

ONTARIO BLACK GAY MEN'S SUMMIT—CULTURES OF SEXUALITY
AND BLACK MEN'S HEALTH: SUMMIT SUMMARY AND OUTCOMES

by

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Introduction

On March 26–28, 2010, the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO) hosted the first Ontario Black Gay Men’s Summit—Cultures of Sexuality and Black Men’s Health. The Summit was the culmination of a ground-breaking, multi-year project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) entitled *MaBwana Black Men’s Study* (2006–2008). The project investigated the susceptibility and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) gay and bisexual men, and other Black men who have sex with men (MSM). Given the disproportionately high incidence of HIV/AIDS among African and Caribbean people in Ontario, especially Black men, the undertaking was timely and significant.

The *MaBwana Black Men’s Study* found that all participants were profoundly affected by experiences of social oppression in the forms of homophobia, heterosexism, and racism. It also determined that the participants cared about their own and other MSM’s health, and that they struggled with challenges to their ability to maintain safe sex practices. As well, the study provided the impetus for the Summit, which focused on many of the challenges that had been identified by participants as influencing their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

The three-day Summit, held at the Ramada Hotel in Toronto, was attended by 140 participants from across Ontario and Québec, representing a cross-section of professions, agencies, and institutions. It provided an opportunity to critically discuss ideas concerning HIV prevention efforts among African, Caribbean, and Black gay and bisexual men, and to put forward a health and social justice agenda with implications for the health and well-being of gay and bisexual men and other Black MSM in Ontario. The event was a bold attempt at organizing a collective response to health (including HIV/AIDS), and to community and social justice issues affecting the men and their communities.

This report summarizes the Summit’s emerging issues and possible outcomes. It focuses on the ways in which the Summit lay the foundation for future gatherings on the health and well-being of African, Caribbean and Black gay and bisexual men and other Black MSM, both regionally and nationally.

Emerging Issues

The Summit yielded far-reaching implications not only for Canada's gay, bisexual, trans, and questioning (GBTQ) African, Caribbean and Black men (ACB) but, more broadly, for all such men globally. By extension, the issues emerging from the Summit reflected the desire of the GBTQ ACB male community to birth a legacy for itself that would extend far beyond Canadian borders. The Summit delved deeply into the issues of oppression, protection, empowerment, and mobilization of the GBTQ ACB male community with the aim of catalyzing a collective, cohesive effort to shed the social stigma associated with being GBTQ Black men and to unite in confronting common obstacles to leading a healthful, open lifestyle.

Oppression of the GBTQ Black Male Community

Overall, the Summit stressed positive themes. However, many speakers recognized that highlighting the common prejudices that contribute to the immobilization of the GBTQ African, Caribbean and Black men could help break down the historically formidable obstacles to their health and well-being. Oppression was presented not as an enemy with which to be reconciled but instead as a valid opponent, to be fought and overcome. GBTQ ACB men were challenged to counter oppression in several contexts—sexual encounters, relationships, friendships, and workplaces and other social institutions—not through ignoring it but by collectively rising against it.

The facilitated discussion on understanding and resisting oppression, for instance, dealt both with historical issues of alienation within the community, and with the various ways in which trust, or lack thereof, has defined the lives of GBTQ ACB men.

Political oppression in conjunction with institutionalized racism was highlighted as the most pervasive obstacle to the health and well-being of GBTQ ACB men. Mobilizing the community to embrace a political presence was therefore seen as necessary to counter the range of ignorance, prejudice, and complacency that characterizes the current sociopolitical landscape. While the Summit itself was indicative of the increasing resistance to the status quo, it was widely accepted throughout the discussions that the Summit was but a starting point for something far greater than a weekend gathering.

Protection of the GBQ Black Male Community

HIV/AIDS was presented as a persistent threat to the health and well-being of GBQ African, Caribbean and Black men. The MaBwana study's findings, that the GBQ Black community was genuinely invested in its own health and concerned with HIV/AIDS, were cited frequently. While the Summit was not inordinately focused on safe sex practices, discussions frequently highlighted the need to recognize unsafe conditions.

Protection of GBQ ACB men against violent hate crimes provided a reason to seek immediate and cohesive union within the community. Youth were the subject of much discussion and themselves raised questions of how to best organize and protect their young community. Recent immigrants were cited as a particularly vulnerable population—to violence as well as deception by crooked immigration consultants who provide unauthorized immigration advice for pay—and the need for protection was perceived as paramount. In essence, protection of the GBQ ACB male community was presented as most effectively done through individual, cultural, and political empowerment.

Empowerment of the GBQ Black Male Community

Perhaps the most dominant theme of the Summit was the empowerment of the GBQ ACB male community; it was present throughout, a distinct undercurrent of heartening the community and developing a common vision for the GBQ culture. Empowering the GBQ ACB male community to embrace their own health and well-being would be vital to dispelling social stigma and claiming their rightful place as a sociocultural group.

Empowerment was channelled through a wide spectrum of topics, including sex, politics, and healthcare. Birthed from a recognition that the community has been too long marginalized by lack of political motivation and concurrent political oppression, the call to individual and collective empowerment was at the heart of the Summit.

Mobilization of the LGBTQ Black Male Community

The goal of the Summit was to engage in a discourse that would be a catalyst for global mobilization of the LGBTQ Black male community. The opening presentation provided a framework for the rest of the Summit. It focused on the community's possible legacy. If the community failed to mobilize cohesively against oppression, and did not rally for protection and empowerment, its legacy would likely be weak at best. However, by meeting the global challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean, in parallel with increasing the political presence of LGBTQ Black men around the world, a positive, heartening legacy could be left by the current generation of LGBTQ African, Caribbean and Black men.

Possible Outcomes

The outcomes of the Summit are inextricably bound up in the notion that LGBTQ ACB men need to recognize the importance of their collective health and well-being, and to mobilize to cultivate their place in the future. By acting on the Summit's themes of oppression, protection, empowerment, and mobilization, the goal of fostering a collective vision for the community could be realized. At the crux of the possible outcomes is the need to build that community through network development, legacy documentation, ensuring accountability, and above all, by perpetuating the cohesion so palpable at the Summit.

Necessary actions toward these ends include the need to form a national LGBTQ network as outlined in the plenary and question-and-answer sessions. Cultivating email communications and discussion boards to maintain the sense of community felt at the Summit is crucial to networking within Canada and across the globe. By developing and maintaining a common vision for the community's culture, individuals of all ages and locales could transcend the traditional barriers to strengthening the community.

The value of a LGBTQ ACB male legacy was additionally and equally critical as a Summit outcome. Articulating and documenting individual, organization, and community histories is paramount for this purpose. Creating an archive of both common and unique histories within the community would send a message to the world that LGBTQ ACB men have long held an essential place in society despite the lack of sociopolitical

recognition. As well, documenting the stories of GBTQ ACB men with HIV/AIDS would be critical in placing the health of the population at the forefront of community discourse.

The need for a space in which the community's youth could congregate, garner support, and communicate with one another was apparent at the Summit. A necessary outcome of the Summit experience would be to create such space, physically and digitally. Enhancing existing resources is as necessary as creating an online network for GBTQ African, Caribbean, and Black male youth. While such a space is critical to protecting younger generations against oppression and prejudice, that space would also be valuable in promoting the legacy of older generations. In validating the needs of the community's youth and supporting age-specific dialogue, the future of a cohesive, GBTQ ACB male culture could be realized.

Digital and physical community spaces, which unite existing, national organizations with international organizations and university groups, including research teams with medical professionals, are required. Political mobilization can occur only through a unified front against common barriers to the health and well-being of the GBTQ ACB male community. Garnering investments for such spaces should not be difficult, given the motivation of individuals attending the Summit.

Posting a declaration on the ACCHO website for the cohesive vision outlined by the Summit would be a critical first step in perpetuating the community birthed during the Summit. However, gathering feedback on that declaration is even more essential, as it would lend credence to the community's ability to engage in critical discourse regarding its own future. ACCHO need not seek to pigeon-hole the needs of the entire GBTQ ACB male community into a single declaration, but instead could initiate an unprecedented articulation of common cultural values and genuine gaps within that community.

The accountability of existing organizations, ACCHO included, is essential to ensuring that energies and funds are channelled effectively. Supporting the needs of the community is an essential function of these organizations, particularly because there are so few in existence at present. Unifying them in a cohesive network is one way to ensure accountability; however, standards for that accountability will need to be identified and

accepted by both national and international organizations. This is a delicate and sensitive task.

The needs of immigrants and other newcomers to Canada must be addressed immediately and effectively, as the Summit clearly identified broken links in the support network for these vulnerable populations. Ultimately, GBTQ African, Caribbean, and Black men who come to Canada to escape oppression in their native countries should not feel as though they can only come out within the local gay community; they should be empowered to embrace and express their identities within the greater community without fear of the same social stigma from which they escaped.

The Summit outcomes discussed above can be summarized to include the following six strategies for keeping the momentum from the event going:

1. Form a national Black queer network organization to advance the struggle of ACB gay and bisexual men and other Black MSM in Ontario and beyond.
2. Document/archive our lives/stories, especially in a Canadian context.
3. Expand/enhance space for empowerment and resources for youth particularly in communities where such spaces are absent.
4. Form networks that connect individuals, groups, and organizations that are currently fragmented. How do we connect these networks?
5. Get feedback in both official languages from Summit participants and the broader community on the Summit declaration posted on ACCHO's website (www.accho.ca).
6. Capture the discussions on accountability, and encourage dual accountability between the organizations that serve African, Caribbean and Black queer communities and among the people these organizations serve.

From a feminist perspective, it is critical that LGBTQ African, Caribbean, and Black men seek allies with women. Despite strides made during the twentieth century, women remain a marginalized population and calling on women of all ethnicities and orientations to rise up against the oppression of LGBTQ ACB men is in line with the goals of feminism. While the LGBTQ African, Caribbean and Black male community is very specifically defined in terms of culture and characteristics, ignoring the value of uniting with other populations *against* oppression and *for* global mobilization would be short-sighted.

In summary, the most valuable outcomes of the Summit relate to creating and maintaining the cohesive energy that permeated discussions and lectures during the Summit. The emerging issues of oppression, protection, empowerment, and mobilization of LGBTQ ACB men are those that have beset the community for decades; and yet, the genuine sense of community coursing through the Summit was unprecedented. Charging individuals and organizations alike to relinquish the stigma that results from the absence of social cohesion and the subsequent social immobility and instead to surge forth as a population as deserving of prosperity and political representation as any other community would be the most fortunate outcome of the Summit. The mental, emotional, social, sexual, physical, and spiritual well-being of the LGBTQ ACB community holds undeniable, globally relevant value, and the Summit was indicative of a genuine desire to move forward in the protection of that well-being. Only through forging connections across urban, rural, and national lines can the vision of a common, healthy, LGBTQ community be realized.

While the Summit did not ignore the negative obstacles posed by discrimination, alienation, and stereotypes, it did not focus excessively on these barriers. By maintaining a positive outlook on valid, workable ways in which the community can not only transcend these barriers, but actively and forcefully counter them, the Summit afforded participants hope for a heartening future in which LGBTQ ACB men of all ages need not remain silent regarding their needs. In short, the Summit was a weighty, valuable step toward a bright future for LGBTQ African, Caribbean, and Black men, but also a step that necessitates further, urgent, cohesive action.