

## **Building the Table: Discussing Tensions of 2SLGBTQIA+ Structural Inclusion**

### **Within the GBV Sector**

**By: Marlene Ham; Debbie Owusu-Akyeeah; and Jade Byard Peek**

The Learning Network is pleased to share this Guest Editorial! All inferences, opinions, and conclusions drawn in this report are those of the invited authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Learning Network or the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children.

#### **Introduction**

The dominance of a structural gender binary within the gender-based violence (GBV) sector still impacts how 2SLGBTQIA+ or gender and sexual diverse people are included, treated, and recognized within the sector. Research, funding, legislation, and service delivery have also been impacted, and are reinforced by an archetype created to understand violence as a victim-perpetrator cisgender heteronormative experience. This framing of violence continues to shape public opinions on how we understand GBV, and in turn, how the government responds to it through programs meant to address gender inequality – for all marginalized genders. While there are strategies developed during the second wave feminist movement that fundamentally shifted women's rights in Canada for the better, this specific archetype continues to be the major barrier to 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion within GBV service delivery today, including shelter systems. Despite gains in the last decade in the inclusion of sexual and gender diverse people into GBV prevention, service delivery and missions, the historical and contemporary tensions and gaps continue to persist. What are these sticky tensions? How does a gender binary or cisgender heteronormative victim-perpetrator archetype frame current practices of GBV prevention? And will it require “building a new table” to adequately meet the service delivery requirements in the face of expanded mandates? In this editorial, we hope to expand on and respond to these questions.

#### **Understanding the Historical Context**

Examining the history of feminist activism on GBV is necessary to ground the conversation on GBV shelters and inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations and/or people. In

what emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to women's experiences of domestic violence, feminist activists mainstreamed the concept of the "personal is political." Before this moment, domestic violence was regarded as a "private issue" that should not require involvement from public institutions like government or law enforcement. Feminist activists, pushing back on this idea, drew public attention to what should be the state's role in addressing domestic violence as a public social issue. Alongside the inception of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) in 1972, this marked a critical moment in the federal government's formal engagement on women's issues, including domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> The federal Liberal Party, led by Pierre Elliott Trudeau, established two first-of-their-kind programs that enabled activists to create shelters for women fleeing violence – a pinnacle moment in the inception of the modern shelter movement in Canada. By the mid-1970s, organizations such as Toronto Interval House opened their doors as some of Canada's first violence against women (VAW) shelters.<sup>2</sup>

To shift public opinion on domestic violence during this time, feminist activists constructed the archetype – our mainstream understanding of GBV – of the "helpless, battered woman and the abusive man who seeks to control his wife."<sup>3</sup> This archetype not only reinforced who was perceived as the "victim" and "perpetrator" of violence, but also emphasized that women (those who are cisgender) must deal with physical violence for it to exist within this construction of domestic violence. Although successful in shifting public opinion and garnering support of the shelter movement, it has consequently fixated public understanding of GBV within a cissexist, heteronormative, and binary framing. Ignoring other contexts where violence shows up was intentional in constructing domestic violence as a (binary) gendered problem of men abusing their women partners. This also resulted in the othering of different forms of GBV, including homophobic and transphobic violence, that manifests in both private and public spaces.

As Loreto explains, "feminism that doesn't challenge the status quo cannot successfully dismantle patriarchy."<sup>4</sup> The status quo includes white supremacy, the ruling class, and the ongoing homophobia and transphobia that continues to permeate throughout every institution in Canada today. It is because of the work of Indigenous women, Black women, poor women,

disabled women, queer and trans women that feminist activists have developed insight into structural forms of violence and systemic barriers to accessing services or addressing violence in their lives. Despite this, the shelter movement still struggles to accommodate 2SLGBTQIA+ people and, more specifically, transgender people.<sup>5</sup> Reports continue to show a significant level of discrimination with shelters either flat out refusing to admit transgender people or only admitting those who successfully “pass” as women. As Apsani states in their work on transgender inclusion in domestic violence shelters, “shelters thus operate a ‘hierarchy of inclusion,’ wherein the degree to which the survivor matches hegemonic constructions of woman or man within traditional gender classifications determines whether they can access space.”<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the structures built upon these gender dichotomies have remained relatively unchanged over the last 40 years. What originally emerged and framed as a social problem was contextually relevant at the time. Responses and solutions developed by women interrupted the violence they were experiencing in their homes, pushed and created new boundaries of rights and freedoms, and brought to the fore how deeply embedded patriarchy is within our institutions and society. Shelters for women and their children experiencing violence became the way to escape, to find safety, and ultimately regain freedom. Today, there are over 600 shelters in Canada that provide an escape route for survivors. Understanding sexism as oppression confined by the patriarchy would define the subordination of women for decades. However, we would learn through this evolution that experiences of violence were not homogenous or experienced in the same way.

### **Contemporary tensions that create barriers to transformative change**

An understanding of this feminist historical context allows us to recognize how a cisgender heteronormative victim-perpetrator archetype impacts services, research, funding, and legislation to address gendered violence in our society. While the archetype remains true for many victims of GBV, the structural hegemony and binary framing has created gaps and tensions in the sector and have made inclusion difficult. To assist in the process of moving through this archetype, post-structural concepts in early childhood development provides us with an example to frame this issue. Glenda McNaughton in her text, *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: Applying Post-Structural Ideas*, highlights that “a consensus that rests on authoritative and officially sanctioned truths always silences alternatives truths, marginalizes diversity and reduces it to abnormality.”<sup>7</sup>

Visualizing this within our sector, the cisgender heteronormative victim-perpetrator archetype can be viewed as an “officially sanctioned truth” that serves as perhaps the greatest barrier during this era of inclusion. “Alternative truths” (or as we describe as hidden truths) of sexual and gender diversity, have been emerging within GBV discourse over the last decade. It is within this emergence that we have begun to highlight the dichotomous underpinning that has informed the design and delivery of services. As a result, sexual and gender diverse individuals have only now begun to have had their experiences of homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and transmisogyny be recognized as forms of GBV. However, even within this structural binary or archetype, gaps and disproportionality still permeate clearly.

An examination of victim-perpetrator relationship data from Ontario has brought to the surface lethal forms of violence that have been perpetrated by men outside of the intimate partner dichotomy.<sup>8</sup> Most recent data on relationships in 2020-2021 included husbands/boyfriends, sons, nephews, grandsons, coworkers, neighbours, and other men closely known to victims through various affiliations. Further to this, OAITH Femicide Data also highlights the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and older women who are killed by cisgender men. This is an important examination as we continue to transform our

understanding of the victim-perpetrator archetype to one that is more encompassing of the different lived realities of violence.

Research that examines the lived realities of gender diverse individuals has been extensively limited through understandings of sex, gender, and violence. Statistical standards have created structural barriers leading to significant gaps, however recent changes in the Statistics Canada reporting system — first seen through the Safety of Private and Public Spaces Survey of 2018— could open doors to new research opportunities:

It is impossible to have reliable information on gender, diversity and inclusion in Canada without strong statistical standards that clearly define the concepts being measured. Statistics Canada, as the national statistical agency, plays a leading role in ensuring that strong statistical standards are developed and adopted as part of the national statistical system. The survey used new statistical standards on sex at birth and gender. These questions allowed, for the first time, the identification and analysis of the experiences of the transgender population in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

Structural barriers within research methodologies and definitions of gender have caused progress to be slow. Regardless of this, it has been the efforts of challenging the status quo through advocacy that gender-diverse people have begun to gain rights and access to basic services. The legitimacy of gender identity and expression has been extensively legislated through Bill 33 (Toby's Act, 2012), Bill C-16 (Gender Identity and Expression Rights, 2017), and more recently, Bill C-4 (Amendment to Criminal Code to End Conversion Therapy). These pieces of legislation have been passed to address exclusion(s) from The Criminal Code, service, and employment barriers due to a limiting gender binary. While recent legislative framing is attempting to address the flaws inherent in dichotomous understandings of gender, funding structures have struggled to keep up.

Legislative frameworks and human rights advancement have forced organizations to reconceptualize their understanding of gender yet there continue to be barriers in implementing meaningful changes in service delivery. Digging deeper into the challenges of sexual and gender diverse inclusion in domestic violence shelters, reveals differences in assessing gender between requiring autonomous *self-identification*<sup>10</sup> as a woman to gain access, to more invasive and harmful practices that assess gender based on medical procedures, legal names, and sex assigned at birth to legitimize identities. Even though

advances have been made, a national survey of VAW shelters across Canada in 2018 highlights that only 47% of participating organizations were serving Trans Women<sup>11</sup>. These examples of situating 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals into a service delivery model that is predicated on the gender binary, sex segregation, and heteronormative family structures fails to recognize the larger continuum of marginalized gender identities—it is the difference between inclusion into our existing model or transforming our model.

Service delivery models can be reliant on both legislative requirements, funding structure, and availability, however to be effective, there needs to be more alignment and clarity about the inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities within GBV programming. Without this alignment and clarity from funders, we are left with GBV organizations who are able to expand their mandates (to fit into funding structures) and expand who they serve (to access funding availability), yet are able to self-determine gender definitions that are not representative of the entire 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

The Enchanté Network identifies how this nuance plays out in their report, [\*Driving Transformational Change: A Funder's Guide to Supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ Organizations\*](#) through a set of key recommendations that identifies the importance of eligibility criteria that “doesn’t entrench the gender binary or colonial notions of gender.”<sup>12</sup> Further, they state: “Essentially, the standard for women’s organizations to meet requirements for non-binary inclusion and experience is considerably lower than the standard which is set for 2SLGBTQ+ organizations to meet the requirements regarding experience with women-focused programming.”<sup>13</sup> This unclarity no doubt leads to gaps in opportunities for enhanced service delivery or prioritizing 2SLGBTQIA+ people accessing services under a GBV mandate.

### **Where we stand today**

While there have been some actions taken to be more inclusive and responsive to including sexually and gender-diverse people in GBV services, the cisgender heteronormative victim-perpetrator archetype and binary structures continue to prevail and form understandings of GBV and ultimately, the delivery of services. If GBV services are to meaningfully include 2SLGBTQIA+ into the services we deliver, then we need to understand *and*

*accept* how violence intersects with their gender identity to alleviate and transform these fundamental tensions. What would happen if we did design, create, and implement structures that had underpinnings that moved beyond dichotomous and binary thinking of gender in research, legislation, funding, and service delivery?

For GBV organizations that have actively attempted to expand their mandate and service delivery to include 2SLGBTQIA+ or sexually gender diverse communities, they have likely had varying success. GBV organizations and networks have been leading and discussing intersectional structures and inclusion over the last decade within the sector, especially with the [Learning Network Knowledge Exchange in 2016](#) as a turning point.<sup>14</sup> However, there hasn't been a significant metric or national standard, or available research to accurately assess the success of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within GBV services and organizations in the last decade. Specifically, we do not know to what extent GBV services have been including sexual and gender diverse people, or how inclusion efforts have been received. Some GBV services have responded in direct opposition to this type of inclusion, especially of Trans Women like in the case of the Vancouver Rape Relief.<sup>15</sup>

The shockwaves no doubt have left some unwilling to fully address structures and scope policies required to properly include sexually and gender diverse communities to avoid cultural, political, and rhetorical backlash and resistance. With these types of tensions, it may seem more intuitive to begin "building a table" as opposed to sexually and gender diverse people seeking or being recruited to fill a "seat at the table", as in the words evoked by Shirley Chisholm.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that GBV organizations should abandon shifting their mandates or their attempts of providing more "seats at the table", but rather make a bold act of expanding service delivery, policies, and structures to accommodate the communities they claim to serve. Aside from direct opposition to inclusion, many of these tensions are also residual cultural norms and binaries maintained within the status quo; this requires greater efforts. A simple change in their mandate is not sufficient to dismantle heteronormative and binary structures built over the last 40 years.

This approach includes making and acting on serious intentions to shift organizational strategies and norms in an environment where there are limited resources and capacity. It requires intentionally including sexual and gender diverse people, akin to retroactively including them from the start. This type of transformative approach can be daunting, and it's no secret that there are bureaucratic, logistical, legal, and operational challenges when addressing systemic contemporary and historical gaps and tensions in GBV prevention. The aforementioned framing tool of "building the table" is not just about addressing representation or who is "sitting at the table", rather the table must be able to brace and accommodate objects or items placed upon it. In this case, these objects represent the direct navigation through difficult and strenuous conversations, topics, and tensions that prevent progress.

### **Considerations for moving forward and creating meaningful changes**

The realities of domestic geo-cultural differences in communities in Canada mean that these new "tables" must be built to reflect individual communities, as well as underrepresented and served members within them. Culturally based tensions may be reflected or resolved differently depending on history, exposure, and lived experiences in that community. Expanding service delivery to include sexual and gender diverse people must include creating supports that acknowledge these tensions. Frustratingly, there is no one simple solution to addressing these historical and contemporary tensions within GBV all in a broad stroke, but perhaps there are viable models waiting to be adopted, explored, or created. This doesn't have to mean sacrificing limited resources, it just requires strategic planning, dedication, and shifting the way we frame GBV in a dichotomous binary. It requires moving forward in building the necessary supports, connections, and outreach strategies, as opposed to fitting sexual and gender diverse people into a framework or model that wasn't built for them.

In practice, "building the table" can look like GBV organizations moving beyond silos, and directly collaborating across sectors with equity-seeking networks and organizations, particularly 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations, in service delivery, research, and advocacy. Such partnerships could lead to narrowing gaps in service delivery and should be seriously considered when discussing long-term GBV prevention efforts. This is not a replacement for



internal structural changes, capacity building, or expanding mandates; it is investing an equal stake in accessible and inclusive GBV service delivery. A development framework or national standard that encourages intersectional GBV prevention and service delivery with a metric to assess progress is fundamental. Funding streams should encourage, consider, and increase intersectional and exploratory approaches to service delivery.

It can be evident to many veterans in the GBV sector that the conversation analogous to “building a table” isn’t new for activists, academics, and service-providing environments. It permeates in the silos of distinct service delivery and gaps that exist between them. However, inclusion has been the dominant force, as opposed to relationship-building. The GBV sector has the potential to shift and take on the risk of accurately providing intersectional services, and this work doesn’t have to be executed alone. In other words, it may seem simple to stick with bread and butter, but we could also have jam. The erasure of women does not occur when we dismantle a culture of dichotomous binary, nor does the narrative of binary violence. If the GBV sector cares enough to expand its mandate or include gender and sexually diverse people into service delivery, they can’t go halfway.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Jade Byard Peek is a young Afro-L’nu trans woman, artist, educator, and community advocate originally from Halifax, Nova Scotia. She currently is the Director of Operations at Kind Space, a 2SLGBTQIA+ Centre in Ottawa, and an Associate with Wisdom2Action. Since attending NSCAD University for Art History, Jade has presented seminars and addresses at several conferences and universities across Canada discussing intercultural dialogue and praxis, and African Nova Scotian methodologies.

Jade’s contributions have spanned from advocating for GBV prevention to trans inclusion in social services to co-developing a tool-kit for combating anti-Black racism for student unions during her time as Deputy Chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students. Jade strives to create a gentle, pragmatic, but rigorous point of entry to anti-oppression through workshops, seminars, hubs, or curatorial endeavors such as Trans-Fest, Sanfo-Fest, We are the Griots, and BIPOC BUS.

Marlene Ham currently works as the Executive Director at the Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses and is a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Marlene has worked in a variety of social justice and social service organizations and has co-authored publications on queer issues. [Making It Better Today](#) (Ham & Byrch, 2012) explored the needs and barriers LGBT youth were experiencing through a community-based research model. Building upon this model an additional publication was co-authored (Yorke, Byrch, Ham, Craggs & Shute, 2016) that examined how social work students and academics worked to legitimize queerness across community, policy development, and social service organizations ([Queering Social Work Education, 2016](#), 227-45).

Debbie Owusu-Akyeeah is an award-winning Black feminist with over 8 years of local and international advocacy experience through feminist initiatives in the Ottawa-Gatineau region and through working at Oxfam Canada and Global Affairs Canada. She became the new Executive Director at the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity (CCGSD) in July 2020. The Centre promotes diversity in gender identity, gender expression, and romantic/sexual orientation in all its forms on a national level through services in the areas of education and advocacy.

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