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Voices, Academic Journal of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, Volume 1, Spring 2010

The Women’s and Gender Studies Program of Boston College
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We would like to thank Dean David Quigley and the College of Arts and Sciences for the financial support that made this publication possible.

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Letter from the Editor

As Editor-in-Chief, I am proud to present to you Volume 1 of Voices, the Academic Journal of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program of Boston College. With a new name for our program comes a greater inclusion of the many topics – including literature, GLBTQ studies, race, history, and politics – discussed in and salient to our classes, research and lives.

The goals of Voices are to give voice to Boston College students who have given serious attention to topics related to women’s and gender studies, provide a forum for the Boston College community to engage with these issues, and celebrate the interdisciplinary connections that gender studies can create.

Over the past year, I have had been honored to lead this publication: recruiting and working with a talented group of editors, collecting and reviewing over twenty submissions of high quality papers, and working with dedicated authors to develop a collection of papers I am proud to publish in Voices.

Emma Staffaroni’s paper begins this volume with a call for the contemporary feminists to use new media to counter widespread feminismphobia; as we see from the title of her paper, “This Movement’s Gotta Move.” In “Nationalism and Masculinity in South Korean Cinema,” Alyssa Hughes provides an in-depth analysis of one segment of media that has perpetuated gender constructs in Korean culture. Colleen Maher’s “Unanswered Questions,” Stephanie Keller’s “The Islamic Feminism Question,” and Rachel Siebert’s “The LBQ Peer Support Group at a Catholic University” look at issues related to sexuality and feminism within religious contexts.

Voices has a special focus on activism in this issue, recognizing the importance of applying our knowledge to the world around us, of not only acknowledging and researching but taking action to improve the lives of ourselves and others. We hope that this journal can provide you with the inspiration and at least some of the tools necessary to take that action and promote social justice.

I am indebted to the guidance and support of Professor Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, for making this publication possible. I would also like to thank Natalie Horbachevsky (BC ’09) for having the vision to move Voices from its former existence as a newsletter to an academic journal, as it was published in Spring 2009.

This issue provides just a glimpse into the meaningful academic contributions of Boston College students. I hope the vision and hard work of the editorial board and the Women’s and Gender Studies Program will come through in this issue, which we see as a launching ground for a long future for Voices. I especially hope that these papers will inspire you to learn more and respond to gender inequalities and other forms on injustice in our communities and beyond.

Sincerely,

Alicia Johnson
Editor-in-Chief
# Table of Contents

"This Movement’s Gotta Move”
Countering Feminismphobia with New Media and Progressive Thought
*Emma Staffaroni*

Nationalism and Masculinity in South Korean Cinema
Im Kwon-Taek’s *Sopyonje* and *The Taebaek Mountains*
*Alyssa Hughes*

Unanswered Questions
Buddhism and Homosexuality
*Colleen Maher*

The Islamic Feminism Question
Feminisms in Iran
*Stephanie Keller*

The Lesbian, Bisexual and Questioning Peer Support Group at a Catholic University
*Rachel Siebert*
On October 26, 2009 at Boston College, the campus hosted a panel discussion featuring two feminist writers from the blog Feministing.com. This paper was inspired by their panel, which took place on a campus that has a lot of anxiety about that seemingly outdated “f-word,” feminism. Courtney Martin and Miriam Pérez sat before us as the embodiment of the feminist activist movement of right now and of new media and young intellect. “Feministing upholds the idea of intersectionality,” Martin began, “or the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality in the world.” Their blog, one of the most beloved feminist blogs on the internet and home to 500,000 distinct readers per month, redefines consciousness-raising in a more accessible, interactive, and global way than ever before. The experience of hearing them speak at BC was formative and inspiring not only in a deeply personal way, but also in an urgent one, because these women and their fellow bloggers are the role models of young feminism that women of my generation lack. “This movement’s gotta move,” Pérez stated matter-of-factly, and her point is multi-faceted; not only does feminism benefit from new media that “moves” information in completely new and exciting ways, but the “f-word” must also continue to move forward and allow itself to shift and mold into what our generation needs it to be. This may be the solution to our culture’s feminismphobia, our collective fear of the word and its nebulous
connotations.

Indeed, both of the Feministing writers admitted that trying on that “feminist” label for size was a challenging process. Martin described her rebellion against her parents’ “hippie feminism,” and particularly her mother’s weekly consciousness-raising groups. “Somehow I ended up at an all-women’s college, even though I was so adamantly ‘not a feminist,’” she joked. Secretly though, as a woman with strong opinions and political statements to make, she sought a group of like-minded, politically concerned individuals. She hoped that her all-women’s school would provide that for her, but yet again she met a culture resisting the “feminist” label and desperately trying to prove the opposite—“We’re not feminists, I promise, we’re cool!”

Martin did, however, start to realize that many of her passions around social justice did directly intersect with feminist issues. “The answers to all of my questions, lo and behold, were in the same feminist books that were sitting on my mother’s bookshelf all along,” she said. Her official conversion to the “feminist” identity came when Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, feminist authors and thinkers, visited her school and spoke. “Jennifer was wearing fishnet tights, and Amy Richards was soooo cool,” Martin recounted. Her message was that becoming a part of a movement and defining our identities can come from “superficial” places like thinking something is “cool”—“Identity movements are attached to aesthetics,” she stated shamelessly. We need to relate to a movement in order to truly and passionately support it and be a part of it. The non-superficial reality—the important activism—comes about only after this crucial recruitment.

This message about aesthetics is arguably more relevant than ever in today’s society. The nature of visual media and marketing, the “raunch culture” that Ariel Levy (2006) so aptly captures in her book, Female Chauvinist Pigs, and the subsequent internalized self-image problems we face as a culture are all facets of a worldview demanding imagery. From my perspective studying in the field of education, I can attest that teachers grapple with this same challenge; indeed, it no longer suffices to assume students will absorb a lecture. Instead, they require and benefit from visuals. They will learn faster and more comprehensively with multimedia, PowerPoint, and critical images supporting the content of a lesson.

Martin may have identified a powerful reason why feminism is losing its footing with the young people of the 2000s. The source of fear around the feminist label is visibility, which Martin asserts we need.
to pursue in an aesthetically appealing way; that is, we need to show women that feminism is not an outdated term used exclusively by older, privileged white women to describe a movement for “equality,” nor is it only used by unshaven man-haters who scowl and complain. Feminism is a physical space and a vocabulary, an opportunity for widespread empowerment of all disenfranchised and under-represented communities and voices. What could be more appealing and powerful than diverse dialogue, open and critical questioning, and new media interaction, all holding accountable the outdated juggernaut-monoliths with gray-haired white men for maestros?

Pérez’s story of identifying with feminism resembled Martin’s, though at its roots it asked different questions in search of different answers. Frustrated from a young age with the purportedly “inherent” and polarized differences between the so-called opposite genders, Pérez spent much of her youth asking the questions no one in Cuban Miami wanted to hear: “Why is it like this? Why do men and women have to be seen as so opposite and distinct? Why am I confined to this role?” During boy-crazy adolescence, she felt misplaced and unsatisfied. “The thing was, I had no images of anything but what my friends and family did, which was to organize their lives around finding a heterosexual life partner, and to fantasize about getting married and having babies,” she said, echoing Martin’s view that role model imagery is crucial to identity growth. “The only lesbian I knew was Ellen Degeneres. I didn’t want to be her, and I didn’t want to have sex with her, so I figured I was not a lesbian.”

Our popular media and mainstream culture lack the visible models of different gender identities and sexualities. Pérez explained that she found the identification “queer” when she began to understand that she needed a community that does not dichotomize or separate the genders, but rather embraces a range of fluid and ever-expanding identities.

“Gender identity is shifting and changing,” Pérez asserted. This, she emphasized, is the face of new feminism: a worldview that goes beyond the rhetoric of equality between the sexes—“which ends up as a ‘separate but equal’ kind of conversation,” she noted. By changing the way we view gender, we can change the way we affect activism and public policy. More specifically, and perhaps more radically, this model and message could expand our rigid definition of female sexuality.

These two articulate women want to save the feminist movement for the sake of dire gendered issues such as the recognition of gender identity as a fluid concept. To use Audre Lorde’s (1984) metaphor from her pioneering essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” I ask: What kinds of structures of power, perhaps earlier unscratched, will these new media tools be able to dismantle? Can we see new media as a space separate from patriarchal institution, and therefore as a way to demolish the master’s house from a striking new angle?

Martin’s and Pérez’s commentaries
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Levy's (2006) work in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Tolman's study of adolescent girls revealed the challenge of growing up in the midst of the raunchy “porno-ization of the culture.” These all-too-current and pervasive issues make for the kind of double-bind surrounding gender that women from an earlier age of feminism did not address in their edicts and declarations. Today's double standard demands women be both sexy and virginal, acting as both wild animals and tamed domestics. Certainly there is space to embody either extreme. But at one end, we face censure from male counterparts; at the other, we face the same humiliation from our fellow woman. Thus, doubly disdained, we are left in a sexual vacuum.

The problem is compounded when women themselves contribute to an impossible standard of social performance. More than likely, this moral standard stems from first- and second-wave liberal feminist ideology, asserting that women are human first, and female second. Cognizant of this tradition or not, women inherit a franchise that grants us opportunities to join the system of power. Our destinies are not biologically determined, like those of our sisters of old. Yet faced with a discourse of “hotness” and compulsory sex appeal, women starve their intellects and block out their self-actualities for the sake of looking, being understood as, and always feeling “sexy.” Any attempt to preach the old dogma of feminist philosophy is sure to be met with either sympathetic smiles or anxious avoidance. People associate feminism with
images of old women voting and housewives burning bras; but at least these feminists knew they were oppressed. Why have we become blind to double standards and engaged in the degrading and raunchy objectification of women through phenomena like Girls Gone Wild, Playboy bunny-hood, cosmetic surgery, and excessive dieting and exercise? Why do it when we know we are made of so much more?

Levy attempts to answer these questions, explaining the ways in which we have morphed into female chauvinist pigs, lusting for a false idea of the female body. We have become the very thing our feminist ancestors scorned in their male peers. Worse, Levy attributes this hyper-sexualization standard to the liberal feminist ideals of yesterday. “Women in America don’t want to be excluded from anything anymore,” she writes, “not the board meeting or the cigar that follows it or, lately, even the trip to the strip club that follows that” (Levy, 2006, p. 35). Performing and internalizing those male activities have served as a source of empowerment for women in the past; we fought long and hard for respect and dignity in historically male forums. But Levy shows how, in some ways, this liberal feminist mindset has morphed into self-imposed body objectification. Or rather, she sees that the values of liberal feminism—the “anything you can do, I can do” equality talk—have made for a twisted form of competition to do, be, and objectify the way men do and have historically. If men get to be chauvinist pigs, women do too, and they’ll do it well.

The issue gets murky when we begin to unpack the nature of intimate sexual relationships shaped and informed by this “sexual liberation” (read: hegemonic sexual exploitation). “Doing Desire” (Tolman, 1994) presented a qualitative analysis of the disembodied desire that young girls experience vis à vis their burgeoning sexual relationships and encounters. Throughout her interviews with adolescent young women, Tolman observed patterns of girls learning to “look at” rather than “experience” themselves; they were learning to know themselves physically and sexually from the perspective of men, thus losing touch with their own bodily feelings and desires. This disconnect has always been a symptom of patriarchy, as Virginia Woolf (1957) poeticized in A Room of One’s Own: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (p. 35). This vivid image of Woman as empty vessel to be projected upon by men is a chilling one, and it absolutely applies to much of intimate sexuality today.

Young girls are socialized to become these mirrors, Tolman (1994) argues, by internalizing discourses about their bodies and sexualities. Taught from a young age to control their sexuality, women understand that by expressing desire, they risk a series of cultural indictments: degraded reputation in the eyes of their peers and communities, contraction of disease, potential pregnancy, and violence. Matched with this ideology of fear is the cut-and-dry solution (presented by media, religion, some sexual education, and cultural authorities
in general) to abstain from sex until you are a member of a heterosexual, monogamous, and preferably married relationship. Without any space or “cultural script” for sexual feelings or experimentation, women learn instead to react to the sexuality that men overtly express and enact—desire that is condoned and essentialized for their gender. Our sexualities thus become entrenched not only in a compulsory search for the “safety” of heterosexual monogamy, but also in a mode of experiencing sex that does not encourage the body to feel for itself.

Tolman’s (1994) psychological analysis of why “teenage girls need an erotic education” also speaks to this tragic lack of diverse role models for young feminists. Demoted to a status of “sub-” or “counter-culture” in the past two decades, feminism as a movement needs visual aids—real models of equality and truth-seeking who stand not in front of the patriarch as his mirror, but rather within a community of like-minded and validating feminist-activist figures. An erotic education cannot look like the raunch culture Levy’s book describes; instead it must provide images of sexual desire and sexual relationships that promote balanced power, mutual respect, and agency. Teenage girls need an erotic education and it must be part of a larger feminist education, one that speaks not from a dusty place on Courtney Martin’s mom’s book shelf, but from a very real, very accessible place for people of all lifestyles and situations.

Feminism has long been about discussion of the personal as political, like Tolman and Levy so successfully achieve—but this movement’s gotta move. Unfortunately, those who pick up a peer-reviewed journal article like Tolman’s, or even those who sign up for a Women’s Studies course, are likely already members of the feminist choir and not feminism-phobic. Perhaps the sexy silhouette pictured on the cover of Levy’s book has caught a few “agnostic” eyes. But it is the progressive space of the blog that carries the potential to dismantle out-dated views of feminism and propose exciting new perspectives on being a woman in the world. The cozy webpage is a new forum of consciousness-raising, a space accessible by all discourses and experiences, across geography and society. There is nothing dusty or out-dated about feminism’s original consciousness-raising methodology: face-to-face, safe, caring, candid human sharing of life experiences to dialogue about change. But it is time to envision us stepping away from the mirror, the one-way conversation dominated by patriarchy, and stepping toward the “diablog” of the young feminist movement.

References
Interested in learning more about feminism and new media?

www.feministing.com
Feministing, featured in the article, is the most popular feminist blog on the internet and is written by and for young feminists.

www.feminist.com
This website has a variety of new media resources for feminists young and old, including a directory of women-owned businesses, anti-violence information, and interviews with inspiring feminist activists.

www.womenactionmedia.org
Women, Action, and the Media’s website is an outlet that works to build a movement for gender justice in media. Contact them to get involved with their active listserv, events, chapters, and other resources.

Ready to be a feminist activist at Boston College?

www.bc.edu/wrc
The Women’s Resource Center is a great place to start. Located in McElroy 141, the WRC is a safe space for all students, faculty, and staff at Boston College, holds weekly support groups, and organizes campus wide events.
“Im’s field of dreams was not the future but the nostalgic past, a premodern universe where the values of tradition, nation and family remained intact and united—however illusory and fictitious this universe might be.” (James & Kim, 2002, p. 7)

Since his debut with Farewell to the Duman River in 1962, South Korean film director Im Kwon-taek has directed one hundred films over nearly five decades (Rayns & Field, 1996, p. 24). His extensive career is reflective of the dynamic social and political changes that occurred in South Korea from the 1960s-1990s. Im Kwon-Taek’s career is unique: it began in the Golden Age of Korean Cinema, endured the stringent self-promotional demands of the Park Chung Hee administration, and continues to be a shaping force of what critics call New Korean Cinema. The movement supporting New Korean Cinema that “seek[s] to realize cultural democracy in Korea by searching for a new national identity and the autonomy of film-making from political control” began in the mid-1990s (Shin & Stringer, 2005, p. 67). The status of Im’s films as representative of a South Korean national identity designates his films as ideal sites of study for the examination of the construction of masculinity in modern South Korea. This paper will analyze the construction of masculinity in two Im Kwon-Taek films from the 1990s: Sopyonje (1993) and The Taebaek Mountains (1994) and discuss how the two works legitimize the formulation of South Korean national identity as connected to
Im’s *Sopyonje* features a family of *p’ansori* artists, practitioners of a genre of nineteenth century Korean vocal and percussional music, performed by one singer and one drummer. The family travels the Korean countryside in an attempt to preserve *p’ansori* in light of growing American cultural imperialism in South Korea. Yu-bong, the family head, is convinced that one day *p’ansori* will take its place as the supreme art form in Korea, prevailing over the popular Japanese *enka* and Western instruments and song. Yu-bong’s conviction inspires him to train his adopted children, Tong-ho and Song-hwa, in *p’ansori*, despite the art form’s declining stature and the family’s growing destitution. As the children reach adolescence, a conflict between Tong-ho and Yu-bong emerges and Tong-ho, angered by Yu-bong’s uncompromising faith in *p’ansori*’s preeminence and its consequence of the family’s poverty, denounces Yu-bong and runs away. Song-hwa, the child demonstrating greater potential for the mastering of *p’ansori*, remains with Yu-bong, though the departure of Tong-ho leaves her heartbroken. *Sopyonje* follows the narrative of the adult Tong-ho as he searches for his lost sister Song-hwa. In Tong-ho’s attempt to reconcile his past, he learns that the now-deceased Yu-bong blinded and abused Song-hwa so that she would undergo the suffering he considered crucial to the perfection of her art.

*Sopyonje* opened in 1993 to an unprecedented domestic reception and international critical acclaim. Both domestic film critics and the public cited Im’s effective portrayal of *han*, a Korean concept of collective suffering and oppression, through the use of long takes and long shots, filming techniques that depart from conventional Western cinematography (Kim, 2004, p. 2). In her analysis of *Sopyonje*, Chungmoo Choi (2002) argued that the film endeavors to “sublimate the national han by recuperating a precolonial, aesthetic means of communication, *p’ansori*, as it highlights the han of a victimized woman who bears the burden of reclaiming national identity” (p. 116). In his mutilation of Song-hwa’s body, the character Yu-bong exemplifies the construction of masculinity in postcolonial Korea. Traditional males were judged as being incapable of both modernizing their nation and challenging the rule of the colonial master (Choi, 2002, p. 116). Yu-bong suffers from the postcolonial disorder of emasculation and ventures to reclaim this lost masculinity by administering violence towards Song-hwa, “the only domain where a fully repressed and marginalized man like Yu-bong can unleash his power” (Kim, 2004, p. 4). Choi equates Yu-bong’s exploitation of Song-hwa’s body for the sake of *p’ansori* to the exploitation of the Korean people and landscape, which is romanticized in the scenery of *Sopyonje*, by South Korea’s rapid industrialization.

Though Im’s film is a critique of South Korea’s post-colonial construction of national identity through the construction of the feminine Other, *Sopyonje* ultimately upholds patriarchal ideology. At the conclusion of the film, Yu-bong is not capable of recovering his patriarchal
power—he can neither provide for his family nor assert his matrilineal power to prevent Tong-ho’s defiance. A poignant example of Yu-bong’s failure to repossess his masculine authority is the scene where a neighbor beats Yu-bong upon discovering that he stole a chicken from him in order to feed Song-hwa. Yu-bong’s death in the forlorn shack which he and Song-hwa occupied for the bitter Korean winter months can be understood as a critique of the retrieval of patriarchal power through the creation and exploitation of the feminine Other, in this case, Song-hwa. The portrayal of Yu-bong’s death in Sopyonje, however, cannot fully be accepted as a condemnation of Yu-bong’s attempt to assert his masculine authority through the mutilation of Song-hwa, because ultimately the audience, as well as Song-hwa, is sympathetic to Yu-bong’s fate (Kim, 2004, p. 5). Furthermore, Yu-bong’s failure to assert his patriarchal power can be tied to his lack of legitimacy as a traditional patriarch: he is not the paternal father of Tong-ho and Song-hwa.

Im Kwon-Taek’s focus on Tong-ho’s narrative ultimately constructs national South Korean masculinity as patriarchal. Sopyonje is framed around Tong-ho’s search to reconcile his past by reuniting with his sister Song-hwa. The film concerns Tong-ho’s subjectivity and the characters are ultimately relieved of their suffering by Tong-ho’s actions to rectify his father’s violence (and thus his nation’s history). Sopyonje maintains that subjectivity is reserved for men; the salient task of reconciling a nation’s violent past is “a struggle that is exercised only in the domain of men” (Kim, 2004, p. 6). The film’s message ultimately reinforces patriarchal gender relations and Im Kwon-taek’s status as South Korea’s preeminent filmmaker effectively constructs national South Korean masculinity as essentially patriarchal.

As in Sopyonje, reconciliation of the nation’s violent past in The Taebaek Mountains is considered to be the task of the nationalist man, in this film the protagonist Kim Pom-u. The Taebaek Mountains is based on the 1948 Yosu-Sunchon Rebellion and depicts the ideological struggles that tormented the province with violence in the years leading up to the Korean War. Im personifies this ideological conflict by focusing on the masculinities of two brothers, the elder Yom Sang-jin, leader of the communist partisan militia, and the younger Yom Sang-gu, commander of the radical right wing Anticommunist Youth League. Throughout the film, Yom Sang-gu leads brutal and violent

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raids on the townspeople, legitimizing his actions by labeling the villagers as communist sympathizers. Yom Sang-gu’s rape of Oesodaek, the wife of Kang Tong-gi, a member of Yom Sang-jin’s partisan army, epitomizes his brutality. Yom Sang-gu’s acts of violence and rape are products of his feeling of inferiority towards other men, especially his older brother. In one scene, Yom Sang-gu confesses his jealousy towards Yom Sang-jin to his mother. The family could only afford to pay for one son to attend college and allotted the privilege to Yom Sang-jin, the eldest son, forcing the younger Sang-gu to drop out of elementary school. Fears concerning the inadequacy of his masculinity as the younger and uneducated son drive Yom Sang-gu’s campaign of terror and violence as commander of the Anticommunist Youth League.

In contrast to Im’s focus on Yom Sang-gu’s subjective experiences, the women of *The Taebaek Mountains* are limited to traditional notions of femininity. Chuksandaek, the wife of Yom Sang-jin, seemingly departs from the characteristic behavior of passive femininity when she bites the ear of her right-wing Anticommunist League interrogator, Lim. Yet, as Kyung Hyun Kim elucidates in his analysis of *The Taebaek Mountains*, “Chuksandaek’s resistance is not motivated by a desire to defend her communist agenda but by her courageous protection of her husband’s public ideology and her private body against Lim’s threat” (Kim, 2002, p. 209). In aggressively protecting her body from Lim’s attack, Chuksandaek demonstrates her adherence to the traditional notion of Korean femininity that emphasizes chastity as a woman’s greatest virtue. The nature of Oesodaek’s victimization, however, departs too much from this national discourse of femininity. There is no possibility for her to absolve the impurity of her body, which is adulterated by Sang-gu’s desire to fulfill his masculine authority. In the final scenes of *The Taebaek Mountains*, Oeseodaek commits suicide.

Im Kwon-Taek’s fundamental message in *The Taebaek Mountains* concerns his reverence for the harmonious family unit, specifically families headed by a present male authority. In one scene, an anguished woman and her young son approach their neighbor and her children. The former woman angrily accuses the latter of charging her husband as a communist, essentially condemning him to death by the hands of the Anticommunist league. As the two depart, the mother tells her child, “You will have a hard life because you have no father.” Her statement is illustrative of Im Kwon-Taek’s sense of the suffering for a number of families such
as those represented in *The Taebaek Mountains*. For example, Kang Tong-gi’s membership in the communist partisan army leaves his wife Osadaek and child vulnerable to Yom Sang-gu’s violence. The Yom family suffers from an absent patriarch as well; the death of Yom Sang-gu and Yom Sang-jin’s father leaves their mother as a sole intermediary force in a fractured family. At the end of the film, both Yom Sang-jin and Yom Sang-gu are alienated from their family and natal home.

The film’s protagonist, Kim Pom-u, is representative of Im Kwon-Taek’s solution to the ideological struggles of terror and violence. Kim Pom-u is unique from most of the characters in *The Taebaek Mountains* in that he subscribes neither to communist ideology nor to the practices of the radical right wing. Kim Pom-u offers an alternative to the tenets held by the radical Yom brothers and his promulgation of humanism and liberal nationalism stem from his filial relationship with his father and the stability of his home rather than a particular ideology. The violence suffered by families with absent patriarchs in *The Taebaek Mountains* is indicative of Im Kwon-Taek’s mourning of the deterioration of the traditional Confucian family. The harmonious family structure can only be restored by the presence of a patriarchal father. Kim Pom-u represents Im Kwon-Taek’s hope for Korea’s future and further illustrates Im’s imagined nation as one “guided by phallocentric liberalism, where the harmonious, traditional universe of the prewar period can be restored” (Kim, 2002, p. 216).

Film director Im Kwon-Taek’s status as a renowned national figure in Korean Cinema and his pursuit in the creation of a national identity through revival of traditional culture and family merit an analysis of his work when considering gender relations in modern Korea. The construction of masculinity in two of Im’s later films, *Sopyonje* (1993) and *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994), has been discussed here to determine what gender conventions are produced on screen as related to South Korean national identity. Although Im has historically shown sensitivity to the treatment of women’s issues in his work, *Sopyonje* and *The Taebaek Mountains* each reassert the importance of the traditional Confucian family roles and attest that the reconciliation of the nation’s past suffering will be enacted by the male patriarch. Furthermore, in *Sopyonje* and *The Taebaek Mountains*, the importance of the male patriarch in the maintenance of harmonious traditional families under the tenets of liberal nationalism and humanism portray the future of Korea. This future will be determined by men—the male patriarch will ultimately reconcile and absolve the suffering of Korea’s modern history. In the words of Kyung Hyun Kim: “Instead of fighting against the Confucian virtues, [Im Kwon-Taek] refined and sentimentalized them, conjuring up exhaustive images of contaminated women to symbolize a victimized nation in the midst of the ongoing process of modernization and globalization” (Kim, 2002, p. 37). Considering the cultural weight of Im Kwon-Taek’s work in the construction of a Korean national identity, it

Masculinity in South Korean Cinema
is beneficial to examine his films’ legitimization of hegemonic masculinity as part of South Korean national identity.

References
Tae-won, L. (Producer), & Kwon-Taek, I. (Director). (1994). *The Taebaek Mountains* [Motion picture]. South Korea: Taehung Pictures

Want more context to better understand the role of gender in Korean films?
www.koreanfilm.or.kr
The Korean Film Council is a body founded in order to improve the quality of Korean films and to promote the Korean film industry.

Want to learn more gender equality in Korea?
english.mogef.go.kr
The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family operates as a governmental body seeking to promote women’s rights and enhance the position of women in Korean society.

Interested in a global perspective on the status of gender equality?
www.kigepe.or.kr/usr/eng/sub01/intro.asp
The Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education is an organization working for gender equity through policy advocacy and education organization.

www.un.org/womenwatch

The United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality provides resources regarding the status of women across the globe.
For many world religions, moral teachings are discussed explicitly in texts; for example, the central guidelines for Buddhist moral living are found in the teachings of the Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts (“The Five Precepts,” 2009). Interestingly, the Buddha’s discourses do not make explicit statements regarding homosexuality. This fact, along with the generally independent nature of Buddhist devotion, leads to an uncertain religious outlook on this contentious issue.

Though no direct reference is made to homosexual behaviors in these texts, generally applicable principles can be derived. The Eightfold Path outlines right resolve. To achieve this ideal, followers are advised to “renounce the pleasures of the senses... harbor no ill will toward anyone, and harm no living creature” (“The Five Precepts,” 2009). The ideal of right conduct complements this notion, advocating that followers “do not destroy any living creature... take only what is given... [and] do not commit any unlawful sexual act” (“The Five Precepts,” 2009). Similarly, the third precept simply states, “I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct” (“The Five Precepts,” 2009).

In one view, both heterosexual and homosexual intimacy are thus proscribed. Ajahn Brahmavamso and Ajahn Nanadhammo (2010) cite the Buddha’s teachings to support this perspective in The Simile of the Snake. The Buddha said, “I have stated how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much
suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time” (Brahmavamso & Nanadhammo). Brahmavamso and Nanadhammo view this text as an admonishment, urging all people to abstain from sexual activity and expressing the sentiment that only celibate life can lead to true enlightenment. Others disagree with this extreme view, citing other teachings of the Buddha in their support, including a surprising text in which he reportedly taught that men may orgasm up to five times in one evening (Cabezon, 2009). A. L. De Silva (n.d.) explains that in his view the third precept is not violated when two lay individuals, either heterosexual or homosexual, mutually consent to a sexual act as an expression of love, respect, loyalty, and warmth. To him, violation of the third precept entails promiscuity, adultery, or disdain for the feelings of another. Such action is “unskillful” because it “requires subterfuge and deceit, it means that solemn promises made at the time of marriage are broken, and it amounts to a betrayal of trust” (De Silva). Different modern scholars thus hold a wide range of beliefs in what sexual acts are or are not proscribed in Buddhism.

The sutras, collected in the first century BCE, are the earliest Buddhist writings that expound on the vagaries of the prohibition against sexual misbehavior. This work exclusively identifies adultery as an act of misconduct (Cabezon, 2009). Later scholarly commentaries provide much lengthier and more detailed lists of unacceptable sexual acts. A fifteenth century Tibetan scholar, Tsongkhapa, offered an extensive set of concrete rules for Buddhist followers. His work seems especially relevant, as the Dalai Lama specifically referenced his teachings during a talk at a 1997 conference (Cabezon, 2009). In his work, Tsongkhapa described prohibitions against various forms of sexual action. Forbidden deeds include oral and anal intercourse, masturbation, sexual intercourse during daylight hours, and intercourse between two men. Similar writings from other scholars of the period display a general consensus. Jose Cabezon (2009), the XIV Dalai Lama Professor in Tibetan Buddhism and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a former Buddhist monk, described the origin of these rules and their apparent departure from earlier freedom from sexual guidelines. He explained that the

Different modern scholars thus hold a wide range of beliefs in what sexual acts are or are not proscribed in Buddhism.
authors were celibate monks and scholastic philosophers—men accustomed to thinking in terms of lists. Theologians like Asanga, Vasubandhu, and others broke down proper behavioral rules into certain partners, organs, orifices, times, and places because these terms were part of the Vinaya, the monastic code (Cabezon, 2009). Cabezon’s response to these teachings is an attitude of skepticism. He wrote that no scriptural justifications exist for the more restrictive, scholastic doctrinal formulation. He asserted that celibate monks inappropriately read monastic norms into lay society and sexual practice. As he stated, “The individuals who did this were great scholars and saints, but on this issue, they simply got it wrong” (Cabezon, 2009).

If this argument holds true, Buddhist followers are left with little guidance regarding their sexual lives. The current Dalai Lama, regarded by many as a strong, spiritual, but fallible leader, has provided some commentary on this dilemma. In 1993, the Dalai Lama outlined his sentiment that nature had made male and female organs “in such a manner that is very suitable... Same-sex organs cannot managewell” (Peskind, 1998). When questioned about the legitimacy of a non-abusive, consensual homosexual relationship, he humbly replied, “Then I don’t know. It’s difficult to say” (Peskind, 1998). In the February/March issue of OUT magazine, the Dalai Lama was quoted as giving a much more tolerant response. The quote read, “If someone comes to me and asks whether it is okay or not, I will first ask if you have some religious vows to uphold. Then my next question is, what is your companion’s opinion? If you both agree, then I think I would say, if two males or two females voluntarily agree to have mutual satisfaction without further implication of harming others, then it is okay” (Peskind, 1998). Though this statement seems clear, the matter was clouded in 1996 when North Atlantic Books published Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses, a collection of talks and discussions from the Dalai Lama’s 1993 visit to France. In this text, the Dalai Lama is quoted as saying that proper sexual action requires the use of sexual organs and nothing else. While homosexuality is not inherently unacceptable, its use of organs defined as inappropriate for sexual contact is considered improper.

The response to this apparent discrepancy was strong. Steve Peskind, coordinator of the Buddhist AIDS Project in San
Francisco and editor of the anthology *Heart Lessons from an Epidemic: Buddhist Practice and Living with HIV* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press), took an active approach. As he recalled in a 1998 article, “On the basis of the discrepancy between the OUT article and Beyond Dogma, I wrote an open, public letter to the Dalai Lama in January of 1997, noting that many of us who so admired him were confused and distressed by the inconsistency of his statements and their worldwide ramifications. I respectfully requested that he ‘in whatever manner and venue he chooses, speak to... the truth of homosexuality and homosexual behavior’” (Peskind, 1998). As a result, the Dalai Lama arranged to speak with seven gay and lesbian leaders at a conference in San Francisco.

At this conference, the Dalai Lama candidly responded to questions. Peskind (1998) narrates, “I asked him, ‘If the Buddha is our teacher, where and when did he teach that homosexual partners are inappropriate, that homosexual behavior is sexual misconduct?’ The Dalai Lama responded, ‘I don’t know’” (Peskind, 1998). The Dalai Lama received another challenging inquiry from Cabezon who was also present at the conference. Cabezon asked, “If the purpose of the proscriptions is to reduce sexual activity, how does it make sense to allow a man to have sex with his wife up to five times a night, while saying that it is sexual misconduct for a man to have sex with another man even once in his life?’” In response, the Dalai Lama reportedly laughed and said, “You have a point there!” (Peskind, 1998). In his most outright commentary on the issue at this conference, the Dalai Lama said, “We have to make a distinction between believers and unbelievers. From a Buddhist point of view, men-to-men and women-to-women is generally considered sexual misconduct... From society’s viewpoint, mutually agreeable homosexual relations can be of mutual benefit, enjoyable and harmless” (Peskind, 1998).

The notion of a Buddhist/non-Buddhist divide appears here as a novel and incongruous idea in moral teaching. No other question could be subject to such a distinction. Murder would certainly not be condoned or free of karmic consequence if committed by a non-believer. Adultery is viewed as no less harmful if committed by nonreligious members of society. Karma applies to all people (“What is Karma?”). To suggest separate karmic criteria for believers and unbelievers appears unfounded in the Buddhist tradition.

A brief overview of legal and cultural history in Buddhist nations provides some additional insight into the conflicting attitudes toward homosexual practice fostered by members of this faith. None of the legal codes of traditionally Buddhist nations penalize homosexuality except in cases of rape or when involving minors. One finds no laws against homosexuality between consenting adults in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Mongolia, Japan, or South Korea. Only Burma and Sri Lanka penalize homosexuality, likely because their legal codes were created during the colonial era (Dhammika, 2008). In medieval Japanese monastic tradition, for example, homosexual relationships between
spiritual guides and young acolytes, or chigo, were common (Janavira, 1997). The abundance of these relationships led to the development of a series of stories known as the Chigo monogatari, or ‘Tales about Acolytes.’ These stories often told of a Buddhist deity who took the form of a young acolyte and was ultimately led to Enlightenment by a charming, older monk. As Dharmachari Janavira (1997) illustrated, “In the fourteenth-century Chigo Kannon engi, Kannon [a Buddhist deity] takes the form of a beautiful novice to become the lover of a monk who is longing for companionship in his old age. After a few years of close companionship, however, the acolyte dies, leaving the monk desolate. Kannon then appears to the monk, reveals that he and the acolyte were one and the same and delivers a discourse on impermanence” (Janavira, 1997). Though this practice is no longer accepted today, Janavira outlines an interesting theory regarding the influence of such practices on modern Buddhist monastic culture in Japan. Janavira stated, “Despite painstaking regulations in the Vinaya against any kind of sexual activity on the part of monks, including many forbidding homosexual encounters, Buddhism in Japan developed a very lax attitude towards sexual expression on the part of monks, which has resulted in the curious anomaly that because most monks now marry...it is only Japanese nuns who live a celibate lifestyle today” (Janavira, 1997).

In contrast to the accommodating views at work in Japanese monasteries, some ancient Buddhist writings outline far harsher positions. The Milindapanha, a Burmese text from the first century BCE, specifically states that certain groups, such as pandakas (described by one source as “males who lack conventional qualities of ‘maleness,’ such as those who suffer temporary impotence, satisfy their own sexual desires by watching others engage in sexual behavior, or fellate other men” [Numrich, 2009, p. 70]) and ubhatobyanjanakas (‘hermaphrodites’), are not only prohibited from entering monasteries (as discussed in the Vinaya) but also are considered inherently unable to fully comprehend Buddhist teachings. Scholarly commentators on this text have gone so far as to label such people “morally and spiritually deficient” (Numrich, 2009, p. 70). One Mahayana text describes “endless varieties of punishments... for the wrong deed of sexual intercourse between two men. The one who commits misconduct with boys sees boys being swept away in the Acid River who cry out to him, and owing to the suffering and pain born of his deep affection for them, plunges in after them” (Numrich, 2009, p. 70).

Recent writings of Thai monks in the Theravada school express a similarly caustic attitude. Phra Ratchaworamuni, a philosopher monk, theorizes that homosexuality is the result of an overly lusty disposition unsatisfied by traditional male-female intercourse (Jackson, 1995). His Dictionary of Buddhist Teachings gives a far more critical definition of pandaka than typically expressed. Phra Ratchaworamuni defines an individual in this group as “someone born as a kathoey [defined by Peter Jackson (1995) as a ‘transvestite, transsexual, male homosexual’ (Jackson, 1995)], a castrated man
called a eunuch, and a man with strong sexual
desire who behaves outside of sexual conventions
and who incites other men to be likewise”
(Jackson, 1995). As Peter Jackson notes, “In this
view homosexual men are considered immoral
because they do not contain their sexual urges
within normal heterosexual limits” (Jackson,
1995).

However, until recently, a karmic
theory of homosexuality’s origin led to a more
compassionate outlook in Thai culture. Because
individuals cannot control the karma that has
led to the struggles in a current life, they are
typically shown sympathy rather than hatred
for any hardship viewed as karmic consequence.
Bunmi details the presently outdated view in
which karma is the cause of an individual’s
homosexuality. In a 1995 paper, Jackson
discusses Bunmi’s teachings, which include
a belief that sexual misconduct in a past life,
such as adultery, can cause homosexuality in a
future life. With this belief, Bunmi countered
contemporary Thai ideas regarding the origins of
homosexuality (i.e., that a kathoey results from
raising a boy with girls or raising a girl with boys).
In his mind, individuals in the class of “lower
level spirits” are born as kathoeys because of
contributory factors in their past lives (Jackson,
1995). Further, Bunmi stated that actions that
are caused by previously accrued karma do
not themselves beget karmic consequence in a
future life. In other words, individuals who feel a
homosexual inclination as a result of past karma
would not be punished for that inclination in the
next life.

Though outdated, the story of Vakkali
provides an example of tolerance still revered in
Theravada societies. Numrich (2009) described
Vakkali as “a monk who sought ordination
because he was smitten by the Buddha’s physical
appearance and then neglected his monastic
duties by following the Buddha around in order
to gaze at him, a fairly clear case of same-sex
attraction” (p. 70). In response, the Buddha
ridiculed Vakkali for his obsession with the
temporal body and ultimately dismissed Vakkali
from his presence. Vakkali became upset to
the point of acting suicidal. In response, the
Buddha saved him with reassuring words.
Vakkali then achieved Enlightenment and won
the Buddha’s praise. Though the commentary
on this work is more critical of Vakkali, scholars
admit he ultimately does achieve Enlightenment
(Numrich, 2009, p. 70).

The general inconsistency in the approach
to homosexuality in the Buddhist tradition
may stem from many causes. One interesting
theory posits that a divide between “ethnic” and
“universal” religion could explain the conflict. In
the words of Winton Higgins, “Ethnic religion
seeks to regulate many civic aspects of a particular
tribe or people, and especially to regulate the
biological and cultural reproduction of the tribe.
It thus stipulates all sorts of rules to do with
marriage, family, sex roles, bringing up children”
(Higgins). In contrast, “A universal religion... is
indifferent to ethnic civic life, transcends cultural
particularism, and stands aloof from issues to
do with the reproduction of the tribe” (Higgins).
Perhaps the adoption of Buddhism as an ethnic
religion, as structured in the writings of monks like Tsongkhapa, paved the way for concrete rules of conduct. If this theory holds true, the tension between universal and ethnic principles may result in the ambiguity present today.

At the conclusion of the San Francisco conference, the Dalai Lama condemned discrimination and violence due to sexual orientation. He outlined “the possibility of understanding these precepts in the context of time, culture, and society... If homosexuality is part of accepted norms [today], it is possible that it may be acceptable... However, no single person or teacher can redefine precepts... It is not unprecedented in the history of Buddhism to redefine [moral] issues, but it has to be done on the collective level” (Cabezon, 2009). He subsequently warned, “Changing Buddhist traditions will be much harder than advocating for your human rights” (Peskind, 1998). The Dalai Lama’s invitation seems to indicate that the tradition, even doctrine, is open to change. Perhaps one day, Buddhism will be the first major faith tradition to openly accept homosexual practice. Until that time, the Buddha’s instruction to be a light unto oneself (Peskind, 1997) offers followers an invitation to respond on a personal level to the unanswered question posed by a long oppressed minority eager to find a welcoming home in the Buddhist faith.

References
Peskind, S. (2008, Mar). According to Buddhist Tradition:
Where can I find more information about Buddhism and homosexuality and related issues?

libguides.bc.edu/glbt
Boston College Libraries provides an online resource for LGBT studies, including links to articles and other academic texts regarding Buddhism and homosexuality.

Are there other online resources to learn about and connect with the GLBTQ Buddhist community?

groups.yahoo.com/group/gbof
The Gay Buddhist Open Forum describe themselves as “an international, minimally moderated online forum for the discussion of Buddhist teachings and practices for the LGBTQ community.”

www.gaybuddhistsangha.com
This website is run by and for lay Buddhist LGBT people with a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Through education and communication, they seek to better individuals’ lives and teach others how to serve their own communities.
Feminism is a term and a movement that has become increasingly linked with the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 Revolution. Both inside and outside the country, academics, activists, and journalists have brought the ideas and theories of feminism into the debate surrounding Iran’s perilous “woman question.” However, Iranians have not merely adopted Western or American feminism. Rather, there is uniqueness to Iranian feminism and its adherents have been hailed as “Islamic feminists.” But what does it mean to be an Islamic feminist? Is such a thing even possible as a construct? And has this development of a kind of Islamic feminism been beneficial to the cause of women in the Iranian context?

What is an Islamic Feminist?
Feminism is defined as “the theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, and organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Merriam-Webster). However, although the movement is growing in popularity, because of a diversity of voices and experiences there is no one singular formulation of “Islamic feminism.” Rather, descriptions extend across a gamut of women with differing political positions and backgrounds: devout and secular women, women who work in politics and political institutions, women who abstain from formal politics, elite women, as well as women who are located on the lowest rungs of society. Some of the women who are called Islamic feminists accept this label, while others claim...
it is oxymoronic and prefer a different term for their particular brand of feminism. For example, Shahla Sherkat, the editor of the most acclaimed women’s rights newspaper in Iran, Zanan, prefers to be called an “indigenous feminist.” She says, “I prefer the term feminism bomi, indigenous feminism, because it relates women’s rights issues to the social and cultural specifics of Iran” (Rostami, 2001, p. 64). Responses to Islamic feminism as a label have varied considerably, because the women who supposedly typify the movement are themselves incredibly diverse.

So what can be made of this burgeoning Islamic feminism, with its seemingly contested definition and broad spectrum of diverse members? Feminists in Iran can be characterized into two relevant categories: the negotiating opposition and the uncompromising opposition. The uncompromising opposition is comprised of women who do not attempt to change Iranian life within the current political, social and religious institutions. They view the current system as inherently anti-woman and therefore believe that no real change can be made within it. Conversely, the negotiators are women who, in some manner, work to create change within the current Iranian system, including Islamic feminists.

The Negotiating Opposition

There is a wide diversity amongst the negotiators ranging from conservative to liberal women. Some strongly believe in Islam and others hold more secular beliefs. Their diversity is best exemplified by highlighting three prominent feminists who, in their profound differences, reveal the variety of women considered Islamic feminists.

Azam Taleghani.

Azam Taleghani exemplifies the firm believers among Iranian women who try to reconcile Islam and women’s rights under the Iranian regime. She is the daughter of the well-known Ayatollah Muhmud Taleghani and is a former member of the Islamic Republic's Parliament (Majles). Conservative negotiators such as Taleghani are usually pious, from the upper echelons of society, and often work directly with or within state institutions. Taleghani is one of many feminists who originally supported the Iranian Revolution but became disillusioned once discriminatory and patriarchal policies were imposed shortly thereafter. Despite her disagreements with the current government, she has worked within it to encourage dialogue on
women's issues and to improve the condition of women in Iran. She was the director of the Islam Women’s Institute and editor of the journal *Payam-e hajar* (‘Hajar’s message’). In *Payam-e Hajar*, conservative negotiators like Taleghani demonstrate that they believe in the compatibility of men and women as well as the notion that each sex has its own distinct role. As each sex has a role that only it can fulfill (women are seen as pacifiers and bearers of tranquility), it has an intrinsic importance, and therefore each sex is equal and necessary (Nakanishi, 1998). In one article entitled “Are Men Superior to Women?” the journal examined passages from the Quran that are usually interpreted to demonstrate male domination over women and then presented alternative interpretations debunking that notion (Sciolino, 2000). Conservative negotiators also believe that the hijab is crucial to a Muslim woman’s identity. They contest that the hijab is not an intrinsic part of Islam, but if women only understood human nature then they would accept it. Conservative negotiators like Taleghani have fought polygamy and temporary marriage. They argue that the Islamic Republic claims to uphold the family and the notion that motherhood is a woman’s primary role; therefore, the state is responsible for securing her economic and matrimonial rights. Taleghani summed up her position:

*I believe the heterosexual family relationship is necessary for the continuation of a healthy society but I also believe that there should be equal relationship between men and women within this family* relationship, especially that the role of mother in the family is very important. I believe we women can change our society, we have the power but we have to understand how to exercise that power, taking into consideration the cultural issues. (Rostami, 2001, p. 3)

Conservative negotiators, including Azam Taleghani, have a strategic advantage in fighting the patriarchy of the Islamic Republic because they are adherents to Islamic faith, they speak within the same frame of language, and their arguments are consistent with the version of Islam promoted by the Islamic Republic.

**Mehrangiz Kar.**

At the other end of the spectrum are women like Mehrangiz Kar, a prominent human rights lawyer. Kar is often categorized as an Islamic feminist despite proclamations of her personal secular beliefs. She actually has stated that she believes “Muslim feminism” is a contradiction in terms (Rostami, 2001, p. 64). Unlike her conservative counterparts, Kar has said that the Islamic dress qualifies as a form of “violence against women” (Sciolino, 2000 p. 129). She also believes that there are serious injustices imbedded within the system of Islamic jurisprudence in Iran. Kar observed that “even if the husband insults his wife or beats her, the judge demands a witness” as an example of such injustice (Sciolino, 2000). She advocates for the separation of mosque and state within Iran:

*The Muslim reformers who believe that Islam is a dynamic religion and are in favor of modification of the Islamic law,*
don’t really believe in equality between men and women. They believe that women and men have been born to play different roles in life and therefore they must be subjected to different laws and regulations within family and society. (Rostami, 2001, p. 55)

Kar exemplifies a category of liberal feminists in Iran who are often urbanites from the middle or elite classes. They are lawyers, judges, filmmakers, artists, journalists, and professors. These women appear quite divergent from conservative feminists like Taleghani, especially when beyond the watchful eyes of the Islamic Republic. At a Berlin conference in 2000, Kar denounced the slow process of reform in Iran and the religious domination over civil law, claiming that it threatened the process of democratization and women’s rights (Rostami, 2001, p. 66). Upon her return to Iran, she was imprisoned for two months, though she had breast cancer at the time. Her imprisonment exposed a divide between conservative and liberal negotiators—as her fellow liberal feminists clamored for her release, feminists from the conservative camp would not do so publicly.

Nonetheless, if feminists like Taleghani and Kar were judged by their actions alone (at least within the Islamic Republic), they would be difficult to distinguish. Though their beliefs may vary considerably, the tactics of liberal and conservative negotiators have been markedly similar. Both focus on the most fundamental issues facing Iranian women like family law and education. They both present arguments based on the Quran, regardless of whether or not they believe it is a legitimate basis for law. For instance, Kar was influential in the reform of the 1985 education law that stipulated that Muslim women students could not study abroad without the accompaniment of a husband or male family member. She also made suggestions to reform Iranian family law to be in accordance with the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Liberal feminists within Iran recognize that debating the regime based on its own premises is an effective strategy. Thus, Kar and other liberal feminists work together with their more religious counterparts on the issues most palatable within the Islamic Republic. Kar described her strategy:

As a lawyer, I do not agree with the constitution but within my work I struggle to change the Islamic law and hopefully the constitution...Until we achieve the separation of politics from religion, we need to overcome obstacles and in this way I welcome cooperation with Muslim feminists. (Rostami, 2001, p. 65)

**Shahla Sherkat.**

If Azam Taleghani and Mehranguz Kar represent opposite ends of the political and social spectrum in Islamic feminism, Shahla Sherkat represents how those two extreme positions can be joined. She plays a connective role between conservative and liberal negotiators in the Islamic Republic as the editor of the most influential women’s publication in Iran, *Zanan* (‘Women’). The brand of feminism Sherkat employs is quite
unique not only in Iran, but throughout the world. Unlike conservative negotiators, Sherkat keeps her distance from official involvement in the government. But she, like conservative feminists, also refrained from publicly defending Kar after her arrest and does not support secular attacks on the government’s existence. Sherkat does not denigrate tradition, but she calls for some progressive changes especially within family dynamics. She said, “Our aim is not to destabilize families and family relationship(s). Our aim is to bring about equality between women and men. If men are oppressive in a variety of ways, that does not mean that women must be silent” (Rostami, 2001, p. 59).

While Sherkat is well versed in the Quran and frequently cited it in her magazine, Zanan was also openly affiliated with Western feminism and in it she translated articles by famous feminist scholars like Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. Zanan provided a forum for discussion about different forms of feminism and liberated that discussion from Western phobia. Sherkat also published secular feminist lawyers in Zanan, including Kar, providing a means for ordinary women to understand their rights under the law. She even published articles with such titles as, “Why Should Only Women Be Receptionists?” “Is Your Baby Sitter Your Husband’s Doll?” and “Sir, Have You Ever Beaten Your Wife?” in which average Iranian men gave surprisingly blunt answers regarding the treatment of their wives (Sciolino, 2000). For such expositions of the social life in Iran, Zanan was eventually closed in 2008 after sixteen years of operation.

Yet, with such brazen and inventive approaches, Sherkat became a leader in breaking the taboo surrounding feminism in Iran. Moreover, her magazine had one of the longest lives in post-revolutionary Iranian journalism because she avoided direct engagement in contentious political issues, yet knew just when to push the envelope on certain social issues.

Sherkat’s public finesse and political savvy make it difficult to decipher her precise position on some feminist questions. Yet, it is exactly this opacity and discretion that has allowed her to be successful in the Iranian context, where the government suppresses dissident voices and the culture dictates that direct speech on certain private issues is impolite. As prominent sociologists Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp said, “the meaning of feminism has changed over time and from place to place and is often disputed... in every group in every place, in every time, the meaning of ‘feminism’ is worked out in the course of being and doing” (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1164).

Despite the diversity amongst these three women called Islamic feminists, they all believe in elevating women’s status to that of men’s and actively work toward this end. They are labeled Islamic feminists because they do this work within the Islamic system in Iran, even if they do not personally believe in Islam, as demonstrated by Mehrangiz Kar. Thus, despite some inconsistency in their beliefs, they can be considered negotiating feminists.

**The Uncompromising Opposition**
Alternatively, there are non-negotiators, important thinkers who are not called Islamic feminists; in fact, many of them are self-proclaimed atheists and claim that the construct “Islamic feminism” is oxymoronic. Most are academics and émigrées who currently work in the United States or Canada and have not returned to Iran since the Revolution. The most prominent of these non-negotiators, Haideh Moghissi, argues that there cannot be “Islamic feminists” for Islam intrinsically negates the equality of women to men and therefore cannot be compatible with feminism (Moghissi, 1999). Non-negotiators also argue that any kind of Islamic feminism in Iran is nonsensical, because the Islamic Republic is inherently incompatible with individual choice, cultural pluralism, and feminism. They contend that by working with and within the government system, Islamic feminists are reinforcing the legitimacy of the Islamic regime, and their use of the Quran as the basis of argument only further legitimizes the state. Moreover, non-negotiators believe that Islamic feminist efforts undermine secular alternatives and divert energy away from true forms of feminism and feminist movements (Moghissi, 1999). Lastly, opponents of Islamic feminism contend that any small gains made by Islamic feminists are insignificant and exaggerated. They state that small legal reforms, for example, are meaningless in a patriarchal society because even if law upholds women’s rights the judiciary and law enforcement agencies are comprised of men who will abuse and circumvent those rights (Moghissi, 1999). Unfortunately this has proven true, as many of the legal gains made by Islamic feminists are negated in practice, and sometimes women are not even aware of the rights that they have gained (such as prenuptial agreements). Therefore, it is important that these uncompromising feminist voices exist, as they serve to counter any illusions that all women and Iranians in general are content with the regime.

Is Islamic Feminism an Oxymoron?

Although the uncompromising opposition makes valid points, some of its arguments are contestable. Multiple scholars have argued that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron because Islam is inherently hostile to women (Moghissi, 1999). Some “uncompromising” atheist feminists believe that all religion is anti-feminist; by their measure, feminism cannot be discussed in relation to religion at all. However, this would mean that the majority of the women in the world cannot be feminists, for most do not reject codified or organized religion altogether. One scholar, Margot Badran, rebuts the generalization that religion is inherently anti-feminist. She argues that it is not the religion of Islam, but Islamism – the theocratic patriarchal state – that is hostile to women (Badran, 2001). Therefore an Islamist feminist, or a woman who accepts the patriarchal state as just, cannot truly exist because she would simultaneously believe in equality for women and a system which makes that impossible. On the contrary, most Islamic feminists in Iran either denounce the regime outright or imply that it is illegitimate through
their publications, speeches, etc. It seems then that just as Christian and Jewish feminists may exist, so do Islamic feminists.

**Refuting the Opposition**

The uncompromising opposition are critics more than activists. They claim that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron and that small gains made by women within the regime are no gains at all. Yet, they do not provide a viable alternative. They would overthrow the regime if possible, but they have been advocating overthrow since 1979 and have yet to see their wish fulfilled. They seem to offer no tangible means for change within the current system. As the prominent pro-Islamic feminist Nayereh Tohidi put it:

> An overwhelming majority of women in Muslim societies are concerned with workable formulas in their daily battles against oppressive rule. To them, the argument that ‘Islamic feminism is an oxymoron, hence useless,’ may sound like secular arrogance or an irrelevant academic concern. (Tohidi, 1998, p. 287)

Another Iranian feminist said that such non-negotiating feminism is neither “adequate” nor “widespread” enough in Iran to be relevant (Ahmadi, 2006). Change, she says, will come from the “voices within.”

These non-negotiators, other feminists contend, are blinded by Anglo-American feminism to the point where they become exclusive. Many Iranian women, especially of the lower and middle classes, are alienated by strictly secular and Western feminism. Some scholars argue that it is wrong to suggest that Anglo-American feminism is the only feminism, for it does not address capitalism, class, or imperialism (Moghadam, 2002). To equate Anglo-American feminism with all feminism is to misunderstand the concept. Feminism is an intrinsically fluid concept, and it can and should be adapted to particular cultures.

Non-negotiators’ rigidity harms them because it often leads to complete exclusion from the dialogue. They are immediately silenced as heralds of “Westoxification,” a term coined by the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Komeini to signify the Western influence considered poisonous to Islam, because they argue based on completely different premises than those presented in the Islamic Republic (Tohidi, 1998). Therefore, they are not allowed in the debate at all, and their arguments have no effect on the minds and laws of patriarchs. Non-negotiating feminists also negate the agency of women currently living in Iran from the perspective of outsiders looking in (Ahmadi, 2006). They declare that the situation is hopeless until the regime is toppled, but such declarations are not practical for women currently struggling inside the country.

**The Case for Negotiating and Islamic Feminists**

Negotiating feminists succeed where their uncompromising sisters fail. They provide hope; foster unity; build feminist consciousness, popular bases, and reform movements; and open up dialogue and debate within the...
Islamic Republic. To effect these changes, negotiating feminists have employed two main strategies. First, they reinterpret Islamic texts themselves, emphasizing the historical context and the egalitarian tendencies of Islam in order to debate patriarchs on their own premises. They also appeal more broadly to postmodern ideas, invoking evidence outside the Quran and introducing the language of human rights and civil society. Negotiating feminists have achieved a small but increasing number of victories in this way.

**Opening the Dialogue**

Negotiating feminists use some of the most prized tenets of Islam in order to fight their case. They emphasize *ijtihad*, which encourages the individual investigation of religious sources; *tafsir*, the interpretation of the Quran; and *fegha poya*, the teaching that Islam can be adapted to the modern world. Negotiating feminists argue that *ijtihad* is the obligation of any responsible adult Muslim (Ahmadi, 2006 p. 43). Since the Revolution, they have used *ijtihad* to challenge the Islamic Republic’s domination of interpretation and to begin to interpret primary texts on their own. Historically, the clerics were deferred to on all matters of religious interpretation in the Shi’i culture, despite the teaching of *ijtihad*. Thus it was a new assertion that ordinary people, and especially women, could interpret the texts on their own and debate them in public forum. Negotiating feminists, consequently, became leaders of a new post-fundamentalist trend that challenged who may interpret the Quran and how it may be interpreted.

Much of the strength behind their arguments can be attributed to a prominent thinker of the twentieth century, Abdolkarim Sorosh. Sorosh argued that all history is contingent. Therefore, even religious texts cannot be wholly objective or absolute because they were written in a certain time period with specific characteristics that may be different in later time periods (Moghadam, 2002). Sorosh left a new impression in Iran that religious texts should be considered in light of their historical context and subsequently reinterpreted to fit the current circumstances and needs of the day.
Implicitly, he also suggested that the state is not the sole authority of religious interpretation and that there should be separation of mosque and state.

Although Soroush was not a self-proclaimed feminist, he did say that the issue of women’s rights in Islam is not a matter of dogma but subject to change. Thus, the negotiating feminists quickly adopted Soroush’s new flexible and inclusive philosophy of interpretation. They employed teachings already within the existing religious texts, like ijtihad and fegha poya, to legitimize their own egalitarian and woman-friendly interpretations (Ahmadi, 2006). In one example of this, Azam Taleghani ran for the presidency of Iran, challenging sharia article 115 of the constitution and the Islamic Guardian Council’s interpretation of rajol. In the traditional Arabic interpretation, rajol signifies ‘man’; however, Taleghani contended that in Persian the term can be understood as ‘mankind’ and therefore not exclude women. Although Taleghani was officially disqualified, she won a symbolic victory. She summed up the event: “I was told I wasn’t a religious and political personality and that was why I could not run for President. But it was a victory. I was not disqualified because I was a woman. That proves that a woman can run for President” (Sciolino, 2000, p. 113).

Another watershed example of negotiating feminists opening the dialogue occurred when female sociologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini was granted entry into the homes of clerics all across Iran, even in the most traditional city of Qom, to discuss women’s issues and Islam. It would have been unthinkable in a previous era for a woman to question religious leaders on matters of faith and especially the status of women in Islam. By claiming the right to interpret and directly question clerics, negotiating feminists challenged one of the foundational concepts of the Islamic Republic, velayat-e faghih, which stipulates deference to the rule of the supreme jurisprudent. Practically speaking, they forced clerics to answer to their people (Hosseini, 1999). As feminist journalist Faezeh Hashemi aptly stated,

> These issues were traditionally discussed and debated by the clergy. We have broken this tradition and have dared to challenge them by arguing about whose interpretation are they? If they are against women’s interests in the family and society they have to be changed...We discuss many real problems raised by ordinary people at the level of society and we argue that Islamic laws are dynamic and changeable. This way we make ordinary people aware of these problems and we demand from the specialists and the clergy to resolve these issues as social problems. (Rostami, 2001, p. 58)

**A Unified Front**

Raising awareness of women’s issues in Iran has had other spillover effects. Negotiating feminists have built a popular base, fostered unity, and provided the impetus for a universal human rights and reform movement.
Despite their historical mistrust of each other, conservative Islamic and liberal secular feminists have put aside their differences in order to lead the effort to unite Iran in reform. For example, by publishing important secular negotiating feminists like Mehringaz Kar, Shahla Sherkat fostered cooperation between the two extreme camps of feminists. She emphasized the importance of unity, stating, “Women’s rights issues in Iran are so complicated that we must start from somewhere that we could agree with each other and work through until we arrive at areas of disagreement” (Rostami, 2001, p. 62). In Iran, feminism used to be taboo and represent the divide between East and West, between culture and “Westoxification” (Ahmadi, 2006). However, over the last thirty years, negotiating feminists have made inroads opening up the public dialogue around this forbidden topic and have focused on issues that both pious women and secular elites can agree need to be changed.

By breaking taboos and challenging authority, negotiating feminists have built a reform movement and inspired other reform-minded groups such as gay rights groups. The advocacy of women’s groups was largely responsible for the surprising election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami (Rostami, 2001). Negotiating feminists have even shaped the official political debates over the last twenty years. Whereas parliamentary debates in the 1980’s primarily focused on social control, the debates of the 1990’s and 2000’s have taken a decisive turn in the direction of reform. In light of the events after the 2009 summer elections, the pioneering efforts of negotiating feminists in building the foundations of the reform movement are especially significant.

**Legal Successes**

Negotiating feminists have succeeded in changing legislation regulating divorce, polygamy and temporary marriage as well as birth control, personal status law, and family code laws (Moghadam, 2002). For example, in a 1986 law, the court decreed that a wife should receive the equivalent of half of her husband’s property in a divorce, provided that she had done her wifely duties and there were no charges of immorality proven against her. No such law existed previously in the Islamic Republic. In the 1990’s, negotiating feminists won further victories over the institutions of *mahr* (‘bride price’) and *nafaghe* (‘maintenance’). The new laws stipulated that if men wished to divorce, they would be required to pay dowries as well as maintenance or compensation fees for their spouses’ work as wives and mothers. The amount mandated was indexed for inflation and living standards. Negotiating feminists won on other fronts. For example, prenuptial agreements have been legal since 1991 and a 1987 law established a Cultural and Social Council on Women’s Affairs that was to ensure women’s welfare by expanding their understanding of their rights and increasing their protection under law (Moghadam, 2002 p. 1140). Lastly, the legal age of marriage was raised to 14 for girls and 17 for boys unless special permission was given by the courts. The Islamic Republic created
these new laws due to persistent pressure from negotiating feminists and the indisputability of their argument that Islam upholds the family and, therefore, the state should too.

Concluding and Looking Ahead

Negotiating feminists have been influential in sustaining hope in a country where sometimes hope is lost. Some have been imprisoned and others have had their lives threatened. Some have been advocates since the Revolution and have only seen marginal change. Their sentiment was summed up by one feminist and local councilwoman, Marzieh Mortazi, who said, “I believe that the foundation of Islam is not anti-woman. The male interpretations...are anti-women... I am not pessimistic, our society will change but through a long and hard process” (Rostami, 2001).

Certainly, this analysis shows that Islamic feminism does exist, its proponents fight for women’s rights by negotiating with the regime in Iran, and their efforts continue to benefit the cause of women there. Although both negotiating Islamic feminists and uncompromising feminists are vital in the struggle, negotiating feminists including Islamic feminists have achieved and will achieve the greatest gains towards women’s equality in Iran, at least as long as the government maintains its current structure. They have laid the groundwork, introduced and legitimized the debate, and built the momentum for change. The task that remains for these negotiating feminists is to increase unity amongst all Iranians in the fight for equality, freedom, and democracy.

For, ultimately, change must come from within. Negotiating feminists are fighting and providing the best defense for women’s rights against the tyranny of the Islamic Republic today, and as the cries of reform rise once again in Iran, these persistent and experienced women will be called upon to lead the fight.

References


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**Want to learn more about issues related to Islamic Feminism on campus?**

www.bc.edu/schools/cas/ics/about-ics.html

The Islamic Civilization and Societies Program offers a variety of programming and courses related to women’s lives and equality in Muslim states.

**How can I get involved with or learn more about the movement for Muslim women’s rights?**

www.irangenderequality.com

Visit this website to help support Iranian women’s struggle for equality by signing a statement of support and learning how to organize on this issue.

www.wisemuslimwomen.org

The Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) empowers Muslim women to reclaim their legacy and rights and participate equally in their communities. Their website provides a directory of activist women’s organizations, educational resources, etc.
Universities and colleges host support groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning students nation-wide. Religiously affiliated institutions from traditions that teach against homosexuality do not escape this trend. In spite of and sometimes because of the repercussions from morality teachings against homosexual activity, some Catholic colleges provide support services especially for their GLBTQ students often in the form of peer social groups (AACRAO Survey Results, 2005). There is a dearth of literature about the intersection of women’s sexuality and the role of the support group at the college level, especially at Catholic institutions. At one particular New England Catholic university, the culture of the college inspired a handful of students to establish a lesbian, bisexual and questioning (LBQ) group specifically for the young women on campus. This paper will formulate a theoretical basis for the LBQ group and discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of the peer support drop-in model. It will outline the therapeutic value of this group based on the culture of this particular university, and the themes that developed during the course of an academic year as they pertain to the theory and practice.

**Theoretical Framework and Cultural Context**

LBQ is an open drop-in group that meets weekly in the campus women’s center. It was designed as a support group for the young women at the university who identify as lesbian...
or bisexual, or are questioning their sexuality. Ten women attended regularly over the last year, and about fifteen others attended only once, out of a total undergraduate population of approximately 10,000. The core members of the group self-selected over time. Those members evolved into a few young women who were no longer questioning their sexuality, but were in the middle and late stages of integrating their sexuality into the whole of their identities. Many of them emerged at the end of the year as leaders in the student government for GLBTQ advocacy that in turn serves over a hundred other students through hosting campus-wide events and advancing policy that expands their visibility on campus.

The group is traditionally led by two female graduate student co-facilitators recruited out of the Counseling and Social Work schools. The co-facilitators have two orientation meetings: one with the director of the women’s center to be familiarized with the history and purpose of the group, and another with the psychotherapist assigned to the group from the university counseling services, who explains potential mental health concerns and situations or signals that necessitate referral, and also supports the facilitators when any other concerns arise. The LBQ is formally hosted by and embedded in a pre-existing program at the university. Preferably the leaders are lesbian, bisexual, or questioning their own sexuality so that they can contribute personal experience to group conversations that helps maintain the cohesion of the group. This paper draws from my experiences as the co-facilitator of LBQ. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Three theoretical frameworks will come into discussion when examining LBQ: developmental theory, feminist groupwork theory, and coming out theory. When speaking of this group, the primary theoretical framework is developmental because the developmental tasks at this age, accompanied by specific difficulties posed by the coming out process, determine why groupwork is beneficial and how it is utilized. Feminist groupwork reflects the value structure used by LBQ and the support needs of young women in the context of a Catholic college.

**Developmental Theory**

The primary developmental tasks at the college level are a blend of both early and late adolescence: identity formation, peer relations, and intimacy (Erikson, 1980). College students who are in a new environment without their parents have more freedom to explore different aspects of who they are. This time period often involves and/or is characterized by integrating their sexual selves into their identity. Although most young people develop their sexual selves throughout late adolescence and may face difficulty, this process is even more tenuous for students who have a sense that they are not heterosexual like the majority of their peers.

Homophobia is prevalent throughout American culture and is doubly so in a Catholic institution (Love, 1998; Jurgens, Schwitzer, & Middleton, 2004). Although many students at this institution do not identify as Catholic
or strictly practice Catholicism, there is limited acceptance of expression of gender or sexuality outside of heterosexual standards in the university’s social space. Christian values invoke and rely on the heterosexual norm of getting married and having children. In addition to being supported by the hierarchy and institutional structure of the Catholic Church itself, the school raises a lot of funds from conservative Catholic families who hold these conservative values, and the school therefore cannot directly validate homosexuality without threatening its financial support. The children of donor families often attend this college, so more students come from backgrounds with traditional Christian family value systems. Therefore, questioning one’s sexuality means putting oneself at risk of being socially ostracized. Yet, to not be true to oneself at this developmental stage is hypocritical and equally difficult to face. The tasks of forming a positive self-identity and being socially accepted are directly at odds for the student questioning homosexuality and can create an enormous amount of stress and anxiety if left unresolved (Potoczniak, Aldea, & DeBlarere, 2007). A new question emerges for the student in this environment as she wonders how she can be true to herself and be accepted by her peers.

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**Feminist Theory**

Rather than assuming there is something flawed in how young women develop a sense of self through their internal socio-emotional configuration, feminist groupwork theory asks if there is something amiss with how they are perceived through institutional value systems. Feminism considers the power dynamic within marginalization and builds strength through women supporting each other from a mutual experience of repression (Mizrahi, 2007). At this university in particular, the administration has denied the queer community funding, endorsement, and visibility. (The definition of queer in this usage is an affirmative reclamation of a once derogatory term, now inclusive of anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning their sexuality.) The absence of GLBTQ activities and support networks throughout years past has been a conspicuous deficit for the queer identified students on campus who are in the crux of forming positive self-perceptions in a moral environment that does not approve of homosexuality. The repression that GLBTQ students endure comes in the form of both covert absence of support and overt homophobia. Sandra Butler and Claire Wintraman outline the many ways in which feminist
groupwork can meet the needs of women facing repression:

For women, the group is (1) a source of immediate support, where the knowledge that the meeting will take place at all provides them with a sense of security; (2) a place to recognize shared experiences and the value derived from them; (3) a way of breaking down isolation and loneliness; (4) the source of a different perspective on personal problems; (5) a place to experience power over personal situations with the capacity to change and have an effect on them; and (6) a source of friendship. (1991)

The primary goal of feminist groupwork then is to support individuals through the processes of changing their interpretations of events as they relate to the building of their identity, and changing their environments where possible. In this particular cultural context any theoretical model that originates from a system of correcting pathology reinforces a notion that the young women are somehow “wrong” and need therapy in order to be “fixed.” Although queer youth can benefit from psychotherapeutic models and feminist group work can facilitate deeper understanding of the self through psychotherapy, it is important that the feminist group work is interpreted here as a secure support system in which they are held in high regard so that students have the opportunity to independently develop strong and integral identities.

Feminist theory also frames the role of the co-facilitators. The advantage of the feminist model is that every woman is considered an expert of her own experience. The group could function outside of the conventional hierarchy based on age and education, so that the co-facilitators were acknowledged as learners while also possessing their own expertise. Each young woman was the authority in her own story, which fostered a sense of ownership of the group by the young woman as well as cultivated self-esteem in each young woman’s identity as they explained their story to the group.

**Coming-out Theory**

Queer youth have the highest suicide rate of any adolescent group (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). One valuable protective factor against suicide is the development of a strong identity within a sympathetic community (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). The support group model is appropriate for queer adolescents looking to normalize their sense of self because it provides a common ground for sharing personal experience through the shared

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process of coming out. The largest obstacles in the coming out process are isolation, finding a peer group, normalizing social and individual ‘gay’ behavior, dating, individuating from the beliefs of their families of origin and reconciling expectations from their culture of origin (Savin-Williams, 1995). All of these obstructions can be reconciled through meeting simple social needs in a homogeneous setting.

Maintaining a group on campus that meets once a week, in which the only parameter is the willingness of each participant to talk about sexual identity and marginalization, lends the subject credence just by virtue of its existence. Consistent face-to-face contact with invested participants establishes community and group belonging, based on the homogenous experience of gender and the examination of sexual orientation. Bonding over these two interlocking facets of identity creates a microcosm of what it is like to be comfortably queer, in part by handing down templates of viable social interactions and representations of the queer self from the person who has mastered a sense of self to the new participants seeking a model of how to be queer. As social norms developed in the LBQ group on campus, friendships arose naturally, and then the young women extended their social interactions outside of LBQ to incorporate other queer students on campus, as well as extending themselves to form better friendships with students outside of that community.

**Drop-in Model**

The open accessibility of the drop-in model conveys the message that new participants are always welcome, which is necessary because there is a fundamental understanding that the purpose of the group is to be a friendly place on campus for women to navigate the coming out process. Because queer students have a sense that they are denied access to so many other areas of “normal” adolescent socialization, creating an exclusive environment would somehow be hypocritical and potentially harmful. Realistically the group could not be a mandatory weekly meeting because academics are an obligation for the majority of students at this university. This particular university has a culture of high expectations for academic achievement, so if schoolwork demands extra time it must be attended to.

The drop-in feature of this group model is utilitarian, but posed some barriers to the consistency and cohesion of the group. The coming out process is inherently emotional as a person relinquishes the privileges of heterosexuality. Since the group remained permeable, confidentiality was not guaranteed, and because the group had inconsistent attendance, building the trust necessary to meet deeper emotional challenges did not happen. Trust grew throughout the academic year, but did not secure enough to allow for difficult internal experiences to surface. The drop-in model helped young women on campus feel comfortable about attending meetings, but was not contained enough to facilitate deeper investigations or sharing of the more difficult emotions about coming out.
Themes and Therapeutic Factors

The therapeutic factors at play in LBQ are similar to the therapeutic factors Yalom (1985) outlines for psychotherapy, but need to be redefined some in order to fit the goals of a support group (Peters, 1997). For example, corrective emotional experiences may have happened for the young women in the group, mostly because they were able to relate to each other’s stories while spending time together. Throughout the year, we reassessed the goals developed by the group. The students were consistently content with the social and unstructured format. The co-facilitators would have a topic prepared if the group wanted one, but more often than not, the conversation centered on an issue one of the students brought up. An intentional therapeutic approach was not employed. The students were not taught how to examine their inner experience or comment on process as is common with intentionally therapeutic groups, but they did benefit from being able to relate to and share stories with a group of women who shared similar concerns.

Three themes developed over the course of the year: whether or not to “pass” as heterosexual, whether or not to come out as a lesbian or bisexual, and what it means to have any of these identities. The ability to pass has both benefits and drawbacks. In a culture that shames homosexuality, passing means being able to function in circles one may otherwise be rejected from. Straight students hesitate to socialize with women who may look like lesbians lest their own sexuality be questioned. In order to avoid other people’s discomfort or possible rejection, passing serves a purpose. However, if a young woman passes all the time, how do her lesbian peers recognize her? How does she find someone she can relate to or someone to date?

Coming out requires similar decision-making. Coming out surfaced as a topic often because it never happened just once for each member. Stories were exchanged of coming out first to close friends, then to roommates, later to parents, and finally to professors, classmates and teammates. Simply walking into LBQ was a form of coming out. Coming out reaffirmed each young woman’s identity but also came with the burden of being considered a representative for all gay people in a community where bias and misinformation is extensive because exposure to and knowledge of queer culture is intentionally minimal or fragmented. Some of the group members weighed the costs and benefits, chose to pass, and came out only to the group and a few close friends in order to satisfy the need to be recognized as both a friend and possible girlfriend.

Regardless of the degree to which each woman chose to pass or come out, installation of hope and universality developed immediately upon contact with the group. The hope each woman was searching for was that she could be accepted for her sexual identity. The homogeneous LBQ group, coupled with a few stories from some of the more “out” students of what it was like to be lesbian or bisexual on campus, showed the universality of their
concerns and instilled the hope that they could remain intact individuals while navigating the dilemma of remaining true to themselves while seeking social acceptance and intimacy. Catharsis occurred as they witnessed each other struggle with the same questions. Cohesion formed as they shared in their dilemma, which in turn began to dissolve the fear of not belonging.

In the middle stage of the group, their identities, now held in a place of growing acceptance and security, could be tried on in different ways. How would the women choose to separate themselves from the status quo? Some of the young women found strength in recognizing they had the choice and the skill to determine how much they would pass in any given setting. They imparted information, sometimes in the form of direct advice, about how to fit into a particular situation while simultaneously defending the idea that they did not have to be like every other girl on campus whom they described as all having long hair, tight jeans, and North Face jackets. By passing, they could go to “normal” parties, but then decided that the parties were disappointing. As one girl described it, “all [the straight students] do is get drunk and try to hit one each other; at least when we hang out, we all dance together and are just there to have fun.” Discussions in LBQ that delineated “us vs. them” became the collective development of new socialization techniques. The young women began to define how they wanted to relate with each other.

Other women in the group, particularly those that were younger, did not speak much during these conversations. This was a conscious decision for one first-year student who said she preferred to be quiet because she had a lot to learn from the upperclassmen on campus. However, after a group conversation about how to identify a lesbian by how many tattoos or piercings she has, the first-year student proudly showed off her tattoo and told the group the story of its meaning. Being able to observe and learn behaviors that echoed the value system of the group made her more comfortable in her role in the group.

Altruism developed as a final therapeutic factor as opposed to one that was integrated into ongoing conversations. Being there for and supporting the other women in the group was a given for all participants: each student came to satisfy her own needs but also understood how important it was to show up for her peers. Sharing stories, opinions and advice are part of the feminist groupwork model. At a basic level,
doing good for others congers feelings of positive self worth. However, these young women were relatively high functioning and self-confident. So, relative to the high-functionality of the women in the group, the most demanding form of altruism they could invest in was to recognize the personal as political. By outing themselves to the whole school, they could help the nameless others too scared to do so. They became willing to let go of any kind of passing status in order to instill hope in people, some they had never met, by showing that being gay and living a full life is possible. At the end of the year, a small and discrete gathering was held in order to toast the graduating GLBTQ student leaders. One professor succinctly stated that to go to this school and be out on this campus, when there were so many easier places to be gay, was truly an act of courage and a gift to the entire community.

The process of defining one’s sexuality never really ends. It is a broad conversation rarely contained in, or adequately expressed by, binary terms such as gay or straight. It affects gender, identity, and a sense of well being and belonging. Research in the field of higher education is giving more attention to the developmental needs of college students and thus more is being demanded of universities, especially when considering the needs of its minority student population. Particularly at risk are queer students in Catholic universities. Although the culture of a school can be difficult to change, simple supportive mechanisms can be put into place to help queer students acclimate to college life thereby developing healthy identities and paving the way to a successful college career. More research can be done about the benefits of peer support groups on college campuses. In this particular example, a grassroots peer support group hosted by the college women’s center and led by graduate students has become a gathering spot for young women interested in dialoging about sexual identity. The LBQ group provides some insight into how a queer support group for women can operate.

References
Where can LBQ women find support at Boston College?

www.bc.edu/wrc
The Lesbian, Bisexual, Questioning Group (LBQ) is hosted by the WRC and supports women on campus by fostering a better understanding of sexuality and women’s issues through weekly meetings. Also hosted by the WRC, Queer Peers is a student-led group that serves as a safe space and support resource for GLBTQ and allied students (office hours three days a week).

www.bc.edu/offices/odsd/meta-elements/pdf/GLTBQ-booklet-edited.pdf
The Office of the Dean for Student Development publishes this extensive resource guide for GLBTQ students, including student groups, individuals in a wide range of offices, and off-campus resources.

How can I help fight for the equality of GLBTQ people?

www.bcglbt.org/Home.htm
Join the GLBTQ Leadership Council (GLC), a student group that works to increase the visibility and better the quality of life of the GLBTQ community at Boston College.

Where else can I find information and support for LGBTQ youth?

www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource
YouthResource, hosted by Advocates for Youth, is a website written by and for GLBTQ youth to provide information and support through online peer education and other resources.
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