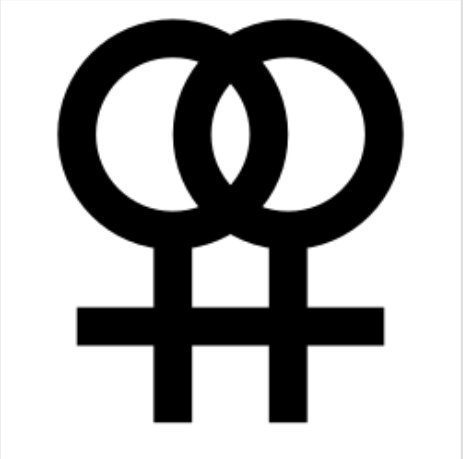
Lesbian

A **lesbian** is a homosexual woman or girl.[3][4][5]:48 The word is also used as an adjective for women in relation to their experiences, regardless of their sexual orientation; or as an adjective to associate nouns with female homosexuality.[4][5]:22

Two lesbians holding a lesbian pride flag at the 2022 Fierté Montréal march[1]

The term lesbian is a derivative of the island of Lesbos, the Greek island home to ancient poet Sappho. Relatively little in history was documented to describe women's lives in general or female homosexuality in particular. The earliest mentions of lesbianism date to around the 600s-500s BC, including Sappho's poetry.

Lesbian relationships and attractions, along with gender nonconforming behaviors more often displayed by lesbians, have been treated in different ways throughout different ages and cultures. While there is a longer documented history of lesbian behavior and relationships throughout different cultures, the idea of a 'lesbian' as a category of person distinct from other women emerged in Europe around the turn of the 19th century. Lesbians' current rights vary widely worldwide, ranging from severe abuse and legal persecution to general acceptance and legal protections.



Symbol for female homosexuality consisting of two intersecting female symbols[2]

Modern polls often estimate lesbians to be 1-3% of the population (i.e., 2-6% of women). Lesbian social movements often advocate for legal changes (such as anti-discrimination protections, child custody protections, and legal civil unions or marriages), as well as for cultural, familial, and religious acceptance of lesbian orientations and relationships.

Etymology

The word *lesbian* is the demonym of the Greek island of Lesbos, home to the 6th-century BCE poet Sappho.[3] Some of Sappho's surviving poetry discusses her love for other women.[6]:47–49

Before the mid-19th century,[7] the word *lesbian* referred to any aspect of Lesbos, including a type of wine.[a] A shift of the word to describe erotic relationships between women had been documented in 1870.[9] In 1875, a critic referred to Baudelaire's poem "Delphine and Hippolyte" (a poem about love between two women, and without reference to Lesbos) as "Lesbian".[10] In 1890, the term *lesbian* was used in the National Medical Dictionary as an adjective to describe tribadism.[11]

Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene by Simeon Solomon, 1864

The terms *lesbian*, *invert* and *homosexual* were interchangeable with *sapphist* around the turn of the 20th century.[9] The use of *lesbian* in medical literature became prominent; by 1925, the word was recorded as a noun to mean the female equivalent of *sodomite*.[9][12]

Sexuality and identity

Biological factors

Lesbian community flag introduced in social media in 2018, with the dark orange stripe representing gender variance[13][14]

Prenatal androgen exposure correlates with same-sex sexual behavior in women.[18] Biological characteristics known to be affected by prenatal hormone exposure have been shown to vary by sexual orientation in women.[19][20] The finding that digit ratios (one characteristic affected by prenatal hormone exposure) differ between lesbian and heterosexual women has been replicated in cross-cultural studies.[20]

Neuroimaging studies have found differences between heterosexual and homosexual women in neurological structures, including both those known to be affected by prenatal androgen exposure[21] and those not known to be affected by prenatal androgen exposure.[22][23] A later meta-analysis concluded that the small sample sizes and small number of studies meant that findings were inconclusive as of 2021.[24]

Lesbian feminist flag consisting of a labrys (a double-bladed axe) within the inverted black triangle, set against a violet-hue background. The labrys represents lesbian strength.[15]

Genetics also play a role; around 20% of the variance of sexual orientation in women is controlled by genetics.[25]

Lesbian identity formation

When a woman realizes she is a lesbian, it may cause an "existential crisis". When a woman was raised in an environment with negative stereotypes of lesbians, she may need to work through these stereotypes and prejudices to come to terms with her orientation.[26]:93

Lesbian flag derived from the colors of the lipstick lesbian flag design[16][17]

Lesbians in modern times share an identity that parallels those built on ethnicity, including the concept of group heritage and group pride.[27]

Compared to gay men, lesbians more often developed their sexual self-concepts either alone or in intimate relationships, instead of in communities, and disclosed them less often.[26]:153

Self-identification and behavior

Some women experience a consistently lesbian orientation. Other women experience varying degrees of fluidity in their orientation.[28]

Lesbians who have never been with men may be referred to as "gold star lesbians." Lesbians who had sex with men before coming out may face ridicule from other lesbians or identity challenges with regard to defining what it means to be a lesbian.[29]

Some researchers observe that behavior and identity sometimes do not match: self-identified straight women may have sex with women, or self-identified lesbians may have sex with men.[5]:22[30]

Several studies have found that the sexual behavior and attractions of exclusively-lesbian women are significantly more likely to be aligned with their identity than those of exclusively-heterosexual women. These included studies of reported attraction throughout the fertility cycle, and direct measures of arousal towards different imagery.[31]

The importance of sex

A 1983 survey asked couples "About how often during the last year have you and your partner had sex relations?". The survey found that long-term lesbian couples named lower numbers than long-term heterosexual or homosexual male couples.[32] This conclusion became known as "lesbian bed death".[33] Numerous critiques were leveled at the study, including that the language could be misinterpreted to mean "heterosexual intercourse", and that the survey sample was limited to a biased sample of self-identified lesbians in 1983.[34]

Researchers report that lesbian and heterosexual women are just as likely to view achieving orgasm as important,[35] and that the two groups report statistically equivalent rates of overall sexual and romantic satisfaction.[36][37] The research suggests that lesbian women tend to achieve said satisfaction through higher quality rather than more frequent sex, and that they engage in different romantic and sexual scripts than heterosexual women.[37][35]

Lesbians in history

There has been extensive debate as to what qualifies a historic relationship as 'lesbian'. In 1989, an academic cohort named the Lesbian History Group wrote:

> Because of society's reluctance to admit that lesbians exist, a high degree of certainty is expected before historians or biographers are allowed to use the label. Evidence that would suffice in any other situation is inadequate here... A woman who never married, who lived with another woman, whose friends were mostly women, or who moved in known lesbian or mixed gay circles, may well have been a lesbian. ... But this sort of evidence is not 'proof'. What our critics want is incontrovertible evidence of sexual activity between women. This is almost impossible to find.[38]:184

Female sexuality is often not adequately represented in historical texts and documents. Until very recently, much of what has been documented about women's sexuality has been written by men, in the context of male understanding, and relevant to women's associations to men—as their wives, daughters, or mothers, for example.[39]

Ancient Greece

Sappho by Amanda Brewster Sewell, 1891. Sappho of Lesbos gave the term *lesbian* the connotation of erotic desire between women.

The lives of ancient Greek women were in general little-documented.[39] In a notable exception, in the 500s BC, Sappho of Lesbos wrote extensive poetry regarding her love for other women, fragments of which survive.[40] A writing from the 600s BC, documenting Greek girls singing to each other, includes flirtatious lyrics.[41]

Some male-written works reference lesbianism. One example, from the 300s BC, is the tale of the four-legged humans told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*.[42][b] Another example, from the 100s CE, is the Dialogues of the Courtesans, where a female character talks about being seduced by two lesbian characters.[43]

In visual culture, historian Nancy Rabinowitz notes that some ancient Greek red vase images portray women in affectionate or erotic scenes.[44]:27–28[39]

Ancient Rome

In first century sources, accounts of lesbian characters include the story of Iphis and Ianthe, related in the *Metamorphoses*;[45]:79–86 a story, related by the fabulist Phaedrus, about Prometheus exchanging the genitals of different men and women;[46] and a satirical figure of a masculine woman who has sex with women, named Philaenis, related in the epigrams of Martial.[47][45]:98–99

A wall painting of a lesbian sex scene. Suburban baths, Pompeii

In the ruins of Pompeii, a Roman town destroyed in 79 CE, archaeologists discovered a love poem graffitied onto a wall.[45] The poem is written with feminine declensions for both speaker and addressee, and identified archivally as Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum 4.5296.[48]

A love spell from 3rd or 4th century CE Roman Egypt was written to enchant a woman named Gorgonia to fall in love with a woman named Sophia.[45]:89–92

Ancient Americas

Both male and female homosexuality were known in Aztec culture. Although both were generally disapproved of, there is no evidence that homosexuality was actively suppressed until after the Spanish Conquest.[49] Female homosexuality is described in the Florentine Codex, a 16th-century study of the

Aztec world written by the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún. It describes Aztec lesbians as masculine in appearance and behavior and never wishing to be married.[49] The book *Monarquía indiana* by Fray Juan de Torquemada, published in 1615, briefly mentions the persecution of Aztec lesbians: "The woman, who with another woman had carnal pleasures, for which they were called *Patlache*, which means: female incubus, they both died for it."[49][c]

Early modern Europe (pre-1400s)

The earliest law against female homosexuality appeared in France in 1270.[38]:191 In Spain, Italy, and the Holy Roman Empire, sodomy between women was included in acts considered unnatural and punishable by burning to death, although few instances are recorded of this taking place.[6]:130 The earliest such execution occurred in Speier, Germany, in 1477.[38]:190

Lesbianism and hermaphroditism, depicted here in an engraving c. 1690, were very similar concepts during the Renaissance.

Forty days' penance was demanded of nuns who "rode" each other or were discovered to have touched each other's breasts. An Italian nun named Sister Benedetta Carlini seduced other nuns when possessed by a Divine spirit named "Splenditello"; as punishment, she was placed in solitary confinement for the last 40 years of her life.[38]:190

In England, female homoeroticism was so common in literature and theater that historians suggest it was fashionable for a period during the Renaissance.[50]:1 Englishwoman Mary Frith has been described as lesbian.[51]

Ideas about women's sexuality were linked to contemporary understanding of female physiology. The vagina was considered an inward version of the penis; in lesbians, nature was thought to be trying to right itself by prolapsing the vagina to form a penis.[50]:12 The idea of hermaphroditism became synonymous with lesbianism. A longer, engorged clitoris was thought to be used in lesbian sex. Penetration was the focus of concern in all sexual acts, and a woman who was thought to have uncontrollable desires because of her engorged clitoris was called a "tribade" (literally, one who rubs).[50]:14–16 For a while, masturbation and lesbian sex carried the same meaning.[6]:129

Tribades were simultaneously considered members of the lower class trying to ruin virtuous women, and representatives of an aristocracy corrupt with debauchery. Satirical writers began to suggest that political rivals (or more often, their wives) engaged in tribadism in order to harm their reputations. Queen Anne was rumored to have a passionate relationship with her close advisor Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough. When Churchill was ousted as the queen's favorite, she purportedly spread allegations of the queen having affairs with her bedchamberwomen.[6]:137 Marie Antoinette was also the subject of such speculation between 1795 and 1796.[50]:17–18

Modern Western Civilizations (1500s-present day)

1500s-1600s

Homoerotic elements in early literature were pervasive, specifically the masquerade of one gender for another to seduce an unsuspecting woman. Such plot devices were used in *Twelfth Night* (1601), *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and *The Bird in a Cage* (1633).[50]:1–11,22–24 During the Renaissance, some women put on male personae and went undetected for years or decades. These women have been described as transvestite lesbians.[52][53] Some historians view cases of cross-dressing women to be manifestations of women seizing social power, or their way of making sense out of their desire for women.[54]:51–54

Gender masquerade was a popular dramatic device in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as this scene of Viola and Olivia from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* painted by Frederick Pickersgill (1859).

In the 1600s, Queen Christina of Sweden had a tendency to dress as a man, abdicated the throne in 1654 to avoid marriage, and was known to pursue romantic relationships with women.[55]:54–55

Catharine Linck and other women who were accused of using dildos, such as two nuns in 16th century Spain executed for using "material instruments", were punished more severely than those who did not.[38]:191[54]:51–54 Linck was executed in Prussia in 1721.[54]:51–54

1700s

Two marriages between women were recorded in Cheshire, England, in 1707 (between Hannah Wright and Anne Gaskill) and 1708 (between Ane Norton and Alice Pickford) with no comment about both parties being female.[50]:30[6]:136

In 1709, English aristocrat Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wrote to Anne Wortley: "Nobody was so entirely, so faithfully yours ... I put in your lovers, for I don't allow it possible for a man to be so sincere as I am."[55]:119

The Swiss woman Anne Grandjean, disguised as male, married and relocated with her wife to Lyons, but was exposed by a woman with whom she had had a previous affair and sentenced to time in the stocks and prison.[54]:51–54

In the 1700s, English poet Anna Seward had a devoted friendship with Honora Sneyd. Sneyd was the subject of many of Seward's poems. When Sneyd married despite Seward's protest, Seward's poems became angry, and she continued to write about Sneyd long after her death.[55]:132–136

Also in the 1700s, Deborah Sampson fought in the American Revolution under the name Robert Shurtlieff, and pursued relationships with women.[56]

Also in the 1700s, English writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft was attached to a woman named Fanny Blood. Writing to another woman, Wollstonecraft declared, "The roses will bloom when there's peace in the breast, and the prospect of living with my Fanny gladdens my heart:—You know not how I love her."[55]:139[d]

Henry Fielding wrote a pamphlet titled *The Female Husband* in 1746, based on the life of Mary Hamilton, who was arrested after marrying a woman while masquerading as a man, and was sentenced to public whipping and six months in jail.[54]:51–54

The Irish Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby were nicknamed the Ladies of Llangollen. Butler and Ponsonby eloped in 1778, to the relief of Ponsonby's family (concerned about their reputation had she run away with a man)[55]:75 to live together in Wales for 51 years and be thought of as eccentrics.[6]:227–229 Their story was considered "the epitome of virtuous romantic friendship" and inspired poetry by Anna Seward and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.[50]:45–46

The Ladies of Llangollen, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby.
The two women had a relationship that was hailed as devoted and virtuous, after eloping and living 51 years together in Wales.

1800s-early 1900s

Re-examining romantic friendships

During the 17th through 19th centuries in the West, a woman expressing passionate love for another woman was fashionable, accepted, and encouraged.[6]:136 These relationships were termed romantic friendships, Boston marriages, or "sentimental friends".[58] These relationships were documented by large volumes of letters written between women. Any sexual components of the relationships were not publicly discussed. Romantic friendships were promoted as alternatives to and practice for a woman's marriage to a man.[55]:74–77

Intimacy between women was fashionable between the 17th and 19th centuries, although sexuality was rarely publicly acknowledged. (Photograph c. 1900.)

In a rare instance of sexuality being the focus of a romantic friendship, two Scottish schoolteachers in the early 19th century were accused by a student of visiting in the same bed, kissing, and making the bed shake. The student's grandmother reported the teachers to the authorities, who were skeptical that their actions were sexual in nature, or that they extended beyond the bounds of normal friendship: "Are we to say that every woman who has formed an intimate friendship and has slept in the same bed with another is guilty? Where is the innocent woman in Scotland?"[6]:233

Around the turn of the 20th century, the development of higher education provided opportunities for women. In all-female surroundings, a culture of romantic pursuit was fostered in women's colleges. Older students mentored younger ones, called on them socially, took them to all-women dances, and sent them flowers, cards, and poems that declared their undying love for each other.[55]:297–313 These were called "smashes" or "spoons", and they were written about quite frankly in stories for girls aspiring to attend college in publications such as *Ladies Home Journal*, a children's magazine titled *St. Nicholas*, and a collection called *Smith College Stories*, without negative views.[57]:255 Enduring loyalty, devotion, and love were major components to these stories, and sexual acts beyond kissing were consistently undescribed.[55]:297–313

Faderman calls this period "the last breath of innocence" before 1920 when characterizations of female affection were connected to sexuality, marking lesbians as a unique and often unflatteringly portrayed group.[55]:297–313 Specifically, Faderman connects the growth of women's independence and their beginning to reject strictly prescribed roles in the Victorian era to the scientific designation of lesbianism as a type of aberrant sexual behavior.[54]:45–49

Notable relationships

In the 1800s, English Diarist Anne Lister, captivated by Butler and Ponsonby, recorded her affairs with women between 1817 and 1840. Some of it was written in code, detailing her sexual relationships with Marianna Belcombe and Maria Barlow.[59]:390

In the 1800s, Edward De Lacy Evans was born female in Ireland, but took a male name during the voyage to Australia and lived as a man for 23 years in Victoria, marrying three times.[6]:224

American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) wrote over 300 letters and poems to Susan Gilbert, who later became her sister-in-law, and later engaged in another romantic correspondence with Kate Scott Anthon.[57]:145–148

American freeborn Black women Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus left evidence of their passion in letters: "No *kisses* is like youres".[6]:234 They wrote openly about their sexual affection for one another, and despite their working-class economic status their writings survived, both of which are unusual for the time.

In 1870, American Alice Baldy wrote to Josie Varner, "Do you know that if you touch me, or speak to me there is not a nerve of fibre in my body that does not respond with a thrill of delight?"[6]:232

In the early 1900s, the unmarried professor Jeannette Augustus Marks at Mount Holyoke College, lived with the college president, Mary Woolley, for 36 years. Even while unmarried and living with a woman, Marks discouraged young women from "abnormal" friendships and insisted happiness could only be attained with a man.[6]:239[e]

In 1909, Percy Redwood created a scandal in New Zealand when she was found to be Amy Bock, who had married a woman from Port Molyneaux; newspapers argued whether it was a sign of insanity or an inherent character flaw.[60]

History of sexology (late 1800s-early 1900s)

In research on "inversion", German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld categorized what was normal sexual behavior for men and women, and therefore categorized to what extent men and women deviated from these "ideal types".[6]:168 Sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing from Germany and Britain's Havelock Ellis wrote some of the earliest and more enduring categorizations of female same-sex attraction, approaching it as a form of insanity and debating whether change was possible.[55]:241–242

The work of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis was widely read and helped to create public consciousness of female homosexuality.[f] In the absence of any other material to describe their emotions, homosexuals accepted the designation of different or perverted, and used their outlaw status to form social circles in Paris and Berlin. *Lesbian* began to describe elements of a subculture.[6]:178–179

Early 1900s

From the 1890s to the 1930s, American heiress Natalie Clifford Barney held a weekly salon of artistic celebrities in Paris, where lesbian topics were the focus. Combining Greek influences with contemporary French eroticism, she attempted to create an updated and idealized version of Lesbos in her salon.[62]:234 Salon attendees included prominent lesbian artists such as novelist Radclyffe Hall,[63]:48 artist Romaine Brooks; writer Colette, writer Djuna Barnes, and social host Gertrude Stein.[64]:153–167

The Victory of Faith by Saint George Hare has been described by Kobena Mercer as depicting an interracial lesbian couple, likening it to *Les Amis* by Jules Robert Auguste.[61]

Berlin had a vibrant homosexual culture in the 1920s, and about 50 clubs catered to lesbians. *Die Freundin* Magazines like (*The Girlfriend*) and *Garçonne* (aka *Frauenliebe* (*Woman Love*)) were aimed at lesbians and male transvestites.[6]:241–244 These publications were controlled by men as owners, publishers, and writers. Around 1926, Selli Engler founded *Die BIF – Blätter Idealer Frauenfreundschaften* (*The BIF – Papers on Ideal Women Friendships*), the first lesbian publication owned, published and written by women. In 1928, the lesbian bar and nightclub guide *Berlins lesbische Frauen* (*The Lesbians of Berlin*) by Ruth Margarite Röllig[65] further popularized the German capital as a center of lesbian activity. Clubs varied between large tourist attractions to small neighborhood cafes. The cabaret song *"Das lila Lied"* ("The Lavender Song") became an anthem to the lesbians of Berlin. Although it was sometimes tolerated, homosexuality was illegal in Germany and law enforcement used permitted gatherings as an opportunity to register the names of homosexuals for future reference.[66] Magnus Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, which promoted tolerance for homosexuals in Germany, welcomed lesbian participation, and a surge of lesbian-themed writing and political activism in the German feminist movement became evident.[62]:230–231

Berlin's thriving lesbian community in the 1920s published *Die Freundin* magazine between 1924 and 1933.

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall published the novel *The Well of Loneliness*. The novel's plot centers around Stephen Gordon, an invert woman. The novel was intended to be a call for tolerance for inverts by publicizing their disadvantages and lack of control over the condition.[55]:320 The novel's trial for obscenity was described as "*the* crystallizing moment in the construction of a visible modern English lesbian subculture" by professor Laura Doan.[67]

Radclyffe Hall's image appeared in many newspapers discussing the content of *The Well of Loneliness*.

Newspaper stories frankly divulged that the book's content includes "sexual relations between Lesbian women", and photographs of Hall often accompanied details about lesbians in most major print outlets within a span of six months.[67] Hall reflected the appearance of a "mannish" woman in the 1920s: short cropped hair, tailored suits (often with pants), and monocle that became widely recognized as a "uniform".[67]

Harlem resident Gladys Bentley was renowned for her blues songs about her affairs with women.

In the United States, the 1920s was a decade of social experimentation, particularly with sex. This was heavily influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, who theorized that sexual desire would be sated unconsciously, despite an individual's wish to ignore it.[54]:63–67 Freud said that while most people have phases of homosexual attraction or experimentation, he attributed exclusive same-sex attraction to stunted development resulting from trauma or parental conflicts.[62]:242[g] Freud's theories were much more pervasive in the U.S. than in Europe. Large cities that provided a nightlife were immensely popular, and women began to seek out sexual adventure. Bisexuality became chic, particularly in America's first gay neighborhoods.[54]:63–67

No location saw more visitors for its possibilities of homosexual nightlife than Harlem, the predominantly African American section of New York City. White "slummers" enjoyed jazz and nightclubs. Blues singers Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Gladys Bentley openly sang about affairs with women.[54]:71[69] Homosexuals began to draw comparisons between their newly recognized minority status and that of African Americans.[54]:68 Among African American residents of Harlem, lesbian relationships were common and tolerated, though not overtly embraced. Some women staged lavish wedding ceremonies, even filing licenses using masculine names with New York City.[54]:73 Most homosexual women were married to men and participated in affairs with women regularly.[69]

Across town, Greenwich Village also saw a growing homosexual community; both Harlem and Greenwich Village provided furnished rooms for single men and women, which was a major factor in their development as centers for homosexual communities.[38]:181 The Village attracted Bohemian intellectuals who rejected Victorian ideals. Homosexuals were predominantly male, although figures such as poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and social host Mabel Dodge were known for their affairs with women and promotion of tolerance of homosexuality.[55]:82–83 Women in the U.S. who could not visit Harlem or live in Greenwich Village were first able to visit saloons in the 1920s without being considered prostitutes. The existence of a public space for women to socialize in bars that catered to lesbians "became the single most important public manifestation of the subculture for many decades", according to historian Lillian Faderman.[54]:79–80

Great Depression

The primary component necessary to encourage lesbians to be public and seek other women was economic independence, which virtually disappeared in the 1930s with the Great Depression. Independent women in the 1930s were generally seen as holding jobs that men should have. Most lesbians in the U.S. found it necessary to marry, engaging either in traditional marriages or "front" marriages to a gay man where both could discreetly pursue homosexual relationships.[54]:94–96

The hostile social attitude led to the formation of small, close-knit, bar-centric communities in large cities. Women in other locales typically remained isolated. Speaking of homosexuality in any context was socially forbidden. Slang terms referred to openly gay people as "in the Life".[54]:105–112[h]

Homosexual subculture disappeared in Germany with the rise of the Nazis in 1933.[6]:191–193

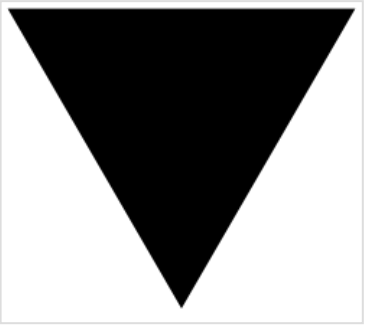
American First Lady from 1933 to 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt, exchanged rings with and wrote daily letters to journalist Lorena Hickok, expressing her love for Hickok, using endearments, and expressing a desire to kiss her.[55]:297–313

World War II

The onset of World War II caused a massive upheaval in people's lives as military mobilization engaged millions of men. Women were also accepted into the military in the U.S. Women's Army Corps (WACs) and U.S. Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). Unlike processes to screen out male homosexuals, which had been in place since the creation of the American military, there were no methods to identify or screen for lesbians; they were put into place gradually during World War II. Despite common attitudes regarding women's traditional roles in the 1930s, independent and masculine women were directly recruited by the military in the 1940s, and frailty discouraged.[71]:28–33

Women's experiences in the work force and the military during World War II gave them economic and social options that helped to shape lesbian subculture.

Some women arrived at the recruiting station in a man's suit, denied ever being in love with another woman, and were easily inducted.[71]:28–33 Sexual activity was forbidden and blue discharge was almost certain if one identified oneself as a lesbian. As women found each other, they formed into tight groups on base, socialized at service clubs, and began to use code words. Historian Allan Bérubé documented that homosexuals in the armed forces either consciously or subconsciously refused to identify themselves as homosexual or lesbian, and also never spoke about others' orientation.[71]:104



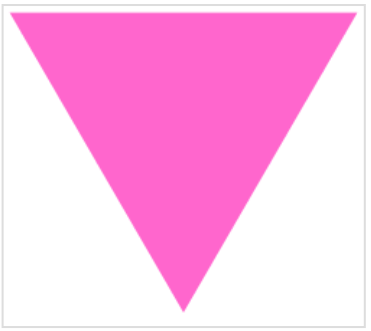
People who did not conform to Nazi ideals were considered asocial, imprisoned, and identified with a black triangle. Lesbians were deemed asocial.

The most masculine women were not necessarily common, though they were visible, so they tended to attract women interested in finding other lesbians. Women had to broach the subject about their interest in other women carefully, sometimes taking days to develop a common understanding without asking or stating anything outright.[71]:100

Women who did not enter the military were aggressively called upon to take industrial jobs left by men, in order to continue national productivity. The increased mobility, sophistication, and independence of many women during and after the war made it possible for women to live without husbands, something that would not have been feasible under different economic and social circumstances, further shaping lesbian networks and environments.[54]:129–130

In Germany, there was no explicit law against lesbianism. Lesbians who were Jewish, Roma, or politically dissident, were persecuted primarily for these other characteristics.[72] Prior to 1939, lesbians were imprisoned as 'asocials', which was "a broad category applied to all people who evaded Nazi

rule."[73] Asocials were identified with an inverted black triangle.[72] In the 1990s in the U.S., some lesbians used the black triangle symbol as an identifier, and the pink triangle was also used for the combined lesbian-gay movement.[73]



Many lesbians reclaimed the symbolism of the pink triangle, though the Nazis only applied it to gay men.

Postwar

Following World War II, a nationwide movement pressed to return to pre-war society as quickly as possible in the U.S.[74] Partially due to the increasing national paranoia about communism and the pervasiveness of psychoanalytic theory, the U.S. government began persecuting homosexuals around 1950. The government fired open homosexuals and began a widespread effort to gather intelligence about employees' private lives.[62]:277 The U.S. military and government conducted interrogations of women's sexual histories.[54]:150–155 State and local governments followed suit, arresting people for congregating in bars and parks, and enacting laws against cross-dressing for both sexes.[74]

The 1957 first edition of *The Ladder*, mailed to hundreds of women in the San Francisco area, urged women to take off their masks.

Postwar practices to eliminate homosexuals from public service positions also began to Australia,[75] Canada,[76] and the UK.[50]:109–114 A section to create an offence of "gross indecency" between females was added to a bill in the United Kingdom House of Commons and passed there in 1921, but was rejected in the House of Lords, apparently because they were concerned any attention paid to sexual misconduct would also promote it.[50]:109–114

Concurrently with government persecution, in 1952, homosexuality was listed as a pathological emotional disturbance in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.[62]:247 The view that homosexuality was a curable sickness was widely believed in the medical community, general population, and among many lesbians themselves.[77]

Very little information was available about homosexuality beyond medical and psychiatric texts. Community meeting places consisted of bars that were commonly raided by police, with those arrested exposed in newspapers. In response, eight women in San Francisco met in their living rooms in 1955 to socialize and have a safe place to dance. When they decided to make it a regular meeting, they became the first organization for lesbians in the U.S., titled the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). In 1956, the DOB began publishing a magazine titled *The Ladder*.[78] *The Ladder* was mailed to hundreds—eventually thousands—of DOB members discussing the nature of homosexuality, sometimes challenging the idea that it was a sickness, with readers offering their own reasons why they were lesbians and suggesting ways to cope with the condition or society's response to it.[77] British lesbians followed with the publication of *Arena Three* beginning in 1964, with a similar mission.[50]:153–158

Butch and femme dichotomy

Early working-class lesbian subculture in the U.S. and Canada developed rigid gender roles. These roles dated back to Harlem and Greenwich Village in the 1920s.[50] In this subculture, a couple was defined as "dichotomous individuals, if not male and female, then butch and femme".[54]:167–168 Although many municipalities enacted laws against cross-dressing, some women (*butches*) would socialize in bars dressed in men's clothing and mirroring traditional masculine behavior. Others (*femmes*) wore traditionally feminine clothing. Butch and femme modes of socialization were so integral within lesbian bars that women who refused to choose between the two would be ignored, or at least unable to date anyone, and butch/butch or femme/femme romantic relationships were unacceptable.[54]:167–168

Though marketed to heterosexual men, lesbian pulp fiction provided an identity to isolated women in the 1950s.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the roles were pervasive and not limited to North America: from 1940 to 1970, butch/femme bar culture flourished in Britain, though there were fewer class distinctions than in lesbian communities in the U.S.[50]:141–143 [54]:170–174 Butch and femme were considered coarse by American lesbians of higher social standing during this period.[54]:175–178

Fiction

Regardless of the lack of information about homosexuality in scholarly texts, another forum for learning about lesbianism was growing. A paperback book titled *Women's Barracks* describing a woman's experiences in the Free French Forces was published in 1950. It told of a lesbian relationship the author had witnessed. After 4.5 million copies were sold, it was consequently named in the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in 1952.[79] Its publisher, Gold Medal Books, followed with the novel *Spring Fire* in 1952, which sold 1.5 million copies. Gold Medal Books was overwhelmed with mail from women writing about the subject matter, and followed with more books, creating the genre of lesbian pulp fiction.[79]

Between 1955 and 1969, over 2,000 books were published using lesbianism as a topic, and they were sold in corner drugstores, train stations, bus stops, and newsstands all over the U.S. and Canada. Literary scholar, Yvonne Keller created several subclasses for lesbian pulp fiction, to help highlight the differences between the types of pulp fiction being released.[80] Virile adventures were written by authors using male pseudonyms, and almost all were marketed to heterosexual men. During this time, another subclass emerged called "Pro-Lesbian". The emergence of pro-lesbian fiction began with authors seeing the voyeuristic and homophobic nature of virile adventures. With only a handful of lesbian pulp fiction authors were women writing for lesbians, including Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor, Paula Christian, and Vin Packer/Ann Aldrich. These authors focused on the relationship between the women instead of writing sexually explicit material, defying the standards of the "virile adventure" model.[80]

The differences between virile adventures and pro-lesbian covers and titles were distinct enough that Bannon, who also purchased lesbian pulp fiction, later stated that women identified the material iconically by the cover art.[81] Pro-lesbian covers were innocuous and hinted at their lesbian themes, and virile adventures ranged from having one woman partially undressed to sexually explicit covers, to

demonstrate the invariably salacious material inside.[80] In addition to this, coded words and images were used on the covers. Instead of "lesbian", terms such as "strange", "twilight", "queer", and "third sex", were used in the titles.[82] Many of the books used cultural references: naming places, terms, describing modes of dress and other codes to isolated women. As a result, pulp fiction helped to proliferate a lesbian identity simultaneously to lesbians and heterosexual readers.[83]

Second-wave feminism / Late 1960s-1980s

The social rigidity of the 1950s and early 1960s encountered a backlash as social movements to improve the standing of African Americans, the poor, women, and gays all became prominent. The gay rights movement and the feminist movement connected after a violent confrontation occurred in New York City in the 1969 Stonewall riots.[6]:212–216

From the late 1950s to the 1970s, the sexual revolution took place, and many women took advantage of their new social freedom to try new experiences. Women who previously identified as heterosexual tried sex with women, though many maintained their heterosexual identity.[54]:203

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the movement of second-wave feminism developed. Lesbianism as a political identity grew to describe a social philosophy among women, often overshadowing sexual desire as a defining trait. Different groups and authors defined "lesbian" as "the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion".,[26]:70 "a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women.",[50]:177 or "a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex[...].".[84]:7 Women who subscribed to this philosophy dubbed themselves lesbian-feminists. In the ideal society, named Lesbian Nation, "woman" and "lesbian" were interchangeable.[54]:218–219

Separatist feminists expressed their disdain with an inherently sexist and patriarchal society, and concluded the most effective way to overcome sexism and attain the equality of women would be to deny men any power or pleasure from women. Many believers strove to separate themselves physically and economically from traditional male-centered culture.[54]:218–219 As equality was a priority for lesbian-feminists, disparity of roles between men and women or butch and femme were viewed as patriarchal. Lesbian-feminists also eschewed the perceived chauvinism of gay men; many lesbian-feminists refused to work with men, or take up their causes.[54]:210–211

Although lesbian-feminism was a significant shift, not all lesbians agreed with it. Lesbian-feminism was a youth-oriented movement: its members were primarily college educated, with experience in New Left and radical causes, but they had not seen any success in persuading radical organizations to take up women's issues.[26]:11 Many older lesbians who had acknowledged their sexuality in more conservative times felt maintaining their ways of coping in a homophobic world was more appropriate.[85] Lesbians who believed they were born homosexual, and used the descriptor "lesbian" to define sexual attraction, often considered the separatist opinions of lesbian-feminists to be detrimental to the cause of gay rights.[54]:217–218

In 1970, the Daughters of Bilitis folded over which direction to focus on: feminism or gay rights issues.[85]

From 1974 to 1993, the organization Salsa Soul Sisters, today known as the African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change, was a lesbian womanist organization operating in New York City.[86]:55

In October 1980, the First Black Lesbian Conference was held, an outgrowth from the First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference.[87][88]

Third-wave feminism / 1980s-2000s

In the 1980s, a significant movement rejected the desexualization of lesbianism by cultural feminists, causing a heated controversy called the feminist sex wars.[54]:246–252 Butch and femme roles returned, although not as strictly followed as they were in the 1950s. They became a mode of chosen sexual self-expression for some women in the 1990s. Once again, women felt safer claiming to be more sexually adventurous, and sexual flexibility became more accepted.[89]

In 1997, Marxist political activist Angela Davis came out a lesbian in an interview with *Out* magazine.[90]

Lesbians of color

"Lesbians of color" is an umbrella term for Black, Latina, Asian, Arab, Native American, and other non-white lesbians. Lesbians of color have often been a marginalized group,[91] and experienced racism in addition to homophobia and misogyny.[92]

Attendees at 2012 New York City Pride parade

Some scholars have noted that past lesbian communities were primarily white and American, and that some lesbians of color had difficulties integrating into these communities at large. Many lesbians of color have stated that they were often systematically excluded from lesbian spaces based on the fact that they are women of color.[93] The early lesbian feminist movement was criticized for excluding race and class issues from their spaces and for a lack of focus on issues that did not benefit white women.[91]

Additionally, lesbians of color face unique sets of challenges within their respective racial communities, as communities of color often view homosexuality as a "white" lifestyle and see the acceptance of homosexuality as a setback in achieving equality.[92] Lesbians of color, especially those of immigrant populations, often hold the sentiment that their orientation adversely affects assimilation into the dominant culture.[91] Within racial communities, the decision to come out can be costly, as the threat of loss of support from family, friends, and the community at large is probable. Lesbians of color are often exposed to a range of adverse consequences, including microaggression, discrimination, menace, and violence.[93]

Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cherrie Moraga are cited as major theorists within the various lesbians of color movements for their insistence on inclusion and equality, from both racial communities and white lesbian communities.[91]

The many intersections surrounding lesbians of color can often contribute to an increased need for mental health resources. Lesbians of color are more likely to experience a number of psychological issues due to the various experiences of sexism, racism, and homophobia.[94] Mental health providers often use heteronormative standards to gauge the health of lesbian relationships, and the relationships of lesbian women of color are often subjects of judgment because they are seen as the most deviant.[94]

Native North America

Some Indigenous peoples of the Americas conceptualize a third gender for women who dress as, and fulfill the roles usually filled by, men in their cultures.[95][96] In other cases they may use different terms for feminine women and masculine women.[97] These identities are rooted in the context of the ceremonial and cultural lives of the particular Indigenous cultures, and "simply being gay and Indian does not make someone a Two-Spirit."[98] These ceremonial and social roles, which are conferred and confirmed by the person's elders, "do not make sense" when defined by non-Native concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity.[96] Rather, they must be understood in an Indigenous context, as traditional spiritual and social roles held by the person in their Indigenous community.[98][96][99]

Tribal law can differ from colonial law. For example, the Navajo Nation's *Diné Marriage Act of 2005*, which bans recognition of specifically same-sex marriages performed outside the Nation, remains in place as of 2025 despite ongoing disputes.[100][101][102]

Middle East

Arabic-language historical records have used various terms to describe sexual practices between women.[103] A common one is "sahq", which refers to rubbing. Lesbian practices and identities are largely absent from the historical record. The common term to describe lesbianism in Arabic today is essentially the same term used to describe men, and thus the distinction between male and female homosexuality is to a certain extent linguistically obscured in contemporary queer discourse.[103] Overall, the study of contemporary lesbian experience in the region is complicated by power dynamics in the postcolonial context, shaped even by what some scholars refer to as "homonationalism", the use of politicized understanding of sexual categories to advance specific national interests on the domestic and international stage.[104]

Women in the Middle East have been historically segregated from men. In the 7th and 8th centuries, some extraordinary women dressed in male attire when gender roles were less strict. The Caliphal court in Baghdad featured women who dressed as men, including false facial hair, but they competed with other women for the attentions of men.[105][103]

In the ninth century, the Muslim philosopher al-Kindi, who was born and educated in modern-day Iraq, explicitly discusses lesbianism: "Lesbianism is due to a vapor which, condensed, generates in the labia heat and an itch which only dissolve and become cold through friction and orgasm. When friction and orgasm take place, the heat turns into coldness because the liquid that a woman ejaculates in lesbian intercourse is cold whereas..."[106]

In the tenth century, the erotic writings *Jawami ` al-ladhdha (Encyclopedia of Pleasure)*, by Abul Hasan Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib, was written also in modern-day Iraq. It describes a committed relationship between a Christian woman and an Arab woman in pre-Islamic Iraq, and the mourning process one went through when the other died.[106]

According to the 12th-century writings of Sharif al-Idrisi, highly intelligent women were more likely to be lesbians; their intellectual prowess put them on a more even par with men.[105]

While male-written accounts of lesbianism in the Middle East exist, a 1978 treatise about repression in Iran asserted that women were completely silenced: "In the whole of Iranian history, [no woman] has been allowed to speak out for such tendencies ... To attest to lesbian desires would be an unforgivable crime."[105]

A lesbian anthropologist in 1991 visited Yemen and reported that women in the town she visited were unable to comprehend her romantic relationship to another woman. Women in Pakistan are expected to marry men; those who do not are ostracized. Women may have intimate relations with other women as long as their wifely duties are met, their private matters are kept quiet, and the woman with whom they are involved is somehow related by family or logical interest to her lover.[105]

Individuals identifying with or otherwise engaging in lesbian practices in the region can face family violence and societal persecution, including "honor killings". The justifications provided by murderers relate to a person's perceived sexual immorality, loss of virginity (outside of acceptable frames of marriage), and target female victims primarily.[107]


Sara Hegazi, an Egyptian arrested in 2017 for flying a rainbow flag

Lesbians also face government persecution in the Middle East. In Yemen, homosexuality is criminalized, and women can face lashings, up to three years in prison or the death penalty for consensual lesbian sex.[108][109] In 2017, the Egyptian government arrested and tortured out lesbian and activist Sarah Hegazi after she flew a rainbow flag at a concert.[110]

Latin America

In Latin America, lesbian subcultures increased as several countries transitioned to or reformed democratic governments. However, social harassment has been common even in places where homosexuality is legal. Laws against child corruption, morality, or "the good ways" (*faltas a la moral o las buenas costumbres*) have been used to persecute homosexuals.[111] Lesbian groups and advocacy have faced repression in many countries where dictators have seized power, including Argentina.[111]

Argentinian lesbian group *Nuestro Mundo* (NM) was created in 1969.[111]

Mexican lesbian group *Lesbos* was founded in 1977. In 1997, 13 lesbian organizations were active in Mexico City.[111]

In Chile, the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet forbade the creation of lesbian groups until 1984. The first lesbian group *Ayuquelén* ("joy of being" in Mapuche) was first founded in 1984, prompted by the very public homophobic murder of a woman. *Ayuquelén* worked to remove the sodomy laws then in place in Chile.[111]

In Nicaragua in 1986, the Sandinista National Liberation Front expelled gay men and lesbians from its midst. State persecution prevented the formation of associations until AIDS became a concern, when educational efforts forced sexual minorities to band together. The first lesbian organization was *Nosotras*,

founded in 1989. An effort to promote visibility from 1991 to 1992 provoked the government to declare homosexuality illegal in 1994, effectively ending the movement until 2004, when *Grupo Safo – Grupo de Mujeres Lesbianas de Nicaragua* was created, four years before homosexuality became legal again.[111]

Africa

Founded in 2004 in Namibia, the Coalition of African Lesbians is a pan-Africanist, radical feminist network of fourteen nonprofits across ten African countries, working to eradicate stigma, legal discrimination, and violence against lesbians.[112]

Cross-gender roles and marriage between women has also been recorded in over 30 traditional African societies.[6]:262 Women may marry other women, raise their children, and be generally thought of as men in societies in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Kenya. The Hausa people of Sudan have a term equivalent to lesbian, *kifi*, that may also be applied to males to mean "neither party insists on a particular sexual role".[6]:259

Near the Congo River, a female who participates in strong emotional or sexual relationships with another female among the Nkundo people is known as *yaikya bonsángo* (a woman who presses against another woman). Lesbian relationships are also known in matrilineal societies in Ghana among the Akan people. In Lesotho, females engage in what is commonly considered sexual behavior to the Western world: they kiss, sleep together, rub genitals, participate in cunnilingus, and maintain their relationships with other females vigilantly. Since the people of Lesotho believe sex requires a penis, they do not consider their behavior sexual, nor label themselves lesbians.[6]:237–238

In Tanzania, lesbians are known as or called "Msagaji" (singular), "Wasagaji" (plural), which in Swahili means grinder or grinding because of the perceived nature of lesbian sex that would involve the mutual rubbing of vulvas.[113]

Corrective rape is reported to be on the rise in South Africa.[114] The crime is sometimes supervised by members of the woman's family or local community,[115] and is a major contributor to HIV infection in South African lesbians.[114] "Corrective rape" is not recognized by the South African legal system as a hate crime despite the fact that the South African Constitution states that no person shall be discriminated against based on their social status and identity, including sexual orientation.[116][117][118] Legally, South Africa protects gay rights extensively, but the government has not taken proactive action to prevent corrective rape, and women do not have much faith in the police and their investigations.[119][120] Local South African organizations including nonprofit "Luleki Sizwe" and The Triangle Project, between 500 (per Triangle Project) and 3600 (Luleki Sizwe) South Africans suffer from corrective rape every year,[121][119] the vast majority of lesbians live in fear of corrective rape, and victims are less likely to report the crime because of their society's homophobia.[119]

Asia

China before westernization was another society that segregated men from women. Historical Chinese culture has not recognized a concept of sexual orientation, or a framework to divide people based on their same-sex or opposite-sex attractions.[122]:29 Although there was a significant culture surrounding homosexual men, there was none for women. Outside their duties to bear sons to their husbands, women were perceived as having no sexuality at all.[6]:311

This did not mean that women could not pursue sexual relationships with other women, but that such associations could not impose upon women's relationships to men. Rare references to lesbianism were written by Ying Shao, who identified same-sex relationships between women in imperial courts who behaved as husband and wife as *dui shi* (paired eating). "Golden Orchid Associations" in Southern China existed into the 20th century and promoted formal marriages between women, who were then allowed to adopt children.[38]:187 Westernization brought new ideas that all sexual behavior not resulting in reproduction was aberrant.[122]:30–31

A historic shunga woodblock printing (c. 1500) from Japan depicting two women having sex

The liberty of being employed in silk factories starting in 1865 allowed some women to style themselves *tzu-shu nii* (never to marry) and live in communes with other women. Other Chinese called them *sou-hei* (self-combers) for adopting hairstyles of married women. These communes passed because of the Great Depression and were subsequently discouraged by the communist government for being a relic of feudal China.[38]:195 In contemporary Chinese society, *tongzhi* (same goal or spirit) is the term used to refer to homosexuals; most Chinese are reluctant to divide this classification further to identify lesbians.[122]:28

In Japan, the term *rezubian*, a Japanese pronunciation of "lesbian", was used during the 1920s. Westernization brought more independence for women and allowed some Japanese women to wear pants.[6]:246 The cognate tomboy is used in the Philippines, and particularly in Manila, to denote women who are more masculine.[122]:122 Virtuous women in Korea prioritize motherhood, chastity, and virginity; outside this scope, very few women are free to express themselves through sexuality, although there is a growing organization for lesbians named *Kkirikkiri*.[122]:75 The term *pondan* is used in Malaysia to refer to gay men, but since there is no historical context to reference lesbians, the term is used for female homosexuals as well.[122]:145 As in many Asian countries, open homosexuality is discouraged in many social levels, so many Malaysians lead double lives.[122]:148–150

In India, a 14th-century Indian text mentioning a lesbian couple who had a child as a result of their lovemaking is an exception to the general silence about female homosexuality. According to Ruth Vanita, this invisibility disappeared with the release of a film titled *Fire* in 1996, prompting some theaters in India to be attacked by religious extremists. Terms used to label homosexuals are often rejected by Indian activists for being the result of imperialist influence, but most discourse on homosexuality centers on men. Women's rights groups in India continue to debate the legitimacy of including lesbian issues in their platforms, as lesbians and material focusing on female homosexuality are frequently suppressed.[123]

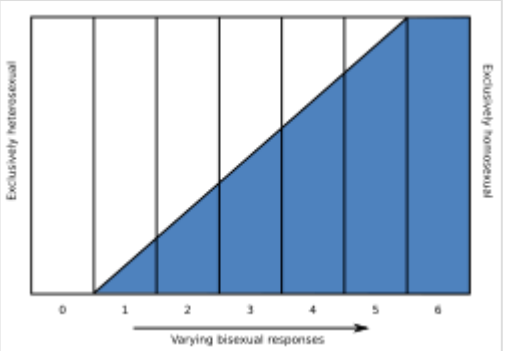
Demographics

Kinsey Report

The most extensive early study of female homosexuality was provided by the Institute for Sex Research, who published an in-depth report of the sexual experiences of American women in 1953. More than 8,000 women were interviewed by Alfred Kinsey and the staff of the Institute for Sex Research for *Kinsey Reports*. The reports' methodology was criticized during and after its publication.[124][125][126]

Despite the criticism, the reports were unexpectedly popular. They reported that 28% of women had been aroused by another female, and 19% had a sexual contact with another female.,[127]:453[i] and that around nine percent of the women had orgasmed.[127]:453–454

The report's dispassionate discussion of homosexuality as a form of human sexual behavior was revolutionary. Up to this study, only physicians and psychiatrists studied sexual behavior, and almost always the results were interpreted with a moral view.[126]



Kinsey's scale of sexual responses showing exclusively heterosexual and homosexual, with the varying degrees of bisexuality in between

Hite Report

In 1976, sexologist Shere Hite did a qualitative survey of 3,019 women on their sexual experiences, and published it as *The Hite Report*. Hite's questions differed from Kinsey's, focusing more on how women identified and what they preferred, rather than their prior experiences. Respondents to Hite's questions indicated that 8% preferred sex with women and 9% answered that they identified as bisexual or had sexual experiences with men and women, though they refused to indicate preference.[128]

Hite found it "striking" that many women who had no lesbian experiences indicated they were interested in sex with women, particularly because the question was not asked.[128] Hite found the two most significant differences between respondents' experience with men and women were the focus on clitoral stimulation, and more emotional involvement and orgasmic responses.[128]

Population estimates

Lesbians in the U.S. are estimated to be about 2.6% of the population, according to a 2000 survey.[129] Another American survey showed that between 2000 and 2005, the number of people claiming to be in same-sex relationships increased by 30%—five times the rate of population growth in the U.S. The study attributed the jump to people being more comfortable self-identifying as homosexual to the federal government.[j]

A survey by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2010 found that 1.5% of Britons identified themselves as gay or bisexual, and the ONS suggests that this is in line with other surveys showing the number between 0.3% and 3%.[131][132]

Polls in Australia recorded a range of self-identified lesbian or bisexual women from 1.3% to 2.2% of the total population.[133]

Health

Physical

Medical research and care sometimes use the term women who have sex with women (WSW) instead of lesbian.[134]

In a 2006 American survey of 2,345 lesbian and bisexual women, only 9.3% had ever been asked their sexual orientation by a physician. A third of the women had received a negative reaction from a medical professional after identifying themselves as lesbian or bisexual.[135]

When women do seek medical attention, medical professionals often fail to take a complete medical history. A patient's complete history helps medical professionals identify higher risk areas. In a 1995 U.S. survey of 6,935 self-identified lesbians, 77% had had one or more lifetime male sexual partners, and 6% had that contact within the previous year.[136][k]

Cancer

The risk factors for developing ovarian cancer rates are higher in lesbians than heterosexual women, perhaps because many lesbians lack the protective factors of pregnancy, abortion, contraceptives, breast feeding, and miscarriages.[137]

Many lesbians neglect to see a physician because they do not participate in heterosexual activity and require no birth control, which is the initiating factor for most women to seek consultation with a gynecologist when they become sexually active.[138]:359 As a result, many lesbians are not screened for cancer regularly with Pap smears.[139]

Lifestyle factors

Factors that add to risk of heart disease include obesity and smoking, both of which are more prevalent among lesbians. Studies show that lesbians are generally less concerned about weight issues than heterosexual women; and lesbians consider women with higher body masses to be more attractive than heterosexual women do. Research is needed to determine specific causes of obesity and smoking in lesbians.[139][135]

Lesbians are more likely to exercise regularly than heterosexual women. Lesbians, unlike heterosexual women, do not generally exercise for aesthetic reasons.[140]

Sexual health

Some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are communicable between women, including human papillomavirus (HPV), trichomoniasis, syphilis, and herpes simplex virus (HSV). Transmission of specific STIs among women who have sex with women depends on the sexual practices women engage in. Any object that comes in contact with cervical secretions, vaginal mucosa, or menstrual blood, including fingers or penetrative objects may transmit STIs.[141] Orogenital contact may indicate a higher risk of acquiring HSV,[142] even among women who have had no sex with men.[134]

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) occurs more often in lesbians, but it is unclear if BV is transmitted by sexual contact; it occurs in celibate as well as sexually active women. BV often occurs in both partners in a lesbian relationship;[143] a recent study of women with BV found that 81% had partners with BV.[134]

Lesbians do not frequently transmit human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), although transmission is possible through vaginal and cervical secretions. The highest rate of transmission of HIV to lesbians is from intravenous drug use or sex with women who have sexual intercourse with bisexual men.[138][144]

Mental

Lesbian women report feeling significantly different and isolated during adolescence.[145][26]:153 These emotions have been cited as appearing on average at 15 years old in lesbians and 18 years old in bisexual women.[146]

More than half the respondents to a 1994 survey of health issues in lesbians reported they had suicidal thoughts, and 18% had attempted suicide.[5]:70 American studies in the 2010s and 2020s have found that LGBT people experience higher rates of mental distress, and that this relationship is mediated by experiences of rejection and adverse childhood experiences.[147]

Depression is reported among lesbians at a rate similar to heterosexual women.[5]:69 Depression is a more significant problem among women who feel they must hide their sexual orientation from friends and family, or experience compounded ethnic or religious discrimination, or endure relationship difficulties with no support system.[26]:157–158 Generalized anxiety disorder is more likely to appear among lesbian and bisexual women than heterosexual women.[145][l]

Studies have shown that heterosexual men and lesbians have different standards for what they consider attractive in women. Lesbians who view themselves with male standards of female beauty may experience lower self-esteem, eating disorders, and higher incidence of depression.[140]

A population-based study completed by the National Alcohol Research Center found that lesbians and bisexual women are less likely than heterosexual women to abstain from alcohol, and have a higher likelihood of reporting problems with alcohol, as well as not being satisfied with treatment for substance abuse programs.[149] Many lesbian communities are centered in bars, and drinking is an activity that correlates to community participation for lesbians and bisexual women.[5]:81

Media representation

The majority of media about lesbians has been produced by men;[26]:389–390 women's publishing companies did not develop until the 1970s, films about lesbians made by women did not appear until the 1980s, and women-written television shows portraying lesbians written only began to be created in the 21st century. When depictions of lesbians began to surface, they were often one-dimensional, simplified stereotypes.[26]:389–390

Literature

Ancient lesbian writers include Sappho.[m] Ancient stories interpreted as examples of lesbianism include the Book of Ruth,[57]:22–23[59]:108 Camilla and Diana, Artemis and Callisto, and Iphis and Ianthe.[57]:24–27

For ten centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, lesbianism disappeared from literature.[59]:11 Foster points to the particularly strict view that Eve—representative of all women—caused the downfall of mankind; original sin among women was a particular concern, especially because women were perceived as creating life.[57]:30–31 During this time, women were largely illiterate and discouraged from intellectual pursuit, and men shaped ideas about sexuality.[59]:6

In the 15th and 16th centuries, French and English depictions of relationships between women, writers' attitudes spanned from amused tolerance to arousal. Physical relationships between women were often encouraged, as long as they did not supersede heterosexual relationships; there was a cultural belief that lesbian sex and relationships could not be as fulfilling as heterosexual sex and relationships.[55]:26–29 At worst, if a woman became enamored of another woman, she became a tragic figure. Male intervention into relationships between women was necessary only when women acted as men and demanded the same social privileges.[55]:29

In the 18th century, writings mentioning lesbianism included the 1749 English erotica *Fanny Hill*[150] and the 1778 erotica *L'Espion Anglais*.[151]

Lesbianism became almost exclusive to French literature in the 19th century, based on male fantasy and the desire to shock bourgeois moral values.[55]:264,268 Honoré de Balzac, in *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835), employed lesbianism in his story about three people living amongst the moral degeneration of Paris, and again in later works. His work influenced novelist Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which provided the first description of a physical type that became associated with lesbians: tall, wide-shouldered, slim-hipped, and athletically inclined.[57]:51–65 Charles Baudelaire repeatedly used lesbianism as a theme in his poems "Lesbos", *"Femmes damnées 1"* ("Damned Women"), and *"Femmes damnées 2"*.[59]:435

In Bed by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1893). The Parisian artist employed the association between lesbianism and prostitution.[55]:281–283

Reflecting French society, as well as employing stock character associations, many of the lesbian characters in 19th-century French literature were prostitutes or courtesans: personifications of vice who died early, violent deaths in moral endings.[55]:281–283 Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 poem "Christabel" and the novella *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu both present lesbianism associated with vampirism.[55]:277,288–289

Gradually, women began to write, and began to write about lesbian relationships. Until the 1920s, most major works involving lesbianism were penned by men. Foster suggests that women would have encountered suspicion about their own lives had they used same-sex love as a topic, and that some writers including Louise Labé, Charlotte Charke, and Margaret Fuller either changed the pronouns in their

literary works to male, or made them ambiguous.[57]:116–127 Author George Sand was portrayed as a character in several works in the 19th century; writer Mario Praz credited the popularity of lesbianism as a theme to Sand's appearance in Paris society in the 1830s.[55]:263[n]

In the 20th century, Katherine Mansfield, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, and Gale Wilhelm wrote popular works that had same-sex relationships as themes.[38]:182 In 1928, *The Well of Loneliness* and three other novels with lesbian themes were published in England: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*, Woolf's *Orlando*, and Compton Mackenzie's satirical novel *Extraordinary Women*.[152] Unlike *The Well of Loneliness*, none of these other novels were banned.[57]:281–287[o]

As the paperback book came into fashion, lesbian themes were relegated to pulp fiction. Many of the pulp novels typically presented very unhappy women, or relationships that ended tragically. Marijane Meaker later wrote that she was told to make the relationship end badly in *Spring Fire* because the publishers were concerned about the books being confiscated by the U.S. Postal Service.[155] Patricia Highsmith, writing as Claire Morgan, wrote *The Price of Salt* in 1951 and refused to follow this directive.[59]:1024–1025

In the 1970s, lesbian feminist magazines such as *The Furies*[156] and *Sinister Wisdom* began publication.[157]

Well-known writers who wrote on lesbian topics or about lesbian-themed plots included Rita Mae Brown, Dorothy Allison,[26]:377–379 Audre Lorde, and Cherríe Moraga.[26]:379

Film

Lesbianism, or the suggestion of it, began early in filmmaking. The same constructs of how lesbians were portrayed—or for what reasons—as what had appeared in literature were placed on women in the films. Women challenging their feminine roles was a device more easily accepted than men challenging masculine ones. Actresses appeared as men in male roles because of plot devices as early as 1914 in *A Florida Enchantment* featuring Edith Storey. In *Morocco* (1930) Marlene Dietrich kisses another woman on the lips, and Katharine Hepburn plays a man in *Christopher Strong* in 1933 and again in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936). Hollywood films followed the same trend set by audiences who flocked to Harlem to see edgy shows that suggested bisexuality.[158]:27–28

Overt female homosexuality was introduced in the 1929 film *Pandora's Box*. German films depicting homosexuality were distributed throughout Europe, but 1931's *Mädchen in Uniform* was not distributed in the U.S. because of the depiction of an adolescent's love for a female teacher in boarding school.[159]:58

After the introduction of the Hays Code in the U.S. in 1930, most references to homosexuality in American films were censored. The originally-lesbian play *The Children's Hour* was converted into a heterosexual love triangle and retitled *These Three*. The 1933 biopic *Queen Christina* veiled most of the speculation about Christina of Sweden's affairs with women.[159]:58 Censors removed a lesbian scene from the 1951 film *The Pit of Loneliness*, saying that it was "Immoral, would tend to corrupt morals".[159]:102 The code was relaxed somewhat after 1961, and the next year William Wyler remade *The Children's Hour* with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine. After MacLaine's character admits her love for Hepburn's, she hangs herself; this set a precedent for miserable endings in films addressing homosexuality.[159]:139

Gay characters also were often killed off at the end, such as the death of Sandy Dennis' character at the end of *The Fox* in 1968. If not victims, lesbians were depicted as villains or morally corrupt, such as portrayals of brothel madames by Barbara Stanwyck in *Walk on the Wild Side* from 1962 and Shelley Winters in *The Balcony* in 1963. Lesbians as predators were presented in *Rebecca* (1940), women's prison films like *Caged* (1950), or in the character Rosa Klebb in *From Russia with Love* (1963).[159]:143–156 Lesbian vampire themes have reappeared in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Blood and Roses* (1960), *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971), and *The Hunger* (1983).[159]:49 *Basic Instinct* (1992) featured a bisexual murderer played by Sharon Stone; it was one of several films that set off a storm of protests about the depiction of gay people as predators.[158]:150–151

Lesbianism, or homosexuality, was never spoken about in *The Children's Hour*, but it is transparent why Shirley MacLaine's character hangs herself.

The first film to address lesbianism with significant depth was *The Killing of Sister George* in 1968, which was filmed in The Gateways Club, a longstanding lesbian pub in London. Film historian Vito Russo considers the film a complex treatment of a multifaceted, openly lesbian character who is forced into silence about her orientation by other lesbians.[159]:170–173 *Personal Best* in 1982, and *Lianna* in 1983 treated lesbian relationships more sympathetically and showed lesbian sex scenes, though in neither film are the relationships happy ones. *Personal Best* was criticized for engaging in the clichéd plot device of one woman returning to a relationship with a man, implying that lesbianism is a phase, as well as treating the lesbian relationship with "undisguised voyeurism".[158]:185–186 More ambiguous portrayals of lesbian characters were seen in *Silkwood* (1983), *The Color Purple* (1985), and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), despite explicit lesbianism in the source material.[160]

An era of independent filmmaking brought different stories, writers, and directors to films. *Desert Hearts* (1985) was directed by lesbian Donna Deitch, and is loosely based on Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart*. It received mixed critical commentary, but earned positive reviews from the gay press.[158]:194–195 The late 1980s and early 1990s ushered in a series of films treating gay and lesbian issues seriously, made by gays and lesbians, nicknamed New Queer Cinema.[158]:237 Films using lesbians as a subject included Rose Troche's avant garde romantic comedy *Go Fish* (1994) and the first film about African American lesbians, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, in 1995.[158]:241–242

Later lesbian films included *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), and the social satire *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999).[158]:270 A twist on the lesbian-as-predator theme was the added complexity of motivations of lesbian characters in the Oscar-winning biopic of Aileen Wuornos, *Monster* (2003).

Theatre

The first stage production to feature a lesbian kiss and open depiction of two women in love is the 1907 Yiddish play *God of Vengeance* (*Got fun nekome*) by Sholem Asch. Rivkele, a young woman, and Manke, a prostitute in her father's brothel, fall in love. On March 6, 1923, during a performance of the play in a New York City theatre, producers and cast were informed that they had been indicted by a Grand Jury for violating the Penal Code that defined the presentation of "an obscene, indecent, immoral and impure theatrical production." They were arrested the following day when they appeared before a judge. Two months later, they were found guilty in a jury trial. The producers were fined $200 and the cast received

suspended sentences. The play is considered by some to be "the greatest drama of the Yiddish theater".[161][162] *God of Vengeance* was the inspiration for the 2015 play *Indecent* by Paula Vogel, which features lesbian characters Rifkele and Manke.[163][164] *Indecent* was nominated for multiple 2017 Tony Awards.[165]

Broadway musical *The Prom* featured lesbian characters Emma Nolan and Alyssa Greene. In 2019, the production was nominated for six Tony Awards, including Best Musical, and received the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical. A performance from *The Prom* was included in the 2018 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and made history by showing the first same-sex kiss in the parade's broadcast.[166][167] *Jagged Little Pill* featured lesbian character Jo, who is dealing with her religious mother's disapproval.[168]

Television

Television began to address homosexuality much later than film. Local talk shows in the late 1950s first addressed homosexuality by inviting panels of experts (usually not gay themselves) to discuss the problems of gay men in society. Lesbianism was rarely included. The first time a lesbian was portrayed on network television was the NBC drama *The Eleventh Hour* in the early 1960s, which ended with the lesbian character being "converted" to heterosexuality.[169]:7–9

Lesbian invisibility in TV continued into the 1970s, even as male homosexuality and coming-out reveals became the subject of dramas (*The Bold Ones*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Medical Center*). These shows allowed homosexuality to be discussed clinically, with the main characters guiding troubled gay characters or correcting homophobic antagonists, while simultaneously comparing homosexuality to psychosis, criminal behavior, or drug use.[169]:13–44

Another stock plot device in the 1970s was the gay character in a police drama. They served as victims of blackmail or anti-gay violence, but more often as criminals. Beginning in the late 1960s with *N.Y.P.D.*, *Police Story*, and *Police Woman*, the use of homosexuals in stories became much more prevalent.[159]:186–189 Lesbians were included as villains, motivated to murder by their desires, internalized homophobia, or fear of being exposed as homosexual. One episode of *Police Woman* earned protests by the National Gay Task Force before it aired for portraying a trio of murderous lesbians who killed retirement home patients for their money.[169]:68 NBC edited the episode because of the protests, but a sit-in was staged in the head of NBC's offices.[169]:69

In the middle of the 1970s, gay men and lesbians began to appear as police officers or detectives. Other shows, such as the 1982*Cagney & Lacey* made conscious attempts to soften the two ground-breaking two female detective characters so they would not appear to be lesbians.[169]:75–76 In 1991, a bisexual lawyer character on *L.A. Law* shared the first significant lesbian kiss[p] on primetime television, stirring a controversy despite being labeled "chaste" by *The Hollywood Reporter*.[169]:89

Though television did not begin to use recurring homosexual characters until the late 1980s, some early situation comedies used a stock character that author Stephen Tropiano calls "gay-straight": supporting characters who were quirky, did not comply with gender norms, or had ambiguous personal lives, that "for all purposes "'should' be gay". These included Zelda from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, Miss Hathaway from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and Jo from *The Facts of Life*.[169]:185–186 In the mid-1980s

through the 1990s, sitcoms frequently employed a "coming out" episode, where a friend of one of the stars admits she is a lesbian, forcing the cast to deal with the issue. *Designing Women*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Friends* used this device.[169]:202–204

Ellen DeGeneres with her Emmy Award in 1997. Her coming out in the media, as well as her sitcom, "ranks, hands down, as the single most public exit in gay history", changing media portrayals of lesbians in Western culture.[171]

Recurring openly lesbian characters were seen on *Married... with Children*, *Mad About You*, and *Roseanne*, in which a highly publicized episode.[26]:394,399 By far the sitcom with the most significant impact to the image of lesbians was *Ellen*, which generated enormous publicity from the 1997 coming out episode; Ellen DeGeneres appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline "Yep, I'm Gay". Parties were held in many U.S. cities to watch the episode, and the opposition from conservative organizations was intense. WBMA-LP, the ABC affiliate in Birmingham, Alabama, refused to air the first run of the episode, citing conservative values of the local viewing audience. Even as "The Puppy Episode" won an Emmy for writing, network executives cancelled the Ellen show.[169]:245–249

Dramas following *L.A. Law* began incorporating homosexual themes, particularly with continuing storylines on *Relativity*, *Picket Fences*, *ER*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*, all of which tested the boundaries of sexuality and gender roles.[169]:128–136 A popular show directed at adolescents was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In the fourth season of *Buffy*, Tara and Willow admit their love for each other without any special fanfare and the relationship is treated as are the other romantic relationships on the show.[169]:183–184

In the 2000s came network television series devoted solely to gay characters. Showtime's American rendition of *Queer as Folk* ran from 2000 to 2005; two of the main characters were a lesbian couple. Showtime promoted the series as "No Limits", and *Queer as Folk* addressed homosexuality graphically. The aggressive advertising paid off as the show became the network's highest rated, doubling the numbers of other Showtime programs after the first season.[169]:150–152 In 2004, Showtime introduced *The L Word*, a dramatic series devoted to a group of lesbian and bisexual women, which ran for six seasons and was then temporarily rebooted in 2019.[172]

Chic and popular culture

Lesbian visibility has improved since the early 1980s. This is in part due to public figures who have drawn speculation and/or comment from the public and the press about their sexuality. The primary figure earning this attention was Martina Navratilova, who served as tabloid fodder for years as she denied being lesbian, admitted to being bisexual, had very public relationships with Rita Mae Brown and Judy Nelson, and acquired as much press about her sexuality as she did her athletic achievements.[173]

Other public figures acknowledged their homosexuality, such as musicians k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge. Madonna pushed sexual boundaries in her performances. In 1993, heterosexual supermodel Cindy Crawford posed for a cover of *Vanity Fair* in a provocative arrangement that showed Crawford

pretending to shave k.d. lang's face.[174] The image "became an internationally recognized symbol of the phenomenon of lesbian chic".[173]

The August 1993 cover of *Vanity Fair* that marked the arrival of lesbian chic as a social phenomenon in the 1990s

The year 1994 marked a rise in lesbian visibility, particularly appealing to women with feminine appearances. Between 1992 and 1994, *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Newsweek*, and *New York* magazines featured stories about women who admitted sexual histories with other women.[171]

One analyst reasoned the recurrence of lesbian chic was due to the often-used homoerotic subtexts of gay male subculture being considered off-limits because of AIDS in the late 1980s and 1990s, joined with the distant memory of lesbians as they appeared in the 1970s: unattractive and militant. In short, lesbians became more attractive to general audiences when they ceased having political convictions.[173] All the attention on feminine and glamorous women created what culture analyst Rodger Streitmatter characterizes as an unrealistic image of lesbians packaged by heterosexual men; the trend influenced an increase in the inclusion of lesbian material in pornography aimed at men.[171]

A resurgence of lesbian visibility was noted in 2009 when sexually fluid female celebrities, such as Cynthia Nixon and Lindsay Lohan, commented openly about their relationships with women, and reality television addressed same-sex relationships. Psychiatrists and feminist philosophers wrote that the rise in women acknowledging same-sex relationships was due to growing social acceptance, but also conceded that "only a certain kind of lesbian—slim and elegant or butch in just the right androgynous way—is acceptable to mainstream culture."[175]

Legal rights

Custody and parenting

Family issues were significant concerns for lesbians when gay activism became more vocal in the 1960s and 1970s. Custody issues in particular were of interest since often courts would not award custody to mothers who were openly homosexual, even though the general procedure acknowledged children were awarded to the biological mother.[26]:125–126[50]:182

Several studies performed as a result of custody disputes compared outcomes for children of single lesbian mothers and single nonlesbian mothers. They found that children's mental health, happiness, overall adjustment, sexual orientation, and sex roles, were similar between both groups.[26]:125–126

The ability to adopt domestically or internationally children or provide a home as a foster parent is also a political and family priority for many lesbians, as is improving access to artificial insemination.[26]:128–129

Marriage

Before the 1970s, the idea that same-sex adults formed long-term committed relationships was unknown to many people. In the 1990s in the U.S., the majority of lesbians (between 60% and 80%) reported being in a long-term relationship.[26]:117 Sociologists credit the high number of paired women to women's higher propensity to commit to relationships. Unlike heterosexual relationships that tend to divide work based on sex roles, lesbian relationships divide chores evenly between both members. Studies have also reported that emotional bonds are closer in lesbian and gay relationships than heterosexual ones.[26]:118–119

As of 2025, same-sex marriage is legal in thirty-nine countries.[176]

Criminalization of sexual activity

Although criminalization of homosexuality primarily affects gay and bisexual men, at least thirty-eight countries criminalize same-sex activity between women.[177]

See also

LGBTQ portal

- African-American LGBTQ community
- Discrimination against lesbians – Irrational fear of, and aversion to, lesbians
- Domestic violence in lesbian relationships – Pattern of violent and coercive behavior in a female same-sex relationship
- Dyke – Lesbian slang term
- Dyke march – Lesbian-led gathering and protest march
- Female bonding – Close personal relationship between women
- History of lesbianism
- History of lesbianism in the United States
- Homosexual behavior in animals – Sexual behavior among non-human species that is interpreted as homosexual
- Homosociality – Socializing with the same sex
- Lesbian bar – Drinking establishment catering to lesbians
- Lesbian erasure – Act of minimizing lesbian representation
- Lesbian erotica – Visual art depiction of female-female sexuality
- Lesbian literature – Subgenre of literature with lesbian themes
- Lesbian Visibility Week – Annual observance
- LGBT themes in speculative fiction
- Lipstick lesbian – Slang for a stereotypically feminine lesbian
- List of lesbian periodicals
- Queerplatonic relationship – Non-romantic intimate partnerships
- Women's music – Movement of popular music for, by, and about women
- Yuri – Fiction genre depicting female same-sex relationships

Notes

a. An attempt by natives of Lesbos (also called "Mytilene" in Greece) in 2008 to reclaim the word to refer only to people from the island was unsuccessful in a Greek court. Inhabitants of Lesbos claimed the use of *lesbian* to refer to female homosexuality violated their human rights and "disgrace[d] them around the world".[8]

b. "[H]e begins by treating of the origin of human nature. The sexes were originally three, men, women, and the union of the two; and they were made round—having four hands, four feet, two faces on a round neck, and the rest to correspond. Terrible was their strength and swiftness; and they were essaying to scale heaven and attack the gods. Doubt reigned in the celestial councils; the gods were divided between the desire of quelling the pride of man and the fear of losing the sacrifices. At last Zeus hit upon an expedient. Let us cut them in two, he said; then they will only have half their strength, and we shall have twice as many sacrifices. He spake, and split them as you might split an egg with an hair; and when this was done, he told Apollo to give their faces a twist and re-arrange their persons, taking out the wrinkles and tying the skin in a knot about the navel. The two halves went about looking for one another, and were ready to die of hunger in one another's arms. Then Zeus invented an adjustment of the sexes, which enabled them to marry and go their way to the business of life. Now the characters of men differ accordingly as they are derived from the original man or the original woman, or the original man-woman. Those who come from the man-woman are lascivious and adulterous; those who come from the woman form female attachments; those who are a section of the male follow the male and embrace him, and in him all their desires centre."

c. "La muger, que con otra muger tenía deleitaciones carnales, a las quales llamaban Patlache, que quiere decir: incuba, morían ambas por ello." (*Monarquía indiana*, transl.)

d. Wollstonecraft and Blood set up a girls' boarding school so they could live and work together, and Wollstonecraft named her first child after Blood. Wollstonecraft's first novel *Mary: A Fiction*, in part, addressed her relationship with Fanny Blood.[57]:55–60

e. Other historical figures rejected being labeled as lesbians despite their behavior: Djuna Barnes, author of *Nightwood*, a novel about an affair Barnes had with Thelma Wood, earned the label "lesbian writer", which she protested by saying, "I am not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma." Virginia Woolf, who modeled the hero/ine in *Orlando* on Vita Sackville-West, with whom she was having an affair, set herself apart from women who pursued relationships with other women by writing, "These Sapphists *love* women; friendship is never untinged with amorosity."[59]:4–5

f. In Germany between 1898 and 1908 over a thousand articles were published regarding the topic of homosexuality.[55]:248 Between 1896 and 1916, 566 articles on women's "perversions" were published in the United States.[54]:49

g. A 1966 survey of psychological literature on homosexuality began with Freud's 1924 theory that it is a fixation on the opposite sex parent. As Freud's views were the foundation of psychotherapy, further articles agreed with this, including one in 1951 that asserted that homosexuals are actually heterosexuals that play both gender roles, and homosexuals are attempting to perpetuate "infantile, incestuous fixation(s)" on relationships that are forbidden.[68]

h. Historian Vern Bullough published a paper based on an unfinished study of mental and physical traits performed by a lesbian in Salt Lake City during the 1920s and 1930s. The compiler of the study reported on 23 of her colleagues, indicating there was an underground lesbian community in the conservative city. Bullough remarked that the information was being used to support the attitude that lesbians were not abnormal or maladjusted, but it also reflected that women included in the study strove in every way to conform to social gender expectations, viewing anyone who pushed the boundaries of respectability with hostility. Bullough wrote, "In fact, their very success in disguising their sexual orientation to the outside world leads us to hypothesize that lesbianism in the past was more prevalent than the sources might indicate, since society was so unsuspecting."[70]

i. Sexual contact, according to Kinsey, included lip kissing, deep kissing, body touching, manual breast and genital stimulation, oral breast and genital stimulation, and object-vaginal penetration.[127]:466–467

j. The study estimated the total population of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals at 8.8 million, but did not differentiate between men and women.[130]

k. Another summary of overall surveys found that women who identify as lesbian, 80–95% had previous sexual contact with men, and some report sexual behavior that was risky.[134]

l. Lesbian and bisexual women are also more likely to report symptoms of multiple disorders that include major depression, panic disorder, alcohol and drug abuse.[148]

m. Sappho has also served as a subject of many works of literature by writers such as John Donne, Alexander Pope, Pierre Louÿs, and several anonymous writers, that have addressed her relationships with women and men. She has been used as an embodiment of same-sex desire, and as a character in fictions loosely based on her life.[59]:125,208,252,319,566

n. The cross-dressing Sand was also the subject of a few of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets.[59]:426–427 Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* in 1853 initiated a genre of boarding school stories with homoerotic themes.[59]:429

o. A fifth novel in 1928, American author Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*, is a *roman à clef* of a lesbian literary and artistic salon in Paris and circulated at first within those circles; Susan Sniader Lanser calls it a "sister-text" to Hall's landmark work,[153] as Barnes includes a character based on Radclyffe Hall and passages that may be a response to *The Well of Loneliness*[154]

p. *21 Jump Street* included a kiss between series regular Holly Robinson Peete and guest star Katy Boyer in "A Change of Heart" (1990) but it did not inspire the critical or popular attention later such kisses would engender.[170]:235

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Further reading

Books

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Journals

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- Moreno-Domínguez, Silvia; Raposo, Tania; Elipe, Paz (2019). "Body Image and Sexual Dissatisfaction: Differences Among Heterosexual, Bisexual, and Lesbian Women" (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6520663). *Frontiers in Psychology*. **10** 903. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00903 (https://doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpsyg.2019.00903). ISSN 1664-1078 (https://search.worldcat.org/issn/1664-1078). PMC 6520663 (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6520663). PMID 31143139 (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31143139). S2CID 147707651 (https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:147707651).

Audio

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External links

- Lesbian Herstory Archives (https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/)
- June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives (https://www.mazerlesbianarchives.org/)
- Bay Area Lesbian Archives (https://www.bayarealesbianarchives.org/) (San Francisco/Oakland, California)
- Lesbian Archive (https://womenslibrary.org.uk/explore-the-library-and-archive/the-archive-collection/the-lesbian-archive/) at Glasgow Women's Library (Scotland)
- Southern Lesbian Feminist Activist Herstory Project (https://slfaherstoryproject.org/)
- *Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project* (https://www.olohp.org/) (OLOHP)
    - *Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project* (https://findingaids.smith.edu/agents/corporate_entities/1078) collection at Smith College
- Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project collection (https://scua.uoregon.edu/repositories/2/resources/8789) at University of Oregon Libraries
- Oral Herstorians Collection (https://www.sinisterwisdom.org/oralherstorians), Lesbian Feminist Activist Oral Herstory Project, *Sinister Wisdom*
- *Lesbians in the Twentieth Century, 1900–1999* (https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lesbians-20th-century/intro), Esther Newton, *OutHistory*, 2008 (Lesbian History project, University of Michigan)
- *Dyke, A Quarterly* (https://seesaw.typepad.com/dykeaquarterly/), published 1975–1979 (online annotated archive, live website)
- Vintage Images (https://web.archive.org/web/20021203222212/http://www.sappho.com/vintage/index.html), *Isle of Lesbos* (*Sappho.com*)