

LGBTQ+ History Month



A group of Hijra in Bangladesh

We've always been here

An idea I often encounter is that it's "fashionable" to be LGBTQ+. That being transgender is this new thing, or that more and more young people are bisexual or queer now, that "we didn't have all this when I was growing up".

In some ways that's true! A lot of what we do have now, history months, pride networks, pride celebrations, more inclusive media, better legal protection, didn't exist in many people's lives until relatively recently. It's easy to see how people who have never had to interact with the LGBTQ+ community might feel like all of a sudden we've just sprouted up out of the ground and are taking over!

While concepts and language like lesbian, queer, transgender, homosexual, are indeed a very recent and Western invention, the people are all over the world, and all throughout time. In every corner of the world today you can find examples of people who live outside of man-woman relationships, who live outside of being born into a gender and living out its assigned roles. In many cultures we have unique and specific language for these people, words like gay and trans may be foreign concepts that don't apply, but we can still see where there are people living out their sexuality and gender in ways that are integrated and celebrated by their culture.

In Māori culture, one of the great love stories is the legend of Hinemoa and Tūtānekai. It is an ancient tale still told today in tv and film, and in it we have Tūtānekai, the son of a chief's wife, and his hoa takatāpui, Tiki. Hoa takatāpui here means "intimate companion of the same sex", and while it is impossible to say if they were sexually involved, they are accepted to be close beyond friendship. Takatāpui now is used by Māori people in a number of ways, often used as a way to describe an LGBT Māori person, but specific to the Māori people and inclusive of culturally specific relationships and expressions. The word is first recorded by missionaries in 1832, but is known by Māori people to be much older.



In the Indian subcontinent, we have Hijra, a third gender with well established communities today, described in ancient sanskrit texts going back to 300bc. Western definitions of Hijras may include transgender, intersex or asexual people, most commonly transgender women. Throughout history we see

Hijras working as political advisors, elite servants and guardians, military commanders and in ancient texts we have divine third gender beings of music and dance.

It was only under British colonialism in the 19th Century that Hijras were viewed as immoral or indecent, and a long dedicated campaign to eradicate them saw Hijras pushed underground and living on the fringes of society. Since the end of British colonial rule, Hijras have still largely been living on the street and outside of mainstream society, with stigmas and opinions hanging over from British rule.

Most recently, as a result of campaigning by Hijra people and their allies, they are now legally recognised as a third gender in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. There is still much discrimination and many obstacles for Hijras, but we see progress for them in shedding the foreign stigmas of the past every year.

These are just two examples, and while they may seem like small words on a page, it's worth remembering that Hijra are a living community that spans a subcontinent of well over 1 billion people and have a documented history of some 2300 years. Certainly not some phase!

Over and over we have evidence of people who lived outside of the gender binary, we have 1000 year old Finnish vikings buried in men's clothes with swords, but with "female" skeletons and XXY chromosomes, we have a 19th century Ugandan king with male lovers, we have Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, 25th century bc ancient Egyptian men buried together, history goes on and on with examples that break the mold of how we expect the world to be. Even here in the UK, homosexuality was first made illegal in the 16th century, and doubtless before that it played out over and over again in the lives of our ancestors.

While by no means a thorough or exhaustive list, I hope learning about these people gives some context to the lives of gender and sexually diverse here, and globally.

I'm so proud to be celebrating our history this month, and so proud that we get this opportunity to do so. We have a rich, beautiful and diverse global history as people who love and exist beyond man or woman, and we have always been here.