



Big Medicine:
**The issues and challenges
of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+
people in Quebec**

Consultations held in November 2022



FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC INC.
QUEBEC NATIVE WOMEN INC.

Quebec Native Women would like to acknowledge the historical and contemporary contributions of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people towards building tolerance and healing in their communities.

These two online consultations were made possible through the financial participation of the *Secrétariat à la condition féminine*.

**Secrétariat
à la condition
féminine**



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The organization

Quebec Native Women Inc (QNW) is a bilingual non-profit organization founded in 1974 as a community-based initiative. We represent women from the Indigenous peoples of Quebec, as well as those living in urban areas. QNW's mission is to support Indigenous women's efforts to improve their living conditions and those of their families through the promotion of non-violence, justice, equality, rights and health. In this context, we play a significant role in politics, education, fostering leadership, awareness and research, and provide a structure for being active in our communities.

Overview

In December 2021, the Youth Council of Quebec Native Women met in-person in Montréal and passed a resolution requesting our organization to hold consultations to better understand the realities that Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people face, and subsequently create a popular education campaign around our findings.

In response to this resolution, on November 8 and 15, 2022, two groups of Indigenous people from Quebec gathered online for consultations on the issues and challenges faced by Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people. The consultations were held over the TEAMS platform and were facilitated by Diane Labelle. Participants represented nine nations: Abenaki, Atikamekw, Innu, Inuit, Anishinaabe, Mohawk, Mi'gmaq, Naskapi and Ojibwe.

A total of 28 people attended our consultations. Some participants represented allies and family members of 2SLGBTQ+ people, while six self-identified as Two-spirit; one person as non-binary and four others as other or unsure. Others preferred not to use a label or simply identified as LGBTQ+.

Participants represented the nuanced and diverse experiences of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people, with various overlapping and intersecting sexual and gender identities (Two-spirit and trans, Two-spirit and gay, non-binary and queer, unlabelled but not hetero).

These consultations were emotional gatherings that brought together individuals to share their struggles, their observations, their solidarity and

their support. During the consultations, a few participants noted that this was one of the first instances where they had experienced a safe space to discuss these topics.

With this in mind, these consultations served several purposes: first, to gather information and potential participation in our forthcoming awareness campaign on Two-spirit people; second, it served to launch the 2SLGBTQQIA+ file at QNW; and finally, the sessions sought to create a space of expression and healing for this community, where solidarity and empowerment can be fostered to confront the issues they face.

Each session began with an opening prayer, followed by a group discussion. Both consultations lasted a little more than two hours and participants expressed a desire to create more opportunities to discuss these topics.

Quebec Native Women thanks all the participants for their trust, candour and willingness to share. We look forward to creating and strengthening more connections within the Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA+ community.



HISTORICAL AND ONGOING VIOLENCE

"My parents accept me, but they make comments like: "Later, when you have kids with a man." I always hear comments like that. "Later, when you're in a house with a man." I know in my head that wouldn't work."

As these sessions represented for many the first documented opportunity they had to discuss their experiences around 2SLGBTQ+ issues, there was much discussion of the different kinds of violence faced by the participants or their loved ones. Much of the violence discussed in our consultations was lateral in nature, occurring within their respective communities and spanning from homophobic remarks to physical violence. Many mentioned that the homophobia and transphobia they had experienced in familial and community settings was influenced by Christian beliefs. Participants shared experiences of being outed by colleagues, of being sexualized by others, of targeted gossip and of pressure to conform to "standard" gender roles, particularly to marry someone of the opposite sex and to have children.

A clear line can be drawn from the testimony of participants and the historical violence faced by Indigenous communities in Canada. From the first records of missionaries observing Two-spirit people in their communities and referring to them as "berdaches" (a pejorative French term), to the heavy policing of gender roles and appearance (according to Christian beliefs) in Residential Schools, to the institutionalization of marriage and erasure of multiple genders in the Indian Act; the colonial institutions of Canada have effectively eradicated traditional tolerance and celebration of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people for the Elderly generations.

As such, many participants lamented that older community members were unaware or unsupportive of 2SLGBTQ+ rights and issues. Some participants who presently or previously worked in intervention roles shared experiences of parents or Elders pulling youth out of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive programming. Where tolerance did exist, participants described misinformation and the impression that being 2SLGBTQ+ was a temporary phase.

All these factors lead to social isolation experienced by Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people both inside and outside the community. Some participants described experiences of moving to urban centres to escape persecution, or attending school outside of their community. However, even in these contexts, they faced both racism and more homophobia. It was expressed that these issues are particularly aggravated in more remote communities, where self-harm and suicide pose significant danger to 2SLGBTQ+ people.

"I'm a social worker... long before I started working, I was around LGBTQ people. In 1980, when one person revealed to his family that he liked men, he got rejected and had to leave his community."

MISSING SERVICES

"There's nothing specific for 2SLGBTQ+ Indigenous people... I wish I had known how to explain to my parents what non-binary, gender or sexual orientation is. That could have made things a lot easier."

Participants explained that there is a general lack of services tailored to Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people both inside and outside their communities. Services such as Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ support groups, 24-hour phone lines, and access to information are all absent. A few young participants explained that they were only able to learn more about different sexual and gender identities on the Web or by moving to urban centres where there are more resources for 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Furthermore, many participants mentioned that safe spaces for discussion and solidarity are missing for 2SLGBTQ+ people. These spaces would ideally be Indigenous-only and exclusive to a research or social work lens.

It was also stated that medical, mental health and intervention staff all have a lack of awareness and sensitivity to the realities of the Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ community. Participants described situations where upon their outreach or their family's outreach to medical or mental health practitioners, they were turned away and later referred elsewhere, or informed that the kind of services they require, are not available.

Participants explained that issues of medical discrimination and misinformation especially affect trans people living in the community. If a trans person in the community choses to undergo surgeries to affirm their identity, they must frequently explain and re-explain their situation to various health practitioners who have varying levels of understanding, whereby they are then placed on long waiting lists for services. This reality leaves them open to many possible experiences of discrimination along the way. Furthermore, after enduring the long waiting lists, trans people must displace themselves to larger cities, as many of these procedures are not performed elsewhere. Access to these services is further complicated

by the bureaucratic limitations of what healthcare the province provides and what must be covered by an individual's status card.

Generally, participants described that, as 2SLGBTQ+ people, the experience of physical and mental healthcare is a revolving door of different practitioners, with no one following your case. Participants also concluded that there is a need for perennial trainings and engagement from medical, mental health and intervention personnel on these issues. One-time workshops and open mindedness are not enough. The question of Indigenous representation in these roles was brought forward as ideal, however, not necessarily essential in the delivery of these services.

"I think that support from Elders and counsellors is rare. While seeing counsellors in town, I never felt comfortable sharing that I'm queer. Part of me is wary that the mindset is still too small town and close-minded."





DESIRE TO LEARN

“Most people ask, why, and how can we get organized when my child or when my daughter is going to be like that.”

Both 2SLGBTQ+ and cis-straight participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to learn and understand more about 2SLGBTQ+ topics. This thirst for knowledge is tied to the reality of the lost histories and practices of communities through colonization. As some Elders and even Two-spirit people expressed, there are many ways to identify - that they are not familiar with. Various participants described a growing tolerance in communities of pride events and changing language.

However, as with colonization, the locus of information has moved from Elders to the Web. There is a distinct absence of accessible, culturally relevant information to communities. Youth described struggling to find sympathetic Elders, having to use YouTube and the Web or other media to describe their experiences. They stated that they often must move to urban centres to access more resources to understand themselves and, as a result, often have “come out” several times to family members before being able to live their truth.

Specifically, participants mentioned that education on Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ realities is missing in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous schools, and that such programming could take place in courses for new moms, pre-natal care classes and other spaces.

It was also mentioned that individuals need to learn to take responsibility for their own learning on these issues, and that we should not rely on 2SLGBTQ+ people to be constantly explaining themselves to their communities.

Furthermore, a few participants mentioned that they struggled to broach 2SLGBTQ+ issues and to receive information from their parents about healthy relationships and sexuality.. A few participants brought up the desire to have their parents advocate for them to Elders and other community members for acceptance, wishing that their parents would speak openly and proudly of their 2SLGBTQ+ children. All of this indicates a need for greater resources for parents and for family members regarding 2SLGBTQ+ issues and sex education.

“I think that having a safe space to gather is vital, even if it were virtual to start. Without the worry of outsiders interfering and causing a ruckus or feeling like we’re under a magnifying glass being observed by social workers for knowledge, etc.”



BIG MEDICINE

“I’ve heard people who are strong in cultural practices and they have said that Two-spirit people have big medicine.”

Historically and currently, Two-spirit people play important roles in their communities and in ceremony. As this knowledge is being regained, participants discussed the need to create safe spaces in ceremony to rediscover the big medicine of 2SLGBTQ+ people. Some participants who have been active in ceremonies explained that some Elders and people conducting sweats and other ceremonies are reluctant to modify their practices, as colonization has forced Indigenous people to be very protective of their culture. However, they equally asserted that colonization has impacted the way Indigenous people conduct ceremony and how women and gender-diverse people may be regarded.

A theme that has transcended our discussions was bridging the gap between the older generations and the 2SLGBTQ+ youth in communities. Both Elders and youth in participation asserted the need to connect, hear from each other, and grow a shared knowledge base and acceptance. Both parties expressed the desire to learn more about 2SLGBTQ+ people and to find spaces for exchange and humour.

Despite all the challenges discussed during our consultations, participants shared stories of the meaningful times of being accepted in community and receiving good medicine. Participants reflected on the healing power of Elders and people conducting ceremony who vouched for them and confirmed the need for more inclusive spiritual spaces like this.

“An Elder is an Elder because of how they make you feel... Anyone running ceremony in a close-minded way is bad medicine, and you don’t need it.”

“The expansion of the letters [of the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym] is kinda like Pi. You know, we say it’s 3.14, but it’s infinite.”

Participants in both our sessions spoke of the continual struggle to be accepted and understood, often from their own family and communities. With few resources and spaces to express and discuss 2SLGBTQ+ topics, many relied on the Web and the media to define themselves. Participants described a lack of tolerance and awareness of 2SLGBTQ+ people in older generations. There was a call for greater education on 2SLGBTQ+ realities, both to community members and service providers. Ceremony and safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ people were highlighted as pathways for healing and solidarity. Those in attendance celebrated their differences and diversity, and the power of acceptance and support in their lives.

“I’ve met queer people, polyamorous people, but I tell myself that by taking the trouble to understand their reality, that’s when you’re going to accept. Some notions I didn’t understand, but it makes sense. I don’t see why anyone would judge that. I’m lucky to have a supportive environment.”

Thank you so much for this collaboration,
I want to become more interested in
2SLGBTQ+ issues and want to make a
difference. I came away stimulated with a
desire to get involved! Congratulations to
the whole team.

COMMENTS FROM OUR SURVEY

It was a privilege and opportunity to participate.
I strongly support dialogue.

Very nice initiative to make things
easier for our future leaders (youth).
Meaningful engagement!

Excellent, everyone was able to
express themselves freely.
I felt very good!



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