The Spectrum Issue
Editor's letter

When we decided to go forward with the Spectrum Issue, we wanted to create a print product revolving around experiences of gender, sexuality and femininity. This assortment of stories delve into the interpersonal and the ephemeral, mapping out an array of encounters, circumstances and perceptions.

In this issue, writers look into online fandoms, trans experience within the University’s confines, hurdles for women in journalism school and varying cultural perspectives on menstruation. SPM’s satirist makes the claim for revamping the gender binary, and other writers look at hijabi culture, intersectional identity and how local organizations are providing music education to young women and girls.
The art of becoming a stan

Fandoms are more than a place to find community — for some, it's all about the celebrity.

by Leah Mesquita
Illustrations by Andrea Ramirez
The internet is a universe of its own, home to infinite galaxies of information strange and familiar to the common user. Our mobile devices are the machines we use to navigate these uncharted territories at light speed — or however long it takes for a page to load.

While most of our online interactions seem to be jumbled patterns of finger touches, swipes and double taps, these miniscule contacts are enough to immerse you in a whole other world, or worlds.

These worlds are more commonly known as fandoms: communities of people who are passionate about certain media, such as a film, a band, a television show or book. Fandoms can be found anywhere and be focused on anything, as long as they gather a strong fanbase.

Social media has enabled widespread growth of various accounts dedicated to being a part of these fandoms, where die-hard fans create and circulate edits and photos of their favorite celebrities or fictional characters. Running these accounts can become full-time jobs: constant updates must be made to maintain relevance and engagement.

One Charli XCX Twitter fan account, which currently sits at 55,000 followers, prides itself on being the singer’s “ultimate source.” The admin for the account spoke to the magazine i-D in 2019 when it had a smaller following; they talked about searching multiple online platforms “at least ten times throughout the day” to find any updates on the star.

Some of the most influential accounts, however, have been shut down by social media platforms when they become especially popular. The Beyoncé fan account @Beyhive was shut down by Instagram with 1.2 million followers; a Selena Gomez fan account with over 600,000 followers was shut down due to “copyright infringement” of paparazzi photos.

Instagram has been known for deleting many of these stan accounts on the grounds of impersonation, despite some celebrities leaving likes or comments of appreciation for their hardcore stans. While these are certainly the more popular examples of fandom interactions online, these high-profile pop stan accounts are only the surface of where these communities burrow.

History of fandoms

For years, young women have found solace in fandoms. Whether it be through fanfiction — stories involving fictional characters or fictional stories about celebrities, usually embedding the reader in the narrative — or by running shops on Etsy specializing in fan-made merchandise, women continue to help various fandoms grow around the globe.

Some of the creative property of dedicated fans has evolved into mainstream television and movies. The “Fifty Shades of Grey” series was originally written as a “Twilight” fanfiction called “Masters of the Universe.” The young adult series “Mortal Instruments” has its roots in Harry Potter fanfiction, which author Cassandra Clare originally developed under the title “The Draco Trilogy.”

Most notoriously, however, the somewhat poorly executed “After” series by Anna Todd grew popular on Wattpad as a Harry Styles fanfiction, where Styles and a young college student fall in love. So far, the five-part series has been made into four movies, as fans continue to reread the series in anticipation of upcoming films.

These instances in fandom culture blur the line between fiction and reality, as many
of peoples' well-loved stories come to life off the page or the big screen.

The Directioners

“I've seen Harry in concert. I have a tote bag from the tour, One Direction merch that I've bought from Etsy and I also have tickets to see Louis [Tomlinson] this coming year,” said freshman secondary education student Arlette Fierro. “I was a fan of them in 2015 right before they broke up, and even though they weren't a band anymore I continued to support them.”

Fierro, who attended Harry Styles’ Love On Tour show in Glendale in 2021, recalled wanting to see the celebrity under any circumstances. “That was my first and only time seeing him, and I bought nosebleeds for $75 at the very top.”

Styles began Love on Tour in September 2021, and has continued to work through several legs of his 22-month global journey, expected to end this July. Fans have been known to spend thousands of dollars to ensure they snag a spot in Styles’ enviable standing-room-only pit section, pressed up against the stage.

“I do take money into consideration, especially as a college student,” said Briana Abate, a freshman studying psychology. “But there's this quote I see all the time that says: money is fake, Harry Styles is forever. I'd say I live by that.”

Over the years, Abate has seen Styles in concert on two occasions: once in October 2021 at a show in Florida, and another time at his “one-night-only” concert in New York for his most recent album “Harry's House.”

“If any of the other boys plan to go on tour, then I'd probably buy tickets for them, too. And Harry's touring constantly, so I usually follow him around,” Abate said.

Making new friends in Abate’s time at ASU is easy, thanks to her love for the band. “I connect a lot through the Harry Styles and One Direction fandoms, not just online, but coming into college as a freshman,” Abate said. “Telling people right off the bat that you love concerts or a certain artist, there's an automatic connection.”

“During quarantine when they had their 10-year anniversary as a band, I joined a group chat with fans that I’m still friends with today,” Fierro said. “We keep in contact and like each other's posts. I feel comfortable with these people, and knowing these people creates a safe space.”

Fierro said One Direction's music is something that calms her down and uplifts her mood. “I like the way Harry puts himself out there,” she said. “I know he tours a lot, so it's nice to see content and know they’re all doing well.”

Although the One Direction fandom has given Fierro long-term connections with other fans, she acknowledges certain fans can sometimes ruin the fun.

“There's a term in the fandom called 'solo Harries,' who are newer fans that really only care about Harry,” Fierro said. “They'll tear down all the other members of One Direction just because they only like Harry, and usually those people tend to make it difficult to enjoy being a part of the fandom.”

In the idolization of stars like Harry Styles, toxic behaviors in the One Direction fandom have emerged as a result of feuding between stans. “I don't want to call them 'crazy,' but the people that don't respect boundaries don't realize the artists are people, too,” Abate said. “I feel like it gives other people that 'look,' like all fans are crazy and obsessive.”

“I definitely think they put him on a pedestal and try to act like they're personal friends with him,” Fierro said. “I know there are people who buy pit tickets to every single show, and it’s those kinds of people who think they’re the better fans because they’ve seen him so many times.”

“I think it's important to separate the fanbase from the artist because they don’t have control over what their fanbase does,” she added. “Some people are just horrible human beings.”

The A.R.M.Y.

“About eight years ago I discovered them on Youtube, and then I explored their music and music videos,” said BTS fan Nikita Anand. “Stan Twitter was a really big thing, too, around 2017.”

Anand, a junior studying business law, has been a fan of the K-pop genre since it first started gaining mainstream traction in the U.S. “In K-pop there's something called ‘Vlive’ where idols can livestream and fans can interact with them, so I'd watch,” Anand said. “Besides that, I followed them on everything they had, like Instagram and Twitter.”

Anand, who is currently a dance instructor for ASU’s K-pop Dance Evolution club, saw BTS in 2016 at a K-pop event. “KCON is a really big K-pop convention that happens in LA and New York. I went to the LA one, and there were a lot of other big name artists like...
SHINee and Girls’ Generation,” Anand said. “In 2018, BTS came back for another concert, but because they’ve become so popular now it’s been really hard to get tickets to their concerts, so I just kind of gave up.”

While groups within the K-pop genre are becoming more mainstream abroad, Anand continues to support them by watching concert highlights online and interacting with social media posts.

Anand owes her transformation as a fan to those she met online: “I was very closeted about my interest in K-pop,” Anand said. “I didn’t want to be stereotyped in a bad way and didn’t want people to be rude by making assumptions.”

Because of her Twitter presence, Anand found a sense of community. “In 2016 to 2019, Twitter was really big. I made a lot of online friends and a lot of them I’ve been friends with for six or seven years now,” Anand said. “K-pop in general has become a safe space for people like me who have similar interests and explore new things together.”

“My sister was a fan of K-pop back in the day,” said ASU alumna Olivia Munson. “In the past 13 years since then, I was a casual listener until BTS came to the forefront in 2016 or 2017, making K-pop more accessible to an American audience.”

Munson “grew” with the A.R.M.Y. fandom, alongside other K-pop groups who debuted around the same time. “It’s been a long-haul with K-pop,” Munson said. “But I’m not an active stan Twitter user. I never have been and I never will be. I’ve never been a fan account girl.”

Munson, a former Barrett student, decided to do her honors thesis on the inner workings of the K-pop fandom, as it piqued her interest. “I knew a girl who did hers on meet and greet culture,” Munson said. “So I wanted to take something I was interested in, too, and expand on it.”

Although Munson was unfamiliar with the K-pop fandom in terms of online congregation, she viewed her thesis as an opportunity to dissect further into the parasocial nature between A.R.M.Y. stans and K-pop celebrities.

“During the height of the pandemic, there were these messaging apps that fans could pay for to communicate with idols. You were put into group chats with idols who could message you throughout the day,” Munson said. “I talked about how that constant communication fosters parasocial relationships and brings fans back for more.”

Munson said these relationships are responsible for keeping these fandoms relevant. “What we see in any fandom is high saturation of content. When there isn’t content to consume is when people tend to fall to the wayside. K-pop thrives on parasocial relationships,” Munson said.

A broader look at parasocial relationships

“I grew up in the ‘80s with ‘The Cosby Show’ and ‘Family Ties,’ and it was interesting to me even back then how I saw people on the screen and liked them,” said Alden Weight, an assistant teaching professor for the Polytechnic social science program. “They seemed like friends and cool people I might like to know.”

Weight has worked at ASU for 17 years and has previously studied the nature of parasocial relationships with fictional characters and celebrities. “People can take advantage of parasocial relationships too, and capitalize on them. Many scholars will argue that a successful book will be able to create an identifiable character that people will just love.”

While this gives insight into some of the strategies used by TV and creative writers to engage with fandoms on a level that rakes in profit, Weight shared the reality of attachments to celebrities from an online standpoint. “You’re seeing who the celebrity has chosen to project,” Weight said. “It’s basically a PR exercise.”

In terms of our interactions with celebrities on social media platforms, Weight believes we are all guilty of fabricating our personas on the web. “This isn’t something exclusive to celebrities. We all do impression management,” Weight said. “But you would be seeing a parasocial relationship with the way celebrities present themselves on social media.”

When asked about the potential danger in these relationships, Weight shared how they could negatively impact what we decipher to be true online. “The potential is always there,” Weight said. “If somebody becomes attracted to that persona, they don’t know the whole picture. They could commit any number of strange errors.”

According to Weight, humans are instinctively drawn toward building these types of bonds. “We all have the propensity to develop them. We’re social creatures. We’re hard-wired for connection with other people. As the saying goes: ‘It’s in our DNA’ to want to develop relationships with other people,” said Weight. “And it’s so intriguing because you are only attracted to part of that celebrity’s personality.”

Editor’s note: Olivia Munson worked for The State Press from 2019 to 2022.
“I don’t want to call them ‘crazy,’ but the people that don’t respect boundaries don’t realize the artists are people, too.”

— Briana Abate
Daniela*, a transfer student at ASU studying kinesiology, began her transition in April 2020.

Before then, she had lived most of her life presenting as a man. She joined the military. Got married. Worked. But none of that took the weight off her chest — the anger and anxiety she felt. She found relief when she started hormone therapy after being diagnosed with Klinefelter syndrome — meaning she has two X chromosomes and one Y chromosome — and gender dysphoria.

“I’ve never really thought of myself as a guy,” she said. “I felt like the term never fit.”

Since she started hormone therapy, she said food has tasted better, she sees colors in more vibrant hues, and she feels like people actually recognize her.

Her desire to transition wasn’t something newfound. She’d known there was something different about her since she was a child, but interactions with people around her — including a psychologist — made it difficult for her to come out.

“One of the psychologists said, ‘Well, you should really consider just living your life as a man because there’s no way that that can be changed,” Daniela said. “That was kind of detrimental to hear as a child.”

After finalizing her divorce and leaving her job, Daniela realized she didn’t need to live for anyone else but herself and started her transition.

“I wasn’t hiding anymore,” Daniela said. “I definitely had a lot more confidence and was a lot less confrontational.”

Daniela wants to open a gym aimed at the LGBTQ+ community within the next 10 years. People in her community often don’t feel safe in the gym, she said, and she hopes to create a workout space that is safe and inclusive.

Still, she fears a gym explicitly identified as a space for the LGBTQ+ community could potentially become a target of hate crimes, and she doesn’t want to be publicly identified as a transgender woman because of the social and political complexities that come along with embracing the label.

“Would you have known?” she asked me when she first came in for our interview.

“No,” I said. And I wouldn’t have. Daniela doesn’t hide her identity, but she doesn’t advertise it either — in case she becomes a target of discrimination or violence, she said. Between 2013 and 2020, more than 200 transgender and gender non-conforming individuals were killed in the U.S., according to a report from the Human Rights Campaign. In the report, the HRC wrote that, while each case is unique, “this epidemic disproportionately impacts trans women of color, who comprise approximately 4 in 5 of all anti-transgender homicides.”

Unsafe spaces

Edith Woods, a freshman studying anthropology, was walking to the light rail in January to attend a club meeting on campus...
when a man started yelling at her, calling her slurs. He chased her for a short distance until she was on the train. Even though she was in public with people clustered around her, no one said anything or did anything to help her.

“I felt completely alone in public,” she said.

Woods recently came out in December, and she said she’s become increasingly aware of her surroundings since then, constantly on guard in case she finds herself in a dangerous situation. Woods was stressed for months before coming out that her identity was going to become impossible for her to hide from her parents. Going home over winter break and being misgendered evoked a feeling of cognitive dissonance.

“It reached a boiling point,” she said.

Since coming out as trans and starting to transition, Woods’ mood has been gradually improving.

“I think this last year or so is probably just the most ambently happy I’ve ever been in my life,” she said. “Transitioning is definitely the best thing that’s ever happened to me … As difficult as the process has been, it’s felt so intensely positive to finally feel like I’m living a more authentic version of myself. To feel as though I’m living a life that’s, if not what I want, closer to what I want.”

At ASU, she found it easy to change her name on her ID and found a supportive group in TransFam, an ASU club dedicated to helping transgender students find community and gain access to University resources.

Woods is often nervous about correcting people who misgender her or are disrespectful to her on campus because of Arizona’s political climate and the attitudes of some of ASU’s male students. She said she “can’t think of it in any other terms” than misogynistic and “vaguely bigoted bullshit.”

The ACLU is currently tracking 11 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in Arizona alone, including a bill that requires schools to notify parents about students’ gender or sexuality; a bill essentially preventing public entities — including public universities and community colleges — from holding diversity, equity and inclusion programs; a bill banning gender reassignment surgery and treatment for those under 18; and a bill prohibiting teachers in public schools from using students’ preferred pronouns without parental consent.

Charlotte Palfi, a former corporate lawyer and current ASU student studying computer science, came out as trans in December. She said she thinks the bills proposed in the state Legislature are forms of political posturing that are designed to make communities afraid — not to actually be passed into law.

“(These bills) give this sense that people don’t want you to exist,” Palfi said. A lot of people in the transgender community have a “feeling of relentless persecution and hatred” accentuated by these bills, she said.

Although these bills make her feel worried, she is more afraid of bills that are seemingly less problematic on the surface, but slowly cut away at access to healthcare, safe environments and resources.

“The most effective way to regulate a
community is restricting its access to resources," she said.

Despite ongoing efforts by the state Legislature to control trans people’s lives, Palfi said transphobic legislation will not change who she is.

“I’m afraid, but not in the sense that it’s going to stop me,” she said. “If anything, it’s going to make me want to spend more time supporting the community that I’m in.”

**Access to resources**

When Woods turned 18, she started hormones and therapy.

“I was able to exert, for the first time, agency over my own life in a lot of regards,” she said. “In terms of medication and making doctor’s appointments myself.”

Before she turned 18, Woods went through phases of fixating on her gender and then repressing those feelings.

“I kind of repetitively did that cycle until I finally turned 18,” she said. “I was trying to look forward at what the rest of my life looked like and I realized I did not want to do it as a man.”

She said her social transition took a little longer because her parents were “not exactly the most accepting when it comes to issues like that.” She initially hid her transition from them.

At Planned Parenthood in Arizona, patients ages 18 or older can receive gender-affirming care and hormone therapy prescriptions from licensed clinicians.

In March 2022, Arizona’s then-governor Doug Ducey signed into law a bill banning “irreversible gender reassignment surgery” for minors. SB 1138, which goes into effect on April 1 of this year, prevents health care professionals from providing gender affirming care to individuals under 18 years of age. At the time, then-Secretary of State Katie Hobbs released a statement condemning SB 1138 and another bill restricting trans athletes in the state.

Both Woods and Daniela said access to gender-affirming healthcare is already limited in Arizona. When Woods wanted to start hormones, she was put on a three-month waiting list before she got an appointment. ASU’s Transgender Voice and Communication Training — which provides voice therapy to people who want to change their voice to better suit their gender identity — has a year-long waiting list, Woods said.

“Trying to find infrastructure here is a nightmare,” Daniela said.

She said she had difficulty finding a gynecologist who would see her; some pharmacies didn’t have the drugs she needed readily available. She also didn’t want to go to clinics identified as inclusive to trans patients due to fears of being targeted.

Daniela said access to transition-related healthcare saved her life.

“If the social dynamic were the same today as when I was younger, it’d go one of two ways: I would either transition DIY ... or I’d be taking a dirt nap.”
“Since she started hormone therapy, she said food has tasted better, she sees colors in more vibrant hues, and she feels like people actually recognize her.”
In fall 2020, I began my journey at the Cronkite School. I was 17, excited to move from a small northern California town to a large metropolitan area to attend one of the nation’s top journalism schools. I had article ideas bursting from every pore and was itching to dive into the field to find hard-hitting scoops and write impactful journalism.

Less than two years later, I started questioning whether my decision to pursue journalism as a career was the right one.

In the spring 2022 semester, I had my first — and only — high-stress, fast-paced reporting gig through Cronkite. I worked for no pay for around 12 hours per day, three days per week in a newsroom where it felt like the only thing valued about me was how quickly I could churn out content.

My boss made it very clear from the first week that I was going to be on my own in figuring out how to succeed during the semester. There was no guidance on what he wanted, not even a seed of distrust in my own writing skills.

Since I had this supposed valuable learning experience, I’ve found myself second-guessing my reporting, struggling with pitching insightful stories and facing massive blocks in writing. I’m seriously considering a career in audience strategy instead of the exhilarating reporting job my teenage self came to Arizona to study for. The only thing I learned in that newsroom is I don’t feel like I can be a reporter anymore.

For months, I’ve discussed this with my therapist, and we have come to the conclusion that I am experiencing burnout and impostor syndrome.

Newsroom intruder

Impostor phenomenon — now more commonly referred to as impostor syndrome — was first defined in a 1978 study by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance & Suzanne Imes as an experience affecting high-achieving professional women who feel they are not as smart or qualified as their peers believe them to be. Nowadays, the term can be applied to just about anyone, whether they are a professional or a student in any field.

Janaé Bradford, a graduate student in Cronkite’s sports journalism program, said she feels impostor syndrome all the time.

“Cronkite is the epitome of a place where you can really get impostor syndrome because, like me, I’m a grad student and I’m in (Walter Cronkite Sports Network), and I’m talking to freshmen who have been doing play-by-play analysis and doing all these things,” Bradford said. “I’m like, ‘How am I going to keep up with them? Like, I only have three semesters to do this and they have eight.”

Researchers have found links between the feelings of stress that impostor syndrome brings on and burnout, a condition where one feels so much exhaustion related to work that they feel cynical and negative about their job, significantly reducing their ability to work.

In journalism school, this feeling can manifest itself as not being seen as a so-called real journalist by other professional journalists or sources, feeling that your work is not at a caliber expected of you or that your journalistic skills are not as refined as you feel they should be.

This immense pressure felt by young adult women in journalism school can lead to situations similar to my own, where women feeling burnout before their career even begins leads them to change career tracks within journalism — or even leave the field altogether.

According to a spokesperson for the University, in the 2020-2021 school year, 62.6% of students attending Cronkite were women.

In the professional world, women only produce 41% of content in the U.S. news media sphere, according to the 2021 Media Gender Gap report by the Women’s Media Center.

Bradford said while she plans to remain in journalism post-graduation, she noted many women feel pushed out of the reporting field in exchange for other, less public-facing facets of journalism.

“I remember being an undergrad and taking sports marketing classes. Like, it just felt like they were always gravitating a woman toward PR or jobs not related to being in the field or in the locker room,” she said.

At an award ceremony for women in sports and entertainment, Bradford said a friend of hers was the only person nominated for an award who was a reporter.

“She, like, was just talking to me and she got a little emotional. She was just like, ‘I want people when they say, ‘Women in sports,’ I want people to think about us too.’”

Balancing act

Another fire that fuels the impostor syndrome stress in young women in journalism is a male-dominated culture, or “bro culture” in newsrooms, in which men blatantly or subtly attempt to exclude women in the newsroom from conversations.

In the newsroom that burnt me out from reporting and writing, all four reporters that semester were women. We bonded over a shared stress that came on from simply being inside the building.
Because of this, I did not have to feel worried about experiencing what other women alumni of the same program described as our director’s favoritism toward men.

Alexis Davis, a sports journalism graduate student, said while the men in her classes are generally supportive of the career path their women classmates chose, some of them have taken steps to socially exclude her from conversations. She said it’s well-known that she’s not as knowledgeable about baseball as other sports, which she said some of her male colleagues use against her.

“I can tell when they want to keep the conversation within them, they’ll kind of extend a conversation (about baseball) longer than what they normally would,” Davis said. “They also know, dealing with me for all these months now, that I’m not the type of person to just add something to a conversation just to talk if I don’t know what’s going on … And I think sometimes that’s taken advantage of.”

Women are also more likely to be put in a position where they have to choose between their journalism career and home life, especially if they are parents.

Caitlin Fowble, a graduate student in the sports journalism program, said she has already heard this rhetoric before even finishing graduate school.

“A lot of people have told me that, like, as a woman, if I want to be a journalist, maybe I have to, like, sacrifice family life,” she said. “That’s not something that I feel like men hear a lot.”

According to Fowble, sports journalism classes tend to have more men than women in them, defying the gender breakdown of Cronkite as a whole.

According to WMC’s report, sports is the reporting topic with the greatest gender gap, with women only producing 15% of sports content.

“Any woman you see in sports journalism right now has some of the thickest skin you’ll ever see,” Bradford said. “They not only have to be ready to be in these male-dominated spaces, but they’re articulating and breaking down everything that’s happening and they’re doing this with confidence, knowing that there’s going to be someone out there that’s going to try and belittle them for what they’re good at.”

Sarah Heller, a senior studying journalism and mass communication, said the non-sports bureau of Cronkite News appears to have a better balance of men to women than the Cronkite News Sports bureau does.

“My group consists of women and my director is a woman,” she said. “If that’s any indication of what the future of journalism looks like, I’m pretty sure in 20-30 years, women will at least even out the male-female ratio (in the newsroom).”

While Bradford, Davis and Fowble said students, faculty and staff at Cronkite support and welcome gender diversity in the sports newsroom, they agree that there’s still work to be done in order to ensure women journalists feel welcome in these spaces as a whole.

During her undergraduate program at North Carolina A&T, Davis said she attended an ESPN fellowship meant for students enrolled at HBCUs where she met a member of the Cronkite faculty who encouraged her to attend graduate school at ASU, even negotiating a full-ride scholarship at the University for herself and two other Black students.

Davis said Cronkite doesn’t advertise its graduate programs well to students like her at HBCUs, and the only way she even found out about her program was through the Cronkite faculty member at ESPN.

“They (the Cronkite School) say they want to have this more diverse program, that was a point of paying for three Black students … to be here,” she said.

Bradford said Black women have to work much harder to receive the same level of respect as her white male counterparts, which has given her incentive to work in sports journalism and pave the way for future generations.

“Hopefully, if any more Black female journalists come to Cronkite, and they see me attached with the (WCSN), they’ll be encouraged to participate,” Bradford said.

“Women have felt voiceless all the time, especially Black women,” she said. “I want women to know that their story matters. They’re smart enough to be in these spaces, and sports needs us more than we think we do.”
Satire

Revamping the binary

‘Some parts of life were never meant to be questioned!’

by Claire Geare
Illustration by Biplove Baral

I

f you’ve read any of my previous work, I may not give this impression, but I’m a traditionalist.

I see these new-age kids talk about breaking down gender norms, and I shake my head in disgust. Without gender norms, we’d live in a world of chaos!

I have overwhelming control issues, and I cannot let this slide. If I cannot arbitrarily separate people into two immutable groups to predict their behavior and interests, I might as well curl up and die.

The gender binary is the lifeblood of order and reason in modern society. It’s just super boring. It’s time for a revamp.

It’s undeniable that sex is determined by scientifically different aspects identified in the human body. It’s also a fact that these biological differences come with completely fixed preferences for nonsensical things that never change and cannot vary from person to person.

If you have two sacks of fat affixed to your chest, you are predisposed to glitter, unicorns, looking desirable and having empathy. And just to put the rumors to bed, none of these things has anything to do with societal expectations. I, for one, popped out of the womb, immediately looked in the mirror, and cut my own umbilical cord because honestly, what sex appeal do vestigial organs have?

Suppose you have two oval organs enclosed in bags of skin in your pants. In that case, you probably enjoy hunting, killing, steak and stoicism so debilitating that, rather than get a therapist, you leave a family of four behind for some “Instagram model” who DM’d you with “an opportunity for a high-interest investment.” This is just how things are meant to be.

Despite my dyed hair, septum piercing and pronouns, I’m not trying to rid the world of gender norms. In fact, I’m trying to engrain them into every facet of life. I want gender norms so strict that testosterone treatment is subsidized and mandated by the government.

All I’m saying is that some parts of life were never meant to be questioned! America is a Christian country! At least as far as any minority is concerned. When God lovingly shaped Adam from clay, starting mankind, he secretly inserted a tiny instruction manual for day trading. Like how women use their estrogen to make their husbands sandwiches, braless, unasked for, men use testosterone to fruitlessly follow the stock market.

I’m no new-fashioned liberal! I’m not trying to reinvent the wheel. I need to be able to look at a classroom full of children and give them either trucks and trains or unicorns and flowers.

If I had to individually care about people, it might cause me to engage in nuanced thought. And the thought of nuanced thought is sickening.
A sharp pain jolted me upward from my comfortable position on my bed. When I stood up, it was like I had eaten a pound of rocks. I dragged my feet as I headed to the bathroom — it felt like my intestines were tangled around my bladder.

I sat down on the toilet seat and noticed my bright red underwear beaming back at me — except I didn’t own any bright red underwear.

I’m too young, my 11-year-old self thought as I recalled “the conversation” I had with my mother a few months ago.

From that day, my period stalked me every month. It would appear at the most inconvenient times, like it was plotting against me.

Sometimes it would come when we had swimming days in P.E. in middle school. I would sit on a metal bench adjacent to the pool, watching as my classmates swam laps because I was too afraid to put a tampon in — I shuddered at morbid tales of toxic shock syndrome.

I held in the guilt of not being able to participate, but at least I wasn’t alone. My friends also sat and watched. Supposedly, we were “synced” — whatever that meant.

I always felt like my period was just an inconvenience. Especially when I got my share of “Are you on your period?” or “She’s PMS-ing.”

When I got to high school, my perspective changed.

I was sitting in my freshman Hawaiian history class learning about the different houses of ancient Hawai‘i. The hale pe‘a stood out to me.

Before Hawai‘i was colonized, a woman’s period was considered sacred by her community. It was never frowned upon or embarrassing; it signified life and the next generation. Women were taken to the hale pe‘a, or menstrual house, to care for themselves and rest until their periods were over.

While women were in the hale pe‘a, they were restricted from taking part in outside activities and daily chores. Instead, they would weave lau hala — leaves of the hala tree — and make kapa — fabric. They were also often brought sweet, fatty foods.

Imagining myself in the position of my ancestors, I felt the guilt and discontentment wash away. Why should I feel bad about something so natural and important?

Colonization almost erased my culture from existence, and in its place came the Western way of thinking about periods, affecting the way we view, understand and treat women.

Blood, sweat and tears

Menstruation is the monthly shedding of the uterine lining. The bodies of menstruators — which can include cisgender women, transgender men, nonbinary people and intersex people — prepare for pregnancy every month. If no pregnancy occurs, menstrual blood, which consists of blood and tissue, flows from the uterus out through the vagina.

Premenstrual syndrome is the emotional
and physical symptoms that some people feel before or during their periods. PMS is caused by the hormonal changes that the body experiences during the menstrual cycle.

Cramps are common during menstruation. The uterus contracts to remove the lining from the uterine wall, causing painful cramps that vary from person to person.

These normal, natural occurrences have led to menstrual taboos and period stigma — the stereotypes and shame surrounding menstruation perpetuated by Western society.

“There is still very much a stigma that exists that perceives menstruation as something that people should feel embarrassed about — that it is a bodily function that no one needs to hear about or wants to hear about, that it is in some ways dirty or gross,” said Demetra Presley, executive director of Go With The Flow, an Arizona nonprofit that helps provide free menstrual supplies to students, low-income and homeless members of the community.

According to Breanne Fahs, a professor of disabilities studies and women and gender studies at ASU, period stigma stems from its framing by the patriarchy.

“Women’s bodies have historically been constructed as dirty or gross or problematic, especially compared to men’s bodies,” she said. “It has been a complicated, tricky binary. So period stigma (has) been related to gender and the gendering of bodies for a long time. … Historically, women are seen as being associated with their bodies, and men being associated with their minds.”

Presley added that this stigma stems from the politicization of periods.

“I think that it has a lot to do with the fact that cis women’s bodies in general are a political playground,” she said. “Unfortunately, they have become political fodder as far as people, elected representatives, politicians wanting to enact policies that really chip away at individuality and bodily autonomy.

“It’s not surprising that periods have become a part of this,” Presley said. “But unfortunately, when we have such a divide politically, we tend to look at not whether this is something that should be enacted, but something that we decide on on the basis of political party or political affiliation.”

As a result, stigma, miseducation and myths — like menstrual synchrony — have plagued menstruators for generations.

Presley described period stigma as having an exponential domino effect.

“If we can’t talk about periods, how are we ever able to talk about what it looks like when people don’t have access to what they need? How are we able to have conversations that are well informed and comprehensive and inclusive? How are we to educate the next generation of menstruators about things that are common and not common when it comes to their cycles?”

Another result of this stigma is the misconception that there is a singular narrative about the ways menstruators view their periods, Fahs said. Some people associate their periods with the pain that comes with it, feeling debilitated during menstruation. Others feel joyful, relieved that they aren’t pregnant. Others can have increased feelings of sexual desire.

The way people are introduced to the topic of menstruation matters a lot too, Fahs said, noting that some school sex education curriculum tells girls “very little about the process of menstruation, or why it might be kind of special, or why it might even be a good thing. And they tell boys almost nothing.”

Girls with parents who talk openly about menstruation are more likely to have positive feelings about it, Fahs said, whereas those who come from a home where it was taboo have a harder time feeling positive about the complexities of menstruation.

“When I was little, my mom would talk about her period and how it’s the worst thing ever,” said Fatima*, a junior studying electrical engineering. “And I would feel so bad for her because she was literally bleeding. So when I first got it, I was scared. And my mom wasn’t happy that I got it. I’m not sure why that was, but that’s how it was.”

Ever since then, she internalized the habit of keeping quiet about her period, especially around men.

Fatima, who is Muslim and was raised in a Middle Eastern household, said talking about periods in her culture isn’t normal. This is how she was raised, how her parents were raised, and how their parents were raised.

“Traditional,” she called it.

*This source’s last name was omitted for privacy.
Blood pressure

Fatima said her period comes with bad cramps, cold sweats, vomiting and headaches. There have been times when her period would pester her until she surrendered, having to call off work or go home early.

But despite having what some would consider extreme period symptoms, Fatima has never utilized accommodations the University offers — not because she never needed them, but because she never knew they were an option.

“That’s the socialization we give to people who menstruate,” Fahs said. “It’s like, you’re allowed to have hard periods, but you’re not allowed to ask for anything in response. You just are supposed to just endure.

“It’s patriarchy and capitalism — capitalism teaches us to ignore the needs of our bodies.”

The University says students can seek accommodations for menstruation in a few different ways.

“If a student’s personal wellbeing is affected by any circumstance, including their period, they can seek support from ASU Health and Counseling, and with their permission, receive a letter from a provider outlining the impact,” said Aaron Krasnow, associate vice president and director of ASU Counseling Services, in an email. “Students can then provide that letter to their faculty or the Dean of Students’ office to seek accommodations.”

Students can also seek accommodations through Student Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Services if they are substantially limited from doing major life activities like breathing, walking, talking, hearing, seeing, sleeping, caring for one’s self, performing manual tasks, learning, communicating, interacting with others and working.

“Students are welcome to register with our office and speak with an Accessibility Consultant to determine if accommodations may be reasonable for their situation,” Chad Price, director of SAILS, said in an email. This could include someone who is substantially limited by their period.

“Accommodations are determined on a case by case, course by course basis through an interactive process,” Price said. “Depending on the accommodation requested, the interactive process may include the faculty member.”

Menstrual products are also available in the bathrooms of main buildings on all four main ASU campuses as a result of an effort made by Undergraduate Student Government, ASU’s Women’s Coalition and University administrators.

However, at the end of 2021, the project slowed due to USG and University inaction and a lack of communication.

“I don’t want to be mean or stuck up, but (menstrual products provided by the University are) not good quality,” Fatima said. “And most of the bathrooms, from what I’ve seen, have only tampons instead of including pads. I use only pads, so I had to resort to using toilet paper because there weren’t any (pads).”

Period poverty is when a menstruator lacks access to period products, Presley said. Period poverty can be attributed to and can mean numerous things. Presley said although schools and universities accommodate the needs of most students using the restroom, when a student is menstruating, they may be left behind. Sometimes, menstruators only have toilet paper available in stalls.

The most common example of period poverty Presley sees is when someone can’t afford products, but the phenomenon is more complicated than that.

“Period poverty, though, also extends to not having the support to manage your cycle, not having the information or knowledge to manage your cycle safely and in a way that is best for you, not having access to restroom facilities and other measures that are needed to keep the products that you do have access to safe and accessible,” Presley said.

To combat period stigma, misinformation and poverty, Presley said the way people view and talk about periods in the West needs to change.

“We firmly believe in talking openly about periods, talking openly about what it looks like when folks don’t have access to period products and the type of impact that can have on their ability to function every day,” she said, “whether it’s in the school setting, whether it’s in the workplace, or if it’s even just being able to engage in day to day basic activities.”
“Imagining myself in the position of my ancestors, I felt the guilt and discontentment wash away. Why should I feel bad about something so natural and important?”
The hijab is often politicized and trivialized, but it remains deeply personal and multifaceted for these five Muslim women.

by Fatima Gabir
Illustrations by Andrea Ramirez

"Hijab, in Islam, means to, you know, cover yourself and stay modest," said Aisha Sadaat, a freshman medical studies student. "But further than that, the hijab is a kind of relationship and constant connection to Islam. It's a constant reminder of what I follow and what I value."

Hijab means something different for every Muslim. Across the Muslim diaspora, the hijab symbolizes different things, ranging from traditionalist practices to more modern views. Each Muslim woman has her own relationship with the hijab, but it remains a symbol of her religious identity.

"It's a form of identity, comfort, and security," said Safa Elhassan, a freshman studying journalism and mass communication, describing the hijab as "a walking representation of what Islam is."

Tagwa Salih, a junior studying global health, often meets people who are curious about the hijab and Islam. She said wearing the hijab gives her an opportunity to discuss Islam in a positive and uplifting way. She gets questions about why she wears it and what it means and represents, which can be great conversation starters, she said.

Since Salih was young, the hijab has been a “constant theme” in her life. She grew up around hijabi women, and as she got older, she learned more about the importance of the hijab within her religion. She said now her life feels unnatural without it.

"I couldn't wait until it was, like, my turn," Salih said. "And then, when I wore it, I just haven't looked back. It's just been like a constant in my life. This is who I am to the world, and I definitely identify with it."

Salih was taught that the hijab is like a crown — one “that has been ordained to me by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala.” It is a gift from God to be able to represent Islam publicly, she said.

Aamina Ahmed, a 2022 ASU graduate with a degree in medical microbiology, said the hijab is a way of "carrying yourself" by being modest — not only in how you dress but in your behavior as well.

"Hijab is a protection of your entire being and your character,” Ahmed said. Hijab protects you by being cautious of how you talk and act so as not to harm yourself or others, she said.

Aala Suliman, a freshman studying psychology, finds confidence in her hijab. Like Salih, the hijab is a core part of her identity. Everyone is on their own journey and has their own relationship with hijab, she said.

**Politicization of the hijab**

Since 9/11, the American perception of Islam has changed drastically, heavily influenced by news and entertainment media. The fear-mongering of the War on Terrorism increased Islamophobia in the 2000s and led to widespread harmful stereotypes of Muslims, especially Muslim women.

In addition to the Western mass media affecting views of Muslim women, laws in Islamic states like Iran and Western countries like France have also influenced global perspectives on hijab.

This has led to the hijab becoming politicized globally; debates and discussions filled with misconceptions about hijab often leave out the voices of the Muslim women wearing it.

"To see people politicize the hijab is upsetting because it’s not a political statement," Salih said. "It's an act of worship, a means
of religious expression. So to politicize it is skewing the image of Islam and the hijab in general.

The spread of Islamophobia comes from a place of ignorance and misinformation, Salih said, and it can spur many forms of violence against Muslims. But she still wears the hijab regardless of what others say or think about it.

Suliman said being Muslim has been racialized because of the spread of misinformation about the religion. Even though Suliman is Black, when she is mostly surrounded by other Black people, people still see her through the lens of negative stereotypes associated with Islam, she said.

“It’s like people judge you before we even speak,” she said.

Suliman also has to prove herself for people to see her for who she really is. Even if people are not outwardly Islamophobic, the prejudice feels internalized.

The politicization of hijab goes hand in hand with the American value of freedom of choice, Elhassan said. “The problem isn’t the idea of the hijab or the laws being put in place. Rather, it’s how the government is taking action to reprimand us,” she added.

The hijab is supposed to be a personal relationship with and connection to Islam, Sadaat said. In her opinion, that right is taken away from many Muslim women when Islam is depicted negatively.

The mass media’s portrayal of the hijab also affected Ahmed. She noticed there had been a shift in how hijab was portrayed by the media; it has become more of a fashion statement, seeing the hijab on fashion runways and in magazines.

This is cool, she said, but it also gives off the impression that there are beauty standards that must be followed.

“The whole point is that we are at the same level, where beauty isn’t valued,” said Ahmed. “But it makes us feel self-conscious because we only see models with smooth skin and skinny physiques portrayed.”

The media should not oppress women by taking away their right of choice, but it also shouldn’t be trivialized as a mainstream fashion statement, she said.

Finding sisterhood through hijab

The Muslim community encourages wearing the hijab, but sometimes for the wrong reasons, said Suliman. Oftentimes, Muslim women wear hijab because they feel pressured by their families and by the culture of Islam in general. This causes social repercussions that can lead to a girl taking off her hijab, she said.

Sometimes, wearing the hijab is encouraged “so that men can respect you, that
nobody touches you and stuff like that,” Suliman said. “Which is very discouraging to hear because hijabis still get harassed.”

With a safe space where Muslim women’s voices are heard, the Muslim community can encourage hijab in a more positive light, especially because the community motivates women to wear the hijab, Sadaat said.

Sadaat attended an Islamic school before coming to ASU. She started wearing hijab when she was 11 after seeing the “pretty older girls” wearing it and wanting to be like them.

But as she got older, the dress code at her school became more strict. Sadaat said her school focused too much on the custom of wearing the hijab rather than the meaning behind it and its importance within Islam. “If you look at it, surface level, it can distance some people from Islam and God,” she added.

Although some factors within the Muslim community discourage the hijab, the community can also be a “safety corner” for navigating Western countries like the U.S., Elhassan said.

The Muslim community is one Elhassan can belong to. Even though she attended a predominantly white, secular school most of her life, Elhassan has Muslim friends from various schools, areas, and backgrounds. The sense of comfort that comes from her religious relationships strengthens her connection to the hijab and Islam as a whole.

In contrast, Ahmed was not surrounded by fellow hijabis because of the demographics of the area she grew up in. Like Elhassan, she went to a school where there were few Muslims. Because of this, Ahmed said she felt a distinct division between her life at school and her personal life at a young age.

When Ahmed started attending ASU and realized how large the University’s Muslim student population is, the newfound community strengthened the confidence that she had in her relationship with hijab.

“Having Muslim people around you who look like you and share the same experiences is a very supportive thing when wearing hijab,” she said.

In conversations with other Muslims, Salih found people who related to being part of an underrepresented community in the U.S. This helped her relationship with the hijab “flourish” because it showed her that she was not alone.

“Being part of the Muslim community reminds me that I’m part of a sisterhood of women who wear a hijab and also women who don’t physically wear the hijab. But the idea of the hijab resonates with them in some way.”
Narrative
8,000 miles away
Crossing the chasm between LGBTQ+ identity and cultural heritage
by Madeline Nguyen
Illustrations by Biplove Baral
If there's anything that I've learned from my parents, it's that survival makes you do funny things.

It's hard for me to reconcile the image I have of them now — one that's steeped in southwestern suburbia and their achievement of the American Dream — with the stories they tell me of their childhoods spent fleeing their homes in Vietnam, torn between overcrowded refugee camps, rafts packed full with bodies and the turbulent waters of the South China Sea.

As a first-generation Asian American child growing up in the maze of strip malls and cookie-cutter suburbs surrounding Phoenix, my familial roots in a coastal country located thousands of miles away almost seemed to be cloaked in layers of myth.

When I was younger, I used to envision the tropical fruit trees that grew in my mom's backyard: brightly colored papaya and mango and dragonfruit, a sharp contrast from the dry brush and spiny cacti that define the desert. On the bone-dry days that accompany Arizona's sweltering summers, I sometimes wonder if my father is ever haunted by childhood memories of tropical summers back home, where the air is so heavy it hugs you with a layer of mist.

When my parents first boarded boats as children during the fallout of the Vietnam War, at the height of the Indochina refugee crisis, to seek fortunes abroad, they lost more than their status and their homes and the many cousins they'd never see again.

Somewhere in the over 8,000-mile-long journey to America, some integral part of my family identity also died. I'm reminded of that permanent loss every time I struggle to communicate with my grandparents in their native language, or bashfully order in English at a Vietnamese restaurant, or ask my parents to describe the so-called home country I've never been to.

Because, despite the features on my face and my quintessentially Vietnamese surname, I am not Vietnamese in the way that my parents and grandparents and everyone else in my family are. To my traditional extended family, the marks of my Americanness are branded onto my soul. I can be fiercely individualistic — perhaps even headstrong. My broken Vietnamese is tinged with a flattened American accent, so the words clumsily tumble from my tongue.

And I identify as queer.

The in-between

It's still imprinted in my memory whenever I close my eyes — that summer after fifth grade I spent in San Francisco when I interacted with the queer community for the first time. It was one of those summers when time moves slow and sticky, like honey, the entire city awash in a bright, golden haze.

I was a gangly, awkward 10-year-old visiting my aunt in the city. Before then, I was just a kid from suburban Arizona. I grew up spending sleepy Sunday afternoons in Catholic Mass, counting down the minutes until my family would grab dim sum together afterward. I had heard the word "gay" in passing before — almost always used negatively — but I had no real grasp of its meaning.

I've now lost much of that first trip to the distorting lens of memory, but I still distinctly remember peering out the car window one afternoon as we crested down San Francisco's hilly streets, transfixed by the city as it rushed by. As we cruised down Market Street, I watched as the densely clustered Victorian homes and steep sidewalks suddenly gave way to a wide open plaza with a massive rainbow flag planted at its center.

The flag fluttered like a banner in the Bay Area breeze, its bright colors bleeding into the sky. I craned my head out the window to see it in its totality.

"There's the gay district," one of my aunts whispered to me — quietly so the rest of my family wouldn't hear — as she pointed derisively at the flag in the distance. I nodded, feeling as if she had just revealed some dirty secret. Her tone dripped with a certain illitness — the sense that this was something to talk about behind closed doors — so I withdrew from the window and said nothing back.

We drove on. The rainbow flag disappeared from my view just as quickly as it had come.

While Americans' attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community have improved in recent years, coming to terms with one's queer identity can still feel othering. But coming from an international background as the daughter of immigrant parents, I felt as if it were almost an act of cultural betrayal. In fact, many people of color and immigrants never publicly come out for fear of homophobia, according to the National LGBTQ Task Force, a social justice nonprofit.

While my own parents are, thankfully, extremely supportive, queer identity is essentially invisible to much of my extended family due to cultural norms that paint queerness as a white, Western concept.

As a first-generation American, I've always been acutely aware I'm a product of the in-between, torn between two different cultures and nations — two ends of the Earth. The balancing act, the conformer, the rebel, the outlier. I may live my life in America, but my heritage lies in a foreign country that would've been mine in a different life, if it weren't for history and circumstance.

Growing up, I felt like a living culture war. Coming to terms with my own queer identity was just another battle among many. My queerness served as a reminder of all that severed me from my cultural roots. I had already lost so much of my cultural heritage — now, would I lose my sexual identity as well?

In Asian cultures, the family isn't only the foundation of personal identity. Life in the West is largely individualistic, but Asian cultures are generally described as collectivist — every person is seen as a cell within some wider
organism. Individuals are expected to sacrifice for the good of the whole, viewing their own lives in relation to the greater community. There’s a beauty in family, in feeling like you’re a part of something whole, like a single thread interwoven into a tapestry.

In Vietnamese, your family name is always introduced first, followed by middle name, and then personal name last. I would be Nguyễn Yến Madeline. People would know me as a Nguyễn first, before they’d know me as me.

But even though family is the root of identity in Vietnam, the type of family I’ll have in the future is culturally invisible. Although the country lifted its ban on same-sex marriages in 2015, such unions aren’t protected under the law, or even recognized.

My own future family may not have a chồng — a husband — or biological children. But I hope one day my grandparents and aunts and uncles will still see it as a family nonetheless.

**Coming to terms**

When Jesse Purice’s parents fell in love in Bucharest, the heart of Romania’s totalitarian regime during the country’s revolutionary era, life had no shortage of challenges. As a teenager, the junior studying computer science would listen as her mother regaled her with stories of her parents’ past in a foreign country. Purice only had the images that her mind conjured up to guide her as her mother recalled memories of the violent Romanian Revolution and the haunting image of the corpse that was broadcasted on Romanian television — the remains of the country’s executed dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu.

But after her parents moved to America to escape the crushing uncertainty that followed the crumbling of Romania’s decades-old authoritarian regime, the challenges didn’t stop.

In the years that followed, Purice’s family found that a new country came with new difficulties. Living in America had driven a cultural wedge between Purice’s parents and their first-generation children, and the family struggled to bridge the rift, even as Purice was coming to terms with her identity as a transgender woman.

“In middle school, I started questioning my gender,” she said. “One time, it was just in a dream. I just saw myself as a woman. I was like, ‘Wait a minute.’”

Years later, Purice said she’s undoubtedly found pride in her identity, but she still struggles with being open about her true self when she’s with her family. Only her mom and one of her sisters know she’s transgender, and she’s gone to great pains to hide her gender identity from her dad, who she said is homophobic. The need to change out of the women’s clothes she wears in public to ensure her safety when she returns home weighs heavily on Purice’s mind whenever she goes out.

“If I could dress however I want, I’ve come to the conclusion that this is how I want to dress,” she said, motioning down to her black dress and matching blazer.

Even though Romania decriminalized homosexuality over 20 years ago to qualify for the European Union, the country has lagged behind in protecting its LGBTQ+ citizens from prejudice and violence, according to a 2020 report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. LGBTQ+ Romanians experience the second-highest rate of physical and sexual attacks in the EU, with one in every two transgender Romanians experiencing harassment for their gender identity.

But despite the challenges LGBTQ+ Romanians face, Purice takes comfort in the fluidity of culture. If she was able to reclaim her Romanian heritage over 5,000 miles away in America, she believes Romanian culture can “turn the page” too in how it views the LGBTQ+ community.

“It’s not going to happen now,” she said. “But maybe eventually. I know that some people think that things should happen immediately, and that would be ideal, but we should be proud of any kind of progress that we get.”

Laura Loriquer Munoz knew she liked girls when she was barely able to read. But growing up in Colombia, the graduate student studying global management found it difficult to envision any same-sex relationships — especially relationships without any men.

“Colombia is a really misogynist country,” she said. “So if you’re a woman, you have to please the guys — basically serve them. And, well, you keep that in your mind even when you don’t really realize it.”

Colombia’s patriarchal norms have led to a history of violence, according to the Humanitarian Advisory Group, an international aid organization. There, a woman is killed in an act of femicide every two days. Beyond that, Munoz said life in Colombia is largely male-centric, leaving the type of life she envisions for herself relegated to the cultural sidelines.

“My mom supports me, but she still has this idea of a family with the girl and the guy and the kids,” she said. “But families aren’t like that anymore.”

Feeling the social pressure to be attracted to men, Munoz first came out as bisexual when she was a teenager. Over the years, she’s reclaimed her true identity as a lesbian, but it’s still difficult to be open about her sexuality in the largely Catholic country.

Even though Colombia is one of the 32 countries worldwide where same-sex marriage is legal, religious attitudes still fuel prejudice. A 2020 survey conducted by UCLA found that one in five of the country’s LGBTQ+ people had undergone conversion therapy; for transgender Colombians, the rate is even higher, at roughly one in three.

“I agree with religion, but I don’t agree when people don’t accept you for who you are and they judge you for that,” Munoz said.

Despite the issues, Munoz has seen
attitudes slowly change for the better. She never even expected her mom to support her sexuality, but they’ve come to a shared understanding despite some of the deep-rooted cultural norms her mom still lives by. For all the people in her life, Munoz stands as living proof that Colombian heritage and LGBTQ+ identity can exist side by side.

“I embrace both,” she said. “I’m from Colombia, so if I don’t embrace that, I wouldn’t be able to embrace anything else. They go together.”

For decades in America, queer culture blossomed while remaining hidden in plain sight, often just under the nose of mainstream society. LGBTQ+ people interacted in private and lived much of their lives behind closed doors, often only coming out to be their true selves while cloaked in the shadows of the night.

But today, eight years after same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide, at a time when a record number of Americans are identifying as LGBTQ+, secrecy shouldn’t seem like a matter of survival anymore. I can’t help but feel the bite of shame and a twinge of cowardice whenever I’m reminded that my extended family doesn’t know I’m queer — and maybe never will.

My family is the closest to Vietnam I’ll ever be, the closest to my roots that I’ll ever be able to trace, the closest thing to a home that I’ve ever known. I can’t risk losing that — not when so much has been lost already — even if it means hiding my true self for the rest of my life.

My parents taught me that survival makes you do funny things.

I learned that in my own time too.
A rocky road

Local organizations create spaces in the music industry for young women, girls and gender nonconforming artists

by Savannah Dagupion
Illustrations by Biplove Baral

As a single mother with a full-time job, Ty Seibel needed to find a safe and affordable place for her then-8-year-old daughter to be throughout the day over the summer.

Harmoniously, she found Girls Rock! Phoenix in its first year of operation when she saw a screening of a Girls Rock Camp Alliance documentary at the local Changing Hands Bookstore.

Girls Rock! Phoenix is a nonprofit organization that provides girls and gender nonconforming kids access to music education.

Inspired by the women in punk rock from her formative years, Seibel signed her daughter up.

“When I saw that there was a camp coming to town that promoted the sort of ethos that women in rock that I grew up with were all about, I was really excited,” she said.

But underlying summer camp fees lingered. At the time, Seibel was unable to afford a lot of things, including the price of a summer camp.

“If you’re a single working parent or even a family with a certain income threshold, it’s really hard to make stuff like that happen,” she said.

Luckily, Girls Rock! Phoenix has fees on a sliding scale, meaning families in situations like Seibel’s only pay what they’re able to based on their income.

“I feel strongly that offering opportunities like that to families that may not otherwise be able to afford them is really important,” she said. “Now that I am in a position where I can afford something like that, I’m very excited to pay more than I can afford to help those who can’t afford it.”

She added that Girls Rock! Phoenix teaches “the kinds of things that we want girls and gender nonconforming kids to learn, so that they feel empowered and brave and like they can take up space.”

Women in music

Despite the raging popularity of female artists like Taylor Swift, Rihanna and Beyoncé, women in the music industry are still largely underrepresented.

From 2012 to 2021, about one in five top music artists were women, according to USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative’s “Inclusion in the Recording Studio?” study. As for music careers behind the scenes, 12.7% of songwriters were women and 2.8% of producers were women.

“In an industry where women’s skills are discounted and they are sexualized or fearful for their safety, the popular charts reflect the reality that women’s contributions are minimized and they continue to be sexualized and stereotyped by their colleagues,” the study said.

Alexis Edmonds, the community coordinator at Girls Rock! Phoenix, said women are often expected to play a specific role in the music industry.

“It comes down to the tone that people talk about the musicians with,” she said. “It seems like men and masc-presenting people never really have their space that they take up in the community questioned, and women have to fight for so much more.”

To combat these barriers, local music organizations are working to provide women
and gender nonconforming individuals better access and opportunities to help them enter and succeed in the industry.

**Beatz by Girlz**

Beatz by Girlz is a worldwide organization that empowers "the next generation of women and gender-expansive people through music and technology," according to its website.

Founded by Erin Barra-Jean, the director of ASU's popular music program, Beats by Girlz has about 35 chapters from Malawi to Turkey to El Salvador.

"(Beats by Girlz) was born out of the sad reality that there was nobody that looked like me that was working in music production or music technology," she said. "We just want women and gender minorities to be able to do anything they want. And the tools that we're using are technology and music. When you can pair a creative skill set with a technical skill set and communication skills, you can have any job in the world. And we want women to have jobs in the future."

The organization started in 2013 with Barra-Jean in New York City teaching beat making to kids through online videos and curriculum. Then she expanded to doing classes and summer camps through The Lower Eastside Girls Club while fundraising through Indiegogo, a crowdfunding website.

"I think the reason why we've grown so much, and in so many places, is that … this is a very saturated area to be working in right now," Barra-Jean said. "And instead of everybody creating their own nonprofit, if you want to have impactful work, we'll be in the business of helping people help themselves."

Now, the organization is able to support its chapters and local communities by helping them fundraise, providing music curriculum and giving them access to music technology through partners like Ableton, a music software company.

With chapters at places like Phoenix Conservatory of Music and ASU, their programming spans kindergarten to adulthood.

"It's very education-based at (the K-12) level," Barra-Jean said. "Then at the college level … there's a lot of community work that plays into it, like let's all be together and create spaces and communities that are for us and by us and meant for us. … At the community level and for adults, it's much more workshops, networking opportunities and professional development."

Barra-Jean added that it's important that her program is holistic and contiguous because oftentimes music education disappears after grade 12 or after college.

Beats by Girlz at ASU is the only college-specific chapter. Stemming from chapter lead Kailin Kentigian's dream to start a music organization for women, Beats by Girlz ASU began last August.

"I wanted to create an opportunity for not only myself, but for other people on campus to have experience in the industry without having to be there in any of those main (Beats by Girlz chapters)," the junior studying project management said.

"This is the age group when we have our entire world ahead of us and we sometimes need an extra push to feel what (our passions and interests) are," said Anna Dale, Beats by Girlz ASU’s communications director and a junior studying microbiology and music performance.

After only being active for less than a year, Beats by Girlz ASU has held curriculum meetings, social meetings and a fundraiser.

"A lot of hobbies are so competitive now," Kentigian said. "Think about dance or sports — if you're not into it by the age of 10, good luck trying to get on any team. So learning a new skill, picking up a new hobby, finding a new passion kind of feels impossible."

Although this makes the ASU chapter unique, Barra-Jean said Beats by Girlz is about
empowerment, and that the issues women getting into music face overlap with broader problems.

The world “has been made to accommodate men,” Barra-Jean said. “When you have to navigate a culture or a community where you’re othered or you don’t have people who are like you to support you, that colors everything — from the way you enter a room to how you’re treated to the way that you’re gonna act.

“And that gets layered beyond gender. There’s sexuality, there’s race … it’s not just a gender issue. It’s highly intersectional.”

“One of our goals is giving people the platform to pursue their passions, especially marginalized identities — that’s what we are here for,” Kentigian said. “Another one of our goals is to give people opportunity — help them pursue their passions and find a new hobby.”

**Girls Rock! Phoenix**

Seibel, ASU’s assistant director of communication at Academic Enterprise Communications, currently serves on the board for Girls Rock! Phoenix. Her 14-year-old daughter is looking forward to returning to the organization’s first summer camp since 2019.

Campers go on a one-week retreat to dip their toes into the music industry. They can choose between voice, guitar, bass, drums or keyboard; if they choose an instrument, they are issued one for free.

Aside from music classes, Girls Rock! Phoenix holds self-defense, self-care, storytelling, poetry and zine-making workshops. Seibel said the camp experience is both inspiring and enriching as she shared the account of her daughter’s first experience at camp in 2017.

On the first day of camp, Seibel said her daughter went to her dad’s house and wanted him to pull out records of female-led punk rock bands like Sleater-Kinney and Bikini Kill. “She wanted him to pull all those out so she could start exploring them,” she said. She also recalled her daughter wanting to cut her hair and being encouraged by the organization to experiment and be creative through music.

“She also would come home with these little index cards with a musician’s name on it — the one that sticks out to me is Sister Rosetta Tharpe — and she would want to research who this is,” Seibel said. “It was just really exciting to see her so interested in the women in rock that came before us.”

At the end of the week, girls learn how to make a logo for their bands and screen-print it onto t-shirts they can wear for their final showcase — the pinnacle of summer camp.

“One of the benefits that (my daughter) got was she felt like she could get loud on stage and really command an audience,” Seibel said. “And I think she caught the fact that the bandmates were so encouraging, and the women who volunteer at this camp are incredible. … So even if she messed up or forgot something, it didn’t matter. She was supported.”

Aside from camp, the organization hosts open mic nights and karaoke parties throughout the year.

“We really try to create as diverse and robust as a community as possible, so recruiting is a huge part of the work that we do, so that we can have a community in our camp that represents the community that we see around us in the greater Phoenix area,” Edmonds said.

“Just like in so many other areas of life, it’s always important to show girls and gender nonconforming people that our voices matter and that we can speak up and that we can take up space in all different types of communities.”
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