

SESSION II: GENDERS AND SEXUALITY

Facilitator: Habiba Zaman

Notetakers: Jessica Horsnell and Veronica Sudesh⁸

The second session in the International Workshop on Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion tackled two themes that tend to be predominantly left out of the spotlight—genders⁹ and sexuality. The session featured two Canadian researchers from Simon Fraser University, as well as one researcher from Hohai University in China. These three researchers covered diverse topics from sexuality and the cityscape, to transgender children, to Myanmar marriage immigrants. People on the margins may find it difficult to voice their struggles and experiences of discrimination, but the speakers of this session provided a medium for these voices. The session was a reminder of the long battle for equity, rights, and social justice that is continually ongoing.

Tiffany Muller Myrdahl, Senior Lecturer, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies and Urban Studies at Simon Fraser University
“Sexuality and the City (Vancouver): What are the Links?”

Tiffany began her presentation by locating her positionality as a colonial settler and stating her desire for her work to contribute to unlearning and decolonizing. She stressed the importance of a decolonial framework to her research, with an overt focus on whose bodies and voices are counted. She further emphasized how her research aims to highlight sexuality as an important issue historically, presently, and for the future, as well as the connection between sexuality, race, and the colonial nation.

The key argument that Tiffany presented was that sex and sexuality are integral parts of the discussion around the city and urban spaces. To begin, she outlined three main points about the normalization of the cityscape:

- 1) Cities are capitalist, with capitalist production relying heavily on reproduction.
- 2) Families who inhabit these cities are often presumed to be heterosexual.
- 3) Families who inhabit these cities are assumed to be white, and property ownership is brokered through whiteness.

These three arguments are enabled by the city grid and street-naming processes, in that street names were created by colonialist men who were racist toward Indigenous peoples. She cited an example of two colonial administrators—Trutch and McDonald—who were known for their racist behaviour towards Indigenous people.

⁸ Jessica Horsnell and Veronica Sudesh are both first year MA students in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. While this paper is written mostly as a transcription of the session, the authors acknowledge that transcriptions are not inherently neutral, but rather are affected by their interpretations.

⁹ The term “genders” is used to encompass more than simply the gender binary, recognizing that gender is a spectrum that goes beyond male and female.

Tiffany further argued that sexuality is absent from discussions about cityscapes and urban spaces, as “legitimate” or heteronormative sex is often assumed as a capstone to the urban. Based on societal norms, we tend to assume that sexuality can be written and read on the body, but that is not always the case. Thus, this absence is a result of sexuality being assumed and heterosexuality being presumed. There is a complicated, interwoven relationship between gender and sexuality. It is quite difficult to imagine that safety for women can be imagined without a discussion around sexuality first.

Politics abound even in discussions about sexuality and urban spaces, where lesbians may be considered threats to heteropatriarchal society while gay men are seen as more permissible within a civic profile of “tolerance.” Tiffany underlined the fact that Pride has become a multi-million-dollar industry where corporations can capitalize off the rainbow flag without being overly concerned with allyship or LGBTQ+ rights.

Tiffany referenced her research in Lethbridge, where inclusion and intersection were her primary framework. Lethbridge had an uneasy relationship with lesbian basketball fans due to the perceived masculinity that comes with being a sports fan; ironically, lesbians made up a large amount of the fanbase but were excluded from visibility as such. However, Tiffany noted that women’s professional basketball’s appeal to lesbian fans has fractured the notion of the basketball arena as a space exclusively for men.

At first glance, a painted rainbow crosswalk may appear as a demarcation of a welcoming city with a framework of inclusion, but there are limits to cities’ willingness to speak to sexuality. Tiffany cited examples of flags being raised at City Hall in a gesture of solidarity, arguing that policy should always be understood as a starting point rather than an end point in changing the reality of homophobia. She mentioned that the City of Vancouver has responded to calls to embrace diverse sexuality by highlighting LGBTQ+ symbols and enacting policy changes. These efforts should be applauded, because in some cities (in Alberta for instance), the agency of LGBTQ+ kids is under threat. Finally, Tiffany argued that same sex rights have a long way to go before we achieve full inclusivity.

Question & Answer Session

June mentioned that the presentation reminded her of the rainbow flag flying in Whitehorse. Tiffany agreed and added that there is a flag flying in Lethbridge too, where she has conducted some of her research. Lethbridge tends to be more of a socially and religiously conservative place, so flying a rainbow or Pride flag can be an important symbolic gesture; yet the gesture is not uncomplicated and does not necessarily fix the problems of homophobia and erasure of the LGBTQ+ community.

Rebecca mentioned her interest in the politics of space. In one of the classes she teaches, she asked her students, “What would happen if cities were designed by mothers?” She was shocked to hear that many of them thought it would make no difference, and she was interested to know Tiffany’s thoughts on the matter. She asked Tiffany to give her a language that would help her teach her classes about why it was important to depoliticize planning. Tiffany noted that cityscapes have already been seemingly depoliticized by those

who participate in their planning, in that it is typically older, white, heterosexual men who are the decision-makers. These men make up a group who are not asked to think about how the personal is political, as their identities are not politicized. She argued that there must be a shift toward more inclusiveness in city planning, with engagement in the city form through story. Another audience member added that we must mitigate against the fact that science never encourages us to be creative, drawing links to how rigid the education system is.

Veronica, as a former student of Tiffany, asked her to elaborate more on the methodological process of conducting her research and putting together her presentation. Tiffany emphasized that she has been trained in thinking about voices that have not been included historically. Because of this, she has put thought into how these voices need to be welcomed to the conversation and how there needs to be more work done to make visibility a priority. In recent years, she has learned more about decolonial practice, questioning whose stories she should get to tell. Furthermore, she wanted to create a project in which she could think about the ways she has a responsibility to her research participants, so her research is not purely an extractive, one-sided experience.

An audience member then brought up Women Transforming Cities (WTC), asking if Tiffany knew about their work and what they do. Tiffany answered that she is aware of their work and was, in fact, a part of this committee. She stated that they are an organization that puts an intersectional lens on municipal policy and city planning, as this is work that directly affects women. However, Tiffany argued that sexuality could be put more at the front and centre of the conversation. She mentioned some of the projects they have undertaken, including changing pool accessibility.

To conclude the Q&A session, Habiba expressed her appreciation for Tiffany's presentation. She stated that, through the presentation, she could see that social norms have shifted over the years, but only in major cities and not in smaller places in North America; those who are disadvantaged may not yet have enough voice in small areas. She then asked if, given that norms have shifted further in larger cities, were LGBTQ+ people moving from smaller cities to larger ones? Tiffany mentioned that there is a long list of literature that shows such migration patterns, but that movement over the course of LGBTQ+ folks' entire lives tend to be neglected in the discourse. People may move to larger cities, then later go back to small towns. She cited "Get Me to the Big City," which contains a discussion on these migration patterns. Tiffany noted that she wishes to challenge the notion that big cities are always inclusive, and further, to problematize the binary of the big, inclusive city that never has any hate crimes versus the small, backward town that is full of them. Citing the example of Abbotsford, which is part of Greater Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, Tiffany mentioned religious education that is mandated by the city due to its conservative attitude toward non-conforming sexualities. In essence, the narrative is a lot more complicated and nuanced than the good big city versus the small backward town, and we need to work on changing the way we position the two in a competing binary.

Ann Travers, Professor of Sociology, Simon Fraser University
“Transgender Children on the Margins”

Ann, who has done extensive research and published on the topic of sports and justice, began with a personal anecdote about a time when they were standing in line at a concession stand behind a young queer kid they assumed was a boy. The child called Ann out on the assumption, and the two began to have a conversation. The conversation concluded with Ann feeling as though they had reached across time to tell this young woman that it would be okay, that one day she would go to university and things would get better. Then Ann realized what an elitist assumption that was to make, to assume that university would be in this young woman’s future, and that university could solve any problem she might face. The majority of trans and queer children will never go to university and must often hide their identities just to get through life.

Ann then went on to share statements made by transgendered children they spoke to while conducting their research. Wren, aged 7, wished she didn’t have to identify with any gender, but made it clear that she did not see trans womanhood in her future. At age 11, Wren reaffirmed that she would one day “change back to a boy,” as she is already Black and doesn’t want to be trans, too. To make life easier for herself, she has consistently resisted being trans. Hunter, another child Ann has spoken with, announced to his class that he was trans, and the school called his mother to confirm that this was true. Hunter is poor and First Nations, and Ann argued that his announcement that he was trans led to heightened surveillance on his mother. Hunter’s mother is a single parent, and within a framework of colonial and systemic racism against First Nations mothers, the idea that these women do not know what is good for their children is pervasive. Such discourses have roots in imperial projects where white men appear as the only reasonable actors. Further, there is a narrative in Western society that children have a lack of knowledge about what is good for them, and when mothers are deemed unfit, surveillance heightens.

The politics of trans children’s visibility are complex, though children today face a less complicated transition than they did in the past thanks to the introduction of hormone blockers. Complicating factors include lack of access to healthcare, lack of access to locations with trans-affirming healthcare services, and lack of understanding that children are trans in time for them to receive hormone blockers, especially when they are also racialized. Ann argued there must be a paradigm shift in the medicalization of transgender kids—from corrective to affirming healthcare—but they have few concerns about how this might play out:

- 1) Racism and poverty intertwine in a way that affects access, and even goes beyond the issue of access.
- 2) It is often a requirement that parents go to appointments with their children, but what if the children don’t have their parents’ support?
- 3) The violent gender binary is a result of colonialism.
- 4) The hyper-sexualization of BIPOC bodies, such as Black and Latina girls, as argued by Gill Peterson.
- 5) The universalization of white sex norms.
- 6) The potential emergence of for-profit gender-affirming markets.

Trans embodiment has become a site of politics, and there has been a shift to support some trans kids, but not others. Identity politics play a large role, where white supremacy and colonialism become reinforced. For many non-binary kids, invisibility is compounded, as most education for trans kids becomes about binary-conforming (i.e., “passing”). In this current neo-liberal context, trans kids are being positioned as proto-citizen consumers in a racialized biomedical market that reflects and exacerbates existing socio-economic divides. Therefore, Ann argued, we need trans-affirming healthcare, as some trans children become victims of medical solutions to social problems. Ann concluded their presentation by emphasizing that we need to challenge white supremacy, colonization, and conformity.

Question & Answer Session

Katie asked Ann to elaborate on the variation in what is currently available for trans children. Ann answered that it used to be impossible to get an ID changed without surgery, but that there is now a growing shift in that area. However, some kids that live outside of a city require transportation to get the right kind of care. They cited one example of a family having to pay for flights and accommodation to receive care; families must also be able to pay for the psychological assessment packaged with receiving care. They mentioned they will elaborate further on these issues in their forthcoming book.

Katie followed up by asking about the availability of such care. Ann noted there is generally care available in urban centres, though not necessarily in every province, and it can be an uncertain venture. Barriers to access are quite real, along with provincial differences in providing coverage for hormone blockers or surgeries. Even finding someone who is educated and skilled enough to provide surgery can be a challenge. In Saskatchewan, for example, it took years before there were any trans-inclusive doctors. However, the trans kids that are the most visible tend to be the ones with the most privilege. These are white, upper/middle-class children, often with a well-educated mother that will go to bat for them. Ann argued that these white mothers hold a lot of power when it comes to bringing change because they are generally regarded as non-threatening and have the ability to organize. These mothers can go into schools and talk about sex education, and schools will often make changes when they are challenged. Meanwhile, Ann argued, mothers of racialized children have more difficulty in doing this. They reminded us that in any environment, there are trans kids, whether they are visible or not. We need to stop explaining children’s behaviour based on gender, and there is still a lot of work to be done to disrupt gender binaries.

Rebecca expressed that Ann’s presentation brought up a lot of emotions for her. She asked how privilege lets trans kids lead a liveable life, and what capacities for resilience exist within children. As a follow-up, she asked whether privilege is synonymous with resilience. Ann responded first by noting that there is a correspondence between privilege and resiliency, but it does not always have to be there. They had seen a mix of experiences. Some kids will somehow keep going, despite adversity, but Ann stressed that most of the kids who showed resilience had strong parental support. These kids had parents who believed in them and fought for them. However, there are also incredible stories of resistance, such as a 17-year-old trans female who made her own hormones, as she

couldn't get them from anywhere else. Ann noted that kids love making up new terms and said how astonishing it is to see young people creating new languages for gender and sexuality, sometimes utilizing online forums. They explained how they were taught some of this new language by kids, saying there is a sense of incredible resilience in developing new languages.

Ann argued that parental support is the single most important factor for mental health; however, kids can find support elsewhere within chosen families if not within their biological families. Moreover, families who are already dealing with poverty and racism have fewer resources and less cultural capital, which makes it difficult to fight this battle for their children. We must therefore step away from this societal norm and racist notion that white parents are the most supportive. They may have more resources, such as the ability to hire a lawyer or pay for gender-affirming care, but this does not necessarily mean they are more supportive, and there are many impoverished racialized trans kids whose parents supported them. Resilience is distributed along the lines of power, but the major takeaway is that it doesn't always manifest that way.

Reema asked about the reliance of urbanity, citing the example of Toronto cutting funding for trans adults. Ann stated that in Canada, most anti-racist and anti-immigrant discourse is rooted in white supremacy. They mentioned the resurgence of conservative values and white terrorism in Toronto and stressed how important it is to locate and understand trans kids within these contexts. One adult showing a trans child respect can make a world of difference. Furthermore, we need to recognize that this is a system of power that lashes out when it becomes threatened.

An audience member shared a story about a white boy from a privileged family whose parents denied them the right to undergo a transition. Ann asserted that we need to fight for the rights of these kids; we must be their allies. Representing them and using their chosen pronouns is one way to show this support. Systems of power like patriarchy, heteronormativity, and colonialism might absorb binary-conforming trans people and not non-binary ones. Ann reinforced the idea that there is no right way to be trans. The nature of the gender binary is culture-specific, which in Canada means Euro-centric. We must not forget the systems of power behind this.

Ann concluded by reminding us that whenever someone relays their gender, you say "yes," and let that be the end of it. It isn't good enough for us to be kinder and gentler; we must also remember how the binary was violently imposed and acknowledge the history of power.

Yanhua Wu, Associate Professor, Hohai University, China
"Myanmar Marriage Immigrants in China"

Yanhua began her presentation by describing various aspects of her research to provide background and context. She discussed how the number of Myanmar immigrants to China have increased over the years, saying her research aims to analyse the problems that these immigrants face in socio-political adjustment and integration in China. Her literature review delved into the influence that government policies and ethnic group

structures have on the social integration process. While explaining her research design, she stated the main question her research addresses: what are the social integration mechanisms of Myanmar marriage immigrants in China in different times and spaces? She argued that little attention is paid to this group and to their social integration, saying she wants to explore the optimal strategies to integration.

Yanhua interviewed 71 Myanmar marriage migrants for her research, looking particularly at key themes of choice, adaptation, and fusion. She argued that four types of inter-marriages exist for these immigrants. There is the active type, the forced type, the drift with the current type, and the chaotic type. The active type was explained as women making the choice to marry, whereas the forced type involves marriage being imposed upon them by an outside factor. The drift with the current type is when women travel across borders with friends, and the chaotic type is when they have no desire to marry at all.

Throughout the presentation, Yanhua touched on many different factors that affect Myanmar marriage immigrants, including economic spaces, social spaces, and hierarchical spaces. Some of the main areas of study in her research were as follows:

- 1) Adaptation on the first arrival.
- 2) Adaptive fusion process.
- 3) Transformation after fusion and maturity.

She also raised discussion around whether these women remained immigrants in status or were considered citizens.

Yanhua concluded her presentation with three main research findings:

- 1) The decision to marry into China makes a difference in the life trajectory of Myanmar marriage immigrants.
- 2) The level of adjustment in social roles is key to understanding their integration process.
- 3) Individual initiatives promote differentiation in integration status.

Question & Answer Session

Reema asked if most of the women from Myanmar in Yanhua's study were coming to China to marry Chinese men. Yanhua responded that yes, they were. Reema then asked whether it is difficult for them to migrate across the border. Yanhua said this varies based on the current relationship between Myanmar and China. As the economic connection between the two countries strengthens, it may be easier to cross the border than it has been in the past. There are also connections between ethnic groups across the border, which can further support migration.

Xiujie questioned whether local policies and wars across and between both countries might cause women in Myanmar problems with their identification documents. Further, Xiujie wondered if governments were pushing women across borders and forcing them to marry. Yanhua responded that, as local policies have changed since the civil war in Myanmar, some governments will not issue travel documents; thus, these can be difficult to obtain. However, she mentioned that it may be easier to obtain ID documents in some districts than in others. Habiba mentioned that sometimes Chinese men will go to Myanmar to marry and then come home with their wives, which makes the process easier. Reema

asked about the citizenship status of any children born when a woman from Myanmar marries a Chinese man. Do they receive full citizenship? Yanhua responded that yes, the children do get citizenship.

Rebecca was curious about the male to female imbalance and the recently modified one child policy relevant to this phenomenon. Yanhua stated that the bigger the imbalance, the more migration will increase from the countryside to cities. Further, the imbalance in the countryside tends to be worse than in the city, as men in the country are farmers, land-based, and poor. Economic factors influence this program, and in rural China, it is difficult for women to afford a house or car, so they cross the border as it becomes cheaper. Xu added that to Chinese men, there is a perception that it is cheaper to marry Myanmar women. Mohammed noted that the impacts of removing this policy will take time to see, as it is so recent. However, the impacts we can see are due to racialized poverty, and the demand for wives by Chinese men. Peter Duan added that the gender imbalance is extremely serious in the countryside, prompting men to move to the city. Unfortunately, not all men can afford to do this, which prompts women to be brought from many different countries so that they can be wives.

Xiujie asked how the one child policy, which has changed the population structure, relates to the increasing mobility from rural to urban land. Yanhua noted that there are complex factors involved in this migration, and that many of these women live in absolute poverty. Mohammed mentioned that he was familiar with Yanhua's fascinating research work and applauded her for doing a tremendous job in the field of cross-border marriage. He further emphasized that these men are also very poor, so they do not have enough money to give a dowry to Chinese women. He argued that there are hardly any women available for men to marry in China, so these men go to rural Vietnam and Myanmar to look for wives. Thus, it is mainly due to poverty and the need to find spouses that this migration takes place. Habiba concluded the session by noting that many other big Chinese cities (such as Guangzhou) have women brought over for the purpose of marriage, which is illegal. The highly imbalanced male to female ratio creates a very serious gendered issue there.

Our Reflections

This session was an interesting amalgamation of the nuanced layers of gender and sexuality, and it was significant to see this as a core topic of the workshop. The speakers in the session were able to brilliantly highlight various dimensions of white power, privilege, colonization, and international migration. Their presentations and research managed to explore vastly different topics while still relating to the theme of genders and sexuality. Tiffany's session spoke to the underlying biases in city planning and addressed how sex, race, sexuality, and the colonial nation intersect in a discussion around urban spaces. Ann's research connected well with Tiffany's in that non-conforming sexualities are always targeted and found on the margins. Further, transgender children can be even more vulnerable to exclusion, and we need to advocate for their rights and show our solidarity. Yanhua's work rounded out the session with a discussion of cross-country migration and how it can be deeply affected by race, ethnicity, gender, and poverty.

As students, we are constantly finding opportunities to learn and expand our knowledge, and thus it was a great honour to be asked to take notes for this session. Attending the workshop enabled us to learn more about diverse topics of research as well as engaging with speakers and audience members. Coming from a feminist background, and with our research interests geared toward resisting gender-based violence, we learned immensely from the speakers of this session as they highlighted the multiple layers of invisible violence and oppression present around us. Toward the end of the session, we were left feeling happily overwhelmed with the expansion of our own knowledge and insights. We hope that the knowledge gained from this session will help guide our feminist practice and research, so that we can join hands in the effort to build a more equitable society.