

Discrimination against lesbians in britain



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Lesbianism and the problems of identification in contemporary Britain

In Britain, lesbian women may not have had to campaign to have their sexual activities decriminalised, as homosexual had needed to do; yet their lives were not free of problems. However, men even homosexual men had more social, economic, and political power and status than British women did as a whole have. Men had a greater control of and over their own bodies than either heterosexual or lesbian women had in the immediate post-war period, and indeed before then as well. British lesbian women would have to campaign for greater rights as both women do, and as lesbians to challenge the discrimination and expected gender roles from a patriarchal and heterosexual dominated society. In other words, British lesbians had to counter sexual discrimination as well as orientation discrimination before they were able to feel fully secure in publicising their sexual orientation and identification. Changing public perceptions of their different gender roles and sexual orientation was, as the main lesbian rights groups realised was not going to be easy, as their experiences during the 1970s proved. ^[8]

In Britain the 1960s was a decade that brought about some wide-ranging social changes and promised further changes for the future. Lesbian women could certainly regard the availability of the contraceptive pill and the legalisation of abortion as being an improvement for the choices that all women were able to make in relation to their own bodies. During the 1960s expectations about the gender roles of women began to change, as feminism meant that fewer women were prepared to become wives and mothers without having a career first. Lesbian women also realised they did not have to put up with marriage and children just because it was expected of them to

do so. The decriminalisation of male homosexual acts at the end of the 1960s could also be viewed as a demonstration that British society was slowly becoming less illiberal in its attitudes towards people that embraced alternative lifestyles. For the more radical lesbians the social changes in the 1960s were the start of the process of fighting discrimination, rather than the end of the process. British lesbian women and gay men were encouraged to start gay pride movements by the apparent success such groups in the United States were having in altering social attitudes, especially in cities like New York and San Francisco. ^[9] British lesbian and gay pride organisations began in earnest during the early 1970s with the objectives of enabling their members to have pride in their orientation identification, as well as aiming to reduce the level of social discrimination which their own members had to endure. The hope was that reduced social discrimination and reduced fear of such prejudices would allow all lesbian women to readily admit their sexuality with pride. These lesbian pride organisations as a whole found that changing social attitudes towards them and their sexual orientation was a slow process, after all generations of social prejudices could not be expected to vanish overnight. ^[10]

The effectiveness or otherwise of lesbian and gay pride movements since the 1970s has been an area of much debate. Depending on which criteria are used to judge the gay pride movements the achievements of these organisations will alter. ^[11] If judging the achievements of the lesbian and gay pride movements solely in terms of their ability to have anti-discrimination legislation passed these movements were undoubtedly a failure before the election of the New Labour government in 1997. ^[12] The <https://assignbuster.com/discrimination-against-lesbians-in-britain/>

only lesbian women to gain from anti-discrimination legislation between the early 1970s and 1997 did so because they also came under gender equality, race relations and disability legislation. Governments from the early 1970s did not believe that legislation was needed to prevent homophobic discrimination, leaving lesbian and gay pride organisations on their own to lower such prejudice aimed at their members. New Labour has taken more steps than any previous governments to pass legislation to reduce homophobic prejudices and promote the rights of all lesbians and gays. New Labour legislation has included passing legislation to end discrimination upon the grounds of sexual orientation to enhance the opportunities for all lesbians and gays to be openly identified as such without fear of homophobic discrimination. Besides specific legislation to protect lesbian and gay rights, lesbians can also use the Human Rights Act of 1998 to make sure that their orientation being publicly identifiable is not detrimental to their rights or their safety. ^[13] Under New Labour, lesbian women have finally received legal equality with heterosexual men and women. For instance, lesbian women and gay men are no longer dismissed from Britain's armed forces if they openly admit their sexuality. Lesbian women and gay men now also have the right to 'marry' each other in civil partnerships. The introduction of civil partnerships means that lesbian women in long term partnerships have the same rights as married and co-habitant heterosexual couples in terms of property, taxation and inheritance rights, as well as the same benefit and pension entitlements. Lesbian women now have the same rights as heterosexual women when it comes to the custody or adoption of children.

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In respect of the lesbian pride movements they probably had a more immediate impact on changing social attitudes towards them than they did in influencing governments to pass legislation which tackled discrimination against them. Lesbian and gay pride organisations did not use the same tactics to publicise their sexual orientation. The more radical lesbian and gay pride organisations were happy to shock heterosexuals in British society with the tone and the methods in which they demonstrated their identifications of sexual orientations. More radical groups were even prepared to 'out' famous people to make headlines and raise public awareness of lesbian and gay issues. ^[15] Other more moderate lesbian and gay pride groups were less keen on showing their sexual orientation and identification in such an ostentatious manner. The more moderate lesbian pride groups would have preferred to be open about their sexual orientation and identification without using over the top publicity stunts. Moderate lesbian groups would have fitted in with insider pressure groups, which attempt to achieve their objectives behind closed doors, rather than in public. Radical lesbian and gay pride groups are examples of outsider groups that have little influence with governments and rely on publicity to bring their objectives to public attention. ^[16]

The campaigns of lesbian pride groups were not as successful in changing public perceptions of lesbian women as a majority of those groups would have hoped from the early 1970s. This was especially the case during the period of Conservative governments between 1979 to 1997. The Conservative party more than the Labour and Liberal/Liberal Democrats parties like to represent traditional family values instead of promoting the

rights and the lifestyles of lesbian and gay pride groups. When in office the Conservatives prevented lesbian and gay groups' from educating school pupils about their sexual orientations and identification through the infamous section 28. Lesbian and gay groups lobbied New Labour to have the section removed as soon as possible. The media did not always help lesbian and gay groups convey the messages to the public that they wanted to be sent out, especially right wing newspapers did not want to change public perceptions of lesbian women. The right wing newspapers often portrayed the objectives of lesbian and gay groups in the most negative perspective possible. ^[17]

Despite the efforts of some politicians, religious groups, and parts of the media the number of people who happen to be publicly prepared to be known as being lesbian and gay in Britain has increased noticeably since the 1970s. It is harder to argue out right that such a situation is entirely due to the attempts of lesbian and gay pride groups to alter the attitudes of British society. After all changed reactions towards their orientation and gender identification could have resulted from the campaigning of such groups, or alternatively could just have been a continuation of increasing indifference to how other people chose to live their lives. ^[18]

Thus in conclusion, lesbian women in Britain have not always felt comfortable or able to openly display their sexual orientation, and their gender identification due to the nature of British society. The immediate post-war society in Britain has remained predominantly patriarchal and heterosexual in terms of social and gender relationships as well as expected behaviours, roles, and identifications. That situation meant lesbianism did exist in Britain, it was just well hidden. The 1960s were a decade that kick

started the process of altering British society, and provided the stimulus for lesbian and gay pride groups to emerge during the early 1970s. The legacies, influence, and success of such groups are highly debatable. Although these groups certainly raised the profile of lesbians and gays in Britain they actually had little affect on the mainstream political agenda prior to New Labour gaining office in 1997. Lesbian and gay pride groups may have attempted to increase acceptance of their lifestyles and their alternative identifications, yet changing public perceptions of lesbian women has not been universal or overwhelmingly favourable. The way in socialisation operates in such a haphazard way means that the predominantly heterosexual and patriarchal nature of British society will continue for a considerable amount of time, even if the acceptance of lesbian women should continue to improve, and more fluid gender roles should develop further.

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Footnotes

[1] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p.

[2] Judt, 2007 p. 485

[3] Martin, 2003 p. 233

[4] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 314

[5] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 314

[6] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 314

[7] Sandbrook, 2005 p. 599

[8] Eatwell & Wright, 2003 p. 214

[9] Hobsbawm, 1994 p. 428

[10] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 314

[11] Judt, 2007 p. 785

[12] Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000, p. 314

[13] Young, 2003 p. 216

[14] Whitaker's, 2007 p. 604

[15] Judt, 2007 p. 785

[16] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 336

[17] Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000 p. 314

[18] Judt, 2007 p. 785