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# Invisible while visible: An Australian perspective on queer women leaders in international affairs

Elise Stephenson

## Key messages

- Queer women experience deep exclusion in diplomacy, often ‘invisible’ despite their highly visible roles.
- Even if not queer, women diplomats were often typified to be queer, emblematic of othering.
- Diplomatic privilege protects queer women, providing opportunities to work in contentious spaces.
- Women with wives may be best able to perform the ‘dual roles’ of diplomacy, but challenges remain.

## Introduction

*I don't think it's necessarily because of my gender or my sexuality or my ethnicity, but . . . I spent a lot of time worrying that I wasn't ambassadorial enough, I wasn't like some of the people I'd seen in [my agency] - particularly the men I have to say, because there's more of them to look at (Participant Two, 4 February 2019).*

Queer women in Australian international affairs highlight the silencing and invisibility that those at the intersection of gender and diverse sexuality endure, despite the high status and visible nature of their work. They face multiple marginalisations, (1) challenging the

archetypical diplomat or security leader as a heteronormative (white) male (Neumann 2008; Enloe 2014), whilst (2) operating in different cultural contexts with varying negative attitudes towards women in power and homosexuality in general (UNDP, ILO 2018). Their experiences reinforce what Marinucci (2010) finds as a deeply entwined oppression and suppression of gender and sexuality. Yet, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, and intersex (LGBTI or 'queer') women's experiences also reinforce the privilege and protection offered by international affairs, which perhaps more so than any other field offers opportunities for queer women to live and work in vastly varying international contexts. After interviewing Australian LGBTI women diplomats and attaches deployed internationally, this paper attempts to understand: what does sexuality add to our understandings of the gendered nature of international affairs?

On this topic, Australia is at a critical juncture, with women nearing parity in leadership across our premiere agency for international affairs. In recent years, Senator Penny Wong has represented Australia as not only the first Asian-born Australian, but also first queer woman, in a foreign affairs ministerial portfolio. Moreover, Australia sits on the cusp of the very first civil society submission to create a 'queer' foreign policy. This contemporary history across Australian international affairs makes the Australian case not only a timely but significant case from which to understand the gendered and queer nature of international affairs.

As a subject, 'queer' is both plural and contested in the literature, defined by (1) the desire to capture anti-normative and non-normative theories and perspectives, and by (2) sexes, genders and sexualities (Weber 2016). Both perspectives provide valuable insights to international relations (IR). Further, while most of the literature on diplomacy, gender and sexuality comes predominantly from European or United States (US) perspectives, contemporary studies from the field and from different perspectives are sought (Aggestam & Towns 2018). This paper therefore presents original and unique in-depth qualitative data from the Australian context,

adding both empirical and theoretical contributions to the fields of diplomacy, IR, feminism and queer theory. The paper addresses critical gaps, applying queer feminist theory to understand women's experiences, as well as ways of being and knowing in this space of diplomacy (Aggestam & Towns 2018; Peterson 1992). Using Weber's definition of queer as "sexes, genders, and sexualities rather than ... a broader understanding of queer as encompassing all things," this research focuses on how queer or LGBTI identity affects the distinct experiences of women who operate within Australian international affairs (Weber 2016, p. 12).

This paper will firstly canvas the literature and context, exploring gender and sexuality in international affairs. It will then discuss the research approach and cases, before exploring queer women's identities and experiences internationally. By applying a queer feminist approach and Altman and Symon's (2016) concept of conditional acceptance, this paper finds that as long as diplomacy bases its assumptions on the perspectives and actions of men, acceptance of queer *and heterosexual* women in international affairs remains deeply conditional. Further, the paper argues that analysis of *gender* in international affairs is incomplete without also analysing *sexuality*.

### **Literature review**

Cynthia Enloe (2014) argues that international diplomacy is a male world, guided by norms of masculinity, and occupied by men. Further, the archetypical diplomat remains heterosexual and the field heteronormative, with (paid) *male envoys* and (unpaid) *female trailing spouses* remaining central to diplomatic structure, responsibilities, and allowances (Aggestam & Towns 2018). Women occupy only 15 per cent of ambassador positions globally, with Towns & Niklasson (2017) finding female ambassadors less likely to occupy high-status ambassadorships than their male colleagues. Queer women represent a minority within an

already marginalised group in international affairs, with employment opportunities generally unevenly distributed across classes, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability and ethnicity (Acker 2012). As Spike Peterson argues, the state exercises power not only through its claim to legitimate violence, but also through state activities, routines and rituals that constitute and regulate “acceptable forms and images of social activity and individual and collective identity” (Peterson 1992, p. 45).

If the history of diplomacy is in any way able to account for these “acceptable forms” of identity, then in the Australian context, acceptable forms of identity take on a distinctly heterosexual, masculine and Anglo-Saxon appearance, suggesting that queer women diplomats and envoys would experience challenges in gaining and maintaining their representational roles. They are likely to experience further difficulties, as Altman and Symons’ (2016) argue, there is an inherent precariousness of LGBTI identities, whereby acceptance of identity remains conditional, and identities remain marked by ‘not normal’, if not outright ‘abnormality’, suggesting significant barriers for queer women in any form of employment, let alone highly fluctuating international representation. The concept of conditional acceptance forms a core part of this paper and delineates strict rules of queer women’s inclusion or exclusion that adds to our understanding of gender and sexuality in international affairs.

The constitution of gender and sexuality categories may vary according to shifting dynamics and varying contexts, which makes the subject of diplomacy particularly complex. However, the subordination of certain genders and sexualities is well documented – with femininities subordinate to masculinities (Cassidy & Althari 2017) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2009) both legitimising men’s dominant position in the field and justifying the subordination of women and men along lines gender, as well as ethnicity, sexuality, ability and class. ‘Queerness’ adds complexity to this understanding. Queer women are often perceived as

‘butch’ or ‘masculine’ women, not quite fitting in the same gender category as heterosexual women and often facing distinct and often ‘additive’ effects of their intersectionality.

Historically, LGBTI individuals have been viewed with caution and suspicion, as security risks typically excluded from sensitive diplomatic positions (Chua 2016). Queer identity placed individuals especially at risk of being blackmailed and their loyalties in diplomacy and security were questioned, perceived as being part of a transnational cosmopolitan community (Chauncey 2005; Crawford 2010). For Australia’s first openly gay diplomat, Stephen Brady, and noted gay senior diplomat John Dauth, queer identity had marked impacts, affecting individuals’ abilities to take the posts they wanted, in some cases requiring them to take ‘lesser’ posts acts of ‘career suicide’. Yet most LGBTI histories focus almost exclusively on gay men, with the issue of queer women only raised in the context of equality: in the UK, if gay men were barred from international appointments, should queer women also be barred?

Increasingly, international and transnational actors have argued that LGBTI rights are human rights (Britt 2015). Globally, the past two decades have witnessed greater acceptance for human rights as a normative moral international framework. Yet global studies indicate that workplaces are one of the most significant contexts where discrimination, homophobia and harassment is felt; suggesting that queer working women may face specific challenges (UNDP, ILO 2018). Across the world, 70 countries still criminalise homosexuality, 44 of which equally apply to women, and in many instances, homophobia is not just accepted, but state sanctioned (ILGA 2019).

In the past, duties of maintaining state security, sovereignty and national interest were largely considered from gender-blind perspectives (Thomson 2017). They were largely blind of intersectionality too (Crenshaw 1989) – the influence of not just gender, but ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on, in an intersecting way on individuals’ experiences. Despite

this, the duties of “articulat[ing] the meaning within which others from around the world work and live” fall to individual leaders – those who are inherently gendered, racialized, and reflective of myriad sexual orientations (Adler 1997, p. 176). Identity therefore is not something neutral or separate to how we conduct interstate relations, it is inextricably entwined with states’ presence within the region and world – the personal is political, and not only gender, but sexuality, matters to IR (Smith & Lee 2014).

This paper therefore addresses significant gaps. As Cynthia Weber (1999) and Laura Sjoberg argue, “*sexuality* as much as gender shapes state identities and foreign policy” (2016, p. 82). Yet, there is “exceptionally little scholarship” on the histories of sexuality in diplomacy, particularly of lesbian, gay or bisexual diplomats (Aggestam & Towns 2018, p. 16). The field of political science and IR has also marginalised ‘queerness’, despite the fact that both remain centrally focused on power and the (re)production of power relations (Smith & Lee 2014). As Marinucci states, “the oppression of women and the suppression of lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender existence are deeply entwined” (2010, p. 106). Queer feminism then, “brings both a queer orientation to feminist theory, and a feminist orientation to queer theory” (2010, p. 105). The point at which queer, feminist and diplomatic theory meet therefore presents a rich site for analysis to understand what sexuality adds to our understanding on the gendered nature of international affairs, particularly given that diverse diplomacy is critical to the functioning and representation of states (Conley Tyler 2016). Crucially, queerness does not simply relate to bodies, but also to the practices and analysis of IR, bringing additional lenses of understanding to IR scholarship (Sjoberg 2016).

The paucity of research, as well as issues of invisibility and silencing, makes the narratives of queer women in international affairs hard to study. This paper therefore explores the experiences of a small number of LGBTI representatives from an Australian perspective who have self-identified as queer, in order to understand not just the gendered, but sexualised nature

of IR. This fits well within a queer and feminist theoretical approach, which aims to put traditionally marginalised voices front and centre (McNae & Vali 2015).

### **Research design**

This research forms part of a larger research project on the experiences of Australian women in international affairs. Initially, the research project had no unique focus on sexuality. Yet through conducting that research, narratives on sexuality were found to be gravely missing in Australian international affairs and in much of the literature globally. This paper is therefore a direct response to gaps in the literature and the unique findings discovered on LGBTI experiences in international affairs.

Gaining LGBTI participants was not initially a specific methodological choice in the wider research. Rather, an intersectional feminist approach was used to gain experiences of *diverse* women in diplomacy, an important methodological contribution and a common methodological choice for this field of research (see, Spark, Cox and Corbett 2018). The primary data analysed is taken from qualitative life-history interviews with four women participants who self-identified as queer or LGBTI (referred to as the ‘primary participants’) and whom formed a natural population of the wider selection of research participants. Given that the intersection of sexuality *and* gender forms the basis of this paper, this paper also draws from the wider dataset of a further 53 participants (referred to as ‘secondary participants’) who formed the basis of the original research and helped to triangulate the data – some of whom spoke of challenges across gender and sexuality in appointments, even if not identifying as queer themselves. Conley Tyler, Blizzard and Crane (2014) and Spark, Cox and Corbett (2018) provide precedence for this kind of deep-dive analysis. The sample of four primary participants provides important, insightful accounts from which to begin to understand this topic, unearthing rich and varied answers on the gendered and sexualised nature of international affairs.



Participant criteria required women who were: (1) employed in one of the four case agencies; (2) had deployed internationally; (3) were at executive level (EL) or senior executive service (SES) level; and (4) identified as a woman. The primary participants for this paper represented all (100 per cent) of those that disclosed being LGBTI or queer in the wider dataset. All participants were sought through published databases of staff in the agencies (where found), online publicly-accessible accounts of senior women, assistance from the agencies, and snowballing. If agencies volunteered to collate names of potential participants, additional senior women leaders were also sought to ensure participant anonymity. This also ensured a broader range of participants were sought than those identified by the agency, whom could be handpicked by the agency as good examples or cases.

Because of the small number of women identifying as queer and in Australian international affairs, and their various statuses of being publicly ‘out’, participants’ names, agencies, post locations, and rank are withheld (unless they were part of the wider cohort of researched participants, where their agency may be identified). The queer women interviewed are number “Participant One, Participant Two...” and so on in the paper, with all participants numbered “Five” and above part of the broader dataset – secondary participants.

Qualitative interviews were semi-structured and undertaken after gaining ethical approval from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Number: 2018/059) and Defence People Low Risk Ethics Panel (Number: 098/18). The four LGBTI participants were employed as envoys in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP), however as part of the wider dataset that helped to triangulate some of the findings, participants also included individuals from Defence and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). The research chose these four most salient agencies to Australian international affairs based on their strategic importance within diplomatic or security spheres. DFAT and Defence are ‘natural’ inclusions on this basis. However, DHA and the AFP (which is a portfolio

agency of DHA), are an important extra inclusion as they are contemporarily recognised as the “third force of security” in foreign affairs and are able to provide a deeper understanding of international engagement across agencies often left out of analysis (Pezzullo in Easton 2017, para 34).

All agencies are at a federal level of government and have high profiles publicly. Yet, the agencies also have clear differences in terms of levels of women in leadership, agency structure and culture, and policy development for supporting gender equality and LGBTI diversity. Agency structure also has specific implications for queer women leaders, with more militaristic agencies particularly steeped in gendered norms around heteronormative male physicality and enforcement (McGlen & Sarkees 1993). While unable to be expanded upon here, women in more ‘masculine’ roles tended to adopt various discursive and bodily identity practices compliant with dominant masculinities – signifying both resistance to and compliance with existing gender orders. This has ramifications to be explored further in another paper, given that military hierarchy is often associated with higher instances of sexual harassment resulting from power differentials.

All participants gave their full permission for their experiences to be recorded and transcribed, yet it is significant to note that in cases where the primary participants’ queer identity was not known prior to the interview, sexuality was often only brought up at the end of the interview. At this point, the interview usually continued for another half to full hour. All participants were between the ages of 30-60 and out of the queer participants, all had partners, with three out of four were married, and one had children. This differed from the wider participants, for whom only half were married or in a relationship, a considerable number remained single, and most had children. Individuals represented a range of ethnic, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds – in both the queer and wider dataset.

In designing the research methodology and questions, intersectionality actively informed the research, shaping the way and manner in which I asked questions: the way I introduced the research topic and myself mattered. I used this as an opportunity to share my own personal credibility, as well as the research context and the ‘safety’ of the interview space. Creating a ‘safe’ space was important, particularly as not just sexism, but racism and homophobia and other forms of discrimination and harassment may have factored into women’s stories. To establish the space as safe, I would often mention my own work in the fields of LGBTI, cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) or other inclusion, and would always use the language of ‘diverse’ women, and the diversity of their experience. Sometimes, additional to my gender, I would further disclose elements of my background to establish a safe environment. This contributed to a kind of ‘embodied intersectionality’ approach to research. My personal identity as a young queer woman researcher, who had been involved in international public diplomacy efforts with the associated agencies, and whose life had been affected by various aspects of disability, gender and sexuality, brought a very specific understanding and ability to connect and explore the research.

Across the four agencies studied, women’s roles internationally varied across portfolios, rank, duties, and type of work. Not all would be comfortable or feel represented by the word ‘diplomat’, yet by virtue of their international representation of Australian interests, values and government overseas, their roles are inherently ‘diplomatic’ and involve highly developed skills of diplomacy.

Individuals had been deployed in every region of the world, across a wide range of postings. Requirements within Defence and some DHA deployments meant that not all participants could choose their country of deployment, although in some circumstances, such as in the civilian side of Defence, women could register expressions of interest only for the countries they wanted. For those who could choose their country of deployment, gendered and sexuality-

based considerations were key considerations in determining whether they took up opportunities or not. For those with children, the choice was explicit. For others, factors like the type of lifestyle, level of domestic support (for instance, the ability to have domestic help), and spousal opportunities or safety weighed considerably into their choice. A small number of countries were recurrently brought up as ‘no-go’ countries, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, with others low on the list of desired postings including Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, and a number of other Middle Eastern countries in particular. As one participant notes,

We wouldn't deploy to somewhere where [homosexuality is] illegal because . . . I think it's critical to have your spouse at post . . . if you're going to be in a foreign country for three years, if you have a spouse, it's really important to have them offshore to have that support network because that's your home, that's your coming back to something - that's your peace point where no matter what sort of stuff happens to you during the course of the day, they're your normal you know? (Participant One, 26 June 2018).

Yet, even countries such as the US were warily regarded, particularly with the decision by the US State Department to stop issuing visas to the same-sex partners of foreign diplomats sent to the US or the United Nations in New York unless they are legally married. Overall, no particular locations were entirely ‘safe’ for queer women. Rather, safety was marked more by safety within participants’ own agencies, reinforcing findings that agencies (not host countries) matter most to women’s treatment overseas (Stephenson 2019).

### **Queer, woman, or diplomat?**

How individuals identify matters. Neumann’s work *The Body of the Diplomat* found that women represented two different femininities and hierarchies for understanding their roles: “as a diplomat that happens to be a woman” and “as a woman who happens to be a diplomat” (Neumann 2008, p. 687). Neumann asserts these characterisations are due to inherent tensions between the status of being a ‘woman’ and a ‘diplomat’, and that women felt they had to make a strategic choice to identify and privilege one status over another. For participants, although

‘queerness’ was inherent in their experiences, similar to Christo’s (2015) findings, their status as women generally preceded their sexuality. Gender and sexuality produced related, but also distinct experiences. While gender is often based off socially constructed differences – many of which are physically ‘obvious’ – sexuality is often invisible, and therefore the need and ability to identify as queer differed between participants and contexts.

Sexual identity was therefore an integral part of participants’ identity, but not always one they could promote or announce. For those who were openly out and were sought for specifically LGBTI- related initiatives or events within their agencies or in-country, the hierarchy for understanding their role followed more of a ‘queer and woman-first-diplomat-next’ identity format. In almost every other circumstance, their gender and sexuality was downplayed, following a role-first-woman-next pattern, with their sexuality often left out entirely. Often, the decision to remain in the ‘closet’ was based out of fear that coming out would limit their career options, damage their reputation, or put them physically at risk on their postings or even in their agencies.

Deciding on the context and audience in which to disclose sexuality was therefore a significant consideration, particularly as diplomacy relies on interpersonal networking and events and considerable public functions. In many circumstances, whether individuals were married and had children was the first question asked, and many had carefully scripted responses ready or used non-gendered pronouns to disguise the gender of their partners. Over a period of years at a single post, the ability to do so was extremely taxing and personally damaging, to individuals and their relationships. As one participant states,

It was difficult for me, I did get away the entire three years I think without actually having it articulated that my partner was female. They didn’t come to any events - whilst they had a (spousal) visa (which would allow them to do so) (Participant One, 26 June 2018).

The effect of this prejudice and invisibility suggests added challenges to the well-documented lack of recognition and self-censoring experienced by women leaders. Further, negotiating invisibility also presented unique challenges in the context of the high profile nature of participants' roles and the historical expectations of diplomacy as a two-person job – with spouses an integral part of the diplomatic package. Therefore, inability to identify, or ability to identify participants' queerness only in certain contexts, highlighted the field as more hostile, than not, to queer women's identities. It appeared only welcoming of diverse women conditional on a large variety of external factors – highlighting the conditional acceptance of queer identity (Altman & Symons 2016).

### **What are the experiences of queer women in international affairs?**

This section seeks to uncover what sexuality adds to our understanding of the gendered nature of international affairs by exploring core parts of women's narratives particularly around the challenges as they have raised them. This section covers: the 'queering' of women leaders in the field; the challenges of queer visibility and invisibility; the protective elements international affairs offered queer women; and the heteronormative structuring of posts and the effect this had on reinforcing women with "wives" as those best equipped to manage diplomatic roles, as opposed to their heterosexual female counterparts.

#### *'Queering' women in international affairs*

As noted earlier, key scholars such as Enloe (2014) find international affairs as masculine and male-dominated. However, by applying queer feminism it is clear that the field is also heteronormative and heterosexist. Therefore, because the ideal diplomat remains the heterosexual, (white) man in Australian international affairs, it is worth noting that heteronormativity and homophobia affect even *heterosexual* women who represent a deviation from the masculine norm. In the wider dataset, Participant Five notes that:

when you look at close girlfriends and I who are still single, there is a view that we must all be lesbians . . . actually we're not [lesbians] . . . but I mean I've been accused of being a lesbian for a long time, particularly within the Army (Participant Five, Defence, 20 March 2019).

For some participants, the correlations between them having short hair, no children and no partner (or a combination of the three), and being a woman in a significant position of leadership, led to them being recurrently perceived as queer. Mostly, this was received good-naturedly and did not affect their work. However, the way participants were perceived by the outside world and their counterparts is significant for understanding the nature of gender in international affairs. Even if not queer, women were frequently typified to be queer. This is emblematic of 'othering' experienced by women leaders and diplomats for whom international affairs continues to reinforce specific gendered and sexual power dynamics that support gender inequality and heterosexism (Cassidy & Althari 2017). It reinforces the fact that even if the majority of women represented internationally are heterosexual, gender *and sexuality* still affect them. There is no 'opting out' of the gendered and sexualised nature of international affairs, which suggests that not only is queer women's acceptance in the field conditional, but that this conditional acceptance is extended, to a degree, to women more generally in the field – symbolic of instances of conflating 'women' with 'queer'. This reinforces the "deeply entwined" nature of the oppression and suppression of women and of 'queer' (Marinucci 2010, p. 107).

#### *Challenges for queer women: visibility and invisibility*

For those who did identify as queer, their experiences revealed the layered effect of their intersectionality. Demanding and exclusive, international affairs is characterised by a high mobility, extraordinary commitment, and complex decision-making on topics both inside and outside an envoy's particular area of expertise (Stephenson 2019). The international affairs

workplace remains a bastion of prestige and social class, with deeply embedded norms of masculinity and heteronormativity that on the surface would appear the antithesis of a space welcoming to queer women (Neumann 2008; Enloe 2014). Queer women leaders operate at the nexus where the gendered (and racialized, classed, et cetera) and heteronormative practices of international affairs meet specific national and overarching international politics, and their specific hierarchies and gender practices. As such, this space is complex, with individual circumstances, agency context, host and home country norms, and diplomatic norms all affecting queer women's conditional acceptance in the field. On top of general challenges envoys experience, queer women experience further challenges in international representation.

As envoys of the Australian Federal Government, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity law, policies, and strategies bind participants and their agencies, which in theory, gives queer women as many opportunities and protections as any other employment group. Particularly now that Australia has legalised same-sex marriage, queer women are generally afforded the same benefits and allowances as any other staff member, outlined by each agencies' overseas conditions of service.

However, depending on host country legal and social acceptance of homosexuality, differential treatment, harassment and discrimination was common, with queer women often experiencing a deep form of exclusion and only conditional acceptance. Their experiences were summed up as thus: “[being LGBTI] is harder offshore where the environment does not sustain [you] – where it's illegal or where you're very much frowned upon” (Participant One, 26 June 2018). The experiences of queer women envoys were affected by their ability to be ‘out’, but did not depend on it. Individuals may have been ‘out’ within their agency or to a select group of colleagues, yet not ‘out’ more broadly. Or, they could have been entirely ‘out’ to the world. If they were ‘out’ entirely, they were often subject to greater overt instances of homophobia or heterosexism – name-calling, bullying, isolation, physical threats or violence – both from



within their agency and from the field or host country. If they were not ‘out’, or only partially ‘out’, they still experienced instances of homophobia and heterosexism, however this was often coupled with the burden of invisibility and lack of recognition, both of themselves and/or of their partner and relationship.

For instance, depending on host location, difficulties exist in getting spousal visas for same-sex partners. As one participant states,

before [Australia] had [legalised] gay marriage, I think we had something where if the other country kind of recognised same sex relationships, the same sex partner could go in on that visa, but otherwise you go in on a member of the household domestic visa (Participant Three, 18 June 2018).

Participants reported instances of colleague’s spouses deploying as ‘maid’ or ‘chauffeur’, which had ramifications on whether they could claim spousal financial benefits. Further, in emergencies, generally only those on spousal or family visas were evacuated – not those on household/staffing visas. Navigating visas and benefits had significant financial and social ramifications for individuals, which also has ramifications on the wider attraction and retention of staff. Substantial improvements have been made in recent years, with departments committing to extend allowances to spouses regardless of their visa status. However, as long as LGBTI individuals in the field remain closeted or only partially out, visas remain an issue.

Further, for individuals posted from more security and enforcement style agencies, the challenges at post were viewed as even more difficult. Whereas homosexuality has been comparatively more accepted in traditional diplomatic spheres, military and para-militaristic organisations throughout both Australia and internationally exhibit many examples of highly institutionalised homophobia and heterosexism. In the military, this has historically been experienced through ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policies in the US, however the lines of homophobia went even further in Australia, where a total ban on gay men and women in the military existed until 1992. In fact, gay men and women served at a time when their identities were illegal, and

“lesbians were punished as deviants who might somehow contaminate the services” (Robinson 2017, para 17). Australian policing agencies have a similarly institutionalised approach to homophobia, with policing noted as on the forefront of historical persecution of LGBTI individuals.

For instance, one public account of the experiences of Queensland’s first female superintendent recounts her being a lesbian police officer working in a time of the ‘lesbian witch hunts’ in Australia which sought to publicly name and shame LGBTI officials. The former chief superintendent notes how she was subject to internal reviews and hearings, was sent to posts that were the furthest distance from her partner in an attempt to break them up, and was forcefully harassed and discriminated against. Years of relentless harassment and discrimination led to her resigning from the force, only to join the Papua New Guinean Royal Constabulary as part of an Australian Government exchange program. Despite the fact that Papua New Guinea criminalises homosexuality and has extreme rates of violence against women, she deployed with her female partner and felt she had equal, or more, standing than many of her male counterparts overseas. Her story demonstrates the nuances of representation within a more para-militaristic agency. For some, international postings represented a reprieve from more entrenched, institutionalised heterosexism and homophobia within Australia.

Yet it was clear that participant experiences were not always so positive, and the risk of fully embracing their identity within the field and workforce was not always practical, or safe. As one participant states,

I get that it's a good thing for us to be moral leaders as much as possible, but I also think there is a duty of care and security issue, and you can push it too far and then you're sending people into the lion's den ... the embassies do have quite a high profile particularly where they are going to small countries or hostile countries, or countries where there's huge diplomatic profiles or communities. You are highly exposed and it is hard to hide (Participant Three, 18 June 2018).

This also had implications on the level of seniority participants were willing to take, particularly in more para-militaristic agencies. Within these agencies particularly, “the best position is number 2IC [second-in-command],” particularly given that some top positions are contractual, with no guarantee of on-going employment, and, that in some countries, it was felt to be simply not safe enough to be a woman, let alone a queer women, in the most senior position (Participant Six, AFP, 21 June 2018).

In many cases, the need to suppress their identity, and the personal challenges that came with navigating a particularly male-dominated and heteronormative field, resulted in self-censoring and opting out of many diplomatic appointments – the emotional and psychological toll falling heavily on women and queer individuals (Aggestam & Towns 2018). Participant Two states,

there’s no kind of putting me back in a closet and I wouldn’t want to, but equally, I have colleagues who have very deliberately chosen not to be very openly part of the [LGBTI] network and things like that because they don’t want to restrict their posting options (Participant Two, 4 February 2019).

The choice to be ‘out’ or not was therefore an individual choice made in the context of widespread structural perceived and real homophobia and heterosexism. However, children also affected individuals’ options and considerations. Participant Two expands on how she and her partner chose their host location because they could be recognised as married, and,

We have a child and we just couldn’t be in a country where we had to be in any way closeted, because that’s not how she’d spent the first years of her life, so she couldn’t spend the next three (Participant Two, 4 February 2019).

Another participant says,

When we do our processes we get to exclude countries, so we can say we don't want to go here or there for cultural reasons. I excluded a number for cultural reasons and decided I couldn't do my best job, I couldn't be me and do what I could do in Dubai for example. I couldn't make the best outcomes for [my agency] I think in any other highly Islamic or highly orthodox country. That's a practical decision for me about what I want and taking away that whole - but it should be equal - that made the difference for me because it gave me peace (Participant One, 26 June 2018).

She further notes that,

It isn't play fighting or anything, there's really deadly consequences ... You can wave the flag of equality as much as you want but if it affects you personally, and it does, then being pragmatic is crucial (Participant One, 26 June 2018).

This ability to self-select in and out of certain deployments was therefore very important for individuals. However, as mentioned earlier, self-selection is not possible across all areas of international deployment, particularly with security and enforcement agencies offering no choice of location – you go where you are sent – perhaps highlighting forms of “masculinised and feminised sacrifice” that are necessary “to sustain a readiness for war” (Sylvester in Peterson 1992, p. 160). Further, opting out of certain postings may have ramifications on individuals’ future careers, as a participant from the wider dataset notes,

Have you deployed offshore? Have you done the hardship postings? Have you actually gainfully progressed [the agency’s] wants and needs offshore? Yes, it is a tick in the box [for career progression] (Participant Six, AFP, 21 June 2018).

#### *Diplomacy and the promise of protection*

The potential loss of highly talented and diverse representatives from the pipeline also has ramifications on Australian objectives. The under-representation of diverse women in diplomacy and security is problematized on two fronts: 1) the loss of women’s equal contribution to international relations decision-making (strategic grounds) (Gilligan 1982); and that (2) women’s under-representation undermines the representative nature of Australian democracy and its national interests overseas (moral grounds) (Cass & Rubenstein 1995). Further, diverse representation, of which queer women are included, adds authenticity and legitimacy to Australia’s foreign policy objectives in the region. The idea of ‘legitimacy’ is particularly salient in international affairs, where the key roles of actors are to represent ‘Australia’ and its interests, and Conley Tyler (2016) argues citizens expect that such agencies should reflect the constituent elements of the community they represent. Participant Four highlights a key point,

We always talk about how proud we are of our multiculturalism, about our broadmindedness ... if we say that and then our overseas presence is the white male, heterosexual man, then how is that reflective of who Australia is? Not that I've got anything against white, heterosexual men, but it's only one part of the Australian identity (Participant Four, 2 August 2018).

The ability to “walk the talk” and the experiences of these diverse queer women in diplomacy demonstrates the protective and privileging aspects of international affairs work, which, perhaps more than any other field, provides diplomatic immunity and protection for queer women in what might otherwise be hostile or even dangerous situations. The protective aspects of international affairs work coalesced around four key themes.

Firstly, there was a privilege attached to rank and role, whereby international representatives, whether queer and women, or not, were likely to be better treated than the average individual in either host or home country. Being part of the ‘elite’, in public office, and selected as the representative of a nation evidently offered considerable status and prestige from which the participants were able to draw upon.

Secondly, diplomats generally evidence high levels of education and cultural competency and operated within specific codes of conduct aimed at mitigating diplomatic incidences (Stephenson 2019). This ‘worldliness’, combined with clearly established protocol and an understanding that an individual was merely a representative of the state, seemed to allow a broader scope of human diversity to be accepted and respected.

Thirdly and relatedly, the women felt themselves to be representing their country firstly and foremostly: a job viewed as genderless, even while still reinforcing distinct gendered experiences. The following interaction between the interviewee and one participant highlights this:

Participant: I do find though as a diplomat or as representative of your country, you don't have gender, because you're representing Australia. So even in places where they don't normally deal with - or they don't have women in their own service, it's okay, you're a foreigner and you're representing your country. So it's never been a complete

impediment or anything. In fact in many ways often it can open doors because there's more of an interest, because they're less used to having women in those roles

Interviewer: That's really interesting. You come in as genderless, you are that representative.

Participant: Yeah, I'm Australia.

Interviewer: Do you think the men feel that too in the Department?

Participant: The men in my Department...they probably don't have to think about it, because they're the dominant gender. (Participant Seven, DFAT, 15 October 2018).

To 'be Australia' appeared to de-personalise participants, adding another layer of protection.

Finally, in some circumstances, participants' identities as queer women was felt to be so far a norm deviation from the standard international representative, that they felt they were not constrained to the same expectations of either gender. For many Australian women in international affairs, their worst experiences of sexism, discrimination, and harassment was found to be agency-based, rather than dependent on the host location (Stephenson 2019). Despite different cultures and norm around gender and sexuality internationally, as long as queer women had the support of their deploying agency, their ability to contribute and be respected as representatives was often highly successful. Support included recognition of their relationship, equally applied spousal benefits for their partner (the same as that of any heterosexual colleagues) and measures to help them adjust to international deployment – such as gained through informal LGBTI networks or formal strategies.

Without this crucial element of agency recognition and support, participants one to three in particular noted that they or their colleagues were more likely to experience challenges. Interactions that were reported included homophobic and sexist comments, a lack of understanding or recourse after homophobic incidences, particularly if there was a feeling of being "tolerated" rather than actively supported by the agencies, and bullying. Further, all participants spoke about issues surrounding visibility and acceptance: navigating to whom they could be open and out (which had effects on access to allowances and visas), and the impact

of entrenched, crushing and long-term invisibility on mental (and physical) health. Common words used to describe the work across all interviewees included that it was “very public,” “isolating,” “lonely,” “exposed,” a “24/7 job,” “de-stabilising,” and “strains relationships,” factors which appeared to have had a compounding effect on queer participants.

### *Heteronormativity underpins international affairs*

Overall, it was clear that queer women challenged the whole structuring of posts around heteronormativity. Women were both in roles of the diplomat and the spouse at the same time, in the same household – doubly different to traditional diplomatic norms of the male envoy and female trailing spouse, and more recently, the female envoy and male trailing spouse (Neumann 2008). The result was that the queer women interviewed (women with female partners) appeared to fare better than their heterosexual female colleagues in terms of meeting the demands of international deployment and the extraordinary requirements of diplomacy. It was not that participants whom had same-sex relationships were inherently more equal, sharing paid and unpaid labour. Rather, female spouses tended to be more engaged in managing diplomatic households and the informal functions that are a mainstay of international negotiation, than male spouses tended to be. Female spouses of the participants who were interviewed were also more likely to undertake the burden of unpaid domestic labour or primary child and eldercare responsibilities, to allow their spouses to dedicate more time for their paid deployed role. Further, a considerable number of heterosexual women from the wider dataset noted that the most successful deploying partnerships they witnessed were “women with wives”, a joke that highlighted a theme that if you could choose it, you would have a ‘wife’ to help you carry out the tasks required of international deployment. Perhaps, if nothing else, this suggests an informal form of acceptance for “women with wives” based on their utility in diplomatic roles.

## **Conclusion**

*I asked the ambassador at the time [how the host country might treat having an LGBTI representative] . . . He said . . . by the time they get over the fact that you're a senior female, the gay thing will be the last thing they'll worry about (Participant Four, 2 August 2018).*

Analysis of queer women's narratives and experiences reveals the deeply gendered and *heteronormative* nature of international affairs – a field more hostile than not to queer women's identities. Visa issues and spousal benefits, as well as silencing and invisibility, deeply affected participants' experience. Their experiences highlighted difficulties fitting in, navigating the circumstances in which to be 'out', and balancing their experiences of harassment and discrimination at home, versus abroad in a variety of new social and normative settings.

Yet, the protected status of a diplomat or representative, whose social circles are typically elite, educated and worldly, obviously offers some protection for queer women to live and work in a range of international contexts, perhaps more so than other fields of work. The role both protects the diplomat from much of the homophobia and sexism latent in host (and home) societies; whilst also highlighting systemic heteronormative policies and social norms that marginalise and discriminate against their identity. These norms and institutions both constrained, and enabled women in their roles, with a sense of norm deviation also used as a source of power for some who felt they were not constrained in the same way heterosexual men or women may be.

It was significant that even heterosexual women could be perceived as 'queer' and subject to the similar conditional acceptance that queer women face, emblematic of women's general othering within the field. Further, it was significant that the queer women interviewed appeared better equipped than their heterosexual female counterparts to handle the 'dual role' that international diplomacy requires of both paid envoys and their unpaid 'trailing spouse'. This was deeply ironic, as the inability to be visible, or requirement to be visible only in certain



circumstances placed a heavy burden on those queer women who were perhaps most able to perform the duties required of a diplomatic couple.

This paper reinforces that analysis of gender in international affairs is incomplete without also including an analysis of sexuality. Queer feminism therefore offers rich opportunities for further research, with significant gaps remaining in understanding baseline statistics about LGBTI representatives globally, including their prevalence, experiences and impact. Further research on the topic is strongly encouraged.

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