



ETHNO CULTURE



Invisible Identities

Sexually Diverse Ethnic and Racial Minorities and Two-Spirited People in Quebec

Memoire presented by Coalition MultiMundo and Ethnoculture Inc., in collaboration with the Sexual and Gender Diversity: Vulnerability, and Resilience (SVR) Research Team, to the Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliees aux differences culturelles

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Descriptions of Presenters

Coalition MultiMundo (<http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/Coalition-MultiMundo>)

La Coalition MultiMundo regroupe des organismes communautaires et des membres individuels de Montréal, qui travaillent avec une clientèle LGBTQ appartenant à des communautés ethnoculturelles ou autochtones.

La coalition a adopté trois objectifs généraux :

- Favoriser la visibilité des membres LGBTQ des communautés ethnoculturelles et autochtones;
- Favoriser une synergie entre les groupes et organismes, LGTBQ et autres, membres de la coalition;
- Lutter contre l'homophobie et le racisme.

Member organizations include: Gay and Lesbian Asians of Montreal, Helem, Zaffiron, Ebony Perspectives of Montreal, Arc-en-ciel Afrique, Association des etres bi-spirituelles, Feygelah, Hola, GRIS, Gay Line, Jeunesse Lambda, Coalition jeunesse montréalaise de lutte a l'homophobie, Coalition des transsexuel(le)s et transexué(e)s du Québec, Lesbian Mothers Association, Alterheros, Aids Community Care Montreal, Project 10, and Sero-Zero.

Ethnoculture Inc. (<http://www.ethnoculture.org>)

La mission est d'organiser des événements participant a la visibilité des personnes LGB3T des communautés culturelles et a la défense de leurs droits au sein de la société en général et des communautés culturelles plus particulièrement en favorisant les rapprochements entre les membres de ces communautés.

Les objectifs de la compagnie Ethnoculture Inc. sont les suivants:

- Lutter contre les discriminations multiples.
- Offrir des espaces de rencontre et d'échange avec les communautés ethnoculturelles a toutes celles et ceux qui travaillent dans le domaine de l'immigration pour leur permettre d'en appréhender les différents bagages culturels en matière d'orientation sexuelle et d'identité de genre.
- Développer chez les Québécois(es) la connaissances et la compréhension de la réalité pluraliste de leur société.
- Sensibiliser la communauté LGB3T en général en lui permettant de prendre conscience de l'existence d'autres communautés LGB3T avec des réalités différentes.
- Favoriser l'intégration des LGB3T issus des différentes communautés culturelles dans la société en général.
- Aider les groupes ethnoculturels LGB3T à s'affirmer dans leurs communautés respectives.
- Favoriser la discussion et les échanges entre les différents groupes ethnoculturels autour de leurs réalités communes et de leurs différences.

Sexual and Gender Diversity: Vulnerability, and Resilience Research Team (SVR) (<http://www.hvr.uqam.ca>)

The SVR research team is an interdisciplinary team consisting of 14 Canadian experts in social and human sciences working on health issues pertinent to sexual and gender diversity and multiple oppressions. The team is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health research and le Fond de recherche sur la société et la culture-Quebec. The team's objectives include:

- To examine the issues, challenges and realities facing people and communities including quality of life, physical and mental health across the lifespan with a particular emphasis on:
 - The impact of "coming out" on various health processes and outcomes.
 - The modalities of multiple oppressions in peoples' experiences and their impact on health.
- To examine health and social services and organizational programs and practices.
- To build an infrastructure based upon knowledge exchange between universities, academic disciplines and communities that has a positive impact upon health and social services, health and well-being, research capacity building and social change in Canada.
- Each team member contributes to the research program, which consists of a series of studies spanning nine Canadian universities situated in 5 provinces.

Objectives

Our objectives in participating in these public consultation hearings on accommodation practices pertaining to cultural differences are as follows:

- To draw attention to our experiences as individuals who identify simultaneously as gender and sexual minorities AND ethnocultural and racial minorities and indigenous persons.
- To shed light on the challenges that we, as multiply-oppressed individuals and communities face, in our daily lives.
- To raise awareness about some of the effects that the accommodation debate has had on our existence in and contribution to Quebec society.
- To recommend integrative and adaptive solutions that proactively address these concerns in order to create a safer, more welcoming environment in Quebec for members of our communities.

Guiding Principles for Our Discussion

The following guiding principles are critical to understanding the complexity of the issues and recommendations presented in our text. These points are vital to the Commission's contemplation and comprehension of our perspective.

- No identity or community is static. Culture is fluid, constantly evolving, and shaped by internal and external forces.
- Historical context is crucial. The influence of homophobic Western ideology and traditions—the result of past colonizing endeavours—have significantly influenced current negative attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity within certain ethnocultural and indigenous communities in Quebec.
- Values and belief systems with respect to sexual and gender diversity will vary among individuals who are members of ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities.
- An identity is made up of many identities. These identities intersect and interlock with each other. The identities of minorities, in particular, are subjected to multiple and complex forms of discrimination and oppressions.

Introduction

We whole-heartedly acknowledge Quebec's role as an innovator of social change through its recognition and enshrinement of the rights of marginalized groups in its Charter. In particular, Quebec should feel proud of itself for being the first province to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its Charter of Human Rights in 1977. Indeed, every year thousands of immigrants choose Quebec as their new home because of its open attitudes towards sexual and cultural diversity. However, as the current debate over accommodating cultural minorities has shown us, there is still much work to be done. We as a society are entering an important phase in our history—one that will determine our future course for years to come. The groups that we represent hope to contribute to the planning of that future by introducing the perspective of a population that is rarely given attention by the greater society.

Coalition MultiMundo and Ethnoculture Inc., working in collaboration with the Sexual and Gender Diversity: Vulnerability and Resilience research team, brings together researchers, activists, and ordinary citizens and residents who identify as or are allies of sexually diverse ethnocultural and racial minorities and Two-Spirit people in Montreal. We are a collective of individuals who proudly call Quebec home, but who also face multiple and intersecting oppressions in our daily lives; by presenting at these public hearings, we hope to raise awareness about the challenges we face, and to provide the Commission with constructive recommendations for resolving some of these issues for inclusion in its final report. We also expect the media outlets to listen to what we have to say in order to be better informed about the context in which we live and, in turn, integrate that context into their programming and news coverage for the sake of more balanced and responsible portrayals of our communities.

While we support much of the content included in the memoire submitted by the Conseil Quebécois des gais et lesbiennes, we feel there are concerns that are specific to the individuals we represent that need to be addressed via our own memoire. The complexity of our identities has a profound effect on the way we are treated and the way we live our lives in Quebec society; we do not fit tidily into singular social categories such as “ethnic” or “gay.” Moreover, we encounter barriers due to our memberships in and relationships and affiliations with our families, our ethnocultural and racial communities, our communities of diverse sexualities and genders, our religious institutions, mainstream Quebec society, and even our workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods. Ours is a complicated existence, and these hearings offer us the opportunity to make that existence known to the Commission and the public-at-large.

Quebec is at a crossroads in its evolution as a free and democratic society. As this accommodation dialogue continues, one thing is clear; our voices must be heard.

Invisible Identities

All human beings feel the need to belong to a community, whether it be as small as a neighbourhood or as large as a nation. To achieve that sense of belonging, it is necessary that they be included fully in every aspect of society that is available to them; in other words, they must be treated as citizens. However, there are many people to whom such citizenship is not completely accessible; the criteria for acceptance, they discover, does not take their interests or their needs into account. In effect, their identities are rendered socially, culturally, politically, and economically invisible by state and society alike. Among those who struggle with this phenomenon are individuals whose identities cross the margins of sexuality, ethnicity, and race as well as gender and religion.

With these multiple identities come multiple oppressions. As racial and ethnic minorities, we experience racism and xenophobia within both mainstream heterosexual and sexually diverse communities. As Ryan, Brotman, and baradaran note, “Racism prevails under various forms among many of those who are located within the socio-cultural and political sites of the gay [community]”¹. For example, there is a noticeable absence of ethnocultural and racial minorities featured in Montreal's gay

¹ Ryan, B., Brotman, S., baradaran, a. (2006). *The Colour of Queer Health care: Experiences of Multiple Oppression in the Lives of Queer People of Colour in Canada*. Montreal: School of Social Work, McGill University: 6-7.

and lesbian media, as if we did not even exist. Furthermore, when we are mentioned or represented in the media, we are frequently depicted according to simplistic and offensive stereotypes, such as subservient Asians. From personal experience, I have seen countless profiles on gay internet dating websites that proclaim “No Asians, Blacks, or Arabs, please” or that mention the attractiveness of the “smooth skin” and submissiveness of gay Asian men, as if we were all the same exotic objects of affection. Such perceptions are insulting, demeaning, hurtful, and frustrating to us, yet we encounter them regularly.

Moreover, we must often contend with homophobia in our cultural communities. In a recent report published by the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, the Groupe de travail mixte contre l'homophobie notes that

[e]n raison du degré d'hostilité envers l'homosexualité dans leur communauté d'origine, il n'est pas rare que les personnes homosexuelles et bisexuelles des communautés culturelles soient rejetées et exclues par leur famille et leur communauté. Les personnes dont l'orientation sexuelle ou bisexuelle est connue sont souvent victimes de violence psychologique et physiquement. En général, le coming out entraîne un bris des liens avec la communauté d'origine, allant même, parfois, jusqu'à mettre en danger la vie de ces personnes.²

The fear and injury to body, mind, and spirit that sexual minorities within ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities deal with on a regular basis infringe on their ability to become full citizens of Quebec.

Those of us who are women may face further disenfranchisement resulting not only from sexist and misogynist attitudes found within the larger society as well as our own cultural communities, but also from Western stereotypes about how women are generally treated and how little power they wield within those communities. One can see this in the debates regarding Muslim women who wear the veil in Western societies such as Quebec. As Homa Hoodfar points out, these women opt do this for numerous political, social, and cultural as well as religious reasons, including as a means of protesting against Western imperialism³.

Similarly, those of us who practice certain faiths may be perceived as victims of the religious sects to which we belong and, thus, in need of rescue, or as traitors to the advancement of sexual minority rights simply because of our affiliations with those sects. Such perspectives ignore the fact that power can manifest itself in different ways, that we can make certain choices of our own free will without feeling pressured to do so, and that those choices might have no bearing or influence on how we engage with our sexualities or other aspects of our identities. As one Muslim man interviewed by Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, and Varga states,

I had this suspicion about Islam...I didn't even want Arabic friends. [...] I wanted to be white on the outside. [...] That was almost 20 years ago. As you get older, you learn that these are your roots. Trying to pretend that you're not, it's pathetic. It's about who you are and being honest and getting that peace within.⁴

The presence of these competing external forces in the lives of the multiply oppressed exacerbates their level of stress and can ultimately damage to their sense of self. For example, In the case of Two-Spirit people, Brotman and Ryan observe,

² Groupe de travail mixte contre l'homophobie. (2007). De l'égalité juridique à l'égalité sociale: Vers une stratégie nationale de lutte contre l'homophobie. Montreal, QC: Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Gouvernement du Québec : 47.

³ Hoodfar, H. (2006). More than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy. In *Religion and Canadian Society: Traditions, Transitions, and Innovations*, edited by Lori G. Beaman. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press: 220.

⁴ Minwalla, O., Rosser, B.R.S., Feldman, J., Varga, C. (2005). Identity experience among progressive gay Muslims in North America: A qualitative study within Al-Fatiha. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 7(2):122.

[w]hat results is an experience of [splitting] (Brotman and Kranjou, 1998) in which [they] end up being forced to choose between defending family and community in response to racist and colonialist attitudes in queer communities or defending their sexuality or gender identity in response to homophobic/transphobic (sic) attitudes in aboriginal communities. The [splitting] of identity and allegiance significantly undermines Two-Spirit (sic) people's potential to self affirm.⁵

This observation is true for many sexually diverse ethnic and racial minorities, as well. In 2001, Wayne van der Meide of Egale Canada, an Ottawa-based LGBTIQ rights organization, interviewed a large number of individuals who identified as sexually diverse ethnic and racial minorities and Two-Spirit people in Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, and British Columbia. One of those interviewed, Norman Liu of Montreal, commented:

J'ai eu de la difficulté à accepter mon homosexualité et j'ai dépensé beaucoup d'énergie à nier, à supprimer, à accepter puis à défendre mon identité ethnique. C'était, après tout, la plus visible tandis que je pouvais cacher mon homosexualité. Le double stress causé par le racisme et l'hétérosexisme externes et intériorisés a été un facteur déterminant dans le processus d'acceptation de mon homosexualité, que je vis ouvertement.⁶

Whether one is a gay Asian, a lesbian Arab, or a transsexual Black person, one always feels pressured to participate in this game of tug-of-war over identity, with one arm pulled by our communities and families of origin and the other arm by those communities represented by our sexual orientation and gender. We always end up feeling separated, distinct, and learn to live in worlds where there is constant tension.

The mass media of mainstream society have only made matters worse for us. There has been very little in the way of fairness or accountability with respect to representations of our communities on television, film, and the radio. We have been bombarded with inaccurate and one-dimensional portrayals of us that are de-contextualized from our real world situations and foster an environment that hatred and hostility towards all aspects of our identities. If we think in terms of human rights, then the media has been particularly culpable in violating them, especially at times when emotions are running high, including during the 2007 Quebec elections.

We can see how homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, and other non-heterosexual forms of sexuality have been depicted in both fiction and non-fiction programming as almost exclusively the domain of white, Euro-North American society. Sometimes a news item or a character will appear to challenge the whiteness of that domain, but invariably its appearance is simply used as a device to reinforce erroneous and prejudicial ideas about non-Western cultures, particularly Islamic ones. For example, recent coverage of Iran's alleged treatment of sexual minorities among its population has given the impression that it is essentially a homophobic culture.

Conversely, when, if ever, non-occidental cultures do appear on television and movie screens or are mentioned on the radio, rarely are there any references to the presence of sexual diversity within those cultures. On those few occasions when the subject is broached, it is usually framed within a Western context, so that concepts such as "coming out," which are familiar primarily to the West, are imposed upon immigrant communities for whom such a concept is neither a practical nor desirable option.

Indeed, the thematic dominance of the coming out process in depictions of the lives of sexual minorities is clearly an example of ethnocentrism, which Althea Smith defines "as the belief that one's

⁵ Ryan, B., Brotman, S. (2004). An Intersectional Approach to Queer Health Policy and Practice: Two-Spirit People in Canada. *Canadian Diversity*. 3(1).

⁶ van der Meide, W. (2001). The Intersection of Sexual Orientation and Race: Considering the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered ('GLBT') People of Colour and Two-Spirited People. Ottawa, ON: Egale: <http://www.egale.ca/index.asp?item=439&version=FR>.

own cultural approach is the normative lens through which to view a situation or experience”⁷. In the politics of sexually diverse communities in the West, “[f]ailure to acknowledge one’s sexual orientation publicly is assumed to represent a form of denial”⁸. However, there are plenty of other reasons why one may choose not to come out. For example, for those sexually diverse individuals belonging to ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities, Smith observes,

racial identity may be a more salient or more primary locus of oppression than their sexual orientation. It may provide them with and represent clearly identifiable cultural connections as well as a source of support against discrimination, and therefore may be a strong basis for their personal identity.⁹

Everyone makes choices in their lives for different reasons; yet it appears that for people like us, the choices are already pre-determined. Coming out as a criterion of acceptance in mainstream sexually diverse communities is just one example of many. Where is the freedom in that?

This is what it is like to live in a liberal Western culture that stereotypes its non-Western counterparts as homophobic and oppressive. This is what it is like to be members of ethnocultural communities that view diverse sexualities as solely a Western concept and a threat to the social and cultural integrity of the community. It must be said that neither cultures nor sexualities are monolithic. They are dynamic, intricate, and varied. Yet we who inhabit these elaborate identities are never allowed to feel like whole, integrated persons; instead, we exist as fragmented beings, with little pieces of our minds, bodies, and spirits ripped out of us each time we attempt to be true to ourselves.

While the legalization of certain rights such as same-sex marriage are certainly welcome, the efforts made toward creating a more just, egalitarian, and democratic society must not end there. There is still much work to be done socially, culturally, politically, and economically at the ground level of Quebec society. All of this talk about defining our “common values” is meaningless if it cannot help the disenfranchised members of society gain access to basic healthcare, or report their victimization at the hands of a violent perpetrator, or even to feel some sense of self-worth. Indeed, as Pierre Tremblay states in his work on Latin gay men,

Nous avons observé que les idées suicidaires sont plus fréquentes chez les homosexuels issus de minorités raciales ou ethniques que chez les homosexuels blancs (contrairement à la tendance observée dans la population générale). [...] En général...une minorité dépréciée au sein d’une autre peut être plus encline aux tendances suicidaires. Par exemple, les membres homosexuels d’une minorité ethnique sont souvent reniés par leurs propres institutions sociales et celles de la majorité, y compris celles qui offrent habituellement un réconfort psychologique dans des cas de symptômes de détresse.¹⁰

Laverne Monette and Darcy Albert remark on similar outcomes in their research on Two-Spirit men, stating,

Les résultats démontrent que les répondants subissent beaucoup de pression personnelle et sociale. Nombre d’entre eux ont été chômeurs et pauvres, ont éprouvé des problèmes de logement, ont subi l’homophobie, le racisme, la discrimination liée au VIH-sida et l’ostracisme de la collectivité autochtone, auxquels s’ajoutent les effets dévastateurs du VIH-sida dans leur propre vie ou

⁷ Smith, A. (1997). Cultural Diversity and the Coming-Out Process: Implications for Clinical Practice. In *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity among Lesbians and Gay Men*, edited by Beverly Greene. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.: 287.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 288.

¹⁰ Tremblay, P., qtd. in van der Meide.

celle de leurs proches.¹¹

These are the real issues that people like us face in Quebec. Make no mistake—at the level of everyday life, we are constantly striving to improve ourselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, to become consummate and exemplary citizens and residents of Quebec. Yet without a fundamental understanding of our situation by the various levels of government, by essential institutions and social service and community organizations, and by the general public, we will never reach our full potential in our own eyes as well as in those of the majority population.

In order to live our lives fully in Quebec, we need to be more than tolerated. We certainly feel proud of the leadership that has promoted the rights of sexual and gender minorities in Quebec. With most of those rights secured, however, we must now evaluate every aspect of public life in order to ensure that all members of sexually diverse ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities are able to experience these freedoms, to self-actualize, and to express their unique identities, with all the opportunities available to them to become physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy citizens of Quebec. In order to achieve this end, we must be recognized and appreciated for the positive social, cultural, and economic contributions we make to Quebec society, just as we recognize and appreciate everything that la belle province has given us. It is with this in mind that we present to the Commission the following recommendations.

Recommendations

By adding in its final report a section on the importance of integration and social inclusion of sexually diverse ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous community members, the Commission has a wonderful opportunity to help solidify Quebec's reputation as an open, welcoming society that is willing to evolve in new, exciting, and progressive ways. To this end, the report by the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse mentioned earlier and the Canadian Council for Refugees' recent policy developments on anti-homophobia, transphobia, and anti-heterosexism are powerful documents that offer very detailed and specific suggestions to adapt policies and practices that can better serve our community members. In consulting these documents, we respectfully ask the Commission to assist us in advocating for necessary adaptations within Quebec's institutional framework of services (including social and health services, education, and community organizations) by including the following recommendations for more sustainable and action-oriented programs and strategies that will address the barriers we face and better facilitate our full citizenship.

Social and Health Services

- Policy and service provision analysis should be conducted across all social and health services to ensure adequate representation and inclusion of our community members.
- Meaningful inclusion of and consultation with our community members when engaging in program development and implementation of services in order to ensure programs that are relevant to our specific needs should be ensured. This includes programs directed to the broader communities of diverse sexualities and gender identities.
- Outputs and outcomes of social and health awareness campaigns and projects directed towards these broader communities should also reflect this inclusion.
- Workshops for service providers that focus on the barriers, vulnerabilities and resilience of our community members should be implemented.

Media

- A media watchdog should be established to monitor discriminatory and sensational coverage of minority groups, including sexually diverse and gender-identified ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities.

¹¹ Monette, L. and Albert, D., qtd. in van der Meide.

Education

- Analysis of Policy and Service Provision within the education system should be conducted in order to ensure the safety and inclusion of our youth members in school.
- Professional development workshops to assist educators in better understanding the barriers, vulnerabilities, resilience, and needs of sexually diverse and gender-identified youth from ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous communities should be created.

Community Organisations*

** It is important to note there are many organizations that serve sexually diverse communities in the Montreal area that have already implemented and continue to improve their programs and services to sexually diverse and gender-identified ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous community members.*

- All community organizations that serve the broader community of diverse sexualities and gender identities can proactively encourage membership of our community members by ensuring its leadership and organizing structures reflect the diversity of the community and create space within current organizing structures to ensure and promote our meaningful involvement (e.g., creating a cultural diversity committee).
- The work of organizations such as Coalition MultiMundo and its member organizations and Ethnoculture Inc. that are already directly supporting sexually diverse and gender-identified ethnocultural and racial minority and indigenous community members should be encouraged through public funding.

Research and Advocacy

- As reported in “De l’égalité juridique à l’égalité sociale: Vers une stratégie nationale de lutte contre l’homophobie”, there is a crucial need in Quebec for more community-based knowledge to be produced on the realities of our lives in order to develop a deeper understanding of our communities. This knowledge must then be transferred to all social policy makers and service providers who serve our community members.

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