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NEWS AND POLITICS

Gender Variance Around the World Over Time

It's nothing new.



[Lucy Diavolo](#) JUN 21, 2017 2:18PM EDT

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***OG History** is a Teen Vogue series where we unearth history **not** told through a white, cisheteropatriarchal lens.*

As the transgender community continues to fight for civil rights in the U.S., one of the most common arguments against progress is that transgender people are a recent phenomenon. Some regard trans people as a symptom of the postmodern condition, or [identity politics on steroids](#). Many claim that the struggle for transgender rights is difficult because the concept is still new [to many Americans](#).

But the reality is that transgender people have been striving for their rights in America before the 1960s, when a black trans woman named Marsha P. Johnson is credited [by many for throwing the first brick during the Stonewall Inn riots](#), ushering in the start of a movement. Just years earlier, transgender people protested police crackdowns on their very existence in

San Francisco [at the Compton's Cafeteria riots](#). Other moments of defiance exist, of course, but remain untold.

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Half a century of struggle for trans rights in the U.S. is only one thread of a larger global tapestry. Employing a variety of genders beyond man and woman across the world, people who don't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth have been working for centuries to guarantee their liberties since ancient times. The recent explosion of visibility might make the fight for trans rights seem like a recent development in the United States, but it's a fight that's been happening here for decades and around the world for centuries. Understanding that history will only help to inform the ongoing struggle for the liberation of gender-variant people everywhere.

Hijras (South Asia)

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With thousands of years [of documented history](#), *hijras* are one of the oldest and best-known examples of gender variance. The word is a blanket term applied to people Westerners might define as transgender, intersex, or eunuchs.

Throughout history, *hijras* in southern Asia have been associated with sacred powers. They [deliver blessings](#) at weddings and births and [are feared for their powerful curses](#). The focus on their efforts for recognition and rights typically centers on India. That's in part because British rule dramatically changed the lives of *hijras* there. The colonial government made the simple act of being a *hijra* [a criminal offense](#). *Hijras* responded by forming their own tight-knit communities, and developing their [own language](#).

In 2014, the Supreme Court of India followed precedents in Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in recognizing *hijras* as [a legally designated third gender](#). That decision helped people in India seeking legal recognition for their identities.

Activists claim it doesn't go far enough, though. Many *hijras* still find themselves resorting to begging or [survival sex work to get by](#). In Indian politics, "*hijra*" is still used as a [public insult](#).

Two-Spirit (North America)

For an example of colonially stifled gender variance closer to home, one needs look no further than the various gender identities recognized and celebrated in indigenous tribes.

Navajo tribes recognized [four genders](#) that roughly correlate with [cisgender and transgender men and women](#), using the terms *nadleehi* for those who "transform" into femininity and *dilbaa* for those "transform" into masculinity. [The Mohave people used the terms](#) *alyha* and *hwame* to

describe similar identities. And the Lakota tribe believed the *wintke* people among them had supernatural powers like India's hijras.

The two-spirit community is experiencing a renaissance of activism lately, but this isn't a recent phenomenon, strictly speaking. We'wha was a famous *lhamana* (i.e., two-spirit) member of the Zuni tribe. She may have been the first out-of-the-closet gender-variant person to meet a U.S. president when she was introduced to Grover Cleveland in 1886.

Two-spirit people in North America have benefited from acceptance within their communities. Already they have reclaimed a piece of their identities by popularizing the term "two-spirit" in place of the French colonial term *berdache*.

Il Femminiello (Naples) and Elagabalus (Rome)

Even within the boundaries of colonial Europe, gender-variant people existed. Documented in paintings from as early as the eighteenth century, *il femminiello* were individuals assigned male at birth who dressed and behaved like women in Naples, Italy.

While largely segregated within the city, *il femminiello* were considered a blessing and good fortune upon the families they were born into. To this day, gender-variant pilgrims still venerate the "Madonna of Transformation" in the country's southern regions.

These are not the only gender-variant people in the region's history. Elagabalus was crowned emperor of the Roman empire in the third century, but insisted that subjects use the term empress and dressed as a woman. According to some historical accounts, Elagabalus may have even summoned the empire's finest doctors in order to pursue a sexual-confirmation surgery.

In today's Italy, activists can celebrate the recent marriage of Alessia Cinquegrana. Cinquegrana, who was crowned Miss Trans Italy in 2014, is reportedly the first trans woman in the nation to marry a man [without first obtaining sexual-confirmation surgery](#).

Ancient History & Modern Struggles

These stories offer up a simple lesson: There are always people who find themselves on the outside of simple binaries. Other examples [in the Pacific Islands](#) and [South America](#) reinforce this notion.

While it might be tempting to apply a label like "transgender" to all of these people, it's important to respect their sovereignty in defining their own identities. European colonialism was a major force in hurting and erasing gender-variant people. Using Western terminology to understand other cultures' gender variance might only result in perpetuating that harm and erasure. Even Americans Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera [described themselves](#) in terminology like "transvestite," which is rarely used today.

Still, the variety of gender expressions and identities is a testament to a key tenet of Western transgender advocacy. They prove that people have rejected restrictive gender systems throughout history and in our modern age. As many of the examples demonstrate, these experiences often exist outside of a binary, [not unlike](#) modern definitions of genderqueer or non-binary.