



OPEN FORUM ON GENDER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON CAMPUS

OCTOBER 16, 2017

Note: This event was livestreamed by TVM Television. Livestream times are listed throughout the minutes. The livestream can be accessed at <https://tvmtelevision.com/videos/open-forum-on-gender-and-sexual-violence-on-campus>

TVM Livestream 8:30

Connor Spencer welcomes the group and thanks everyone for being here. This is the second open forum. This is an open space in that anyone can walk in or out as they need, and the Peer Support Centre is located directly upstairs.

Spencer acknowledges that most people in this space are here with their own experiences which are really varying, and encourages everyone to be aware of this. This is a place to ask questions, state concerns, and direct comments.

Spencer highlights that this work around sexual violence on campus has always been a student-led movement, and any solutions that exist on this campus were largely brought about because of students, and it is up to students to keep pushing this conversation forward to address some of the many violences that occur on campus in different spaces and by different people, and also how we are all complicit in this violence. A motion was just passed through council acknowledging rape culture on campus. Spencer encourages everyone to talk to their elected representatives, and to hold Councillors and executives accountable. SSMU has a history of passing different motions and then not really doing anything to work on the themes that they address, and this is one that is especially important, especially with some of the recent conversations that are happening.

Like most people, Spencer saw the #metoo campaign surfacing on social media, and wants to acknowledge those who can't or choose not to identify themselves, and also wants to give a shout-out to those who are watching through the livestream and want to be a part of the conversation but can't be here because the way that we set up the rooms do not make these conversations accessible to the people they are most important for. Hopefully we can work together to address that in the future.

Connor Spencer reiterates that this space is for questions, thoughts, concerns, and if people want to share stories, they hope that we hold this space for that. They remind folks that there is a livestream, so just to be aware that what people share will be available for others to check in with, so it is up to folks' comfort level what they choose to share.



For those who were not around last semester, Connor Spencer explains that there were allegations that resulted in the resignation of two executives, and a conversation. One of the executives had over 12 anonymous disclosures, and a group called the Community Disclosure Network brought this forth to SSMU to see how they would handle that they couldn't really take any formalized route to address the issue and the communities that he was a part of. Part of the work that they did ended in a recommendation to write a policy that specifically addresses sexual and gendered violence in the SSMU. This is still very much a conversation phase. There were consultations done last year, via open forums and also closed spaces, for survivors. This is building on the work that has been happening in grassroots forms for years and years, and this is not SSMU starting this conversation. Hopefully we can find a way for SSMU as an institution to support the grassroots movements that have always been happening on campus, so we are looking to see what the membership thinks, generally or specifically. We can discuss questions, suggestions, routes that have not been taken, etc. The hope is to continue consultations throughout this semester and into next semester, with maybe a draft being made. This will largely be directed by what students have to say. If there is anything that people are uncomfortable sharing in this space, we have an anonymous form that is linked to on the event and in listservs, and the only two people who read these are Connor Spencer and Maya Koparkar, the VP Internal.

TVM Livestream 18:15

Connor Spencer opens to space for anyone who wants to share.

A member has a general question. They ask how the SSMU hopes this sessions and other sessions like this will inform the draft, and how they hope consultation will be used. Connor Spencer answers that one of the things they have to keep doing is keep creating the space, and also criticize who is or isn't in the room, and we need to problematize this a bit more. We are still very early in the stages, and what is important in creating the first draft that will only go to stakeholder groups who know a lot more about this, and what they are hoping with consultations is knowing what the membership generally feels about conversations happening with administration, or with grassroots movements, and where we fit in between that. Although there are spaces working on these themes, they aren't always open to everyone, and we are hoping to avoid that as we move forward. We have a lot more work to do and a lot more to learn, so hopefully through these consultations we will know a bit more about what we need to know and what needs to be done.

A member asks, based on the Our Turn report, what the most important areas are to address in the first draft. Connor Spencer responds that this is a personal interpretation so if others have anything else, please share. There seem to be three main levels where this work is happening. It's happening at the grassroots level, very slowly at the SSMU, and it's happening at the admin level. The admin and grassroots levels are much more developed. The Our Turn score gives a tangible tool to be able to engage with our university level policy, and it highlights that where McGill loses the most points is that it isn't a stand-alone policy. This is unique to Quebec, where currently the provincial government is going through what is going to be in a bill that mandates



sexual violence policies at schools, but right now it is not clear if it being a stand-alone bill will be required. So right now, from the 14 schools that were fully graded, it was only Concordia and McGill that didn't have a stand-alone policy, and they were the only schools in Quebec that were fully graded. So the scores were most heavily publicized, but it's the least exciting part about the report. It is one of the many tools in that report, and for SSMU, what is most exciting is that it's a toolkit that is training student unions to look at the movements already happening on campus, and how to support them. It's about creating channels and networks and the role that the union plays in that communication channel. This has also received really important criticism, one of the biggest being that this labour done around sexual violence is unpaid, and the folks that are doing this labour are majority women and non-binary folk, and often people of colour. The delegitimization of the labour that goes into this work is something that SSMU has been complicit in in the past, and Spencer really hopes that moving forward we can find a way to change this, which is also a tenet of the Our Turn report. There are problems with the McGill policy, but it isn't the worst and a lot of work went into it. The Our Turn gives just specific things to adjust, which is really valuable. They've had conversations with admin that hopefully will allow them to advocate for these specific things that may be easier than creating a stand-alone policy.

The member follows up asking how not being a stand-alone policy will affect things and if it will compromise its effectiveness. Spencer responds that a stand-alone policy means it doesn't refer to any other policies in order to be effective, but right now our policy goes through the code of student conduct. Basically, what it means is the same people who typically deal with academic infractions who are dealing with sexual violence, which obviously has its drawbacks. This code also applies only to students, which means the technical reporting measures and disciplinary actions are hard to apply to faculty or staff. However, the code of student conduct revisions are happening now under the dean of students, and because it probably won't be in the next few months that a stand-alone policy will be created, it's important to understand that those revisions are directly related to how the sexual violence policy is interpreted. Knowing that revisions will affect how the sexual violence policy is enacted is important to keep in mind.

A member asks what difference not having a stand-alone policy has in its effectiveness. Connor Spencer responds that it means it doesn't exist in its own ecosystem, but it needs to refer to other documents and other policies in order to understand how the sexual violence policy is read and implemented. That makes it already a little bit more inaccessible, because it isn't all in one document. It also doesn't specifically mandate trainings around sexual violence for everyone implicated at every stage in the student code of conduct, which kind of creates a reliance on previous systems that could maybe harm survivors or folks who are trying to access the policy, in that the disciplinary measures listed were not made specifically for addressing sexual violence. Relying on the code of student conduct doesn't properly address the specific context of sexual violence cases.

Connor Spencer asks if folks have any thoughts on the rape culture that exists on campus, how SSMU is complicit in this, and what needs to be done in terms of conversations that need to be started and work that needs to be done.



Connor Spencer says something that came up in a previous consultation was the drinking culture and drinking events that SSMU condones, and how SSMU can say that it's going to try to address the sexual violence that happens in our communities when we are aware that the events SSMU creates are spaces where this sometimes happens.

A member says it is important to keep in mind, when looking at these large events, that often we come in with the idea of changing the whole event from the outside, when sometimes it needs to be changed from the inside. The member worked closely with the frosh community this summer to bring in new policies around disclosures, coordinators, and leaders, so there is a lot of room in these communities to address violence. There is sometimes an easy target when we talk about rape culture, and a lot of incidents happen when drugs and alcohol are involved, but it needs to be looked at in the bigger picture, besides just these events on campus.

Spencer says drawing off of this, it also highlights the fact that a lot of this work is being done, sometimes invisibly, and this maybe moves us into the question of how effective a policy can be, and how we can use it to support work that is already being done without mandating even more work.

A member says one thing that can be done is increasing funding for groups that work to combat rape culture, like Rez Project. Connor Spencer agrees, and this goes back to fluff policies and saying we are committing to things. It also goes back to issues of representation, equity, social justice, etc, and how we don't necessarily structure ourselves as an institution that really understands the financial implications, and we need to look at the bigger things past just writing a policy. We need to look at how to restructure ourselves. For instance, the executives are very overworked and it isn't unusual to work over 100 hours a week, and still not be on top of everything. We have to make sure we restructure so that something as important as this conversation isn't led by folks that are overworked and underslept and have a million other things to do too. So we need to look at the internal changes that need to happen to address the concerns of students and stakeholder groups.

TVM Livestream 40:00

Connor Spencer explains that we don't really have the answers to a lot of things, and these consultations might show that we are just kind of searching for answers, and in this conversation the execs don't have the information, and in fact they have much less information than many groups on campus, and it's important to have this hard conversation. Maybe the executives aren't the best people to be leading this conversation, so we need to work on how to subvert tools meant for top-down change so that they work in a bottom-up fashion, and one of the most exciting things about Our Turn is that it provides the tools to change the tools. So trying to have accessible spaces and a conversation that isn't rushed is important. We need to create something, whether a policy or not, that can stop something like what happened last year from ever happening again.



A member asks where Spencer sees this policy going. All of the events that happened last year were horrible, but nothing really seems to have changed, like on the SSMU website there is no information on resources. It seems like we are kind of brushing this off, so where will this policy actually fit. Are we just going to keep having facebook events for forums? The member acknowledges that this isn't all on Spencer. Connor Spencer replies that the member is absolutely right in that resources are lacking, and there isn't really any explicit document that deals with sexual violence, which is partly how we got into this situation last year. So there isn't a system right now for dealing with this kind of violence, which is part of what we hope this policy will do. In a perfect world, we would find through consultation what the next steps are in creating policy, and what kind of resources students need that don't already exist on this campus. This is kind of a puzzle, and SSMU needs to figure out what resources are missing. This might include a lack of resources on the website, as the member mentioned. It also might include training, for all elected officials and clubs and services. Spencer hears a lot from their end about communities where sexual violence is happening, and no one really knows how to deal with it, and how they can support survivors properly. A lot of the conversation on this campus has been about how we support survivors, and we haven't talked a lot about how we deal with abusers. Part of why the conversation at SSMU has been so unclear is that we don't really know what to do with abusers. There are things like the blacklist, where certain people aren't allowed at events, which is kind of preventative and kind of disciplinary. This has kind of just developed on its own without a policy, so if people don't know that it exists then how do they use this? So maybe where SSMU can go is putting all of these little grassroots initiatives and resources in one place. A big thing is that folks who have experienced sexual assault often don't know where to look, or don't know if they have a lot of choice, and this is something really important that SSMU can tangibly do. How can we offer folks who have experienced sexual assault choice in terms of pursuing a reporting process or not. Right now, only one exists, through the sexual violence policy. But if folks don't want to go through that specific resource, they are kind of on their own right now. So an informed choice is kind of the most important thing in the pro-survivor approach to this conversation, and hopefully SSMU can implicate itself with this, using policy to kind of put resources all in one place, or maybe create a system, or just kind of mobilize the rights that members have in order to give them something to point back to to create a case. Hopefully by hearing folks and giving folks space to share concerns and experiences, we will be able to highlight and identify what the hole is that we need to be filling.

A member notices that it is often the same people engaging in these conversation about rape culture, and they often have a lot of experience leading these conversations, but a concern might be how to get a broader group of people to engage in this conversation. The member has often wondered how we can really reach people and have them understand that rape culture exists and that they should care about it, and how we as a student union should be involved in that.

TVM Livestream 51:10

A member adds onto the point about addressing rape culture, sharing an experience that many times they have heard people use the word "rape" to say things like "I was raped" or "I feel like I



have been raped” to describe a situation that is not even related to this, just as a general expression to say they feel they were ripped off or something wasn’t fair. This language really needs to change, so how do we get people to care, realize that this language really matters. The member agrees that rape culture needs to be addressed and it is great that SSMU is passing the policy on rape culture because it is definitely a big problem.

Connor Spencer says they were having a conversation with someone, explaining how they did the press conference for Our Turn, and someone semi-disrupted the press conference saying things that were really not appropriate for the space, and for some reason this disturbed Spencer a lot less than when they put forward a motion at Council to address rape culture and no one said anything. We read the motion, it was voted on, and no one had anything to say. This terrifies Spencer. It made them realize the conversation about the tools we give each other to talk about these things, or how we stop each other from talking about these things, and in a room full of elected representatives from faculties where this happens, the movers and Spencer were a little surprised to have no one say anything. They also made a point of asking if anyone had just statements to make, not even necessarily debate or questions, and there was just silence. That kind of showed Spencer that we need to address what the specific things are that elected student representatives can be doing and how to have the tools to have these conversations. There are people in all of these faculties that are really working on this conversation, but Spencer missed an opportunity to mandate these representatives to go back and really start a conversation within their councils or general assemblies about what representatives can do specifically to address rape culture that exists. This also kind of highlights that this top-down approach leaves words being applauded, but we don’t necessarily have the tools, or there is fear around engaging in some of this. The fear is valid, and it is clear that the conversation at that representation level is new and we don’t know what to do with it, but I am determined that we can have these conversations. So often the labour is put on the same folks over and over again, and others just don’t really want to touch it. This is kind of like the #metoo campaign which is again putting the labour on the folks who have already identified themselves, and have been trying to push these conversation forward, and it doesn’t implicate those who haven’t engaged yet, and Spencer hopes that is what can begin happening. With 24,000 members and only 7 executives, it is hard to be in touch perfectly with the membership, but SSMU is still more in touch than admin, so hopefully they can use this to kind of move the conversation forward.

A member asks about how we can address a broad range of groups while also addressing all of the people who exist within those groups. The member had a rough experience calling out rape culture last year, which became really messy. The larger student union might have better frameworks for addressing things than smaller clubs, but these clubs still exist within the larger organization. So how do we address spaces that are organized differently? How do we get to the structures that don’t exist in certain groups that are within our larger community?

Connor Spencer is so glad the member brought this to the space. Even in SSMU there is a problem that it’s the same people all the time, and it’s disconnected from some other communities. We’re talking about a problem that touches many communities that SSMU doesn’t



necessarily reach, so how can we even pretend to address that? And the answer is we can't, but I don't want that to stop us from trying. It's the silence that worries Spencer more than anything. Spencer doesn't have the answer, and wants everyone to keep reflecting on that until we do have the answer. Spencer says CLE (Campus Life and Engagement) has set up a weekly space in the SSMU building for students who live off campus, and this shows how we are still looking for how to create spaces for various different groups, and how SSMU can represent students who aren't always the ones engaged in this. Hopefully we can touch some of their worlds as well with the work that we do here.

A member asks what the biggest issues are that SSMU faces in making this policy as successful as possible. Connor Spencer responds that the biggest problems are lack of resources, and lack of expertise. SACOMSS has an incredible amount of expertise, and we need to acknowledge that and figure out what the implication of working in the second level is for the work that has already been done at the first level, and how to not override this work. The main challenges are thus lack of resources, lack of expertise in the rooms (so we will need to make sure the right people with the right expertise are in the rooms), and making sure it doesn't overrun the work that is already being done.

TVM Livestream 1:05:00

A member says it is very important that we keep giving SACOMSS attention and resources, and that we continue to encourage it. As some students have heard, the SSMU building is closing in early 2018, and in the future it might be good to consider moving the physical SACOMSS location. Currently it is right beside the student bar, and that can be a hard place for some people, so it might be good in the future to reconsider the location of SACOMSS.

A member says that while the location being next to the bar may not be perfect, in 2013 SACOMSS was offered a different location but turned it down because it would be very obvious that a student was heading up the stairs to drop into SACOMSS, so the basement location provides an element of confidentiality. It's always something that SACOMSS is working on and trying to figure out.

A member says that it's a really good point that maybe SACOMSS shouldn't be next to the bar, and there should maybe also be a conversation about accessibility too, especially in light of the construction that happened last year. Perhaps the resources can be put in different locations, but of course it can also be really difficult to find spaces on campus for these locations. But maybe having more than one location could be a solution.

A member asks, considering the lack of resources that SSMU faces, how does Spencer foresee the need for resources being fulfilled in a perfect scenario, versus how the reality is. Connor Spencer replies that in a perfect scenario, students would not keep voting down the base fee increase, which is one of the reasons why there is such little funding. There is a chronic underfunding of these kinds of projects, and a reason is a change of mentality, but also just a lack of resources. SSMU has a set amount of money, and despite inflation, that continues to be



the money. Every year new projects are initiated, which adds up and suddenly there isn't enough funding. A base fee increase would be ideal, but Spencer wants to shout out student groups that are doing such great work while trying to figure out how we can fix these things together. A big confusion this year has been the relationship between SSMU and QPIRG, which they are still trying to figure out. They need to figure out how this project can be supported, without other projects being hurt. Spencer is looking at the resource sharing between projects and seeing how certain types of funding can be moved. There are different pots of money that can only be used for certain things. It's been suggested by a stakeholder that a position be created for someone who isn't an executive to lead this movement, so Spencer is talking to QPIRG about whether there is funding that can be moved to hire student staff with expertise in policy and sexual assault, who doesn't have a conflict of interest. With executives, there is no real way of taking action against those who perpetuate sexual violence, which is a huge problem. Spencer thanks QPIRG for having these conversations.

A member asks if the budget allocation could be restructured based on a motion, or another tool to adjust how much money is given to sexual assault resources. Another member explains that SACOMSS and all other student services receive set budgets through student funding, so these are separate and can only be touched by the services. Other groups can use the clubs fund. Connor Spencer adds in that the VP experience sets the budget for the next year, so that's what they are working with this year. Spencer doesn't know how much power they have to change things, but will be advocating for a change in allocation. One of Spencer's biggest problems with the SSMU is that they often treat students as clients rather than as members of a union. We have to address this, and part of it is having a conversation about where money goes within SSMU and thus which programs are seen as important. Instead of why aren't members mobilized, the bigger question is what is SSMU not doing to get members interested. And some of it is that we aren't giving the support in the right places. Part of it is creating the right channels and making sure things are accessible and giving students the right time to actually access those channels.

TVM Livestream 1:18:20

A member asks how we can make sure to include students who aren't necessarily interested in SSMU. A lot of the funding seems to be connected to SSMU, so how can we make sure that it's accessible to more people. Connor Spencer responds that it's really hard and there isn't an answer yet, but part of it is that students will not get engaged if they don't feel represented. One of the issues with this executive was that we looked at it as a blank slate, but the reality is that this is a flawed institution and it is going to take many years of many good people to change the fact that students do not feel represented right now in this institution. If the members can't trust SSMU with basic democratic processes, how can they trust SSMU with gendered violence policies? It's going to be fluff unless SSMU gets the resources to do the work, and not enough resources are there right now for the executives and the student staff. So generally, within the conversation of sexual violence, SSMU needs to understand and recognize how it is implicated in the larger structures of violence, and how it perpetuates that violence. There needs to be a very real conversation about this. It's been years of students being taught to distance



themselves, and we need to make sure that the channels that do exist are more publicized. There needs to be more communication between the different offices and student groups and clubs and services. The work done here is important and deserves better from our systems.

A member asks how we can begin to use resources and address these issues when the proper trainings aren't in place across the membership. Connor Spencer says this point about training is a really important one. Another member explains that there are various types of trainings that go on on campus, and it might be difficult to implement one blanket training for everyone. The training for people who haven't been that interested in these issues might look different than additional training for groups that are already implicated in this work. How can we model our trainings to suit the people they are serving?

A member says that a question that should be considered too is why we need students to engage in SSMU. There is a bit of a thought process to this. So SSMU is large and applies to so many groups and it can be hard to feel like you exist within that system, so it should also be considered how we can break this down into smaller communities. Especially for smaller faculties that might be more meaningful. The SSMU consultations are good, but maybe we should also look at branching out into the communities that people have more of a stake in and might be more likely to engage in this culture change, and then we could bring these conversations back up to the larger level.

A member says this goes back to what SSMU's role is, and this consultation unfortunately is not wide student representation, so it might be really meaningful and worthwhile to branch out and to engage those people that are generally disinterested or dismissive.

TVM Livestream: 1:27:53

A member asks how we can make sure that smaller roundtable discussions are given the same weight as this larger forum. Connor Spencer replies that we need to empower smaller groups to know that what they do does matter and they do have power. Historically SSMU has held onto its power, and perhaps it can change by disseminating some of this power, even just by letting faculties know that they can speak up and disagree with SSMU. So a lot needs to be done with empowerment and letting groups know the power they already have. Spencer reached out to VP externals over the summers to see if they can hold their own forums within their faculties, and there was definitely interest among the Externals. A lot of people don't really know how to do that, so some of it will require sharing knowledge and learning, but faculties need to recognize they do have that power to start conversation among their own faculties, and they don't need to rely on the conversations that SSMU starts. More power in this conversation needs to be given to the faculties, because this conversation will have no tangible effect if it is top down. You can't have a top-down answer to a bottom-up problem.

A member asks how one can approach mobilizing while understanding that some people want to participate by staying silent and listening, and recognizing that this can be a really triggering topic. Connor Spencer replies that it's about setting up spaces, having things like livestreams



and anonymous forms, and also acknowledging the people who are in the space even when they're not in the space. Another member adds that it also is about recognizing that mobilization doesn't just mean getting folks in a room, or getting more posts on media, it's also about getting folks thinking about issues, which is a huge part about mobilization. Over the years that the member has been at McGill, they've realized it's not just about the demos and the forums, but also about the one-on-one conversations.

A member says that time is something that needs to be considered. It's a long process and things need to be done well, but there is also a sense of urgency, and there are likely students who have faced gendered violence within a SSMU context. Even when the policy comes out, how long will things like disciplinary processes take? It can be really difficult for survivors to have to keep revisiting details. The member asks what Spencer's views are on this issue of time. Connor Spencer responds that this is a tricky issue. It's about finding the place in between, and it's not clear where that balance is. They don't want to rush something, but they also don't want to leave people hanging. That's one of the scariest parts. They may not really know the answer until they've done it and they are in the place where they're ready to take this conversation to the next steps. Spencer acknowledges that this was a very important point, and wants to remind folks of the lived realities that are attached to this conversation, and this is really important to acknowledge in the conversation.

A member agrees with the importance of urgency. But while a lot of this talk is over SSMU and a SSMU policy and how SSMU can support students, we shouldn't forget that there is still support that exists on this campus already. It's important that students know that there are places they can go now, and resources they can utilize now.

Connor Spencer thanks everyone for being present during this conversation. This is like part 20 of the first step, and these conversations are going to continue, so thank you for being a part of that. Spencer will look at the live stream after that and find a way for minutes to be accessible so that conversations can be found in a way that doesn't take 2 hours to watch. Spencer invites anyone to speak to them after the forum if they would like, and thanks everyone for sitting through the forum.

TVM Livestream 1:39:06