

2. In fact, the principle of "ownership of one's body and person" has much deeper roots in the history of radical libertarian and democratic thought in Western Europe. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis traced this idea to sixteenth-century Geneva, when a young Lyonnaise girl, brought before the Protestant elders for sleeping with her fiancé before marriage, invoked what may have been a popular slogan: "*Paris est au roi, et mon corps est à moi*" (Paris is the king's, and my body is mine). The radical Levellers in seventeenth-century England developed the notion of a "property in one's person," which they used to defend their members against arbitrary arrest and imprisonment (Petchesky 1994). But the principle is not only of European derivation. Gandhi's concept of *Brahmacharya*, or "control over the body," was rooted in Hindu ascetic traditions and the Vedas' admonition to preserve the body's vital fluids. Like that of nineteenth-century feminists and the Catholic church, Gandhi's concept was theoretically gender-neutral, requiring both men and women to engage in sexual restraint except for purposes of procreation (Fischer 1962; O'Flaherty 1980). Islamic law goes further toward a sexually affirmative concept of self-ownership. Quranic provisions not only entitle women to sexual satisfaction in marriage, as well as condoning abortion and contraception; they also allow that, upon divorce—which wives as well as husbands may initiate—a woman regains her body (Ahmed 1992; Musallam 1983; Ruthven 1984).
3. In Latin America, a new resolution of the Colombian Ministry of Public Health "orders all health institutions to ensure women the right to decide on all issues that affect their health, their life, and their sexuality, and guarantees rights to information and orientation to allow the exercise of free, gratifying, responsible sexuality which cannot be tied to maternity" (quoted in Cook 1993a). In North Africa, Dr. Hind Khattab's field research among rural Egyptian women has revealed strong sentiments of their sexual entitlement to pleasure and gratification from husbands (Khattab 1993 [personal communication]).
4. Feminist theory and practice have witnessed a long history of division over this question. Whether with regard to protective labor legislation, prostitution, pornography, or providing contraceptive implants to teenagers or poor women, conflicts between "liberals" (advocates of "freedom to choose") and "radicals" (advocates of social protection or legal prohibition) have been bitter and protracted.
5. Not only clinicians but feminist activists maybe guilty of imposing their own values and failing to respect diversity. Feminist groups that condemn all reproductive technologies (for examples, technologies that artificially assist fertility) as instruments of medical control over women against "nature" ignore the ways that such technologies may expand the rights of particular women (for example, lesbians seeking pregnancy through artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization).
6. It seems crucial to us to recognize that religious fundamentalist movements are on the upswing in all the world's regions and major religions—Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Hinduism as well as Islam. Despite vast cultural and theological differences, these fundamentalisms share a view of women as reproductive vessels that is antipathetic to any notion of women's reproductive rights. In an otherwise excellent discussion of the clash between religious and customary law and human rights, Lynn Freedman and Stephen Isaacs (1993) place undue emphasis on Muslim countries and Islamic law.

16.

TRANSGENDER LIBERATION: A MOVEMENT WHOSE TIME HAS COME

Leslie Feinberg

(1992)

This pamphlet is an attempt to trace the historic rise of an oppression that, as yet, has no commonly agreed name. We are talking here about people who defy the "man"-made boundaries of gender.

Gender: self-expression, not anatomy.

All our lives we've been taught that sex and gender are synonymous—men are "masculine" and women are "feminine." Pink for girls and blue for boys. It's just "natural," we've been told. But at the turn of the century in this country, blue was considered a girl's color and pink was a boy's. Simplistic and rigid gender codes are neither eternal nor natural. They are changing social concepts.

Nevertheless, there's nothing wrong with men who are considered "masculine" and women whose self-expression falls into the range of what is considered "feminine." The problem is that the many people who don't fit these narrow social constraints run a gamut of harassment and violence.

This raises the question: Who decided what the "norm" should be? Why are some people punished for their self-expression?

Many people today would be surprised to learn that ancient communal societies held transgendered people in high esteem. It took a bloody campaign by the emerging ruling classes to declare what had been considered natural to be its opposite. That prejudice, foisted on society by its ruling elite, endures today.

Yet even in a society where there are harsh social penalties for not fitting, a large part of the population can't or won't change their nature. It is apparent that there are many ways for women and men to be; everything in nature is a continuum.

Many of the terms used to describe us are words that cut and sear.

When I first worked in the factories of Buffalo as a teenager, women like me were called "he-shes." Although "he-shes" in the plants were most frequently lesbians, we were recognized not by our sexual preference but by the way we expressed our gender.

There are other words used to express the wide range of "gender outlaws": transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, androgynes, diesel dykes or berdache—a European colonialist term.

We didn't choose these words. They don't fit all of us. It's hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us.

In recent years a community has begun to emerge that is sometimes referred to as the gender or transgender community. Within our community is a diverse group of people who define ourselves in many different ways. Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions. The language used in this pamphlet may quickly become outdated as the gender community coalesces and organizes—a wonderful problem.

We've chosen words in this pamphlet we hope are understandable to the vast majority of working and oppressed people in this country, as a tool to battle bigotry and brutality. We are trying to find words, however inadequate, that can connect us, that can capture what is similar about the oppression we endure. We have also given careful thought to our use of pronouns, striving for both clarity and sensitivity in a language that only allows for two sexes.

Great social movements forge a common language—tools to reach out and win broader understanding. But we've been largely shut out of the progressive movement.

It was gay transvestites who led the 1969 battle at the Stonewall Inn in New York City that gave birth to the modern lesbian and gay movement.

But just as the lesbian and gay movement had to win over the progressive movement to the understanding that struggling shoulder to shoulder together would create a more powerful force for change, the transgendered community is struggling to win the same understanding from the lesbian and gay movement.

Many people think that all "masculine" women are lesbians and all "feminine" men are gay. That is a misunderstanding. Not all lesbians and gay men are "cross"-gendered. Not all transgendered women and men are lesbian or gay. Transgendered people are mistakenly viewed as the cusp of the lesbian and gay community. In reality the two huge communities are like circles that only partially overlap.

While the oppressions within these two powerful communities are not the same, we face a common enemy. Gender-phobia—like racism, sexism and bigotry against lesbians and gay men—is meant to keep us divided. Unity can only increase our strength.

Solidarity is built on understanding how and why oppression exists and who profits from it. It is our view that revolutionary changes in human society can do away with inequality, bigotry and intolerance.

In the spirit of building that fighting movement, we offer this view of the sweeping patterns in history, the commonality of women and men who have walked the path of the berdache, of the transgendered—walked that road whether we were held in high esteem or reviled.

Look at us. We are battling for survival. Listen. We are struggling to be heard.

Transgender Predates Oppression

Jazz musician Billy Tipton died in 1989 at the age of 74. He will be remembered most not for his music, but for the revelation that Tipton was born a woman. Tipton died of an untreated bleeding ulcer rather than visit a doctor and risk exposure.

After his death this debate began: Did Tipton live as a man simply in order to work as a musician in a male-dominated industry or because of lesbian oppression?

It is true that women's oppression, especially under capitalism, has created profound social and economic pressures that force women to pass as men for survival. But this argument leaves out transgendered women—women who are considered so "masculine" in class society that they endure extreme harassment and danger. Many of these women are forced to "pass" in order to live. Of course transgendered women also experience the crushing weight of economic inequity and, in many cases, anti-lesbian oppression. These factors also play a role in forcing "masculine" women as well as non-transgendered women to pass.

If "masculine" women are acknowledged at all, it is implied that they're merely a product of decadent patriarchal capitalism and that when genuine equality is won, they will disappear.

It's "Passing" That's New

Transgendered women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is *passing* that's historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today.

There are legions of women and men whose self-expression, as judged by Hollywood stereotypes, is "at odds" with their sex. Some are forced underground or "pass" because of the repression and ostracism they endure.

Today all gender education teaches that women are "feminine," men are "masculine," and an unforgable river rages between these banks. The reality is there is a whole range of ways for women and men to express themselves.

Transgender is a very ancient form of human expression that predates oppression. It was once regarded with honor. A glance at human history proves that when societies were not ruled by exploiting classes that rely on divide-and-conquer tactics, "cross-gendered" youths, women and men on all continents were respected members of their communities.

"She is a Man"

"Strange country, this," a white man wrote of the Crow nation on this continent in 1850, "where males assume the dress and perform the duties of females, while women turn men and mate with their own sex."

Randy Burns, a founder of the modern group Gay American Indians, wrote that GAI's History Project documented these alternative roles for women and men in over 135 North American Native nations.

The high incidence of transgendered men and women in Native societies on this continent was documented by the colonialists who referred to them as *berdache*.

Perhaps the most notable of all berdache Native women was Barcheeampe, the Crow "Woman Chief," the most famous war leader in the history of the upper Missouri

nations. She married several wives and her bravery as a hunter and warrior was honored in songs. When the Crow nation council was held, she took her place among the chiefs, ranking third in a band of 160 lodges.

Today transgender is considered "anti-social" behavior. But amongst the Klamath nations transgendered women were given special initiation ceremonies by their societies.

Among the Cocopa, Edward Gifford wrote, "female transvestites were called war hameh, wore their hair and pierced their noses in the male fashion, married women and fought in battle alongside men."

Wewha, a famous Zuni berdache who was born a man, lived from 1849 to 1896. She was among the tallest and strongest of all the Zuni. When asked, her people would explain, "She is a man." Wewha was sent by the Zuni to Washington, D.C., for six months where she met with President Grover Cleveland and other politicians who never realized she was berdache.

Osh-Tische (Finds Them and Kills Them), a Crow berdache or badé who was also born a man, fought in the Battle of the Rosebud. When a colonial agent tried to force Osh-Tische to wear men's clothing, the other Native people argued with him that it was against her nature and they kicked the agent off their land. They said it was a tragedy, trying to change the nature of the badé.

A Jesuit priest observed in the 1670s of the berdache, "They are summoned to the Councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice."

But the missionaries and colonialist military reacted to the Native berdache in this hemisphere with murderous hostility. Many berdache were tortured and burnt to death by their Christian conquerors. Other colonial armies sicced wild dogs on the berdache.

Why Such Hostility?

Why were the European colonialists so hostile to transgendered women and men? The answer can be found back on the European continent in the struggles that raged between the developing classes of haves and have-nots.

Ancient societies on the European continent were communal. Thousands of artifacts have been unearthed dating back to 25,000 B.C. that prove these societies worshipped goddesses, not gods. Some of the deities were transgendered, as were many of their shamans or religious representatives.

We have been taught that the way things are now is roughly the way they have always been—the "Flintstones" school of anthropology. The strong message is: Don't bother trying to change people. But a glance at history proves that human society has undergone continuous development and change.

A great debate has raged for more than 150 years about the role of women in ancient societies. To hear Jesse Helms and his ilk rant, you'd think that the patriarchal nuclear family has always existed. That's not true.

Twentieth-century anthropologists recognize that matrilineal communal societies existed all over the world at an early stage in social development. Women were the heads of gens or clans that bore little resemblance to today's "family." ...

When Bigotry Began

In the fertile river valleys of Eurasia and Northeast Africa, during the period of about 4500 BC to 1200 B.C., human labor became more productive and abundance accumulated as wealth. The old communal systems were gradually and unconsciously transformed.

A tremendous societal change took place. The desire to pass on wealth to male heirs demanded wifely monogamy; the patriarchal family became the new economic unit of society.

But the respect the ancient communal societies accorded transgendered men and women, and same-sex love, endured long after these societies underwent dramatic changes.

An Egyptian sculpture of a bearded Queen Hat-shepsut dressed in the garb of a pharaoh (1485 B.C.), for example, shows the persistence of popular folklore about the bearded woman as a sacred symbol of power and wisdom.

A link between transvestism and religious practice is also found in ancient myths associated with Greek gods and heroes. The myth of Achilles notes that he lived and dressed as a woman at the Court of Lycomedes in Scyros before he acquired his martial skills. ...

To "justify" the new economic system and break the spirit of people who had lived and worked communally, a systematic downgrading of the status of women and an assault on the transgendered population began.

An early prohibition against transgender was codified in the Mosaic Law of the Hebrews, one of the earliest patriarchal societies: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God" (*Deuteronomy 22:5*).

The rise of the Greek city-states during the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. is another example of the subjugation of women. The new patriarchal economic system couldn't co-exist with matrilineage. But in many areas transgender, same-sex love and many of the old religious practices of transvestism continued to flourish, because they didn't yet threaten the new ruling order.

The slave-owners developed an ideology degrading women in order to justify overturning women's equality in society. Many of the early Greek myths and the numerous depictions in artwork of battles against Amazon warriors symbolized the overthrow of matrilineal communal societies and their replacement with patriarchal slave societies.

Patriarchal gods like the Greek deity Dionysos arose to overpower the pre-class goddesses. Dionysos was one of the Greek gods that replaced goddess worship. But Greek painters and writers portrayed Dionysos as feminine or dressed in women's apparel. Transvestism also persisted in the rituals of Dionysos, which endured even after Christianity became a state religion of the ruling elite.

The attitude toward women partly accounts for the growing hostility of the ruling classes toward transgendered men. But another aspect of the campaign against "effeminate" men, and Dionysos in particular, might have been to create a Rambo mentality, like the extreme appeal to "manhood" of the Nazi war machine or today's Pentagon.

These were "expand or die" militaristic societies. Unlike the war god Ares, Dionysos was a "make love, not war" god who encouraged soldiers to desert their posts in battle. ...

The Persistence of Transgender

Although ruling attitudes toward cross-gendered expression were changing and becoming repressive, ancient respect for transgender proved difficult to eradicate and transgendered women and men continued to be present in all classes of society. ...

The Natural Becomes "Unnatural"

Ancient religion, before the division of society into classes, combined collectively held beliefs with material observations about nature. Christianity as a mass religion really began in the cities of the Roman empire among the poor, and incorporated elements of collectivism and hatred of the rich ruling class. But over several hundred years, Christianity was transformed from a revolutionary movement of the urban poor into a powerful state religion that served the wealthy elite.

Transgender in all its forms became a target. In reality it was the rise of private property, the male-dominated family and class divisions which led to narrowing what was considered acceptable self-expression. What had been natural was declared its opposite.

As the Roman slave-based system of production disintegrated it was gradually replaced by feudalism. Laborers who once worked in chains were now chained to the land.

Christianity was an urban religion. But the ruling classes were not yet able to foist their new economic system, or the religion that sought to defend it, on the peasantry. The word pagan derives from the Latin *paganus*, which meant rural dweller or peasant. It would soon become a codeword in a violent class war.

Even after the rise of feudalism, remnants of the old pagan religion remained. It was joyously prosexual—lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight. Many women were among its practitioners. Many shamans were still transvestites. And transvestism was still a part of virtually all rural festivals and rituals.

In the medieval Feast of Fools, laymen and clergy alike dressed as women. The Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris reported priests "who danced in the choir dressed as women."

But in order for the land-owning Catholic church to rule, it had to stamp out the old beliefs that persisted from pre-class communal societies, because they challenged private ownership of the land.

Ancient respect for transgendered people still had roots in the peasantry. Transvestism played an important role in rural cultural life. Many pagan religious leaders were transgendered. So it was not surprising that the Catholic church hunted down male and female transvestites, labeling them as heretics, and tried to ban and suppress transvestism from all peasant rituals and celebrations.

By the eleventh century, the Catholic church—by then the largest landlord in Western Europe—gained the organizational and military strength to wage war against the

followers of the old beliefs. The campaign was carried out under a religious banner—but it was a class war against the vestiges of the older communal societies. ...

Transgender Endures

... Throughout the Middle Ages and into early industrial capitalism, transvestism continued to play an important role in many militant struggles as a form of social and political rebellion against class rule. ...

As the old land-based feudal order was replaced by capitalism, the very existence of transvestite and other transgendered women and men had been largely driven underground. Many were forced to pass as the opposite sex in order to survive. Transvestite women passed as men and became soldiers, pirates and highway robbers. Yet transvestism continued to emerge culturally throughout Europe in holiday celebrations, rituals, carnival days, masquerade parties, theater and opera.

These transgender traditions persist today in the Mummer's Festival, Mardi Gras and Halloween. In contemporary imperialist Japan cross-gendered roles are still at the heart of ancient Noh drama and Kabuki theater. But these are not merely vestiges of tradition. Transgendered women and men still exist, no matter how difficult their struggle for survival has become.

Transgender Around the World

Our focus has been on European history, and consciously so. The blame for anti-transgender laws and attitudes rests squarely on the shoulders of the ruling classes on that continent. The seizures of lands and assets of the "accused" during the witch trials and Inquisition helped the ruling classes acquire the capital to expand their domination over Asia, Africa and the Americas. The European elite then tried to force their ideology on the peoples they colonized around the world.

But despite the colonialists' racist attempts at cultural genocide, transvestism and other transgendered expression can still be observed in the rituals and beliefs of oppressed peoples. It is clear that they held respected public roles in vast numbers of diverse societies in cultures continents apart.

Since the sixteenth century, "transvestite shamans have ... been reported among the Araucanians, a large tribe living in southern Chile and parts of Argentina. ... Male transvestite shamans have also been reported for the Guajira, a cattle-herding people of northwest Venezuela and north Colombia, and the Tebuelche, hunter-gatherers of Argentina" (*Construction*).

"Transvestism also used to be practiced by shamans in the Vietnamese countryside, Burma, in India among the Pardhi, a hunting people, and in the southeast, by the Lhoo-sais, as well as in Korea" (*Construction*).

Transgender in religious ceremony is still reported in areas of West Africa. "One of the principal deities of the Abomey pantheon is Lisa-Marou, a figure which incorporates both man and woman; the great god Shango can be represented as either male or female; and contemporary shamans in Brazil worship Yansan, who is the 'man-woman'" (*Dressing Up*).

"The mugawe, a powerful religious leader of the Kenyan Meru, is considered a complement to the male political leaders and consequently must exemplify feminine qualities: he wears women's clothing and adopts women's hairstyles; he is often homosexual, and sometimes marries a man. Among the Kwayama, a tribe of Angolan Bantu cultivators and herders, many diviners, augurers, and diagnosticians of illness wear women's clothing, do women's work, and become secondary spouses of men whose other wives are female. South African Zulu diviners are usually women, but roughly 10 percent are male transvestites" (*Construction*).

Male-to-female transgender that doesn't appear to have a special religious significance has been reported in the pastoral Nandi of Kenya, the Dinka and Nuer of the Sudan, the agricultural Konso and Amhara of Ethiopia, the Ottoro of Nubia, the Fanti of Ghana, the Ovimbundu of Angola, the Thonga farmers of Zimbabwe, the Tanala and Bara of Madagascar, the Wolof of Senegal, and the Lango, Iteso, Gisu, and Sebei of Uganda (*Construction*).

Cross-dressing is still a feature in Brazilian and Haitian ceremonies derived from West African religions (*Construction*).

The Chukchee, Kamchadal, Koryak, and Inuits—all Native peoples of the Arctic Basin—had male shamans who dressed as women.

"In India, the Vallabha sect, devotees of Krishna, dressed as women ... Reports, of the 1870s and 1930s, describe the priests (*bissu*) of the Celebes who live and dress as women" (*Dressing Up*) ...

Passing for Survival

By the time the Industrial Revolution in Europe had forged plowshares into weapons and machinery, prejudice against transgendered women and men was woven deep into the tapestry of exploitation.

But mercantile trade and early industrial capitalism created opportunities for anonymity that seldom existed under feudalism, where the large serf families and their neighbors lived and worked on the land.

Capitalism unchained the peasants from the land—but chained them to machinery as wage slaves, or sent them off in armies and armadas to conquer new land, labor and resources.

Not only transgendered women but men now had the opportunity to pass. The oppression of women under capitalism forced many thousands of women who weren't transgendered to pass as men in order to escape the economic and social inequities of their oppression.

The consequences for passing were harsh. At the close of the seventeenth century the penalty in England was to be placed in the stocks and dragged through the streets in an open cart. In France as late as 1760 transvestites were burned to death.

Despite the criminal penalties, women passed as men throughout Europe—most notably in the Netherlands, England and Germany. Passing was so widespread during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it was the theme of novels, fictionalized biographies and memoirs, art, plays, operas and popular songs ...

... [D]espite long being termed "illegal" and "unnatural" and still carrying with it an "unofficial" death penalty, transvestism is still a part of human expression.

Transvestites and other transgendered people were leaders of the first wave of gay liberation that began in the 1880s in Germany. That movement enjoyed the support of many in the mass Socialist parties.

Magnus Hirschfeld, a Jewish gay leader of the first wave of gay liberation in Germany in the 1880s, was also reported to be transvestite. He wrote a ground-breaking work on the subject. Most of the valuable documentation this movement uncovered about transgender throughout history, along with research about lesbians and gay men, was burned in a pyre by the Nazis. ...

Transgendered roles are still seen—most frequently as "comedy"—on television and in film, theater, literature, dance and music. But the social penalties for transgendered people who try to live and work in dignity and respect are still cruel and frequently violent.

Christine Jorgensen Battled Bigotry

The development of anesthesia and the commercial synthesis of hormones are relatively recent discoveries of this century. These breakthroughs opened the possibility for individuals to change their sex to conform with their gender. Since that time, tens of thousands of transsexuals in this country alone have made the same life decision that Christine Jorgensen made.

While Jorgensen was not the first person to have a sex-change, she was by far the most well-publicized. She died May 3, 1989, at age 62 after a battle with cancer. Jorgensen was remembered in mainstream media obituaries as George Jorgensen, the Bronx-born ex-GI and photographer who traveled to Denmark in the early 1950s to become Christine—the first reported sex-change.

These accounts admit to an "international fuss" over her life decision, but add that she was "transformed into an instant celebrity. She traveled the lecture and nightclub circuit, met royalty and celebrities and ended up rich" (*New York Daily News*, May 4, 1989).

Sounds like a Harlequin novel, doesn't it? This is sheer hypocrisy coming from the media—and the ruling powers guiding their pens—that made Jorgensen the object of universal ridicule. Not once during her lifetime did anyone who controls this society say that Christine Jorgensen was a human being deserving respect.

The news of Jorgensen's sex change was leaked to the press in late 1952—one of the deepest periods of political reaction in the history of the United States. It was the height of the notorious McCarthy witch hunts, when hundreds were dragged into court and put in prison simply for their political views. The Rosenbergs were sitting on death row, awaiting electrocution at Sing-Sing. Pentagon planes bombed Korea and tested the hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific.

Jim Crow laws still ruled the South. Gay men and lesbians were fighting for survival without a movement. Transvestism was only acceptable when it was "Uncle Miltie" Berle putting on drag for guffaws.

When the news about Christine Jorgensen hit, all hell broke loose. From appalled news commentators to cruel talk show hosts, she was attacked so viciously it seemed she was exiled from the human race.

What had been an important private decision was seized on by a hostile media and vulgarized. Her personal life was no longer her own. She was relentlessly hounded. Jorgensen told the media a year before her death: "I'm not that recognizable anymore. I can actually go into a supermarket and people don't know who I am, which is just wonderful and suits me just fine."

"Things don't hurt the way they did then," she added.

Somehow she paid this punishing emotional price and survived with grace and dignity. It took great courage.

The attacks on Jorgensen were part of a campaign meant to enforce conformity, but it was too late in history for this to succeed.

Jorgensen told the press in 1986: "I could never understand why I was receiving so much attention. Now, looking back, I realize it was the beginning of the sexual revolution, and I just happened to be one of the trigger mechanisms."

From Joan of Arc to Stonewall

In the last decades, the development of technology rendered many of the occupational divisions between men and women obsolete. Women were joining the workforce in larger numbers, becoming a part of the working class in the most active and immediate sense. This shaped a whole new consciousness.

The contraceptive pill, first produced in 1952 [sic, correct date is 1959], virtually revolutionized social relations for many women, and allowed women to participate in all phases of life with the same freedom from unwanted pregnancies as men.

Rigidly enforced gender boundaries should also have been scrapped. But the motor force of capitalism still drives prejudice and inequity as a vehicle for division. It took monumental struggles—and still greater ones remain on the horizon—to right these wrongs.

The civil rights and national liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and the massive resistance to the Vietnam war, rocked the world and helped give rise to the women's liberation struggle as well.

In 1969, militant young gay transvestites in New York City's Greenwich Village led a fight against cops who tried to raid the Stonewall Inn. The battles lasted for four nights running. The Stonewall Rebellion gave birth to a modern lesbian and gay rights movement that will never again be silenced behind closet doors.

From peasant uprisings against feudalism in the Middle Ages to the Stonewall Rebellion in the twentieth century, transvestites and other transgendered people have figured in many militant struggles, both in defense of the right of personal expression and as a form of political rebellion.

But from the violence on the streets to the brutality of the police, from job discrimination to denial of health care and housing—survival is still a battle for the transgendered population.

Transgendered people are the brunt of cruel jokes on television and in films. Movies like *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill* and *Silence of the Lambs* create images of transgendered people as dangerous sociopaths.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, a sort-of-transvestite, wanna-be-transsexual kills women and skins them in order to sew a woman's body for himself. The film turns reality upside down: It is actually transvestites and transsexuals who have been the victims of grisly murders.

This point was driven home by activists who disrupted the National Film Society awards in spring 1992. They passed out fliers highlighting the real-life murder of transsexual Venus Xtravaganza, who appeared in the documentary *Paris is Burning*. Xtravaganza was murdered before the film on Harlem's drag balls was finished.

Silence of the Lambs swept the Academy Awards. *Paris is Burning* wasn't even nominated.

Fighting for a Better World

The institutionalized bigotry and oppression we face today have not always existed. They arose with the division of society into exploiter and exploited. Divide-and-conquer tactics have allowed the slave-owners, feudal landlords and corporate ruling classes to keep for themselves the lion's share of wealth created by the laboring class.

Like racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry toward transgendered people is a deadly carcinogen. We are pitted against each other in order to keep us from seeing each other as allies.

Genuine bonds of solidarity can be forged between people who respect each other's differences and are willing to fight their enemy together. We are the class that does the work of the world, and can revolutionize it. We can win true liberation.

The struggle against intolerable conditions is on the rise around the world. And the militant role of transgendered women, men and youths in today's fight-back movement is already helping to shape the future.