Definitions for the term *lesbian* range from identifying the people of the Greek island of Lesbos, to female homosexual, to women who are sexually oriented to women. The term has both psychological and social meanings. Contemporary terms for lesbians begin with derivatives of the name of a 16th century B.C.E. poet, Sappho, from Lesbos. Some slang terms include *sapphic, lesbo, dykey, butch,* and *lezsie.* These terms are sometimes used to denigrate girls and women who identify themselves as lesbian, and other times are reclaimed by gay women as an act of empowerment. The word *lesbian* can be used as a noun as in, “she is a lesbian” or as an adjective as in, “lesbian mother.” Lesbians may identify themselves in a more masculine gender roles, earning them the name *butch lesbian* or more feminine role, earning them the term *lipstick lesbian.*

**Visibility for Women and Lesbians**

The acceptance of lesbian identity in the 21st century is not secure, and could not have taken place without the work of many pioneering predecessors. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir explored questions of female identity when she commented that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one.” Two lesbian writers, Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich, furthered this premise to question both female heterosexuality and gender identity. Wittig boldly declared, to the shock of her audience at the Modern Language Association Convention in 1978, “I am a lesbian, not a woman.” In her 1980 groundbreaking essay that ignited much public debate, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich argued that lesbian identity requires breaking the compulsory way of life.

The key contribution of these and many other writers was to disengage biological sex from socially constructed gender identity. That is, rather than presume that having female genitalia dictates which clothes women should wear, the sports they should play, the education they should have access to, and the people with whom they have emotional and sexual relationships, there was an acknowledgment that an individual’s feelings and wishes must play a part. Instead of insisting that the natural order of things is a presumption of patriarchy and heterosexuality that ties women to reproduction and opposite-sex sexuality, lesbian writers offered an alternate way of thinking.

They insisted that gender was socially constructed, and depended on a psychological attachment to gender that was not solely biological. Within such a framework, gender identity allowed women who did not identify under a system of heteropatriarchy to redefine womanhood outside the imposition of opposite sex imperatives and passivity. Even with the heightened attention and acceptance of women and lesbians living independent of men, the struggle to identify as a woman and lesbian outside heteropatriarchy is still ongoing.

Lesbian writers continue to help legitimize relationships between women. There is a growing library of lesbian novels for teens, such as those authored by Nancy Garden. Authors such as Jeanette Winterson continue to add to the growing literary work, with lesbian themes penned by lesbian authors. Academic work contributes to contemporary debates about legal and social constructs of lesbian identity. These include the writings of E. J. Graff, Sara Ahmed, and Brenda Cossman from the United States, Great
Britain, and Canada, respectively.

Earlier writings exposed marriages of women living full lives with other women, such as David Mamet’s 2002 play, *Boston Marriage*, female-to-female attractions, and the revelation of rich and famous women who had long intimate relationships with other women that were found recorded in private documents (see Lillian Faderman’s 1991 work, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*). Uncovering such histories alone was not sufficient to legitimize lesbian relationships. Seismic changes occurring since the 1920s repositioned women in the world order: World War II forcing large numbers of women to leave their homes and take on traditionally men's jobs outside of the home; the radical bra-burning 1960s and 1970s of women's liberation; and the more diversified 1980s and 1990s when conditions advanced further to permit women to enter public debates in ways they never had before. What lesbians in particular brought to this political landscape was a notion that women had sexual desire, and that their desire was not always oriented toward men, that they were not satisfied to be relegated to the domestic sphere, and that lesbians could not be reduced to be identified solely by their sexual orientation. The legacy of these political movements is that a more legitimate gender identity, one that has been expanded beyond heterosexual women, was made possible in many parts of the world.

Current political movements have seen changes in same-sex benefits and laws in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In Canada, a law allowing same-sex marriage was passed in 2005; a growing number of states in the United States have legalized domestic partnerships, and a handful of European countries, South Africa, various South American nations, Australia, and New Zealand also have passed laws legalizing same-sex relationships. Where these laws are in place, lesbians are able to openly and legally live together, organize family units, have children together, and adopt each other's children. In some instances, immigration is made possible through the recognition of lesbian relationships. This is not to suggest, however, that homophobia has been eradicated in countries with even the most progressive same-sex laws, such as legal marriage.

**Multiple and Interlocking Identities**

As is the case in any marginal identity, the more compounded one's identity is, the more difficult it is to avoid social penalties. For instance, some indigenous women and women of color have noted that the term *lesbian* doesn't apply to them because it is perceived to exclude them and privilege white women. From the mid-1970s on, groups such as the Salsa Sisters and Third World Wimmin were created as a way for lesbians of color to break into white-dominated spaces and resist racial discrimination. It is more common today to find groups that represent and welcome lesbians of color. Because of the way in which social identities are either accepted or not in certain cultures, white, middle-class, able-bodied lesbians are likely to have more privileges than black, poor, or disabled lesbians.

Lesbian identity joins heterosexuality as two of a number of sexually oriented identities available to women. Others include transgendered women, or men who identify with the female gender. Another is transsexual women, or men who identify as women and undergo a sex change surgery. In cases of female trans identity, the person may or may not be a lesbian. Lesbian identity in the case of male to female is sometimes challenged by other lesbians as not legitimate. Thus, transphobia may be part of some lesbian communities. The Aboriginal term *two-spirited* represents those born with both male and female spirits, and is a term that has been reclaimed by lesbians, gay men, and those who identify themselves as transgendered or queer. Prior to colonial contact, two-spirited women fought as male
warriors and formally partnered with other females. They were revered and honored as a “third gender,” who were often seen as visionaries and healers.

Women with disabilities are often overlooked in lesbian circles because of society's tendency to view people with disabilities as not possessing sexual desire, whether opposite or same sex oriented. More research needs to be done to examine how different groups are able, or not able, to raise funds to create spaces that include the full range of multiple lesbian identities.

Internationally, lesbian identity is often extremely complex. In some countries there is no language for the identity, nor are there public spaces in which lesbians can congregate. In 1994, Lepa Mladjenovic was given the international human rights award, Filipa de Souza, for lesbian rights. She spoke out about the constraints and invisibility of lesbians in Belgrade, Serbia. As Deepa Mehta's film, Fire (1996), demonstrates, in some countries, to be caught in a lesbian relationship is punishable by the family and/or the state. Punishment can be as severe as a death sentence or serving long jail terms. In some conservative and religious communities, identifying as a lesbian is cause for psychological reassignment. Robert Spitzer, an American psychiatrist, claims to be able to “cure” same-sex orientation by reorienting lesbians (and gay men) to the opposite sex. He supports his claims with questionable research that is challenged by many doctors in the field of psychology and psychiatry, as well as by the head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington.

Lesbian Activism

The Daughters of Bilitis began formal lesbian political mobilization in the mid-1950s, and many other groups have followed in their wake. Since 1992, the Lesbian Avengers-lesbian activists who take direct action in public spaces such as street theaters and marches-have created space for lesbians in the male-dominated gay rights movement. The first Dyke Marches took place in the early 1990s in New York City, and in Washington, D.C. Dyke Marches have since become a mainstay during many Pride celebrations in larger urban centers. The Dyke Marches celebrate women loving women, and often takes place a day before larger Pride Parades. Male supporters are invited to attend, but not to march. The march is traditionally started by the loud motorcycle revving of the group Dykes on Bikes.

Popular Culture

Lesbian identity is not a singular category, and as noted above, has a complex and varied history. Popular media represents lesbians in ways that can further identify, categorize, vilify, and normalize them. Lesbian kissing on television and in movies can attract much publicity and attention. There is some debate about when the first televised all-female kiss took place. On the TV show LA Law, a kiss took place in 1991 between the actors Michele Greene and Amanda Donohoe, and on the Roseanne show, a kiss occurred in 1994 between actors Roseanne Barr and Mariel Hemmingway. That debate seems less important now that lesbians have been portrayed more often on TV shows such as The L Word, Buffy The Vampire Slayer, ER, Queer as Folk, Friends, and Spin City.

Comic books have also included lesbian characters. Alison Bechdel, in her long-running comic strip (1983-2008), Dykes to Watch Out For, provided a diverse range of contemporary lesbian identities with which younger lesbians could identify. Bechdel's comic strip addressed political and personal issues in the lives of young lesbians, such as relationships, homophobic family angst, and the meaning of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (an annual woman-only music festival that began in 1976, and is attended predominantly by lesbians). In the Batman comic strip, the lead female character, Renee Montoya (Batwoman) was first developed as a police officer, a Latina, and a tough, beautiful woman.
before coming out in the series as a lesbian in 2003, in *Batman: The Animated Series*, and later in the *New Batman Adventures*. This readily available range of popular culture, activities and literature creates a stronger sense of lesbian identity for lesbians today.

Lesbians in the public eye in the early 21st century included Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O'Donnell (television hosts), Dorothy Alison (novelist), Angela Davis (activist), Melissa Etheridge (musician), Amy Ray and Emily Saliers (musicians, Indigo Girls), k. d. lang (musician), and Marilyn Waring, Linda Ketner, and Kathleen Wynne (politicians).

**See Also:**

**Further Readings**


Fumia, Doreen

**APA**

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**
