Same-Sex Marriage Should Be More Accepted And Legalized In South East Asian Countries

What is the purpose of marriage?

We believe that the majority of couples marry because it is their way of proclaiming one's undying love for their significant other. In southeast Asian (SEA) countries, people accept and celebrate this proclamation of love when it is between a man and a woman. But, when the same proclamation is made between 2 individuals of the same sex, it is rejected.

Why does this idea of homosexuality scare people?

The main culprit is religion. SEA countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Brunei and Malaysia are heavily influenced by their dominant religions. For example, a recent multi-national interview-based survey called the World Values Survey (WVS), investigated people's beliefs and values concerning a wide range of social issues such as same-sex sexualities in 6 countries. Part of the 6 countries investigated was Malaysia and Thailand. The results obtained showed that 58.7% of respondents from Malaysia have high homonegative attitudes and that religiosity was the main factor that strongly influenced this high homonegativity present. This was also the case for Thailand where 40% of the respondents conveyed similar homonegative views with religion as the driving factor. Despite having different beliefs, these countries express rejection and disapproval of same-sex relations meaning acts like same-sex marriages are not approved. Here, we can see how religion becomes one of the largest institutions that shapes those perspectives held by governments and societies in these countries.

For countries like Cambodia and Thailand, they are known to be tolerant and do not criminalize homosexuality unlike their SEA neighbors. Yet, they believe that individuals that deviate from the gender norms of heterosexuality are 'freaks of nature' that has to be cured. They believe homosexuality and same-sex marriages are acts caused by a mental illness or a sort of 'demonic possession of the soul' that needs to be exorcised. A study by Khon Thai foundation found out that more than 50% of Thai youths expressed that same strong rejection. This can be owed to the fact that Cambodia and Thailand are predominantly Buddhist countries, where such sexual orientations and acts go against their beliefs and traditions.

But, there are more severe cases than this. SEA countries where Islam is the predominant religion, such as in Malaysia and Brunei, asserts more opposition against homosexuality. Here, homosexuality is condemned and being in a gay relationship can cause one to be imprisoned. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Razak, claims that such acts are the "enemies of Islam" and emphasised that "Malaysia will not defend LGBT rights" as it goes against the order of nature. That is: heterosexuality.

The most shocking acts of opposition against the notion of homosexuality actually lies in Brunei. With the world's largest Muslim population, it is the most conservative out of the SEA countries mentioned. Brunei abides by the Shariah law. According to Hassanal Bolkiah (Brunei's sultan and prime minister), the Shariah law practised in Brunei 'criminalises and deters acts that are

against the teachings of Islam'. This means punishing same-sex relations such as same-sex marriages through the death penalty. Such discrimnatory laws practiced in Brunei illustrates the strong promotion of heterosexuality and the forbidding of homosexuality.

What implications does this create for ASEAN's homosexual community?

Discrimination against homosexuals are institutionalized in South East Asia. Article 2 of the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), intentionally excluded homosexuals from protection against discrimination. Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, won this argument against Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, non-government organisations (NGO) and a few regional civil society coalitions working on the AHRD, who insisted on including the rights of homosexuals. There has not been an update on the matter as of now.

Institutionalised discrimination distrupts their ability to live safely in their home country. Most SEA countries practice Section 377 of the Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex relations. In Myanmar, homosexual citizens are suffering from heavy abuse by society. These people are unable to seek solace in their own homes and often abused by their families, friends and employers. Such abuse are justified in society's eyes because of the popular Buddhist belief: homosexuality is a result of bad karma and immorality. This belief enables Myanmar's corrupt police force to take advantage of the 377 Penal Code, to persecute suspected homosexuals. Often times these unjust incarcerations of homosexuals are also ignored by the public due to their fear of authority. Arrestees' payment for an early release then usually involves providing sexual demands or monetary bribes. Such fear, abuse and humiliation creates a horrible living environment.

Being openly gay has also caused many people to lose their jobs, be denied promotions and suffer workplace harassment. A study found that Thailand's society has not accepted the presence of homosexuals in their community which supports the aforementioned data showcasing the Thais homonegative sentiments. The public sector expects men and women employees to act traditionally, presumably to behave according to gender norms. Anyone who does not conform to such gender norms will then face discrimination at their workplace. So, homosexuals are strongly motivated to hide their sexuality.

Unfortunately, those who were able to find employment, were often limited to stereotypical jobs. An interview study on gays in Thailand about exclusion and discrimination found Anan and Ali on their employment experiences. Anan, a 42 year old gay man, despite being qualified, was rejected by an international school from being a counsellor. But, he was readily accepted when he applied as a flight attendant. He believed that his 'gayness' was one of the reasons he got the job. It seems to be a common occurrence as Ali, a 26 year old gay man, also expressed that people trust and accept the work of homosexual professionals in the beauty industry. This stereotype stems from the expectation that gays are feminine which explains why gays are limited to female-dominated industries.

'Staying in the closet' can be detrimental to one's mental and physical health. A study on Muslim MSM's (or male homosexuals) health in South and South East Asia explains the effects of stigmatization. The discrimation faced causes Muslim MSM to question their masculinity and identity as a Muslim. Many feel isolated as they were unable to figure out their place in society.

Eventually, the constant rejection and abuse they face increases the likelihood of suffering from anxiety, depression and even succumbing to suicide.

Stigmatization against same-sex unions, influences MSM to engage in one night stands, sex work or casual relationships to satisfy their need for affection and intimacy. This makes them likely to have mulitple sex partners, which increases the risk of contracting STIs and HIV. Interviews with Muslim MSM found that the fear of rejection and victimisation causes them to avoid accessing health care services. There is already an underlying fear associated with the stigmatization surrounding HIV. So, if the MSM were to reveal that they also suffer from HIV, they would face further discrimination. They may choose to hide the illness which can be dangerous because untreated HIV will cause other health complications.

How do homosexuals cope with this predicament? Through migration.

A case study of an interracial lesbian couple in Singapore, Aaliyah and Alyssa, highlights the troubles that they went through in order to be together. Aaliyah's family was once close knitted, but it changed when her sexuality was discovered. She was escorted everywhere she went: "it came to a point where I was kind of locked up under house arrest." Eventually, Aaliyah and Alyssa chose to migrate to Sydney, Australia. Marriage migration by homosexuals to Australia was common, due to the country's acceptance of same-sex partnerships. Visa applications in Australia were found to be mostly from South East Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Similar predicaments are also faced by Indonesian gays who migrated to Paris. The research on this concluded that sexuality is the driving force of migration for them as well.

So, when homosexuals migrate, family dynamics are affected. Family, community and culture are often left behind. They have to start afresh in a new country, with no one to depend on. They face many challenges such as the costs of migration, and uncertainties such as the ability to integrate, just because they want to be able to love freely. "Sometimes I get angry thinking that we had to spend so much time and energy just to be where we are, and we have lost all those years when we were younger," Alyssa commented. This highlights the frustrations and troubles homosexuals in SEA have to go through in the name of love.

From a societal view in SEA, same-sex marriages go against religious beliefs which warrants discrimination towards homosexual individuals and affects their family dynamics. We believe that more can be done to protect homosexuals' rights and prevent verbal and physical persecution against them. To achieve that, open-mindedness and acceptance is key. To start, on a personal level, we can increase our awareness by learning about or experiencing the Pink Dot movement. On an institutionalized level, the government can, if they have not done so already, address this issue during the civics education taught in primary schools. This promotes an understanding of such issues onto impressionable kids so that future generations will be less discriminatory. This promotion is done in hopes that it will aid in the future acceptance and legalization of same-sex marriages in South East Asia.