umbrella of the church, and be able to enjoy the functions of what the churches offer (Man O).”

It would not be fair to suggest that all churches in St. Lucia are cultivators of hate and discrimination against LGB

communities. As a Man F noted, “Some religion, some churches, some ministers are okay and others aren’t.” Some churches can appear to be more inclusive, but as one woman indicated, “We have had pastors who have said that they don’t discriminate because anybody can come to the church, but you come to the church knowing, that if the Bible says so, this is what we will say also (Woman I).” Others described regional and social variations that corresponded to differences in the influence of Christianity and consequent potential for living openly and safely as a sexual minority: “Christianity is more prevalent, actually, in the rural areas. You’ll see a stronger faith, the religious faith there, so it’s difficult for those persons to actually be themselves (Man G).” Inclusion and exclusion by the churches is far from straightforward, but it is clear that churches have tremendous power over the quality of LGB life. All of the people interviewed had something to say about the virulence of church rhetoric directed against members of sexual minority communities.

### Religion and Faith Sustaining LGB Lives

Much of what was shared presented churches as a source of pain, fear, and conflict for participants. Yet, faith and spirituality still offered things that could supersede negativity within religious institutions. For some participants, churches continued to offer cherished connections to family, friends, and community. Church could serve as a necessary touchstone for some, as described here: “I go to church. That’s my community obligation, right, and my family they are deep in terms of, you know, my kids and so on, they are deeply involved in the Church, not only in Church, I must say, and the relationship that they have with God (Man N).” Further, family members in the churches were described as instrumental in sustaining life as a persecuted minority. Two respondents provided the following examples: “I was afraid that I would lose the relationship and everything, but you know as God would have it, that did not happen and, you know, they did tell me that, you know, we are praying for you (Man M);” “My mother was a churchgoer and I was spared [violence]... She believed, and must have been always her own nieces praying for our protection (Man D).” It seemed, however, that remaining in the church was sometimes made possible by accepting that LGB identity was problematic and required change. For example, Man M’s family prayers for him included the hope that “God is able to change this situation.” Another man stated that he had no opposition to anyone based on sexual identity, yet he looked to God to change his own, saying “He would give you that courage to make that change in your life because you can change if you are gay (Man D).” He went on to say:

“I was born gay. God just give me a peace, give the serenity, the tranquility, to understand myself and to love myself and to be who you cut out to be there. But if I’m not meant to be out there, then give the courage to change myself from

being gay so then I may move onto another lifestyle that I would feel, I would be pleasing you, because I really want to be pleasing you.”

This man finds support and sustenance in his church, but it seems to require his acceptance and integration of a homonegative discourse in which he requires God’s grace to bear the stigma of his sexuality. This path to community support and tolerance is confirmed by other respondents who acknowledge that a place can be made in religious institutions for LGB people if churches are willing to “...embrace the sinners, if you want to call it that, let’s keep that language for a minute...so if they come in, embrace (Man N)”. Similarly, Woman B suggested that some might be open to “loving the individual no matter what they did, or whatever their orientation is.” Willingness to trade self-stigmatization for a place in religious institutions may be difficult to comprehend as outsiders, although, this is seen in many other places, (for example, see Levy and Reeves’s (2011) exploration of this in the United States). It may be an indication of how growing up in this environment socializes most Saint Lucians to regard homosexuality as problematic and sinful. It may also further speak to the desperation that some members of sexual minority communities in Saint Lucia feel to remain connected to their religious communities, and the cost they are willing to pay to do so.

Others, however, found ways to participate in church without accepting contempt for their sexual identities. One strategy was ignoring homophobic rhetoric: “As long as I welcome myself in the Church I know God will welcome me as well. So I don’t have to be thinking about who is going to welcome me at the Church (Man A)”. Others removed themselves when hate speech emerged “I am into the religious practices of going to church on every Sunday and singing a song and getting up and leaving (Man B)”. For several people, the separation of faith and spirituality from religious practice and institutions made retaining a loving, sustaining relationship with God possible, despite messages of rejection and hate communicated by church leaders and members. As one woman said, “My God is not a vengeful god. My God is a loving and forgiving God. And I am—I am a very spiritual person. And I have a huge amount of faith. I—I’m just not religious, because I think religions erode faith (Woman I).”

### Religion and Love as Pillars for LGB Human Rights

With the knowledge that religious institutions in Saint Lucia are active participants in opposing human rights for sexual minority people, it may be surprising to learn that participants also shared ways in which churches have stepped forward to engage with sexual minority communities. Participants working in the health sector spoke of how the threat of HIV in Saint Lucia was a catalyst for collaborations between churches and AIDS Services Organizations but those collaborations have

required compromise on both sides. For example, Woman D noted “They have been sensitized. They have come around in speaking about men sleeping with men and HIV, which is the health component” and goes on to say “They are not willing to speak about the sexual orientation and gender identity as a rights issue. That is a barrier.” Similarly, another participant reported “I’ve worked with faith-based organizations. They’ve actually taken some of the lead in HIV-testing amongst their parishioners and there’s a youth group and, you know, we can do education for them. We agree to disagree on the issue of condoms (Man E).” For some, these alliances are a sign of progress toward better outcomes for everyone. As Woman I noted “We look at it as the church having its role, the—the general public the—all of us, we have different roles to play.”

Other participants hoped for more than these conditional collaborations. They hoped for more because they saw the Christian faith and love that are part of Saint Lucian life as a foundation for a human rights agenda. They also hoped for more because they believed that religious institutions had to be the impetus for change, as they had influence over the laws, the education system, and the hearts and minds of the population. As already presented, Woman I rejected the idea of a God that did not love her as she was, asserting “My God is a loving and forgiving God.” Others went further, pointing to clergy as individuals with the responsibility to convey love and acceptance that they viewed as consistent with Christianity. For example, one said “The church’s particular agenda or main agenda is supposed to be creating love. It’s supposed to be harmonizing people. But in this particular setting the church is creating disunity among people in society (Man O).” Man N was more direct: “I think that preachers, right, have a responsibility to preach love. Religion has to be about love, it cannot be about hate. A religion cannot promote hate and call itself a Christian religion.” In various ways, participants demanded more of their religious institutions. Several suggested that the churches’ alignment with doctrines that may have outlived their usefulness was inconsistent with demonstrated capacity to evolve practices and beliefs to accommodate contemporary realities. One participant expressed frustration, saying “You will forgive adultery, you forgive this, you forgive that, you forgive this, but we hold strongly onto a particular sexual orientation (Woman G).” Another participant expressed similar frustration:

“It may be a sin in the Bible in the same way that divorce is a sin in the Bible, a fornication is a sin in the Bible, and many other things are sins in the Bible. But those two are more relevant comparisons because, if you want to call it sexual crimes, and we do not have legislation that criminalizes fornication or criminalizes divorce. In fact, we have legislation that provides for divorce (Woman A).”

While some expressed the belief that the churches were adhering to outdated ideas that were best understood as “a

people of that time talking about their people and their rules for their people at that time (Man N),” others were more frank in their condemnation of how Biblical doctrine was used to support hate. As one put it, “God may have said it was wrong, he may have, who knows, but he never said that you could take their life (Woman D).”

Man N expressed a common belief in the futility of a human rights agenda that would exclude the churches. Instead, he exhorted the value of partnering with them:

I don’t think we should ever push against the church, I think we should push with the church. I think the church, with discussion, I may be wrong, but I think the church should be on our side. I think the church would understand and I think part of seeding the ground is to speak to the church leaders, have good dialogue with them good conversation with them, let them, let them do some reflection and let them unwork and work with the LGBT community (Man N).

Others shared his hope for working with the churches, naming them as one of several groups that needed to work together: “I think there is need to do work with the police and the judiciary...and we also need to have some more dialogue with the church (Woman B).”

In the end, the churches were seen as critical to human rights work in St. Lucia. As Man O indicated:

“First and foremost, the challenges that we face by the churches, it ties in with the constitution. It ties in with the state, in a sense that, because of them, laws that would address certain human rights for sex-workers, members of the LGBT community, etcetera, etcetera have not been repealed and stands the way it was from our Commonwealth mother. The churches play a pivotal role in our society in the sense that they can allow laws to be made or make laws... they can allow laws to be broken or they can allow laws to be made.”

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to develop an understanding of the role that religion plays in shaping the context for LGBT communities in Saint Lucia. Participant narratives reveal that religion and churches are threaded through life in Saint Lucia from cradle to grave as arbiters of culture, community, identity, and morality. In addition, churches and their members have a profound influence on laws, policies, and practices in justice, education, health, and social systems. Therefore, attitudes in the churches have a direct link to the potential for creating a social context in which sexual minority communities are no longer persecuted and can be full participants in Saint Lucian life. Although colonial history is implicated in the legal

constraints that affect sexual minority people in Saint Lucia, religion was revealed to have a more salient role in fuelling the exclusion and discrimination experienced in daily life. A simple telling of this story might suggest that the churches are aligned with a reading of the Bible that condemns anything aside from cisgender heterosexual existence and the immutability of the Bible entrenches immutability of that stance. Our participants offer a more complicated narrative. Although religion, churches, and church members are undoubtedly implicated in the social exclusion and violence they face, they suggest that it would be misrepresentative to suggest that all Saint Lucians are homophobic, and similarly misrepresentative to suggest that churches and their leaders are not capable of evolving toward acceptance of LGB people and, perhaps, toward engagement in a LGBT human rights agenda.

Religion was an issue that emerged within an analysis based in the Five Faces of Oppression and there are clear points of contact between the described practices of Saint Lucian religious institutions and the mechanisms of oppression described by Young (1990). The power that churches can use against LGB people in Saint Lucia is exemplified in participant narratives that are easily recognized as stories of marginalization, disempowerment, cultural imperialism, and violence that threaten and constrain the lives of sexual minority people. They can also be identified as tools of “religious/spiritual abuse” (A. W. Wood & Conley, 2014) in which church doctrine is mobilized to spread and incite hate, and church people are mobilized to act on that hate. Yet, the connection between church ideologies and marginalization of LGBT people is more complex than identifying the potential for religious leaders to weaponize scripture and discharge parishioners to implement violence and discrimination. International studies of the connections between religiosity and homophobia or heterosexism point to religious organizations as gatekeepers against social tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people. Definitions of these terms are inconsistent in the literature but the overarching message is that religious beliefs and affiliations are linked to resistance to accepting the possibility of same-sex relationships (Kozloski, 2010), to accepting the possibility of having relationships with people who identify as sexual and gender minorities (Griffith & Wickham, 2019), and to endorsing acceptance and tolerance of LGBT people having full rights and participation in social life (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Whitehead, 2013). Research in the Caribbean and Latin America echoes these themes with the addition that, in those contexts, resistance to acceptance and tolerance includes investment in maintaining legislation that criminalizes same-sex sexual activity (Bangwayo-Skeete & Zikhali, 2013; Davis, Thomas, & Sewalish, 2006; Jackman, 2017; Navarro, Barrientos, Gómez, & Bahamondes, 2019). Our participants substantiate the belief that religion, the laws, and discrimination are linked so tightly in Saint Lucia that change in one area is dependent on change in the others as well.

The churches’ integration with major institutions of Saint Lucia extends their reach into Saint Lucian lives through a multitude of preachers, teachers, doctors, politicians, police officers, and other actors with large and small authority to promote internalized, interpersonal, and institutionalized homophobia. Unsurprisingly, some sexual minority people choose to distance themselves from religious institutions. Various participants’ descriptions of rejecting the abhorrent messages of churches while retaining connections to spirituality and faith demonstrate strategies for resistance to oppression and religious abuses. Although surrounded by hate, these individuals remain resilient and resistant to behaviours that threaten them and their faith. Others choose to find ways to remain within church spaces. In this study, participants spoke of choices to remain engaged by embracing the community and ignoring homophobic messaging or by accepting doctrines that condemned them but allowed them to remain within the grace of God. The enduring desire for connection with a faith community, and with God, speaks to the power that churches and religion have to sustain LGB lives in Saint Lucia. Wahab (2018) suggests that individuals may develop a “double consciousness” to withstand such experiences and he characterizes this bifurcation as the exercising of agency in a context of profound vulnerability. Another way to think about this capacity to remain in these spaces and experience them as places of love and community, even as they deliver pain and rejection, is to recognize these individuals as having tremendous resilience. These are individuals who have found ways to endure tremendously challenging circumstances in service of maintaining their spirituality. Some may think that the abuses delivered by churches are ended by distancing or excising religious institutions from LGB lives but the loss of church communities and spirituality can be accompanied by grief, isolation, and spiritual crisis that undermine the emotional well-being of sexual minority people (A. W. Wood & Conley, 2014). The personal and cultural importance of religion in Saint Lucia requires that LGBT human rights advocacy find ways to navigate religious and spiritual life. In other regions of the world where religious influences similarly obstruct LGBT human rights, the capacity to understand and utilize religious themes in advocacy has proven essential for affecting change (Walls, 2010).

A context-specific and culturally-specific lens is necessary for conceptualizing international involvement in LGBT advocacy in Saint Lucia. International LGBT human rights advocacy has an important role to play in pressuring for decriminalization, and there is important work underway to disseminate and implement “post-colonial legal approaches” to challenge homophobic laws (Emi, 2016). However, strategies that have been successful in the Global North cannot be assumed to translate effectively to other regions. Internationally, advocates are wary of globalized LGBT frameworks and initiatives



that essentialize non-heterosexual identities and pressure toward homonationalism and homonormativity (B. A. Robinson, 2012; Wahab, 2018). Saint Lucian advocates may not need or want to take notes on activism from the international movement, and the international movement may not be equipped to provide useful notes. Scholars writing in the Caribbean assert that homophobia in the Caribbean plays an important role in reinforcing post-colonial power structures and this is often overlooked by outsiders. Kamugisha (2007) makes a compelling argument that the oppression of not-male, not-heterosexual persons in the Caribbean maintains a power structure in which Caribbean men dominate and that dominance is accepted by others. Wahab (2018) echoes this sentiment in his description of how the post-colonial Caribbean promotes an authentic Caribbean identity based in the performance of “heterosexual reproductive intimacy (p. 136),” that expels and excludes non-conforming citizens. This exclusion becomes exploitation (the fifth face of oppression) because powerful elites use LGB people, and agendas built on exerting structural violence against them, to bolster and justify their power. Therefore, the preservation of colonial legislation that disempowers people not included in patriarchy, heterosexuality, and heteromascularity must be understood as not just historical residue, but contemporary Caribbean politics. A western critique of Caribbean culture and politics as inherently homophobic and backward fails to account for the alignment of these representations of Caribbean identity with internal resistance to post-colonial and neo-colonial states (J. Corrales & Combs, 2013; Noble, 2008). As challenging local homophobia is also challenging nation-specific power structures that are sustained and empowered by fuelling moral panic over emergent social citizenship for sexual and gender minority people in the Caribbean and Latin America (Andrinopoulos, Figueroa, Kerrigan, & Ellen, 2011; Griffith & Wickham, 2019; Navarro et al., 2019), local advocates are best positioned to lead activism in the region.

Sensitivity to religion and faith appear to be crucial for crafting effective, relevant advocacy in Saint Lucia. This is a factor in LGBT advocacy throughout the Caribbean. Although there is limited research on attitudes toward sexual minorities and same-sex relationships in the Anglophone Caribbean, the research available demonstrates religious affiliation is associated with stigmatizing attitudes and resistance to decriminalization in Barbados, Guyana and Trinidad (Gromer, Campbell, Gomory, & Maynard, 2013; Jackman, 2016, 2017), Trinidad and Tobago (Chadee et al., 2013), and Jamaica (Lovell, 2016; West & Cowell, 2015). With that in mind, a participant’s advice that advocacy in Saint Lucia cannot work against the church and must “push with the church” is important. He challenges us to imagine a future in which Saint Lucian churches are allies in human rights advocacy, perhaps expanding the strategies that participants told us

created the possibility of churches being allies in HIV prevention work. It may be some time before the Caribbean is a site for church-led LGBT advocacy but there are examples of these possibilities in other regions. For example, Chan (2018) writes about a pro-LGBT Christian alliance called “The Rainbow Covenant” in Hong Kong, another former British colony with strong religious opposition to LGBT human rights. Churches there have become advocates for human rights, engaging LGBT and non-LGBT church members by creating spaces in which dialogue is centred in common values of Godliness, inclusion and promoting social justice as demonstrated by Jesus in the New Testament. Notably, they have been deliberate about “desexualizing” the advocacy work, integrating LGBT advocacy within a larger agenda of activism in which LGBT exclusion is identified as one of many inequities that must be challenged in an unjust society. Another example of church-allied activism is available in Ghana, also a region where churches form resistance to LGBT human rights. Amoah and Gyasi (2016) describe churches taking up the work of creating spaces in which young people can speak openly about sexual diversity and religious values to promote inclusion and challenge homophobic interpretations of religious doctrine. They have had success with education that makes links between religious values and principles of human rights and freedoms. The work in Hong Kong and Ghana brings people into dialogue to evoke and develop “everyday theologies” (Walls, 2010) that emerge through social interactions in which people can grapple with how religious doctrine, personal values, and lived experiences guide attitudes and behaviours. These activities speak to the potential progress that can be made by challenging the idea of religion as an immutable barrier to LGBT human rights. Perhaps similarly, dialogue among people who are church-identified and open to working through the challenges and contradictions of church viewpoints can chart a path toward transformative collaborations in Saint Lucia.

Many LGB people in Saint Lucia are eager to find opportunities for partnerships with the churches; however, there must also be challenge to the churches. The homophobia and heteronormativity described by these participants manifests in religious rhetoric expressed in interactions with family and community members, and institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia propagated through church-controlled social services, education, commerce, and politics (Beretta, 2018). Religious organizations may be necessary but limited allies in implementing progressive social change. The “unwork” mentioned by one of our participants as a precursor to collaboration includes dismantling deeply embedded oppressive ideologies that have empowered churches for centuries. Looking to examples our participants provided of the churches evolving stances on adultery and divorce, perhaps there is a future in which evolution of stances on same-sex relationships will lay

the groundwork for unconditional collaborations for LGBT human rights.

Although this research is based on interviews with a relatively large sample for a qualitative study on this topic, this study has limitations that should be noted. The participants in this research cannot be assumed to be representative of sexual and gender minority people in St. Lucia. For example, no one in the sample identified beyond binary gender categories. This missing category of participants may reflect irrelevance of a transgender category in Saint Lucia despite the presence of gender non-conformity (described in interviews and video testimonies). The absence of trans-identified participants could also reflect under-representation in the sample. Although we took deliberate steps to establish safety for research participants, risks associated with disclosing minority sexual and gender identities in that context likely limited the people coming forward to those who were either publicly identified with LGB identities and issues, or those with sufficient social privilege to withstand potential consequences of involvement in the study. This latter possibility alludes to a further limitation of this study; its inattention to issues of intersectionality. Saint Lucia is a country in which gender, economic class, education, region, and skin tone correspond to social status differences (Couzens et al., 2017). Although we heard from both men and women in the study, differences of experience associated with different identities and social exclusions were rarely noted and this may point to ways in which the sample is not representative, or ways in which the methodology did not address diversity adequately. This is a limitation that merits attention in future research, as there is ample evidence that race, gender, class, and other differences influence the lived experience of LGBT marginalization in Saint Lucia. This evidence includes the discussion by Couzens et al. (2017) of how social stratification associated with class differences and light-skin supremacy produce stark differences in exposure to and consequences from homophobia. In addition, lesbian women in the Caribbean are often overlooked in local LGBT advocacy or are characterized as unintended victims of anti-LGBT rhetoric (Perkins, 2016), but their economic and political marginalization in Saint Lucian life augments the exposure they have to both physical and structural violence (Charles, 2017b). An important component of building relevant advocacy for LGBT rights in Saint Lucia is surfacing diverse experiences of LGB marginalization and their intersection with racism, sexism, colorism, and class exclusion that makes advocating on behalf of an essentialized Saint Lucian LGBT citizen unsuitable. In addition, surfacing these complexities is a necessary challenge to globalized LGBT advocacy that has been criticized for asserting a singular gay victim identity to be rescued using Global North remedies, furthering US human rights imperialism and undermining local, culturally-specific responses (Mayers, 2018; Navarro et al., 2019).

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the literature by presenting research from Saint Lucia, a country where there is little research on LGBT human rights, and by challenging oversimplified notions about religion, the Caribbean, and LGBT human rights that suggest the culture and local religious institutions are defined by homophobia. Clearly, more research is needed to explore the nuances of LGB life in Saint Lucia and the opportunities that may be available for increasing inclusion and human rights, with or without church involvement. For both local and international advocacy efforts, attention to the power and meaningfulness of churches and religion in individual and community life appears to be crucial for affecting meaningful change.

## Conclusions

Observing from the Global North, it is common to accept claims that Saint Lucia and other Caribbean nations are defined by entrenched homophobia, driven largely by conservative religious institutions. This paper suggests that the lived experience of religion-fuelled homophobia in Saint Lucia is more complicated. Saint Lucian advocates and citizens have nuanced perspectives on how religion sustains legislated and systemic discrimination against LGBT people in Saint Lucia and, with that knowledge, are able to conceptualize advocacy strategies that can challenge religious institutions and, potentially, engage them as allies. Their assertions suggest that advancing a human rights agenda for LGBT people in Saint Lucia will be more effective if it incorporates religion and religious institutions as able. The work of international activists may be to align with local people who can craft advocacy based on deep knowledge of the history, culture, and context.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures for the research study were approved by the institutional ethics review board at the University of Toronto and York University.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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