

The content of this fact sheet summarizes the main issues raised by some fifteen LGBTQ+ people invited to participate in a reflective workshop organized by the UNIE-LGBTQ Research Partnership in June 2017 to document experiential knowledge about social networks. These people testified to their realities and those of people around them. The comments collected will be used to develop research and result analysis materials, in addition to literature reviews*.

SOCIAL NETWORKS: An insight into the main current divisions

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In social sciences, the notion of social networks refers to all the links maintained by a person with the individuals in his or her entourage, which includes representatives of the institutions with which he or she deals¹. This has therefore nothing (or almost nothing) to do with Facebook, Tinder and other virtual networks of this kind; although they are places that are increasingly popular with LGBTQ people to forge friendly relationships and meet potential sexual or romantic partners.

In light of the comments collected in this reflective workshop, one of the main difficulties encountered by LGBTQ+ people in relation to social networks seems to be associated with the fact that "*it forces us to come out all the time*". People who have internalized homophobia/lesbophobia/biphobia/transphobia seem to be particularly affected by this issue. Indeed, a person who is uncomfortable with his or her sexual orientation or gender identity and sees this facet of himself or herself as a negative or shameful aspect of his or her person may have difficulty feeling good about himself or herself in the presence of others who know this side of himself or herself and sharing it publicly.

Older people, for example, may have more difficulties with these challenges because of their history. Marie-Marcelle Godbout, a pioneer who has done a lot to change attitudes about trans people, testifies to this². "*Trans people have long been perceived as*

- ¹ To learn more about the concept of social networks, consult the [research brief of the research component of the UNIE-LGBTQ project](#), written by Sophie Doucet, master's candidate in sexology at UQAM.
- ² Marie-Marcelle Godbout participated in this workshop shortly before her sudden death on July 15, 2017. Often referred to as a "*great lady of the heart*", she was one of the first to speak publicly about trans people in the media. For nearly four decades, she has helped dozens of trans people through a helpline within the Aide aux trans du Québec, an organization she founded in 1980.

*The conduct of this reflective workshop was inspired by a model developed by the Vieillesse, exclusions sociales et solidarité team (VIES, FRQSC) that highlighted seven main inclusion/exclusion dimensions: 1) symbolic, 2) identity, 3) socio-political, 4) institutional, 5) economic, 6) relational (significant social ties) and 7) territorial. The participants in this workshop were invited to express themselves in light of these seven dimensions.

criminals. There has been progress, advances on the legal level, but what we experienced as young people, it remains. I have known elderly trans individuals who only had ID cards corresponding to their assigned sex at birth and who died without care. They didn't go to the doctor. There is still a lot to be done also regarding transphobia of attendants, nurses and other staff in the health network". "For people who have lived with the idea of mortal sin, coming out is not only about asserting yourself, it is about becoming a spokesperson for your generation. It's an additional burden," adds one participant about the experiences of LGBTQ seniors.

Within LGBTQ+ youth organizations, there is recognition that trans people's issues are becoming more and more visible, but there is concern about the prevailing sensationalism about trans people and the intrusive questions that are still too often asked to them, on their genitalia, for example. These inappropriate behaviours obviously lead young and not so young trans or non-binary people to exclude themselves at times.

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Divisions

People under 40 years of age have not experienced the era of decriminalization and the fight for basic human rights, which, according to some participants, creates misunderstandings on either side sometimes within the LGBTQ+ community, but also in society in general. The question of how history is transmitted to young people was raised during this workshop. There is a duty of remembrance to be done for all those who fought for the LGBTQ+ cause and for all those who are living with the after-effects of the era that preceded and followed this dark period of unjustified imprisonment and shame. *"There are elders who will not attend activities to avoid being associated with people who are present and who have come out of the closet".* They will isolate themselves in fear of disapproving looks, marked for life by the dramatic side of LGBTQ+ history. The same is true in some areas far from major urban centres: *"On May 17³, we went to community centres for tea and people ignored us or told us about their grandchildren. I don't know where LGBT seniors are in rural areas",* says one stakeholder. *"In Montreal!",* believe some of the participants. Indeed, many LGBTQ+ people have decided and still decide to move to Montreal to live their lives as gay or trans people in a more anonymous context (away from their families of origin and the people they have known all their youth).

Among the sequels of this dark period, we find the invisibility that often leads to isolation. For senior lesbians and those over 40 or 50 years of age, it seems that invisibility is the main problem encountered. *"Those I know only tell their families,"* says one participant. Among the youngest, this situation still exists in some lesbophobic families or communities where values may be

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more traditional: *"My parents told me it was OK to be a lesbian, but no one should know about it. Many black girls around me also think it's OK to be a lesbian only if no one knows".*

"We, as lesbians, are making ourselves invisible," commented one participant. *"I even think we're on the verge of extinction."* Mainly in Montreal, it seems, where young girls identify themselves more as women who love women or bisexuals than as lesbians.

It even seems to be frowned upon to call oneself a lesbian within certain diversity groups. However, young men who call themselves gay do not seem to have to deal with this type of perception. The word "gay" does not seem to have negative connotations. What we realize about gay men is that they still gather together as much as they did in the past. The same applies to lesbian or bisexual women and trans people. The social networks of LGBTQ+ people therefore often still have in common nowadays a group of friends with the same gender identity or sexual orientation.

3 In 2017, the theme of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia was aging and LGBTQ+ seniors.

Concerns are also expressed about young gay or bisexual people from rural areas that migrate to the metropolis: *"I am worried, we are giving them tools, we are trying to help them, but many don't even know what a sauna is, for example"*. They have very little knowledge of LGBTQ+ realities in urban areas.

These intergenerational cleavages, between regions and between LGBTQ people, therefore cause exclusion within the LGBTQ+ community itself. *"We don't know how to name ourselves anymore. We no longer have a sense of belonging. We don't understand each other. How to move towards inclusion?"* We also face a paradox associated with the multiplication of labels. Do we want to take out more or do we want to put more? The addition of letters to the acronym LGBTQ+ (LGBTTIQA2S) seems to support the latter. Many LGBTQ people are keen to do so. *"When I was young, I didn't know the word gay, I'm happy today to be able to put a word on my reality"*. On the one hand, we recognize the importance of naming things, of admitting that different realities exist and that we must try to understand them. However, some people lack interest in terminological debates. Others find the addition of letters and new words (labels) difficult to understand given the initial desire for destigmatization and inclusion. *"I prefer to use the expression sexual diversity and gender plurality,"* said one participant, because it is simpler and there is no risk of excluding people by omission. *"In high schools, where there are alliances, there is great acceptance. Young people are moving less and less towards letters and more and more towards the simple desire to be"*.

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Stereotypes and prejudices related to origins

Finally, stereotypes and prejudices associated with origins can also lead to exclusion. *"Racialized people who arrive in the gay village (in Montreal) are often perceived as hypersexualized in spite of themselves"*. Some feel that people only come into contact with them for ephemeral adventures, because they are perceived to be highly sexual and as having more exceptional attributes or skills in the field than the average. They feel that they receive much less attention for serious relationships. Which they find very unfortunate.

Closing remarks

"When people will be allowed to do what they want and be what they are instead of focusing on appearance, we will no longer have to fight like this and organize discussions like this one," said Marie-Marcelle Godbout at the end of the workshop. *"We have to let people be what they want to be."* This is probably the main solution to be retained from these exchanges, which ultimately focused more on experiences of exclusion than on social inclusion.

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For more information on the Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People (UNIE-LGBTQ) Project of the Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM):

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