

# Lesbian communities

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The phrase “lesbian communities” refers to the collective experiences of women-identified individuals whose personal, social, and/or political lives are organized at least in part around same-sex love and desire. Because the identity label “lesbian” did not come into common parlance until the early twentieth century, there is a debate among historians of sexuality about using the term “lesbian” anachronistically to describe the history of love and sex between women (e.g., European sexologists in the late nineteenth century would describe women who had erotic interest in other women as “inverts,” not lesbians). Due to the etymological and cultural location of “lesbian” within a fairly modern Euro-American context, this entry focuses on Euro-American communities comprised of individuals who largely identify as lesbian.

## Historical overview of lesbian communities

In a Euro-American historical context, gay male communities flourished in the public sphere earlier than did lesbian communities, as men as a group had greater access to and freedom of movement in the public sphere than did women. Nonetheless, there have been key examples of lesbian communities throughout history, such as the women’s literary salons hosted by U.S. expatriate Nathalie Barney (1876–1972) in Paris from the early 1900s into the 1960s. The introduction of Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) ideas about female sexuality in the early twentieth century that built on sexological research about female sexual “inversion,” paved the way for women’s same-sex relationships, previously thought of as benign “romantic friendships” during the nineteenth century, to fall under more societal scrutiny.

Bisexual experimentation among women (and men) became popular in the 1920s in a generation of youth disillusioned by World War I and fiercely protesting the older generations’ Victorian morals. During World War II, many women found one another in factories and the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (1942–1978) (WAAC, later WAC when “Auxiliary” was dropped). Despite the significant presence of lesbians in the military, women’s labor power was so desperately needed at this time that their superiors were discouraged from launching anti-lesbian witch hunts. This would change during the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, when gay men and lesbian women were aggressively targeted for persecution by the U.S. federal government.

By the 1950s, working-class lesbian women created a thriving underground bar culture in which a butch-femme aesthetic became highly prized. Some members of butch-femme communities became ostracized from their lesbian social groups if they deviated from butch-femme pairings. For example, the stigma faced by two butches in love in their Buffalo, New York lesbian community is chronicled in Leslie Steinberg’s (1949–) autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993).

Lesbian feminism in the 1960s and 1970s directly critiqued butch-femme communities as replicating restrictive masculine-feminine roles found in heterosexual relationships, roles that feminists saw themselves as seeking to eliminate. Lesbian feminist communities adopted an androgynous style of dress and frowned upon anything deemed anti-feminist or phallogocentric. Such spaces tended to be white-dominated and more class privileged than the butch-femme communities they critiqued. Lesbian feminists’ commitment to female community, self-empowerment, and independence from men led to the philosophy of lesbian separatism, in which women set up lesbian feminist communes or “womyn’s land” beginning in the 1970s in rural areas.

The standard belief found in the communes was that, following radical feminist positions, women needed to break with the bonds of

heteropatriarchal society in order to begin the process of unlearning identification with men. The ultimate goal was to identify and find solidarity with other women in order to unleash women's full human potential unfettered by sexist gender roles. In some contexts, formerly heterosexual-identified women embraced political lesbianism, or the idea of removing men from their lives and taking up romantic and sexual relationships with women out of a commitment to feminist politics. These women were questioned by other lesbians, who argued that political lesbianism was inauthentic and desexualized.

Not all lesbian women found the idea of separatist communes appealing. White lesbians and lesbians of color who did not identify as lesbian feminists declined to adopt the prevailing lesbian feminist principles of the time. Women of color argued they were expected to give up their solidarity with men of color fighting a racist society in order to embrace their lesbian identities and feminist politics. For these women, "men" could not easily be identified as "the oppressor" of women, as men of color experienced oppression under the rule of white supremacy, and white women often exerted their white privilege over women of color.

During the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian communities in the United States faced divisions over issues such as the consumption of and participation in pornography, sex work, and BDSM, a period of time called the feminist sex wars. Many lesbian feminists remain deeply critical of these practices and find them damaging to women. Other lesbian and queer women, many of them third-wave feminists, find potential for sexual empowerment and agency in pornography, sex work, and BDSM.

Lesbian and queer women who came of age in the 1980s and later in North America have, as a demographic, mostly abandoned strict feminist-motivated androgyny and have incorporated a spectrum of gender presentations into their communities. However, many lesbian-queer women never stopped incorporating masculine-feminine aesthetics into their communities. Many younger lesbians and queer women have also embraced a politics of sex positivity. The 1990s has come to be known as the "lesbian baby boom," as many lesbian couples began raising children in greater numbers and with greater access to reproductive technologies, domestic adoptive and foster care services, and lesbian and gay male parenting support networks.

## Contemporary lesbian and queer communal spaces

Contemporary lesbian and queer spaces exist in diverse contexts. Since the advent of the Internet, lesbian and queer communities have exploded in virtual spaces, providing communal interaction on social networking sites, list serves, and lesbian-queer blogs as well as fostering offline connections, as occurs through MeetUp groups, Facebook events, and dating sites such as OKCupid. Lesbian-centered travel companies Olivia and Sweet host lesbian and queer cruises. Large annual lesbian-queer parties have become well-known at Dinah Shore in Palm Springs, California and on Memorial Day weekend in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Some geographic areas known for large lesbian populations, such as Northampton in western Massachusetts, Somerville and Jamaica Plain in Boston, and the Mission District in San Francisco, all feature densely-populated lesbian-queer neighborhoods and options for night life. Lesbian clubs and bars, as well as lesbian-themed nights at non-lesbian venues, continue to be important spaces for the expression of lesbian and queer community.

Sex-segregated spaces found at progressive women's colleges and in women's prisons are host to strong lesbian-queer communities. Various queer-positive sex clubs, play parties, and BDSM spaces are found in major cities and smaller towns alike. Although far more rare than those established by men, there have been some notable female same-sex bath houses, such as The Pleasure Palace in Toronto, which despite being raided in 2007 continues to hold licensed events for women and transgender individuals in the space of a men's bath house. Lesbian and queer women also continue to find community within the world of sports, including women's softball, rugby, and roller derby teams.

## Politics and hierarchies in lesbian communities

The question of genitals and who "really" counts as a woman, as well as debates over who counts as a lesbian, remain significant areas of concern within modern lesbian communities. The transition of many formerly butch lesbian-presenting individuals to transgender male identities has

historically been an issue of debate especially within lesbian feminist communities, who have seen transgender men as attempting to recoup male privilege and as self-loathingly denying their “true nature” as women. Lesbian-identified women and their transitioning male partners also face new questions about gender and sexual identities, such as whether transgender men should still be included in “lesbian” communities; whether a woman is still a lesbian when her partner transitions to male; and how a transgender man who was formerly lesbian-identified is to understand shifts in his sexual orientation. Many trans\* men’s emotional and political investment in lesbian culture, and thus their continued identification with and participation in lesbian and queer female communities, indicates that membership in and connection to such communities is not always easily defined according to boundaries of sexual or gender identity.

Transgender women have also faced, and continue to face, discrimination within various feminist and lesbian communities. A classic example of transphobic policy in “women’s” and lesbian-centric communities has been the controversy generated by The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in rural Hart, Michigan (1976–). MichFest’s “womyn-born womyn” policy, which states that only individuals assigned female at birth are welcome in the space, has drawn further attention to the politics of sexed bodies in determining who is “authentically” female in closed feminist spaces. The transphobia found at MichFest has since generated protests, boycotts, and counter-festivals of transgender-positive feminist, lesbian, and queer people each year.

Other key debates about who counts as lesbian typically center around discrepancies in sexual behavior versus identity, such as lesbian-identified women sleeping with cisgender (one whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth) men. In such instances, accusations of inauthenticity are leveled against such women, and intracommunal critiques of heterosexual privilege remain paramount. Bisexual women in lesbian communities have often reported their experiences as having been made to feel like outsiders who are confused and will inevitably “go back” to men.

Femme-inine women have historically faced challenges of not being recognized as queer unless on the arm of a butch. They have also had

their sexual identities challenged by others both within their lesbian and queer communities and in the outside heterosexual world due to their gender-normative appearance. The term “femme invisibility” refers to femmes’ negative experiences with not being recognized and/or validated by others in their lesbian/queer communities and in larger society. The politics of femme invisibility result in the valorization of female masculinity as the iconic representation of “dyke” or queer female identity, while more fem(me)inine lesbian and queer women are continually read as straight or “less gay” than their more masculine friends and partners. The pairing of visible lesbianism with masculinity, and its resultant erotic capital, in queer female communities continues to remain an undertheorized topic in sexualities scholarship. Further scholarship on queer fem(me)inities is needed for scholars to deepen and enrich LGBTQ studies analysis.

### “Lesbian” versus “queer”

Many younger women and female-bodied people have embraced the term “queer” either in addition to or instead of the term “lesbian” in order to denote a more fluid understanding of both sexuality and gender. For these individuals, queer communities allow for a more inclusive gathering place for those whose sexualities are non-heterosexual (and in some contexts, any non-normative sexual practice, such as heterosexual BDSM, is conceived of as queer) and/or whose gender identities and expressions transgress fixed notions of male/female. In these communities, sexual fluidity and pansexuality are recognized in addition to gay and lesbian identities, and genderqueer, genderfuck, transgender, and boi identities are considered a part of the community in addition to those who identify strictly as women.

This shift in terminology, especially in white-dominated, college-educated, economically privileged, urban queer centers, is seen by many third-wave feminists and self-described queers and gender rebels as an attempt to depart from the forms of exclusion described above in historically lesbian communities. However, issues of racism, classism, ableism, transphobia, and femmephobia remain important problems within these spaces. Lesbian and queer communities of color

contribute identity categories such as stud and aggressive, in addition to femme, as part of the matrix of gender and sexual possibilities, as exemplified in the LOGO documentary *The Aggressives* (Peddle 2005). An overall awareness of the socially constructed spectrum of sexuality and gender, and interest in sexual and gender exploration, is apparent in many female-bodied queer communities as well through drag king performances, femme burlesque troupes, and other forms of queer entertainment and political expression.

SEE ALSO: Desire versus 'Sexual Identity' Debate; Feminism; Lesbian; Lesbian Feminism; LGBT/Queer Sexuality, History of, North America; Pansexuality; Politics of Labeling; Queer; Trans\* Bodies; Transgender

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