



Action Canada submission to Heritage Canada consultation on LGBTQ2 action plan

1. Please provide the name of your organization.

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights

2. Please provide the website or social media hyperlink for your organization (if any).

- www.actioncanadashr.org
- <https://www.facebook.com/actioncanadaSHR/>
- <https://twitter.com/actioncanadashr>
- <https://www.instagram.com/actioncanadashr/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkkaPDWLjyxvznWybVKUeIQ>

3. Please provide the city and province or territory, where your organization is based, as well as the geographic region that you serve.

- a. City: Ottawa
- b. Province or territory: Ontario
- c. Geographic regions served:
 - i. Local city or town
 - ii. Provincial or territorial region
 - iii. Province or territory
 - iv. National
 - v. More than one provincial or territorial region

4. How many people does your organization serve or represent?

Action Canada is primarily a policy and advocacy organization, working to inform governmental and non-governmental actors for the advancement of sexual rights, and support movement for the advancement of a broad and intersectional SRHR agenda both in Canada and globally. Action Canada has been active at the Human Rights Council since 2002. We are also at the helm of 24 associate organizations, sexual health centers operating independently in communities across Canada but informing Action Canada's policy and advocacy work as they serve the public from coast to coast to coast, offering frontline sexual and reproductive health services. Action Canada also offers frontline services such as the 24/7 Access Line where people can call with any questions on their sexual or reproductive health for information, support or referrals. We get between 200 and 500 calls a month and support upward of 100 people a year with our Norma Scarborough Emergency Fund for people who experience barriers to abortion care.

5. Please identify the nature of your organization (select all that apply): Ally organization

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights is a national advocacy organization working to advance the realization of sexual and reproductive rights. Sexual and reproductive rights encompass the right of all people to freely control and express their sexuality, gender and reproduction. This includes the rights of individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. We advocate for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against 2SLGBTQ folks in laws, policies, programs and practices, and guaranteed access to comprehensive health information and services for 2SLGBTQ folks (including hormone therapy, gender affirming surgeries, mental health supports, etc.). We work in solidarity with front-line 2SLGBTQ organizations and activists.

6. What communities does your organization serve or represent? (Select all that apply):

- a. Two-Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQ communities
- b. Black LGBTQ2 people in Canada

- c. Trans and non-binary communities
- d. Lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer communities
- e. LGBTQ2 newcomer and refugee communities
- f. LGBTQ2 official language minority communities (e.g. francophones outside of Quebec)
- g. LGBTQ2 people with disabilities
- h. LGBTQ2 racialized communities
- i. LGBTQ2 seniors
- j. LGBTQ2 youth

7. Which key policy issues and related solutions would your organization like to see included in a federal LGBTQ2 Action Plan, and please explain why? Provide up to five:

a. Issue and solution 1

The Government of Canada must create a National Comprehensive Sexuality Education ('sex-ed') Strategy. We call on the LGBTQ2+ Secretariat, Heritage Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Department for Women and Gender Equality to jointly lead a national initiative to increase access to high quality sex-ed, raise public awareness of the importance of sex-ed in both health and social outcomes, and support the capacity building of skilled sexual health educators key to the delivery of this subject. Such a strategy would build awareness of the critical role that sex-ed plays in identifying, addressing and preventing stigma, discrimination and violence experienced by individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), advancing gender equality, supporting better health outcomes, preventing gender-based violence and bullying and finally, fostering youth empowerment.

This upstream initiative would empower millions of young people, with a specific focus on 2SLGBTQ youth, to claim their right to sex-ed, reduce the likelihood of experiencing stigma and discrimination on the basis of SOGIE and experience better health outcomes across the board. There is currently no national strategy or accountability framework to ensure equitable access to comprehensive sex-ed. The sex-ed young people get in Canada is most often sub-par, unevenly accessible, outdated, offered by teachers who are not supported or trained adequately, and under-resourced. The sex-ed curricula currently in use center the experiences and needs of white, heterosexual and cisgender learners, leaving many youth without access to the necessary information to make and act on health decisions and all youth without a civic education that tackles homophobia, transphobia and gender-based discrimination. Sub-par sex-ed has real impacts, especially on the health of 2SLGBTQ youth. 2SLGBTQ youth experience health disparities, including poorer mental health outcomes and higher instances of violence in school, including cyberbullying.

Every child benefits from information, support, and space to be who they truly are. Between 4% and 10% of the population identify themselves as something other than heterosexual and/or cisgender. This percentage continues to rise as younger generations become more comfortable with a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality and as more space is opened in our society for people to be their authentic selves. Most children will have a sense of their gender identity as young as 2 or 3 years old and their sexual orientation by age 10. Considering only these numbers, classrooms are full of children and young people who already or will eventually identify themselves as LGBTQI2S+. Feeling safe at school and having a teacher "who gets it" are two of the three most important predictor of better mental and physical health outcomes for the rest of their lives. Children who are cisgender and/or heterosexual also benefit greatly from the space we can create for them to discover how they wish to express their gender and to learn what they are passionate about, free from rules about what boys or what girls "should" be like. Safe and inclusive learning environments for LGBTQI2S+ kids reduce the risk of suicide and risk-taking behaviours of all.

In 2019, Action Canada undertook the analysis of all sex-ed curricula across the country and in 2020, published the report *The State of Sex-ed in Canada*.

Currently, teachings on gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation are absent from many curricula. Where it is included, it is more common to see content on sexual orientation than on gender identity and expression. This



leaves educators without formal supports and goal posts to teach the differences between sex assigned at birth, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Across all curricula, content reinforces the notion of sex and gender as a binary and fails to explain and challenge gender norms and stereotypes.

Where gender identity and sexual orientation are mentioned in curricula, we found that the content on gender identity and expression effectively centered heterosexual and cisgender learners, presenting other gender identities and sexualities as differences to learn about, rather than lessons that every student can see themselves in. Across the board, the content included is not sensitive to the needs and experiences of LGBTQI2S+ students.

The federal government has a role to play in eliminating discrepancies across jurisdictions, ensuring equal access to comprehensive sex-ed, and establishing benchmarks through which curricula can be assessed and strengthened. Canada has received numerous recommendations by the UN to lead on the standardization of sex-ed across jurisdiction to ensure the realization of young people's rights to information, to health and to non-discrimination, regardless of their province of residence. It is time for the federal government to take up leadership on ensuring access to crucial health information and capacity building opportunities. This is especially critical as many young people have not received any sex-ed as a result of the pandemic. In 2019, the Public Health Agency of Canada commissioned the publication of updated *Canadian Guidelines for Sexuality Education*. The Guidelines are clear; sexuality education must be "accessible to all people inclusive of age, race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, STI status, geographic location, socio-economic status, cultural, or religious background, ability, or housing status."

A National Sexuality Education Strategy is needed to: (1) raise awareness to and bring greater alignment with the implementation of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexuality Education* across all provinces and territories, (2) identify and take action on the intersections between quality sexuality education and strategies to reduce gender-based violence, stigma, discrimination and violence against LGBTQI2S+ people, STBBIs (including HIV), and create cultures of consent, equity and respect, (3) generate best practices and share lessons learned on transformative approaches to implementing comprehensive sexuality education across jurisdictions, and (4) work towards reducing inequitable disparities in health and empowerment outcomes among LGBTQI2S+.

b. Issue and solution 2

As the Government of Canada takes action on the federal budget 2021's commitment to develop and implement Canada's first National sexual health survey, we urge Statistics Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to meaningfully engage in consultation with diverse stakeholders, including 2SLGBTQ folks, sexual health organizations and experts, and equity seeking groups, to ensure the survey meaningfully captures the lived experiences and perspectives of 2SLGBTQ folks. Specifically, the survey must include questions that seek to identify the specific sexual health needs and experiences of trans folks, lesbians, bisexual folks, queer folks, gender non-confirming and non-binary folks, two-spirit and their intersecting lived experiences (meaning: disabled queer folks, 2SLGBTQ youth, racialized 2SLGBTQ folks, (im)migrant 2SLGBTQ folks, etc.). Failing to do so will result in the erasure of the diversity of experiences of 2SLGBTQ folks, their sexual health needs, and the inability of policy-makers to develop policies and programs that meet their needs.

In developing the survey methodology, we call on Statistics Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to centre an equity lens in the process by providing compensation to all individuals who complete the survey and to ensure that the survey can also be completed in person. Meaningful engagement of community and academic leaders from equity seeking groups is also key to ensure a survey that will reach the right people and ask the right questions. Failing to do so will result in over-sampling a privileged subset of the population (wealthy, employed, white people). In order to meaningfully understand and address the sexual health needs of those experiencing health and other disparities on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, race, class, age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, geographic location, (im)migration status, among other factors. It is also imperative that the data be readily available for researchers across Canada in a timely way.

c. Issue and solution 3

As a key part of the development of cohorts of educators who are skilled in offering comprehensive sexuality education that centers the need and experiences of LGBTQ2 youth and address gender-based discrimination and violence, including homophobia and transphobia, it is imperative that LGBTQ2 organizations are sustainably funded. We join the call for greater federal investment in 2SLGBTQ+ community, health and social service organizations providing essential services that promote and protect human rights. These organizations play crucial roles in community in offering educational resources for educators and youth, develop curricula to support access to health information and to combat violence, stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ2 youth and communities at large. They are touchpoints in our communities that also ensure better access to affirming health care and we know from the



evidence that sex-ed is most effective with linked with thriving networks of community health centers and skilled health workers that offer affirming care for LGBTQ2 people and communities. As a part of our call toward the development of a national Comprehensive sex-ed strategy, we therefore call for meaningful and sustained investment in LGBTQ2 organizations and at a minimum, include \$25M in annual federal funding dedicated to 2SLGBTQ+ organizations and that the LGBTQ2 Secretariat be permanently federal funded. This funding must be dispersed in ways that ensure that grassroots and frontline LGBTQ2 organizations can access it without undue barriers such as onerous granting and reporting requirements that only larger more established organizations can sustain. Funding must be offered to the mission and not just go toward time limited projects to ensure the development and thriving of a key sector.

- 8. In addition to your previous response and reflecting on existing Government of Canada policies and programs, please identify any policies and programs that your organization would like to see improved to better meet the needs of LGBTQ2 people in Canada. In your response, please explain why and how they should be amended.**

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights calls on the LGBTQ2 Secretariat to actively engage the Department of Women and Gender Equality and the Public Health Agency of Canada towards ensuring the integration of comprehensive sexuality education as an upstream intervention to address gender-based violence and the transmission of STBBIs. We further encourage the LGBTQ2 Action Plan to include a specific focus on comprehensive sexuality education within the Plan, and reference to the GBV and STBBI strategies.

- 9. In addition to your previous responses, please identify any new policies and programs that the Government of Canada should consider implementing in order to meet the needs of LGBTQ2 people in Canada. In your response, please explain why they should be considered and how they should be implemented.**

Youth engagement must be a central component of a National Comprehensive sex-ed strategy. To be effective, sex-ed must be comprehensive, gender-focused and also, must be responsive to the realities of young people as they evolve. The only way to do so effectively is to ensure the meaningful engagement of youth in the development, design and implementation of such a strategy through the establishment of an advisory council made up of youth in majority from communities that have traditionally been marginalized in sex-ed, centering LGBTQ2 youth and particularly Black, Indigenous and racialized youth, disabled youth (please see DAWN Canada's report 'Girls without borders' on disabled girls and women's experiences of sex-ed), newcomer youth, etc.

The information young people need can change at the drop of a hat and that meaningful engagement is key to ensure relevance and connection. One example is how young people talk among themselves, what words are used, how language and culture evolve around gender and sexuality. It is important to keep up to date on what is important, meaningful, or concerning to youth.

That said, it's not just about language. It's also important to stay up to date on social trends. The 2018 study from Australia 'From Girls to Men: Social attitudes to gender equality in Australia' found that millennial men (born between 1982 and 2000) have been leading a backlash against gender equality. This is important to know because it counters the common idea that sexism and misogyny lessen with each generation. Sexism and misogyny are central to homophobia and transphobia. The study highlights how millennial men are leaders in advancing the "men's rights movement" which aggressively pushes back against gender equality and the rights of LGBTQ2 people. It also shows how the adoption of more traditional values around gender roles is linked to online male-dominated "alt-right" and white supremacist communities.

Misogynist and racist online subcultures have contributed to their combined rise and political influence. The gender inequality, rigid gender norms, gender-based violence, and gendered sexual scripts that these groups endorse have significant negative social and health outcomes—especially for women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people. This makes it even more important for sex-ed to be comprehensive, include extensive teachings on sexism, misogyny, and power dynamics and be equally available across the country.

