

Mapping the Landscape of Faith-Based Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canada

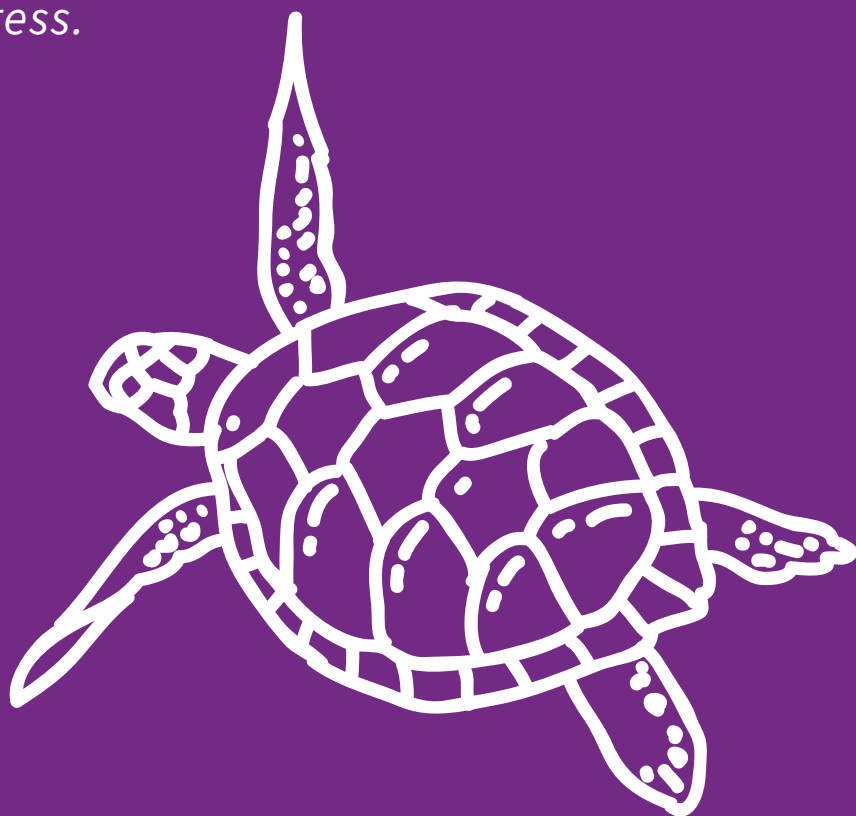
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Land Acknowledgement

This report speaks to the land on Turtle Island that is now referred to as Canada, a name likely derived from the Huron-Iroquois word “kanata.” We at Rainbow Faith and Freedom (RFF) acknowledge the land on which we operate and the ongoing struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. Tkaronto, under Treaty 13, is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. In a spirit of reconciliation, RFF prioritizes and honours the long history of Indigenous sexuality and gender expression, which colonizing religious institutions continue to suppress.



Author's Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Canada houses some of the most progressive and expansive **2SLGBTQ+** protections in the world and it is widely considered to be one of the safest places to express sexual or gender diversity. In fact, Canada has some of the lowest levels of **homonegativity** comparative to other countries. Since 1995, Canadians could seek legal recourse for discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Yet the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians, and especially those who are **racialized** and live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, show that legal protections do not always mean equality in practice. 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians, for example, are more likely to be victims of sexual assault, to experience poorer mental health and higher degrees of loneliness and social isolation, to suffer from substance use disorders, and to be economically marginalized.

Rainbow Faith and Freedom, a Canadian based non-profit, aims to tackle one of the deep-seated justifications for institutionalized **heterosexism** and **transphobia** in Canada, that which is rooted in religion.

Religiosity continues to be one of the strongest determinants of a person's view of homosexuality. While a largely secular society, Canada's institutions are built on a foundation of 'Christian' norms of **heteronormativity** and transphobia. These sectors include the family, worship communities, healthcare and education.

This report addresses the most critical areas of where faith-based discrimination continues to be prominent, and relies on existing scholarly research from the last fifteen years. RFF has not yet done any original quantitative or qualitative work. Above all, this report draws attention to the absence of coordinated efforts to address the religious basis on which many 2SLGBTQ+ rights are opposed. There is limited publicly available data on how inclusive or exclusive Canadian institutions are. Healthcare providers, worship spaces, and schools systems in Canada either have either a limited or nonexistent platform which rates or identifies their 2SLGBTQ+ non-discrimination policies.

These kinds of publicly navigable sites or databases are important and help 2SLGBTQ+ people maneuver systems that were often designed to exclude them. The Human Rights Campaign in the United States has established indexes of municipalities, healthcare systems and corporations. Metrics to determine the relative degree of safety or harm are crucial for understanding the problem and providing actionable resources for community members.

The role of religion in enforcing **heteronormativity** and the **gender binary** cannot be separated from histories of colonization, **misogyny** and white supremacy in Canada. Colonizers relied on their restrictive definitions of gender and sexuality to impose rule over Indigenous peoples, with a target on the crucial role women and **Two-spirit** persons played in many of these societies.

With this history at the forefront, confronting heterosexism and transphobia perpetuated by religion must take a **decolonizing** approach. This approach requires centering the experiences of Two-Spirit community members and recognizing the difference in experiences between settler LGBTQ communities and Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous communities. Decolonization, as scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang point out, is not a metaphor but a practice of unsettling colonizer-colonized hierarchies. Nonprofits and others seeking to advance 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, including RFF, must provide support to Indigenous-led organizations, including social and financial support, rather than seeking to do the work themselves. Decolonization also requires examination of the desire to ‘educate’ others, even in the interests of fighting homophobia, as education can be rooted in white saviourism and paternalism. These underpinnings must be rooted out of the non-profit sector.

While research shows that faith-based 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination is far-reaching and embedded within many social institutions, there is no holistic study that investigates either the qualitative or quantitative evidence of how faith-based discrimination on the basis of sexual minority status operates today. As a part of the launch of this report, RFF is issuing a community survey and asking 2SLGBTQ+ people across Canada to participate in sharing their direct experiences from the last five years with a variety of institutions, to build out a fuller picture and animate RFF's mandates.

The work required to combat faith-based heterosexism and transphobia in Canada is immense. It requires that the more privileged people who undertake this work to collaborate with and defer to the most marginalized, in particular racialized and Indigenous communities. Further, this work has great potential for solidarities with other social justice movements, in particular with anti-racism, sex positivity, disability rights and fat liberation movements. This report is by no means exhaustive and should be seen as an entry point into the various forces of faith-based discrimination. The author invites feedback and recognizes that there is always more to learn and more ways to grapple with these questions.



2SLGBTQ+

A Note on Language

The terminology used to refer to the population of people who are marginalized for their gender expression or sexuality has changed over time. The acronym '2SLGBTQ+' refers to people who identify as **Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer**, and the plus sign recognizes the identities or experiences unaccounted for in the acronym. As Two-spirited poet and activist Nicole Tanguay describes in our podcast series *Queer Devotions*, the title of Two-spirit must be at the front of the acronym as Indigenous peoples were here first and are often the most marginalized from conversations on queer identities in Canada.

Over time, various terminologies have been reclaimed from their original derogatory contexts, most prominently the word 'queer.' 2SLGBTQ+ community members sometimes use 'queer' to signify the entirety of identified communities, while others still find the term either derogatory or not expansive enough. It is the agency of an individual to determine the label or term with which they identify and this report does not seek to limit autonomy from persons in the way it names communities.

As a shorthand, this report uses the acronym '2SLGBTQ+,' 'gender and sexual minorities' and 'gender and sexual diversity' to refer— 6

—to anyone who is marginalized for their gender or sexual expression in Canada, with the recognition that names change over time, as do identifications. For a conversation about the limits on language and opportunities to expand them, RFF has produced a podcast which addresses this called “Decolonizing Gender,” with anthropologist Hazim Ismail. Further, there is no single 2SLGBTQ+ community, which organizer LeZlie Lee Kam speaks about on the podcast as well. With these conversations in mind, this report uses the term ‘2SLGBTQ+

communities.’ Finally, this report uses the term ‘racialized’ to describe people and communities who experience racism. Using the term racialized recognizes how race is a creation of white supremacist hierarchies, which structure economic, political and social life. Race has no biological basis. Further, this report also uses the acronym, **BIPOC**, to refer to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, as well **QPOC**, which stands for Queer People of Colour.

The terms that are bolded have additional definitions in the Glossary.





What do we mean when we talk about 'faith-based heterosexist and transphobic discrimination?'

The influence of religious affiliation on beliefs about sexual diversity has been closely studied, often from two perspectives. The first is a moral or philosophical perspective, which identifies the teachings from holy texts, religious laws and leaders that influence belief, while the second is a psychological perspective, which investigates the conditions that give rise to homophobic beliefs. Though there are well-documented insights into the influence of religious beliefs on 2SLGBTQ+ issues, many continue

to oversimplify or misrepresent these interactions. First, *religions are often treated as monoliths*, without attention to the considerable disagreements within religions or the many perspectives on gender and sexual diversity they house. For example, Canadian Muslims are largely divided on this topic; in a 2016 Environics poll, 36% of the Muslim population thought homosexuality acceptable versus 43% who opposed it. There is no singular Muslim position, just as there is no one Christian position.

There is a wide spectrum of beliefs on sexuality within single religions

Yet media programs invite religious leaders to speak on behalf of an entire faith without offering opposing views. In seeking 'news-making' coverage, the media often calls on right-wing religious leaders who are not reflective of denominational policies to generate controversy. Further, the perceived homonegativity in Muslim communities has been used to fuel racist paranoia about Muslims's 'integration' into 'Canadian society' (Nakhaie, 2018) For example, the 2015 "Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act" (Bill S-7) directly shows how a professed concern for 2SLGBTQ+ and women's right is used to justify xenophobic immigration law. With this in mind, this report does not seek to exaggerate or inflame the positions of religions on the 2SLGBTQ+ community. This report acknowledges the vast difference in beliefs and seeks to find nuance in the many manifestations of how religion justifies discrimination against gender and sexual minorities.

Not only are religions simplified as being either anti or pro-2SLGBTQ+ rights, *sexualities are often presented as if they are a biological fact* and an ingrained source of conflict in society. Sexuality as we understand it today is an invented category and product of society, which has changed enormously throughout history. While human sexuality is diverse, the different meaning attached to behaviours is always contextual.

The study of sexuality is a rich field, and it documents how radically different ancient, pre-colonial and post-industrial societies have conceptualized the sexual body. In the Christian context, it was not until the eighteenth century that the concept of two genders emerged. In antiquity, the female body was seen as an inferior, failed version of the perfect male body. With only one gender, therefore, discourses of heterosexuality and homosexuality could not exist until the nineteenth century. Further, heterosexuality and homosexuality were terms first invented to describe sexual 'pathologies,' far from the "biological constants" they are often seen as (Nortjé-Meyer, Lilly, 2017).

Popular mainstream discourses, as exemplified in media coverage, often *equate 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion with modernity*, and equate those who oppose it with backwardness. This framing, however, obscures the longstanding pre-colonial history of gender and sexual diversity, particularly practiced in the Global South and in Indigenous societies. As many queer activists and scholars explain, there is nothing inherently modern with expressing sexual or gender difference. In fact, as scholars Manuela L. Picq and Josi Tukuna write:

Queerness has long been the "norm, not the exception, among Indigenous peoples."

1990

Indigenous activists and scholars gather at a conference in Winnipeg and propose the term 'Two-spirit'

An abundance of scholarship identifies the rich histories of gender and sexual diversity across the world, including the Two-spirit tradition in Canada. This term arose from a discussion at the 1990 "Intertribal First Nations / Native American Gay and Lesbian" gathering in Winnipeg and is credited, in part, to activist Albert McLeod. The term Two-spirit is translated from, as Courtney Dakin writes in the article "Hearing Two Spirits," the Ojibwe *niizh manidoowag*, and different communities continue to use other terms. The identity of "Two-spirit" recenters Indigenous views of gender and sexual identity and fights against the widespread colonized conceptions of them in society. Heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia is a distinctly Westernizing, colonial construction and any consideration of the contemporary Canadian landscape must recognize this. Upon the earliest contact between colonizers and the First Nations of Canada, colonizers targeted the gender fluidity they observed in Indigenous peoples.

In the 17th century, for example, Jesuits were appalled by the high regard in which gender fluid and sexually diverse members of the community were held, and saw it as evidence of a lack of "Godliness" (Cannon, 1998). As more colonizers came to Canada, the focus on instilling Western ideologies of gender and sexuality Indigenous peoples became enforced through religious institutions.

These heteronormative ideologies include:

- That heterosexuality is the default
- Sex outside of marriage or reproduction is sinful
- Gender is synonymous with the sex assigned at birth
- Engaging in sexual acts with someone of the 'opposite' gender is a sin

A major institutionalizer of the ideologies listed above were residential schools, which the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches primarily operated, along with the Canadian Government. Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing until 1996, the residential school system violently removed one-hundred and fifty thousand Indigenous children from their families and communities to be 'Westernized' and 'Christianized,' according to the 2015 **Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's** report.

The impacts of the residential schools are long-reaching and brutal; there is still no confirmed number of children who died at the hands of the system and its enforcers.

For the children who escaped these institutions, survivors felt acute cultural and spiritual alienation, and experienced difficulty navigating adulthood, Indigenous life and community as a whole - creating inexpressible intergenerational trauma. The residential school system, while massive in scale and impact, is only one piece of how settlers enforced heteronormativity on Indigenous peoples. As scholar Martin Cannon demonstrated, for example, the Indian Act made marriage the sole means of procuring 'Indian' status and rights thus coercing heterosexual monogamy.

Discussions of ongoing religious-based discrimination of 2SLGBTQ+ must be grounded in this history and in decolonization. While this report cannot provide a comprehensive history of what distinguishes the experience of Two-spirit peoples from settler LGBTQ populations, it is important to state the distinction when summarizing how religious based homophobia and transphobia impact these communities. Further, this report provides this broader background to demonstrate that the landscape of faith-based heterosexist and transphobic discrimination is rooted in a recent development in the scope of Canadian history and thus does not have to be a permanent feature.

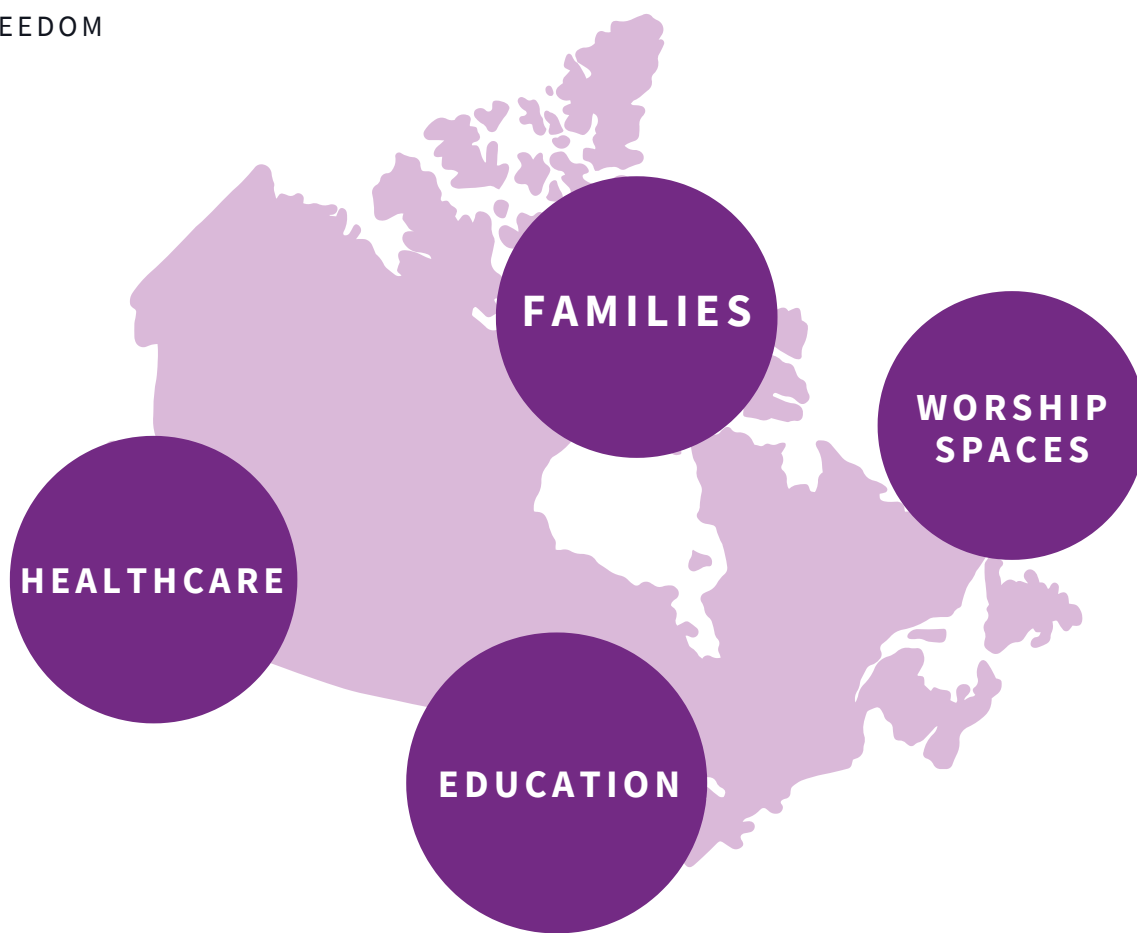


**My existence is
my resistance**

Two-spirited elder, Lila Pine, and community activist, LeZlie Lee Kam, in an interview for Queer Devotions, reflected on how the Jesuits enforced rule on the Mikmaq people and how those ideologies are still present today

SUMMARY:

- *Beliefs within religions are not monolithic*
- *Sexuality is a product of society and not a biological constant*
- *Gender or sexual diversity is not a modern phenomena*
- *Religious institutions in Canada have enforced colonization through homophobic and transphobic violence*



Defining the Scope of the Problem and the Report

While there is a higher degree of secularism in Canada compared to the United States and other countries, a PEW study found that in 2019 the majority of adult Canadians identify as religious, while only three in ten identify as either unaffiliated, atheist or agnostic. 55% identify as Christian, with 29% of whom identifying as Catholic and 18% as Protestant. Not only are the majority of Canadians religious, a rising number of Canadians identify as non-Christian, including as Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish or Buddhist, making up 8% of the population.

According to an Angus Reid Institute study from 2018, new permanent residents are more and more likely to be religious and non-Christian.

This report is focused on four categories to examine how religious-based discrimination happens within these sectors. Above all, religion is a form of meaning making and goes beyond religious contexts (Bowers et al., 2010). These contexts include **families, schools, health care and worship spaces**. This report prioritized literature from 2005-2020 and work that examined faith-based discrimination in the public sector to identify how 2SLGBTQ+ people are marginalized within these spaces. The purpose was to identify key themes in the—

—publications that provide insight into where faith-based discrimination is happening in Canada.

It is hard to determine the exact size of 2SLGBTQ+ communities in Canada, due to various limitations including stigma and methodological barriers (Waite et al., 2019). More is known about coupled people than single people, and more about those who live in urban settings than in rural ones.

Estimating the number of trans people in Canada is a challenge as Statistics Canada has never, until this most recent census, included questions on gender identity (though the TransPULSE project is currently building out a better picture of trans communities in Ontario). Thus, barriers to identify the size of the population make it more challenging to collect a full picture of the scale and nature of faith-based heterosexism and transphobia in Canada. That said, Statistics Canada in 2017 reported that 1.7% of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 59 are gay or lesbian, and an additional 1.3% are bisexual.

While this report breaks up the ensuing sections by institution, the individual and institutional manifestations of faith-based discrimination are deeply intertwined. To acknowledge the various levels on which faith-based discrimination operates, this report uses the ecological social systems theory from American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. The theory distinguishes society into microsystems (the immediate environment of school or home), mesosystems (the interaction between settings) and macrosystems (overarching



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ideologies in a culture), as well as exosystems (communities, school boards, or mass media). Following Emile Durkheim, these various forces act as socializing agents and work together in the shaping of various individual and systemic discriminations.



ALL IN THE FAMILY: **Religious-Based Exclusions** **within the Home**



“God does not like gays, which means my parents don’t like me.”

A teenager recounted this to researchers in the 2015 Newman, et al. study

A supportive family unit is a crucial source of an economic safety net and emotional well-being. Yet 2SLGBTQ+ populations have traditionally been denied access to these familial supports because of heteronormative conceptions of the family. Previous 2SLGBTQ+ movements have focused on addressing the various ways that access to state institutions of marriage or adoption were denied to gender or sexual minorities. This approach focused on external factors influencing the ability to create a non-heteronormative family.



With many successes in enshrining more equal access to those state apparatuses, the most urgent issue of familial faith-based discrimination are the exclusions produced within intra-family dynamics, also described as intimate discrimination by researchers. Among a wide set of negative outcomes, intra-family religious-based discrimination has, in part, led to the disproportionate makeup of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the **houseless** population and the emotional and financial challenges experienced by queer seniors.

Internal dynamics are challenging to address as they are largely premised on belief systems, and fall outside the mandates of legal protection, thus requiring the difficult work of shaping hearts and minds.

Supportive family units are crucial for helping a young person transition into adulthood. A growing body of research indicates that familial support of sexual or gender diversity produces a wide set of positive outcomes, such as better identity development, fewer suicidal ideations and less psychological stress (Bouris et al., 2010; D'Amico & Julien, 2012). Support also builds resiliency, which enables youth to bounce back from challenges outside the home (Westwater et al., 2019).

***Supportive family
environments produce greater
resiliency in 2SLGBTQ+ youth***

While supportive family environments produce greater resiliency and better outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ youth for the rest of their lives, research has also documented the inverse - that children of religiously affiliated parents who do not experience support for their gender or sexual diversity fare far worse. The outcomes of this dynamic range in severity. Researchers have documented that the loss of family relationships led to feelings of alienation, which led to the wider disintegration of their social support networks (Subhi & Geelan, 2012).



In a study investigating the social ecology of how sexual and gender minority youth experience bullying, researcher Peter A. Newman et. al found that much of their subjects' "experience of homophobic violence...came from the family" (Newman et al., 2014). This violence took the form of verbal and physical abuse, rejection, ostracism, and exclusion. Parents may force their child to begin sexual orientation change efforts, and demand they participate in religious or spiritual "counseling" which this report will explore in greater detail in the 'Healthcare' section.

Intolerant families often subject their children to abusive treatment, which can force youth to seek shelter elsewhere. In a shocking estimation that attests to the crisis and impacts of these intra-family dynamics, sexual and gender diverse youth are overrepresented in the Canadian houseless population; independent scientist Alex Abramovich estimates that 20%-40% of the youth houseless population is 2SLGBTQ+ (Abramovich, 2016).

A majority of houseless youth cite familial rejection or abuse as the reason they leave home. Despite the prevalence of faith-based discrimination in the family, there are very few services, secular or religious, that offer counseling within families or specialized housing services for 2SLGBTQ+ youth when they are forced out of their homes. [Spratt House](#) in Toronto is one excellent model for the kind of services needed for queer and trans youth.

These exclusions from the family have long-term emotional and financial consequences and shape how 2SLGBTQ+ populations age. Queer seniors, for example, are more isolated than their heterosexual counterparts. Several studies have found that 2SLGBTQ+ seniors are less likely to be in a spousal relationship, widowed, or to have children. In a 2015 Ottawa Senior Pride Network survey, 2SLGBTQ+ seniors were four times more likely to be without a partner, as compared to other Ottawa seniors.

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In interviews, queer elders described their experience of being rejected by family members, including parents, siblings and their extended family, and losing support early in life. This is especially challenging in old age when one needs more external support to navigate health or financial challenges.

This isolation is a gateway to further risks - of depression, morbidity and increased mortality, as well as heightened suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and a higher rate of substance abuse than in the general population (ESDC). These challenges are further enhanced by the widespread erasure of 2SLGBTQ+ seniors, as governments largely fail to acknowledge them as a particular minority community. In fact, it was only in 2020 that the term '2SLGBTQ+' seniors was first read into the records of the Ontario legislature.

Despite the very dire outcomes for queer elders, there is very little research or data available on 2SLGBTQ+ aging and family structures. Even on the most basic level there is very little information. No data exists on how many Canadians above the age of 65 identify as gender or sexual minorities, which presents a large challenge for researchers. Much of the data comes from qualitative inquiries and case studies. As with youth forced out of their homes due to religious beliefs regarding their sexuality or gender expression, the dynamic of the family is an under-explored field of study for seniors, and the need to support the work of queer seniors fighting for visibility and support has never been more important.



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: Continued Discrimination in Worship Places



“I left my community that I grew up in. I left, essentially, my family.”

An adult recounted this to researchers Began et al. in their 2015 study exploring conflicts between sexuality and religion

Religious organizations are often presented as the opposite of 2SLGBTQ+ communities - seen as contradictory by nature. Yet 2SLGBTQ+ people of faith want to see changes in their own religious communities and are the drivers of this change where it occurs. Queer Muslims, for example, have gone on to found affirming mosques across Canada, such as the Unity Mosque, El-Tawhid Juma Islamic Center co-founded by Imam El-Farouk Khaki, Dr. Laury Silvers and Larry Jackson in Toronto.

Allies within religious institutions have also worked to affirm their gender and sexual minority congregants; hundreds of Rabbis, for example, signed onto a statement expressing that harassing gay or lesbians to be in violation of prohibitions in the Torah (Beck, 2010). Further, affirming religious spaces have been shown to build social and emotional resources for 2SLGBTQ+ people. Research has shown that when queer people can find an affirming congregation, their ability to build resilience grows. Public insight into the relative openness of worship communities to 2SLGBTQ+ community members varies immensely. The most prominent faiths in



Canada that provide accreditation or affirming processes are the Metropolitan Community Churches, Affirm United, Eshel: Welcoming Shuls, Generous Spaces, Salaam Canada, and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Canada. The United Church of Canada's Affirm United model is incredibly standardized and well-resourced, provides tangible steps to individual churches and produces reports on the statuses of their progress annually. While some denominations have publicly available resources and processes by which faith spaces become affirming, many—

—denominations do not have one set of coherent policies nor do they universally apply them. For example, there are no official church associations designed for Catholic or Anglican churches, or Sikh communities, though there are some breakout organizations in support of queer rights. Further, Salaam, the only visible national 2SLGBTQ+ Muslim organization in Canada, has a limited national reach with only two chapters (one in Toronto and the other in Montreal). Pointing to the limited reach of these organizations is not meant to negate their importance—rather, it serves to show how much variety there is in what is publicly known about individual congregations and how different resources are between them.

Faith organizations may have public anti-discrimination policies but behind closed doors operate with different rules

The considerable disagreements within faith communities on the issue of homophobia and transphobia make it difficult to generalize how places of worship either welcome or exclude 2SLGBTQ+ congregants. Further, faith organizations may have stated anti-discrimination policies but behind closed doors operate with different rules. As these discrepancies are not widely reported or documented, it is hard to state how fastidiously policies are followed. This is further challenging as some gender and sexual minorities feel internalized shame in

their religious communities and may not feel comfortable reporting any negatives experiences associated with them (Itzhaky et al., 2015). Before delving into the 'hidden script,' i.e. what we can gather from qualitative studies about the continued impacts of 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination in faith communities, it is important to discuss the very overt cases of publicized exclusions. In Canada, denominational policy across the country continues to openly discriminate against 2SLGBTQ+ community members. These policies include rules on who can be ordained, excluding gender and sexual minorities from the congregation, and refusing to provide same-gender blessings. The faiths considered to be in active opposition to 2SLGBTQ+ rights include Baptists, Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Latter-day Saints, Roman Catholic Church—the largest Christian denomination in Canada. It must be said that within these denominations, many of these faiths have breakaway groups determined to fight their religion's opposition to 2SLGBTQ+ rights.



In recent years, news stories have documented episodes such as:

- Pastors dismissed for being trans
- Members asked not to disclose their transgender identity and/or to leave their churches (Levy & Lo, 2013; Westerfield, 2012).
- Evangelical groups using anti-queer propaganda in youth programming
- Fringe Christian groups marching into the Toronto gay village
- Large opposition from Christian groups at Canada's plan to ban conversion therapy
- Canadian bishops rejecting government policy on funding for religious groups that are anti-2SLGBTQ+



Minister Junia Joplin was fired from her Mississauga Baptist Church in 2020 because she is trans

People cut off from their religious communities report feelings of profound loss

To get a better sense of what happens behind closed doors, we look to the many studies that examine how queer people of faith experience being cut off from their religions and/or being targeted inside of them. These studies show just how traumatic this experience can be, with long-lasting negative outcomes, especially related to psychological and mental health. For example, in 2015 researchers Gibbs et al. found that those who mature in a religious context are more likely to internalize homophobia, and that the harms of being queer in religious spaces were extensive across all ages. They also found that participants often felt detached from bodies and delayed sexual activity. Further, in a study looking at the Mormon context, adopted beliefs about seeing homosexuality as sin led to heightened risk for self-harm, including suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Jacobsen, 2015). Consistently across many of these studies, participants described the experience of being pushed out of faith communities or important roles within them as a profound loss which led to greater feelings of hopelessness and loneliness (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

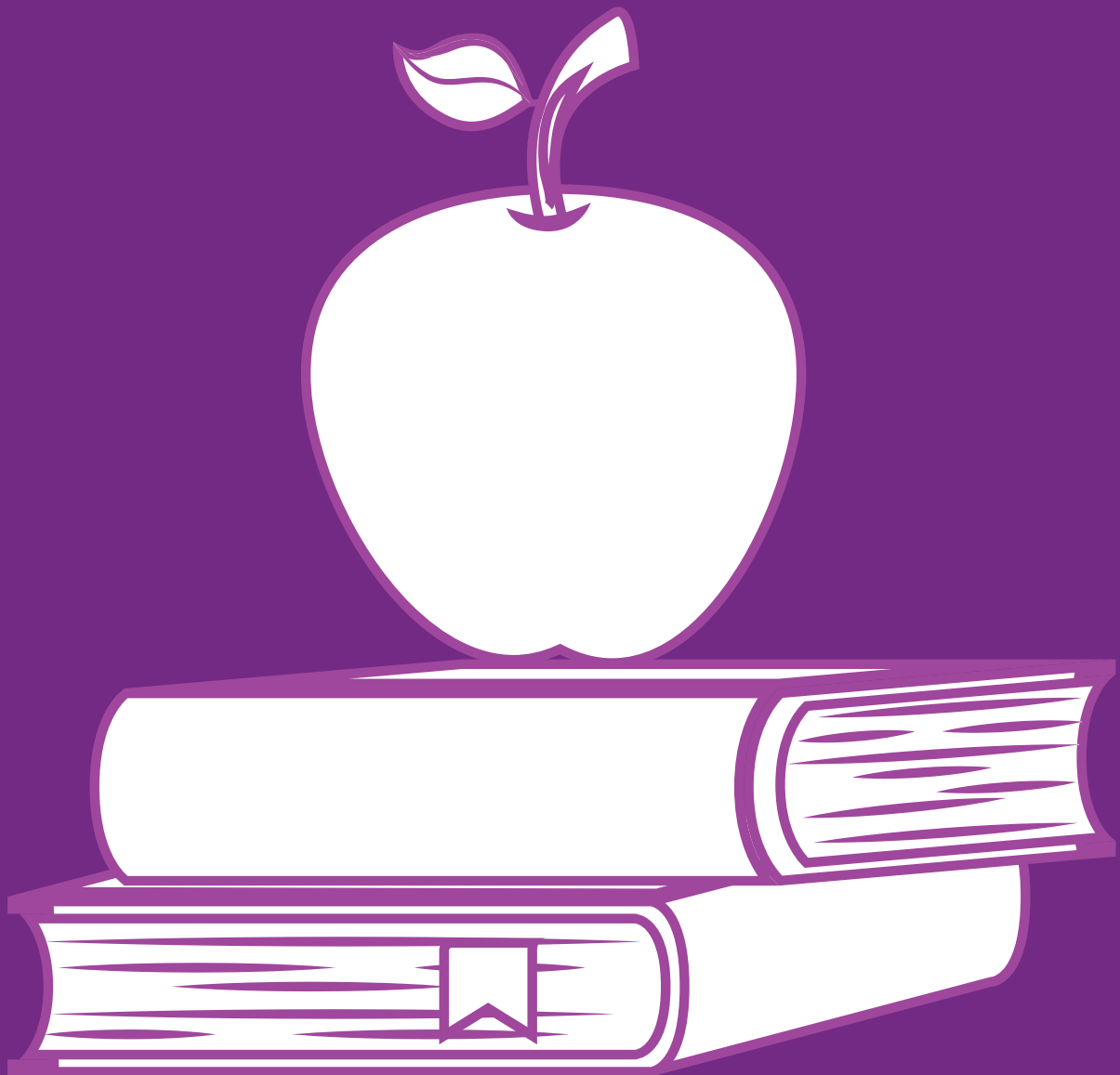
With this general sense of loss of community and support, many queer people of faith have also reported feeling disconnected from their relationship with their God (Began & Hattie et al., 2015).

These impacts vary based on the context and religion in which a person is ostracized. In Orthodox Jewish contexts, coming to terms with one's identity, as researchers Itszhacky et. al found in 2015, "is much harder for Orthodox Jewish gay men because they are raised to remain separate from the secular world and, therefore, have more difficulty seeking out secular supports and resources." For LGBTQ Christians, a growing body of research has documented the often-intense identity conflicts they experience, and far less research has been conducted with transgender Christians (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galli, 2009). Even less is known about the quantitative impacts on gender and sexually diverse Muslims (Minsky, 2017).

Mapping out the worship spaces where 2SLGBTQ+ folks are accepted is a challenging process, which requires far more investigation and attention. From the qualitative studies examining the emotional impacts to media reports on exclusion within faith communities, these insights show that religious institutions continue to carry on many of the discriminatory practices thought to be long gone from a 'tolerant' Canadian landscape.

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SCHOOLING HETEROSEXISM AND TRANSPHOBIA



"Am I the only gay person here?"

- Jonas, a student interviewed in Tonya Callaghan's book, "Homophobia in the Hallways"

By many accounts, 2SLGBTQ+ students are experiencing higher degrees of inclusion and affirmation in faith-based and secular schools than in decades past. GSAs across the country, so-called Gender-Sex Alliances or Gay-Straight Alliances, have been growing in numbers after various provinces required publicly-funded schools to allow them. Curriculum is becoming increasingly diverse across the country and includes more teachings about 2SLGBTQ+ communities and histories.

Courts have ruled against educational institutions promoting anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiment and policies, such as in the case of Trinity Western University in British Columbia. In one of the biggest news stories related to 2SLGBTQ+ students in schools and the influence of the religious right, the Conservative Government in Ontario, under Doug Ford, reinstated its 2015 reversal of a more expansive and 2SLGBTQ+ positive Physical Health and Sex Education curriculum after intense public pressure.

Though courts are increasingly erring on the side of 2SLGBTQ+ rights, students continue to be marginalized within faith-based and secular school settings.

In 2011, the non-profit Egale released the report, "Every Class in Every School," in which they surveyed students on their experiences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Egale found that almost two-thirds of gender and sexual minority students felt unsafe in school. Further, in later research, Egale found that 90% of trans students reported hearing negative or demeaning comments daily or weekly in school (Taylor et. al, 2011).

So why are these experiences still so widespread - despite decades of enshrined legal protections? Part of the answer is that these exclusions take many shapes. Most prominently we can document them in the form of policies, practices and stated values of educational institutions. But they also occur off-script in implicit curriculums, which refers to how teachers censor content in the classroom, fail to promote positive views on 2SLGBTQ+ identities, or fail to intervene when bullying occurs (Castro, 2014).



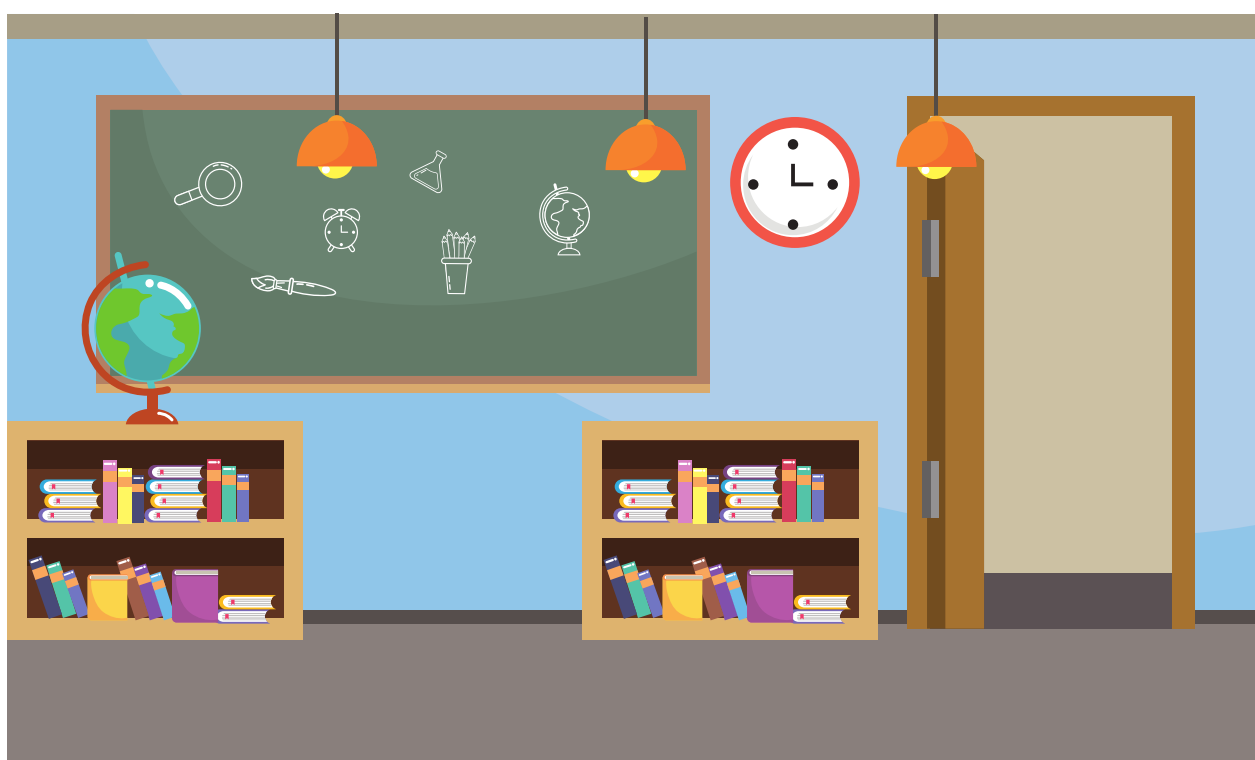
Teachers and other administrators are not the only enforcers of heterosexism and transphobia; peer-to-peer victimization plays a crucial role (Newman et. al, 2015). In fact, it is one of the strongest predictors for school disengagement for sexual and gender minorities (Wells, 2011).

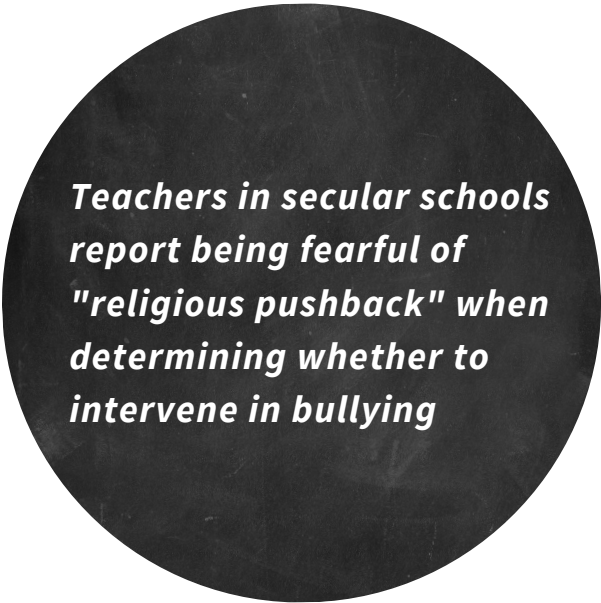
Religious-based school systems are the primary setting of faith-based discrimination in education, and one of the best studied - the Catholic school system especially. As a publicly funded system in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, Catholic schools have a constitutionally protected mandate to abide by Catholic doctrine, so long as they do not conflict with Canadian common law or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom (Young et al., 2014). Despite these obligations, much research has documented the widespread discrimination against

2SLGBTQ+ persons within Catholic schools.

A study of sexual and gender minority youth at Catholic high schools and Christian colleges, for example, identified widespread fears of suspension, discrimination, and physical violence, with a “disturbingly high percentage of males” in Catholic schools voicing the belief that violence against queer persons was acceptable (Maher, 2013).

Further, lesbian, trans and gay teachers have been fired for their identities, and framed as justified under the guise of their failure to follow “denominational doctrine” (Young et. al, 2014). Catholic school systems, identified in great detail in scholar Tonya Callaghan’s book, *Homophobia in the Hallways*, routinely house the implicit and explicit teachings of heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia.





Teachers in secular schools report being fearful of "religious pushback" when determining whether to intervene in bullying

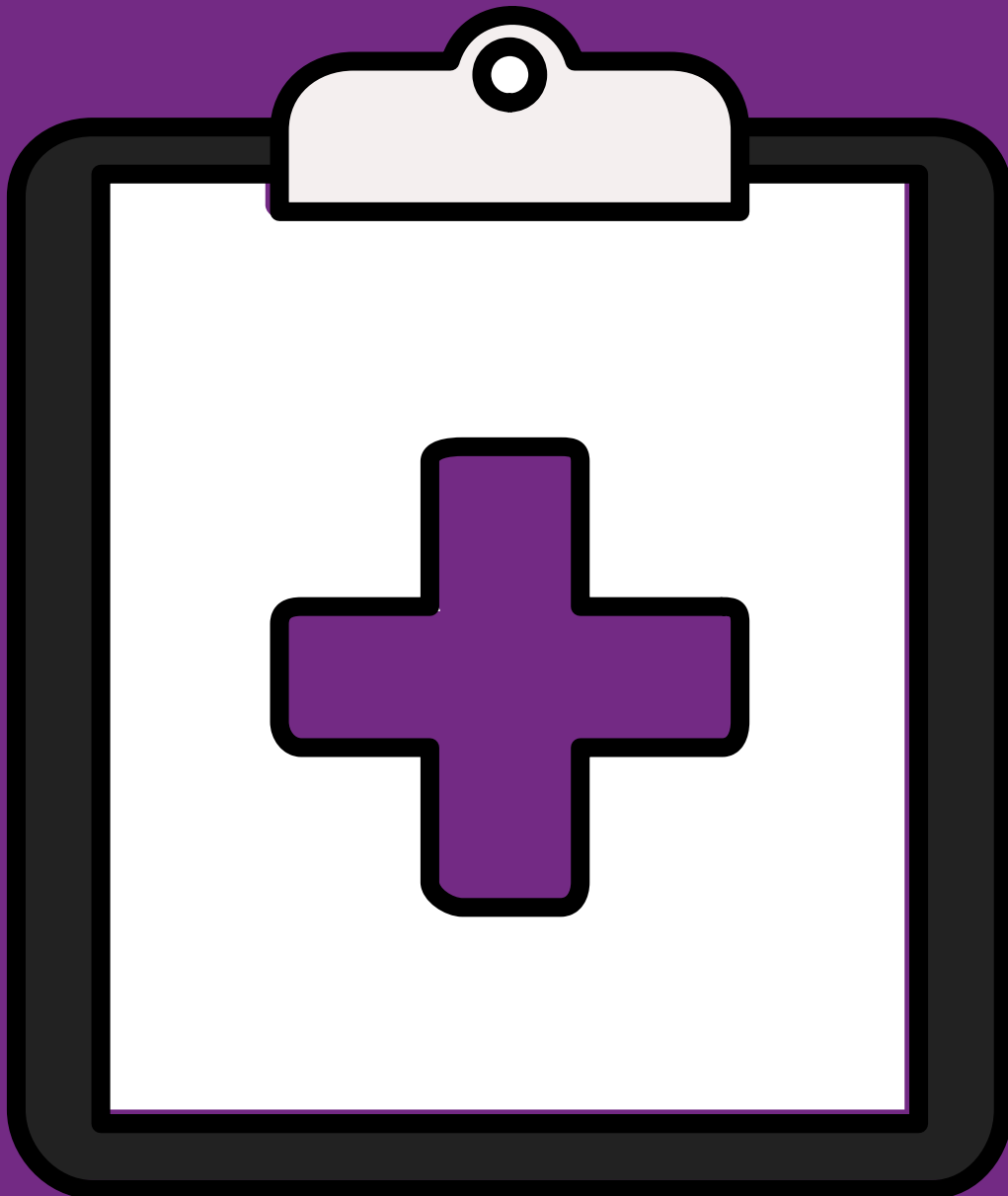
Beyond religious-based school systems, research has shown the clear link between religion and the justification for exclusions in secular settings, as well as a predictor for inaction when bullying or other forms of discrimination occurs (Higa et al., 2014).

For example, one study conducted in Toronto schools identified a strong link between religion and interventions in bullying (Newman et al., 2014). Educators spoke about the role of religious parents in making them fearful of "religious pushback" when intervening. This fear was further compounded by the media's role in perpetuating the belief that "parental and religious rights trump[] human rights education" (Newman et al., 2014).

Faith-based discrimination in school is an enduring problem and leaves long-lasting damages

Though students inevitably graduate or move on from a school system, studies have shown that these experiences leave indelible scars. These include "spirit-crushing experiences of isolation, abuse, and self-loathing" that may require a "lifelong process of post-traumatic recovery" (Barton, 2010; Bowers et al., 2010). With little documented about how individual schools operate, Catholic school boards violating constitutional mandates and religious-based discrimination remaining a large influence on secular schools, educational settings are an important ground for advocacy work. Schools serve as important sites of "becoming," where students are trying out and realizing new selves, which often intersects with their sexual or gender identities (Grosz, 2011). When students are prevented from exploring and realizing these identities, the harms are deeply damaging and long-lasting.

TOWARDS TRUE HEALING: **Religious Bias in the Healthcare System**



“Who’s going to want to look after me, and who’s going to want to look after a gay woman? You know?”

An elder quoted in Kimberly Wilson's 2018 study, "Staying Out of the Closet"

An abundance of research has identified how minority statuses produce different physical and mental health outcomes compared to more privileged counterparts. These insights have led advocacy groups to develop a model of healthcare which views health inequalities and outcomes through the lens of a patient’s various identities (Health Canada). In the case of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, researchers and policy makers have become increasingly focused on the relative disparities in access to healthcare and the heightened prevalence of physical or mental ailments . For example, gender and sexual minorities are more likely than heterosexual Canadians to face mental health challenges, including suicidality and substance abuse, which can be compounded by minority stress - the weathering produced by a lifetime of encountering discrimination (Casey, 2019). This growing field has increasingly documented how these health outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ communities are particularly pronounced when these persons occupy the most marginal positions in society, including “newcomers, asylum seekers, refugees, substance users,

sex workers, the racialized, disabled, those living in poverty, prisoners, and the houseless, among others.” For example, racialized trans and non-binary people in Canada were more “likely to rate their health as poor, and to report living with a disability and/or chronic pain" (TransPULSE Canada). A greater appreciation for the ways in which a person’s identity affects their health has also accompanied a growing understanding of how health is a socially constructed category and used to further marginalize minorities (Wade et al., 2015). This has particular resonance for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, as gender and sexual differences in the West were first identified in a medical context and treated as diseases to be cured. It was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed the disease of “homosexuality” from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) (Drescher, 2015). Just as homosexuality was removed from the DSM, however, the category of Gender Identity Disorders (GID) was soon added in 1980 (Drescher, 2010).

1973

the year that the APA removed homosexuality's listing as a disease in the DSM



67%

of conversion therapy occurred
within religious settings for sexual
and gender minority men in
Canada

Religious beliefs have often originated or promoted the wider understanding of sexual or gender minorities as ill or diseased. One immediate example of the way religious communities can use ‘health’ as a means to advance 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination is in the continued practice of **sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts** (SOGICE). Otherwise known as conversion or reparative therapy, SOGICE is the process of using various means to “cure” someone of their queer identity and make them straight. It remains legal federally, though provinces have begun the process of imposing bans. Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario and the city of Vancouver have all instituted bans of varying criteria.

Conversion therapy is widely discredited by healthcare providers and contributes to the mental health challenges experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ communities (Pyne et al., 2019).

The impacts include low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and death by suicide. This ‘therapy’ is often carried out in uncredentialed religious settings, especially Christian ones. The now shuttered Exodus International, which was generally seen as the religious arm of the conversion therapy movement,

inspired programs in Canada, including Exodus Global Alliance, New Directions Ministries and Living Waters Canada (now called Journey Canada). Generous Space Ministries, a Canadian non-profit which has been fighting against SOGICE after they left Exodus International, hypothesizes that due to lower levels of homonegativity in Canada, credentialed healthcare providers are more likely to discredit SOGICE and therefore, the majority of SOGICE experiences occur within religious contexts. These ‘professionals’ present themselves as medical authorities but the majority are not accountable to anyone. As a result, these providers, as Generous Space Ministries note, are “difficult to expose, difficult to prevent, and difficult to affect by legislation.” A 2021 study found that 10% of sexual and gender men experienced conversion therapy, and that 67% occurred within religious/faith-based settings (Salway et al., 2021).

Much like in schools, religious beliefs show up in secular healthcare settings. Mental and physical health providers, for one, can bring their negative biases towards gender and sexual diversity into their work, which can worsen the quality of care patients receive (Bowers et al., 2010) The vast majority of 2SLGBTQ+ people - up to 60% - do not talk to their health care provider about their sexual orientation. People who do not inform their doctors of their sexual orientation are also less likely to be tested for HIV based on their risk factors.

Trans communities are particularly marginalized in the healthcare system. In the Canadian Trans Youth Healthy survey, many trans youth described missing needed physical health care (33% of younger and 49% of older youth) and many more described missing mental health care (68% of younger youth) (Veale et al., 2010). When trans youth had access to supportive family networks and could feel safe living in their identified gender, the significant health challenges they faced were often counteracted (Veale et al., 2010).

Canada has an aging population, which is an increasingly diverse one; the dimension of age in this discussion is a crucial one (Brotman et al., 2007). Older 2SLGBTQ+ persons experience high degrees of marginalization when seeking healthcare. In one of the first studies of its kind in Canada, University of Guelph researchers identified several of the fears and anxieties gender and sexual minorities face when aging. They described concerns about having to go back into the closet and “maintaining identity throughout aging and end-of-life” (Wilson et al., 2018).

The healthcare system has ingrained heteronormative understandings of the family unit, and often fails to account for non-heteronormative support networks when interacting with patients. Studies show that gender and sexual minorities are more likely to prefer non biological social support during end-of-life, compared to their heterosexual counterparts (MetLife, 2010).



They may also prefer a close friend to have legal rights for end-of-life decisions rather than a family member (Arthur, 2015). Part of these anxieties came from concern about the religious affiliations of the healthcare system. One noted frankly in the study:

Let's put that on the table right now ... I'm very frustrated and angry about faith-based approaches to anything regarding our health. If you choose that and wish that, cool. I'm sure there's many places you can access, but to even consider it or think about being what I would call trapped or prisoned in a faith-based institution makes me nearly apoplectic.

The study described how many of these older 2SLGBTQ+ adults came of age when dominating faiths of the time, in particular Catholic and Anglican churches, actively enforced anti-2SLGBTQ+ agendas, and now more closely associate religion with extreme discrimination.

Seniors report fears of being forced back into the closet as they enter long-term care homes

Faith-based discrimination towards 2SLGBTQ+ older adults living in long-term care (LTC) homes is a predominant issue that is largely under-examined. Existing literature identifies that 2SLGBTQ+ older adults are concerned health care providers and administrators will overlook or discard their unique needs as gender and sexual minorities.

The Ontario Senior Pride Network, for example, submitted a detailed report to the Long-Term Care COVID-19 Commission in 2020, and again in 2021, identifying major discrepancies and urgent needs of the community. They identified that the religious affiliations of healthcare organizations contributed to the inequities within LTC homes for 2SLGBTQ+ residents and families. They wrote:

Many 2S-LGBTQ+ seniors in Ontario report having had personal experiences with religious-based discrimination and are less likely to have accepting blood-relatives to support them in personal times of crisis and end-of life situations.

They advocated for inclusion and respect within faith-based care homes, "including in spiritual and pastoral care, religious services, end of life rituals, funerals and celebrations of life."



Their submission points to the widespread 'invisibility' of 2SLGBTQ+ seniors in LTC homes, with staff and administrators not having training or awareness of their particular health and social needs. 2SLGBTQ+ seniors are also more likely to be institutionalized more quickly, which further adds to their isolation. These fears have been affirmed in many studies and affirm the extent to which religion - particularly Christian organizations- causes ongoing harms for 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Clearly, the ideologies of religious-based heterosexism and transphobia play a damaging role in the health of 2SLGBTQ+ people. Of course, these disparities are most prominent for those that are further marginalized through their economic status or racialization. However, no kind of public database exists to give 2SLGBTQ+ folks a thorough look at individual providers or healthcare systems.

Conclusions

This report is merely a brief introduction to the wider landscape of faith-based heterosexism and transphobia in Canada. Unaccounted sectors in this report include charitable sectors, immigration and carceral systems. The purpose of this synthesis was to identify through lines between the religious basis of discrimination - in a country where media often inflames the positions of the religious right or Canadian identity politics weaponizes the perceived homonegativity of racialized religions.

There are inverse relationships this report has not considered - namely the inverse role of 2SLGBTQ+ community members exhibiting bias against religious expression, particularly in terms of Muslim communities and other groups who are racialized. Religious differences can often be used to enforce an 'us' or 'them' dichotomy, with people in LGBTQ communities using this to establish themselves with the Canadian body politic as opposed to racialized others (Young, 2017).

In four years, between 2013 and 2017, there was a 253% increase in hate crimes against Muslims in Canada. The role of white, settler LGBTQ+ communities in perpetuating these harms

is necessary to address in community conversations (Minsky, 2017).

2SLGBTQ+ people can experience dual moments of dislocation from their spiritual identities when queer communities express suspicion or disdain for organized religion or spiritual practice. Research has shown there can be secondary experience of closeting in 2SLGBTQ+ circles, where queer people of faith feel pressure to hide their religion or spirituality. Conversations going forward with 2SLGBTQ+ community spaces must consider how they can meet the gender and sexual minorities of faith as their whole selves, without attaching shame or guilt to spirituality.

In attempting to map the landscape of Canadian faith-based heterosexism and transphobia, we see the limitations of what people can access to make informed choices about their schools, healthcare providers, and worship spaces. All the more apparent is the incredible absence of spaces aimed at combatting religious-based anti-2SLGBTQ+ discrimination in secular contexts, as many organizations presume that they are free of these ideologies. In many sectors, we see how religious beliefs show up and affect the quality of care, the educational experience and access to community support networks. The colonial project of religious 'Westernization' continues in many aspects of Canadian society. Naming these issues is the first start.

Working collaboratively with anti-racist, sex positive, disability and fat liberation movements, we can reimagine and liberate our definitions of "normal" bodies or desires into more expansive models. Freeing our conceptions of sexuality and spirituality will support the freeing of heterosexual and cis people as well, and the lifting of shame and guilt is a mutually restitutive process.

While the research available shows that faith-based 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination is far-reaching and embedded within many

social institutions, there is no holistic research or study that investigates either the qualitative or quantitative evidence of how faith-based discrimination on the basis of sexual minority status operates today. As a part of the launch of this report, RFF is issuing a community survey and asking 2SLGBTQ+ people across Canada to participate in sharing their experiences from the last five years. The work continues.



Glossary

2SLGBTQ+: commonly used in Canada to refer to people who are marginalized on the basis of their gender expression or sexuality, including those who identify as Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer, and the plus sign recognizes the identities or experiences unaccounted for in the acronym, including pansexual, intersex, asexual and questioning folks.

BIPOC: stands for Black, Indigenous People of Color.

Bisexual: people who experience romantic attraction, sexual attraction, or sexual behaviour toward both men and women or to more than one sex or gender.

Christianize: similar to the word evangelize, colonizers sought to convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity through coercive means, with the intention to eradicate Indigenous culture and practices.

Cisgender: refers to individuals who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.

Conversion Therapy: also known as sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts (SOGICE), the process of using 'medical or therapeutic interventions' to make someone straight or cisgender.

Decolonize: a term with many evolving definitions, largely refers to the process of unsettling the privileges and centrality of settlers in Canadian society and seeking that land and other resources be returned to Indigenous peoples.

Gender Binary: the heteronormative construction of two genders, male and female, that are assigned at birth.

Heteronormative: refers to how social norms privilege individuals who are heterosexual, cisgender and attracted to the opposite sex.

Heterosexism: discrimination or prejudice towards individuals who do not conform with heteronormative ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Homonegativity: the levels of support within a country or society against or for sexual and gender minorities.

Homophobia: this definition has also changed throughout time, but it generally refers to prejudicial views of gay or 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Houseless: while the term to describe people who do not have stable access to a shelter or no housing at all has typically been "homeless," in recent years people have put pressure on this term and asked for a language shift, recognizing that 'home' can denote an emotional state whereas 'house' denotes a physical location.

Gay: can refer to anyone who experiences romantic attraction, sexual attraction, or sexual behaviour toward the same gender, though it is commonly used by men.

Lesbian: used for women in relation to their sexual identity or sexual behaviour regardless of sexual orientation or as an adjective to characterize or associate nouns with female same-sex attraction.

Glossary

Misogyny: prejudicial dislike or hatred of women, or more broadly of feminine expression or affiliation, which forms the roots of some homophobia and transphobia.

Non-binary: individuals who do not identify with any gender.

Racialized: used to describe people and communities who experience racism. Using the term racialized recognizes how race is a creation of white supremacist hierarchies, which structure economic, political and social life.

Transphobia: discrimination or prejudice towards individuals who identify differently than their assigned sex at birth.

Trans: someone whose gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. Can also be an umbrella term: in addition to including people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex (trans men and trans women), it may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine (people who are non-binary or genderqueer). Other definitions of transgender also include people who belong to a third gender.

Transgender is a gender identity and is distinct from sexual orientation. Trans people may identify as heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or any other sexual identity.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: established out of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada aimed to facilitate reconciliation among former students, their families, their communities and all Canadians. The commission concluded in 2015 and issued 94 calls to action, which some Indigenous people have

Two-spirit: a term used by some Indigenous people to self-identify. It is an Indigenous specific term that can only be used by Indigenous people to identify themselves. The term comes from the Ojibwe language and different communities continue to use other terms

Two-spirit can sometimes refer to sexual orientation and at other times to gender identity, depending on the individual and/or their particular nation. It can also describe roles and responsibilities specific to different Indigenous nations that may or may not be tied to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Not all Indigenous people identify with the term two spirit.

QPOC: this acronym stands for queer people of colour, used to both describe communities and reflect the doubled-oppression of being racialized and queer.

Queer: a word that many have reclaimed as an umbrella term for non-normative sexual and/or gender identities. Queer can be used as either an individual identity or an umbrella term for all members of LGBT community as in "queer community." Because of its use as an insult, not everyone thinks that "queer" is a word that can or should be reclaimed and do not identify with this term.

For more terms, visit <https://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary>

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