History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Social Movements

Bonnie J. Morris, PhD
George Washington University
Washington, D.C.


Most historians agree that there is evidence of homosexual activity and same-sex love, whether such relationships were accepted or persecuted, in every documented culture.

Social movements, organizing around the acceptance and rights of persons who might today identify as LGBT or queer, began as responses to centuries of persecution by church, state and medical authorities. Where homosexual activity or deviance from established gender roles/dress was banned by law or traditional custom, such condemnation might be communicated through sensational public trials, exile, medical warnings and language from the pulpit. These paths of persecution entrenched homophobia for centuries—but also alerted entire populations to the existence of difference. Whether an individual recognized they, too, shared this identity and were at risk, or dared to speak out for tolerance and change, there were few organizations or resources
before the scientific and political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Gradually, the growth of a public media and ideals of human rights drew together activists from all walks of life, who drew courage from sympathetic medical studies, banned literature, emerging sex research and a climate of greater democracy. By the 20th century, a movement in recognition of gays and lesbians was underway, abetted by the social climate of feminism and new anthropologies of difference.

However, throughout 150 years of homosexual social movements (roughly from the 1870s to today), leaders and organizers struggled to address the very different concerns and identity issues of gay men, women identifying as lesbians, and others identifying as gender variant or nonbinary. White, male and Western activists whose groups and theories gained leverage against homophobia did not necessarily represent the range of racial, class and national identities complicating a broader LGBT agenda. Women were often left out altogether.

What is the pre-history of LGBT activism? Most historians agree that there is evidence of homosexual activity and same-sex love, whether such relationships were accepted or persecuted, in every documented culture. We know that homosexuality existed in ancient Israel simply because it is prohibited in the Bible, whereas it flourished between both men and women in Ancient Greece. Substantial evidence also exists for individuals who lived at least part of their lives as a different gender than assigned at birth. From the lyrics of same-sex desire inscribed by Sappho in the seventh century BCE to youths raised as the opposite sex in cultures ranging from Albania to Afghanistan; from the “female husbands” of Kenya to the Native American “Two-Spirit,” alternatives to the Western male-female and heterosexual binaries thrived across millennia and culture. These realities gradually became known to the West via travelers’ diaries, the church records of missionaries, diplomats’ journals, and in reports by medical anthropologists. Such eyewitness accounts in the era before other media were of course riddled with the biases of the (often) Western or white observer, and added to beliefs that homosexual practices were other, foreign, savage, a medical issue, or evidence of a lower racial hierarchy. The peaceful flowering of early trans or bisexual acceptance in different indigenous civilizations met with opposition from European and Christian colonizers.

In the age of European exploration and empire-building, Native American, North African and Pacific Islander cultures accepting of “Two-Spirit” people or same-sex love shocked European invaders who objected to any deviation from a limited understanding of “masculine” and “feminine” roles. The European powers enforced their own criminal codes against what was called sodomy in the New World: the first known case of homosexual activity receiving a death sentence in North America occurred in 1566, when the Spanish executed a Frenchman in Florida. Against the emerging backdrop of national power and Christian faith, what might have been learned about same-sex love or gender identity was buried in scandal. Ironically, both wartime conflict between emerging nations and the departure or deaths of male soldiers left women behind to live together and fostered strong alliances between men as well. Same-sex companionship thrived where it was frowned upon for unmarried, unrelated males and females to mingle or socialize freely. Women’s relationships in particular escaped scrutiny since there was no threat of pregnancy. Nonetheless, in much of the world, female sexual activity and sensation were curtailed wherever genital circumcision practices made clitoridectomy an ongoing custom.

Where European dress—a clear marker of gender—was enforced by missionaries, we find another complicated history of both gender identity and resistance. Biblical interpretation made it illegal for
a woman to wear pants or a man to adopt female dress, and sensationalized public trials warned against “deviants” but also made such martyrs and heroes popular: Joan of Arc is one example, and the chilling origins of the word “faggot” include a stick of wood used in public burnings of gay men. Despite the risks of defying severe legal codes, cross-dressing flourished in early modern Europe and America. Women and girls, economically oppressed by the sexism which kept them from jobs and economic/education opportunities designated for men only, might pass as male in order to gain access to coveted experiences or income. This was a choice made by many women who were not necessarily transgender in identity. Women “disguised” themselves as men, sometimes for extended periods of years, in order to fight in the military (Deborah Sampson), to work as pirates (Mary Read and Anne Bonney), attend medical school, etc. Both men and women who lived as a different gender were often only discovered after their deaths, as the extreme differences in male vs. female clothing and grooming in much of Western culture made “passing” surprisingly easy in certain environments. Moreover, roles in the arts where women were banned from working required that men be recruited to play female roles, often creating a high-status, competitive market for those we might today identify as transwomen, in venues from Shakespeare’s theatre to Japanese Kabuki to the Chinese opera. This acceptance of performance artists, and the popularity of “drag” humor cross-culturally, did not necessarily mark the start of transgender advocacy, but made the arts an often accepting sanctuary for LGBT individuals who built theatrical careers based around disguise and illusion.

The era of sexology studies is where we first see a small, privileged cluster of medical authorities begin promoting a limited tolerance of those born “invert.” In Western history, we find little formal study of what was later called homosexuality before the 19th century, beyond medical texts identifying women with large clitorises as “tribades” and severe punishment codes for male homosexual acts. Early efforts to understand the range of human sexual behavior came from European doctors and scientists including Carl von Westphal (1869), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1882) and Havelock Ellis (1897). Their writings were sympathetic to the concept of a homosexual or bisexual orientation occurring naturally in an identifiable segment of humankind, but the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis also labeled a “third sex” degenerate and abnormal. Sigmund Freud, writing in the same era, did not consider homosexuality an illness or a crime and believed bisexuality to be an innate aspect beginning with undetermined gender development in the womb. Yet Freud also felt that lesbian desires were an immaturity women could overcome through heterosexual marriage and male dominance. These writings gradually trickled down to a curious public through magazines and presentations, reaching men and women desperate to learn more about those like themselves, including some like English writer Radclyffe Hall who willingly accepted the idea of being a “congenital invert.” German researcher Magnus Hirschfeld went on to gather a broader range of information by founding Berlin’s Institute for Sexual Science, Europe’s best library archive of materials on gay cultural history. His efforts, and Germany’s more liberal laws and thriving gay bar scene between the two World Wars, contrasted with the backlash, in England, against gay and lesbian writers such as Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall. With the rise of Hitler’s Third Reich, however, the former tolerance demonstrated by Germany’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee vanished. Hirschfeld’s great library was destroyed and the books burnt by Nazis on May 10, 1933.

In the United States, there were few attempts to create advocacy groups supporting gay and lesbian relationships until after World War II. However, prewar gay life flourished in urban centers such as New York’s Greenwich Village and Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.
The blues music of African-American women showcased varieties of lesbian desire, struggle and humor; these performances, along with male and female drag stars, introduced a gay underworld to straight patrons during Prohibition’s defiance of race and sex codes in speakeasy clubs. The disruptions of World War II allowed formerly isolated gay men and women to meet as soldiers and war workers; and other volunteers were uprooted from small towns and posted worldwide. Many minds were opened by wartime, during which LGBT people were both tolerated in military service and officially sentenced to death camps in the Holocaust. This increasing awareness of an existing and vulnerable population, coupled with Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s investigation of homosexuals holding government jobs during the early 1950s outraged writers and federal employees whose own lives were shown to be second-class under the law, including Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, Allen Ginsberg and Harry Hay. Awareness of a burgeoning civil rights movement (Martin Luther King’s key organizer Bayard Rustin was a gay man) led to the first American-based political demands for fair treatment of gays and lesbians in mental health, public policy and employment. Studies such as Alfred Kinsey’s 1947 Kinsey Report suggested a far greater range of homosexual identities and behaviors than previously understood, with Kinsey creating a “scale” or spectrum ranging from complete heterosexual to complete homosexual.

The primary organization for gay men as an oppressed cultural minority was the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 by Harry Hay and Chuck Rowland. Other important homophile organizations on the West Coast included One, Inc., founded in 1952, and the first lesbian support network Daughters of Bilitis, founded in 1955 by Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin. Through meetings and publications, these groups offered information and outreach to thousands. These first organizations soon found support from prominent sociologists and psychologists. In 1951, Donald Webster Cory published “The Homosexual in America”, asserting that gay men and lesbians were a legitimate minority group, and in 1953 Evelyn Hooker, PhD, won a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to study gay men. Her groundbreaking paper, presented in 1956, demonstrated that gay men were as well-adjusted as heterosexual men, often more so. But it would not be until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as an “illness” classification in its diagnostic manual. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, gay men and lesbians continued to be at risk for psychiatric lockup as well as jail, losing jobs, and/or child custody when courts and clinics defined gay love as sick, criminal or immoral.

In 1965, as the civil rights movement won new legislation outlawing racial discrimination, the first gay rights demonstrations took place in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., led by longtime activists Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings. The turning point for gay liberation came on June 28, 1969, when patrons of the popular Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village fought back against ongoing police raids of their neighborhood bar. Stonewall is still considered a watershed moment of gay pride and has been commemorated since the 1970s with “pride marches” held every June across the United States. Recent scholarship has called for better acknowledgement of the roles that drag performers, people of color, bisexuals and transgender patrons played in the Stonewall Riots.

The gay liberation movement of the 1970s saw myriad political organizations spring up, often at odds with one another. Frustrated with the male leadership of most gay liberation groups, lesbians influenced by the feminist movement of the 1970s formed their own collectives, record labels, music festivals, newspapers, bookstores, and publishing houses, and called for lesbian rights in
mainstream feminist groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW). Gatherings such as women’s music concerts, bookstore readings and lesbian festivals well beyond the United States were extraordinarily successful in organizing women to become activists; the feminist movement against domestic violence also assisted women to leave abusive marriages, while retaining custody of children became a paramount issue for lesbian mothers.

Expanding religious acceptance for gay men and women of faith, the first out gay minister was ordained by the United Church of Christ in 1972. Other gay and lesbian church and synagogue congregations soon followed. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), formed in 1972, offered family members greater support roles in the gay rights movement. And political action exploded through the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign, the election of openly gay and lesbian representatives like Elaine Noble and Barney Frank, and, in 1979, the first march on Washington for gay rights. The increasing expansion of a global LGBT rights movement suffered a setback during the 1980s, as the gay male community was decimated by the AIDS epidemic, demands for compassion and medical funding led to renewed coalitions between men and women as well as angry street theatre by groups like AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation. Enormous marches on Washington drew as many as one million gay rights supporters in 1987 and again in 1993. Right wing religious movements, spurred on by beliefs that AIDS was God’s punishment, expanded via direct mail. A New Right coalition of political lobby groups competed with national LGBT organizations in Washington, seeking to create religious exemptions from any new LGBT rights protections. In the same era, one wing of the political gay movement called for an end to military expulsion of gay, lesbian and bisexual soldiers, with the high-profile case of Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer publicized through a made-for-television movie, “Serving in Silence.” In spite of the patriotism and service of gay men and lesbians in uniform, the uncomfortable and unjust compromise “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” emerged as an alternative to decades of military witch hunts and dishonorable discharges. Yet more service members ended up being discharged under DADT.

During in the last decade of the 20th century, millions of Americans watched as actress Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television in April 1997, heralding a new era of gay celebrity power and media visibility—although not without risks. Celebrity performers, both gay and heterosexual, continued to be among the most vocal activists calling for tolerance and equal rights. With greater media attention to gay and lesbian civil rights in the 1990s, trans and intersex voices began to gain space through works such as Kate Boernstein’s "Gender Outlaw" (1994) and "My Gender Workbook" (1998), Ann Fausto-Sterling’s "Myths of Gender" (1992) and Leslie Feinberg’s Transgender Warriors (1998), enhancing shifts in women’s and gender studies to become more inclusive of transgender and nonbinary identities. As a result of hard work by countless organizations and individuals, helped by internet and direct-mail campaign networking, the 21st century heralded new legal gains for gay and lesbian couples. Same-sex civil unions were recognized under Vermont law in 2000 and Massachusetts became the first state to perform same-sex marriages in 2004; with the end of state sodomy laws (Lawrence v. Texas, 2003), gay and lesbian Americans were finally free from criminal classification. Gay marriage was first legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Canada; but the recognition of gay marriage by church and state continued to divide opinion worldwide. After the impressive gains for LGBT rights in post-apartheid South Africa, conservative evangelicals in the U.S. began providing support and funding for
homophobic campaigns overseas. Uganda's dramatic death penalty for gays and lesbians was perhaps the most severe in Africa.

The first part of the 21st century saw new emphasis on transgender activism and the increasing usage of terminology that questioned binary gender identification. Images of trans women became more prevalent in film and television, as did programming with same-sex couples raising children. Transphobia, cissexism and other language (such as “hir” and “them”) became standardized, and film and television programming featured more openly trans youth and adult characters. Tensions between lesbian and trans activists, however, remained, with the long-running Michigan Womyn's Music Festival boycotted by national LGBT groups over the issue of trans inclusion; like many woman-only events with a primarily lesbian base, Michfest had supported an ideal of ingathering women and girls born female. The festival ended after its fortieth anniversary in August 2015.

Internet activism burgeoned, while many of the public, physical gathering spaces that once defined LGBT activism (bars, bookstores, women’s music festivals) began to vanish, and the usage of “queer” replaced lesbian identification for many younger women activists. Attention shifted to global activism as U.S. gains were not matched by similar equal rights laws in the 75 other countries where homosexuality remained illegal. As of 2016, LGBT identification and activism was still punishable by death in ten countries: Iran, Iraq, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Yemen; the plight of the LGBT community in Russia received intense focus during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, to which President Obama sent a contingent of out LGBT athletes. Supportive remarks from the new Pope Francis (“Who am I to judge?”) gave hope to LGBT Catholics worldwide.

Perhaps the greatest changes in the U.S. occurred between spring 2015 and spring 2016: in late spring 2015 Alison Bechdel’s lesbian-themed Broadway production Fun Home won several Tony awards, former Olympic champion Bruce Jenner transitioned to Caitlyn Jenner, and then in June of 2015, the Supreme Court decision recognized same-sex marriage (Obergefell v. Hodges). By spring 2016 the Academy Awards recognized films with both lesbian and transgender themes: Carol and The Danish Girl. And the Supreme Court had avowed that a lesbian family adoption in one state had to be recognized in all states. However, the United States also saw intense racial profiling confrontations and tragedies in this same period, turning LGBT activism to “intersectionality,” or recognition of intersections issues of race, class, gender identity and sexism. With the June 12 attacks on the Pulse Club in Orlando, that intersectionality was made plain as straight allies held vigils grieving the loss of young Latino drag queens and lesbians of color; with unanswered questions about the killer's possible identification with ISIS terrorism, other voices now call for alliances between the LGBT and Muslim communities, and the greater recognition of perspectives from those who are both Muslim and LGBT in the U.S. and beyond. The possible repression of identity which may have played a role in the killer’s choice of target has generated new attention to the price of homophobia —internalized, or culturally expressed— in and beyond the United States.

Reference

Additional selected resources:

- Sue-Ellen Jacobs, *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality*, University of Illinois, 1997
- Donn Short, *Don’t Be So Gay! Queers, Bullying, and Making Schools Safe*, UBC Press, 2013
- Ryan Thoreson, *Transnational LGBT Activism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014

Find this article at:
https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/history
Introduction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History (LGBTQ History) in the United States. Early Moments and Findings. How do we uncover a history of individuals, peoples, and identities that shifted over time and were often distinct to place and cultures? How does one talk about sexual and gender identity and expression cross-culturally during periods when such identities and expressions were not necessarily linked to particular kinds of sexual or gendered behavior? How does one talk about sexual or gender identity cross-culturally or during periods in which the meanings of GAY: Used in some cultural settings to represent men who are attracted to men in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in same-gender sexual behavior identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution. BISEXUAL or BI: A person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree. TRANSGENDER: A person whose sense of personal identity or gender does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth, or does not conform to gender st The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people: building a foundation for better understanding. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies of Press; 2011.Google Scholar. 2. Levounis P, Ruggiero J. Outpatient management of crystal methamphetamine dependence among gay and bisexual men: how can it be done? Prim Psychiatry. 2006;13(2):75â€“80.Google Scholar. Gay rights movement. political and social movement. Print. print Print. Gay rights movement, also called homosexual rights movement or gay liberation movement, civil rights movement that advocates equal rights for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons; seeks to eliminate sodomy laws barring homosexual acts between consenting adults; and calls for an end to discrimination against gay men, lesbians, and transgender persons in employment, credit, housing, public accommodations, and other areas of life.
Because many lesbians and gays were not out during their time in the movement, and in some cases had not yet identified as lesbian or gay, this work also analyzes how the civil rights movement, and in a number of cases women’s liberation, contributed to their identity formation and coming out. This work also contributes to our understanding of opposition ... All Articles in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies. Follow Faceted Search. 3,183 full-text articles. This presentation attempts to construct a history of the Maine Bisexual People’s Network (MBPN), drawing from primary sources from USM’s Special Collections, specifically from the LGBTQ+ Collection in the Jean Byers Sampson Center. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, worldwide federation of individuals and nonprofit organizations seeking to protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and intersexual persons and to raise awareness of discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association". Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 Feb. 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Trans-and-Intersex-Association. Accessed 18 May 2021. Copy Citation. Share. Share to social media. Facebook Twitter. URL. *Starred Review* At a time when marriage equality is being championed and challenged, the publication of this resource on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities, communities, cultures, and movements in the U.S. could not be more timely. A carefully constructed entry list includes more than 500 entry subjects. Libraries that own the Garland set will want, therefore, to make room for Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America in their reference collections. It an exceptional work that should be useful for academic and public libraries. General readers, students, researchers, and members of the LGBT communities alike will find this to be a most welcome resource.