



## Bisexual Movements

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Although bisexuals have played an important part in the glbt movement for equality, they often have had to hide their bisexuality because of a lack of acceptance from many lesbians and gay men, who believed that bisexuals would rely on heterosexual privilege to escape stigma. More recently, however, the bisexual movement has been accepted as part of the larger glbt movement and bisexual organizations now flourish.

### **Bisexual Involvement in Early Gay Rights Groups**

Although specific bisexual organizations did not develop in the United States until the 1970s and in Europe until the 1980s, individuals who were attracted to both women and men were involved in many of the early gay rights groups on both sides of the Atlantic. However, most were not open about their bisexuality, either because they did not feel the need to assert a separate bisexual identity or because they feared being ostracized for having different-sex relationships.

For example, the vice president of the Society for Human Rights, the first known male homophile organization in the United States (established in Chicago in 1924), was bisexual and married. He had to keep his bisexuality a secret, however, as the group denied membership to bisexuals, believing that they would be less committed to the cause.

Bisexual women and men also joined the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and other American homophile organizations founded in the 1950s and 1960s. The first gay college group, Columbia University's Student Homophile League, was established by Stephen Donaldson (born Robert Martin), an openly bisexual student, in 1966. With his support, other campuses soon created similar organizations, leading to the development of gay groups on college campuses throughout the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But, as with the Society for Human Rights, bisexuals were not always accepted in the homophile movement during the 1950s and 1960s. It was feared that they would retreat to the closet (even though many lesbians and gay men in the movement were not entirely open themselves) and had less to lose than lesbians or gay men. Yet many of the people who sought the assistance of homophile organizations were bisexual.

In contrast, bisexuality was often accepted and, at times, celebrated in the gay and sexual liberation movements of the early 1970s. Both radical gay groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and organizations that consisted mainly of heterosexually-identified "swingers" such as the Sexual Freedom League encouraged sexual fluidity and experimentation, believing that people should be free to love regardless of gender.

But gay liberationists who were bisexual still often felt compelled to represent themselves as gay in order to challenge compulsory heterosexuality and avoid suspicions that they were "selling out."

### **Early Bisexual Groups**

By the early 1970s, many bisexuals were tired of having to hide an important part of themselves. Being involved in the lesbian and gay movement had taught them the importance of coming out and organizing; now they recognized the need to come out again and establish their own organizations.

The National Bisexual Liberation Group and Bisexual Forum were formed in New York City in 1972 and 1975, respectively, and the San Francisco Bisexual Center, the world's first specifically bisexual institution, opened in 1976. Bisexual groups also developed in the 1970s in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C.

### **The 1980s**

Many of the early bisexual groups in the United States were run by and for married men and all had disbanded by the mid-1980s, as many bisexual men turned their attention to the growing AIDS epidemic. While the first wave of bisexual organizations were folding, bisexual women were starting to found their own groups to support each other and to counter the hostility they increasingly received from many lesbian communities.

Many of these bisexual women had been active in lesbian groups until the growing influence of lesbian separatism made them outcasts. But despite rejecting an exclusive lesbian politics, they remained committed to feminism, women's culture, and women-only spaces. Indeed, feminist principles were central to the bisexual women's groups formed in the 1980s: the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, the Chicago Action Bi-Women, and the Seattle Bisexual Women's Network.

The 1980s also saw the creation of mixed-gender bisexual political groups in a number of U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston, and the establishment of the country's first regional bisexual organization, the East Coast Bisexual Network.

The San Francisco group, the Bay Area Bisexual Network, produced the first U.S. bisexual magazine, *Anything That Moves: Beyond the Myths of Bisexuality*, from 1991 to 2000. The East Coast Bisexual Network, which has since changed its name to the Bisexual Resource Center, serves as a national clearinghouse for bisexual material and publishes the *Bisexual Resource Guide*, an international listing of bisexual and bi-inclusive groups.

The first bisexual organizations outside the United States developed in Europe in the 1980s. The London Bisexual Group was created by men involved in the anti-sexist men's movement in 1981. Bisexual organizations subsequently began in the Netherlands (1983), Scotland (1984), and West Germany (1984). The Netherlands group, the Dutch National Bi Network, is the oldest continuing bisexual organization in the world.

### **Toward a U. S. Bisexual Movement**

A bisexual movement began to take shape in the United States when a call for a bisexual contingent at the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights brought together 75 activists from around the country and laid the groundwork for the establishment of the North American Bisexual Network.

The movement further took shape at the first national bisexual conference, held in San Francisco in 1990. The following year, the group's name was changed to BiNet U.S.A.

BiNet fought bias against bisexuals and bisexuality in the popular press and increased the visibility of bisexuals, with members appearing on television talk shows and being quoted in mainstream and lesbian and gay newspapers and magazines.

The organization also educated national lesbian and gay groups about the importance of using bi-inclusive

language and recognizing the involvement of bisexuals in what was more appropriately called the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights movement.

One major victory was convincing lesbian and gay organizers to include bisexuals by name in the 1993 March on Washington, the first time that bisexuals had been acknowledged in a national political action, and to have an openly bisexual speaker at the rally afterward.

### **The 1990s**

In the 1990s, the number of bisexual organizations in the United States and Western Europe grew tremendously and groups formed in many other countries. The 2001 edition of the *Bisexual Resource Guide* lists 352 bisexual and 2,134 bi-inclusive organizations in 68 countries, including Botswana, Colombia, Fiji, Hungary, Lithuania, Namibia, Singapore, South Korea, and Uruguay.

The proliferation of bisexual and bi-supportive groups has been facilitated by the development of bisexual electronic mailing lists (the *Bisexual Resource Guide* includes more than one hundred) and Internet resources on bisexuality, such as [biresource.org](http://biresource.org), [bi.org](http://bi.org), and [bisexual.org](http://bisexual.org).

Also important have been the creation of international, continental, and regional bisexual conferences and the publication of an increasing number of books on bisexuality. Beginning in 1991, nine international bisexual conferences have been held, one about every other year in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia; and since 2001, European and North American conferences have been held during the year between international gatherings.

The first texts to consider bisexuality from an affirming perspective were not published until the mid-1970s, and few books addressed the topic through the 1980s. The 1990s, however, witnessed a boom in the number of works by and about bisexuals. Among the most influential were Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu's *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (1991), Elizabeth Reba Weise's *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism* (1992), the Bisexual Anthology Collective's *Plural Desires: Writing Bisexual Women's Realities* (1995), and The Off Pink Collective's *Bisexual Horizons: Politics, Histories, Lives* (1996).

Important research on bisexuality has also been published in the *Journal of Bisexuality*, the first academic periodical devoted to the topic, which began publishing in 2001.

### **New Century, New Choices**

Because of the sustained prominence of bisexuals and bisexual groups in North America, Europe, and elsewhere and the inclusion of bisexuals in many formerly "lesbian and gay" campus and community organizations in the 1990s, people growing up in the early twenty-first century generally have a much greater awareness of bisexuality than previous generations.

As a result, many youths today openly identify as bisexual when they first begin to acknowledge their sexuality. They do not feel compelled to come out as lesbian or gay or to forefront heterosexual relationships, as was the case for many bisexuals in the 1970s and 1980s.

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### **About the Author**

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.