

PRESS STATEMENT

All Caribbean people are equal

A message from UNAIDS Caribbean Director, Dr. Ernest Massiah, on May 17th 2012, the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO)

PORT OF SPAIN, 17 May, 2012—Many of us have someone in our families who is gay. Or bisexual. Similarly, we have family members who are tall. Or short. But we don't make an issue of the tall or short ones, or hide to talk about them. No, we give them funny nicknames—Tall Boy, Shorty, Miss Tiny. We use our language to convey humour and acceptance. But we hide the fact that we know that someone close to us is gay or bisexual. It becomes the obvious secret. We show our fear and unease with our expressions, our words and our hush.

May 17th is the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO). Phobia is a fancy word for fear. When applied to people, phobia is a fear of people. Homophobia is the fear of people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Transphobia is the fear of people whose biological sex doesn't line up with the gender they feel inside.

We are afraid of these differences. This makes us fearful of our own loved ones. It is a fear of who they love, with whom they are intimate and how they express their identity. It is a fear that moves us to avoid, attack, or reject family members who we have grown up with and loved. It is a fear we need to overcome in much the same way we've confronted our phobias about differences of race, colour and gender.

In schools across the Caribbean we teach children the concepts of justice and equity. However, at home, in the street and in the school yard, our children hear a different story. They hear old tales and fears. We teach them prejudice.

This is just like in the old days when skin colour, hair texture, where you lived, who your parents were, and if you were male or female meant that you could be denied a job, a place in school or entry to certain clubs. We have developed as a people but there are still phobias that we must address. Homophobia is one of them.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are our sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, neighbours and members of our churches, mosques and temples. They are teachers, judges, politicians, policemen and women, soldiers, boys on the block, and sports personalities. They are on TV and radio. They live in

town and in the country. They are no less deserving of the protections, services and opportunities that our Caribbean societies offer to all citizens.

In many of our countries, except the Bahamas, there are old nineteenth century “buggery” laws. These laws feed the prejudice, violence and lack of protection from law enforcement that gay and bisexual people often experience.

We sometimes point to members of the gay lesbian bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community who live fulfilling lives, citing this as evidence of our tolerance. The true test of our humanity is our willingness to accept all members of our family and those on the margins. That means we must we stop throwing gay and bisexual youth out of their homes. We must stop abusing transgender people. Our hospitals, clinics, police services and laws must now respond to the needs of LGBT people.

Leadership on these issues has begun to emerge in our region. During the December 2011 Jamaica general election that she would go on to win, Portia Simpson Miller called for a conscience vote on anti-gay laws.

In March, Trinidad and Tobago agreed at the United Nation’s Universal Periodic Review to “increase measures to ensure that violence and discrimination against... lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, are both prevented and prosecuted”.

And in April the Guyana government announced a series of national consultations on whether legislation that discriminates against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people should be reformed.

Over time some people change their minds about these issues. As we have seen from our experience of race and class prejudice, others do not. Today’s commemoration of IDAHO is an acknowledgement that whatever one’s personal position on homosexuality or gender, there are universal and Caribbean standards that all people must be treated with dignity and respect. We are all equal and are therefore equally entitled to the protection and services of the state as well as the humanity and respect of our fellow man.

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