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Sailing in the deep channels off the coast of Central America at the end of the fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus named the land there *Honduras*, meaning "depths." Since the time of that early European sighting, the lush tropical nation of Honduras has struggled to maintain independence and identity in the face of political, religious, and economic colonization.

Pressure from U.S. governments and corporations and from a powerful Roman Catholic church has contributed to the formation of right-wing governments and a largely conservative society, neither of which have been friendly to gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities. Nonetheless, in the face of discrimination, prejudice, and violence, queer activists have taken courageous stands. They have formed social groups and political organizations to improve the quality of their lives and fight for human rights and dignity.

At 43,277 square miles in size, slightly smaller than England and slightly larger than the state of Virginia, Honduras has a population of 6.25 million. Most are ethnically Mestizo and Spanish-speaking, though a small Native population still speaks indigenous languages. In spite of a wealth of agricultural products, including bananas and coffee, and exports of timber, minerals, and seafood, Honduras has long been one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. This is in large part due to the practices of large U.S.-owned corporations that have manipulated the Honduran government and exploited Honduran workers to ensure profits.

Honduran society, like many traditional Catholic cultures, tends towards conservative values. However, in the pre-AIDS era, Hondurans showed a certain degree of tolerance towards homosexuality. Though never approved, discreet homosexual behavior among men was often overlooked. There was more open condemnation of sexual activity among women, probably because lesbians' rejection of men threatens male dominion in the social hierarchy.

Arrival of AIDS and the Growth of Gay and Lesbian Consciousness

The arrival of the AIDS epidemic in Honduras in 1985 greatly increased general fear of and hostility towards queer people. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the rise in anti-gay violence was matched by a growth in gay and lesbian consciousness.

In 1988, a loosely organized lesbian social and political network evolved into *Las Hijas del Maíz*, an overtly feminist lesbian organization. Also during the late 1980s, the short-lived *Amiga* project raised funds for an exchange program between lesbians in the U.S. and Honduras. The only participant, a lesbian from Rochester, New York, was so favorably affected by her time in Honduras that she returned to work more extensively with a group called *Mujeres por la Paz* (Women for Peace).

Other gay organizations were centered in the capital city of Tegucigalpa and in the northern Honduran center of San Pedro Sula. In 1991 the Honduran Association of Homosexuals Fighting Against AIDS was formed, followed in 1994 by *Grupo Prisma*, a gay/lesbian social organization with a strong focus on unity. *Colectivo Violeta*, formed in 1995, consisted mainly of gay men and transgendered people. Around the same time, the gay rights group *Comunidad Gay Sanpedrana* (San Pedro Sula Gay Community) began organizing community projects, such as starting cyber cafes for queer youth.

Human Rights Abuses

Meanwhile, some government agencies and officials used the rise of AIDS to raid gay bars, harass gay organizations, and pass anti-gay legislation. In 2000, the human rights group Amnesty International accused the Honduran government of serious human rights violations. They cited lack of police investigation into more than 200 murders of gay and trans sex workers between 1991 and 2000. In addition, they pointed to governmental discrimination against gay organizations, such as *Grupo Prisma*, which was denied the right to register as a non-profit organization.

In spite of this international opposition, Honduran President Ricardo Maduro signed the Social and Co-Existence Law in May of 2002, giving police the right to arrest people they suspected of being gay, lesbian, or queer, and to raid gay gathering places. In January of 2004, Oscar Kilgore, the mayor of San Pedro Sula authorized a raid on Boyz, the city's only gay bar, which resulted in the arrest of twelve patrons and workers.

Opposition to these policies continues, both within Honduras and in the United States. The American group Latino/a Lesbian & Gay Organization (LLEGO), has issued a call for U.S. government intervention into queer human rights abuses in Honduras. During Gay Pride Week, 2002, gay activists staged sit-ins in front of the Honduran embassy in Washington, D. C.

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About the Author

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