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Crossdressers

Individuals who identify as crossdressers (as opposed to individuals who crossdress for work and/or fun) 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, many do, and they have been among the most prominent trans activists. The crossdresser community is much smaller and less consequential today, but its contributions to trans and LGBTQIA+ history remain significant.

The First “Trans” People

Individuals who presented as a gender different than they were assigned at birth first began to be described as “trans” by 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 gender 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 trans men) but wanted to exhibit traits and mannerisms not traditionally associated with individuals of their assigned sex.

Whereas 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 crossdressers. 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 and helped found the Southern Comfort Conference, one of the largest annual gatherings of trans people, in 1991.

More Contemporary Crossdresser Activism

In the 1980s and 1990s, crossdresser activists 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 in the 1990s and were among those who founded and led the annual National Gender Lobbying Day, which began in 1995 and continued into the 2000s.

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 trans men and not included crossdressers and other trans people, because transitioning individuals needed and were often denied access to appropriate

health care, including hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgeries. But the attention given to the medical care of trans women and trans 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 non-transitioning 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.

The Decline of Self-Identified Crossdressers Today

At its height in the early 2000s, Tri-Ess had 25 chapters, including some in southern and midwestern U.S. cities that, until then, had few resources for trans people. The chapters sponsored not only social events but also sessions on topics like feminine dressing, legal issues, disclosing to partners and children, and self-defense. However, in the 2010s and early 2020s, the number of members and chapters fell precipitously, and by 2023, the organization had largely disbanded.

Several factors played a role in the decline of the organization. Many longtime leaders passed away, became ill, or otherwise could no longer continue in their positions, and there were not younger people to take their places. In part, the group was a victim of its own success: Because of the activism and visibility of crossdressers and trans people in general, many individuals who had been assigned male at birth began to find it easier to go out crossdressed and could meet others like themselves through various online platforms, so felt less of a need to join an organization. In addition, as gender-affirming health care became more accessible in the 2000s, some female-presenting crossdressers decided that they were more comfortable as trans women and medically transitioned, leaving the community.

But the biggest factor in the decline of Tri-Ess and the crossdresser community overall was the changing ways that people experienced their gender. Research since the 1990s has shown that the individuals who identify as crossdressers are mostly older, which means that their numbers have dwindled and will continue to do so.

For example, for their book *The Lives of Transgender People*, Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin found that far fewer crossdressers took part in their research than trans men, trans women, and nonbinary individuals, and that they were significantly older on average than the members of the other groups. Of the nearly 3,500 trans people they surveyed in 2005 and 2006, just 7% identified as crossdressers, and of these individuals, only 13% were in their teens, 20s, or early 30s.

Comparing data from the two largest studies to date of trans people in the United States further demonstrates that fewer and fewer people are identifying as crossdressers. In the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, which was conducted from 2007 to 2008 and had close to 6,500 trans participants, 11% of the respondents identified as female-presenting crossdressers and 3% as male-presenting crossdressers. Less than a decade later, the 2011 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), which included more than 27,700 participants, had only 3% identify as crossdressers. Analyzing the data from the USTS by age, just 8% of the crossdressers were 18 to 24 years old, and 20% were at least 65 years old. In comparison, 61% of the nonbinary respondents were aged 18 to 24 and only 1% were 65 or older.

The fact that the nonbinary respondents to the USTS were mostly young people is indicative of ongoing generational shifts in how trans people think about and identify their gender. Many female-presenting crossdressers describe themselves as male but as also having a second, female self (hence the group's name, the Society for the Second Self) that they express at times. Most young trans people today do not conceptualize their gender in such a binary, bifurcated way. Even if they see themselves as bigendered, they are likely to describe themselves as genderfluid, genderqueer, genderflux, or demigender and to express their gender in nonbinary ways, rather than moving between traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine gender presentations. Moreover, while many female-presenting crossdressers keep their female selves hidden from others, including sometimes their partners and families, and only dress *en femme* in secret or discreetly with other crossdressers, nonbinary youth typically present publicly as how they see themselves, which could mean expressing their gender differently in different contexts or at different times. In sum, they dress as the gender(s) they are, rather than *crossdressing*.

The trend of young people not identifying as crossdressers continues with the latest generation, Gen Alpha. Tellingly, of the more than 1.2 million high school students who filled out the Common Application to apply to college in 2021–2022, not a single student indicated that they were a crossdresser. Most of the students who identified as other than female or male used terms like nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer, and agender to describe themselves.

Because few young trans people today identify as crossdressers, most trans youth do not know anyone who

is a crossdresser and are unaware that crossdressers not only were a part of the trans movement but were among its leaders. Although most trans people, like the rest of society, see crossdressing as a practice which is engaged in primarily by drag queens and drag kings, it should not be lost that crossdressing can also be an identity in itself.

See also [Drag](#); [Nonbinary Genders](#); [Sexology](#); [Stonewall](#); [Trans Identities](#); [World Professional Association for Transgender Health](#)

Further Readings

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