RESEARCH REPORT

BUILDING COMMUNITY, FINDING BELONGING

How QTMAAWE Became Family and Home for Black Queer and Trans Newcomers in Windsor-Essex, Ontario, Canada

Carlo Handy Charles, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Windsor
Visiting Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor
Fellow, The French Collaborative Institute on Migration, CNRS, Paris

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DAYS OF RECOGNITION

Land Acknowledgement

This report was researched and written in Windsor-Essex, on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations — the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi — in the region known to the Anishinaabe as Waawiiyaatanong, where the river bends. This land, covered by the McKee Purchase Treaty of 1790, remains home to Indigenous peoples today, whose presence on and care for these lands and waters long predate the founding of Windsor and continue into the present. As a study of migration, displacement, and the search for queer belonging, this report acknowledges that the community-building it documents takes place on land shaped by colonial dispossession — and that honouring Indigenous sovereignty, histories, and the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is part of building the just and inclusive region this research envisions.

International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia

Each year on 17 May, communities around the world mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), commemorating the World Health Organization's 1990 decision to remove homosexuality from its classification of mental disorders. The day carries particular weight for the members of QTMAAWE, many of whom fled countries where their sexual orientations and gender identities remain criminalized and where visibility can cost a person their family, their safety, or their life. This report joins that global observance by affirming what participants themselves made clear: the freedom to live openly is not guaranteed by arrival in Canada alone — it must be built, protected, and celebrated in community.

World Refugee Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

This report also honours two observances recognized in Canada and around the world. World Refugee Day, on 20 June, celebrates the strength, courage, and contributions of people forced to flee their homes — including the refugee claimants, protected persons, and newcomers whose voices fill these pages. The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, on 21 March, commemorates the 1960 Sharpeville massacre and calls on all countries, Canada among them, to confront racism in every form. For the Black queer and trans migrants at the heart of this study, these two days are not separate: displacement and anti-Black racism intersect in their daily lives. Recognizing both is a reminder that welcoming refugees and dismantling racism are shared responsibilities — ones in which everyone in Windsor-Essex has a part to play.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, Black queer and trans migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and newcomers arrive in Windsor-Essex seeking safety from violence, persecution, and discrimination. While Canada offers protection, participants in this study described that arrival is often accompanied by loneliness, uncertainty, racism, financial hardship, and the challenge of rebuilding life in an unfamiliar place.

QTMAAWE was founded in 2024 by and for queer and trans migrants, after community members recognized that existing services did not adequately meet the needs of Black queer and trans newcomers. Since then, it has become a community hub providing safe spaces, peer support, settlement assistance, refugee claim support, advocacy, leadership opportunities, health promotion, and social connection to approximately 600 members.

This exploratory study, conducted in Summer 2025 through focus groups with 22 community members affiliated with QTMAAWE, examined how Black queer and trans newcomers experience belonging through the organization. Six major findings emerged:

- Isolation is one of the greatest challenges facing newcomers, often beginning immediately after arrival — and it can be devastating.
- Legal protection alone does not create belonging: participants navigate intersecting experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-immigrant discrimination, including within spaces presumed to be safe.
- QTMAAWE creates belonging through shared lived experience — participants described it as family, home, and the only space where all of their identities can coexist.
- Practical and emotional supports are interconnected: settlement help, job referrals, and legal literacy are most meaningful when delivered by people who share the community's experience — and community participation itself carries weight in refugee claims.
- Community gatherings foster healing and resilience: shared meals, wellness activities, Pride celebrations, and creative expression promote well-being collectively.
- QTMAAWE is becoming an important community institution, building partnerships across the region and beyond — but its sustainability requires investment.

The report situates these findings within the broader Canadian research landscape — showing that the patterns documented in Windsor-Essex recur across the country, and that peer-led community organizations are the most trusted and effective support this population has — and closes with recommendations for community organizations, funders, service providers, and the broader Windsor-Essex community.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report shares how a research study on community-building among Black queer and trans migrants and refugees in Windsor-Essex was designed and carried out. It is written for the community itself — for members and leadership of the Queer and Trans Migrant Advocacy Alliance of Windsor-Essex (QTMAAWE), for the newcomers whose experiences are at the heart of this research, and for the settlement agencies, legal aid providers, health and social service organizations, funders, and residents of Windsor-Essex who work alongside them or wish to.

It is written to be accessible rather than academic. The report explains why the study was needed, describes the legal and social conditions that shape the lives of Black queer and trans newcomers in our region, details — step by step — how the research was conducted, and shares what participants told us and what their experiences mean for our community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Carlo Handy Charles (he/him) is a researcher and Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Windsor, with appointments as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Michigan's Department of Sociology in Ann Arbor and Fellow at the CNRS French Collaborative Institute on Migration in Paris. Committed to research that serves the communities he studies, Dr. Charles partners with community-based organizations to strengthen their research and evaluation capacities and has served on and chaired equity committees at universities and professional organizations across Canada, the United States, and France. As a public policy advisor, he sat on the Toronto City Council's Francophone Affairs Advisory Committee from 2019 to 2026 and has advised multiple governmental initiatives. His research examines how international migration intersects with race, gender, sexualities, socioeconomic inequalities, and health among migrants and nonmigrants across the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe.

Believing research should reach beyond the university, he shares his findings through opinion-editorials (op-eds) and media interviews in outlets including The Conversation, The Toronto Star, Policy Options, The Globe and Mail, La Presse, and Le Monde, among others; through community-based research reports; and through research-based art, including the play *Kap O Mond!* (co-authored with Alice Carré in 2022), performed over 100 times across France and the French Caribbean, and the manga *Histoire de Louis* (2024). He is completing his first monograph, tentatively titled *Cross-Border Intimacies: Haitian Men Navigating Queer Relationships and Money Across Nations*, and co-editing a special issue titled "Queer Migrants in Transnational Social Spaces: Sexualized Geographies of Power" for the academic journal *Gender, Place & Culture* (expected in 2027). He holds a dual Ph.D. in Sociology and Geography from McMaster University and the Université des Antilles, an M.A. in Sociology and a Graduate Diploma in Migration and Refugee Studies from York University in Toronto, a *Maîtrise* in Sciences Humaines and Sociales and dual bachelor's degrees in Sociology and Psychology from the Université Lumière Lyon II. He is fluent in Haitian Creole, French, English, and Spanish, and he has limited fluency in Portuguese. For more information about his work and research, visit his website: https://carlohandycharles.com/

INTRODUCTION

Canada occupies a distinctive position in the world when it comes to LGBTQ+ migration. It is a country that formally protects queer and trans refugees — people fleeing persecution in their home countries because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics — while at the same time producing significant barriers to their integration once they arrive. For Black queer and trans migrants specifically, this contradiction is felt with particular force. They navigate overlapping systems of exclusion — tied to race, sexuality, gender identity, and immigration status — that the formal refugee process neither anticipates nor addresses.

Windsor-Essex receives a significant share of these newcomers. Many arrive with refugee claims pending, are housed in hotels and shelters, and receive some assistance with employment, healthcare, and language training while they wait for decisions on their claims. Moving to Canada allows many to express their gender and sexual identities freely for the first time. Yet freedom from persecution does not automatically translate into belonging. Many describe an overwhelming sense of social isolation and alienation as they adjust to life in a new city and country.

In 2024, a group of Black queer and trans migrants in Windsor responded to this isolation themselves by founding the Queer and Trans Migrant Advocacy Alliance of Windsor-Essex (QTMAAWE) — the first organization of its kind in the region. Created by and for queer and trans migrants, QTMAAWE works to foster safe, diverse, and inclusive spaces where its members can find safety, support, and empowerment as they build new lives here.



Before the organization: Black queer and trans newcomers at the first unofficial meeting spot in downtown Windsor, where the group gathered to talk about LGBTQ2S+ migrants' lived experiences from July 2023 onward. Photos courtesy of QTMAAWE.

This study asked a straightforward question with far-reaching implications: *how does a peer-led grassroots organization like QTMAAWE work to bridge the gap between legal protection and social belonging for Black queer and trans migrants in Windsor-Essex?* No prior study had examined how Black queer and trans migrants in Windsor-Essex, a mid-sized Canadian border city with the United States, experience and build community through an organization of this kind. This research, conducted in the Summer of 2025 through focus groups with 22 QTMAAWE-affiliated participants, is the first of its kind.

WHAT RESEARCH ALREADY TELLS US

This study builds on a substantial body of research on migration, queer community life, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ newcomers in Canada. Rather than reviewing that scholarship in detail here — two full academic papers in preparation by the author will do so in the future — a few key insights are worth stating plainly, because they shaped how this study was designed.

- Settlement systems meet legal needs better than relational ones. Research consistently shows that the distress refugees experience comes less from past trauma alone than from present-day stressors: disrupted social networks, economic precarity, and the loss of meaningful social roles. Community-centred responses — not only individual services — are what address these (Gold and Anderson 1994; Miller 1999; Nickels 1999; Stansbury et al. 2025).
- Social isolation is the central harm. Studies of African and Caribbean LGBTQ+ newcomers in Canadian cities find that isolation — produced by racism, homophobia, and immigration precarity acting together — is the primary driver of poor health outcomes. Community connection is not a nice-to-have; it measurably protects people's mental health (Logie et al. 2016; Ogunbajo et al. 2019; Nair 2019; Charles and Ngoumou 2024).
- Mainstream queer spaces and ethnic communities can each exclude. LGBTQ+ organizations and neighbourhoods often centre white, middle-class experiences, while immigrant and faith communities that offer racial and cultural solidarity may foreclose queer belonging. People whose identities cut across these categories can find themselves welcome nowhere in full (Eder, Staggenborg and Sudderth 1995; Gamson 1997; Sullivan 2009; Lovink 2010; D'Angelo 2020).
- Legal protection is not the same as belonging. Canadian research documents that formal refugee protection coexists with a determination process that expects claimants to perform recognizably "Western" LGBTQ+ identities to be found credible — expectations that disadvantage those who survived by concealment (Murray 2020; Tian 2020; Lee et al. 2021).
- Peer-led organizations are where integration happens. Studies across Canada find that LGBTQ+ migrants describe community-based, peer-led organizations — rather than formal settlement infrastructure — as the primary sites where meaningful integration, healing, and empowerment become possible (Chbat et al. 2023; Borges 2021; Alvarez 2021; Smith 2020; Lewis and Mills 2016).

Together, this research makes clear that the challenges facing Black queer and trans migrants cannot be understood one issue at a time. Being Black, queer or trans, and a migrant is not three separate disadvantages added together (Bowleg 2008); these dimensions of identity and exclusion interact and compound. This is the insight of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990, 2019) — a framework developed by Black feminist scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins — which guided every stage of this study, from its questions to its methods to its analysis. Intersectionality also carries a commitment: research should not merely describe inequality but work toward redressing it. In that spirit, this study treats QTMAAWE not simply as a subject of research but as a knowledge-producing community in its own right.



QTMAAWE protest in support of stopping LGBTQ+ refugees' deportation in November 2024. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

THE WINDSOR-ESSEX CONTEXT: WHERE LAW AND LIFE MEET

To understand why this study matters — and why it was conducted the way it was — it helps to understand the specific place where it happened. Windsor-Essex is not simply a backdrop; its geography, demographics, economy, and position in Canada's asylum system shape the daily lives of the people at the centre of this research.

A Region of Newcomers

Windsor-Essex is a mid-sized region of approximately 422,860 people on Canada's southern border with the United States, along the Detroit River. It is one of Ontario's most immigration-intensive regions. In 2021, 23.3% of the Windsor metropolitan area's population was foreign-born, and 31% of immigrants who arrived between 1980 and 2016 identified as refugees. The region's racialized population is substantial: roughly 18% of residents identified as members of a visible minority group in 2016, with Arab, Black, and South Asian residents forming the largest groups — the Black and Arab populations proportionally exceeding the Ontario average. Among recent immigrants, top countries of birth include Iraq, Syria, and India, and the region's newcomer population increasingly comes from the Global South — including sub-Saharan Africa, the region of origin of most participants in this study.

Yet despite this demographic profile, Windsor-Essex has no established commercial LGBTQ+ neighbourhood and has limited visible queer infrastructure. Settlement services were not designed for the intersecting needs of Black queer and trans migrants. The existing queer infrastructure that does exist tends to centre the needs of white queer communities. Economic conditions add further pressure: Windsor has had the highest child poverty rate among Ontario municipalities over 100,000 people, with 36.9% of children aged 0–5 living in low-income households in 2016 — a figure that reflects the broader economic precarity that structures life for newly arrived migrants. These conditions are not background details. They are the material environment in which QTMAAWE does its community-building work.

How Canada Decides Refugee Claims

The lives of most participants in this study are shaped by Canada's refugee determination system. Claims are governed by the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) and decided by the Refugee Protection Division of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). For claims based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics — known as SOGIESC claims — the IRB has issued specific guidance (Chairperson's Guideline 9, often called the SOGIE Guidelines) directing adjudicators to be sensitive to claimants' lived experiences and conditions in their countries of origin.

In practice, however, a persistent tension runs through these decisions. Credibility standards that appear neutral on paper often function as culturally specific expectations about how a "genuine" LGBTQ+ person should look, speak, and tell their story — expectations rooted in urban, Western, largely white queer experiences that associate queerness with open, linear "coming out" narratives. For

claimants from countries where open LGBTQ+ expression carries severe familial, social, and legal consequences — including Nigeria and the East African countries most participants in this study come from — these expectations can be profoundly disadvantageous. Many survived precisely by leaving no trace: no community memberships, no photographs, no records.

Canadian case law illustrates both the problem and the stakes. In McKenzie v Canada (2019), the Federal Court found that decision-makers had failed to consider a Jamaican pastor's concealment of his sexual identity in the context of the homophobic environment he lived in. Another decision (RAD MB9-00755, 2020) affirmed that years of concealment need not undermine a claimant's credibility when the survival context is properly understood. But Diallo v Canada (2012) shows the opposite risk: a claim failed in part because the claimant lacked corroborating documentation. And in Tchangoue v Canada (2016), skepticism toward fragmented supporting documents compounded the vulnerability of a Cameroonian LGBTQ+ activist. The pattern across these cases is clear: documentation matters enormously, and those persecuted in ways that left informal rather than official traces are at a structural disadvantage.

The Border, the Safe Third Country Agreement, and Why Community Participation Has Legal Weight

Windsor-Essex's border geography sharpens these vulnerabilities further. Under the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) between Canada and the United States — significantly expanded in 2023 — people who enter Canada through the United States are generally required to have sought asylum there first. This is directly relevant to this study's participants: roughly 70% arrived in Canada within the last three years, many having transited through the U.S.

Successful SOGIESC refugee claims are characteristically supported by documentary evidence: psychological assessments, letters from community organizations, records of participation in LGBTQ+ community life, and documentation of conditions in the country of origin. For migrants who arrived with little or no documentation of their identities, participation in community organizations may be the primary means through which an evidentiary record can be built at all. This gives QTMAAWE's work a significance that goes beyond social support: letters, participation records, legal information sessions, and connections to professionals can carry real weight in refugee hearings. Community-building in this context is not separate from the legal system — it happens in ongoing, unequal, and contested relationship with it.

Legal inclusion and social belonging, in short, are not the same thing. The gap between them is precisely the space this study set out to examine.

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

Community members, service providers, and funders deserve to know exactly how research about their community was carried out. This section describes the study's design in detail.

Why Focus Groups?

This sociological study used a qualitative focus group methodology (Krueger 2014; Morgan 2018) — guided group conversations in which participants discuss their experiences together. Focus groups were chosen deliberately. They generate insight at the level of social interaction, allowing researchers to observe how participants collectively make sense of shared experiences. For a community defined by the convergence of multiple stigmatized identities, the group setting also reduces the power imbalance of a one-on-one interview. Consistent with the intersectional framework guiding the study — and its principle that knowledge about marginalized communities is best produced collectively by those most affected — focus groups position participants as co-producers of knowledge rather than subjects of it.

The Research Partnership

The study was conducted in the summer of 2025 in partnership with QTMAAWE. Founded in 2024, QTMAAWE is a peer-led grassroots organization that has become an anchor institution in Windsor-Essex's support ecosystem for SOGIESC refugee claimants. It connects approximately 600 members — the majority migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa holding Refugee Claimant or Protected Person status — to allied organizations providing mental health, legal, and settlement services. It offers legal support, healthcare and housing navigation, community solidarity networks, and advocacy for policy reform. Conducting the research in partnership with QTMAAWE, rather than merely about it, reflected the study's commitment to community-grounded knowledge.

Who Participated and How They Were Recruited

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via community networks. Purposive sampling means participants were deliberately selected to meet the study's eligibility criteria: self-identification as Black, queer and/or trans, and a migrant or refugee residing in Windsor-Essex. Snowball sampling means participants referred others from within their own social networks. This approach was chosen because the community is not reachable through institutional registries, and many members — understandably — may be reluctant to participate in research through formal channels. Recruiting through trusted community networks reflected an understanding of the specific conditions under which Black queer and trans migrants can safely take part in research.

Twenty-two people participated across three focus groups of seven to eight participants each — a size chosen in line with established best practices in focus group research. Data collection continued until "thematic saturation" was reached: the point at which additional conversations were no longer generating substantially new themes. Two participants chose not to provide demographic information; the description below draws on the 20 participants with complete information.

- Age: participants ranged from 18 to 55 and older, with 45–54 the most common age group.
- Gender identity: 11 men, 8 women, and 1 participant identifying as trans.
- Sexual orientation: bisexual was the most frequently reported (15), followed by gay (3), queer (1), and lesbian (1).
- Country of birth: Nigeria (13), Tanzania (4), Kenya (1), and Zambia (1). All identified as Black; many also specified ethnic identities including Yoruba, Igbo, and Black African.
- Immigration status: most held Refugee Claimant status (16), with two Protected Persons and two Temporary Residents.
- Time in Canada: most (14) had lived in Canada between one and three years; four had arrived less than a year earlier; one had been in Canada seven to ten years.
- Where they live: participants resided across the region, most frequently in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, East Windsor, and Tecumseh.

The predominance of bisexual participants is itself meaningful: bisexuality occupies a doubly marginal position within both heterosexual society and many LGBTQ+ communities, underlining the study's attention to people at risk of being overlooked by multiple communities at once.

How the Conversations Were Run

Each focus group was facilitated by the author, Dr. Carlo Handy Charles — a trained moderator with shared positionality, meaning a facilitator who identifies with the community being studied. In research with marginalized communities, shared positionality is an established best practice: it reduces the distance between researcher and participants and supports the trust needed for people to speak candidly about discrimination, precarity, and belonging. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed word for word. A semi-structured "funnel" question guide moved from broad questions about community life and belonging in Windsor-Essex to more specific questions about QTMAAWE's role, barriers to community participation, and experiences with Canadian institutions.

How the Conversations Were Analyzed

Transcripts were analyzed using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis. First, "inductive" codes were generated directly from participants' own language — preserving their own terms and framings rather than imposing outside categories. Emerging themes were then examined through the lens of intersectionality theory to move from describing what participants said toward explaining the patterns behind it. To ensure rigour, coding decisions were made by consensus among the research team, and "member-checking" — returning to selected participants to verify that interpretations rang true — confirmed the accuracy of the analysis.

Ethics and Participant Protection

The study received ethical approval from the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB# 25-101). All participants provided informed consent and were advised of their right to withdraw at any

time. Pseudonyms are used in all reporting to protect confidentiality. Given the heightened vulnerabilities that come with the intersection of refugee status and LGBTQ+ identity, particular care was taken to avoid re-traumatization and to manage the responsibilities that come with a researcher's shared community position.

WHAT WE HEARD: FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

The three focus groups generated rich, candid, and often moving accounts of isolation and belonging, exclusion and community, law and everyday life in Windsor-Essex. Four big-picture findings emerged. First, legal protection does not produce belonging: Canada's laws allow participants to live openly as queer people without fear of prosecution, but they continue to face racial exclusion, economic hardship, and a lack of services built for them. Second, participants face exclusion from three directions at once — from mainstream queer spaces because of race, from Black immigrant communities because of their queer identities, and from broader Canadian society because of their migration status — and no institution addresses all three at once except QTMAAWE. Third, the freedom to be openly queer depends on economic security and immigration status. And fourth, community is not a social nicety — it is survival infrastructure. The five themes below unpack these findings in participants' own words. All names are pseudonyms.

1. The Refugee Process Shapes Everyday Life

Participants described the refugee determination system not as a distant legal procedure but as a force shaping their sense of self and their daily choices. A consistent source of anxiety was the credibility hearing's unspoken expectation of a visible, documentable LGBTQ+ identity — a demand fundamentally at odds with the survival strategies participants had developed back home. In Nigeria, one participant reflected, being known as gay was dangerous: there was no community to join, no records to keep, no photographs to take. Arriving in Windsor and being asked to prove one's identity through exactly those forms of evidence felt, as another participant put it, "like being punished for surviving."

This is where QTMAAWE's practical role becomes visible. Susan described the founder's support in preparing her refugee claim:

> *"He [the organization's founding director] is very, very resourceful in that regard. He answers everybody's questions. I have had the opportunity to sit with him to review my story, and he has given me very helpful tips on how to present it more effectively. He also brought resource people from the Ministry of Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada to come speak with us."*
>
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

The organization functions not only as social support but as a place where the community participation records, legal knowledge, and professional connections that can decide a refugee claim are actually built.

The refugee process also follows participants into everyday life through the documents they must carry. Until permanent residency is granted, refugee claimants carry a large paper identity document — the "brown paper," as participants called it — that publicly marks their status every time it is presented.

Mark described what something as ordinary as buying a drink can become:

> *"You take your ID out and you show it to them, and they're like, 'I don't know if we accept this. Hold on, let me talk to my boss for a second.' And then you have to wait. And obviously it becomes a whole thing. Even though you get the service at the end, it's kind of like — damn, that was embarrassing."*
>
> **— Mark, Focus Group 1**

Ivan explained why he obtained a driver's licence he does not otherwise need:

> *"I don't drive, but I had to get a driver's licence because it makes me feel more comfortable. With a driver's licence, nobody knows who I am — I could be born here; nobody cares. But when you have the paper, they know you're a refugee, that you're living on handouts — even if you're working. That's the first impression."*
>
> **— Ivan, Focus Group 1**

Others met the same stigma with defiance. Susan refused to let the document define her:

> *"Yes, I'm a refugee claimant. Okay — deal with it. That is who I am right now. It's not in my blood; it's not in my system. Eventually it will go away. I don't give them the opportunity to make me feel bad. That's who I am right now, but that's not who I am forever."*
>
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

For some, the refugee process reaches back into the most painful parts of their history. Dramatist described being asked to produce physical proof of the violence she had fled:

> *"They asked me where is the wound. It is very visible here now — are you not seeing my hand? I will show the lawyer: this is what the man did to me with a knife, and this is the date he did it to me."*
>
> **— Dramatist, Focus Group 3**

The founder's preparation of claimants is deliberate and hands-on. He described how he coaches members before their hearings:

> *"How can you memorize your story way better? And how can you make sure that you defend everything that's written on the document that you provided? Because some of you, you submitted the story, and then every time I sit with you, you cannot even remember what you had written."*
>
> **— QTMAAWE founding director**

2. Isolation Is the Central Harm — and It Can Be Devastating

Social isolation emerged as the dominant condition of life for Black queer and trans migrants in Windsor-Essex — before, during, and after migration. It appeared as enforced secrecy in countries of origin, as physical and emotional aloneness upon arrival, and as the ongoing absence of affirming community.

For many, isolation began long before migration, as a condition of survival under criminalized homosexuality:

> *"It's either you are straight, or you are dead."*
> **— Leo, Focus Group 3**

The consequences can be severe. Daniel described a trajectory from solitary student life to psychiatric hospitalization:

> *"I was always alone. I was always in the room, and I don't have friends. I didn't know there was a community for me. After a year, I ended up getting hospitalized because of loneliness. It affected me mentally in a very serious way."*
> **— Daniel, Focus Group 1**

Isolation was compounded by estrangement from family back home. Ivan described his first months in Windsor:

> *"The first three or four months, I actually struggled. I wasn't getting my bearings. I was disconnected from my family — I've been ostracized by my family. Phone calls, video calls — we don't have that anymore. I message them, I text them, I call them. No response. It really affected me in a very negative way."*
> **— Ivan, Focus Group 1**

For some, the search for community stretched over years. Mark, who had lived in Windsor for seven years before finding QTMAAWE, described what that absence does to a person's sense of possibility:

> *"I've been searching a lot for communities that are specifically Black and queer. I found other queer communities, but a lot of the time I tend to be the only Black person in the room, and it can be a little alienating. For some reason, I thought maybe there aren't people like me out there. It can feel like that if you're not really seeing anyone like you."*
> **— Mark, Focus Group 1**

Tony reframed what community means against that backdrop:

> *"If you're coming from a society where you've been discriminated a lot, isolated a lot in your own thoughts — and for once in your lifetime you're in an organization where all those things are thrown out the window — it means a lot. You can have all the money, but if you're mentally, emotionally isolated, then all that money doesn't mean anything."*
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

For those still living in concealment, community can feel purely notional. Trent described a life of queerness that existed only in the abstract:

> *"At the moment, it's just gay in theory. How does that look like? You go to school, you come back, you watch movies. And I go to my part-time job. That's all I do. Nothing else."*
> **— Trent, Focus Group 2**

Tony traced the psychological cost of a life split in two:

> *"You are forced to kind of live a double life. It's not by choice but by survival. You have to survive. That has messed up my mental health in a way that I try to see — how do I even figure out who am I, really?"*
>
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

3. Excluded from Every Direction — Except One Place

Participants navigate pressures arising from race, sexuality, gender identity, religion, migration status, and the norms of their countries of origin — all at once. No single existing community fully holds all of these identities. Strikingly, exclusion operated not only in hostile spaces but within spaces presumed to be safe. Susan described attending a local queer church:

> *"It was just white people. No single Black person, but it was a queer church. I've never felt Black in my life — I felt so Black. Everybody was white, and they were all looking at me. They were friendly, I wouldn't lie, but you could see the discomfort. That experience made me feel out of place even in a space that was supposed to be inclusive."*
>
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

The same pattern extended to the region's queer organizational networks. QTMAAWE's founding director recalled attending a weekly gathering of local queer organizations before deciding not to bring his members into it:

> *"Every week we used to meet, and it would be just the two of us who were Black. Everyone else would sit by themselves, and if we joined them, they would go and sit somewhere else. I had been invited to look at the space so that I could start bringing members. After that, I said: I do not want to subject my community to this. And that's when I stopped."*
>
> **— QTMAAWE founding director**

Trent named the three-way structure of this exclusion precisely:

> *"We navigate so many intersectionalities — you're not only an immigrant, you're Black, you're from Africa, but you're gay, queer. It's not all immigrant groups that are going to accept you being gay."*
>
> **— Trent, Focus Group 2**

Toby captured how racism and homophobia compound each other rather than simply adding up:

> *"When you go to the doctor's office as a Black person and you have pain, he doesn't listen. It's the same way when you see a Black person that is gay: you are already judged. White people are gay too, but they are not judged that way. It's like — you are Black, and I am trying to tolerate that, and you are gay on top of it. Double problems."*
>
> **— Toby, Focus Group 1**

Anti-immigrant hostility, often disguised as humour, added a third layer. Ivan described comments he has received at work:

> *"Someone has asked me, 'What are you doing in my country? This is not your country. Go back to your country.' I've had someone say, 'How did you come here? Did you swim?' Maybe to them it's a joke, but it's hurtful. Of course, I didn't swim — I got flight tickets and I was on a plane. At the end of the day, I start to think: is this worth it? But it's still way better. You can achieve your dreams here."*
>
> **— Ivan, Focus Group 1**

Faith was part of this terrain too. Susan described rebuilding her relationship with religion without abandoning it:

> *"Back home — you are abnormal, you are sick, you need deliverance. Now I can say those things without feeling like I am committing a sin. Knowing that God loves me just the way I am."*
>
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

Yet no space is universally accessible: for Doty, a Muslim participant, the organization's Christian church-based meeting space at the time of this research in 2025 was itself a genuine barrier — a reminder that no single setting can hold every dimension of identity at once.

Against this backdrop, QTMAAWE was consistently described as the only space where racial, cultural, and queer identities could coexist without requiring participants to choose between them — the space where they are no longer the only Black person in the room, and where being fully themselves does not demand strategic concealment.

Exclusion from ethnic community could be absolute. Tony described how being gay is understood within his own community back home:

> *"That one is gay — he's lost to the family, he's a minus one, he's not going to benefit the family anymore. You're a condemned course. You have no value whatsoever as a human being; there's nothing valuable you can contribute to life anymore."*
>
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

The region's mainstream organizations often offered a welcome that did not survive first contact. Tony was blunt about it:

> *"Most organizations are liars, allies. They try to say, we care about the queer community, we love the community — but they don't have any programs. And once you identify, it all changes immediately; they start looking at you differently."*
>
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

4. A Place to Gather, and a Community That Cares for Its Own

Physical space and mutual care emerged as two sides of the same survival infrastructure. A local church serves as the organization's primary weekly meeting point — a "no-judgement zone," in Susan's words, where members arrive "just as they are." For a community whose members may not be safe being

publicly visible as queer, a controlled and private gathering space is a precondition for participation, not a preference. Newcomers are guided there almost immediately:

> *"When they took us to the shelter, I found some people who told me about the church. So, I had to go there and declare myself as a member with them."*
> **— Debra, Focus Group 3**



Members and organizers at the community conference on Black queer and trans migrant racism in Windsor-Essex County at the University of Windsor's Black Scholars Institute in March 2026. Photos courtesy of QTMAAWE.



The first QTMAAWE Safe Space gathering hosted at Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) Windsor — the church that participants repeatedly described as home. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

Susan described what happens inside that space — and how the organization has adapted as it has grown, adding online sessions after its weekly gatherings outgrew their original office:

> *"That space is really, really safe. It's a no-judgement zone. When you come there, you come just as you are. It's such a homecoming feeling. He normally brings resources — sometimes he will bring people from everywhere to come speak with us and give us information. And sometimes we also have it via Zoom, so that when you are not able to physically attend, you can at least log on and be part of something."*
>
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

Tony described what is lost without such a space:

> *"Most people want somewhere that they could walk into every day or twice a week, where they can just go sit down, talk to somebody physically. Not having that space has surely given a big blow to the community."*
>
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

Within that space, community is sustained through reciprocal care. Dana described belonging as something built through shared labour:

> *"We cook for everybody without asking for anything. We try to support each other and build something together. Everyone plays a role."*
>
> **— Dana, Focus Group 1**

Others articulated a longer-term vision for the community's growth:

> *"We can have more people that are entrepreneurs, that are financially stable, that can contribute back into the community and help us grow."*
>
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

> *"It's like creating a community for Blacks migrating irrespective of wherever they come from — coming into a community which is Windsor and the community assisting, helping the migrants to grow."*
>
> **— Chidinma, Focus Group 3**

For others, the gathering space was described in the simplest possible terms. Samuel returned again and again to a single word:

> *"It's a home. You know, it's a home. That's the way I see the church. And wherever you find yourself as home, it's the best — because you feel good there."*
>
> **— Samuel, Focus Group 3**



Members and organizers at a QTMAAWE Safe Space event at MCC Windsor. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

5. Practical Help That Opens Doors

QTMAAWE also functions as a practical integration hub: job referrals, immigration information, housing guidance, and help navigating settlement. Happiness described the ideal:

> *"A one-stop shop — physical, emotional support, financial support, jobs — something that can make immigration easier."*
>
> **— Happiness, Focus Group 2**

The results can be concrete. Of one QTMAAWE job fair, Trent reported:

> *"Many people got hired that day — over 50 people got hired. Referrals are really important, they work."*
>
> **— Trent, Focus Group 2**



An LGBTQ2S+ migrant information session organized by QTMAAWE, where members meet resource people and learn about immigration, employment, and settlement supports. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

For newcomers whose credentials from non-Western countries are often devalued in the Canadian labour market, community referral networks do not fix that unfairness — but they help people get around it.

The way people find QTMAAWE in the first place, however, reveals a gap. Participants described arriving with no knowledge of available resources, guided only through informal contacts:

> *"When you get here, you don't really know where to go, so you depend on the people you meet."*
>
> **— Leo, Focus Group 3**

Access depends on happening to meet the right person — which means those in the most precarious situations are often the last to find out that support exists.

6. Healing Happens Together

Beyond meeting practical needs, QTMAAWE's gatherings promote emotional well-being and resilience. Shared meals, art and wellness sessions, Pride celebrations, educational workshops, and social events give members opportunities to celebrate their identities — often for the first time in their lives — and to process difficult experiences alongside people who understand them. Participants emphasized that healing rarely happened alone: it occurred collectively, through relationships, creativity, and shared celebration. For people whose histories include criminalization, family rejection, and enforced concealment, the simple experience of joy in community is itself restorative. Many described QTMAAWE not as an organization at all, but as family and home.

Mark described a community art session that broke through a long creative block:

> *"There was a lot of art there — everyone was painting, making things. I heard people speak Swahili; it's my language. Everyone was making art, and the whole room lit up. It felt good to be outside and see that. At the time I had a lot of creative block, and I was like — I think I'm ready to get back to the drawing board."*
> **— Mark, Focus Group 1**

For Ivan, a shared meal of food from home carried the weight of belonging itself:

> *"People were allowed to bring their own food — they cooked it and brought it, and someone brought one of my favourite foods from back home. We used our hands to eat it, and we all had fun. You're trying to build your own sense of community, your own sense of belonging — and I felt like, this is where I belong."*
> **— Ivan, Focus Group 1**

Toby explained that the meals matter less for what is served than for who is at the table:

> *"For me, it's not really about the kind of food — just the fact that I'm eating with people."*
> **— Toby, Focus Group 1**

These gatherings also became places where participants learned to express identities they had spent their lives concealing. Daniel contrasted his life in Windsor with life in Nigeria:

> *"I'm more free, more expressive, and more open — unlike how it was in Nigeria, where you can't even do more than a handshake. If a handshake gets longer, people talk; they'll call the police on you, or they'll harm you physically. Here, I can hug people. I found interest in my same gender. I can have a boyfriend."*
> **— Daniel, Focus Group 1**

Toby put the cumulative effect simply:

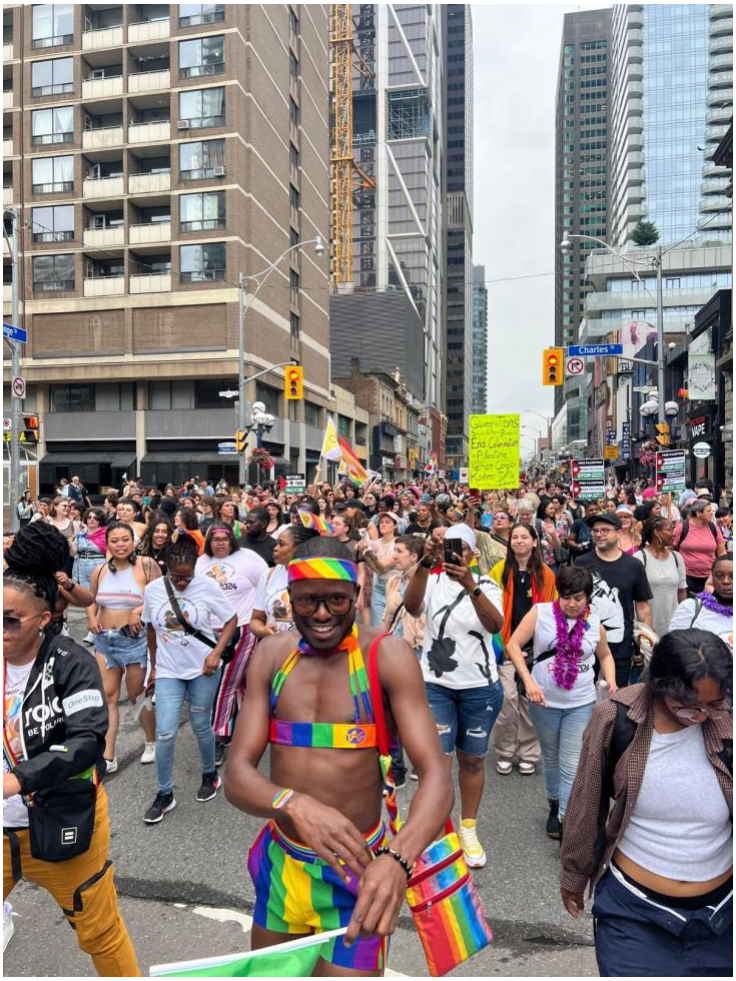
> *"I just had the feeling that I'm living again. I can be myself. I can actually express myself. We come from a culture where expressing yourself or your emotions is seen as a sign of weakness. But somehow, I can say I'm free."*
> **— Toby, Focus Group 1**

Tony described what the organization did for him in a single image:

> *"QTMAAWE is that bridge that took me from sitting down and looking at the ceiling and wondering, to being out there. QTMAAWE has actually brought sunshine to my dark days."*
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

The first experience of open celebration could feel like pure wonder. Recalling a Pride gathering, Tony said:

> *"That was my first time seeing drag queens, my first time taking pictures at all, getting on a plane. It's just like taking a small boy to Father Christmas."*
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**



QTMAAWE's debut at Toronto Pride, 2024 — for several participants, a first experience of celebrating openly. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

For Debra, arriving into a community meant recovering something she had lost:

> *"We are coming from a place where there's no peace — but we found peace. We found hope, happiness. Because even back home, when you are found out to be bisexual, your family can reject you, your father can disown you. But here, everywhere you are free; you can associate yourself with your kind of people."*
> **— Debra, Focus Group 3**

7. A Growing Community Institution

Though founded only in 2024, QTMAAWE is becoming an anchor institution in Windsor-Essex. It has developed partnerships with community organizations, researchers, settlement agencies, and advocacy organizations at the local, provincial, national, and international levels — including the research partnership behind this report. Participants articulated a clear vision for its future: a permanent community centre of its own, with stable space and resources, supporting future generations of Black queer and trans newcomers to Windsor-Essex. QTMAAWE's growth strengthens not only its own members but the region as a whole, filling a gap no other institution was addressing.



"You belong here": the QTMAAWE banner setting out the organization's mission, at the community conference on Black queer and trans migrant racism in Windsor-Essex County. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

Participants themselves articulated this trajectory in ambitious terms. Susan predicted the organization's reach would extend well beyond the region:

> *"In the next five years, in the next ten years, I see QTMAAWE exploding — being able to support a lot more Black migrants, not just from the Windsor-Essex area alone. I see it expanding beyond Windsor."*
> **— Susan, Focus Group 1**

Ivan's hope was concrete: a permanent home.

> *"A queer organization that gets its own building — its own physical structure. Right now we're using borrowed space, so I want it to have its own space. I pray that happens."*
> **— Ivan, Focus Group 1**

And Mark connected the organization's future to what it has already accomplished:

> *"I see it really growing and changing people's lives — it's definitely changed mine. It has helped so many people get their papers and stay in this country, me being one of them. I do see a lot of great things coming from this community."*
> **— Mark, Focus Group 1**

Members were also clear-eyed about how much rests on the founder personally. Tony captured both the gratitude and the weight in one metaphor:

> *"He could decide not to do all this, but he chooses to, from his own experience — I've been through this, I want to give everybody a chance to live. QTMAAWE is a clinic for your toothache, and it's going to pull the teeth out. The next minute, you're free."*
> **— Tony, Focus Group 2**

Asked at the close of their session what QTMAAWE represents to them, participants in Focus Group 1 answered in single words: freedom. Home. Family. Peace. A happy place.

WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Taken together, the findings carry clear messages for service providers, legal aid organizations, funders, policymakers, and the broader Windsor-Essex community.

Legal protection is not the same as belonging — and the gap between them causes real harm. Canada's promise of protection is real, but so are the barriers participants face after arrival: racialized expectations in refugee hearings, queer spaces that centre whiteness, and settlement services not built for this population. Closing this gap requires culturally competent supports, not just legal recognition.

Community participation has legal weight. One of the study's most important insights is that belonging and legal standing are intertwined. QTMAAWE's letters, participation records, legal information sessions, and professional connections help members build the documentary evidence that refugee hearings expect — evidence that people who survived by concealment could not otherwise produce. Supporting organizations like QTMAAWE is, in a very direct sense, supporting access to justice.

Being openly queer costs money. Participants were clear that the freedom to express their identities depends on economic security and stable immigration status. As one participant put it:

> *"First things first, I want to be financially stable. Then maybe I can start enjoying being gay."*
> **— Trent, Focus Group 2**

This means that job fairs, referral networks, and settlement guidance are not side activities for a queer organization — they are the foundation that makes queer community life possible. It also means that economic precarity can quietly undermine refugee claims: people who cannot afford to be visibly queer cannot generate the community participation that hearings look for.

One organization should not have to do it all. QTMAAWE was consistently described not as one option among many but as the only option — a testament to what the organization has achieved, and at the same time a warning sign. Much of its functioning depends on a single physical meeting space and on the founding director's personal knowledge, relationships, and cultural competence. A community's only bulwark against three compounding forms of exclusion should not rest on one organization and one person. Funders and partner institutions should treat QTMAAWE's sustainability — stable space, core funding, capacity-building, and succession planning — as an urgent priority, and the broader settlement sector should ask why this gap existed in the first place.

Participants themselves voiced this concern — often directing it to the founder personally. Toby offered a warning drawn from her own family:

> *"Take care of yourself too. Sometimes people take care of people and stop taking care of themselves. If you feel that you're overwhelmed, ask for help — mental help, emotional help, rest. Emotionally, mentally, psychologically: take care of yourself. Sometimes take a break."*
> **— Toby, Focus Group 1**

Newcomers should not have to rely on luck to find support. Because people currently learn about QTMAAWE through word of mouth — often in shelters — those most isolated are least likely to find it.

Settlement agencies, shelters, health providers, and legal aid clinics can help by building reliable referral pathways so that every Black queer and trans newcomer learns early that this community exists.

TWO PILLARS OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: THE FOUNDER AND THE PASTOR

The findings above centre the voices of QTMAAWE's members. But the infrastructure they describe — the safe spaces, the casework, the church that became a home — rests to a remarkable degree on two people. This section draws on in-depth interviews Dr. Carlo Handy Charles conducted in the summer of 2025 for this study with Anold Mulaisho, founder and managing director of QTMAAWE, and Rev. Joseph Livingston, pastor of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) Windsor, which hosts the organization's gatherings. Their stories show how that infrastructure was built — and what it costs to sustain.

Anold Mulaisho: "I'm Going to Create My Own Table"

Anold's own path traces the arc of the refugee journeys documented in this report. Expelled from his family home in Zambia at age 10 because of his sexuality, he fled to South Africa, where his refugee claim was initially rejected on the grounds that he did not look gay enough. He rebuilt his life through advocacy — working with Amnesty International, the United Nations, and Wits University's migration centre — and was resettled to Canada as a permanent resident in March 2023, choosing Windsor deliberately over a larger city.



Community-building began within months, and almost by accident. Queer Black newcomers would stop him in the street to ask where people like them met; gatherings moved from his house to the riverside trail in downtown Windsor by June 2023. Two turning points pushed him to formalize. The riverside meetings became unsafe — people threw bottles at the group, leaving him feeling powerless to protect those who came. And the organization Windsor Pride excluded him from participating in 2023 despite his offers to contribute, which activated what he calls the activist in him:

> *"If you're not going to give me a seat at the table, I'm going to create my own table."*
> **— Anold Mulaisho, Founder of QTMAAWE**

He registered QTMAAWE in January 2024, secured office space at Trans Wellness, and — after the sessions outgrew that space — moved the weekly safe spaces to MCC Windsor in 2024, where they have run until they found a new location at 2180 Howard Ave in Windsor. His work now spans weekly Sunday safe-space sessions for socializing, sexual health education, and self-discovery; one-on-one immigration casework, including court preparation, support letters, and speaking to a judge on a client's behalf; practical mutual aid, from work shoes to condoms; dedicated group meetings for sex workers; and partnerships with the Windsor-Essex Local Immigration Partnership, United Way, as well as Leamington and Chatam migrant groups.



Anold Mulaisho at the Black Queer and Trans Migrants and Racism Conference at the University of Windsor's Black Scholars Institute in March 2026. Photo courtesy of Dave Gauthier, PAC, University of Windsor.

The costs are real. At the time of the study in 2025, he described QTMAAWE as an extension of himself and carried the emotional weight largely alone — including absorbing an extortion scheme in which a former client hijacked the organization's website and members' data, and organizing the funeral of a member whose ashes he scattered in the Detroit River when no one else came. His vision is for QTMAAWE to outgrow him: a dedicated, Black-led building operating as a community centre and clinic, with walk-in counselling, STI testing, PrEP/PEP access, queer-competent lawyers, and scheduled programming for elders, youth, Muslim members, and sex workers. What sustains him is watching members become independent and thrive — that, he says, is what makes him sleep and smile at night.

Rev. Joseph Livingston: A Congregation That Became a Home

Rev. Joseph Livingston arrived at Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) Windsor from the United States in 2023, his first posting in Canada. His route to ministry ran through theatre and was crystallized by the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, where he was living at the time; he went on to serve as assistant pastor at MCC San Francisco and as a chaplain in Michigan. When he started in Windsor, the congregation numbered a couple of dozen people.

The partnership with Anold Mulaisho transformed the church. As QTMAAWE's safe spaces moved in, the congregation grew to more than 400 members — most within a single year, and almost all of them queer refugees. One Easter Sunday, more than 60 people became members, and 47 were baptized in a single service. And when a hostile visitor came to condemn the congregation, members collectively stood up for themselves before their pastor could intervene — proof, for Livingston, that they had internalized the message that they are loved as they are.

His contribution mixes pastoral care with practical organizing. He personally paid for the church's Pride parade participation two years running because the budget could not cover it; hosts dinners and social events, including a prom that drew about 90 people; offers informal counselling and referrals for members working through internalized shame; and maintains deliberate cultural sensitivity — events are not filmed or photographed, because some members fear exposure to authorities or family back home. His weekly messages are insistently affirming:

> *"God created trans people perfect, like cookie dough."*
> **— Rev. Livingston, Pastor of MCC Windsor**

He is candid about the limits: economic precarity has cost the church members who moved away for work — he hopes to launch a jobs-and-careers ministry in response — and racism persists in the broader community, which he addresses from the pulpit regularly. Together, the founder and the pastor embody both the strength and the fragility documented throughout this report: an extraordinary infrastructure of belonging in Windsor-Essex that still rests, for now, on the shoulders of remarkably few people.





Pastor Livingston, alongside Anold Mulaisho, Irene Moore Davis, and Christie Nelson, participated in a community panel during the Black Queer and Trans Migrants and Racism Conference at the University of Windsor's Black Scholars Institute in March 2026. The hybrid conference was co-organized by the QTMAAWE and the University of Windsor's Black Scholars Institute and Department of Sociology and Criminology. It was financially supported by the Black Scholars Institute, SSHRC, and the Run for Rocky Legacy Project, and was logistically supported by the Windsor-Essex Local Immigration Partnership. For more information about the conference, please visit: https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/black-queer-trans-migrants-and-racism-in-windsor-essex-county-tickets-1982899925054. Photos courtesy of Dave Gauthier, Office of Public Affairs and Communications, University of Windsor.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: QTMAAWE ACROSS CANADA

What participants described in Windsor-Essex is not an isolated local story. A review of thirteen community-based and institutional research reports published across Canada between 2016 and 2025 — spanning national surveys of thousands of 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians, qualitative studies in Waterloo Region, Edmonton, Toronto, and Ottawa, a federal parliamentary inquiry, and a municipal policy toolkit — shows that the patterns documented in this study recur across the country. Situating QTMAAWE in that national landscape does two things: it confirms that the challenges its members face are structural rather than local anomalies, and it shows that QTMAAWE's model reflects what the best available Canadian evidence says actually works.

The Double Exclusion Is a National Pattern

The three-way exclusion participants described in this study — from queer spaces, from immigrant and cultural communities, and from broader Canadian society — is the most consistent finding across the Canadian literature. In Waterloo Region, 92% of Black, Indigenous, and racialized 2SLGBTQIA+ survey respondents felt unrepresented or underrepresented in mainstream queer organizations, with participants describing that they "never feel like we belong anywhere." An Edmonton study documented the same constant negotiation of identity — too queer for Black spaces, too Black for queer spaces — with almost no spaces designed for people at the intersection of both. A federal parliamentary committee heard directly comparable testimony from racialized and Indigenous witnesses across the country.

National survey data add an important nuance. Across housing, education, employment, and health care, Black 2SLGBTQI+ respondents to the Enchanté Network's national surveys consistently reported anti-Black racism as a more severe barrier than homophobia or transphobia — including inside LGBTQ-affirming spaces. In other words, for many Black queer and trans people in Canada, the more urgent daily threat is racism, including racism within communities that are otherwise safe on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. This matches exactly what participants like Susan described in Windsor's queer spaces.

Newcomers Face the Thinnest Services — and the Need Does Not End with Status

Migration adds a layer the national infrastructure has been slow to address. Among 199 LGBTQ community centres surveyed across North America, only 28% offer programming tailored to LGBTQ immigrants and just 17% to LGBTQ refugees — among the smallest shares of any population these centres serve. Research with racialized francophone 2SLGBTQIA+ migrants in Toronto and Ottawa — conducted by this report's author with FrancoQueer — found that newly arrived asylum seekers face compounding stressors including pre-migration trauma, language barriers, housing instability, and precarious work. Critically, that study also found these problems do not simply disappear once immigration status is secured: participants who had held permanent residency or citizenship for years still reported isolation, depression, and family rejection. The lesson for Windsor-Essex is direct —

belonging matters at every stage of settlement, not only in the crisis period after arrival, and support should never be treated as a short-term, status-based service.

Community Organizations Are Canada's Most Trusted Institutions for This Population

Every Canadian report that measured trust or reliance found community organizations — and Black-led, migrant-led organizations specifically — to be the most trusted and most effective source of support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, national surveys found that around 70–75% of trans, non-binary, and disabled 2SLGBTQI+ respondents placed high trust in queer and trans community organizations, compared with trust in police as low as 2% among the same respondents — and trust in the health care system, courts, and every level of government lagged far behind. Peer support emerges as distinctly valued precisely because it does not require formal credentials or institutional gatekeeping: it is delivered by people who share the community's experience. This is exactly the model QTMAAWE embodies. According to the national evidence, a Black-led, migrant-led peer organization is close to the single most effective intervention available for reducing isolation among Black queer and trans newcomers.

Belonging Protects Mental Health — Measurably

The mental health stakes documented in this study — including one participant's hospitalization from loneliness — are mirrored nationally. Egale Canada's national survey found 82% of 2SLGBTQI+ respondents had recently felt anxious and 71% had felt depressed or hopeless, while fewer than half felt a genuine sense of belonging to their community. Researchers explain these disparities through minority stress: it is the ongoing strain of confronting discrimination, not sexual orientation or gender identity itself, that damages mental health. The clearest counterweight the research identifies is belonging — people with strong community and social support report markedly better mental health. This means QTMAAWE's gatherings, shared meals, and peer networks should be understood — and funded — as mental health infrastructure, not just social programming.

A National Research Gap That Windsor-Essex Helps Fill

Finally, the review reveals a striking gap: Canada's large national surveys of 2SLGBTQI+ people remain overwhelmingly white (81–91% in recent major studies) and Canadian-born, and immigration status is rarely analyzed against outcomes like isolation or discrimination. A parliamentary committee heard that even Statistics Canada's samples are too small to analyze the health of racialized sexual and gender minorities. No existing Canadian study combines a large, representative sample with detailed analysis by race, gender identity, and immigration status at once. The studies that do centre Black queer and trans migrants — like this one — are small and local, but they carry disproportionate value precisely because they document what the national data cannot. QTMAAWE's research is therefore not only a local contribution: it helps close a gap that Canada's major national surveys have themselves flagged but not yet filled. Read as a whole, the Canadian evidence does not just support QTMAAWE's model — it makes a clear case for sustaining and expanding it.





Anold Mulaisho, Dr. Carlo Handy Charles, Drag Performers Valentina Rosé and Baddie Brooks, and Dr. Camisha Sibblis, the Founding Director of the Black Scholars Institute, participated in the Black Queer and Trans Migrants and Racism Conference at the University of Windsor's Black Scholars Institute in March 2026. Photos courtesy of Dave Gauthier, PAC, University of Windsor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this report offers the following recommendations.

For community organizations:

- Strengthen partnerships with QTMAAWE, including shared programming, space-sharing, and mutual referrals.
- Expand culturally responsive programming that recognizes members' intersecting identities — including attention to religious diversity in the choice of meeting spaces.

For funders:

- Invest in long-term, core operational funding rather than short-term project grants.
- Support a permanent, accessible community space — identified by participants as the single most important need.
- Fund mental health programming and treat organizational sustainability — capacity-building and succession planning — as an urgent priority.

For service providers and legal aid:

- Improve understanding of intersectionality: no single-axis service — settlement, LGBTQ+, or otherwise — meets this community's needs on its own.
- Include people with lived experience in service design and delivery.
- Build reliable referral pathways from shelters, settlement agencies, health providers, and legal clinics so every Black queer and trans newcomer learns early that QTMAAWE exists.
- Recognize the evidentiary role of community participation in SOGIESC refugee claims, and the disadvantage faced by claimants whose survival required leaving no trace.

For the Windsor-Essex community:

- Promote inclusion, challenge racism and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination where it appears, and support community-led initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Participants in this study spoke openly about fear, loneliness, and discrimination — and equally about resilience, hope, and friendship. QTMAAWE has become more than an organization: it is a community where Black queer and trans migrants begin rebuilding lives interrupted by persecution and displacement.

What the study establishes clearly is this: for Black queer and trans migrants in Windsor-Essex, community is not a social amenity. It is a practice of survival, resistance, and legal standing — built by community members themselves, within a system that offers protection with one hand and imposes burdens with the other. This report highlights both the challenges newcomers continue to face and the remarkable strength that emerges through collective care and belonging. When communities organize to care for their own, everyone in Windsor-Essex benefits — and everyone in Windsor-Essex has a role to play in making sure they do not have to do it alone.



QTMAAWE at Toronto Pride, 2025. Photo courtesy of QTMAAWE.

Like any study, this one has limits. It involved 22 participants connected to a single organization, most of them recent arrivals from Nigeria and East Africa, so its findings describe this community in this place at this time rather than all LGBTQ+ migrants everywhere. Future research following participants over time, and comparing experiences across cities, would deepen what we have learned here.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Opening

Let's begin. Please tell us your country of origin, and how long you have been residing in Windsor-Essex.

Introductory Question

Did you locate queer community/communities upon your arrival in Windsor-Essex? If so, how?

Transition Questions

1. How did you hear about the Queer and Trans Migrants Advocacy Alliance of Windsor-Essex?
2. How long have you been involved in QTMAAWE?
3. How often do you participate in QTMAAWE's activities?

Key Questions

4. Are there opportunities and benefits of your efforts to build a queer community for Black migrants and refugees in Windsor-Essex? If so, please describe them.
    a. Probing questions about opportunities:
        i. What opportunities are there in QTMAAWE to meet other queer and trans migrants and refugees?
        ii. Opportunities to visit and/or discover the region.
        iii. Opportunity to understand queerness and trans issues from a Canadian perspective.
        iv. Opportunities to connect with the larger queer community in Windsor-Essex.
    b. Probing questions about potential benefits:
        i. Are there some benefits to your mental and emotional health? If so, please describe them.
        ii. Are there some benefits of your involvement in QTMAAWE to your social and cultural integration in Windsor-Essex? If so, please share.
        iii. Are there benefits of your participation in QTMAAWE to economic and political integration in Canada? If so, please describe them.
5. Have you faced any challenges in your effort to build a Black queer community for migrants and refugees in Windsor-Essex?
    a. Probing questions separately, if not already mentioned:
        i. Potential language and cultural barriers.

ii. Potential economic challenges.

iii. Potential neighbourhood and transportation issues across the region.

iv. Potential social isolation and/or alienation.

6. How does your identity and lived experience as a Black queer/trans migrant/refugee contribute to these benefits or challenges?

    a. Probing separately, if not already mentioned:

        i. The potential impact of race,

        ii. The potential impact of gender,

        iii. The potential impact of sexuality,

        iv. The potential impact of country/region of origin,

        v. The potential impact of migration,

        vi. The intersectional impact of these social markers on their experiences in building a queer community in Windsor-Essex.

Ending Questions

- All-things-considered question: Of all of the things we discussed today, what is the most important to you?
- Summary question: [after summarizing the discussion] Is this an adequate summary?
- Final question: Have we missed anything?

FURTHER READING: CANADIAN COMMUNITY RESEARCH REPORTS INFORMING THIS ANALYSIS

The national context section draws on the following community-based and institutional research reports:

- Enchanté Network (2024). Back to Our Roots: Black 2S/Trans, Non-Binary and Gender Nonconforming Populations in Canada, https://www.enchantenetwork.ca/projects/back-to-our-roots
- Enchanté Network (2024). Back to Our Roots: Disabled Black 2SLGBTQI Populations in Canada, https://www.enchantenetwork.ca/insights-hub/back-to-our-roots-sub-population-report-disabled-black-2slgbtqi-populations-in-canada
- Enchanté Network & Black Queer Canada (2024). Back to Our Roots: Rural and Remote Black 2SLGBTQI Populations in Canada, https://www.enchantenetwork.ca/projects/back-to-our-roots
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Contact: Dr. Carlo Handy Charles, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Windsor · carlo.charles@uwindsor.ca · 519-253-3000 ext. 2192.