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# Guest editorial: Gender and sexuality in Asia

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## Prologue

Several years ago, we were invited to put together a special issue for *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*. This is a journal that deals with the management of social plurality, issues that are close to our hearts, and so we said yes without hesitation. However, coming up with a topic for this special issue proved to be harder than we thought. As we are trained in different academic disciplines, we examined *EDI* issues through multiple lenses and at different levels. Our research also focused on different aspects of diversity and used different methodological approaches. It took us several rounds of discussions to converge on a topic for this special issue because we did not want this to be a “special issue” in the literal sense but a “special” issue in which we not only attempt to fill a void in the literature, but also to provide a legitimate space for voices and issues that are marginalized through structural inequalities. We married our respective research interests in gender, sexuality and culture and leveraged our understanding of the research in this area to put together this special issue on *Gender and Sexuality in Asia*.

Through this journey of reviewing abstracts and papers, we have come to the realization that linguistic diversity, economic disparities, access to quality graduate education and different cultural interpretations of gender have limited the visibility of research on gender and sexuality in Asia, particularly in mainstream, English language publications. This guest editorial journey was not simply one of reviewing papers for their quality, but also one in which we support and enable authors (especially those whose first language is not English) to articulate their research so that there is greater visibility and understanding of their perspectives. Not surprisingly, issues on gender and sexuality are often enacted and interpreted in their emic indigenous forms specific to that emic cultural background. We hope that this special issue will be that wedge in the door to allow for more research in this part of the world to be known to an English-speaking academic community, and we hope that you enjoy reading this set of papers.

## Asia and its evolving social fabric

Asia is home to the world's largest population and has a landmass of over 44 million km<sup>2</sup>, covering 30% of the entire land surface on Earth. This region also has the most diverse, multicultural demographic fabric and socio-political systems in human civilizations ([United Nations, 2022](#)). Economic growth and technological innovations in East Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea have powered much of global development in the past decade and the broader Asian region is expected to drive global demand as the world emerges from the shadows of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic ([Rosa, 2023](#)).

While neoliberal ideologies have steadily flourished since the end of the Second World War, conservative values continue to dominate and shape social norms in the region, particularly on matters related to diversity management. Importantly, the public discourse on same-sex relationships and non-normative sexual identities [i.e. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual (LGBT)] in Asia has endured similar contestations as the ones in the West, although the controversies and reproduction of divergent identities are considerably more nuanced due to the region's cultural dynamics.



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## Gender and sexuality in Asia

In the last five years, Asia reported a wave of legislative changes and civic activism related to LGBT rights which eventually paved the way for greater visibility of the LGBT community in this region. On May 16, 2019, Taiwan became the first Asian society to legalize same-sex marriage (Wong, 2019). This momentous occasion was preceded by the decriminalization of gay sex in India in September 2018 (Anand, 2018), the Singapore Supreme Court's decision to allow a gay man to adopt his biological son birthed by a United States America surrogate in December 2018 (Supreme Court of Singapore, 2018) and the first pride boat parade in Myanmar in January 2019 (The Straits Times, 2019).

More recently, in August 2022, the Singapore Government announced its decision to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code, an arcane piece of legislation criminalizing sex between men (Tham, 2022). A bill was passed on November 29, 2022 to repeal the legislation (Goh, 2022). At the same time, lawmakers also amended the constitution to protect the definition of marriage (defined as a union between a man and a woman) against legal challenge (Lim, 2022; Tham and Koh, 2022). This revision prohibits same-sex marriage and effectively deprives same-sex couples of any civil rights and family-based subsidies in housing, education and healthcare that are available to heterosexual couples. This further prevents any chance for legal child adoption and thereby the right to establish a nuclear family in the traditional sense. The public considers the constitutional amendment a means to defend conservative values and a concerted effort to stigmatize and marginalize same-sex couples in Singapore (Koh and Mathews, 2022).

Across Asia, all these milestones reflect the progress and conflicts experienced by the LGBT community in their quest for inclusion and acceptance. It also highlights the inherent struggle related to the social construction of family and societal values governing sexual orientation and gender identity within Asian institutions. Most notably, the struggle for equal rights and recognition for the LGBT community was rejected by South Korean conservatives (AsiaOne, 2019), Singaporean churches (Zaccheus, 2018) and the Chinese Government (Reuters, 2019; South China Morning Post, 2019); Brunei imposed the death penalty on men who have sex with men (Ochab, 2019) and Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway (MTR) and airport banned the display of a Cathay Pacific advertisement depicting a same-sex couple (Lee, 2019).

Despite the increasing visibility of the LGBT community and the tensions faced by them in this part of the world, scholarly work in this area has been scant, especially when compared to the research emanating from Western, English-speaking countries. This could be due to gender and sexual identities being taboo subjects of discussion in socially conservative Asian societies (Jackson, 1999) until recent times. Moreover, English is a second language for many in this region and could be a reason empirical research and discussion from this region have not fed to the body of mainstream literature.

We also observed that the concept of gender and sexuality take on different meanings and connotations across cultural contexts in this region. The contemporary discourse on LGBT tends to be shaped by the individual-level perspective, with an emphasis on human rights (or lack of), and amplified by the perceived clash in societal values. But this need not be the only or the inevitable, theoretical lens to study LGBT in Asia. As articulated by anthropologist, Megan Sinnott, "Appreciation of local cultural understandings of sexual practices will be lost or subtly skewed if researchers use the categorizations of 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' without conscious awareness of the implicit cultural meanings embedded within this binary construct" (c.f. Enteen, 2007, p. 257).

Within Thailand alone, the term "gay" has several different connotations (Borthwick, 1999). There are also the kathoey in Thailand (Ocha, 2012), the hijras in India, the third gender or third sex in Indonesia, the babaylans in the Philippines and other gendered variations of what the Western world categorizes as LGBT. This diverse but multifaceted perspective warrants a culture-centric approach to our study of gender and sexuality.

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## Overview of the papers in this special issue

While extant research on the regional LGBT community has provided critical insights into issues faced by this segment of the population across Asian cultures, much work remains to be done. This special issue of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* aims to bring together scholars researching LGBT in Asia to advance research on this under-researched community. We invited papers that investigate gender and sexuality in a variety of cultural and societal settings within Asia and received a number of interesting submissions from different parts of Asia. The curated set of five papers presented in this special issue covers a diverse range of issues (including employment, human rights, religion, literature and mental health and well-being) across several cultural contexts.

The first paper in this special issue, “*Sexuality and gender within Afghanistan’s bacha bereesh Population*,” by Elise Racine, examines an increasingly revived practice of transgenerational same-sex relationships in Afghanistan associated with the sexual exploitation of young males known as *bacha bereesh*. Using an integrative literature review of qualitative and quantitative secondary data, the author provides a comprehensive overview of the health needs, sexual practices, gender identities and orientations of *bacha bereesh*. The study also revealed how such practices emerge in relation to power structures and notions of honor in the Afghanistan culture.

The second paper in this special issue, “*Queer India ‘On Paper’. Decriminalization, Recognition and Visibility of Sexual Diversity and Non-Normativity*,” by Michiel Baas traces the way Indian activists, journalists and academics have dealt with the growing awareness of non-heterosexual relationship since the publication of *Yaraana* (Merchant, 1999). The edited English volume is ostensibly the first collection of mainstream gay writing published in India and is often considered the seminal work that inspired the diverse and critical inquiries in the ensuing two decades. What started as giving voice to the disempowered has morphed into a question on non-normative identity, medicalization and socio-political representation of homosexuality and how India’s domestic expressions of alternative sexuality may be eclipsed by the broader global constellation of sexual diversity and practices.

The third paper in this special issue, “*Experiences of conflict, non-acceptance and discrimination are associated with poor mental well-being among LGBTQ-identified individuals in Singapore*,” by Gerard Toh, Wee Ling Koh, Jack Ho, Jackson Chia, Ad Maulod, Irene Tirtanjana, Peter Yang and Mathia Lee reports findings from the first National LGBT Census conducted in Singapore. Consistent with extant research on LGBT individuals’ mental well-being, the census found that 40.9% of respondents had poor mental well-being but those who participated in LGBTQ community organizations or events had better mental well-being, compared to those who did not.

The fourth paper in this special issue, “*Understanding LGBT individuals’ employment environment in Taiwan: A relational framework perspective*,” is by Jennet Achyldurdyeva, Li-Fan Wu and Nurbibi Datova. The article examines the interplay between the micro (e.g. individual differences), meso (e.g. non-profit organizations, food and beverage establishments) and macro (e.g. support in mass media, legislation against discriminatory practices) aspects of the workplace environment that are crucial to foster social inclusion and integration of the LGBT community in Taiwan. The three layers are interwoven, as they either reinforce or mitigate exclusionary forces in organizations and acceptance by co-workers. The findings underscore the systemic interaction between individual-, family- and societal-level forces at the workplace, which has until now received limited empirical attention in the Asian context.

The final paper in this special issue, “*Buddhism, Gender, and Sexualities: Queer Spiritualities in Thailand*,” by Ocha Witchayanee investigated the role and perceptions of religion in the lives of Thai Buddhist male-to-female transgender sex workers. Through a series of focus group discussions, small group discussions and in-depth interviews with 65

sex workers in Bangkok and Pattaya, the author found 3 principal characteristics in the way Buddhism intersects with gender identity and the sex work profession in the lived experiences of these transgender sex workers – Buddhist dequeering, queering Buddhism amidst multiple oppressions and queering Buddhism as enlightenment.

## Discussion

These papers provide us with insight into how gender and sexuality are enacted and experienced in the represented culture. In particular, they provide a glimpse into how sexuality impacts the lived experiences of these individuals who are striving to live and survive within their respective cultural systems. Several things stood out for us. First, gender and sexual minorities are confronted with stigma and prejudice regardless of the cultural context. Whether they are transgender sex workers in Thailand (Witchayanee, this issue), the *bacha bereesh* in Afghanistan (Racine, this issue) or LGBT individuals in Singapore (Toh *et al.*, this issue) and Taiwan (Achyldurdyeva *et al.*, this issue), these papers highlighted a clear subordination of their identities in the social fabric of these societies. This stigmatization did not just come from others around them; it also came from themselves. Consistent with what past studies have found, such stigmatization negatively impacts their mental health, emotional health, physical health and employment opportunities.

A second observation was how economic progress and wealth serve to justify and liberate gender and sexual minorities. In Witchayanee's (this issue) paper, she describes how transgender sex workers justify their gender identity and occupation to their families by the income they earn (far more than what they can earn as university graduates doing an office job) and make merits by sponsoring Buddhist rituals and festivals. Racine (this issue), in her analysis of the *bacha bereesh* in Afghanistan, similarly reported how wealthy heterosexual-identifying married men with family could afford to purchase pre-pubescent boys who are typically economically deprived for their sexual gratification. While the relationship between wealth and power is not new or surprising, what stood out is the stark contrast of the gender and sexual minorities in these cultures, compared to what we typically see or read about in Western literature.

Last but not least, the papers remind us that gender and sexuality are a function of a set of culturally embedded systems spanning history, legislation, employment, family, values, etc. and it would be remiss of us to assume that all gender and sexual minorities around the world have similar lived experiences. For example, while the practice of having sex with pre-pubescent boys in Afghanistan is labeled as pedophilic in many parts of the world, such practices are accepted and even seen as a status symbol within the Afghan culture. In India and other parts of South and Southeast Asia, gender is not a binary; it is trinary. The third sex or the third gender is a legitimate and accepted part of the social fabric of these cultures, and an emic perspective is much needed when seeking to understand gender and sexuality in these cultural contexts. Of course, these observations stem from our limited knowledge of how gender and sexuality are enacted in Asia. This further reinforces the need for more emic and culturally nuanced perspectives in the study of gender and sexuality.

Several questions arise from these observations. What does the future hold for LGBT individuals in Asia? What will be the social compact between the LGBT communities and the heterosexual collectives in the next 20 years? What kind of policy and ground-up levers can help forge a more inclusive and cohesive society? There are many questions but few answers to the known unknowns and unknown unknowns. This special issue is a modest effort to address an empirical gap in the literature for an ethno-culturally diverse region that is also home to societies known for their rigid and imposing norms governing gender roles and endorsement of toxic masculinity.

Asia, as the growth engine for the region and beyond, is going through a series of seismic economic and demographic transformations. National income has risen steadily among

emerging economies such as Indonesia, India and Vietnam, while developed nation-states like Japan, South Korea, China and Singapore are rapidly aging. These tectonic changes will shape the evolving societal needs and values of residents and consumers, and this, in turn, influences how diversity will be managed.

While much progress was achieved in the last two decades in fostering LGBT inclusion, there is also a distinct schism between LGBT communities and the conservatives in today's fractured and polarized partisan politics (Hoyt *et al.*, 2019; Schnabel, 2018). In some segments of society where political compromise is viewed as a zero-sum game (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018), tolerance and acceptance of the LGBT community are a fragile social compact, powered by anxieties over the erosion of traditional values that define the contour of the community and what should be the pre-eminent form of cultural identity. The future of diversity and inclusion for LGBT would need to consider the broader socio-political climate even as it expands the common space for all.

Importantly, the barriers to inclusion and change and the contestations to gender ideology are not the only forces that determine acceptance of non-normative sexual communities and the state of cohesion. Instead, other evolving competitions could have originated from an exogenous source. In this special issue, Baas' observation of India's evolving LGBT public discourse offers the perfect example of this nascent tension. In this article, he described how rapid urbanization and the influx of cosmopolitan gay culture in India have had a hegemonic impact on the expression of alternative sexual identities in the country, homogenizing what would have been otherwise a vibrant and indigenous gay culture. Baas' introduction could have been the preface for the rest of the region. Even as Asia's economy powers global economic growth in the 21st century, there are unmistakable signs of widening social inequality and marginalization. This economic chasm will invariably lead to a delicate, class divide in gay lifestyles between LGBT communities from upper-middle professionals and their working-class counterparts – and consequently compounding and complicating the existing social fabric.

What kind of social and policy levers do we have to advance LGBT inclusion? The literature on social identity has thus hinted to us the theoretical imperatives to explore common in-group identity. Specifically, what are the challenges, goals and aspirations that will bring people of different sexual orientations and gender identities together? To this end, we believe that our collective appreciation of our shared responsibilities in dealing with natural and man-made catastrophes will be a good start. Since embarking on this special issue some four years ago, humanity has been weakened by a series of calamities – the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war and a worsening global climate have all but shifted our attention to our shared destiny in tangible ways. If only we pay close enough attention to the common civilization, we will realize that gender roles and sexual identities are no more than a blip in our shared identity in the history of mankind.

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