

UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls (DAWG)

Questionnaire on girls' and young women's activism

September 2021

Contact: Makeda Zook, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights
makeda@actioncanadashr.org

Introduction

This is a joint submission by Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights and members of its National Youth Advisory Board and the Sexual Rights Initiative. Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights (Action Canada) is a progressive, human rights based, charitable organization located in Canada. Action Canada is a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2004 that works nationally and globally to advance and uphold sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Action Canada is a partner of the Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI); a coalition of six organizations based in all regions of the world that work together to advance human rights related to sexuality at the United Nations.

The following submission was prepared by youth activists who are members of Action Canada's National Youth Advisory Board (NYAB) with support from Action Canada and the SRI. The NYAB was formed in 2018 to guide the creation of national and regional campaigns to encourage STI testing among youth communities with a specific focus on racialized newcomers, queer, trans and Two Spirit¹ youth (2SLGBTQIA+), and gay, bi, young men who have sex with young men (gbMSM). The board was set-up with "nothing for us, without us" as the guiding principle of the STI testing campaigns and has since expanded its scope of work to advise Action Canada on various thematic issues and conduct autonomous advocacy.

The 14 NYAB members work to end gender-based discrimination through both their volunteer work on the NYAB, other volunteer and paid work with local, front-line sexual health organizations, national SRHR advocacy coalitions, grassroots activism and the creation of online activist and learning spaces. The submission includes four NYAB member's experiences being young women and gender diverse youth activists, fighting to dismantle systems of oppression that intersect and exacerbate gender-based

¹ Two Spirit is a term used by some Indigenous people in North America to self-identify. It is an Indigenous specific term that can only be used by Indigenous people to identify themselves. While the term itself is Anishinaabe based, it has been taken up by different Indigenous nations to describe complex experiences and identities as well as cultural roles and responsibilities. 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. Like any other term that people use to self-identify, do not assume that just because someone is Indigenous and identifies as LGBTQ+, that they will use the term Two Spirit to identify themselves.

violence, including poverty, racism, food insecurity, homophobia and transphobia. The NYAB authors of this submission are: **Topaza Yu, Jessiny Ly, Alice Gauntley, and Dhruhi Shah.**

I. Nature, modalities, and trends of your activism

1. What issues are you working on? How did you choose them, why is this important to you?

Topaza Yu: I am currently working on sexual and reproductive rights issues that perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

I am part of the Prime Minister's Youth Council (PMYC) where I am advocating for the abolishment of the MSM (men who have sex with men) blood ban in Canada. The MSM blood ban discriminates against people in queer and trans communities and perpetuates stigma that HIV/AIDS is a "gay disease." As part of the PMYC I am also advocating at a national level for universal no-low fee contraceptive cost coverage for youth.

As a member of Action Canada's NYAB, I have been working on increased access to SRHR. Increased access to SRHR, is important for everyone and is crucial in the fight to end gender-based discrimination. For instance, the research tells us that sex ed can: prevent and reduce gender-based and intimate partner violence and discrimination²; increase confidence, gender equality, and our ability to achieve our goals³; and increase school safety for 2SLGBTQ+⁴ students⁵.

My interest in these issues was sparked due to having personally faced barriers to accessing contraceptives, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), and sex positive, non-stigmatizing, accurate sexual and reproductive health information. As a young woman, I was frustrated by the lack of accessibility and scope of sexual and reproductive health and rights resources. I wanted to find ways to break down barriers for other young people who may be facing similar obstacles as I was, and still do.

Sexual health and rights are important to me because it is a way to ensure that everyone regardless of age, ability, race, sexual orientation and gender identity gets to realize their right to bodily autonomy and live free from violence and stigma.

² UNESCO. (2018). *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002607/260770e.pdf>

³ Haberland, N., & Rogow, D. (2015). Sexuality education: emerging trends in evidence and practice. *Journal of adolescent health, 56*(1), S15-S21. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25528976>

⁴ 2SLGBTQ+ is an acronym commonly used in Canada that includes a spectrum of queer sexual orientations and gender identities. Fully spelled out it is: Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, with the + denoting more identities within the queer spectrum such as: Asexual, Questioning, Pansexual, and Intersex.

⁵ Baams et al. (2017). Comprehensive Sexuality Education as a Longitudinal Predictor of LGBTQ Name-Calling and Perceived Willingness to Intervene in School. *J Youth Adolesc.* 46(5): 931-942. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5388727/>

Jessiny Ly: After being a volunteer peer sexuality educator with Planned Parenthood Toronto’s Supporting Newcomer Access Program (SNAP), I started my own organization in my home country of Vietnam. The organization I started, called Vietnam Youth Alliance, disseminates knowledge on CSE and LGBTQIA+⁶ communities for young people around the world. My organization specifically focuses on less privileged communities, and young people with less access to sexuality education, such as Vietnamese youth. I chose to concentrate on these issues because as a kid growing up in Vietnam, I did not have any CSE (or any kind of sex-ed).

The majority of sexuality education in Vietnam only focuses on abstinence, heterosexuality, and alienation of sexuality minority groups (i.e., the LGBTQIA+ community). For instance, abstinence education was so enforced that when I was in grade 6, I witnessed a heterosexual couple in my grade expelled just because they were dating each other. In Vietnam, if your teacher catches you dating someone else in secondary school (grade 6 to grade 9), you will be punished both from the school and your parents. Topics such as birth control options (other than condoms), and sexual discovery and orientation were also banned at my secondary school. In short, despite it being necessary for young people to learn CSE for their health and well-being, the Vietnamese educational system prevents open dialogue about sexual health from happening in the classroom. Without open dialogue that challenges gendered dating scripts, talks about health, consensual relationships and gives young people the tools to navigate contraception and condom negotiation, then gender-based discrimination (including sexism, transphobia, and homophobia) has more opportunity to take root.

The research is clear: young people need CSE to ensure their sexual, emotional, physical and mental well-being. However, the stigma of talking about sexuality in the classroom in Vietnam puts sexual minority groups at risk. I identify myself as asexual, and even though it might seem that I had an “easier” time living in a country that stresses abstinence before marriage, I still had a tough time trying to reconcile with myself. Since my experience of sex-ed in Vietnam only ever touched on heterosexual relationships, there is no accessible information regarding non-heterosexual identities for Vietnamese youth in the classroom. Even information found online is not reliable or LGBTQIA+- friendly. Many sex-ed sources in Vietnam only discuss “homosexuality” (gay and lesbian identities) and classify them as a mental disorder, making information judgmental and highly stigmatized. As an asexual young person, I suffered from many mental conflicts and confusion due to inaccurate and aophobic information in Vietnam.

The gap I experienced in accurate, non-judgmental, inclusive information “by and for” LGBTQIA+ youth led me to advocate for comprehensive sexuality education “by and for” our communities. Ensuring that information is “by and for” Vietnamese LGBTQIA+ youth means that it will be relevant and representative of authentic LGBTQIA+ communities. This will leave a long-lasting, positive impact on young people’s well-being.

⁶ LGBTQIA+ fully spelled out is: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual, with the + denoting other identities within the queer spectrum. This is the acronym used throughout Jessiny Ly’s section because they are referring to the acronym most used in Vietnam.

Alice Gauntley: Other than my volunteer work on the NYAB, I am working in a coordination role in a grassroots mutual aid network that brings cooked meals and groceries to people in need across my city. The network started in response to the deeply rooted inequities exposed in Canada (and throughout the world) during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We specifically focus on providing support to marginalized communities most impacted by the isolation and economic (as well as food) insecurity exacerbated by the pandemic including Black Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), and 2SLGBTQ+ people, sex workers, persons with disabilities, women and girls fleeing domestic violence, and seniors.

Dhruhi Shah: In my volunteer and work life, I am an activist. As a NYAB member at Action Canada I work on increasing accessibility to and providing sexual and reproductive health information and resources to communities who have historically, and are currently, being left out, including persons with disabilities, BIPOC, and 2SLGBTQ+ people. I also work as a counsellor with Centre for Sexuality in Calgary. In this role I work with families to support their 2SLGBTQ+ loved ones who have come out. Finally, as an educator with Goodnight Out Vancouver, I advocate for harm reduction and sexual violence prevention within organizations. All of the activism and work that I do tackles both the impacts of, and works to prevent, gender-based violence. I do this by providing education, information, and support that centres the experiences of those who are inequitably impacted by harmful gender norms, sexual violence, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

2. Are you part of any organization or network? What type of organization or network are you part of? How are you organized?

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights is an adult-led, charitable organization. The NYAB does not manage staff, nor do they fit within the staffing structure at Action Canada. Instead, the NYAB operates in a programmatic advisory capacity. The NYAB's primary role is to advise on domestic health promotion work, as well as national and global advocacy work that Action Canada's programmatic teams lead.

Action Canada staff facilitate the work of the NYAB through principles of youth engagement. Youth engagement articulates a vision of young people as capable, responsible, smart, and inherently valuable as people with ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences worth sharing and being listened to. This vision of young people challenges infantilizing assumptions and stereotypes that youth cannot be trusted, or do not possess significant expertise, and it is often a departure from the ways that young people are often engaged with and consulted on projects. In short, we assume that youth are the experts of their own lives and experiences, and that they can best tell us how to build projects that will enhance their lives. In practice this kind of youth engagement means that Action Canada staff play a secretariat role; staff convene meetings of the NYAB, implementing directions from members to move projects forward. Action Canada also provides an activity-based honorarium for NYAB members. This means that Action Canada pays youth for their expertise and participation in an activity or event. Action Canada's honoraria are based on our organizational policy and best practices for equitable and just community engagement.

Below, we will hear from NYAB members about the arenas of their activism both within and outside of Action Canada.

Topaza Yu: I am part of Action Canada’s NYAB and governance Board of Directors. I am also a member of the cohort 5 Prime Minister’s Youth Council (PMYC). The Prime Minister’s Youth Council is a group of young Canadians who provide non-partisan advice to the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada on issues of importance to us and to all Canadians.

The PMYC members meet both online and in person several times a year to discuss issues that matter to our peers, community, and country. We interact with each other outside of meetings to discuss ideas and upcoming activities, and to talk with each other about issues that matter most to young people. We also engage with local and national organizations, meet with policy-makers and Cabinet Ministers, and attend public events.

At in-person meetings (now virtual because of COVID-19), Council members provide advice to the Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers and government officials. Our discussions are captured in a meeting summary, which is then used by government officials to follow up with relevant Ministers and departments for further action.

PMYC members also provide written or video input on particular topics, based on:

- their school, work and life experience
- input from other youth in their community
- their research and volunteer experience

This often results in the Prime Minister tasking Ministers and federal departments and agencies to undertake further analysis of the issue to address the PMYC’s input.

The recruitment process for the PMYC involves two stages. In the first stage, three sets of approximately 100 applicants are chosen to form a pool of approximately 300 people who proceed to the second stage.

The first stage set of 100 applicants are chosen based on the highest scores in community engagement in each region of Canada. The first stage second set is made up of 100 randomly selected applicants in order to achieve a broad representation of all applicants and to give everyone who applied a chance to be considered. The first stage third set of approximately 100 applicants is formed based on diversity indicators, to ensure that the large pool of approximately 300 advancing to the second stage is fully representative of the diversity of Canada.

The second stage of the selection process invites the approximately 300 selected applicants to participate in a video interview and submit their résumés online, with references. Only those selected for this second stage of the selection process are contacted. This additional information is used to select the top candidates based on their capacity to contribute diverse perspectives to the Prime Minister’s Youth Council.

Jessiny Ly: I am a part of Action Canada’s NYAB and the Founder/President of [Vietnam Youth Alliance](#), a youth organization that disseminates knowledge about sexuality education and LGBTQIA+ communities

in Vietnam. Our network includes activists for sexual health and rights and LGBTQIA+ activists in Vietnam and Canada.

Vietnam Youth Alliance is a youth organization that exists online to prevent geographical barriers to information. To avoid political tension and ensure the freedom to advocate for comprehensive sexuality education in Vietnam, Vietnam Youth Alliance remains an independent organization that publishes information on sexuality education and Vietnamese LGBTQIA+ communities. The only affiliation Vietnam Youth Alliance has is with InterPride as part of InterPride's Region 19, which consists of Southeast Asian countries.

3. Do some of your activist actions require financial support? How are you financed?

Activism requires financial support to be sustainable. Providing financial support is one way to even the field of who can put the time and resources into activism work and can help prevent burnout. Youth activists are often under-resourced, under-financed, and under-supported in Canada. One of the reasons for this is that youth perspectives are undervalued, especially in more formal spaces. It is for this reason that Action Canada, when conceptualizing the NYAB, wanted to ensure that youth SRHR activists were valued for their time, energy and expertise. Action Canada's NYAB receives honorarium between \$75 and \$150 CAD per project depending on the scope of work and the amount of time required. Action Canada's NYAB is funded by the federal government through the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

Jessiny Ly: The Vietnam Youth Alliance requires financial support but does not need a tremendous budget for its operation. The organization relies on donations from individuals.

Alice Gauntley: We've received some small grants, often partnering with more established organizations. We also take donations. There is a tension in activism that our mutual aid group also experiences. We want to remain grassroots, but then we cannot give donors tax receipts or be able to apply for all the grants that might help us.

Dhruhi Shah: We are constantly applying for grants and funding, and rely on donations as well. Donations can come from individuals as well as corporations. We also hold some fundraisers throughout the year.

4. What are your main spaces and levels of engagement (local communities, national level or international), who are the political actors and authorities you mostly engage with? What influenced your choice of actors and spaces and do you consider expanding your engagement to different levels?

Action Canada's NYAB engages local actors to disseminate work on a national scale. This is illustrated by the youth STI testing campaigns. Action Canada works with the NYAB and local, frontline sexual health organizations to reach youth across Canada and in the three regions our campaigns run. The NYAB also occasionally gets the opportunity to speak directly with national policy makers and other federal government officials through the funding body that supports our work (The Public Health Agency of Canada).

Topaza Yu: I have worked within my local community of Saskatoon through my work with the NYAB, a youth-run health clinic and Saskatoon Sexual Health. I have also worked at the national level and I have engaged with Canadian Members of Parliament, including the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers.

Alice Gauntley: Our mutual aid network works locally. We have partnered with other mutual aid networks that sprung up during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as different neighbourhood groups, and a group supporting people living in encampments. Our mutual aid work is focused on the immediate material impacts and this happens at the local level.

Dhruhi Shah: The activist organizations I work with engage at the local level (city and provincial). I don't typically get to engage with any politicians myself but as organized entities, we have met with federal Members of Parliament and provincial Ministers.

5. Is your activism mainly conducted online or offline or both? What influenced your choice?

The NYAB has always worked both online and offline. The campaigns we run to encourage youth to make STI testing a regular part of their health care routine have been all online; however, other work we did together, such as talk with policy makers, was done offline. The reasoning for conducting our campaigns online from the beginning was to reach youth where they are at - on social media and other online platforms. COVID-19 has changed the landscape for activism and now all of our work is conducted online.

Jessiny Ly: My activism is mainly conducted online because I live in many different places. Another reason is that young people around the world want to contribute to advancing CSE and advocating for LGBTQIA+ communities. I prevent geographical barriers by conducting my activism online.

Alice Gauntley: The activism I do is both online and off. I coordinate delivery drivers/cyclists who deliver meals and I also buy, cook and pack meals offline. Other activists in our mutual aid network perform roles online like finance and social media.

Dhruhi Shah: I work both online and in-person. Our service and program delivery has varied throughout the pandemic, and I also do some components of outreach through social media in some of my roles. It is usually because the situation calls for it; for instance, protests and working directly with community members/clients.

6. Do you cooperate with other individuals and organizations, how and why?

Action Canada's NYAB develops partnerships with local organizations in the regions and with the communities that our campaigns engage. One of the main reasons for this kind of partnership work is to ensure collaboration, legitimacy and reach of our campaign.

Dhruhi Shah: We collaborate with other sexual health and 2SLGBTQ+ services in Calgary, mostly to provide referrals and get the most up to date health care and service navigation info.

I. Motivations and impact of your activism

1. *What motivated you to become an activist? What was your vision, your goals?*

Topaza Yu: I have had many negative experiences with the Canadian health care system especially in sexual and mental health. These experiences sparked my interest in finding out ways to make sexual and mental health resources more accessible for young women, girls and 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

Alice Gauntley: When the pandemic hit, I could see how precariousness was experienced inequitably in my community, as well as how much everyone (including me!) was yearning for connection. The thing I like about mutual aid in particular is this idea that I'm not doing things on behalf of others, but that we are truly all working in solidarity together across difference, and focusing on where need is (which is often in communities who are marginalized).

Dhruhi Shah: I had negative experiences within systems and organizations. I wanted to be able to provide improved services and resources, with the lens of lived experience, with the goal of reducing barriers for others. I also greatly believe in community/mutual aid. I want to be able to create and have spaces within the systems we are forced to live under (such as capitalism) that provide safety, empowerment, and respite.

2. *What factors encouraged you to continue your activism?*

The motivations that keep NYAB members fighting for the world and future that they want is partly the knowing that there is still so much work to be done.

Jessiny Ly: I think the top-tier factor of why I continue activism is that I have a lot of hopes that everything will get better if we work towards it. With the emergence of COVID-19, I think that we must work harder for the advocacy we are doing as the pandemic has revealed the deeply embedded gaps in justice, health and well-being.

Dhruhi Shah: I continue my activism because of how much there is still to do. I also look back at activism over the past decades, and have realized that there needs to be people who continue to do the work to propel movements and fuel change.

3. *What did your activism bring, how did it change your life?*

Action Canada established the National Youth Advisory Board to build campaigns that were “by and for.” A secondary goal was to nurture SRHR champions - youth who would work towards dismantling the systems of oppression (i.e., racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, femmephobia, transphobia, ableism) that obstruct access to sexual health and rights. Below, NYAB members describe how their activism has changed their lives:

Topaza Yu: It brought me spaces to grow as a person and as an activist. It has been a big part of my life and it has inspired me to pursue a career in sexual and mental health.

Alice Gauntley: I often feel pretty hopeless about the future; however, making a tangible, material impact in people's lives is both good for me and helps me feel prepared for future crises/collapses.

Dhruhi Shah: My activism changed my perspective of the world and my own agency in it. At times it has brought me to a more cynical place, but at others it has brought me incredible empowerment.

4. *What are some of the main successes of your activism?* To what extent is your activism influencing State authorities, including policies and legislation? Why and in which specific ways?

The NYAB members talk about success in terms of reach and impact:

Topaza Yu: One of the main successes of my activism as part of the NYAB was being part of launching four campaigns that destigmatized STI testing among youth. With these campaigns we were able to reach millions of young people and direct them to services that were youth friendly, anti-oppressive and culturally relevant. As part of the Prime Minister's Youth Council, I can connect with government officials and be able to impact SRHR policy in ways that will have material impacts on young women, girls, queer and trans people.

Dhruhi Shah: I have been able to witness the tangible impacts of my activism from organizations changing their sexual harassment policies to support their staff and clients, to implementing a province-wide Sexual Violence Support Line, to clients who are finally getting the right sexual health info, to clients who are supported in coming out as 2SLGBTQ+ and able to be their authentic selves

III. Enabling factors and good practices

To tackle gender-based discrimination, enabling environments for youth activism must include safe and supportive spaces to grow; state-level infrastructure, such as far-reaching internet and wifi networks, and access to public libraries; a platform for youth to speak; organizational and staff support for sharing decisions and power; and finally, empowerment through peer-based knowledge and skill sharing.

Mentorship, staff and collegial support from within organizations is key to creating enabling environments. For instance, being available, passing on opportunities, being flexible, engaging in debriefs and conversations about tough things happening in the world is a large part of what makes mentorship within activism successful. Nurturing support networks that help young activists continue the work is key to building a sustainable movement, this includes recognizing that for some people families (chosen or origin) are key to being able to continue our activism. A practice that needs to be embedded everywhere to ensure that environments are enabling for everyone, not only those with the most access to resources,

wealth and privilege. One crucial way of doing this is through anti-racism and anti-oppression frameworks instituted within organizations and practiced within movements.

IV. Challenges and structural barriers

Youth activists in an already overlooked and underfunded field such as sexual health must contend with an added lack of funding for youth engagement. Furthermore, the structural racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia means that women and girls from marginalized groups (like BIPOC, disAbleD, and trans youth) experience silencing and invisibility in many activist spaces.

Dhruhi Shah: Being a person of color I experience a lot of silencing from white members (of all genders). I also recognize that Trans people experience a lot of exclusion and silencing from activist movements that are specific to gender-based violence.

Alice Gauntley: I haven't been discriminated against for being a young woman activist, but I think that has to do with other privileges I carry, like being white and from a middle-class background.

Topaza Yu: Underrepresented young women and girls, such as visible minorities or queer youth face more barriers to accessing activist spaces. I have faced prejudice as a young woman.

Specific challenges that NYAB members have experienced when doing activist work include:

Topaza Yu: Getting media exposure, sharing my work, and being paid as the facilitator/activist.

Dhruhi Shah: Trying not to replicate other grassroots organizations' work/current activist efforts, imposter syndrome, funding, high turn-around (and burn-out) in other members/volunteers/staff. Another area of challenge is that certain political parties pose a significant threat to our financial stability as activist organizations (funding cuts). As well, Instagram and Facebook censorship have repeatedly deleted certain SRHR topics of posts on social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected The NYAB members' activist work both in positive and negative ways. For instance:

Topaza Yu: The COVID pandemic has made networking with other activists more challenging; it's hard to create interpersonal relationships and connections only online.

Alice Gauntley: COVID was what started my mutual aid activist work! I think one of the truly exciting things to come out of this time is a renewed interest in mutual aid and in building solidarity between neighbours and immediate, physical communities.

Dhruhi Shah: COVID made organizations and services push to deliver online sexual health programming and information in a more accessible way. This meant more youth living in rural and remote areas (of which Canada has many) were able to access services usually only offered in big cities. The pandemic did

however impact community building and internal team dynamics; not being able to organize in person and the constant changing governmental direction in Alberta was frustrating and led to a lot of stopping and starting our work.

V. Recommendations/ the way forward

The recommendations NYAB members have for addressing state-level and civil society barriers include: more funding, more media exposure and promotion of our work, more policy-makers involved in front line work (and front-line workers involved in policy making), more community controlled funds without the heavy reporting burdens (including low barrier grants, UBI cash transfers to our communities).

Dhruhi Shah: State-level and political actors should represent the communities they are making policy for; lived experience and front-line workers should be at the core of all policy making.

Alice Gauntley: When young people see that they are being taken seriously and that their actions will lead to concrete material change, they are more likely to want to be involved in state-level processes; I think it requires good faith on the part of policy-makers.

Jessiny Ly: For nation states, there needs to be people who represent the diversity of the country in the council that decides the legislation for the country (for Canada, it's the House of Commons). There also needs to be adequate funding for comprehensive sexuality education for all schools across the country; and legislation that tackles discrimination against women, girls and gender diverse people at the roots. For the private sector, Corporate Social Responsibility programs that educate their employees about the need for diversity and inclusion in the workplace; just and equitable policies for those belonging to minority communities working in their firms; donations to organizations that support marginalized communities. Across civil society, culture needs to shift to one of respect and increased participation of everyone decision-making processes.

-ENDS-