

Minorities (ethnic and religious)

You may not be considered a minority in your home country, but by going overseas you may become one. In some cases, your outward appearance can also make you stand out. Sometimes the locals' curiosity, ignorance or misunderstanding of you can be unpleasant. If a comment offends you, be tactful with your response. Remember that some comments are simply made out of ignorance, not malice. Ask your program administrators if you should be aware of anything in particular related to ethnic, political or religious conflict.

Students with special needs

If you are a student with special needs and suffer from cognitive, hearing, learning, mental, physical, or other conditions, be sure to discuss your study away trip with your program advisor and counselor about particular medications or additional services you may need while overseas. Countries outside of the U.S. may not have as many provisions to help you with (such as wheelchair ramps or signs translated to braille). [Mobility International U.S.A.](#) is an organization dedicated to providing helpful services to students with disabilities looking to travel overseas. Visit their website for information on how they can help.

Also note that other countries' views of such special needs may not be as tolerant. Whether their actions or words are out of ignorance or out of malice, it is important for you to understand their background and respond tactfully. Talk to your program advisor for more information on what to be aware of.

being a woman overseas

Well, women, there's no shortage of you studying away; you are 65% of U.S. students abroad, and number over 100,000 a year. As an American woman, studying overseas is just one of the many opportunities you have to experience life and transform yourself into the person you'd like to be. But as you travel, remember that women are perceived and treated differently from culture to culture—and may not have the same day-to-day lives that you do.

Living overseas, your close encounters with a new culture may challenge your most deeply-held beliefs—your sense of good and bad, right and wrong—which is a big part of the learning experience. Be open-minded, learn to adapt to the society around you, and behave in ways that will keep you safe. And don't worry too much: women study abroad all the time without facing serious issues. You, like the women before you, will become part of defining how people abroad perceive American women...and the wider world will become part of defining who you are.

differing gender roles

You know the reality: different people have different ideas about what it means to be a woman. Most American women think of gender as only one of a number of factors that define personal identity. In our society, gender is usually less important to a person's identity than things like educational level, socioeconomic standing, professional accomplishments, spiritual beliefs, and creativity. The principle of equality between the sexes is almost universally accepted, and U.S. women expect that just societies will ensure equal opportunity for women.

So, it's important to recognize that some cultures rely on gender as a primary way to define identity, though how that manifests itself in attitudes and behavior varies widely. In some cultures, attitudes toward women are similar to U.S. attitudes. But others deny the equality of men and women in one aspect or another. For example, some traditional cultures enshrine motherhood while restricting women from participating in the wide range of activities they do in the U.S.

If you study in one of these more restrictive societies, you might be surprised at the extent your gender can

shape the opportunities you have. In the most extreme cases, there might be certain places you simply can't go and things you simply can't do. Even U.S. women comfortable with traditional family roles can find it challenging to live and study in such a society, so be ready to learn, analyze, and adapt.

unwanted attention

Unwanted attention can range from a nuisance to a serious threat of danger. Get set to learn first-hand how widely standards of behavior can vary from culture to culture. What might be considered acceptable or even friendly in one place might be socially inappropriate or even illegal in another. So be prepared to encounter behavior that might surprise you, and be sure not to judge people's actions from only an American point of view. In some places, open staring at women is common, and comments directed at women on the street can range from the sexually suggestive to the explicit. Men in some countries may go so far as to touch or grab a woman in public. This behavior may be frowned on to some extent—local women especially may be offended—but it persists.

So, how do you respond? There's no simple answer. Men can be forceful, and the word "no" doesn't always carry the same weight it does in the U.S. Don't be frustrated if you try respond in several different ways that would be considered appropriate in the U.S.—glaring, shouting, ignoring—and none have the desired effect. Cultures differ, and there is no one response that would be effective in all of them.

A good rule is to put your personal safety first. If you're unsure about what is culturally appropriate—or lack a sure command of the local language—you could easily act more passively than you normally would. Ask on-site program staff and local women what sorts of behavior provoke unwanted attention and observe how local women deflect that attention. Avoid the common problem of placing yourself in escalating romantic situations because you're concerned about offending the other person. It's honorable to be culturally appropriate, but it's better to risk upsetting another person than to risk physical or emotional harm.

the "easy" stereotype

You may not think of yourself as easy, but many other cultures have the impression that U.S. women are loose and looking for sexual adventure. Where does that impression come from? First, both female and male U.S. students abroad are more active sexually, and more likely to be open about their sexual practices, than local people in their host countries. Then, there is the portrayal of American women in movies and television programs that are distributed worldwide. Finally, there is what people themselves observe. According to a recent survey, female American students are more likely to be sexually active while abroad than their male counterparts—and the behavior of some study abroad participants, especially at popular destinations, has done its part to contribute to the stereotype of the easy American woman.

The way women interact with men in the U.S. may not be as socially acceptable overseas. It's important to realize that a number of non-sexual behaviors common in the U.S. may suggest that you're "available" while overseas. In the U.S., when you look a man in the eye while he's talking, it shows you're listening. In certain places, if you look a man in the eye while he's talking, it's a signal that you want to have sex with him. Commonly misinterpreted behavior includes looking directly at people, whether in bars or on the street, smiling openly at strangers, and visiting nightspots without being accompanied by a man.

dressing the part

You can avoid some unwanted attention by dressing as local women do. The informal warm-weather dress you wear at home—tank tops and shorts, sundresses—may be culturally inappropriate and attract the sort of unwanted sexual attention you're working to discourage. That casual dress is much less common abroad; you'll find that women in many places dress formally in social situations that commonly allow casual dress in the U.S. In certain places, you'll see this cultural difference in the extreme: women dress extremely modestly by Western standards and are never addressed by strangers.

getting close, staying safe

Despite the need to be careful, it's not necessary to hold everyone you meet abroad at arm's length. Part of immersing yourself may be dating a local man or woman. Post-sexual revolution, it's practically impossible to generalize about dating and sex—even when you're talking about people of the same culture. Once you add the complexity of different cultures coming together, there are really no consistent behaviors or universal responses, but this advice may help if you get romantically involved with someone of another culture:

- **observe local women**
 - **how they and their romantic interests act, and the consequences of their actions**
 - **how their behavior changes from one social situation to another**
- **be aware of cultural clues**
 - **a woman's willingness to be alone with a man can signal a willingness to have sex**
 - **“no means no” will not necessarily slow sexual advances; in some cultures, “no” is what “nice girls” are taught to say prior to surrendering to advances**
 - **learn what behaviors are associated with prostitution and avoid them**
 - **local people may ostracize a woman who has sex outside marriage—starting with the man she sleeps with**
 - **asking to be “just friends” with someone whose romantic advances have been refused may be met with incomprehension rather than acceptance**
 - **local females may resent foreign women because they believe their men are chasing after them getting close, staying safe**
- **seek advice**
 - **befriend an older—or younger—woman and ask her honest advice about your interests in other men or women**
 - **if you have a bad experience, let the resident staff of your program know; they can help with any physical or psychological support you need**
- **control your own behavior**
 - **listen to your instincts—which may mean saying “no” and leaving**
 - **promise yourself you're not going to have too much to drink, and stick to the promise; negotiating inter-cultural romance is complicated enough without losing control because of alcohol**
 - **agree with a small number of reliable friends that none of you will leave a social event without the others**
 - **don't act in ways you wouldn't at home because you won't see these people once you return**

sexual and gender expression overseas

Studying away is a golden opportunity to live another culture, soak up a second language, and transform yourself as a citizen and as a human being. If you're lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexed, asexual or an ally (LGBTQIA, for short) this could include experimenting with and expressing alternate identities, both sexual and non-sexual.

It is important for LGBTQIA students to be aware that the way sexual identities are defined and understood will vary by country and culture. You might want to consider how a possible threat of discrimination or punishment might affect your experience or activities when you choose a study away location and program. Of course you'll want to satisfy your academic and extracurricular needs, but also evaluate the aspects of the environment that could affect how you express your sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQIA life exists almost everywhere, but the degree to which it's visible at first glance varies. As you get to know people and places more intimately, you'll usually find a plethora of welcoming institutions and hangouts. Approach expressing

your sexual identity as just another cross-cultural challenge. Be positive and flexible, use sensitivity and openness in every interaction, and your time away will be the most satisfying of your life.

Before we talk about how your sexual identity fits into your study away experience, let's make sure we're all using terms in the same way—a challenge even within the U.S., never mind outside it. It's important to distinguish gender identity, the sense that a person is male or female, from sexual orientation, the sense that a person claims a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual identity. Gender identity is a person's sense of being masculine, feminine, in-between, or androgynous—a sense that is independent from biological sex and usually manifests itself by the age of three or four. Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, physical, and/or sexual attraction and the expression of that attraction—which does not manifest itself until much later in life, usually after puberty and often not until adulthood. And gender expression—the way you communicate your gender to others—is independent as well. Many equate being gay with looking or acting effeminate and being lesbian with looking or acting mannish—or even think gay men want to be women and lesbians want to be men—but the spectrum of gender expression is more complex than that.

cultural mores from place to place

While studying away, you'll be constantly comparing your host culture to what you're accustomed to at home, and that goes for everything from what you eat to who you meet to where and how you live. Here in the U.S., many hurdles to full acceptance and legal recognition still exist, but young people are finding the strength, resources, and acceptance to live their true sexual identities at a younger age than ever before. This doesn't mean heterosexism (the belief that all people are or should be heterosexual) or homophobia (the irrational fear of homosexuality or behaviors or beliefs that don't conform to traditional sex roles) have been eradicated. Problems still exist in the U.S. on personal, social, institutional, and societal levels, and there's no question that some LGBTQIAs still live lives of silence, invisibility, and even violence—but there's also no question that gays and lesbians are more visible in U.S. culture and society than ever before. As you travel and study overseas, you'll find that local laws and customs afford you fewer freedoms than you've come to expect in some places and more in others.

Part of living and studying away is adapting to the customs—and of course complying with the laws—of your host country and its predominant culture or cultures. In some societies, LGBTQIA culture is more clandestine than it is in the U.S. For example, in China, same-sex public affection is much more common than opposite-sex public affection, so most Chinese LGBTQIAs remain cleverly disguised and somewhat closeted. To the discerning eye, two men or two women holding hands and smiling at each other in a certain way are most definitely lovers, but to the typical Chinese eye, they are nothing more than friends. In other societies, like the Dutch, a wide range of gender identities and expressions is visible and accepted.

an opportunity for expression

Overseas, you'll find a new way of seeing your place in the world, and that might include new freedom to express your identity. You may have the opportunity to self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.—or you may feel sent back into the closet because the environment or host culture is not conducive to outward expression of your sexuality or gender. Depending on where you study, you could encounter attitudes ranging from full acceptance of all forms of identity and expression to severe homophobia or transphobia. Striking a balance between sincere expression of your sexuality and gender and local norms can be a challenge, particularly in cultures where little tolerance exists. On the other hand, in some places where the broader cultural milieu is conservative, liberal laws may exist to protect people with differing sexual identities.

to come out or not to come out

There isn't a single, overarching rule for how to express your true self while away. As in any cross-cultural situation, it pays to observe, be sensitive to local customs, and express yourself appropriately and respectfully.

If you come to the experience with your own sexual politics and a desire to actively challenge local cultural norms, that could complicate your interactions with people both inside and outside the classroom. Be true to yourself, but stay open to every learning opportunity.

Most students find their study experience is what they make of it. At first, you may be apprehensive about coming out, but if your situation is typical, once you do, you'll have a positive experience filled with friends, fun, and understanding.

Your program staff is there for support, so ask them for advice about the local culture as you consider taking the plunge—a plunge similar to the decision to study away in the first place.

Actually, you may be surprised or disappointed to find that your sexual identity can be overshadowed by your nationality in the eyes of your host culture. Quite often, LGBTQI Americans who speak in English overseas are seen simply as Americans, without regard to their sexual identity or gender expression. Remember that your sexual identity is just one part of the complete identity that makes you who you are.

tips from those before you

choose wisely and plan

As you choose a program, take the location's entire environment into consideration in addition to whether or not your academic needs are being met. Be as open and honest as you can with your study away advisor and program staff so they can tell you about any culture-specific sexuality or gender issues you need to keep in mind as you choose. Ask how the host culture interprets and handles different sexual identities and gender expressions. What laws exist that affect LGBTQIAs? What resources does each program have to deal with issues that could arise and affect your housing, health, safety, or support services?

adapt to your new environment

While away, you'll be a guest of your host country. To engage fully, you must be willing to balance your own cultural values with those of your hosts. By actively listening to locals, you'll become sensitive to subtle cues that indicate what is considered acceptable behavior. Hopefully, you won't need to hide aspects of your true identity, but you might need to be more careful of your behavior.

observe local manners

Understand when it's appropriate to discuss your sexual identity or gender expression with fellow students or hosts. What is commonplace discussion in public and private settings in the U.S. may not be considered polite conversation in your host culture. Same-sex marriage, gay adoption, same-sex partner benefits, and gays in the military may not be subjects of open debate overseas. Are all forms of sexual or gender expression, including kissing or holding hands (whether gay or straight) considered a private matter? Is any sexual topic a social taboo? Consider what can or should be discussed publicly in the classroom, in your housing situation, at social events, and in interactions with the local community. Don't take omissions or silences as intolerance, though. Be flexible, trust your instincts, and ask your on-site program director if you have questions.

stay healthy

Doing what you can to stay in good health is essential whether you're at home or away. Eat well, sleep enough, exercise regularly, and practice responsible sexual behavior to guard yourself against sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, and undesirable social consequences. The incidence of HIV/AIDS is much higher in some parts of the world than it is in the U.S., and it knows no boundaries of country, color, or sexuality. So know your HIV status, learn safe sex practices, and communicate openly with sexual partners. If you need health care overseas, choose a provider who is sensitive to sexual and gender issues if that could be relevant to your needs. If you're transgender, research options for continuing treatments while away and restrictions on traveling with certain prescription medications.

be safe

Local laws and practices differ greatly, and the reality is that how you express your sexuality and gender could pose safety concerns while away. Make sure you know the laws relating to sexuality and gender expression; if you're transgender, note legal issues related to travel and immigration. Homosexuality remains illegal in some countries, and even in countries without legal barriers, cultural norms may prohibit outward expression of your sexual identity. In some places, even the perception of being gay or lesbian could put you at additional risk. These risks may include outward hostility from locals or harassment from even law enforcement officials. The good news is that if you come to your study away experience with good planning and keen understanding of the issues, your time away should be as healthy, safe, and meaningful as any student's.

groups that can help

Rainbow SIG (a Special Interest Group of NAFSA) counsels and supports international and study away students and international education professionals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Resources for students and advisors alike can be found at <http://www.rainbowsig.org/>.

Outright Action International fights for the human rights for LGBTIQ people everywhere. OutRight works at the international, regional and national levels to research, document, defend, and advance human rights for LGBTIQ people around the world. Learn more at <https://outrightinternational.org/>.

The International Lesbian and Gay Association is a worldwide federation of national and local groups dedicated to achieving equal rights for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people everywhere. ILGA focuses public and government attention on cases of discrimination by supporting programs and protest actions, asserting diplomatic pressure, providing information, and working with international organizations and media. More is online at www.ilga.org.

The US Department of State has helpful information for those travelling overseas as well. Learn more at <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/go/lgbt.html>