

# Gender and Sexuality 101

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With support from



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# Introduction

Most people recognize the feeling of their stomachs tightening, their faces burning up, and the failure to find the right words to respond in the moment. Others, too scared or unaware of how to help, stand by as witnesses. We have all been bullied, bullied others, or acted ignorantly. However, sometimes the victims of bullying suffer from damage irreversible. I have memories of my brother's peers, some of which were the people he considered his closest friends, ostracizing him. At times he was even physically harmed due to his Attention Deficit Disorder and Learning Disabilities. Teachers blamed him for conflicts when he could not find the appropriate words to stand up for himself. Feeling alone with low self-esteem and little hope for improvement in the quality of his life, he stopped caring. I still remember the late night conversations my parents had with my brother in attempts to revive his spirit. There are no excuses for treating others with such little respect.

Schools should be a community where students, peers, friends, teachers, and families work together to support the well being and growth of children in a holistic manner. The writing and compilation of this booklet serves several purposes. First, through exposing high school students to ideas that they may not encounter until college, I wish to mitigate homophobia. Due to the recent suicides of young adults this issue is extremely timely. In September 2010 alone, more than six gay teens took their lives due to homophobia. Michelle Burford, journalist for AOL Health, writes: "The Trevor Project—an organization that operates the only 24/7 crisis line for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth—reports that gay teens are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers; nine out of ten teen LGBT students have experienced harassment at school"(Burford 2010). It is my hope that the ideas conveyed in this packet will expand the way people think about gender and sexuality, diminishing the gap between "us" and "them". Secondly, I encourage a dialogue between students, teachers, and parents about the issues covered in this booklet.

Tyler Clementi (right) was a freshman at Rutgers University, when he took his life after a video of his sexual encounter with another male was posted online.

Both Justin Aaberg (middle), age fifteen, and Asher Brown (left) age thirteen, committed suicide after undergoing harassment for being gay or perceived to be gay.



Brown Family | MCT | AFP

I would like to note that I will be using the word queer to encompass all non-normative identities for simplification purposes, but readers should be aware that this term has taken on many different meanings. My last note is that I will be utilizing the pronouns he/she, but I do acknowledge that gender is a non-dichotomous topic for many people.

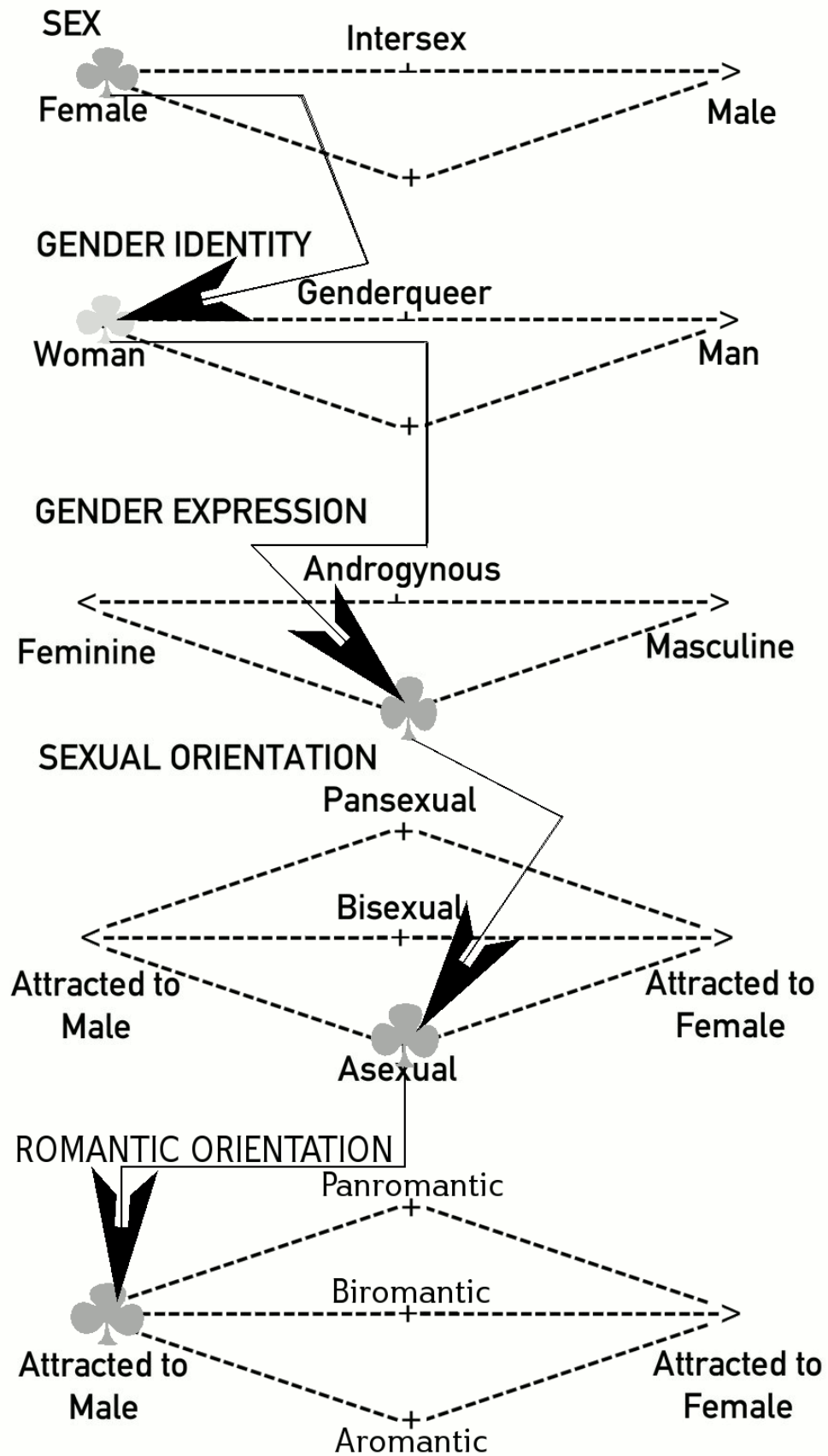
## Not so Black and White: Fluidity

Like most concepts in life, gender and sexuality are difficult to sum up in one word or label. We are taught from an early age that if someone has a penis he is a man, and if someone has a vagina she is a woman. Another common view is that if a person is attracted to the same-sex he/she is attracted to the same-sex in every context. We also learn through popular media representations that if a male is involved in ballet, likes to cook, and speaks in a higher-pitched voice he is attracted to men, or if a woman wants to be a police officer or does not wear makeup, she is attracted to other women. Is this correct?

Not always! Human beings are diverse creatures. No two humans are the same. When we take this into account, there can be a wide range of identity markers. Therefore, any combination of interests, gender expression, and sexual orientation are possible. Many people believe that gender and sexuality are like fingerprints; every person's orientation is different. One attribute or identity marker does not necessarily preclude or result in another. In addition, these attributes can change. Speaking of gender, let's start there.

**Gender** is the behavioral, cultural, and psychological traits typically associated with a particular sex. This is manifest in **gender expression** including: clothing, mannerisms, interests, hair, and other factors. **Sex** refers to the biological aspects which make up a female or male encompassing: hormones, chromosomes, genitalia, etc. A person might identify as **transgender** if his/her biological sex does not match what gender he/she identifies with inside, and often as a result takes on the cultural gender norms of the opposite sex. However, some individuals identify as gender queer, feeling as if their gender identity fails to fit simply within the male or female markers. They may also oppose the limited male/female binary recognized in many societies. People who identify as intersex possess a combination of female and male hormones, genitalia, or chromosomes. Hermaphrodite is not the respectful term for inter-sex individuals. In general, people often feel their identities shift or fall between categories. An example of gender expression is of someone who may not be easily identifiable as male or female based on their hair, clothing, behavior or attitude. People who fall into this category are known as **androgynous**. **Queer** is a term that is engaged in many ways, but relates to gender, sex, and sexuality. Although it may sound like an offensive word, some people feel queer describes their non-conformity to traditional ways of looking at these categories.

What confuses many people is the difference between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. **Sexual behavior** is what a person does erotically or romantically. **Sexual orientation** is who a person likes; the genders of the people they get crushes on or could fall in love with. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to define or refrain from labeling his/herself. Some people view their identity as ever-changing and see labels as restrictive, therefore wish to avoid labels altogether. The spectrums below illustrate how the above categories can lie on a continuum. These spectrums provide one contemporary way to discuss identities.



## Closets Are For Clothing: Coming Out

No, coming out is not standing on a table with a loudspeaker addressing a large crowd yelling, “Guess what world? I am gay and proud!” Nor is it emerging from a closet with tight and vibrant 80s clothing on, while rainbow lights are flashing and family, friends, and strangers sit on the couch cheering and clapping. Well, at least for most it isn’t.

Coming out is a different experience for everyone and the process is a life-long one. It is impossible to discuss sexuality and gender to every person that an individual knows all at once. People choose to tell certain people at certain times when they feel ready. Often people may fear rejection after telling friends and family. It may take time for a friend or family member to feel comfortable with the news or alter his or her perspective. Sometimes this adjustment requires education on such topics as how to incorporate sensitive language into casual conversation.

Coming out is rarely as simple as describing one’s sexuality, sex, or gender in one word. Furthermore, the individual may still be in the process of arriving at fully understanding his/herself. However, it is important to remember that an individual’s preferences may change. It is not your responsibility to disclose information about someone’s sex, gender, or sexuality to others before he/she is ready, or without permission. Equally important to remember is that not everyone’s experiences involve experimenting. It can be disrespectful to simply write off an individual as going through a phase simply because what that person explains to you does not match up to how you previously envisioned him or her. It is also important to respect that some people do not like the words “coming out” because it insinuates that they are confessing; that there is something inherently wrong with what they are doing or how they view themselves. Perhaps more appropriate terms are: “being open” or “sharing their true selves”.



# Language

Currently, discussion looms surrounding the annoyance of the elongated acronym LGBTQI, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex peoples. Why does it seem that there are more letters added every year? Some within the community think this is necessary and others don't. The point to get here is to be inclusive and respectful with your speech. You may forget a letter in the acronym, but what counts is if you approach the individuals and their personal lives with respect and privacy.

Many people who see others who may identify as transgender stare and look confused, unsure of whether they identify as a man, woman, both, neither, or something in between. Do not assume a transgender identity accompanies a lesbian or gay orientation. In general, when addressing discussion groups and people in other forums it is good to state what pronoun you would like others to address you as, and ask others when introducing themselves to do the same. For example, "I am Caryn and I prefer if people use the pronoun she when they are referring to me."

The issue of homophobic language is a grave concern due to the impact this language has on LGBTQI individuals. Homophobia has no boundaries—it is in the locker rooms, the work place, and within one's home. It is never ok to use the word "faggot", nor the word "gay" to describe a negative experience or object. These words evince fearful, painful, and unwelcoming feelings from people who identify as LGBTQI.

In the last couple years students picked up the words "no homo" from rap songs and other sources. This is often inserted before or after an expression of affection towards the same-sex. The phrase is often implored to assert the speaker's heterosexuality. I would ask in this context: why does the speaker feel the need to do that? Consequently, is there an assumption intrinsic in those statements that queerness is a bad thing? These are only some of the harmful words in circulation. The main concern here is not solely about diction, but why and how speakers choose to use such words.



"Homosexual" is a tricky case due to the long negative history it has connected with the mental health field, a field in which professionals viewed homosexuality as a mental illness. Many people within the queer community use this word in certain contexts; however, it is mainly used in academic discourse as opposed to self-identification. I would recommend avoiding the word in casual encounters with queer acquaintances and friends.



## Intersections: Race, Religion, and Class

Nobody is simply queer. By looking at other aspects of a person's identity, it helps us to understand how his/her sexuality and gender manifest in his/her everyday life. Religion, race, residence, ethnicity, and socio-economic status are just some of the possible intersections with gender and sexuality. The below quote depicts the complexity of intersecting identity traits.



Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw 1989: 149).

In discussing intersections, it is important to keep an open mind and not hold tightly to preconceived notions of what peoples' experiences are when certain aspects of their identities meet. For instance, it is a widely held belief in the United States that certain Christian sects are hostile to the idea of a queer lifestyle and gay marriage. However, it is fairly common for more conservative sects of many religions, including Islam and Judaism, to condemn homosexuality as well. Nonetheless, there are families, religious leaders, and practitioners of these sects who interpret their religious scriptures differently, who belong to gay friendly places of worship, or simply do not agree with anti-gay rhetoric. On the other hand, an individual may explain his/her gender, sex, or sexuality to his/her family, practitioners of a certain faith, and the family and friends may choose not to accept this explanation or person for who he or she is.

People who may be questioning their sexuality or gender may agree with their scriptures and religious leaders about homosexuality, feeling as





though they are possibly living a contradiction. Wanting to be a person of faith but simultaneously wishing to live a queer lifestyle can be a struggle. As a result of this struggle some attempt to rid themselves of their non-traditional gender and sexuality through religious or psychiatric means, or try to live secret lives. These examples demonstrate that these intersections work in harmony for some, while provide a source of confusion and discomfort for others. If you are interested in learning more about how religion and queerness intersect, I recommend viewing the documentary *Trembling Before G-d*, which depicts the complexities of identifying as a religious gay Jew.

An example of how race, religion, and sexuality intersect can be found in the condemnation of gay lesbian men and women in Black Churches. Horace Griffin, an African American gay man in “Their Own Received Them Not: African American Gays and Lesbians in Black Churches” writes:

While African Americans are exceptional in their view that homosexuality is immoral, there are few arenas where dread and condemnation of homosexuality is more noticeable than in Black

Church settings. In the climate of gay visibility in religious circles, African American heterosexual voices have been some of the most intolerant and oppositional. The following is one such example. Last spring at a United Methodist theological seminary forum, African American seminarians spoke with a united voice in an emotionally charged discussion condemning fellow lesbian and gay seminarians as immoral (Griffin 2000: 88-89).

Some academics explain that this intolerance in Black Churches originally sought to mitigate additional community marginalization from non-black communities (Ward 2005). As Griffin points out, Black Churches are not the exception, but this quote is effective in demonstrating how the intersections of race, religion, and sexuality can play out in society.

In relation to this topic consider these questions: How may being a lower-class transgender Latina affect one’s chances of finding employment? What does it mean to be an African American male and bisexual? What is the experience of a white gay male in a socially conservative organization? You cannot always predict. Even when two people share these same characteristics their experience may differ.



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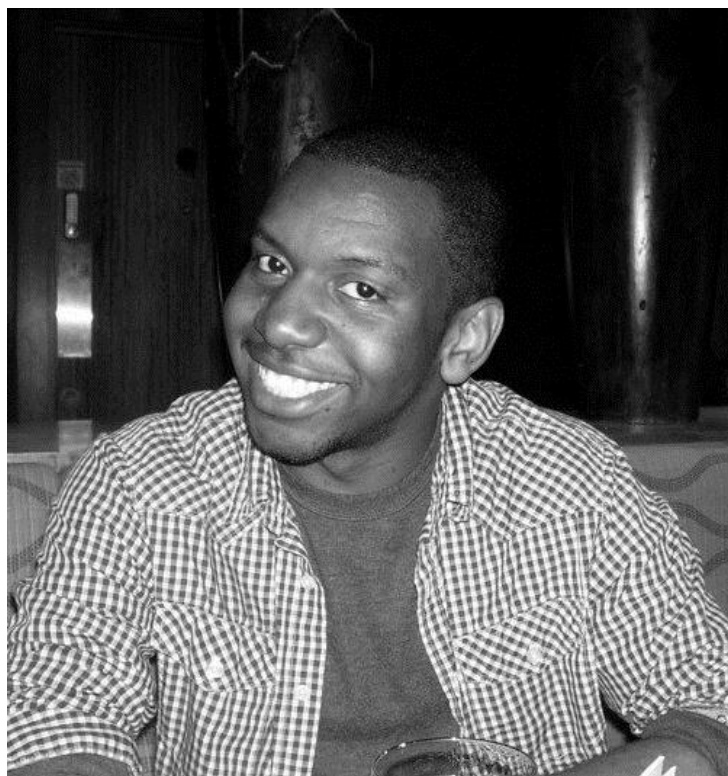
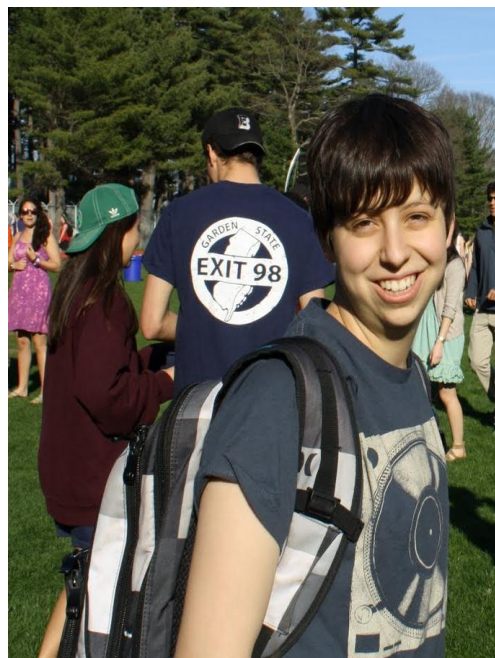
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## Testimonies

Aiden, a nineteen-year-old college student sees himself as a queer feminist, activist, comic book geek, and Jew. When I asked him about how and when he knew he was trans and queer he answered:

I never really identified as a girl. There was a lot of back and forth in my mind just because there was a lot of shame associated with being trans for me. I officially started outwardly identifying as a guy last year. This year I also realized I could be attracted to guys, and dated someone briefly, who is questioning their gender, so that's why I am queer. Sexuality is pretty gender non-specific for me. It has been a process gender-wise though, honestly. When I was little I thought I would grow up to be a father and it would just happen naturally. Then I found out that wasn't the case and that was sad. Then I came to understand what trans was and realized that's how I identify. I identify more as trans than as a man though.

Aiden's identity and experiences are illustrative of how gender and sexuality are not black and white. He never saw himself as a woman. Contrary to common misconceptions about trans people, Aiden is not only attracted to women, but also men. His attraction is largely gender blind. In addition, his self-awareness was a process that has evolved over time.



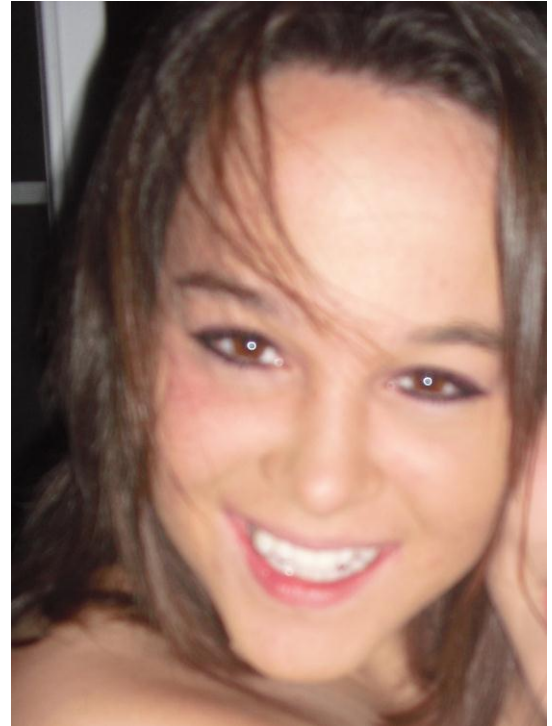
Branden Asemah is a twenty-one-year-old leader, listener, thinker, Nigerian American, and queer college student. Unlike Aiden, Branden knew he was queer since he was a little boy. In the tenth grade he decided to explore his sexuality more because that was the year he realized being queer didn't have to be taboo. When I asked Branden about his encounters with homophobia he spoke about his father:

I have experienced frequent homophobia being raised in Memphis, but also having an immigrant father from Nigeria. In Nigeria homosexuality is bad. I remember coming home my sophomore year of high school and he had put several articles about homosexuals who had been hung in Nigeria on my desk.

It is clear by Branden's story that homophobia exists in the home and in other places such as schools, where people should feel safe. It is not just on the school bus or on the athletic fields, but rather it remains a problem world-wide.

Maria is a twenty-two-year-old, Catholic, loyal sister, friend, and social worker. Her story involves negotiating her faith and her sexuality. She explains:

I remember my first crush on a girl was in third grade. I did not know it was a crush because I thought it was normal to feel that way about girls. Following the path that was laid out for me, I proceeded to pursue guys and had a few boyfriends in high school and college. Out of my deep dedication and love for the Catholic Church, I suppressed and disregarded any thoughts of being gay. However, my junior year of college, I fell in love with my best friend. When we had our first kiss, it was like an explosion. I thought: "Oh! This is what it is supposed to feel like!" What happened after that was a journey of questioning and inquiring about what the Church taught. I honestly just wanted to know if God thought it was okay or not- if it was wrong, okay, I could deal with that. If it was the way God made me—it should be something embraced. There were countless nights of tears, confusion, deep prayer and reading. The paralytic fear of telling my family overwhelmed me. The two hardest parts of my journey have been deciphering if being gay and being Christian can go together. The second is my family not accepting me being gay. I have learned to listen but stand my ground. I just accept that some days are going to suck and be hard, but know that God loves me the way God made me, and letting that be enough. I learned to be Maria-both Christian and gay.



Many people of all faiths confront similar experiences in regards to religion and sexuality. Sometimes this challenge does not go away with patience and explanation. Some are even given ultimatums to choose between their families, and simply put, their happiness. How religion and sexuality fit together continues to be debated in both the political and personal realm. Another young adult and queer leader that I knew informed his parents about his sexuality. As a response, his parents refused to pay for his college education. Actions like these are not uncommon. As you can see, there are many stories to tell and many to be heard. One of the most important tasks you can do if you chose to be an ally is to listen.

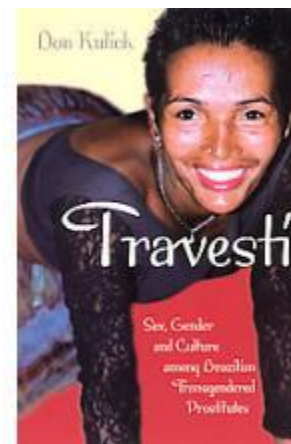




## Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: International Perspectives

Societies in other countries sometimes perceive sex, gender, and sexuality differently than in the United States. In Korea there is a common practice in which gays and lesbians form contract marriages between each other. They do this to appear as if they are living a heterosexual lifestyle in order to appease their families. Lesbian and gay Koreans feel this pressure to form contract marriages due to the communal and family-oriented characteristics of Korean society (Cho 2009: 403). In Thailand sexuality is frequently described through a gender binary. *Toms* are known to be masculine sexually dominant lesbians, where as *Dees* are feminine passive lesbians (Sinnott 2004). A third example is of the travesties of South America or similarly the hijras of India. The travesties are born male, more often attracted to men, and possess a feminine gender identity. Many of them work as sex workers (Kulick 1998). Hijras are born male or intersex and are transgender. Indians value hijras for their spiritual abilities, yet Indians also discriminate against hijras due to their sexuality and gender (Lal 1999). The above examples are only a few out of a variety of international constructions of gender and sexuality. To learn more about this topic I suggest picking up the book Same-Sex Cultures and Sexualities: An Anthropological Reader, edited by Jennifer Robertson.

A Tom (left) and a Dee couple (right) in Thailand



Don Kulick's book on travestis

## Conclusion

I leave you with a story and a request. A friend of mine who is transgender went to use a bathroom. When he went to do so two bystanders jeered, “I wonder what bathroom *it* will go into.” This comment left my friend hurt and angry. It doesn’t matter if this comment was thoughtless or intentionally harmful, this is not acceptable.

In conclusion, I encourage you to take a stand. The stand you take may have significant influence on others in more ways than you can imagine. Correct someone’s homophobic language, kindly point out that an individual identifies as a “he” instead of a “she”, work to diminish stereotypes and generalizations, and most importantly, continue to ask questions and engage in dialogue about sex, gender and sexuality.

Have you learned at least one new vocabulary word or way to approach a topic concerning gender and sexuality? If you did not learn anything from this reader then that may signify that the world is becoming a more inclusive place. Please fill out the survey on the following page to assess how much you have learned.

For further information access the two websites included below:

<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/educator/index.html>

<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=194&srcid=-2>

# Survey

Circle the following

**What did I take away from this booklet?**

Didn't learn anything new.    1-3 things    3-5 things    5 or more things

**What did I learn more of?**

Concepts                  Vocabulary                  Ways to approach subjects                  Facts  
A combination of the previous

**Did you find the language and concepts:**

Accessible                  Too accessible                  Not accessible enough

**What should have been included?**



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