



International Students and Sexuality at Syracuse University

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Syracuse University plays host to over 2,233 international students, scholars, and their dependents from 151 different countries and all geographic regions of the globe. While students from Asia are the visible, numerical majority, there have been demographic shifts in sub-regional and national representation: students from India are now the largest single national group on campus, displacing China and Taiwan in the past year. When teaching international students, it is important to recognize the

many ways perspectives on and experiences with particular sexualities, races, ethnicities, abilities, nationalities, and religions intersect—just as it is important when teaching American students. These different perspectives, experiences, and levels of understanding sexuality shape the ways students make sense of LGBT issues in the classroom and on campus, more generally. Therefore, it is imperative that TAs begin to explore the variations that exist among their students.

Our international student population is

extremely diverse. Their American classmates, faculty, and staff are often poorly equipped to grasp differences among them. While there are exceptions, most Americans do not readily distinguish Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Parsis or regional and local identities, languages and dialects. The assumption of homogeneity within these populations extends to students and scholars from nations other than India; few Americans speak or understand Cantonese, Taiwanese, Tibetan, Mongolian, or Fujian's multiple dialects. Nor do they recognize the differences between Han, Mongolians, Chinese Koreans, Hui, Bai, Yi, Manchus, and Tibetans, to name a few. These multiple nationalities, religions, and languages are just a few of the ways that Syracuse University has received its international reputation for diversity.

Despite all these variations, international students on campus are often described as

people who represent “majorities” in their own countries. Conceptualizing international students as part of “majority” groups inhibits discussions of the differences that exist within these groups, including sexual and gender identity. While Americans acknowledge that gender is a form of diversity among international students, many may not understand the nuances in gendered identities that characterize internationals on campus. In fact, this is evident from the stereotypes that are often used to characterize international students.¹

These generalizations frame any discussion of sexuality among international students. First, it is impossible to fathom attitudes and values about sexual identity, behavior, or gender expression without first recognizing the sources of diversity within the international student population. Second, understanding the diversity within our international student population reminds us that the context for any

discussion of gender and sexuality has to be sufficiently nuanced to link sexual, religious, and socio/political experiences distinctly different from our own, and disconnect sexuality and attitudes about it from the Judeo-Christian legacy from which many Americans



**National and International Gay and Lesbian Organizations and Publications >>
faculty.washington.edu/alvin/gayorg.htm**

Contains 47 pages of non-profit and information-providing organizations and publications with websites having numerous full-text resources and links to many LGBT topics.

understand LGBT people and issues.

A substantial number of our international students and scholars come from patriarchal social systems pervaded by political ideologies and/or religious dogmas that result either in the censorship of information and activity related to sexuality in general, and non-heterosexuality in particular, or reiterate heterosexist norms as if they were the only acceptable standard for sexual, marital and social relationships. This would be familiar territory to Americans were it not for the fact that the religious and secular ideologies that frame sexual identities and behavior for most of our international students are Muslim, Confucian, Neo-Confucian, Hindu, secular socialist and communist, and not Judeo-Christian. In contemporary American society, it is possible to find safe space, even if it is limited, by escaping into the privatized sectors of secular society. However, in many of the countries from which our international students come, patriarchal control severely limits safe space and safe discourse.

In addition, our students, scholars, and their dependents also come from many societies suffering the ravages of civil war, terrorism, and internecine warfare, and some of them come from societies only recently in transition from conditions of conflict.² Governmental and heads of households alike all too often regard



VOICES

One of the things that I find is that I have no role-models. None. So, where are we supposed to find role models?

>SU undergraduate student

homosexuality as the manifestation not only of sexual deviance, but also of political dissonance. Those whose lives do not adhere to the acceptable social norms either retreat to very private spaces, self-censor, or flee. Politics, then, frames sexual identities and behaviors in more ways than those to which most Americans are accustomed.

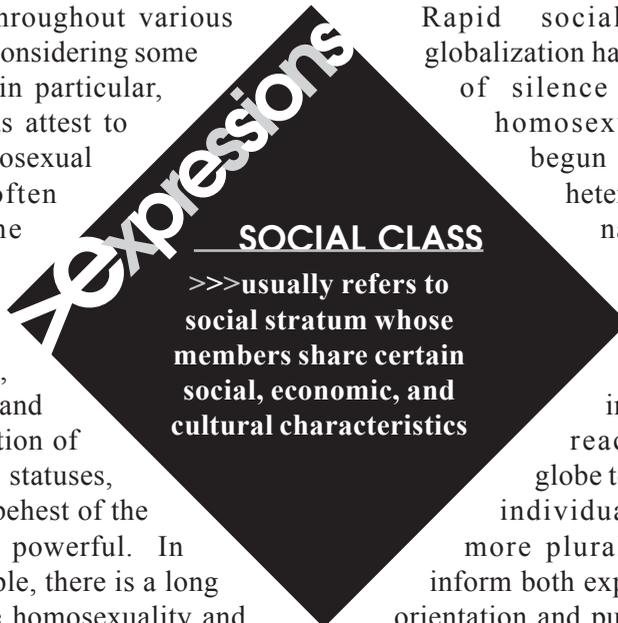
To generalize is difficult, but the impact of these experiences often draws a deep line between what is private and what is public, leaving much less room for the expression of sexual and gender identity, particularly for women and transgender individuals. When political crisis is added to the ideological and religious mix, the room for expression is narrowed much further. Even

when cultures are not experiencing such extreme turmoil, formal and informal laws, widespread belief systems, and cultural norms often work to silence, or severely stigmatize, those whose practices do not conform to that which is considered acceptable.

However, these larger social forces do not always effectively force LGBT people into invisibility. Instead, both historically and today, non-heterosexual identities are expressed throughout various cultures. When considering some Asian societies in particular, historical records attest to the fact that homosexual behavior was often practiced in the domains of the wealthy and powerful, in very private, familial spaces, and through the creation of special castes or statuses, primarily at the behest of the wealthy and the powerful. In China, for example, there is a long tradition of male homosexuality and, in many Indian societies, a Muslim caste-like organization of entertainers composed of homosexuals and transsexuals, known as Hijras, represent a little known identity (Ellingson & Green, 2002; Hinsch, 1990;

Nanda, 1990). When trying to make sense of how these ways of life became stigmatized, the literature on colonialism reminds us of the ways in which Western colonists described and portrayed the people they colonized and their institutions as either sexually depraved or sexually enticing, such as the sexual deviance attributed to harems and the zanas of the Middle East and India (Hunt & Lessard, 2002).

Rapid social change and globalization have broken the wall of silence that surrounds homosexuality and have begun to undermine the heterosexism of many nations around the globe, but not everywhere, or to equal degrees. Where international media reaches across the globe to touch the lives of individuals and families, more pluralities of attitude inform both exploration of sexual orientation and public expression of sexual and gender identities. Even in repressive societies, major metropolitan areas across the globe offer space for self-expression. Hong Kong, despite Chinese rule, offers more room than the mainland



for expression of dissent in general. In South Korea, despite strong patriarchal structures, access to the internet and international media has created opportunities for people to connect with communities of people like them, encouraging greater levels of self-acceptance.

More specifically, in India, a democratic country undergoing very rapid change, homosexuality is now broached in new magazines, in television talk shows, novels, short stories on the internet, and in film. A protest movement now champions the cause of the Hijras and seeks justice and human rights protections for this marginalized group. Also, in China, the post Cultural Revolution era brought about a rebellion among college students who formed on-campus clubs exploring all aspects of sexual and gender identity. Now, one can find novels, films, magazines, graphic art, and rock music that impart stories of the influence of the Cultural Revolution on sexual identity. While fear persists among officials that these private practices and ideologies might yield public rebellion, media continue to offer a much more open approach to sexualities. Again, this growing inclusiveness of non-heterosexual identities is not occurring equally around the globe: in many nations, terrorism and civil strife continue to threaten groups

deemed sexually and politically “deviant” and none of these countries accept non-heterosexual behaviors and identities as a suitable alternative to heterosexuality.

With this framework in mind, we can return to the experiences of international students in the context of Syracuse University. While they are mostly graduate students, many undergraduates also call another nation their home and both men and women from both levels of study tend to pursue degree programs predominantly in the sciences and engineering. These are not classroom cultures where sexuality is, itself, a subject of study and discussion, nor have most of our international students been in classrooms where it is. Heterosexism prevails, and that prevalence echoes most of these students’ experiences at home. How, then, do international students who identify as other than heterosexual begin



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to feel supported, accepted, and respected for who they are?

Given the emphasis on “privacy” and concerns about “conventionality” that most international students are taught before coming to the U.S., the place to which most international students turn to explore all facets of sexuality is the internet. This exploration takes place, not in the classroom, but outside of it. However, there are clear efforts that TAs and faculty can make that can communicate a sense of support for their LGBT students from abroad. Perhaps a comment on a syllabus can indicate that all students are equally respected in a particular classroom, regardless of nationality, religion, gender identity, (dis)ability, or sexuality. You may also want to include contact information for the LGBT Resource Center on campus, along with the same information for the Slutzker Center for International Services. Placing a “SAFE SPACE” sticker on an office door symbolizes that those office residents respect LGBT students. Announcing campus events in classrooms, including events pertaining to non-heterosexual people and communities, is another way to indicate that you recognize and accept that your students come from a variety of social locations. And, when an occurrence on campus threatens the S.U.

LGBT community, address these situations and make sure your students know where they can turn for support. These are all examples of how to communicate to your students that you understand how sexuality is an important component of your students’ multiple identities, that you recognize how sexual identity and gender expression often shape students’ experiences and social allegiances, and, most importantly, that you appreciate these differences.

It is critical to emphasize that international students who identify as non-heterosexual face a triple dilemma: first, they must deal with being international students in the United States, on a campus full of predominantly white and economically privileged students. Second, these international students must struggle with heteronormativity and homophobia in this country and among their fellow students on this campus; and third, they must also negotiate those same oppositional forces when in their home country. It takes very strong people to successfully embrace all of their identities under these circumstances. This is why it is so vital that our TAs and faculty members recognize their responsibility as allies to these populations and take that job very seriously.

>>REFERENCES

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>>ENDNOTES

- 1 > In the late 1970s and early 1980s, new arrivals from abroad were largely drawn from the top income earning families and selected from the best known educational institutions. That selectivity gave the appearance of homogeneity to the international student population on campus. But, from the mid-1980s onward, the international student population increased significantly and the recruitment base spread across regions, classes, linguistic, and ethnic groups fueling diversity within international student ranks. However, the notion that international students are homogeneous persists despite the changes in the composition of this population.
- 2 > Many of the countries that have either been in varying states of war and dissolution contribute small numbers to our international student population, but the significance of their experience looms large. They include students from Bolivia, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, the Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Lebanon, Montenegro, Pakistan, Serbia, Tibet, and Zimbabwe.

