THE IMPACT OF CHOSEN FAMILIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANS, NON-BINARY AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING INDIVIDUALS:

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS
The Impact of Chosen Families on the Development of Trans, Non-Binary and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals:

A Case Study Analysis

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• **Chosen Families**: Chosen families are non-biological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love.

• **Gender**: Dominant western society generally defines gender as a binary system - men and women - but many cultures define gender as more fluid and existing along a continuum with a range of identities outside of the traditional man and woman.

• **Gender Roles**: The socially defined rules and roles for men and women in a society. The attitudes, customs and values associated with gender are socially constructed; however, individuals develop their gender identities in two primary ways: through an innate sense of their own identity and through their life experiences and interactions with others.

• **Gender Identity**: How an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Since gender identity is internal, one’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

• **Gender Non-Conforming**: A person who does not adhere to societal pressures to conform to gender norms and roles.

• **Gender Queer/Non-binary**: A person who may neither identifies as man nor woman or may embody both genders.

• **Gender Variant**: This is an umbrella term used to describe gender identity, expression, or behaviour that falls outside of culturally defined norms associated with a specific gender.

• **Harassment**: Harassment is unwanted behaviour which you find offensive, or which makes you feel intimidated or humiliated. It can happen on its own or alongside other forms of discrimination.

• **Discrimination**: The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability.
• **Mental Health:** Person’s condition with regards to their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

• **Transgender/Trans:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identify differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or whose gender expression do not match society’s expectations with regards to gender roles. The term may include identities such as: transsexual, genderqueer, gender- nonconforming, FTM, MTF, non-binary and gender variant. Transgender people may or may not choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically.

• **Transgender Man/Trans Man:** A person who identifies as a man but was assigned as a female (AFAB) at birth.

• **Transgender Woman/Trans Woman:** A person who identifies as a woman but was assigned as male at birth (AMAB).

• **TransWave Jamaica:** A non-government, non-profit organization that advocates for the rights, privileges, and concerns of the transgender community in Jamaica.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For years, we have seen the proliferation of chosen families becoming commonplace in Jamaica. Accordingly, the impact it has created for LGBT individuals, has been very resounding and is one that requires mass celebration and recognition. For these reasons, it is imperative that we explore the impact of chosen families on the overall development of LGBT persons, with specific focus on the trans and gender-nonconforming population. This research encapsulates a case study which focuses on three (3) model chosen families within the LGBT community namely, the Haus of Yemoja, the Royal House of Evangelista and the Cheetah Girls. Participants (house members) were contacted, mobilized, and interviewed by Lamar Grant, Policy, Advocacy & Research Officer and Anika Walsh, Policy, Advocacy & Research Programme Assistant respectively. From the interviews, it was noted that all three families were very much different from the other and displayed a very unique family dynamic which is important and relevant to the development of positive trans and LGB identities.

Normalizing and promoting education about the prevalence of chosen families within the LGBT community is imperative as it leads to wider public discourse and steers conversations on its relevance as well as the different ways in which recommendations regarding policy and legislation can be made. For instance, if a queer child is displaced from their biological family home and is now existing within a chosen family space, the option should be given to the house leader or parent to act as that child’s legal guardian. Similarly, some families, upon knowing the sexual orientation or gender identity of their child, may choose to shun or neglect them totally therefore withholding that sense of belonging and security and in extreme cases, banish them from their homes. As such, while conducting this research, we found that family relationships impacted queer youth mental health in complexed ways that were related to the establishment of their autonomous queer selves. Likewise, the desire to remain belonging to
their family and the need to maintain a secure environment due to the various familial heteronormativity, teenage autonomy, emotions, and family expectations involved in navigating identity, belonging, and security was made harder, and had a significant influence on LGBT youth mental health and well-being. Thus, improving the mental health of LGBT youth necessitates a deeper awareness of the emotionality of familial relationships, as well as the challenges of navigating them as a young person.
The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) community is a diverse collection of communities and individuals, each with their own strengths, needs, and experiences. Contemporary research suggests that gender and sexual identity development is a fluid, dynamic process that begins as early as three years old and continues into adulthood. This is in line with recent neurological research, which has discovered that teenage brain growth continues until one's mid-twenties. While forming one's identity is a lifelong process, the formative years are the most crucial. This can be a particularly difficult process for trans and gender non-conforming GNC individuals who do not always satisfy social and cultural norms.

Typically, trans people experience significant levels of discrimination, victimization, and harassment on the basis of their gender identity and sexual orientation, as they transgress normative gender expectations as perpetuated by the gender binary; or the rigid system that makes the assertion that there are only two genders: the man and the woman. As such, due to the sheer influence of this restrictive gender binary, trans individuals, and specifically trans youth, are not regarded as valid entities in society and are, subsequently, erased. This erasure is evidenced by the lack of a current statistic concerning the prevalence of trans identities worldwide and the high rates of human rights violations being reported. “Trans children must be viewed as a vulnerable group faced with major psychosocial risks. They must be taken into account when framing child welfare policies, which should be cross-sectoral in nature.”

One of the many elements that will play into the healthy identity development of trans youth is positive familial involvement which looks at the degree of success to which families supply
social support and creates a safe space that is conducive to their child being fully affirmed and feel a sense of belonging. These needs are further explored in our 2019, Trans Health Strategy from goals 8-8.2:

8. Empower families and communities to support fully support trans community members by 2025.

8.1 Family and community support and parenting services, interventions, and resources regarding trans, gender non-conforming and intersex Jamaicans established by 2025.

8.2 Knowledge of human rights, child protections and supporting positive gender expression among families of intersex, trans and gender non-conforming people increased by 2025.

As such, with the necessary care and support being withheld by their biological families, trans and LGB individuals by extension, are chastised and thrown in the face of rejection. Hence, the proliferation of chosen families being a safe haven to rescue these young LGBT individuals by bridging the social gap to offer support, love and care and to sort of reintegrate them back into the world.
METHODOLOGY

The data was collected using a qualitative approach consisting of primarily focus groups and interviews. TransWave facilitated by a series of focus groups with a total of three (3) houses/chosen families, namely, the Haus of Yemoja, the Royal House of Evangelista and the Cheetah Girls. The families interviewed were all from Urban Jamaica as there were some challenges experienced in trying to schedule a meeting with those from rural areas. Participants were contacted, mobilized and interviewed by Lamar Grant (Policy, Advocacy & Research Officer) and Anika Walsh (Policy, Advocacy & Research Programme Assistant) across a two (2) week period. A total of ten (10) questions were asked in the form of an interview which included a mixture of both open and closed ended questions. (A copy of the questions can be found attached in the appendices.) Participants were assured that their responses were solely for research purposes and that confidentiality was paramount. The invitation was initially sent to the heads of the various houses who then mobilised the house members on our behalf.

Data from this case study will be used to champion the organization’s advocacy efforts as well as to develop future projects surrounding the proliferation of chosen families in Jamaica and the impact they have been creating on the lives of community members. The data from the research is preliminary and was taken from a small sample that is not entirely representative of range of chosen families that exist across the length and breadth of the island. Greater research needs to be done to have a more wholesome sample and add more legitimacy to the recommendations made within this document.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Royal House of Evangelista

While pretty young in its existence the Royal House of Evangelista headed by House Mother Terry-Kay Walker and House Father Mark Crump seeks to target homelessness which is a constant problem in the Queer Community. Since its initiation, the Royal House of Evangelista has maintained a family dynamic of shared values. The house comprises seventeen (17) members to date and has provided housing among other necessities for its members. While most members don't have strong biological ties with family, the connection made through this family unit has been one like no other. During the interview, a house member stated, “The House has impacted my life because I never knew I could come around a bunch of strangers and feel loved as I've always known them”. Although the house is deemed as very young in the community, the ages of its members and how experienced they are is rather remarkable, with the youngest member being 18 and the oldest being 33; the melting personalities create nothing less than strong family values. Our research also showed that 12 of the 17 house members were impacted positively after becoming a part of the house or being aligned with family members. Although sibling relationships are a big part of this house, intimate relationships seem to thrive while understanding different sexual relationships, such as Polygamy. It's through different spaces such as these that persons are also able to better understand their gender identity and get a better understanding of self. Even though membership into the house has no real implications based on specific standards, shared values seem to be the continuing factor of how small spaces like these strive to champion the status quo.

- Attendees
1. Terry-Kay Walker - House Mother
2. Mark Crump - House Father
3. 15 House Members

**Haus of Yemoja**

Started in 2017, the Haus of Yemoja is known for its strong family dynamic as well as its ability to hone and develop the human capital potential of its members. The house currently has a total of 9 members, with Glenroy Murray as the house mother followed by Renae Green and Emme Christie as aunts, who all combine to make up the trinity of the Yemoja sisters. The house has been known to foster positive development and advancement of young, queer individuals by creating a safe space to share and become vulnerable; things which they probably cannot do or were not afforded with their biological families. During the interview, most participants stated that they still have somewhat of a relationship with their biological families to date, however, when it comes on to fully expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity, that posed as a challenge as most (biological families) were traditional and did not really understand what it meant to be queer. One participant in particular stated joining the family was the best thing that had ever happened to them as becoming a member not only positively amplified their charter, but also develop their social, emotional, and professional skills in addition to give them that sense of independence to survive.

- Attendees
  1. Glenroy Murray (House Mother)
  2. Renae Green
  3. Emme Christie
  4. Other house members
The Cheetah Girls

While the existence of this house seems to be quite unique, The House of Cheetah has been in full swing from 2001. This family in specific is close knitted because the founders are all cousin. This house is known to be the socialites of the party scene and as such has great standing with the community because of their excellent dancing abilities. Since its initiation, the Cheetah Girls has positively maintained occupying transphobic spaces and changing the narrative of who we truly are. With being a professional dancer, Chasidy tackles the narrative of not being a great dance teacher because she is trans and as such strides and continues to change both heart and minds.

Our research also showed that of the five (5) house members the three (3) core founding members rely on each other heavily for emotional support. Although sibling relationships are a big part of this house, intimate relationships also seem to thrive while understanding different sexual relationships, such as polygamy. It was also mentioned from this engagement that trans people can better grasp their gender identities and have a better knowledge of themselves by visiting diverse venues like this. Despite the fact that membership in the home has no actual consequences based on particular criteria, shared values appear to be a constant in how tiny settings like these attempts to maintain the status quo as also seen with all three (3) families.

Attendees

1. Demae Cheetah
2. Chasidy Cheetah
3. Richie Poo Cheetah
NB: Other families were identified across both rural and urban Jamaica, however when screened over the phone, the issues experienced by these families were similar to those explored in this paper. Some of the issues include:

- Homelessness
- Unemployment
- Lack of educational attainment
- Inadequate access to social services and health care
- Mental health issues

The participants were also asked to share some of the benefits they experience while being a member of their chosen family. Some of these include:

- Familial support
- Provision of basic amenities such as food, shelter, etc.
- Notable familial figures and role models
- Financial support
- Networking opportunities
- Character development
ANALYSIS

In the past year or two, the covid-19 pandemic has proven to have had significant challenges for LGBT individuals. More so with the huge economic fallout that most community members experienced, several gaps were identified which disrupted lives and livelihoods. These included limited access to education, homelessness, inability to provide basic amenities, unemployment, among others. In addition, some LGBT people had to now depend on their biological families for support and as such, had to conform to their rules and expectations and in some cases had to also suppress their gender identities or sexual orientation. This was described by some community members as torturous as any effort to rebel would therefore lead to them being either kicked out or even abused physically or verbally.

On the contrary, those who had the benefit of being a part of chosen families or “houses” were better able at getting the necessary love and support they needed to navigate the challenges of the pandemic in addition to fully actualizing their potentials as many were displaced from their jobs or lacked the requisite education to be employed. Therefore, capacity building was a major aspect in how each house catered to the needs of their members. A total of three families were interviewed with ten (10) specific questions being asked geared towards understanding what each family understood from the term “chosen family”, how they benefitted from being a part of the family, any challenges or successes they experienced, what was life like growing up as well as the relationship with their biological families and lastly, one message that they would want to tell their younger selves. From the interviewer’s point of view, each family was very emotional in their responses due to the presence of triggers and trauma that still were not fully dealt with or addressed as most participants did not have the outlet to share or just simply explain how they were truly feeling. This, in turn, emphasized the need for more conversations surrounding how to handle trauma as well as developing more safe spaces and outlets for
community members to share and vent when needed. Likewise, many individuals lamented being kicked out at a very tender age (most in their teenage years) due to speculations of them either being gay or trans. This therefore led to them being homeless and had to resort to survival sex work in order to earn and afford themselves basic amenities. Some even stated that it was because of their chosen families that they were able to meet people and develop networks which would further afford them opportunities to network and actualize their potential.
FINDINGS

Figure 1

Age Ranges of Participants

Figure 2

Gender Identity of Participants
• The age range of the participants interviewed were between ages 15 – 35 for all three houses. Specifically, when it came to homelessness, it was found that individuals as young as 14 years old, were being kicked out of their biological family homes for reasons such as affirming their gender identity or realizing their sexual orientation.

• For the question “Do you still have/maintain a good relationship with your biological family?”, 70% of respondents stated that they no longer have a good relationship with their biological families. This was either as a result being either shunned or discriminated against upon coming out to family members or in some cases being deliberately outing by others which was in turn meted with violence, discrimination, threats, etc. (disclosing their sexual orientation or affirming their gender identity.)

• It was seen where most participants did not readily have a clear understanding of the terms gender identity or sexual orientation prior to being a part of their chosen families.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Belongingness, as an aspect of continued growth, has been seen to mediate the development of trans identity positively, which may lead to more positive physical and mental health outcomes such as higher self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and psychological well-being (Barr et al., 2016).

Continued growth in providing social support will positively influence the healthy identity development of trans individuals. Generally, the participants liked the idea of discussions about the realities they face as Queer individuals as TransWave Jamaica was seen as a safe space to have these conversations. Regarding this specific research, these suggestions were given from the participants:

- Having more of this research with rural community members.
- Connect more community houses with mentors to have better family structures for sustainable future.
- More community involvement in advocacy activities/initiatives.
- Have more social events to keep the community engaged.
- Have specific focus groups to family leaders and members to see how others overcome similar obstacles and challenges and for networking purposes.
REFERENCES


Levin, J. (2020) “We Just Take Care of Each Other”: Navigating ‘Chosen Family’ in the Context of Health, Illness, and the Mutual Provision of Care amongst Queer and Transgender Young Adults. Retrieved February 27, 2022 from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7579626/
APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Demographics:
- Age
- Gender Identity
- Sexual Orientation
- Location (Urban or Rural Jamaica)

1. What do you understand from the term “Chosen Family”?
2. How long have you been a part of your chosen family?
3. What are the benefits of being in a chosen family?
4. Do you believe that your chosen family has impacted you in a positive way?
5. What was the experience like growing up with your biological family?
6. Do you still have/maintain a good relationship with your biological family?
7. What prompted your decision to become a part of your chosen family?
8. What has the experience been like so far?
9. What advice would you give to someone who would like to join a chosen family/house, but don’t know how to go about it?
10. State one message you would give to your younger self.

Impact
Data from the case study will be used to champion the organization’s advocacy efforts as well as to develop future projects surrounding the proliferation of chosen families in Jamaica and the impact, they have been creating on the lives of community members.