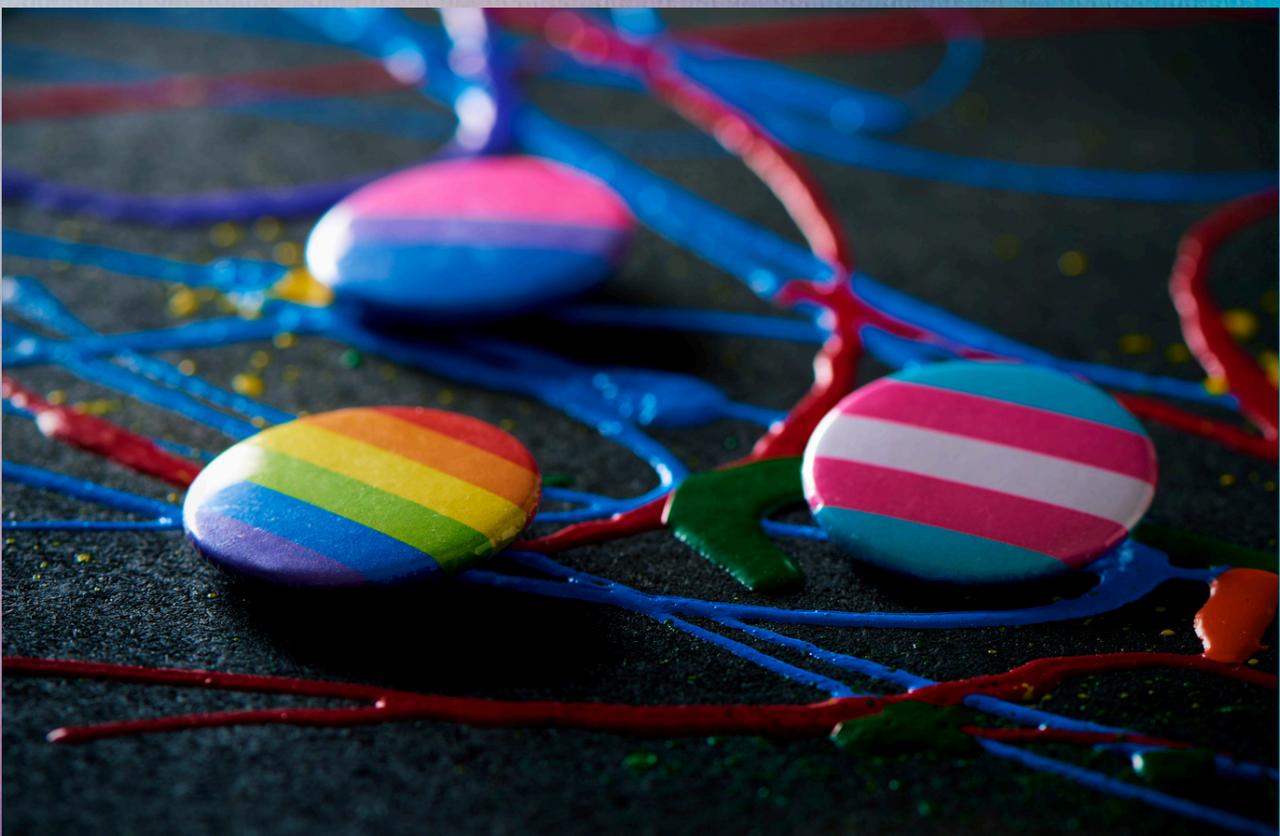

Strengthening Civic Engagement for Transgender & Gender Non-Conforming Persons in 2026

EVIDENCE, EQUITY, AND INCLUSIVE DEMOCRATIC REFORM IN JAMAICA





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Jamaica approaches a critical period of civic and electoral activity in 2026, transgender and gender non-conforming persons continue to face systemic exclusion from democratic participation. While civic engagement is a foundational pillar of democratic governance, evidence shows that transgender and gender non-conforming people experience disproportionate barriers to voting, political participation, and public decision-making.

Community-led research conducted by TransWave Jamaica in 2025 confirms that low levels of civic participation among TGNC persons are not driven by apathy, but by fear, institutional distrust, documentation barriers, and political invisibility (TransWave Jamaica, 2025).

The study found that 67 percent of respondents have never voted, 53

percent reported feeling unsafe experiencing discrimination while voting, and only 33 percent expressed any trust in government institutions. Between 60 and 77 percent of respondents indicated that no political party meaningfully addresses the concerns of TGNC people (TransWave Jamaica, 2025).

This policy brief argues that 2026 represents a pivotal opportunity for Jamaica to strengthen democratic legitimacy by embedding inclusive, rights-based civic engagement into electoral systems, governance frameworks, and political culture. Without deliberate reforms and sustained investment, TGNC exclusion will deepen. With intentional action, inclusive civic participation can enhance trust, representation, and democratic resilience.

BACKGROUND &

Transgender and gender non-conforming persons in Jamaica experience intersecting forms of marginalization, including stigma, violence, economic exclusion, and legal invisibility. These realities shape how TGNC individuals interact with public institutions, particularly civic and electoral systems that depend on public exposure, identity verification, and discretionary decision-making.

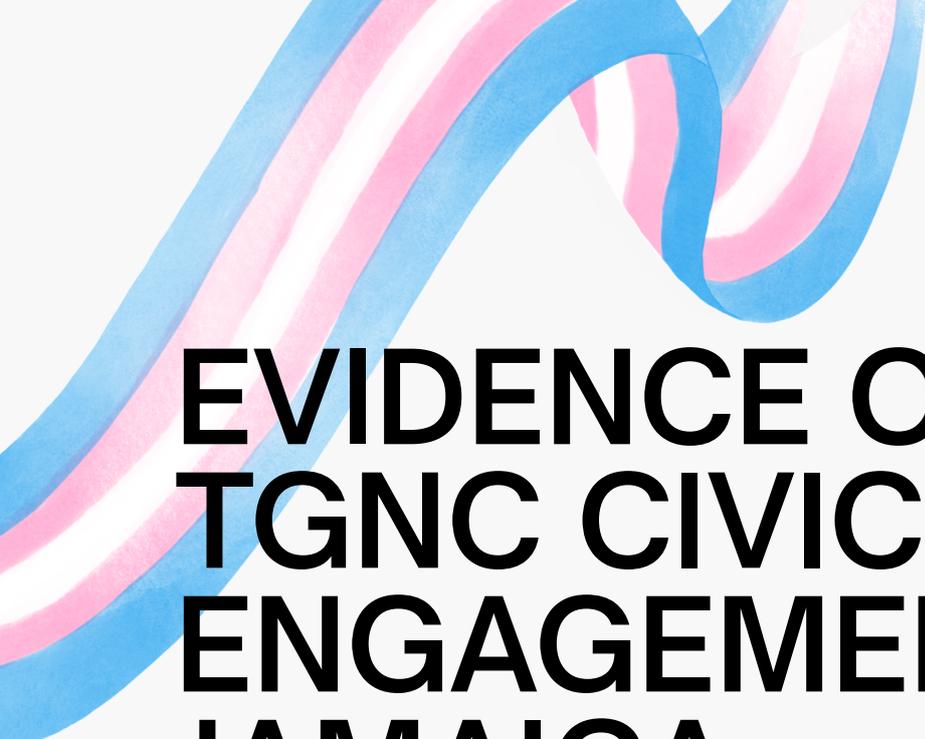
Jamaica's political culture is characterized by strong party loyalty, visible political signalling, and community surveillance. While this environment mobilizes many voters, it also creates heightened risk for TGNC persons whose gender expression or appearance may expose them to harassment, outing, or violence. TransWave Jamaica's 2025 study documents that polling stations are widely perceived by TGNC individuals as hostile and emotionally



distressing spaces, particularly in garrison and inner city communities (TransWave Jamaica, 2025).

Civil society organizations have long highlighted that these exclusions are not incidental. TransWave Jamaica, Equality for All Foundation (formerly JFLAG), and regional partners such as the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality and the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition have consistently documented how legal gaps, lack of institutional safeguards, and political tokenism undermine inclusive democracy for LGBTQ plus communities.





EVIDENCE ON TGNC CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN JAMAICA

Political Distrust and Institutional Alienation

Only 33 percent of TGNC respondents expressed any trust in government institutions, while half reported complete distrust (TransWave Jamaica, 2025). Focus group participants described political engagement with LGBTQ plus communities as performative, noting that outreach often occurs during election cycles without sustained policy follow-through. This distrust extends beyond individual politicians to electoral, legal, and governance systems as a whole, reinforcing a perception that TGNC people are excluded from meaningful decision-making processes.

Low Voter Turnout as a Rational Response

While 67 percent of respondents reported never voting, qualitative data demonstrate that disengagement is a rational response to exclusion rather than indifference. Over 40 percent of respondents identified safety and fear of violence as the single greatest barrier to voting, surpassing documentation challenges or lack of civic knowledge (TransWave Jamaica, 2025). For many TGNC individuals, abstaining from voting represents a survival strategy in a political environment that does not guarantee safety or dignity.

Safety and Discrimination at Polling Stations

More than 53 percent of respondents reported feeling unsafe or experiencing discrimination while voting due to their gender identity (TransWave Jamaica, 2025). Experiences included misgendering by polling staff, invasive questioning, and fear of being publicly outed through mismatched identification documents.

These findings align with concerns raised by international human rights bodies that electoral processes frequently fail to account for gender diversity, resulting in indirect discrimination (OHCHR, 2015, 2018).

Political Parties and Perceived Exclusion

Between 60 and 77 percent of respondents indicated that no political party meaningfully addresses TGNC concerns (TransWave Jamaica, 2025). Participants described party engagement with LGBTQ plus communities as symbolic and inconsistent, lacking accountability or measurable policy commitments.

The absence of openly TGNC individuals within political leadership structures further reinforces perceptions that TGNC lives are not politically valued.

Documentation Barriers and Legal Invisibility

Thirty percent of respondents reported documentation-related challenges when attempting to vote or engage in civic activities (TransWave Jamaica, 2025). Jamaica currently lacks a legal gender recognition framework, requiring TGNC persons to present identification that does not reflect their lived gender identity.

This mismatch exposes individuals to humiliation, delays, and denial of services, discouraging participation in civic life. Advocacy by TransWave Jamaica and Equality for All Foundation has consistently identified gender affirming documentation as essential to inclusive democratic participation.

Conditional Willingness to Engage

Despite persistent exclusion, TGNC respondents expressed a strong willingness to engage under affirming conditions. Fifty-three percent stated that inclusive political representation would encourage participation, 47 percent identified civic education as a key motivator, and 40 percent emphasized safety and protection (TransWave Jamaica, 2025).

These findings demonstrate that TGNC civic disengagement is not permanent, but contingent on dignity, representation, and institutional accountability.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ADVANCING AN INCLUSIVE AND JUST DEMOCRACY

TransWave Jamaica has played a central role in generating community-led evidence on TGNC civic participation and translating lived experience into policy advocacy. Its research and engagement efforts have contributed significantly to national discourse on inclusive governance.

This work is complemented by other key civil society actors. Equality for All Foundation has led legal and policy engagement to challenge structural barriers affect-

ing LGBTQ plus participation in public life. Regionally, the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality has advanced inclusive and just democracy through civic participation initiatives, electoral reform advocacy, strategic litigation and political leadership development for LGBTQ plus communities across the Caribbean.

Together, these organizations represent a growing ecosystem of civil society leadershi



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2026

Government & Parliament

Government should enact legal gender recognition frameworks grounded in self-determination, explicitly include gender identity and expression in anti-discrimination and electoral legislation, and institutionalize consultation with trans led and LGBTQ plus civil society organizations in governance processes.

Political Parties

Political parties should integrate TGNC-specific commitments into party manifestos, engage LGBTQ plus communities beyond election cycles, and create pathways for TGNC leadership, policy input, and advisory roles within party structures.

International Partners and Donors

International partners should provide sustained, flexible funding for TGNC led civic engagement initiatives, embed LGBTQ plus inclusion within democracy and governance programming, and support continued community led research and data collection (UNDP, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Electoral Management Bodies

The Electoral Office of Jamaica should adopt inclusive polling protocols, mandate gender sensitivity and human rights training for polling staff and security personnel, and establish accessible, confidential complaint and redress mechanisms for electoral discrimination, in line with international best practice (UNDP, 2016). For many TGNC individuals, abstaining from voting represents a survival strategy in a political environment that does not guarantee safety or dignity.

Civil Society

Civil society organizations should expand TGNC specific civic education, support community led voter education and monitoring initiatives, and build coalitions across youth, women's rights, disability, and climate justice movements to strengthen inclusive democratic reform.

CONCLUSION

Evidence from TransWave Jamaica's 2025 study confirms that transgender and gender non-conforming Jamaicans are not disengaged from democracy, they are excluded by it. As we start 2026, democratic institutions face an urgent responsibility to dismantle systems that force TGNC persons to choose between safety and participation.

Inclusive civic engagement is not a niche concern. It is a measure of democratic maturity. A democracy that excludes TGNC people is incomplete. A democracy that includes them is stronger, more legitimate, and more just.



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