



Advancing Gender Equity and Inclusion in Thai Universities: Empowering Student Voices and Strengthening Support Systems for Sustainable Development

Population and Society 2025

Real – World Impacts of Population and Social Research

Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University

Advancing Gender Equity and Inclusion in Thai Universities: Empowering Student Voices and Strengthening Support Systems for Sustainable Development

Timethius J. Terrell¹, Truc Ngoc Hoang Dang¹
and Krista L. Cortes²

“ Policy highlights

Thai universities continue to face challenges in promoting inclusion and supporting marginalized students, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+. To advance gender inclusion, robust institutional mechanisms are essential. These should ensure equal opportunities, protect rights, and foster the active participation of LGBTQ+ students in both university life and broader society. Additionally, such mechanisms must address barriers to inclusion, encourage open dialogue, involve LGBTQ+ individuals in all university activities, and provide educational tools that promote a culture of inclusivity.

Keywords: Sexual and gender minorities, sexual harassment, community-based participatory research, sexual assault

Key findings

There is an inadequate access among Thai university students to mental health services and a near-total absence of institutional sexual health education.

Although many LGBTQ+ students initially describe their university experiences as positive or open, normalized exclusion and selective self-expression were shaped by fear of biases or harm.

LGBTQ+ students experience microaggressions (e.g. misgendering, inappropriate jokes) at university, but due to cultural norms such as *kreng jai*, they downplay or excuse discrimination experiences to avoid disrupting social harmony.

44% of local stakeholders were aware that they are uneducated on sexual consent but still strongly support community-based sexual violence prevention programs.

Thai universities uphold heteronormativity by failing to equitably include diverse identities and experiences in curricula and general discourse, while public messages and identity-themed campaigns are often used to symbolize inclusion without directly addressing ongoing harms or lack of institutionalized support.

¹ Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University

² Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania



Call for actions

Thai policy makers and other stakeholders should actively prioritize the following immediate steps:

- ✓ Create formal mechanisms for the impacted students to participate and co-create university policy, safety protocols, and program evaluation processes.
- ✓ Implement innovative, intersectional student support strategies by funding peer mentorship, diversity workshops for faculty, and formal partnerships with community-based organizations who can already provide inclusive sexual health education.
- ✓ Require regular review of course materials, lecture content, and campus messaging to eliminate bias, improve representation, and dismantle the heteronormative standards embedded in university discourse.



Executive summary

Although higher learning spaces are designed to model behavior and social norms before students re-enter the broader civilian world, Thai universities still have many gaps in inclusion and support for marginalized students, including those who carry LGBTQ+ identities. Additionally, Thai universities lack institutionalized prevention and education programs focused on sexual/relationship violence, limiting the modeling of consent as a vital social norm. This policy brief proposes evidence-based strategies to advance their commitment to SDGs 5 and 16 by confronting

cultural and institutional barriers to student gender equity and inclusion at Thai universities. Recommendations include (a) prioritizing student voices in important decision-making for gender equality, (b) adopting more diverse, intersectional approaches to student support to foster more inclusive societies, (c) allocating more funding towards support resources, and (d) dismantling practices that uphold Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions (THIs).

Introduction

Thailand is hailed as a haven for queer people in Asia

due in large part to its dominant culture of tolerance or *kreng jai*-เกรงใจ, which enforces interpersonal consideration even to the point of avoiding exchanges that could cause discomfort or demonstrate disagreement [1].

This behavior translates to many areas of individual difference, with broader Thai society largely leaning more towards tolerance than explicit discrimination. Although there has been more representation of LGBTQ+ people and their experiences in Thai media [2], this visibility has often reinforced stereotypical representations of queer people (funny, flamboyant, etc.) which pressures many to perform specific, predetermined gendered norms and behaviors to be seen as tolerable by those around them [3, 4]. Within the Thai university environment, there is often an avoidance of discussions regarding non-heteronormative

identities in the classroom [5] and very few universities offer any events or resources for LGBTQ+ students [6]. This absence of university programs impacts other realms of gender and sexuality as well, including cases of sexual/relationship violence, leading students to feel abandoned and avoid formal reporting [7], creating the false perception that few issues exist.

This policy brief outlines current gaps that, if filled by confronting cultural and institutional barriers that have negative impacts on the experiences of LGBTQ+ and gender-minoritized students, can be used to form evidence-based strategies that advance SDGs 5 and 16 at Thai universities. Evidence consists of qualitative interviews, surveys, and textual analyses—using both primary and secondary data to apply Preston and Hoffman's [8] framework to examine how stories told within a university and the language used in student narratives reflect and perpetuate heteronormativity.

Approach and results

We interviewed seven LGBTQ+ Thai students to learn about their social experiences and access to necessary resources, and we coded their responses using narrative analysis. We also coded 26 Thai and English news, opinion, academic, and university texts using critical discourse analysis then combined both findings to examine how institutional narratives reinforce gendered power in universities.

1.

Students desire more accessible resources for mental and sexual health



Across interviews, students felt unaware of mental health resources and desired greater awareness/advertisement. Additionally, they noted a general lack of necessary sexual health resources and education provided at the university level. These resource gaps echo those students faced before university.

2.

Students are taught to prioritize social harmony above their wellness needs



LGBTQ+ students initially reported having a positive experience at university. However, they also described (a) misgendering and mislabeling by some staff and fellow students, (b) inappropriate jokes made based on stereotypes regarding their identities, and (c) their decision to limit their “coming out” and self-expression to social circles and designated spaces where they are less likely to experience blatant, malevolent discrimination. In one interview, a student who identifies as a lesbian woman shared their experience with assumptions coming directly from university staff/faculty:

Student E



“ Sometimes interaction and conversation with older people, staffs or whatever, if we talk about love life teasingly, they would assume it’s a guy. Because older people could be old fashioned. ”

One student initially denied discrimination but later described a clearly discriminatory encounter:

Student B

“ I wouldn’t say it’s discrimination but more like something that’s slipped... To me, it’s more like they don’t hate, they just genuinely think that, and I don’t hate them for that... There was one time a friend asks me. He said that I’ll ‘probably have a boyfriend in the future,’ and I said ‘probably a girlfriend as well’. And he said ‘you’re probably going to have a boyfriend. And I asked ‘why?’ He said ‘because girls like penis more’. I was like hah, I can see that your worldview is annoying... But, most of the time, people don’t say things like that... This is just a little thing that I feel like they don’t really notice, and it makes me annoyed... But, the fact that people are allowed to have different ideologies, but it kind of make me pause a bit... And like, you’re allowed, entitled to your opinion, but I won’t interact with that. ”

These interactions reinforce the idea that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, passively othering students through conversation. For other interviewed students, it is only through careful, selective disclosure patterns that they feel safe and welcome to fully express themselves. Their normalized approach to social life suggests that they operate within an environment that might feel unsafe for many LGBTQ+ students. And yet, multiple students still dismiss or excuse troubling experiences in order to avoid social confrontation. Thai students appear hesitant to speak up about certain challenges due to

the cultural norm of tolerance—the very same social mechanism that earned Thailand its reputation as a regional paradise for queer people. Past studies show that tolerance fosters superficial acceptance rather than genuine inclusivity [9]. Students' strict adherence to tolerance and conditioned discouragement from disturbing social harmony may allow certain inclusion gaps to persist untested.

3.

The broader community actively desires sexual violence prevention programs

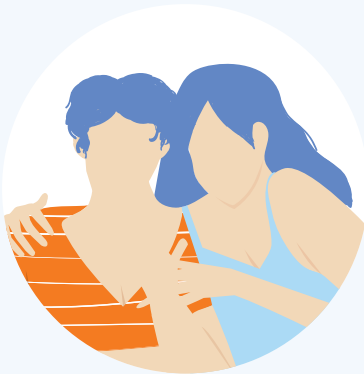


In 2023, researchers surveyed 2,420 school administrators, parents, and local leaders, and conducted focus groups with civil servants. They found that 44% lacked sufficient knowledge about consent but expressed strong support for institutionalized sexual violence prevention tools built on collaboration and education. Additionally, the researchers noted that such tools require collaboration at familial, local, and institutional levels, prioritizing individual empowerment and education [10]. Their work provides a comprehensive outline of prevailing gaps in sexual violence prevention and the necessary ingredients to fill them.



4.

Current institutional cultures and discourse limit necessary social change



Our research demonstrates that institutional language and the stories told within Thai society still perpetuate heteronormativity, gendered norms, and performative acceptance, which characterizes these universities as Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions (THIs)—systems that uphold heterogendered discourse even while claiming a commitment to inclusivity. Echoing prior research, students' descriptions of their university avoiding directly addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ+ community members, in addition to the exclusion of LGBTQ+ identities in general academic conversations, align with the definition of a THI. Regardless of whether a university publicizes campaigns or hosts pride-themed events, THIs inevitably and adversely impact LGBTQ+ student social experiences by concealing these experiences and restricting direct criticism of cultural and institutional barriers.

A similar phenomenon rings true in cases of sexual and relationship violence. Existing cases are often left unreported due to social barriers, and there is still widespread language misuse and misinformation about the cause of sexual/relationship

violence, even among younger generations. Outspoken tolerance remains hollow unless institutional discourse reflects students' lived experiences and work to counteract the psychological barriers that stem from imposed cultural norms, such as *kreng jai*. As more universities continue adopting new policies and hosting events, their efforts are performative if not accompanied by an active cultural shift.

Policy recommendations

1



Prioritize the voices of impacted students in important decision-making for gender equality

- ✓ Every solution designed to fill in gaps of student education, safety, and support should place the experiences and opinions of the students who are most impacted by the gaps at the forefront.
- ✓ Incorporate institutional evaluation methods that encourage and include the specific perspectives of minoritized students so that their voices are always considered, rather than being assimilated alongside the rest of the student body, which leads to them being overlooked.

2



Adopt more diverse, intersectional approaches to student support to foster more inclusive societies

- ✓ Pilot and implement more innovative models for student support and wellbeing in Thailand, such as participatory and peer-led education programs, lecturer diversity education, etc., to address ongoing accessibility, awareness, and inclusion gaps.
- ✓ Formally collaborate with nonprofit and community-based organizations to provide institutionalized sexual health education and access.

3



Re-allocate more funding towards support resources

- ✓ Invest more in staffing budget of existing mental wellness resources to increase their presence and accessibility on-campus.
- ✓ Boost volume of programs and tools that educate members of the university community on minoritized identity, social barriers, and sexual/romantic relationships.

4



Dismantle practices that perpetuate Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions (THIs)

- ✓ Consider the impact that linguistic norms have on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ and other minoritized students.
- ✓ Require lecture material/content and vocabulary to be critically reviewed and updated for inclusivity and accuracy on a more regular basis.

References

1. Nuruzzaman MA, Ridwan A, Safriani A. Piety and tolerance in Thai society: exploring multicultural coexistence at Phatnawitya School. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*. 2023;11(2):131-148.
2. Mendos LR, Botha K, Lelis RC, de Silva LC, Saveniuk P. State-sponsored homophobia 2020: global legislation overview update. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA); 2020.
3. UNDP, USAID. Being LGBT in Asia: Thailand country report. Bangkok: UNDP, USAID; 2014.
4. Phalapong P. Doing gender and the retaliation of confrontational interactions: a case study of gay community in Thailand. *Journal of Social Sciences Naresuan University*. 2022;18(2):363-392. doi:10.14456/jssnu.2022.20.
5. Chintaradeja P. "Coming out" of Thai students in the Discourse of Higher Education. *Journal of Green Learning*. 2021 Dec 16;1(2):34-40.
6. Khaikham L. The recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights as human rights in Thailand's six public universities. *Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies*. 2022;8(2):287-316.
7. Preston MJ, Hoffman GD. Traditionally heterogendered institutions: discourses surrounding LGBTQ college students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*. 2015 Jan 2;12(1):64-86.
8. Adelman L, Yogeeswaran K, Verkuyten M. The unintended consequences of tolerance: the experience and repercussions of being tolerated for minority group members. *PLoS One*. 2023 Mar 22;18(3):e0282073. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0282073.
9. Kanyajit P, et al. Building prevention tools for sexual violence in family, school and community of Thailand. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*. 2023;18(1):267-280.
10. Khaosod English. Thai colleges urged to do more about sexual violence [Internet]. Khaosod English; 2017 Sep 19 [cited 2025 May 2]. Available from: <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/crimecourtscalemity/crime-crime/2017/09/19/thai-colleges-urged-sexual-violence/>.

Ask for more information

Timethius J. Terrell Email: timet@sas.upenn.edu

Research funding: Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (CSERI) Research Fellowship