



POLICY PAPER

MSU Anti-Oppression Policy

Introduction

“Anti-oppressive practice embodies a person-centered philosophy, an egalitarian value system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people’s lives; a methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of hierarchy in their immediate interaction and the work they do together.”¹

As an organization representing the best interests of its diverse student body, the McMaster Students Union is committed to ensuring that the University campus and the broader McMaster community are inclusive spaces where all members are treated with respect and dignity.

Throughout the years, disenfranchised groups including womyn, communities who have been minoritized on the basis of **ethnicity** and/or religion, racialized communities, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and/or members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Two-Spirit, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) communities have engaged in an arduous and ongoing struggle for the same equality of opportunity and equality of outcome as members of the dominant culture.

This struggle against **oppression** occurs not only within society but also at McMaster University, which is a microcosm of society. Oppression is defined as “a social dynamic in which certain ways of being in this world—including certain ways of identifying or being identified—are normalized or privileged while other ways are disadvantaged or marginalized. It refers to the injustices some groups experience as a consequence of institutionalized **power** and **privilege** assigned to others.”²

As a student union, it is our duty to take note of these inequalities in power and hierarchies that exist within the McMaster community, as well as to take action in order to eradicate them. Together, we must work as a community to challenge the social inequality embedded in people’s attitudes and value systems and challenge the social institutions that re-create disempowerment for some and privilege for others. To do so, the McMaster Student Union must act as a catalyst, by sparking individuals to critically analyze their perceptions and assumptions, as well as to recognize the power imbalances that continue to exist on our campus. Let us create a campus of **Allies** who stand in solidarity with equity-seeking groups. Through our joint efforts, we will work toward the equalization of power relationships and the elimination of all forms of oppression.

Forms of Oppression

There are many forms of oppression that exist, including but not limited to: racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and religious **discrimination**.

Racism can be defined as “a mix of prejudice and power leading to domination and exploitation of one group (the dominant or majority group) over another (the non- dominant, minority or racialized group). It asserts that the one group is supreme and superior while the other is inferior. Racism is any individual action, or institutional practice backed by institutional power, which subordinates people because of their colour or ethnicity.”³

Ableism can be defined as “the cultural, institutional and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign different (lower) value to people who have developmental, emotional, physical, sensory or health-related disabilities, thereby resulting in differential treatment. Disabilities, invisible or visible,

have been redefined in the disabilities studies field as impairments that can have effects on the level and quality of activities that individuals can pursue. Since the 1970s, people with disabilities, and allies, have worked to explain their reality, based on the idea that it is not the actual impairment that limits a person's interaction in the world, but the **barriers**, both physical and attitudinal, that society constructs around impairments.”⁴

Sexism “stems from a set of implicit or explicit beliefs, erroneous assumptions, and actions based upon an ideology of inherent superiority of one gender over another and may be evident within organizational or institutional structures or programs, as well as within individual thought or behaviour patterns. Sexism is any act or institutional practice, backed by institutional power, which subordinates people because of gender. While, in principle, sexism may be practiced by either gender, most of our societal institutions are still the domain of men and usually the impact of sexism is experienced by **womyn**.”⁴

Homophobia can be defined as “the discrimination against or hatred of people who do not conform to rigid sex roles and sexuality stereotypes. The fear and persecution of queer people, rooted in a desire to maintain the heterosexual social order.”⁵ Transphobia can be defined as “the discrimination against or hatred of people who are trans. It can also refer to people who are unable or unwilling to deal with gender ambiguity.”⁵

Religious discrimination can be defined as “discriminatory or harassing behaviour that is based on religion or which arises because the person who is the target of the behaviour does not share the same faith. This principle extends to situations where the person who is the target of such behaviour has no religious beliefs whatsoever, including atheists and agnostics. This policy does not extend to religions that incite hatred or violence against other individuals or groups,⁵ or to practices and observances that purport to have a religious basis but which contravene international human rights standards or criminal law.”⁶

Policy Recommendations

This policy recommends that in order to create a safer community at McMaster University, a comprehensive annual campaign is needed. Each year, the campaign will be directed at awareness raising concerning one of the above-mentioned forms of oppression. The overall goal of each of these annual campaigns will be the reduction and eventual elimination of all forms of oppression. The campaign's theme would rotate each year, to ensure that each form of oppression is given sufficient attention, and all forms are targeted over time.

It should be noted that **intersectionality** between forms of oppression occur. For example, at McMaster there are womyn who are also faith-based, queer, racialized, and so on. Thus is important to ensure that this diversity of the student body is represented in a multi-faceted way in terms of identities and experiences with oppression.

There are several partners on campus and in the community that ought to be contacted and collaborated with for each campaign. The McMaster Students Union is not the only body interested in anti-oppression campaigns; each year several groups engage in their own initiatives that will reach a select group of students. The problem is that these groups are divided, meaning these initiatives do not reach the maximum number of students possible. The role of the McMaster Students Union is to be the

facilitator; i.e., to bring all these groups to the table and create a series of united annual campaigns that incorporate the issues and concerns of as many groups as possible.

Lastly, it is crucial that each year the Student Representative Assembly undergoes anti-oppression training. In order to best represent our constituents and ensure all perspectives are taken into account, exposure to, and an understanding of, anti-oppressive frameworks is required.

Glossary of Terms

Ally: A member of an oppressor group who works to end a form of oppression that gives her or him privileges. For example, a white person who works to end racism, or a man who works to end sexism.⁴

Assimilation: The full adoption by an individual or group, of the culture, values and patterns of a different social, religious, linguistic or national group, resulting in the elimination of attitudinal and behavioural affiliations from the original cultural group. Can be voluntary or forced.⁴

Barrier: An overt or covert obstacle; used in employment equity to mean a systemic obstacle to equal employment opportunities or outcomes; an obstacle which must be overcome for equality to be possible.⁴

Discrimination: The denial of equal treatment, civil liberties and opportunity to individuals or groups with respect to education, accommodation, health care, employment and access to services, goods and facilities. Behaviour that results from prejudiced attitudes by individuals or institutions, resulting in unequal outcomes for persons who are perceived as different. Differential treatment that may occur on the basis of race, nationality, gender, age, religion, political or ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation, marital or family status, physical, developmental or mental disability. Discrimination also includes the denial of cultural, economic, educational, political and/or social rights of members of non-dominant groups.⁴

Ethnic Group: Refers to a group of people having a common heritage or ancestry, or a shared historical past, often with identifiable physical, cultural, linguistic and/or religious characteristics.⁴

Feminism: Refers to theories, movements and actions that aim to challenge and eliminate sexism.⁴

Harassment: Persistent, on-going communication (in any form) of negative attitudes, beliefs or actions towards an individual or group, with the intention of disparaging that person(s). Harassment is manifested in name calling, jokes or slurs, graffiti, insults, threats, discourteous treatment, and written or physical abuse. Harassment may be subtle or overt.⁴

Institutional Oppression: Arrangements of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.⁴

Internalized Oppression: The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.⁴

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of all forms of oppression (cultural, institutional and social) against particular groups, and the way they are imbedded within existing systems such that they operate in insidious, covert, and compounded ways (e.g., gender and colour; religion and race; sexual orientation and race).⁴

Minority Group: Refers to a group of people within a society that is either small in numbers or that has little or no access to social, economic, political or religious power.⁴

Power: That which allows one group to name and classify subordinate groups and to subject them to differential treatment.⁴

Privilege: The experience of freedoms, rights, benefits, advantages, access and/or opportunities afforded members of the dominant group in a society or in a given context, usually unrecognized and taken for granted by members of the majority group, while the same freedoms, rights, benefits, advantages access and/or opportunities are denied to members of the minority or disadvantaged groups.⁴

Social Justice: A concept premised upon the belief that each individual and group within society is to be given equal opportunity, fairness, civil liberties and participation in the social, educational, economic, institutional and moral freedoms and responsibilities valued by the society.⁴

Stereotype: A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. Though often negative, can also be complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact, however, simply because they involve broad generalizations that ignore individual realities. Stereotyping may be based upon misconceptions, incomplete information and/or false generalizations about race, age, ethnic, linguistic, geographical or natural groups, religions, social, marital or family status, physical, developmental or mental attributes, gender or sexual orientation.⁴

Tolerance: Usually meant as a liberal attitude toward those whose race, religion, nationality, etc. is different from one's own. Since it has the connotation of 'put up with', today the term acceptance is preferred. That is, through anti-racism and equity work we aim to counter intolerance, but to achieve acceptance for all.⁴

Womyn: Womyn is one of a number of alternate spellings which some promote as a way to remove the perception of gender bias from the English word women. Other variants include wimmin, wom!n, womban, and woman. All are pronounced the same as the conventional terms. Feminists who prefer to use these words feel that the terms "woman/women" relate to the historical and ongoing social subordination of women, since the word "man" is seen as an exclusively male term, implying that women are a subset of men, or a deviation from the norm. Those who argue in favour of the terms like womyn contend that they have the right to choose how a term referring to them is spelled, rather than be compelled to use words that evolved in what they see as a patriarchal society. Feminists in favour of the modification argue that language is a powerful tool that shapes the way people perceive their surroundings, and even how they understand gender and gender roles. They also feel that the current form of the words do not value women. Therefore, some feminists see these changes as part of a movement to correct what they consider inherent biases in language.⁷

References

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