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Crossdressers as Part of the Trans Community

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Individuals who crossdress have always been a part of the trans community and, in fact, were instrumental in the formation of the trans and the larger LGBTQIA+ rights movements. Although some crossdressers do not align themselves with the larger trans community, most do, and they have historically been among the most prominent members of the community. The crossdressing population may be less visible today, but they remain important contributors to many trans social and political groups.

The First “Trans” People

Individuals who presented as a gender different from what they were assigned at birth first began to be described as “trans” by the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who coined the word transvestites—from the Latin trans or “across” and vestis or “clothing”—in his 1910 book with that title. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hirschfeld recognized that transvestism was not a form of psychopathology, nor were most of those who engaged in crossdressing attracted to others of the same sex or doing so for erotic pleasure. These men and sometimes women were simply more comfortable, and experienced a greater sense of well-being, when dressed and expressing themselves as a member of the “opposite” sex. They did not desire to change their assigned sex (which distinguished them from trans women and men) but wanted to exhibit traits and mannerisms not traditionally associated with individuals of their sex.

While Hirschfeld saw transvestite as simply a descriptive term for a minoritized gender group, it began to become a derogatory word in the 1970s and 1980s. Individuals with no understanding of the crossdressing community redefined “transvestites” as men who were turned on by wearing traditionally women’s clothing. In response, members of the community started to refer to themselves as “crossdressers,” and this remains the appropriate term today.

Early Crossdresser Activism

Some of the earliest trans activists were cross-dressers. Because crossdressing was against the law in many U.S. cities, individuals who were thought to be crossdressers were often harassed and arrested by the police, which was a contributing factor to the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969. Some of the participants in the riots were self-identified transvestites, including Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. Soon after Stonewall, they established Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a grassroots group that supported and fought for the rights of the many young trans people who were living on the city’s streets. At the same time, two other New York City crossdresser activists, Lee Brewster and Bunny Eisenhower, founded the Queens Liberation Front and led a campaign that decriminalized crossdressing in the city. Brewster also began *Drag*, one of the first politically oriented trans publications, in 1970.

Despite helping to start the LGBTQIA+ rights movement, crossdressers, as well as drag queens, were largely exiled from the movement by the mid-1970s because many radical lesbian feminist leaders considered female-presenting crossdressers to be demeaning to women, and many moderate gay male leaders saw crossdressers as taking away from the mainstream respectability that they sought for themselves. Nevertheless, crossdressers continued to engage in activism and organized within the trans community. Two groups for heterosexual crossdressers and their wives and partners merged in 1976 to form the first national trans organization in the United States, the Society for the Second Self or Tri-Ess. While Tri-Ess’s membership was primarily crossdressers, it welcomed all trans people, and its leaders were involved in many trans rights events and initiatives. For example, Tri-Ess representatives served on the board of directors of the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) and helped found the Southern Comfort Conference, one of the largest annual gatherings of trans people, in 1991.

Contemporary Crossdresser Activism

In recent decades, crossdresser activists have had significant involvements in both the LGBTQIA+ and trans rights movements. Crossdressers participated in the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, despite

the latter denying a motion by trans activists and supporters to have “transgender” included in the name of the march. Many crossdressers also attended the annual International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy (ICTLEP) in the 1990s and were among those who founded the annual National Gender Lobbying Day in 1995 and continued to participate each year.

WPATH Recognition

The Standards of Care developed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) beginning in 1979 have historically focused on trans women and men and not included crossdressers and other trans people, because transitioning individuals were seen as needing a consistent means to access hormones and surgeries. But the attention given to the medical care of trans women and men was largely the result of the work of Louise Lawrence, a full-time crossdresser who educated Alfred Kinsey, Harry Benjamin, and many other medical professionals and scientists about the experiences of trans people. She also introduced many trans people to sympathetic doctors and to each other.

Not until 2019 did crossdressers receive official recognition from medical professionals. In that year, at the conference of USPATH, the U.S. chapter of WPATH, crossdresser activists met with association leaders, which led WPATH to agree to use terminology that was inclusive of crossdressers, to expand its trainings of providers to include crossdressing information, and to appoint a nontransitioning trans individual to the USPATH board to ensure that the concerns of crossdressers were being included in the group’s work in the future. After years of being overlooked as members of the trans community, crossdressers had finally received some of the acknowledgment that they desired and deserved.

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See also [Activism](#); [Crossdressing, History of](#); [History](#); [International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy](#); [Johnson, Marsha P.](#); [Rivera, Sylvia](#); [STAR](#); [Tri-Ess](#); [WPATH](#)

Further Readings

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