

# Open Letter on the Recent Consultations on Sexual Violence

April 6, 2017

We are groups and associations that advocate for the rights of students and survivors across Quebec. We recognize that the issue of sexual violence and rape culture affects us all, and that significant changes must be made in our educational institutions, as well as in society more generally, to both address past and ongoing harm, and to create safer communities.

In light of this, we are encouraged that there seem to be increasingly coordinated efforts to acknowledge and address the pervasive problems which permeate the spaces in which we study, work, and learn. At the provincial level, this has materialized as consultations on sexual violence, hosted throughout February and March by the Ministry of Education and Post-Secondary Education, with the intention of gathering information to contribute to possible legislation. While we may have been involved or excluded from these consultations to varying degrees, we have taken the opportunity to reflect together on the process thus far. Here we share these reflections, as well as the next steps that we deem absolutely necessary for this initiative to be a success.

We appreciate the general display of goodwill on the part of the Ministry and many participants in the consultations. It is positive to note that the Minister of Post-Secondary Education seems to genuinely care about the issue and to have advanced her understanding and analysis throughout the course of the consultations. Additionally, there appeared to be fairly widespread participation by various organizations and individuals making written submissions and attending the days of reflection.

At the same time, the consultation was noticeably lacking in some areas, despite proactive intervention by some of our organizations to bring this to the attention of the Minister both before and during the consultations. Firstly, we stressed the necessity for both the needs and experiences of survivors to be centered, but we feel that this was not adequately done. We are glad that some groups that work with survivors were ultimately invited, but having by-invitation-only events made the consultations inherently exclusive. Furthermore, for the few self-identifying survivors that were present, there was little to no accommodation provided to support their participation, which resulted in survivors themselves having to emotionally support each other through difficult testimonies. It was recommended that active listeners be present, and that there be many ways for people to participate, but the nature of the consultations primarily provided space for people to speak out at microphones or in mixed groups of people that they were not familiar with. Thus, the space was not necessarily a welcoming one to promote inclusive input on such an important and sometimes emotionally charged topic.

Secondly, the government relied primarily on school administrations to conduct consultations and recommend invitees, rather than going directly to relevant groups to ensure equitable inclusion of relevant parties. We are particularly disappointed to note that many administrations, such as Concordia, McGill and Rimouski, did not conduct their own consultations of their constituents. Given the pattern that we have observed at many of the universities that we are part of, we were not surprised that many crucial stakeholders, particularly students and survivors, were not well included by their administrations in discussions of sexual violence. This resulted in a skewing of the composition of people present at the government consultations; the lack of acknowledgement of power dynamics, and the underrepresentation of groups such as young people, survivors, people of colour and Indigenous people, meant that these voices were less heard, and some important groups were altogether excluded. We caution that as a result of this, there will almost certainly be concerning oversights in future decisions, including those regarding the proposed law.

Finally, we found that more needed to be done to improve accessibility of the event. While bi-directional simultaneous translation was requested specifically for the consultation in Montreal, home to over 100,000 students at anglophone post-secondary institutions, it was not provided. The linguistic inaccessibility of this event meant that many important testimonies and points brought forward by survivors and others in the room may have literally been lost in translation. This may have also been a factor in the lack of ability for some to feel comfortable participating, as there were no accommodations made for them to be able to understand their peers. If we are to work towards inclusive and meaningful solutions together, it seems that the ability to effectively communicate with each other must be an absolute minimum requirement. Furthermore, very little information about the format of the consultations was given in advance, and accessibility information (physical, linguistic, sensory, emotional, etc.) was not provided at all. At minimum, sending out an agenda in advance would have allowed people to prepare and feel comfortable about their ability to participate effectively.

We do hope that this feedback is accepted and reflected upon by the Ministry, in order to ensure that the needs of all community members are being met in future engagement efforts. We also ask that a synthesis of conclusions from the written and in-person consultations is made publicly accessible, and specifically sent to all participants that were involved in the process.

Moving forward, it is absolutely necessary that ongoing consultation is conducted, especially with student associations, survivors, and frontline workers, throughout the development of any legislation resulting from this process. In particular, we believe that this legislation must clearly outline the requirements for specific sexual violence policies for every institution of higher education, as well as how support and resources will be equitably distributed to a

diversity of preventative and responsive initiatives. There needs to be a specific focus on ensuring that existing community groups, and regional universities, which are the most poorly-financed, have dedicated resources allocated to them. We also hope that accountability mechanisms will be included, with clearly elucidated recourses for community members to take when institutions are not fulfilling their duties.

It is everyone's responsibility to hold each other accountable and to a higher standard when it comes to fighting sexual violence on our campuses and in society at large. We look forward to continuing this work together, and pledge to do what we can to support survivors.

In solidarity against rape culture,

***Association for the Voice of Education in Quebec***

***Concordia Student Union***

***Centre for Gender Advocacy (Concordia)***

***Association Générale Étudiante du Campus de Rimouski de l'UQAR***

***Students' Society of McGill University***

***Community Disclosure Network (McGill)***

***Mouvement des Associations Générales Étudiante de l'UQAC***

***Executive Committee of the Post-Graduate Students Society (McGill)***

***Association Générale des Étudiants de l'UQTR***

***Silence is Violence- McGill Chapter***

***Graduate Students' Association-Concordia***