


# LGBT+ Women in History

 *There is no  
such thing  
as a single-issue  
struggle because  
we do not live  
single issue lives."*

Audre Lorde

## Hello from the LGBT+ Campaign

LGBT+ History Month has been celebrated across the UK since February 2005. Each year the event has become bigger and better, and we've no doubt that this year's will be the best yet with more events than ever before. LGBT+ History Month is followed by International Women's Day, which falls on 8 March every year and has seen March become International Women's Month.

Unfortunately LGBT+ people are all too often erased from the history books. This couldn't be truer for the LGBT+ women of history. Sexism, homophobia and transphobia combined mean that LGBT+ women's achievements are regularly overlooked or not recorded, honored or recognised.

NUS LGBT+ Campaign believe that these exceptional women should be celebrated as part of history month, and that's why we've produced this briefing. It contains a useful guide to being more inclusive of LGBT+ women in your history month activities, a list of LGBT+ women of history – ranging from activists and actresses to politicians and singers. We've also included some top tips on how to use this information.

LGBT+ History Month is our opportunity to celebrate our past, contemplate our present and look towards a more diverse and inclusive future: we hope you will join us in celebrating the amazing achievements of LGBT+ women.

Wishing you a great LGBT+ History Month!

Melantha Chittenden  
LGBT+ Officer (Womens Place)



## Introduction

In recognition of LGBT+ History Month and International Women's Month we've produced this briefing as an opportunity to focus on LGBT+ Women in history. In this briefing you will find the profiles of 10 LGBT+ women from history who have made remarkable and amazing achievements.

Other sections of this briefing focus on ways in which you can implement this information and encourage your union to participate in celebrating LGBT+ women of history. We have also included information about other organisations who celebrate LGBT+ history and Women's history that should be able to provide you with more information and possibly materials that you can use when promoting LGBT+ women in your unions.

This briefing celebrates LGBT+ women from history and highlights the need to campaign and achieve equality for all. Join NUS in actively empowering and supporting LGBT+ women to affirm their place in society.

***"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."***



## **Audre Lorde**

### **Background**

African American writer, feminist and civil rights activist who dedicated her life to confronting and addressing racism, sexism and homophobia. Her poems particularly dealt with issues relating to civil rights, feminism and the exploration of black female identity.

### **Achievements**

In 1981 she won the Gay Caucus Book of the Year Award for *The Cancer Journals* after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her theories and prose influenced much contemporary feminist thought and after her death in 1992 the Audre Lorde Project was founded to campaign for queer people of colour especially relating to trans communities in New York.

***"At the end of the day, we can endure much more than we think we can."***



## **Frida Kahlo**

### **Background**

Born in 1907 she was a Mexican painter best known for her self-portraits. During her childhood she contracted polio which resulted in life long mobility complications. She joined the Mexican Communist Party and was introduced to many activists and artists. One of these was to be the man she would go on to marry, Diego Rivera. Though they often separated and their relationship became the focus of much media attention. After her death in 1954 her former residence became the Frida Kahlo Museum where most of her work still resides.

### **Achievements**

She is considered one of the world's greatest painters and feminist icon. Her work inspires artists and the truthfulness in her portraits exposed pain and suffering but also her resilience.



***"Once it was out there, I felt I could truly be myself. It was incredibly liberating."***



## **Nicola Adams**

### **Background**

Born in Leeds. She fought her first fight age 13 but it would be four years before she found a second opponent. In 2007 she began to dominate amateur divisions and then subsequently the European and World Championships. She turned professional on 23 January 2017. Though openly bisexual now, it wasn't until 2014 that she began speaking about her sexuality. Worrying about people's reactions she would say she was single rather than say she was with a woman.

### **Achievements**

Nicola Adams is the first woman to win an Olympic boxing title. She was also the first openly LGBT+ person to win an Olympic boxing Gold medal in 2012. The same year she went on to win the Boxing Writer's Club of Great Britain, becoming the first woman to do so. In 2013 Adams was appointed MBE in the New Years Honours for services to boxing and OBE in 2017. She was named the most influential LGBT+ person in Britain in 2012.

***"I'm not missing a minute of this. It's the revolution."***



## **Sylvia Rivera**

### **Background**

Born in 1951 in New York City it was where Rivera would live most of her life. American gay liberation, trans activist and drag queen. She began a life of activism during the Civil Rights and anti-war movements present during the Stonewall Riots in 1969. At different stages in her life she battled substance abuse and was homeless age 11. Raised by her grandmother initially, by her teenage years she was living with the community of drag queens. Who gave her the name 'Sylvia'. She penned many essays throughout her life and wrote mainly on gender identity and issues of poverty and discrimination faced by people of colour.

### **Achievements**

Along with Marsha P. Johnson she co-founded the *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries* (STAR) dedicated to helping homeless young drag queens and trans women of colour. Her most prominent work was around the exclusion of trans people from the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act in New York.

***"It's easier to change a body than to change a mind"***



## **Roberta Cowell**

### **Background**

Racing car driver and World War II pilot, she was the first known British woman to undergo sex reassignment. During the war she was captured by German troops and held for 5 months. Later founding a motor-racing team and competing around Europe. Due to gender reassignment being illegal in the UK in 1950, no surgeon would openly agree to perform the procedure. An acquaintance Michael Dillon in fact performed the initial stages and eventually a gynecologist provided a document stating she was intersex, allowing for the remaining procedures to be carried out.

### **Achievements**

Through her continued involvement in motor racing, 1957 saw her win the Shelsley Walsh Speed Hill Climb. Cowell also penned an autobiography which spoke candidly about sex and gender both socially and medically.

***"I think it's important for little girls growing up, and young women, to have one in every walk of life. So from that point of view, I'm proud to be a role model!"***



## **Sally Ride**

### **Background**

Born in Los Angeles in 1951, Ride was a physicist and astronaut. She joined NASA in 1973 and became the first American woman in space in 1983 and the third woman in space overall. She is also the first known LGBT+ astronaut. She remains the youngest American astronaut to travel to space, having done so at 32.

### **Achievements**

In 2001, she started her own company to create educational programs and products known as Sally Ride Science to help inspire girls and young women to pursue their interests in science and maths. While in 2014 Ride was inducted into the Legacy Walk, an outdoor public display that celebrated LGBT+ history and people.

***"Feminism is for everybody"***



## **Bell Hooks**

### **Background**

Born in 1952 she became a renowned author, feminist and social activist. In her early life she attended a racially segregated school and wrote at great length about the troublesome transition of moving over to a predominately white integrated school. In 1976 she began teaching English at the University of Southern California and it was shortly after this that many of her best known work was written.

### **Achievements**

Her first major work published in 1981 *Aint I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* has gained widespread recognition as an influential contribution to feminist thought. She won the Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace – Reader's Digest Fund in 1994. More recently in 2014 the Bell Hooks Institute at Berea College, Kentucky was founded.

***"I think the truth is if you really care about the quality of somebody's life as much as you care about the quality of your own, you have it made"***



## **Edith 'Edie' Windsor**

### **Background**

Born in 1929, Windsor is probably best known for her success in the case against the US government within the Supreme Court which overturned Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act. At the time this was a big victory for the same-sex marriage movement in the US. She was also an LGBT+ activist and former technology manager at IBM.

### **Achievements**

The Edie Windsor Fund for Old Lesbians, gifted to Windsor on her 70th birthday and maintained and administered by Open Meadows Foundation, provides meaningful grants to projects by and for lesbian older adults. The case of United States v Windsor is arguably the most influential legal precedent in the struggle for LGBT marriage equality.

***"I find the courage to admit that I am transgendered and this doesn't mean that I am unlovable"***



## **The Wachowskis**

### **Background**

Lana and Lilly Wachowski born 1965 and 1967 respectively are film directors, producers and screenwriters. They are also both openly trans women. Reaching fame with the infamous *Matrix series*. They made their debut with *Bound* in 1996 and have gone on to produce the Netflix series *Sense8* among many other successful films. They also wrote the screen play for the film *Assassins*.

### **Achievements**

Lana Wachowski was awarded the Human Rights Campaign Visibility Award in 2012. *Bound* released in 1996 was co-written, directed and produced by the Wachowskis and it went on to win many awards, the most prestigious being the Grand Jury Award – Honorable Mention at L.A.

***"It is a privilege to serve people, a privilege that must be earned, and once earned, there is an obligation to do something good with it."***



## **Rep. Barbara Jordan**

### **Background**

Born in Houston, Texas Jordan was a lawyer, educator, politician and leader of the Civil Rights Movement. She was the first African American elected to the Texas Senate and the first Southern African American woman election to the US House of Representatives. She is also the first lesbian known to have been elected to the US Congress. Her speech for the impeachment process against Richard Nixon is regarded as one of the best in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Achievements**

In 1990 she was inducted to the National Women's Hall of Fame. The NAACP awarded her the Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement. The powerful and influential role she played in the Watergate scandal earned her national praise for her rhetoric, morals and wisdom.



## Celebrating LGBT+ Women of History

### Information and tips on how to promote and celebrate Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans women of history in your union

This section will give you tips as to how you can use this information and encourage your Students' Union to celebrate LGBT+ Women of History. This is not just an opportunity for you to share the profiles of the 10 LGBT+ Women that feature in this briefing, but also a chance for you to think about other LGBT+ Women of History and ways in which you can use and share this information with the students at your institution and your community.

#### Top 10 tips on how to highlight and profile LGBT+ Women of History

1. During February (LGBT+ History Month) and March (International Women's Day is on 8 March) ask your students' union and/or your institution for some space on a notice/display board so that you can make a display about LGBT+ Women, both from history and today.
2. Put on a Feminist Histories, Feminist Futures event and invite an LGBT+ woman who has achieved success and acclaim in their career or activism. They could be from the women's movement or someone who has done really well in their career. Ask them to come and speak about their achievements and what needs to be done to ensure all LGBT+ women have equal opportunities to achieve success in their activism and careers.
3. Encourage LGBT+ women to participate in the activities that your union women's and LGBT+ campaigns have to offer, such as your women's group.
4. Make sure LGBT+ women have access to this briefing and other publications we have produced that encourage LGBT+ activism and offer support and guidance to LGBT+ students.
5. Speak to LGBT+ women in your institution about what would they like to see happen during LGBT+ History Month/International Women's Day and what they would like to happen in your union, to highlight this important time and LGBT+ women's issues.
6. Speak to clubs and societies that represent LGBT+ women about what they are doing during LGBT+ History Month for LGBT+ women and offer support to them to achieve their chosen activities during this time.
7. Put on an event to celebrate LGBT+ women's achievements and successes, both from history and now. Highlight the importance of inclusivity and why LGBT+ women are an integral part of your women's campaign.
8. Invite LGBT+ women from your institution to put on an event where they can display some of their own achievements or share their talents with other people from your institution. This could be anything from displaying artwork, to reading poetry to singing, to giving a talk about their academic achievements.
9. Contact Local and National LGBT+ Groups and find out what sort of activities and information they have available for LGBT women and tap into their services. You can do this by encouraging LGBT+ women to attend external events, making sure information from these organisations is available in your union and inviting these organisations to your union to deliver talks and workshops on what they do and how they support LGBT+ women.
10. Showcase LGBT Women Alumni in your institution and/or historical LGBT+ Women figures from your area. You could even put together a presentation and/or a workshop to highlight these people and follow it up with a film or reading about or featuring one of the people.