

## **Heteronormativity in Singapore Society**

In “Sex (education) in the city: Singapore's sexuality education curriculum”, Warren Mark Liew uses the term “heteronormativity” to describe the societal and cultural norms that prioritize and assume heterosexuality as the only normative and acceptable form of sexual identity, expression, and relationship (Liew, 2014). In other words, it is the belief that everyone should identify as either a male or female, and that male-female relationships are the only natural and acceptable form of romantic or sexual attraction. According to Liew, the Singapore society has constructed a narrow and rigid framework of sexual norms in which heterosexuality is celebrated and normalized, while alternative forms of sexuality and gender identities are stigmatized and marginalized (Liew, 2014). He argues that this is reflected in the sexuality education curriculum in Singapore schools, which focuses solely on teaching heterosexual relationships to students and ignores same-sex or non-binary gender identities (Liew, 2014). Liew also points out that the emphasis on heteronormativity in Singapore's sexuality education curriculum reinforces the social and cultural norms of heterosexuality, and largely ignores the needs and experiences of LGBT individuals, thereby contributing to their exclusion in Singapore society (Liew, 2014).

Indeed, such a view is deeply entrenched in a heteronormative society like Singapore. Here, majority of the population is not yet ready to accept same-sex marriage, as it could result in violent pushbacks from society (Wong, 2015). A recent incident involving a Facebook post by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) highlights this point. In 2022, a group of netizens criticized the HDB for a graphic depicting two parents who both appeared to be women drying laundry together in the same household (Choo, 2022). Among the many criticisms, one netizen wrote “Hello... Why parents (sic) both female! Sick!!”, and another wrote “Are we being infiltrated by liberal ideals covertly?”, and one more questioned whether women were “now allowed to get married to one another and buy a flat” (Choo, 2022). The backlash eventually forced HDB to replace the graphic with one that featured a male and a female instead (Choo, 2022). What started out as an attempt by HDB to promote awareness

of their new retractable clothes drying rack quickly spiraled into an attempt to show their stance on heterosexuality to array the concerns of same-sex relationships among netizens. As seen from this incident, the fact that netizens felt compelled to express their disapproval emphasizes how the idea of two same-sex couples living together is perceived as abnormal, even absurd, and goes against their traditional values and beliefs of a family structure involving a heterosexual couple. This incident is just one of numerous where same-sex relationships and activities have been deemed unacceptable by society. In Singapore society, interpersonal relations among individuals are heavily influenced by heteronormative standards, which are perpetuated by both top-down structures in the form of laws and policies, as well as self-initiated traditional family cultures from the ground up.

Top-down structures imposed by institutions and the government have a significant impact on shaping societal expectations and thereby promoting heteronormativity in Singapore. This is evident in the laws and policies which tend to favor heterosexual couples over same-sex relationships, leading to the marginalization of the LGBT community. For instance, Section 377A of the Penal Code had criminalized sex between adult males for decades (Section 377A), which humiliated the gay community. While it has been repealed, same-sex marriage is still not recognized under the state's constitution (Ministry of Law, 2020), making it difficult for same-sex partners to live and work in Singapore. Furthermore, unlike heterosexual couples, Singapore's Immigration Act does not provide long-term visit passes and dependent passes to same-sex couples in foreign countries who intend to relocate to Singapore in the long-term (Immigration Act, 2020). Same-sex couples are also ineligible to apply for adoption of children (Adoption of Children Act, 2022) which makes it difficult for them to have a family. In contrast, engaged or married heterosexual couples who intend to start families are well supported by family-friendly policies such as the Built-To-Order flat program overseen by HDB, the Parenthood Priority Scheme as well as the Baby Bonus Scheme. Moreover, married heterosexual couples also enjoy tax incentives and rebates which include the Working Mother's Child Relief, Parenthood Tax Rebate, and Qualifying Child Relief.

Undoubtedly, these financial incentives are helpful for married heterosexual couples raising children as it reduces the financial strain on them, but such incentives are not extended to that of same-sex couples. Hence, policies and laws governing the day-to-day livelihoods of individuals in Singapore has the effect of favoring heterosexual couples and restricting same-sex relationships, establishing a social hierarchy and an unspoken inequality that continually celebrates the joys of heterosexual couples while marginalizing same-sex couples. Over time, they create an impression that heterosexual couples stand to gain a lot more in society, shaping the societal expectations and values in Singapore. These societal expectations, in turn, reinforce the very policies that cater to such a heteronormative society, inducing a self-perpetuating cycle that makes it difficult to challenge or change the norms it created without being met with disapproval as a non-conforming behavior. As a result, the prevailing understanding of interpersonal relations in Singapore society regarding sexual orientation and relationships becomes heavily skewed towards heteronormativity.

The impact of heteronormativity in Singaporean culture is not only influenced by top-down structures in the form of laws and policies, but also by self-initiated traditional family culture from the ground up. Religion, particularly in a multireligious society like Singapore where Buddhism, Islam and Christianity are the most common (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020), plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality. Religious beliefs and teachings that are passed down through generations can significantly impact societal attitudes towards sexuality. For example, traditional Christian teachings view sex as a sacred act between a man and a woman within the context of marriage (Genesis 2:24), reinforcing heteronormativity by promoting the idea that sexual relationships should only be between heterosexual couples. Similarly, some Islamic teachings also consider homosexuality as a sin (Al-Bukhari), which can create a hostile environment for individuals who identify as LGBT which further reinforces expectations that people should conform to heteronormative norms. Apart from religion, families also partake in various special occasions that often emphasize that a loving and stable family must comprise of a heterosexual couple,

which creates the expectation that heterosexuality is the norm in Singapore society. Weddings, in particular, exemplify how society's expectation of heteronormativity is solidified as they only celebrate the union of a heterosexual couple, where there should be a groom and a bride (Tan, 2019). Additionally, the occasions of Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day are typically celebrated as a family where children are reminded to show appreciation for their heterosexual parents (Families for Life, 2023), further driving the idea that heterosexuality is the norm for happy families. Therefore, traditional family cultures, involving religious teachings and partaking in special occasions that emphasise heterosexuality, result in a traditional upbringing where heterosexuality is not only an expectation created from within families but also one passed down from generations. It becomes difficult to go against such a mindset of heteronormativity that is so deeply cultivated since young, and especially so when majority in society thinks this way. At the same time, it also makes it easier to communicate with different people in society who believe the same ideals because of a similar family upbringing. This inadvertently reinforces norms and expectations surrounding gender and relationships, ultimately shaping, and perpetuating the acceptance of heteronormativity within the Singapore society.

In light of the above discussion, it is evident that heteronormativity in Singapore is deeply entrenched in various aspects of society and will be here to stay in the foreseeable future. The unrelenting influence of top-down structures in the form of institution laws and government policies, strongly coupled with deep self-initiated traditional family cultures from the ground up emphasising religious beliefs and heterosexuality, fuels a self-propagating cycle of reinforcing heteronormativity in Singapore. This cements a seemingly impenetrable societal and cultural belief system where heterosexuality is accepted, renewed, and perpetuated as the norm of sexual orientation and relationships in the Singapore society. Such a system inevitably marginalizes the LGBT and stigmatises those who do not conform to it. It then begs the question of how society should accommodate them with dignity and respect, what is the eventual trade-off involved, and whether society is ready for that. While some progress in this

regard has been made in recent times through more inclusive policies, the government is nevertheless cautious to maintain a balance with the traditional values and beliefs held by various aspects of its traditional and multiracial society. There is still much work to be done in due time towards creating a more accepting and inclusive society for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. (1462 words)

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