

# Having KOURAJ to Make a Difference in Haiti

Queer Haitians are organizing for their rights and dignity in a hostile environment. And Grassroots International, through our [Martín-Baró Initiative](#), is providing resources for the community to organize, heal, and connect.

Ongoing colonialism and inequality in Haiti have created a perfect storm of civil unrest and violence, increasing the risks for already marginalized Haitians. As Haiti continues to endure this deep political and constitutional crisis, the LGBTQI+ community faces increased persecution, violence, medical neglect, and mental illness brought on from stress and fear.

But queer Haitians are not enduring this quietly. Thankfully, our grantee KOURAJ is on the ground joining them in their struggle for their human rights.

## Legalized Discrimination

While same-sex relationships are legal in Haiti, homophobia and oppression are still widespread. In 2017, the Haitian Senate passed laws banning same-sex marriage and “public demonstrations for homosexuality and proselytizing in favor of such acts.” The laws also allow government officials to deny LGBTQI+ Haitians the *Certificat de Bonne Vie et Moeurs*. This document is required by many employers and universities, so the ban effectively codifies employment discrimination. Despite the fact that these laws remain unenforceable, they reflect the widespread antipathy towards LGBTQI+ people.

LGBTQI+ people experience harassment, discrimination, violence, and social stigmatization at the hands of authorities and private citizens. Government officials have shut down several LGBTQI+ events, while simultaneously allowing anti-LGBTQI+ protests to take place.

Significantly both the Catholic and Protestant churches exert a powerful force in Haitian society and influence norms around gender and sexuality. Prominent religious leaders publicly disparage LGBTQI+ identities as immoral.

Just as colonialism historically [imposed homophobia on colonized peoples](#), the US religious right has exerted its own discriminatory influence on Haiti in recent years. After the 2010 earthquake, the influx of conservative religious charities restricted access to aid for LGBTQI+ people, while simultaneously blaming them for the disaster as if it was brought on as [divine punishment](#) for their mortal sins. Stigmatization like this is just another example of the daily discrimination and violence they already face.

Because of the intensity and volume of the discrimination, many in the LGBTQI+ community are taught to feel ashamed of who they are, forcing them to remain secretive about their identity or live a lie. By being pushed aside, many in the community are revictimized through limited access for resources such as medical and mental health care.

## Creating Change Through Pride

Even as these challenges weigh heavily on a community that survives amid despair, one group remains committed to bringing positive changes. This group of Haitians, aptly named KOURAJ (courage), is a nonprofit community organization founded by activists in 2011. KOURAJ seeks to fight all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and raise awareness and empower homosexuals and transgender people throughout the Republic of Haiti. To win real change in Haiti, KOURAJ focuses on four main areas: advocacy, health services, community mobilization and networking.

“We wish to propose an alternative discourse on homosexuality in Haiti because [for] too long have only homophobes discuss[ed] our reality and propose[ed] their own interpretation,” said Charlot Jeudy, founding member and former president of the Executive Committee of KOURAJ.

As part of their mission to change perceptions in Haitian society, KOURAJ has reclaimed the term Masisi — a slur once used to victimize the LGBTQI+ community in the past — and redefined it. Like “queer” in English-speaking contexts, it now means all people who were, are, or will be potentially or actually discriminated against and/or stigmatized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. KOURAJ’s seeks to integrate Masisi people into the broader fight for human rights in Haiti. Above all, KOURAJ aims to raise awareness in Haitian society and to change the misconceptions of LGBTQI+ people.

Through targeted and strategic outreach and programs, KOURAJ is working to bring stability to the LGBTQI+ community. Having the support to live authentically can give rise to a stronger and healthier population. LGBTQI+ Haitians suffer from [mental health disorders](#) (such as depression and general anxiety) at an alarmingly disproportionate rate, and compassionate health care is more difficult to find.

For its part, KOURAJ offers counseling, human rights training, and access to medical care specifically for those impacted by violence or HIV. Amplifying the voices of folks who have historically been silenced will hopefully allow more citizens to come forward without fear, to seek out necessary resources, and to begin to heal and live as their true selves.

## A Vision for the Future

Numerous experts have said the situation in Haiti has reached a [crisis point](#), as gang violence is surging across the country in the aftermath of [President Jovenel Moise’s assassination](#) last year. Community support organizations like KOURAJ face daunting challenges, but their work is increasingly important.

Currently, just over 50 percent of the population is literate. According to the [Human Capital Index](#), over one-fifth of Haitian children are at risk of cognitive and physical limitations, and only 78 percent of 15-year-olds will survive to age 60.

Even so, KOURAJ leaders believe that, with the will and resources to succeed, it will be possible for Masisi Haitians to make positive change and win liberation in their own society. By encouraging the LGBTQI+ community and educating the rest of the population, KOURAJ is working tirelessly to cultivate a liberated and vibrant Haiti.

## Together in Struggle

Educating, agitating and organizing can only go so far without solidarity. Likewise, that solidarity is nothing without locally-led organizations like KOURAJ leading the struggle. Grassroots partners with KOURAJ toward the vision of a safer, liberated Haiti for Masisi and all Haitians.