



Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

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Presenting organizations: Elimin8Hate

Roundtable attendees: Audrey Wong

BCOHRC¹ attendees: Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Sarah Khan, Meghan Toal

Please note that third-party personal information has been removed from this transcript.

[Introductory comments by Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript.]

Audrey Wong: Thank you very much, Commissioner. My name, again – Audrey Wong. My pronouns are she and her. I operate--as long--as well as my organization, Elimin8Hate, and our parent organization, the Vancouver Asian Film Festival on the traditional and unceded territories of the **Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.**

Now, I will be speaking about an area that we're quite well-versed in. In the course of it, I personally prefer this, if possible, to be more like a conversation. If someone has a question and wants clarification to stop me, and I find it easier to proceed that way. If it works for everyone else, please do. And either jump in--if you don't want to jump in, raise your hands, either way works.

So, I am the executive director of a nonprofit group called Elimin8Hate. Elimin8Hate is the social-change arm of the Vancouver Asian Film Festival. VAFF is the longest running Asian Canadian film festival in the country – we're on our 26th year. Now, VAFF and Elimin8Hate is fully volunteer run. Everybody in the group is operating based on their passions and their all altruism. Everyone has a full-time job or full-time schooling, aside from that. Now VAFF came of--

Elimin8Hate came about in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Barbara Lee, who's the chair of VAFF, had been envisioning an anti-Asian racism wing of her film festival prior to that, but COVID-

¹ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

19 and the uptick of anti-Asian racism, unfortunately, provided a lot of spotlight and discourse on this particular issue, and it was the time for EliminateHate to go forward.

Now, what EliminateHate focuses on is where our strengths are, which is harnessing the power of arts, film, and media to combat anti-Asian racism. Examples of our work include partnering with community partners, like the Canucks, to showcase and represent Asian Canadians during their Lunar New Year's game, to partnering with TikTok Canada on a Reclaim Your Name campaign, highlighting the need for individuals to Anglicize their given names often to blend, or fit in, or even have job opportunities.

On top of that, other examples of our work have been partnering with project 1907 and the Canadian Chinese National Council on the Anti-Asian Racism Incident Reporting Center, which was an opportunity for people to report incidences of hate during COVID-19.

We are looking at other partnerships and activations as we go through 2022 to educate our community, and our allies, and the public about the issues with anti-Asian racism and the harms and the impacts it can have on communities in society.

Going forward in the future, we'll be looking to provide solutions and tools for those within our community and outside our community to combat these issues. And, ultimately, we are working for a future of racial equity and an inclusive society for all Asian Canadians.

Now, we looked at your scope of inquiry alongside the lens of our expertise. So, I'm not going to be answering these questions – specific as you've listed them – but I hope in the course of my presentation I've touched upon all of them, and if you would like any further clarifications, please do let me know. So, I'm sure many groups have already spoken with you about the uptick in racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. And, of course, with our work with project 1907 and the CCNC, we were also providing an outlet to track anti-Asian racism incidences.

Now, in 2020, we know that more anti-Asian hate crimes were reported to police in Vancouver than all of the top 10 most populous U.S. cities combined. We know that nearly one out of two residences of Asian descent in B.C. experienced a hate incident in 2020.

And for myself personally, at the end of the year 2020, I remember going to a LifeLabs to get some blood testing – some routine blood testing – and even though we had long moved past calling it the “Wuhan Flu”, and there was an official name for it, and China had, at that point, been a leading country in containing their COVID infections, there was a very prominent sign displayed on LifeLabs asking for people to look for symptoms of the “Wuhan Flu” and to report it if they had been to China, when, again, that was really no longer the focal point of the conversation. So, certainly where it doesn't fit within the scope of a hate incident, but I'm providing the context of which there was an uptick of sentiment--in anti-Asian sentiment going through this time.

Now, EliminateHate's framework is not specific to COVID-19. What we know and we focus on, is that racism and the uptick of racism during COVID-19 was a continuance of systemic and historical racism that exists. The pandemic was a catalyst in a tangible point in time for hateful incidences to arise. But the underlying issues of anti-Asian racism and hate have always, and continue, to exist.

Examples, of course, include the Japanese Canadian internment camps during World War II, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which morphed into the Chinese Immigration Act, and which morphed into an Order in Council that held until the 1960s that prevented anybody but spouses and children of naturalized Chinese Canadians to apply for immigration. And we know that during this time, up until the 1960s, children who were sponsored over by their parents were X-rayed to be determined whether--to be assessed as to whether or not they were under 21 to meet the



guidelines. And if the X-rays that assessed that they were--their bone structure was over what they deemed to be a 21-year-old, they were immediately deported back to their countries.

And, of course, we know about the local covenants that bar the sale of properties to those of African and Asiatic descents that were not nullified until the 1970s.

So, this is all to provide a very serious and a somber message that, while there was a massive uptick in hate, and I'm not going to go into details about those incidences, because that's, again, not an area where Eliminate Hate is an expert. We provided a conduit for those race reporting incidences, but many other groups are more informed, and more data focused than us.

Now, what I would like to focus on today, is where specifically these incidences of anti-Asian racism that we saw a significant uptick of during COVID-19, arenas of where they were manifested, and how this impacted Asian Canadians, as well as opportunities for Government and institutional organizations to make a difference. Again, they may not fall within your definition. These issues may not fall within the definition, your definition of hate, but what I want to emphasize is this systemic and ongoing issue is what forms and percolates into hate and hate incidences. So, without combating the source or the underlying issues, one cannot eliminate or combat express incidences of race--express incidences of hate and hate incidences.

So, in our focus for today, I'd like to talk about the perpetuation of anti-Asian sentiment, and, essentially, irresponsible reporting in mass media.

There is a portrayal of Asians in mass media that often is perpetuating the othering, or the outsidering, or the issues of perpetuating stereotypes that are not true. And mass media is a key avenue of influencing and shaping macro-level ideology. So, where there's no representation, or there's poor representation, it permeates into mainstream ideology and lack of understanding – resulting in hate. Events, such as COVID-19, provide a tangible scenario for which this hate is expressed.

An example in mass media that often perpetuates othering and misunderstanding is that all East Asians are rich. So, we have incidences in 2015 where a study that was backed by Opposition Government, at the time, that indicated the Chinese buyers were responsible for Vancouver's affordable housing problems. Now that received an inordinate amount of uptake, including major organizations like Bloomberg and The Guardian reporting on it. And, of course, that permeated into people's belief that Chinese buyers were fueling the unaffordable housing crisis in Vancouver – that it was people that had no affiliation with Canadian society and communities.

There were fundamental flaws in this study, where a sample size of 172 houses were used amongst over 40,000 transactions that year. And the methodology was identifying non-anglicized names as a way of identifying a foreigner. And, of course, we know how problematic that can be when many, many Asian Canadians born in Canada will not have an Anglicized name.

Now this continued, and continues to continue on, where, even as recently as the February of this year, the Vancouver Sun published an opinion-piece by one of their staff writers, using based-on factual data, but a very flawed methodology that identified that Chinese and South Asian Canadians were among the top earners and most educated, beyond--and above and beyond non-visible minorities. But, of course, again the methodology was flawed, and it only measured those Canadian-born.

So, in one incidence, it took non-anglicized names to identify foreigner, even though many individuals would have been born in Canada. And in this incident, it did not count the very large, significant group of immigrant Chinese Canadians and South Asian Canadians that, of course, have different variables and intersectionality that can impact their personal and individual journeys. Now, this article was finished with a quote from an economist and an academic at the



University of Waterloo, which said, "rather than automatically believing gaps in earnings and education are rooted in injustice and unfairness, it's also important to simply remember people make different choices."

So, although this was an opinion piece, it was reported by a very mainstream news source. And the effect, even though it was stating facts, the effect is, it led people, and, intentionally or unintentionally, to consider that discrepancies were not due to injustice and unfairness, as well as led people to continue--it led the perpetuation of the "Model Minority" myth, that Asian Canadians do well, that Asian Canadians are not victims of hate incidences or racism.

Now this, of course, conflicts with the StatsCan report in 2017, the census, that indicated racialized persons are more than two times likely to experience poverty – and this includes Chinese and South Asian groups, who are more likely to be low-income than groups of non-visible minorities.

So, I'm going to stop at this moment and just inquire if anyone has any questions. Again, I would like to emphasize – the nature of our group is not to focus on specific or ongoing hate incidences, but rather, we want to be proactive and address the underlying systemic and macro issues that exist that then lead to tangible and specific hate incidences being expressed. Anyone have any thoughts so much?

Sarah Khan: Thank you so much.

Audrey Wong: Thank you.

Sarah Khan: Yeah, thank you so much. Well, I mean, I do have some questions related to your online reporting tool, but before I get to those--'cause I can come to those--come back to those later. I'm wondering if you--this is so interesting and helpful the way you're framing, to hear the way that you're framing the incidences of hate and discrimination, and the intersectionality, and the roots. I'm wondering if you have, or if you'll be covering recommendations that you might have or that your organization might have for what we could do? Some steps that we could take, or recommendations we could make, to try to deal with the situation at hand.

Audrey Wong: Thank you, Sarah. So, yes, I'm specifically focusing on a very narrow topic today because this is an area that EliminateHate has done work on. And, again, I recognize that you're meeting with many groups, and everybody will have a lot of data about hate and a lot of personal and community level information about the sheer amount of hate that happened during COVID-19. But with regards to media, and the media portrayal, and biased media reporting – we, in 2021, produced a style guide which, working alongside other individuals in the media field with experts in DEI to provide recommendations to media groups on how to work on and improve their reporting. Now, alongside that, I will be speaking about the suggestions and recommendations that the report made that is also applicable to our meeting today.

Sarah Khan: Thank you. I guess another question, if this is something that you're able to comment on, and if you're--would be very interesting to hear from you--is how to deal with incidents of online hate. So, saying going outside of mainstream media, or going on to social media platforms, for example, or the comments boxes in--that follow many more mainstream media stories. So, if you have any thoughts on online hate and how to address it as well, feel free to address that.

Audrey Wong: And I don't have any comments about social media today. We actually have been asked to speak in May. The name of the forum escapes me right now, but it is in partnership with Resilience BC and the Foundation for a Path Forward, and they are investigating and speaking about online hate. Now, with regards to mass media, the style guide did make a recommendation about mainstream media controlling and providing more resources to their comments section and



considering that part of their role and responsibility – it's not a form strictly about free speech. If they're releasing this information, they are responsible for moderating the conversations that happen afterwards, and ensuring that those conversations are free of hate and enable a safe space for people to have conversations

Commissioner Kasari Govender: I just have a couple of questions. Not sure where you want to address them now or as your comments progress, so feel free to do whatever works for you. One of them is in relation to your comment around – we're not the experts in the individual incidents, we're going to leave that to other folks, we're going to talk about some of these more systemic forces. I'm curious, in that context, what you see as the role of the reporting mechanism that you--that EliminateHate built early in the pandemic, and, more generally, what you see the value of community-based recording to be.

Audrey Wong: So, while we don't--we had a good network and sphere of influence, especially because of our long-standing relationship and in VAFF. So, when we partnered with project 1907 and the CCNJ, we gave a platform for the reporting intake to occur. Now, as I understood it, this was this predates me a bit, but as I understood it, the CCNJ took the onus on the data collection and the analytics. Now, we do receive the information back in and it informs our programming. But, of course, again, because we focus on arts, film, and media, we take it in an indirect manner. Now, as I understand it, project 1907 does use that data and they share it more in an educational fashion with their forums and their outlets.

We recognize how important it is to have data. Without data one cannot make informed decisions and insights. We also recognize, though, that oftentimes with too much data and without the resources and the funding to synthesize and make tangible decisions out of it, it becomes information with no output. So, we really do want to balance that tangible means of...absolutely, we need a unified and synthesized data reporting center – I'm familiar with ours. I imagine there's probably other groups who also had data reporting and that in itself becomes the piecemeal and difficult. If we could have a unified source that would coordinate everybody, get a centralized consensus and agreement that we filter everyone through the same route, then that data becomes effective, it becomes reliable, and there's a central source to provide the recommendations and the insights from them.

So, as I understand it, we have, we provide the platform for EliminateHate. I cannot honestly speak towards how much uptake we received recently, but that also shows the of the lack of resourcing and funding that grassroots groups, such as ourselves, has. That information still filters through the to the CCNJ, and we are currently reaching out to project 1907 to see if we can get a cohesive data set. But I think your question leads to one, without a doubt, without data someone cannot make decisions. However, the biggest issue I think all of us are facing right now is the--how is the data coming in and how is the data then to be used?

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Okay, thank you for that context. My other question was around the "Reclaim Your Name" campaign, I was curious whether you could tell us any more about that campaign and whether you see any intersections there with our conversation around hate.

Audrey Wong: Yes. So, again, our group really focuses on representation and quality of representation to showcase the Asian Canadian story, both that we are--there's a duality of Asian and Canadian. So, the "Reclaim Your Name" piece is in that same vein of not specifically, tangibly addressing a hate incidence, but rather providing this normalization and means for Asian Canadians to showcase both the struggles that we face, but also in a mainstream manner. So "Reclaim Your Name" in partnership with TikTok Canada launched TikToks that showcased our community, what their original names were, their given names were, what they may have Anglicized it to be, and why they did so. There's other stories that are similar to that that theme. Now, it had a significant amount of uptake, and we, I think there was about 12,000 likes in that



short period of campaign, and at that point it was more of an awareness. Eliminate Hate, it was awareness about that there is anti-Asian sentiment that still exists even when people see, especially East Asian Canadians, as being successful, or having successfully integrated into Canadian society.

Now, that received a lot of positive sentiment. What we're looking to do this summer is relaunch "Reclaim Your Name 2.0", and what we want to provide, in this instance, is more content and substance about the macro level impacts and the impacts it has to Asian Canadians when we have to anglicize our names, when we're asked to have our names changed in--or maybe called an Anglicized name -- "I can't pronounce your name can I just call you X or shorten it?" Now the intention of this, this year, is to go beyond an awareness campaign, but also to educate on the harms and the impact, and then call upon institutions to support us with funding so that, going forward, we can launch tools and programming in 2023 that would go back to these institutions to talk about unconscious bias as it pertains to job applications. Talk about how to recognize one's own racist tendencies, how to educate themselves and those around them to prevent and mitigate these issues. So, again, what we're focused on is racism and bias versus express incidences of hate. But uncontrolled racism, unconscious bias, that's this the underlying source of what creates misunderstanding -- othering -- that leads to more extreme incidences of hate expression.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you for that. Very useful. If you want to continue, if you have more on your section.

Audrey Wong: Absolutely. Thank you. So, in continuing this media bias topic that I'm discussing, I want to just quickly talk about media during COVID. So, needless to say, these incidences of anti-Asian sentiment or biased reporting continued through into COVID. And, in fact, an environmental scan done by a research group identified that, right at the beginning of COVID on March 2020, in conservative news media outlets in the States there was an 800% increase in the use of the term "Chinese Virus." And I think, anecdotally, we will--would have all seen this as encouraged by their President, Trump, at that time. Now, it was found that this formed the turning point of changing the dialogue into an anti-Asian sentiment. Rhetoric during COVID-19--and absolutely it was correlated to an increased bias against Asian Americans, and where Asian Americans were perceived as less American than their Asian counterparts.

Now, how this moved into Canada. In a survey in May of 2020, done by Angus Reid, they found that one in five non-Asian respondents said they felt that most or all Asian Canadians do not contribute to the broader community. Their results also suggested that one in three non-Asian respondents said that Chinese Canadians are more loyal to China than to Canada when it comes to conflict between the two countries. There was no direct measurement of how this coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, but from a correlative standpoint, this absolutely coincides with an increase in uptake on this intention of the Chinese variable of a Chinese Canadian and the expression of bias and the anti-Asian racism uptake during COVID-19.

So, in effect, there were, even without pointing towards the data points--needless to say, COVID-19 was a very difficult and traumatic time for the entire community. Now you factor in an increase in, and potentially a significant uptake in, hate incidences and anti-Asian racism that spite fear amongst many of us who never had to and were fortunate enough up to this point to be living in a city like in Vancouver, where I live, where there is a large proportion of Asian Canadians and Chinese Canadians, so that I was largely sheltered from this.

But even myself, during COVID-19, I was originally scheduled to travel to London, and having traveled to London many times before, but I actually consciously found myself doing the math. The community--the Asian community is much smaller there, they're much more decentralized. How safe did I feel, not just for my physical being, but my emotional wellbeing, traveling to a place where the entire world was talking about a "Chinese Virus" or "Wuhan Flu"? To see even incidental or singular incidences of racism directed at me could potentially ruin my vacation, so I



elected not to go. Now, that is a specific incidence that I experienced. But within Asian Canadian communities UVic researchers found that Chinese Canadians surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic were worried about their children being bullied, were worried about their job and career opportunities worsening due to the Chinese identity, and this--their sense of belonging actually decreased during this time, and they felt distinctly more othered. So, we can see this correlated and alongside non-Asian Canadians also responding to feel that they didn't feel the Chinese Canadians were part of the Canadian fabric. So, we have both people within our community and outside of our community seeing an increase and a greater divide.

Now, again, EliminateHate and VAF, we really believe that a key way to combat hate is to fight the source. And to fight the source, we need representation, we need positive representation, and we need institutions in Government to take responsibility in a systemic level, to monitor this, to manage this, and to promote opportunities for positive representation.

Now, a few calls to actions and recommendations that I have for this group today is – there is absolutely work to be done on a systemic level that can eliminate unconscious--reduce racism and reduce systemic racism and increase understanding that Asian Canadians are very much historically, and currently, part of the fabric of Canadian society. We would like one, for there to be a provincial media watchdog organization created to monitor and advance the elimination of bias in media reporting. Two, for the B.C. Government to fund an annual report that tracks news stories from racialized communities. Three, provide government funding for organizations such as mine, EliminateHate, to promote and educate institutions on proper media reporting. As mentioned, we have created a style guide that we will be looking in the future to disseminate to media groups. In 2021 summer, when we produced it, it was--we don't have the resources or capacity to do outreach. We've created something, it's a great start, and it brings to light the issue. Yet, we need resources, funding, and internal capacity and expertise for facilitators to go out, and funding and support is needed in this realm.

We would like community organizations to be funded to help reshape the narrative, to provide educational materials to educate British Columbians on the historical and contemporary contributions of Asian Canadians to our province. And, again, there's no one better than those of us with lived experiences to create these campaigns. Now, with that said, I recognize that there's so many grassroots groups out there. Where Government can absolutely help is provide the funding, and the forum, and the administration or coordination to bring us together so that we can have a cohesive approach and leverage each other's skills but also not reinvent the wheel or spin in this wheel when we're all trying to achieve the same outcome. So that is all I have for today, in terms of my presentation. Any further questions of the moment?

Sarah Khan: I could ask one. Thank you so much, again. You talk--your second recommendation that you were just talking about, you mentioned track media stories from racialized communities. Could you tell me more about this recommendation and what--yes, just a little bit more about what this recommendation would entail.

Audrey Wong: Yes. So, there's a couple of areas that we would like to focus on. One is the--how represented are racialized communities in the stories that are being told? Are they--are we telling our own stories? Are they being told from a lens of groups that have not been living the experience? Now, secondly is, are the stories that are being told about racialized communities told in a non-biased light. What is the percentage of stories that are told that have a negative connotation versus those that are told in a positive light or a neutral light? And finally, how many racialized stories are being told? So, who are the creators, or percentage of the creators are racialized, of stories that are being told? What percentage are racialized stories? Is it representative of our demographic? When it's being told, are they being told in a way that represents us in a fair and positive light versus a negative and neutral light?



Sarah Khan: Thank you. I don't think that I have any other questions, Kasari, because I've asked a number of them already.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: I think that covers off mine as well. I found those recommendations at the end particularly helpful, so thank you for pulling that together for us. And just a thank you, again, for being here with us and walking us through your perspective and drawing those connections between the context and the hate incidences. Very helpful. Very interesting work that the organization is doing and thank you again for making that time.

Audrey Wong: Thank you for having me.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: I'll pass it to Meghan for some final comments.

Meghan Toal: Thanks, Kasari. And thanks so much, Audrey. That was really, again, rich, and yeah, it was really--we're really grateful to be able to hear what you have to say and share all the great work that you're doing through the many ways that you do your work. Just to wrap us out, I just want to remind that we are also accepting written submissions for the inquiry until the end of March. So, March 31st is the deadline for written and recorded. So not just written, but also there are some other mediums that we're inviting folks to provide some additional submissions. So, we're flanking that for everybody so that's on folks' radar. We will provide access to this recording, if that's something that you would like, and you'd like to review it. Please just let me know, and we'll let you know when it's ready. And we are open to folks reviewing the recordings of these oral submissions. And outside of that, just once again, thank you so much for taking the time today, we're very happy to have had you share your experiences.

Audrey Wong: Thank you very much. And, Meghan, I would, when ready, love a copy of the recording, just so I can share it with my team.

Meghan Toal: Sure, sounds great. So, I'll follow up with you about that, and we will find a way to make sure we can get that to you.

Audrey Wong: Thank you. Have a good day, all.

