

AGIR Annual Report

April 1st 2015 - March 31st 2016

English version

Acknowledgements

This year, we could not have adhered to our mission, nor completed our daily activities, without the support of so many people and organizations that often remain invisible, even though they are crucial to our continued success. We would like to recognize the contribution of our board of directors, volunteers, members, social work stage student Cynthia Beaudry, as well as organizations like Arc-en-ciel d’Afrique, L’Astérisque, the Centre for Gender Advocacy and METISS. We would especially like to thank all of AGIR’s supported members who had the courage to fight not only for full access to their fundamental rights, but also to freely live and love without fear. Thank you for allowing us to accompany you and to support you in your migration process and for reminding us that AGIR’s mission remains pertinent and necessary.

Introduction

This report provides an overview of AGIR's activities from April 1st 2015 until March 31st 2016 (this time period is consistent with AGIR's fiscal year). AGIR activities include Board of Directors' general and sub-committee meetings, along with a summary of the various initiatives undertaken this year. This report provides an opportunity to present the various successes and challenges that AGIR encountered this year, and concludes with presenting our proposed action plan for the coming year. To begin, this report includes AGIR's "heart beat" (basis of unity) and a summary of last year's Annual General Meeting (AGM).

AGIR's Heartbeat (basis of unity)

Who we are

- We believe everyone deserves to live a life free of violence, threat, fear and coercion.
- We believe that everyone is equal regardless of their migrant status.
- We believe in social, political and economic rights for all migrants.
- We believe all types of families have the right to stay together.
- We are aware of and working against systems of intersecting oppressions, including, but not limited to, patriarchy, misogyny, racism, colonialism, xenophobia, ableism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism, transphobia, homophobia, etc.

How we do things

- We apply an anti-oppressive, non-judgemental and person-centred approach.
- We cultivate a respectful, inclusive, and welcoming environment where everyone feels safe(r) and secure.
- We build community with the participation of LGBTQ migrants.
- Our decision making process is informed and guided by the experiences and needs of LGBTQ migrants.
- We apply the principles of consensus-based decision making and community organizing.
- We respect and value all individuals' journeys, skills, knowledge and contributions.
- We are committed to working in solidarity with organizations and groups that can help us achieve our vision.
- We are accountable to our members, collaborators and allies.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM) 2015

Summary

AGIR's previous AGM was held on June 29th, 2015, in room 404 at the Centre 2110, at 1500 de Maisonneuve West, in Montréal. This was AGIR's fifth AGM. During this AGM, AGIR voted to pass the 2014 AGM meeting minutes, and the year-end financial and activity reports. In addition, 4 new board members were elected, 2 were re-elected, and 3 continued their mandates.

New board members:

- Alein Ortegon (French administrator)
- Carmen Ng (Treasurer)
- Liz Edith Acosta (General board member)
- Sofiane Chouiter (General board member)

Re-elected board members:

- Edward Lee
- Niel Ladode

The adopted priorities

Priority #1: Develop fundraising strategies and/or funding applications.

Priority #2: Find a physical space for AGIR to use for our work.

Priority #3: Continue to increase AGIR support team capacity. Develop and implement AGIR support work recruitment and training.

Priority #4: Create an active External Communications Committee.

Priority #5: Develop more collective activities for AGIR members.

AGIR 2015-2016

The Board of Directors (BoD)

Composition of BoD and calendar of meetings

Composition

The AGIR Board of Directors (BoD) is composed of nine members: Six general members, two administrators (French and English) and one treasurer

- Administrator (French): Alein Ortegon (elected);
- Administrator (English): Akki Mackay (second year of their mandate)
- Treasurer: Carmen Ng (elected);
- General Board Members: Sofiane Chouiter, Liz Edith Acosta, Niel Ladode, Edward Lee (elected), as well as Betty Iglesias, Christina Olivieri (second year of their mandate).

Calendar of meetings

To ensure the achievement of our mission and priorities adopted at the AGM, the BoD met approximately once a month. These meetings were organized and prepared by the administrators. The administrators prepare the agenda, write the meeting minutes, and ensure people follow through with their tasks.

2015 :	July 12 th , August 23 rd , October 25 th , November 15 th
2016 :	March 3 rd , March 31 st , April 14 th , April 28 th , May 30 th

BoD sub-committees

The Board is composed of 2 sub-committees: the support committee as well as the external communications committee. These sub-committees aim to implement not only the priorities that were adopted at the last AGM but also to implement AGIR's everyday activities.

Support and accompaniment with LGBTQ migrants

AGIR's Support Team offers support and accompaniment to LGBTQ individuals and couples as they progress through the refugee system or an immigration process, and/or with their integration and settlement, in Montreal.

The types of support and accompaniment that AGIR offers include:

- one-to-one meetings focused on active listening
- check-ins and follow-ups by phone call, text message and email
- referrals to social services and to community organizations related to legal services, housing, employment, education, healthcare, social activities, etc.
- providing accurate information about immigration and refugee processes
- providing letters of support for refugee hearings, Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) appeals, sponsorship applications, Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRAA) and Humanitarian and Compassionate Considerations (H & C) applications
- attending refugee hearings and detention reviews in a support role
- supporting people in their relationships with professionals and services providers, including accompaniment to appointments
- peer support
- group support focused on mutual aid

Most LGBTQ migrants who contact AGIR are referred to us by their immigration or refugee lawyer. Many are also referred to us by service providers and community organizations. As well, some

LGBTQ migrants learn about AGIR through word of mouth, such as from people who have previously been supported members.

Support Team approach

AGIR'S Support Team engages in an anti-oppressive, non-judgemental and person-centered approach to support and accompaniment work. Our support work focuses on active listening, harm reduction and relationship-building skills, with the aim of empowering supported members to make their own informed decisions. Support Team volunteers cultivate a confidential, respectful and welcoming 'space' so that supported members can feel safe(r) and (more) secure. They respect and value supported members' unique life journeys, their cultural experiences, their knowledge and skills, their fears and hopes. Support Team volunteers also critically reflect on and continually develop their practice of AGIR's approach, as well as their skills in support and accompaniment work.

The Support Team

AGIR's Support Team is composed of volunteers who identify as LGBTQ. Most came to Canada as immigrants or refugees, and most are racialized. All are knowledgeable in Canadian refugee and/or immigration processes and of the multifaceted challenges faced by LGBTQ migrants to Montreal, to Quebec and to Canada. At the same time, Support Team volunteers come from a variety cultural, educational, professional and life experience backgrounds, and each draws on their respective areas of knowledge, skills and experience to enhance their work in support and accompaniment.

AGIR's Support Team is a resourceful, generous and creative bunch. The support and accompaniment work they do is entirely on a voluntary basis (without any expenses reimbursed). Support Team volunteers organize themselves to be able to support and accompany LGBTQ migrants while at the same time being in paid employment and/or continuing their studies, and attending to other commitments in their lives. AGIR has no offices or equipment, so Support Team volunteers use their own resources, along with their wits and savvy, to stay in touch with

supported members, find and get them the information and referrals they need, arrange to meet with them in safe spaces, and so on.

AGIR's Support Team Volunteers 2015-2016

Support and accompaniment with LGBTQ refugee claimants:

Alein Ortegon, Betty Iglesias, Christina Olivieri, Cynthia Beaudry, Edward Lee and Sofiane Chouiter

Support and accompaniment with LGBTQ migrants navigating immigration processes and/or integration and settlement in Montreal:

Individual support: Betty Iglesias, Edward Lee and Sofiane Chouiter

Group support: Christina Olivieri and Cynthia Beaudry

Supported Members

Demographics, Processes, Outcomes

For the period of April 1st, 2015, to March 31st, 2016, AGIR supported 35 LGBTQ migrants through the refugee claim process, an immigration process or with their integration and settlement in Montreal. These “supported members” of AGIR arrived in Canada from a number of regions across the world, from 16 countries of origin: Cameroon, Chile, Columbia, France, Ghana, Guinea, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Saint-Vincent and the Grenadines, South Africa, Syria and Togo. The majority of these supported members are men, along with 10 women, 2 trans women and 2 trans men.

This year, AGIR supported LGBTQ migrants whose ages ranged from their early twenties to their mid-fifties, of which 75% were in the range of 20 to 29 years old. Like previous years, supported members had a diversity of educational, career and life experience backgrounds. As in recent years, the vast majority of this year's supported members – 27 individuals out of 35 – were progressing through the refugee claimant system, having fled their countries of origin due to being persecuted for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and were seeking protection

in Canada. Of note, 80% of the LGBTQ refugee claimants supported by AGIR this year came from 6 countries across West Africa alone.

LGBTQ refugee claimants supported by AGIR

As indicated in the table below, 17 AGIR supported members received positive decisions on their refugee claims, recognizing them as refugees or protected persons. On March 31st, 2016, four supported members were at various stages of the appeals process, while one supported member was still awaiting the decision after their hearing and five supported members were awaiting the scheduling of new hearing dates.

AGIR Supported Members' Outcomes and Progress through the Canadian Refugee System – April 1st, 2015 to March 31st, 2016	
Accepted as Refugees or Protected Persons	17
- <i>Positive decision on refugee claim after hearing</i>	17
- <i>Negative decision on refugee claim after hearing, then positive decision through appeals process</i>	0
Negative decision on refugee claim after hearing, currently in appeals process	4
Waiting for decision after hearing	1
Waiting for new hearing date to be scheduled	5
Total:	27

LGBTQ migrants supported by AGIR in their immigration processes

The immigration processes that 2 AGIR supported members were navigating outside of the refugee claim system included applying for permanent residency and having a name change officially recognized despite not yet having Canadian citizenship. Both of these processes are ongoing and these supported members continue to access AGIR support.

LGBTQ migrants supported by AGIR in their integration and settlement in Montreal

This year, 6 LGBTQ migrants (who were not in the refugee or an immigration process) accessed AGIR's support for specific needs related to their integration and settlement in Montreal. AGIR provided these supported members with information and referrals to organizations and resources related to housing, employment, health and social services, and legal clinics, among others. As well, one of these supported members was supported with their complaint to Quebec's Labour Relations Board (Commission des normes du travail). Furthermore, 3 of these supported members participated in AGIR's first Support Group for LGBTQ Migrants.

“Thank you to AGIR for supporting me through to my hearing, which was a very difficult period for me. I was accompanied by a wonderful support volunteer who kept my spirits up while I was going through very difficult moments like having to recount my life to people I didn't know. Her support really helped me, her little tips that I put into practice, to alleviate the fear inside of me. I say thank you and I ask AGIR to continue supporting LGBT migrants in need.”

“The support that AGIR gave me in a particular moment in my life was a true gift. It was a difficult period and AGIR's help was more than appreciated. To be there, present and listening to me... a small thing for AGIR, but it was a huge thing for me. What would I have done if AGIR wasn't there? All that AGIR did means a lot to me. I am both moved and grateful. I will never be able to thank AGIR enough. Thank you!.”

In recent years, the reforms to the refugee system have proven challenging for AGIR's Support Team's ability to support several individuals at once through such a rushed and intense process. So, over this past year, AGIR added two new support and accompaniment volunteers to the Support Team, as well as hosted a Master of Social Work student who ran a pilot project Support Group for LGBTQ Migrants along with providing support and accompaniment to individuals.

These additions resulted in the Support Team's improved capacity for offering support in four languages (French, English, Arabic and Spanish), an increase in the number of supported members who were co-supported by two or more volunteers (instead of by just one), and the opportunity for roughly a third of our supported members to have engaged in mutual aid and community building through the 'safe space' of the Support Group.

Pilot Project: Support Group for LGBTQ Migrants

This year, AGIR collaborated with a Master of Social Work student from the University of Québec in Montreal (UQAM), Cynthia Beaudry, to develop AGIR's first support group! Meeting our strategic priorities for 2015-2016, this pilot project gave 11 English-speaking supported members (2 women, 9 men; 8 from West Africa, 2 from the Middle-East and 1 from South-America) the opportunity to participate in 10 group sessions during the coldest months of the year.

Thanks to AGIR Support Team volunteer Christina Olivieri who co-facilitated the group, financial support from QPIRG Concordia and QPIRG McGill, l'AstérisK who lent us their space and African Rainbow who gave us free tickets to the Massimadi film festival, participants were able to benefit from discussions (e.g., "how it's going", "homosexuality", "Montreal activities", "culture shock", "family", "the hearing") and activities (e.g. Head and Hands sexual health workshop, traditional meals prepared by participants) and outings (e.g. LGBTQ Afro-Caribbean movies) during which they developed friendships and supported each to better integrate into their new lives in Montreal.

This project led to many positive results. For example, the majority of participants said that they felt better able to face their personal difficulties due to their participation in the group, and that

the group helped them to better accept themselves as LGBTQ people. The project also supported the capacity of AGIR's support team by diminishing participants' need for individual support.

Following group participants' request, we decided to organize social activities during the summer and to work towards finding ways to continue support groups in the fall. Amongst other things, we plan to improve the groups by prioritizing francophone members', women's and trans people's participation, as well as the cultural diversity of participants. We also want to make sure that the co-facilitators' identities are more representative of participants' experiences, and prioritize supported members' participation in co-facilitation.

Thank you so much to everyone who contributed to making this project a success!

“Participating in the group erased my fear of isolation as I arrive in Canada. Because I was chanced to meet wonderful friends and facilitators who made me feel at home.”

“I felt supported by group members because of their views, ideas and opinions they share makes me happy and welcome to the group.”

“Participating in the group erased my fear of isolation as I arrive in Canada. Because I was chanced to meet wonderful friends and facilitators who made me feel at home.”

“The group helped me express myself as gay person. In French class I tell my colleagues: moi et mon [chum], I'm not hiding that I [have a boyfriend].”

“It helped me to really discover myself and have started applying our rules, regulation and norms in my personal life.”

“I felt more confident to face my personal difficulties because the group gave me the exposure to express myself freely e.g. during my hearing I was straight forward and was with confident because of my encounter with the group.”

The Support Committee

In November 2015, members of the AGIR's Support Committee (which oversees and contributes to the work of support and accompaniment) had the opportunity to participate in the Canadian Council for Refugees' Consultation in Hamilton, Ontario, by co-organizing and moderating a workshop on LGBTQ refugee mental health. Through facilitated round table discussions, workshop participants addressed the lack of awareness and training around the mental health and wellness needs of LGBTQ refugees. Facilitators and participants also shared their experiences, practices and insights into ways of better welcoming and serving LGBTQ refugees in our organizations and communities, and of better understanding and supporting their wellness needs without reinforcing or creating new forms of oppression.

External Communications Committee Report

This was AGIR's first year with an active External Communication Committee. The committee held 5 meetings between April 1st 2015 and March 31st 2016: April 2015, May 2015, September 20th 2015, October 18th 2015, January 28th 2016.

The roles, responsibilities and tasks of the committee are outlined in AGIR's bylaws as follows:

- Answer email inquiries from potential supported members
- Answer email inquiries from potential collaborators and/or partners
- Answer email inquiries from other service providers that wish to communicate with AGIR
- Update information on AGIR's Facebook page and Facebook group
- Send out invitations to AGIR general members (AGA, Christmas party, social events)
- Manage AGIR's calendar of events (PRIDE Community Day, journee de lutte contre l'homophobie, conferences, etc)
- Input new general members into database

The main tasks and projects that the committee worked on during the 2015/2016 year were as follows:

- Creating a set of guidelines outlining how AGIR should proceed when receiving endorsement requests from other organizations (for example, a request for AGIR to formally endorse a demonstration), as well as procedures for ongoing partnerships between AGIR and other organizations.
- The creation of an online database to catalogue contact information of our various members (such as supported members, general members, and potential volunteers). The next step related to this task will be to create e-mail lists for specific types of members (such as a "supported members" e-mail list), so that AGIR can contact members more efficiently.

- The reorganizing of AGIR’s primary e-mail account. This task included deleting old e-mails, and creating folders to sort existing e-mails, such as “endorsement requests”, “support requests”, and “volunteers”.
- With the support of AGIR’s treasurer, who sits on the committee, the development of long-term fundraising strategies: the development of a monthly donor program, and the creation of a one-minute animated promotional video to be used for fundraising purposes, and for the general promotion of AGIR. Currently, a script has been developed for the video. Next steps include animation and video voiceover.

Goals for the upcoming year for the committee include:

- The redevelopment of AGIR’s website.
- Increased social media presence.
- Creating a more efficient system for responding to e-mails, and forwarding e-mails to the appropriate people within AGIR (ex. the treasurer, the support committee)
- The development of a volunteer coordinator position, possibly to be filled by current English Administrator and member of the External Communications Committee, Akki Mackay.

Research

In March 2016, METISS (Migration et ethnicité dans les interventions en santé et en services sociaux) researchers Edward Ou Jin Lee (who is also an AGIR board member) and Habib El-Hage received funding from METISS for a « projet de valorisation ». This projet aims to develop an LGBTQ migrant support work practice guide. This guide incorporates key findings from the AGIR - METISS research report (published in April 2015), along with previously developed workshops, in order to present a comprehensive practice guide for present and incoming AGIR support workers. This practice guide would increase AGIR's capacity to provide support to LGBTQ migrants (particularly refugees) and could serve as a resource for various LGBTQ and migrant community organisations and social services in Montreal.

METISS (Migration et Ethnicité dans les Interventions de Santé et de Service social)

<http://www.sherpa-recherche.com/fr/sherpa/equipes-recherche/metiss/>

Proposed AGIR Work Priorities

April 1st 2016 – March 31st 2017

- Priority #1: Continue to develop, and start to implement, fundraising strategies and funding applications.
- Priority #2: Find a more stable and permanent physical space for AGIR to use for our work.
- Priority #3: Continue to develop support team capacity, and start to implement recruitment and training strategies.
- Priority #4: Start to develop strategies to better integrate volunteers in all areas of AGIR's work.
- Priority #5: Continue to offer collective activities to AGIR members.

Annual report contributors

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Testimonies by supported members