

Learning Network

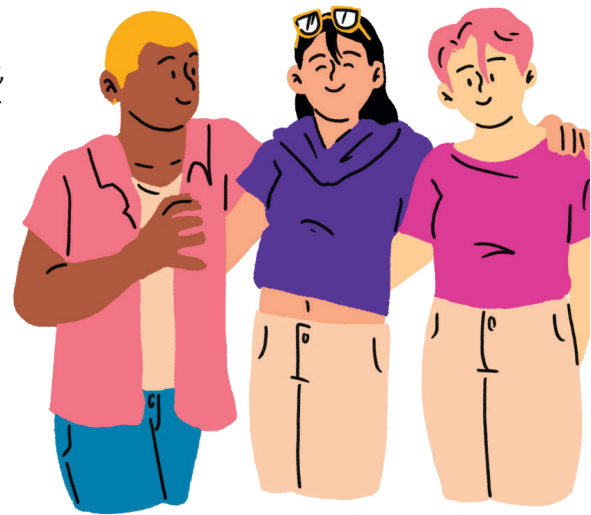
Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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Gender-based Violence as the Systemic Erasure of Queer and Trans Joy: Understanding 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Experiences

Gender-based violence (GBV) is often thought of as something that happens between a man and woman who are cisgender* and heterosexual, so it is invisibilized or unintelligible that Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (2SLGBTQ+) experience generally higher rates of GBV than their cisgender, heterosexual peers.¹

2SLGBTQ+ young people bear the brunt of this violence, and their experiences tend to go undiscussed in GBV prevention education and unrecognized in frontline services for survivors.² This is concerning considering that:



70% of trans and non-binary youth report experiencing sexual harassment.³

This Issue is intended to provide information to better understand how GBV appears in 2SLGBTQ+ youths' lives and some of the ways it can be addressed and prevented through an intersectional lens. This Issue will help contextualize how rape culture— a society that legitimizes and normalizes sexual and gendered violence—intersects with systems of domination and oppression, such as settler colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism, to disproportionately impact 2SLGBTQ+ youth who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), disabled, and/or working class or poor.

Most importantly, this Issue aims to push against the deficit-based approach that is often used within community advocacy and research in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, seeking to highlight the ways that queer and trans youth are themselves resisting GBV. Lastly, the Issue calls on the need to center queer and trans joy in efforts to dismantle rape culture and how frontline service providers can reject this “joy deficit” and recognize the wholeness of queer and trans youth.

**Someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. In this Issue, cisgender is referred to as ‘cis’ for short. Those who do not identify with the gender assigned at birth are trans, and the term trans is used as such.*



This Issue is guest authored by Dr. JJ Wright.

Dr. JJ Wright (she/they) is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at MacEwan University on Treaty 6 territory in ᐱᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Amiskwaciwâskahikan) in Edmonton. Dr. Wright is a community-engaged researcher who works with regional, provincial, and national organizations to address gender-based violence and other issues impacting 2SLGBTQ+ youth through anti-oppressive, trauma-informed, and community-responsive education and policy. The core of their present research uses artmaking to examine queer and trans joy as methods of imagining alternative futures that are less hateful and violent and more just, sustainable, and caring.

Key Concepts

To make sure this Issue is accessible, here are some definitions of key terms you will find in the following pages:

- **Cisheteropatriarchy** refers to how male dominance in a patriarchal society is imagined to be the dominance of *cisgender*, *heterosexual* males (and not, for example, cis gay men or trans men). A certain kind of masculinity is valued under cisheteropatriarchy, one that is ‘manly’ and tough and that rejects emotions (anger is the exception) or being effeminate.
- **White supremacist cisheteropatriarchy** describes how cisheteropatriarchy in, for example, Canada and the United States (U.S.), is shaped by the history and ongoing reality of settler colonialism, which forwards the notion that those who are not white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied and minded, or class-privileged are less deserving of sexual pleasure and protection from GBV than cis, straight, able-bodied and minded, affluent men.⁴
- **Cisheteronormativity** is a system of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours stemming from cisheteropatriarchy that normalize and naturalize being cisgender and heterosexual while rejecting and pathologizing transness and queerness as “unnatural” or “abnormal.” You can see cisheteronormativity at work when people joke that a little boy and girl are “boyfriend and girlfriend”, yet the idea that queer or trans children exist is contentious and even horrifying to some people. We also see cisheteronormativity through the idea that men are biologically ‘wired’ to be sexually aggressive and even to rape, while females tend to be understood as ‘naturally’ submissive and sexually passive. Cisheteronormativity functions to reinforce the idea that men and women are biological opposites, positioning men as natural leaders and women as naturally subservient to men.



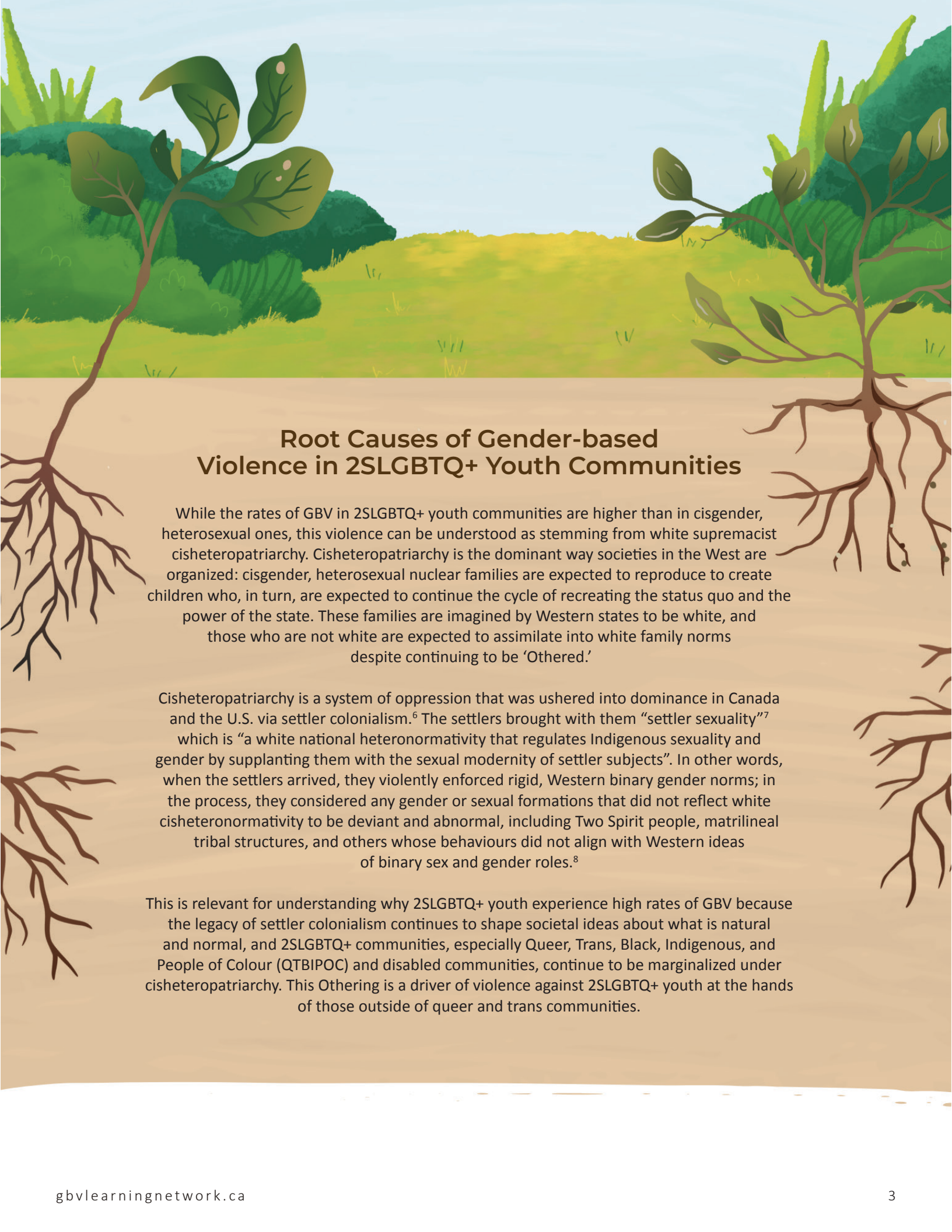
A Note on Intersectionality

As queer and trans communities are not homogenous and contain many different lived experiences related to gender and sexual orientation but also race, ability, class, and other identity markers (religion, citizenship status, etc.), it is important to take an intersectional lens in examining the topic of GBV experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

Intersectionality is an analytical tool that recognizes that marginalization does not always happen along one axis of oppression and, instead, tends to be contextualized by intersecting and overlapping systems of domination.⁵ An intersectional framework makes visible the ways that, for example, a Black queer young woman may face discrimination on the basis of being Black (racism), queer (homophobia), and a young woman (misogyny), and these oppressions cannot be separated but rather happen in tandem to form a particular experience.

An intersectional lens takes into consideration that each person has a ‘social location’ marked by the specific overlapping social relations of power that define one’s identity and position in society. For example, the author of this Issue is socially located as a settler who is a lesbian, non-binary (she/they), disabled, 30 something, first generation academic, and experiences the world specific to that location.





Root Causes of Gender-based Violence in 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Communities

While the rates of GBV in 2SLGBTQ+ youth communities are higher than in cisgender, heterosexual ones, this violence can be understood as stemming from white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy. Cisheteropatriarchy is the dominant way societies in the West are organized: cisgender, heterosexual nuclear families are expected to reproduce to create children who, in turn, are expected to continue the cycle of recreating the status quo and the power of the state. These families are imagined by Western states to be white, and those who are not white are expected to assimilate into white family norms despite continuing to be ‘Othered.’

Cisheteropatriarchy is a system of oppression that was ushered into dominance in Canada and the U.S. via settler colonialism.⁶ The settlers brought with them “settler sexuality”⁷ which is “a white national heteronormativity that regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of settler subjects”. In other words, when the settlers arrived, they violently enforced rigid, Western binary gender norms; in the process, they considered any gender or sexual formations that did not reflect white cisheteronormativity to be deviant and abnormal, including Two Spirit people, matrilineal tribal structures, and others whose behaviours did not align with Western ideas of binary sex and gender roles.⁸

This is relevant for understanding why 2SLGBTQ+ youth experience high rates of GBV because the legacy of settler colonialism continues to shape societal ideas about what is natural and normal, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, especially Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (QTBIPOC) and disabled communities, continue to be marginalized under cisheteropatriarchy. This Othering is a driver of violence against 2SLGBTQ+ youth at the hands of those outside of queer and trans communities.

Unique Challenges Faced by 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

Due to the Othering 2SLGBTQ+ youth face, they encounter unique challenges specific to being queer and trans when it comes to GBV, which their cis, heterosexual peers do not have to grapple with. Some of these challenges are explored below:

Fear of being outed:

- Youth may keep quiet about being a survivor of GBV out of fear of being outed by their sexual or romantic partners or an abuser from outside 2SLGBTQ+ communities. This fear can result in youth staying in abusive relationships or workplaces.
- Indeed, when 2SLGBTQ+ youth approach community support services, they report fear that the authorities will be involved and that they will be outed to their family.⁹ Often, seeking informal support from friends is the extent of 2SLGBTQ+ youths' help-seeking behaviour.¹⁰ This may be related to worry that appointments with counselors or other support staff (e.g., a doctor) may require parental consent and put them at risk of being outed.

Harassment, bullying, and systemic discrimination:

- Harassment and bullying based on a youth's perceived sexual orientation and gender identity inside and outside of school means they experience what is called "minority stress"¹¹, or an added layer of stress in one's life due to systemic discrimination, which can lead to shame, self-hatred, and mental and physical health issues.
- Compounding the victim blaming that survivors already face, 2SLGBTQ+ youth can feel shame about their queer and trans identities and blame themselves for violence they experience, particularly if the violence was explicitly fueled by homophobia and transphobia.¹²

Lack of adequate and safe supports and services:

- If 2SLGBTQ+ youth are struggling to find community that feels accepting, it can mean that they do not perceive it as safe to disclose their experiences of GBV to friends, other community members, or support services.¹³
- For disabled 2SLGBTQ+ youth, they may fear that support services will see them as asexual due to the way disabled people can be positioned as sexually childlike.¹⁴ They may also fear that they will be given the message that they should be grateful for any sexual attention they receive.¹⁵ Fat 2SLGBTQ+ youth may also fear being given the message that they should be grateful for sexual violence they have experienced since fatphobia perpetuates the notion that 'real' victims are normatively attractive (i.e., thin, white, able-bodied and minded, etc.).¹⁶
- Generally, 2SLGBTQ+ youth report that they face homophobia and transphobia when seeking support services, as staff can be heteronormative and discriminatory, which compounds the harm youth have already experienced.¹⁷ It is also fatiguing for youth to have to teach service providers about the shape of violence within 2SLGBTQ+ communities, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., so they avoid this labour by not seeking support services.
- Some research has found that youth may even avoid 2SLGBTQ+-specific services because they fear that providers may know their perpetrator due to the size of queer and trans communities.¹⁸

Fear of law enforcement and legal systems:

- The troubling history that 2SLGBTQ+ communities have had with the police—especially queer and trans BIPOC communities—may mean that queer and trans youth are skeptical of police being able to help without enacting further harm and violence.¹⁹ Concern that support services may not be culturally grounded also prevents diverse 2SLGBTQ+ youth from feeling as though they can seek help from community organizations.²⁰
- Sapphic youth (youth who are attracted to women and/or femmes and/or non-binary female people broadly) face not being believed by police or other support services when seeking help related to an abusive relationship and/or experience of sexual assault.²¹ Police—at least cis, heterosexual police officers—do not always recognize that two sapphic people can be in a domestic dispute, especially one that involves violence that is typically thought to happen between cis, heterosexual men and women, like rape or battery. Police or other support services may not take a survivor seriously if she, for instance, claims that her partner—who may be of similar stature to her—is being physically or sexually abusive.

Risk of experiencing homelessness and substance use:

- Queer and trans youth may face the fear of becoming homeless if they attempt to hold their perpetrator accountable or flee an abusive relationship. 2SLGBTQ+ youth face higher rates of homelessness than their heterosexual peers due to, among other things, higher rates of estrangement from family as well as discrimination when seeking or holding employment.²²
- Queer and trans youth are more likely than their cis, heterosexual peers to use substances heavily, which puts them at higher risk of experiencing GBV.²³

These are some of the primary ways that 2SLGBTQ+ youth face both unique complications related to GBV as well as barriers when they may be seeking support in the aftermath of violence. Below, we provide a deeper understanding of what GBV looks like within queer and trans youth communities, also known as lateral violence.



Lateral Violence in Queer and Trans Youth Communities

To understand violence within 2SLGBTQ+ youth communities, it is important to consider the concept of lateral violence. This term refers to the ways individuals within a community may direct harm or aggression towards each other, often as a result of internalized oppression or trauma.

We have to recognize that within 2SLGBTQ+ youth communities, white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy is often downloaded into these communities, informing the perpetration of harm. By promoting homophobia and transphobia, cisheteronormativity breeds trauma in queer and trans communities as well as promotes self-hatred which can then, unfortunately, be projected out in the form of harming others, including intimate partners (i.e., hurt people hurt people). There is little research detailing lateral GBV as a phenomenon in 2SLGBTQ+ youth communities, but we can understand that this violence is deeply shaped by cisheteronormativity.

For example, a gay young man may seek to have a lot of sex even if some of it is unwanted by him and others, in order to retain the power provided by being in proximity to normative masculinity (by normative masculinity we are referring to the popularly understood conventions for masculinity under patriarchy: being 'manly,' sexually objectifying others, having a high sex drive, prioritizing men's pleasure even at the expense of others, etc.).²⁴

Since 2SLGBTQ+ people are not untouched by the dominance of cisheteronormativity, these norms unfortunately appear in queer and trans relationships. A study by Bedera and Nordmeyer on lateral violence among cisgender queer women found that harms often happened due to "righteous masculinity", or the refusal of the perpetrator to recognize their reproduction of violent, toxic masculine norms stemming from misogyny and sexism.²⁵ Cisheteronormativity can be understood as *a symptom* of rape culture. In other words, it promotes logics of dominance, objectification, and conquest, and it enforces a rigid gender binary that normalizes rape culture, which men and masc people are encouraged to enact.²⁶

To challenge the ways in which queer and trans youth are being socialized to reproduce violent norms, there must be sexuality education/GBV prevention education that recognizes the complexities that these youth face which can be different from their cisgender, heterosexual peers.²⁷

Most sexuality education (sex ed) is deeply cisheteronormative, and 2SLGBTQ+ youth report being left out of the curriculum or actively discriminated against by sex ed lessons and teachers.²⁸ Queer and trans youth who are BIPOC and/or disabled face additional layers of exclusion and prejudice as sexuality education (or sex ed) is often racist and ableist, which reflects the history of this education as a method of producing normative sexual subjects (white, straight, cisgender citizens).²⁹ Further, the need for trauma-informed sexuality education that can cater to the needs of survivors of GBV is lacking, which disproportionately impacts 2SLGBTQ+ youth.³⁰ One major way this discriminatory education could be challenged is by centering queer and trans sexual joy. This approach is also key for frontline responses to 2SLGBTQ+ youth survivors and future research.



Queer Joy as Resistance to Cisheteropatriarchy and Rape Culture

Much of the research and community advocacy for and with 2SLGBTQ+ communities is dominated by a ‘deficit-based’ framework.³¹ This “joy deficit” means that queer and trans lives become represented in broader society as bereft of pleasure and characterized only by despair and oppression.³² This is damaging firstly because it is simply not true: despite facing oppression, many queer and trans people including youth find ways to not just survive but thrive. The deficit-based approach to understanding 2SLGBTQ+ communities is also harmful because negative ideas about queer and trans lives and existence come to negatively shape what queer and trans people believe about themselves.³³

To push back against the joy deficit, we must highlight the ways that queer and trans youth are themselves resisting GBV, and what we may learn from this for supporting 2SLGBTQ+ survivors in the aftermath of violence and to help end rape culture more broadly.

We must also center queer and trans joy in efforts to dismantle rape culture. It would be fair to wonder what the relationship between queer joy* and GBV could possibly be since joy and violence are opposite things. New research from my Queer Joy Research Lab has found that queer and trans joy act as forms of resistance against the colonial, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist cultural norms that perpetuate GBV.³⁴ Indeed, the queer and trans sexual joy 2SLGBTQ+ young people create provides new models for sexual relations that move us away from the objectification and dehumanization that is baked into dominant sexual cultures.

Queer and trans youth do indeed struggle with homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of systemic oppression, yet they often discover joy, love, euphoria, and community away from white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy. When we only imagine that these youth are one-dimensional and a homogenous group marked by despair and suffering, we do not hold their full complexity and spirits.

Frontline service providers can reject the joy deficit and recognize the wholeness of queer and trans youth. To do this, they must be educated on the various ways that 2SLGBTQ+ youth face unique factors that complicate their experiences of GBV, like the ones discussed above.³⁵ Beyond seeing queer and trans youth in non-homogenous ways that respects their wholeness and thriving, queer and trans joy—sexual joy in particular—has much to offer the project to end rape culture.

To understand how joy confronts oppression and violence, it is important to know that joy is not simply a feeling an individual has but rather an affect that makes us more alive, more capable, and more connected to others.³⁶

If we understand that “cisheteropatriarchy poisons intimacy with trauma and violence”, queer sexual joy can be understood as affect that “transforms and reorients people and relationships” in ways that undermine the status quo and usher in new imaginations for sexual cultures.³⁷ These new imaginations reject patriarchal binary gender roles that teach men and masc people to unrelentingly pursue sex and teach women and femmes to submit to men and masc people’s sexual demands. As described by research participants who are 2SLGBTQ+ youth, queer sexual joy involves expansiveness, embodiment, play, intention, creativity, and respect for mutual pleasure.³⁸

**Queer joy is used as an umbrella term for trans joy at times in this Issue. More research is needed to build on the work started by the author with colleagues to distinguish any significant differences between queer and trans joy.³⁹*



*Queer sexual joy “is not universally defined but is rooted in, among other things, rejecting cisheteronormative sexual scripts, celebrating interdependence, and creativity stemming from authenticity, safety, and clear communication”.*⁴⁰

What examining experiences of queer sexual joy has shown is that 2SLGBTQ+ youth are engaging in sex and relationships in ways that challenge the enactment of cisheteropatriarchal power—or the logics of aggression, domination, and objectification that perpetuate GBV. These youths’ experiences offer counter-knowledges that prioritize reciprocity, play, creativity, and sexual joy.

Research from my Queer Sexual Joy project also found that cisgender women spend most of the time they are engaging in sex with men focused on the pleasure of their partners rather than their own embodied pleasure.⁴¹ This is cisheteropatriarchy at work. It demands disembodied experiences, unequal distribution of pleasure and sexual joy, and the normalization of unwanted sex and grey rape.

Queer sexual joy challenges cisheteronormative sexual scripts and fosters alternative imaginaries for sex that defy the disembodied performances demanded by cisheteronormativity.

Research from my Queer Sexual Joy project also found that due to the disproportionate rates of GBV in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, queer and trans folks are particularly skilled at navigating consent as well as supporting survivors’ needs around sex. 2SLGBTQ+ young people are using disability justice principles—like interdependence and collective access—to support survivors in accessing safe, pleasurable sex after trauma.⁴³ They do this by, for example, tuning into their own and their partner’s embodied needs, holding great respect for each other’s consent and non-consent, communicating extensively about bodily comfort and their desires, and focusing more on being present rather than performing prescribed scripts for sex. These lessons aren’t just valuable for queer and trans people and if extended to cisgender, heterosexual people, they could finally start to challenge the rates of GBV which have not decreased in over three decades with contemporary efforts to end rape culture.⁴⁴

Grey rape refers to rape that happens in the “grey areas of consent” which “can be understood as an area of experience that is not easily categorized as consensual and wanted or as violent or criminal.”⁴²



Key Takeaways for Service Providers

1. Understand Queer Joy as Resistance:

Embrace the idea that queer and trans joy is a form of resistance against oppressive cultural norms. By celebrating and understanding queer sexual joy and its role in challenging cisheteropatriarchy, service providers can better support youth in navigating their experiences and advocating for themselves.

2. Incorporate Joy-Centered Approaches in Support Services:

Integrate services with practices that acknowledge and support queer and trans joy. This includes creating spaces where joy, creativity, and mutual pleasure are celebrated, rather than solely focusing on trauma and violence.

3. Educate on Queer Sexual Joy:

Familiarize yourself with how queer sexual joy differs from mainstream narratives about sexuality. This involves understanding how queer and trans youth engage in relationships that prioritize mutual pleasure, respect, and creativity. Recognize that these practices offer valuable insights into healthier, more consensual interactions.

4. Reject the “Joy Deficit” Narrative:

Actively counter the narrative that portrays queer and trans lives as predominantly marked by despair and oppression. Instead, highlight and support the ways in which queer and trans youth find joy, community, and love, which can empower them and foster resilience.

5. Support Intersectional Needs:

BIPOC, disabled, poor, working class, and houseless 2SLGBTQ+ youth face some of the highest rates of GBV and some of the tallest barriers to accessing support services. Familiarize yourself with the challenges that 2SLGBTQ+ youth from different racial and ethnic groups, abilities, and classes face when it comes to experiences of GBV and support in the aftermath.



Resources

- Egale Canada is an incredible resource for all things 2SLGBTQ+ in Canada (and their resources are applicable to the U.S. and other regions): www.egale.ca
- PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) is a Canadian organization and research lab that has some great resources for supporting 2SLGBTQ+ youth around dating violence, such as this one for caregivers: <https://youthdatingviolence.prevnet.ca/learn-more/caregivers/how-to-support-lgbtqqip2saa-youth/>
- PREVNet has a 2SLGBTQ+ Resource Hub which has links to webinars, tip sheets, workshops, and many other kinds of resources on GBV and 2SLGBTQ+ youth. They also have links to other fantastic Canadian organization's resources, such as the Canadian Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity. Visit the Resource Hub here: <https://youthdatingviolence.prevnet.ca/2slgbtq-resource-hub/>
- For a more detailed literature review on how queer and trans youth are left out of sexuality education and GBV prevention education, [check out this journal article](#). The author's reports and zine from the Queer Sexual Joy Project, which was a collaborative study with Egale Canada that the author spearheaded, discusses how queer and trans sexual joy can be centered in sex ed and GBV prevention education. To explore a queer joy-centered framework for sexuality education and youth-led recommendations for understanding this approach, [check out this journal article](#).



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