

# Caught Between Homophobia and Racism

## Effects of Discrimination Upon the Sexual Behaviour of Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) From Ethnic and Racial Minority Communities

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### Background

Despite the fact that ethno-racial and people of color communities made up nearly half of the new HIV cases amongst MSM in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006), few studies have been done that examine the issues that may impact upon risky sexual behaviour amongst these vulnerable populations. A government, academic and community research partnership was developed to explore issues affecting these communities and to identify a priority agenda for research and interventions.

### Challenges & Barriers

- The scarcity of research focusing on ethno-racial MSM hinders efforts to create an evidence base for HIV prevention work in Ontario.
- To bridge this gap, the Ethno-Racial MSM Working Group of the Ontario Gay Men's HIV Prevention Strategy developed this study with the objective to engage MSM HIV prevention and outreach workers at AIDS Service Organisations to identify factors affecting risk-taking behaviour and to identify potential research questions to better inform policy and practice for the MSM ethno-racial target communities.

### Methods

A qualitative study comprising of one-on-one interviews with 10 prevention workers and 7 focus groups (n= 71) with MSM from target communities (African, Caribbean, Chinese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking).

- The study explored factors affecting risky behaviour, personal and cultural beliefs on HIV/AIDS, perception on the effectiveness of current HIV prevention strategies, and potential gaps in policy and research.
- Results were coded thematically using N-vivo 7.0 and analyzed by the research team. Reports were developed to inform future research development.

### Key Findings

Participants reported that ethno-racial MSM face unique social and cultural challenges that affect their ability to effectively negotiate safer sex practices and/or behaviour. Participants reported that homophobia was prevalent in many cultural communities. Participants also reported that fear of rejection and discrimination by family and friends was a driving force for many ethno-racial MSM to conceal their sexual identity. Homophobia within ethno-racial communities have a huge impact on individuals' sense of self-esteem and confidence in interaction during sexual activities. Many seek unplanned same-sex encounters in anonymous settings. These create barriers for them to access HIV prevention information and to practise safer sex.

Among gay-identified participants, racism was identified as an HIV risk factor in that the gay community tends to view white men as more attractive and desirable than men of colour. The impact of unspoken racism and racial preference by the predominant white gay community further fuelled the isolation for many ethno-racial MSM with a need to belong and to be desired. The isolation has a direct impact on ethno-racial men to indulge in risky sexual behaviour. As a result, many participants

found it difficult to negotiate safer sex with white sexual partners due to lowered self-esteem and fear of rejection.

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Systemic racism also manifested as inequitable resource support of programs targeting ethno-racial MSM. Participants reported continued systemic inequities further hamper the effectiveness of many community-based prevention efforts, especially amongst newcomers and youth from ethno-racial communities.

"I remember when I was in 8th Grade my mom had told me first...it is a sin and you go to hell dadada so it is in all communities and religion... and they scare you towards homosexuality, and people get more confused because they want something and, especially when they are about to come out."

A South Asian Participant

"I think there is a stigma attached to queer Asian men particular around our identities...I think in many instances we are considered asexual, undesirable. For example when you just look in the media, what you see as images is white men...I think if for a lot of Asians if a white man approaches them and ask them to engage in unsafe sex... they are more likely to go with it."

An East Asian Participant

"For the heterosexual, they are bound to their family and then limited their sex life, while gay people has a comparatively unstable relation, no matter it is in China or abroad, it is rare to see a couple to live together for more than eight or ten years... A gay family is a family not recognized, not accepted, or blessed. A very small issue may lead to the split of the family. It is not like a heterosexual family, which are bound by property or children, it is not only two people, but two families behind these two people."

An East Asian participant

"Let's say you are here alone. You are illegal and don't have anybody. You meet somebody who is interested in you and you don't have much self-esteem and this guy like, he is very good looking and wants to have sex with you and you just don't feel like saying no because it is the chance to meet a guy, a Canadian."

A Portuguese-speaking Participant

"...as a newcomer I'm seeing the new world, wow...I'm just arriving in a new city, I don't know the dynamics of the city. I don't know what people's doing...and this culture's like telling me let's have sex bare-backing. The thing is, I don't speak English. Me no English. Say, come on, come on, baby, Boom! There, risky sex."

Spanish speaking MSM

Ethno racial newcomer MSM Newcomer MSM face systemic barriers such as access to culturally-sensitive information and language-specific needs to assist with familiarity with MSM community. These needs include:

- Culturally-sensitive information addressing sexuality and sexual identity;
- Information on social and sexual etiquette in environments where MSM meet for sex;
- Lack of safer sex and HIV information in their own languages;
- Information on safe space to access information and services related to sexual health;
- Language barriers in negotiating safer sex.

"I have this friend who's HIV+...Being that he's a new immigrant, doesn't have a job, he's unemployed, doesn't have money. So sometime when he's having sex with other guys, he has trouble negotiating when to use condom and when, why, where, whether to pose the decision to have condom use or go without it...At the same time he thinks money because he's unemployed and when he's going out with this guy who'd (take him out)for a beer, have a meal and then go home..."

An African participant

"We are still struggling with certain funding and certain programming that people are not carrying out towards Asian MSM or to meet Asian MSM needs because they assume everyone should be English-speaking."

An East and Southeast Asian Participant

### Impact on Policy & Practice

- In order to be effective, HIV prevention efforts with ethno-racial MSM need to include language-specific and culturally-sensitive materials that address their needs
- Information needs to be accompanied by capacity-building efforts to deal with coming out issues, to enhance self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and sexual disclosure.
- Specific information for newcomers on gay culture and how to access support needs to be made available in different languages and be accessible through various mediums such as settlement services and the internet.

"We have problem with providing education because we don't have the resources. I work for the HIV prevention program for (the Spanish Speaking community) for 14 years and this is my first year that I've been full-time. All this time I've been working part-time... All the information in Toronto is in English, but we need to relate and adapt it to our culture because the issues are different for each community."

A Spanish-speaking worker

### Conclusions

Homophobia and racism both appear to increase HIV risk behaviour among ethno-racial MSM. More HIV prevention needs to focus on reaching non gay-identified ethno-racial MSM through their cultural communities, as well as promoting culturally-inclusive HIV prevention messages in the gay community. Structural interventions to decrease homophobia and racism may have a positive impact upon the sexual health of MSM.

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