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*“Our Boys Need Blood”:
The Activism of Women, Lesbians, and People of Color
during the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco*

ABSTRACT: *This article highlights the activism of women, lesbians, and people of color during the first decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in San Francisco. Utilizing primary source materials such as pamphlets, posters, and flyers from LGBTQ+ activist groups in the Bay Area, as well as historiographical works on the epidemic, the author argues that the historiography of the epidemic has previously centered around white gay men, but that marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community were greatly affected and responded with culturally competent community care methods that reduced the spread of HIV/AIDS.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; 1980s; United States (U.S.); San Francisco; LGBTQ+ community; HIV/AIDS; activism; women; lesbians; people of color*

Introduction

When HIV/AIDS appeared in the early 1980s, the United States was experiencing rampant political debates between the federal government and Civil Rights activists. In the decade prior, both the gay liberation movement and the second wave feminist movement occurred, and both communities made major strides in their fight for equality. When Ronald Reagan entered the White House in January 1981, he ushered in an era of conservatism, funding cuts, and silence on Civil Rights issues.¹ The Reagan era brought major setbacks for both communities, as well as people of color. However, the research on the epidemic has been mostly centered around the effects that HIV/AIDS had on gay white men.

This article looks at the HIV/AIDS epidemic through a new lens that emphasizes the intersections of gender, race, and class in the gay community's activism of the 1980s. It focuses specifically on the gay community of San Francisco in the first decade of the crisis. Conservative historians who have written about Ronald Reagan's presidency have chosen to remove his role with regard to HIV/AIDS altogether. They have not acknowledged how his administration's irresponsible handling of public health contributed to the deaths of thousands of Americans while he was in office, most of whom belonged to the gay community.² This article argues that the historiography has routinely overlooked the toll that the virus took on people of color, women, and lesbians, misrepresented these communities' roles in the activism of the decade, and neglected their strong influence on prevention strategies. However, these groups mobilized quickly to

¹ Stewart Landers, Farzana Kapadia, and Lisa Bowleg, "1981–2021: HIV and Our World," *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 7 (2021): 1180–1182.

² Jeanine Alexander, "The Problem of AIDS: The Reagan Administration, the Presidential Commission, and the AIDS epidemic" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2013), 1.

combat the epidemic and care for their communities and others. This article aims to highlight those feats.

I. Historiography

Amidst the historiography of HIV/AIDS, some historians have already shed light on these misrepresentations in their work and amplified the voices that have traditionally been silenced. Jennifer Brier's *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* addresses the politics behind the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which includes the federal government's inadequate response, the different individuals and organizations that worked with AIDS, and the people who were affected by the disease.³ This work also discusses the problematic elements of the gay community's response, along with the women, lesbians, and people of color who worked to correct these shortcomings. Mike Greenly's *Chronicle: The Human Side of AIDS* sets out to fix misrepresentations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic by utilizing the stories of people who experienced the crisis, told in their own words.⁴ In his book, Greenly interviews people with AIDS, healthcare professionals, volunteers from the organization Shanti, the former Director of Consumer Affairs for the FDA, and more. These narrators bring stories that might have otherwise gone untold into the literature on AIDS, they dispel myths and stigmas, amplify the work of volunteers, and give voices to people with AIDS. Brandon Michael Ball's article "The Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses as an Issue of Civil and Sexual Liberties During the AIDS Epidemic" takes a different approach, addressing the carceral nature of the San Francisco government's closing of the gay bathhouses, which was regarded by others as a positive action.⁵ Although some historians have heralded Dianne Feinstein as a hero, Ball argues that stripping the gay community of its safe spaces was a Civil Rights violation and highlights other controversial actions of the San Francisco government that hurt the community. Lastly, Dan Royles' *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against AIDS* discusses not only the disproportionate effect that AIDS had on the black community but also the struggles they faced within the gay community due to a lack of representation and solidarity.⁶ The black community was hit especially hard by the epidemic, and activists battled both the abandonment of the government and their community while trying to provide culturally comprehensive prevention and care strategies for those affected.

³ Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁴ Mike Greenly, *Chronicle: The Human Side of AIDS* (New York: Irvington Publishers Inc., 1986).

⁵ Brandon Michael Ball, "The Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses as an Issue of Civil and Sexual Liberties During the AIDS Epidemic," *Ex Post Facto: Journal of the History Students at San Francisco State University* 28 (2019): 59-70.

⁶ Dan Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

Other historians have focused solely on the role women and lesbians played in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Jackie Winnow's article, "Lesbians Evolving Healthcare: Cancer and AIDS," discusses the specific services that lesbians offered to both women and men in their community during the crisis and shows their involvement in social justice movements in prior decades.⁷ Winnow also points to the uncomfortable truth that women and lesbians have not always received the same level of support and solidarity from men in the gay community. Jacqueline Foertsch's "Angels in an Epidemic: Women as 'Negatives' in Recent AIDS Literature" shares some of the same arguments as Winnow's work.⁸ Foertsch focuses mainly on how these women were perceived as "angelic" caregivers instead of powerful activists with agency to organize an effective response. This work changes the narrative of women as passive and soft helpers and highlights their capacity for strong leadership. Maggie Shackelford's M.A. thesis, "Unsung Heroes: Lesbian Activists in the AIDS Epidemic in North Carolina and California, 1981-1989," outlines the work of lesbian activists, highlights notable activists in cities such as San Francisco, and gives credit to the activists in smaller cities in the South that mobilized AIDS care.⁹ Shackelford provides discourse on the separation between gay men and lesbians in the community and explains the ideological schisms between lesbian separatists and those who worked with HIV/AIDS. Emily K. Hobson's *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* reflects some of the sentiments of the authors above but focuses on the more radical and progressive members of the gay community, intersectional approaches to AIDS, and activists' previous work in the anti-war movement.¹⁰ Hobson reflects on the issues of race, class, and imperialism in the gay community and those who created more inclusive activist spaces. Lastly, Beth E. Schneider's and Nancy E. Stoller's *Women Resisting AIDS* discusses the ways in which women were left behind during the epidemic, how their health was ignored, and how they fought back.¹¹ Schneider and Stoller also explore the specific discrimination and underrepresentation that lesbians experienced during the crisis. Together, the works of these historians help to fill the gaps in the historiography of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They paint a clearer picture of the actors involved in caring for their communities and taking a stand against a misinformed and silent government.

⁷ Jackie Winnow, "Lesbians Evolving Health Care: Cancer and AIDS," *Feminist Review* 41, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 68-76.

⁸ Jacqueline Foertsch, "Angels in an Epidemic: Women as 'Negatives' in Recent AIDS Literature," *South Central Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 57-72.

⁹ Maggie Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes: Lesbian Activists in the AIDS Epidemic in North Carolina and California, 1981-1989" (Master's thesis, The College of William and Mary, 2011).

¹⁰ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

¹¹ Beth E. Schneider and Nancy E. Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS: Feminist Strategies of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

II. The Federal Government's Response

The first cases of AIDS appeared in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles in the summer of 1981.¹² Since the first cases were discovered in gay men, it was initially named Gay-Related Autoimmune Disease (GRID), a misnomer that deeply offended the gay community.¹³ In 1983, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) identified four risk groups: gay men, intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians (who were removed from the list in 1985).¹⁴ These four groups, called the "4-H Club", were heavily stigmatized populations, and this classification further marginalized them. People with AIDS would go on to experience discrimination in healthcare, housing, insurance, and social security due to harmful stigmas, racism, and homophobia.¹⁵ The federal government also criminalized those who had HIV/AIDS, and it became the only medical condition that carried a felony charge when undisclosed, amongst other discriminatory laws.¹⁶ When HIV was determined to be the precursor to AIDS by Dr. Robert Gallo in 1984, the CDC, the government of San Francisco, and community-based organizations had already been hard at work trying to prevent the spread of AIDS and treat those who had developed it.¹⁷ However, the Reagan administration was lagging far behind.

The Reagan administration was fatally slow to respond to the epidemic. AIDS was first discovered six months after Ronald Reagan took office.¹⁸ Although meetings were held on AIDS in 1983, they were informal and included only a handful of government officials; the federal government did not hold any more meetings to discuss AIDS until 1985.¹⁹ Prior to that moment, members of his administration and conservative journalists had publicly mocked people with AIDS, calling it the "gay plague" in a 1982 press conference.²⁰ In 1985, Rock

¹² Michelle Cochrane, *When AIDS Began: San Francisco and the Making of an Epidemic* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xx.

¹³ "Looking Back: The AIDS Epidemic," *SF LGBT CENTER*, December 15, 2018, [online](#).

¹⁴ Patricia D. Siplon, *AIDS and the Policy Struggle in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 6-7.

¹⁵ Nan D. Hunter, *Epidemic of Fear: A Survey of AIDS Discrimination in the 1980s and Policy Recommendations for the 1990s* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1990), 1-2; see also 22.

¹⁶ Aaron Samuel Breslow, "HIV is Not a Crime: Exploring Criminalization and Discrimination in a Dual Model of HIV/AIDS Minority Stress" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018), 2.

¹⁷ Kathy S. Stolley and John E. Glass, *HIV/AIDS* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 173.

¹⁸ Donald P. Francis, "Deadly AIDS Policy Failure by the Highest Levels of the U.S. Government: A Personal Look Back 30 Years Later for Lessons to Respond Better to Future Epidemics," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 33, no. 3 (2012): 290-300, here 292.

¹⁹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 82-83.

²⁰ Joseph Bennington-Castro, "How Aids Became an Unspoken—But Deadly—Epidemic for Years," *History*, June 1, 2020, [online](#). See also Trevor Hoppe, *Punishing Disease: HIV and the Criminalization of Sickness* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018; first published 2017), 1.

Hudson, an American actor and close friend of Reagan's, died of AIDS.²¹ Only then, after 15,000 cases, half of which had already resulted in deaths, did Reagan acknowledge the epidemic. In the same year, the CDC also proposed a prevention plan that would provide antibody testing and the latest information on the virus. It had an estimated \$37 million budget request. It was denied on February 4, and members of the CDC were told to "look pretty and do as little as you can."²² During that time, Reagan refused to meet with AIDS organizations and did not hold his own conference on AIDS or say the word aloud until February 5, 1986.²³ His Surgeon General, Everett C. Koop, a known Christian conservative, took a surprising turn and wanted to be proactive about AIDS.²⁴ His report in 1986 provided AIDS education to children in schools, information about condom use, and addressed racial disparities, which gained him the support of AIDS activists.²⁵ Twenty million copies of his report were set to be distributed to American homes and schools. This angered the members of his own party and subjected him to public attacks.²⁶ Following the report, the Secretary of Education, Gary Bauer, denounced Koop. Reagan supported Bauer and favored his traditional Christian rhetoric, which emphasized monogamy and abstinence.²⁷ Reagan did not create the federal AIDS Commission until 1987, and they did not release their report until 1988, a full seven years after AIDS had been discovered.²⁸ The commission included doctors and one gay male but excluded activists that AIDS organizations had recommended.²⁹

In 1987, the federal government finally began allotting money for the prevention, research, and treatment of AIDS. Conservatives began launching counterattacks to limit the government's ability to respond. Historians have also pointed out how little the government spent on AIDS in comparison to the federal budget. In 1988, Reagan relegated \$1.5 million to the AIDS crisis, which was not nearly enough money since the estimated cost an AIDS patient would spend on care in their lifetime was an estimated \$100,000.³⁰ Out of over 500 recommendations made to the president by the AIDS Commission, a ten-point

²¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007; first published 2007), xxi. See also Tasleem J. Padamsee, "Fighting an Epidemic in Political Context: Thirty-Five Years of HIV/AIDS Policy Making in the United States," *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 3 (2020): 1001-1028, here 1005.

²² Francis, "Deadly AIDS Policy Failure," 295-297.

²³ Alexander, "Problem of AIDS," 34-35.

²⁴ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 88. See also Padamsee, "Fighting an Epidemic," 1006.

²⁵ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 89.

²⁶ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 90.

²⁷ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 92.

²⁸ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 94; see also 96.

²⁹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 95.

³⁰ Alexander, "Problem of AIDS," 79.

plan was developed. It did not include a ban on AIDS discrimination and, in fact, removed Civil Rights rhetoric from the original wording.³¹ In 1986, the Department of Health and Human Services' AIDS budget was \$126 million, which was only .08% of the department's \$1.5 billion budget.³² One of the roadblocks to funding put up by conservatives was the Helms Amendment, which stated that any federally funded program could not contain sexually explicit material in its advertising and was required to promote abstinence.³³ This would prevent AIDS organizations from promoting safe sex, using suggestive imagery, or using graphics about condom use if they were to receive federal funding.

III. The Local Government's Response in San Francisco

At the local level, the government of San Francisco was used as a model for taking action and distributing funds early to fight AIDS. According to Dianne Feinstein, who was the mayor of San Francisco during the epidemic, the city's leaders educated themselves on the virus in order to respond quickly and rationally with government programs.³⁴ In 1983, the city government had already established an AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital and staffed it with nurses and volunteers who were willing to give specialized care to AIDS patients.³⁵ Cliff Morrison, one of the nurses who helped develop Ward 5-B at San Francisco General Hospital, gave credit to Feinstein for being proactive about AIDS. Feinstein also initiated the city's first AIDS awareness week in 1984. By 1985, the city government had allotted \$8.8 million to healthcare, counseling, and education. Feinstein also wrote a personal letter to President Reagan asking him to increase the budget for AIDS, but he never responded.³⁶ Feinstein claimed that the public and the gay community also played a large role in mobilizing to help others and that the city was used as a paradigm for responding to the epidemic. Dr. Mervyn Silverman, who was the director of the city's Department of Public Health at the time, attributed the success of the San Francisco model to the compassionate and anti-hierarchical organization of hospitals and volunteer organizations like Shanti that worked with AIDS patients.³⁷ Shanti, which was developed in 1974 to help terminally ill patients, mostly those with cancer, sent around 400 volunteers to work with AIDS patients in San Francisco.³⁸

³¹ Alexander, "Problem of AIDS," 61; see also 74.

³² Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 86.

³³ "S.Amdt.963 to H.R.3058," 100th Congress (1987-1988), October 14, 1987, *The Library of Congress*, [online](#).

³⁴ Greenly, *Chronicle*, v.

³⁵ Greenly, *Chronicle*, 366-367.

³⁶ Alexander, "Problem of AIDS," 29.

³⁷ Greenly, *Chronicle*, 357-358.

³⁸ Greenly, *Chronicle*, 377.

While the government of San Francisco acted quickly, some historians have pointed out flaws in their policies that angered the gay community. Although it was short-lived and they were reopened later the same year, one particularly problematic initiative was Dianne Feinstein's decision to close the bathhouses in early 1984.³⁹ This policy was backed by Dr. Mervyn Silverman, who resigned the next year amid the backlash.⁴⁰ A small number of community members, including the famed author Randy Shilts, who later died of AIDS in 1994, supported the closure.⁴¹ According to Brandon Michael Ball, the gay community had established several safe spaces for men to socialize, including bars and nightclubs, theaters, and stores, since the early 1900s.⁴² The bathhouses were one of those safe spaces. Those who opposed the closure believed it to be a waste of money and a symbol of the government's history of criminalizing the gay community. It was also a sign that outsiders did not trust their ability to participate in safe and consensual sex. Prior to the AIDS epidemic, the city's police had raided the bathhouses throughout the 1960s, and gay sex was illegal up until the Consenting Adult Sex Bill was passed in 1976.⁴³ An anonymous source also revealed that Feinstein spent \$50,000 of AIDS money on undercover investigators to surveil the bathhouses and report on what they witnessed.⁴⁴ Her rhetoric that "promiscuity kills" also contributed to the harmful stigmatization and stereotyping of gay men's sexual activity.⁴⁵ This was considered a major infringement on the privacy and sexual freedom of the gay community and connected to the larger history of the city's policing. Activists also drew attention to the fact that Feinstein was ignoring women's health during the epidemic. Organizations like ACT UP San Francisco made political cartoons addressing this issue. One flyer titled "Feinstein on Women and AIDS" depicted the mayor's face with an empty speech bubble, symbolizing her silence toward women during the epidemic. It also featured dollar signs drawn across her face, suggesting that Feinstein was only motivated to act by money.⁴⁶ Regardless of their rapid response, politicians in San Francisco deployed misguided and stigmatizing approaches and neglected the needs of women and the gay community, and activists sought ways to address and fix their shortcomings.

³⁹ Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 60; see also 64.

⁴⁰ Greenly, *Chronicle*, 357.

⁴¹ Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 62. See also Alexander, "Problem of AIDS," 13.

⁴² Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 59.

⁴³ Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 65.

⁴⁴ Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 66.

⁴⁵ Ball, "Defense of San Francisco's Gay Bathhouses," 67.

⁴⁶ "Feinstein on Women and AIDS; Wilson on Women and AIDS," circa 1987-1996, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Digital Library, [Calisphere, online](#).

IV. HIV/AIDS Activism in San Francisco

At the end of 1981, there were twenty-four AIDS cases in San Francisco, and the number grew to over one hundred in 1982.⁴⁷ In the face of the federal government's silence and some of the erroneous actions of the local government, the gay community of San Francisco organized swiftly to care for one another. Their actions were much more comprehensive than those of the government in preventing the spread of the disease.⁴⁸ The incidence rate in San Francisco in 1982 was 18.4%, but by 1987 the rate had gone down to 1%, which is attributed to the work of community organizations.⁴⁹ Jeffrey Weeks's work outlines three traits in the gay community that could have contributed to this effectiveness: social capital in the city, extensive experience in grassroots organizing, and long-established mutual care networks.⁵⁰ Their response was also so successful because it was rooted in the ideas of community empowerment and gay liberation. This removed the shame and stigma from AIDS and promoted collective responsibility over placing blame on individual behavior.⁵¹

One of the most powerful organizations during the epidemic was the San Francisco AIDS Foundation (S.F.A.F.). The majority of the S.F.A.F.'s volunteers were gay men who were involved in both politics and healthcare.⁵² Their initial model for prevention was to "eroticize" safe sex and push condom use along with instructional pamphlets at gay bars and businesses.⁵³ Their safe-sex marketing strategies were sexually suggestive and concise, which was the opposite marketing strategy used by condom brands themselves, which used discrete messaging.⁵⁴ One of the S.F.A.F.'s condom ads depicted two young shirtless men draped in an American flag and brandishing a condom, above which the text read: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."⁵⁵ Although this ad was not offensive, at the time, this kind of marketing was considered more explicit and put images of homosexuality directly in the public eye.

Apart from marketing, the S.F.A.F. participated in more direct action. They created a hotline to disseminate information and direct people to AIDS care, which

⁴⁷ Mick Sinclair, *San Francisco: A Cultural and Literary History* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2010; first published 2004), 223.

⁴⁸ Siplon, *AIDS and the Policy Struggle*, 8.

⁴⁹ Eric Stewart and Julian Rappaport, "Narrative Insurrections: HIV, Circulating Knowledges, and Local Resistances," in *Community Interventions and AIDS*, ed. Edison J. Trickett and Willo Pequegnat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56–87, here 61.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 10–11.

⁵¹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 39–40.

⁵² Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 51.

⁵³ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 45.

⁵⁴ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 46.

⁵⁵ "Condom Use," circa 1986–2000, item 2/81, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

served over six thousand callers, therapy groups, and education centers. The organization also designed their own educational pamphlets, one of which was called *Can We Talk*, which promoted safe sex and condom use.⁵⁶ The bathhouses were being turned into educational centers by 1983, prior to the government shutting them down the following year.⁵⁷ Over one hundred bars, nightclubs, and businesses also became safe-sex educational centers.⁵⁸ Bartenders against AIDS began holding their own meetings, where they distributed condoms, offered training sessions, and made commercials.⁵⁹ The S.F.A.F. also organized free forums on AIDS antibody testing with healthcare professionals at the Department of Public Health.⁶⁰ They addressed how AIDS affected their work lives and helped organize a conference titled "Moving Beyond Crisis: Managing AIDS in the Workplace."⁶¹ In order to honor those who had lost their lives to AIDS, candlelight vigils were held in the city. Two of these took place on May 2 and May 27, 1983, and the pamphlets read "Fighting for Our Lives: An AIDS Candlelit March."⁶² The work of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation was valuable and did not go unnoticed. The organization went on to receive awards, such as the 1985 Cable Car Award, as well as an award from the Washington Business Group on Health, for their achievements.⁶³

Other organizations outside of the S.F.A.F. were also working on prevention and outreach strategies and distributed their own pamphlets and flyers. Organizations like ACT UP San Francisco used even more sexually explicit messaging than the S.F.A.F. One particularly blunt ACT UP flyer depicted the "La Muerte" Loteria card (a popular Mexican card game), which featured a skeleton holding a scythe. The back read, "Don't play lottery with your life!" along with

⁵⁶ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 52.

⁵⁷ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 53.

⁵⁸ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 57.

⁵⁹ "Bartenders against AIDS Meeting Flyer," undated, item 1/1, San Francisco AIDS Foundation Records, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶⁰ "Conferences and Community Forums—Healthcare Industry Related," 1984–2001, item 20/23, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶¹ "Conferences and Community Forums—General," 1982–1998, item 1/164, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶² "AIDS Candlelight Memorial Vigil and March," circa 1983–2000, item 4/28, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "AIDS Candlelight Memorial Vigil and March," circa 1983–2000, item 5/28, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶³ "Awards Given to SFAF," (1985), Item 1/2, San Francisco AIDS Foundation Records, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "Awards Given to SFAF," (1985), Item 2/2, San Francisco AIDS Foundation Records, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

expletives.⁶⁴ Other organizations were not as brusque with their advertising but produced extensive informational pamphlets on HIV/AIDS. For example, the Gay Men's Health Crisis created "The Safer Sex Condom Guide."⁶⁵ It was four pages long, intended for both men and women, and offered photo demonstrations. The *Hot and Healthy Times* newspaper distributed a condom guide as well, which included AIDS facts on the other side.⁶⁶ It provided information on a wide variety of protection, inserted a guide for communication between partners, and contained photo demonstrations as well. Lastly, the *Condom Sense* newspaper made a more inclusive issue that discussed women and AIDS and prevention techniques.⁶⁷ It was titled "Women's Concerns about Condoms" and corrected misinformation for women to help them make safer choices.

Although they were fighting for the same cause, and organizations like the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and ACT UP did a lot of important work to fight AIDS, infighting took place within the prominent gay community organizations. These organizations also had trouble gaining federal funding because of their sexually explicit ad campaigns.⁶⁸ In addition, some of their marketing lacked cultural sensitivity and mostly appealed to white gay men. Marginalized groups within the community began pointing to the inadequate support for women and people of color.⁶⁹ In response to their lack of visibility in the primarily white gay male organizations, these groups took matters into their own hands and constructed their own prevention and care strategies.

V. Women and Lesbian Activists

The traditional image of San Francisco's gay community was that of gay men in the Castro, but lesbians had a strong presence in the city prior to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They created safe spaces for the women in the community and owned businesses that catered to their needs in areas such as the Mission District.⁷⁰ These spaces were not only used as a means of socialization but also for organizing.⁷¹ Unfortunately, lesbians have been largely left out of the historiography on HIV/AIDS. They have also been omitted from the art made about the period, which includes films and literature. In the words of Jacqueline Foertsch,

⁶⁴ "Condom Use," circa 1986–2000, item 9/81, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶⁵ "Condom Use," circa 1986–2000, item 40/81, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶⁶ "Condom Use," circa 1986–2000, item 57/81, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶⁷ "Condom Use," circa 1986–2000, item 69/81, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁶⁸ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 72.

⁶⁹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 77.

⁷⁰ Sinclair, *San Francisco*, 226.

⁷¹ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 17.

Women have been integral to gay men's lives since the advent of the HIV epidemic; gay authors' continued efforts to downplay or ignore women's important roles as supporters, healers, activists, and fellow sufferers dissolve the radical potential of the AIDS text into the misogynist tradition that typifies the heterosexualized Western canon.⁷²

Although they are often left out of the representation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the lesbian community of San Francisco has had a long history of activism in the city and across the globe. Lesbians were involved in the Civil Rights movement, anti-war protests, and the fight for class equality.⁷³ They participated in large numbers as leaders in the second wave feminist movement as well as the gay liberation movement during the 1970s.⁷⁴ They also organized for multiple causes at once. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic, they took part in protests against war in Nicaragua and Honduras and called for "Money for AIDS, Not War."⁷⁵ These activists saw sexual identity as a political issue and connected it to other issues such as racism, imperialism, and classism in their organizing.⁷⁶

Although women were seemingly less affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic than men, lesbians took on a major role in fighting for the gay community in the early 1980s. Women who were affected by AIDS were greatly ignored by the media and the medical field because of the notion that AIDS was a disease of gay men.⁷⁷ Much attention was not paid to the health of women and lesbians during the crisis, and some felt "othered" by the gay community that they were fighting to protect.⁷⁸ Their grass-roots initiatives also did not receive as much funding as predominantly male organizations, but they set a precedent for responding to the crisis in a way that emphasized communal care. Despite being ostracized, they felt a responsibility to women and to the gay community to take action when the government would not. Well-known activists such as Tonie Osborn also rejected the idea that lesbians participated in HIV/AIDS organizing because of the shared experience of being gay or the stereotype that women were "natural caretakers."⁷⁹ Their real motivation was justice, and they acted because they believed it was the right thing to do. Since lesbians did not view themselves as being "at-risk" in comparison to gay men or heterosexual women, they also felt that they could safely engage in AIDS work and saw it as an opportunity to bridge the gap between themselves and gay men.⁸⁰ These women, such as the prominent activist

⁷² Foertsch, "Angels in an Epidemic," 57.

⁷³ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 7.

⁷⁴ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 270.

⁷⁵ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 157.

⁷⁶ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 2.

⁷⁷ Julien S. Murphy, "Women with Aids: Sexual Ethics in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Principles, Practices, & Politics*, ed. Inge B. Corless and Mary Pittman-Lindeman (New York: Routledge, 2013), 65–80, here 65.

⁷⁸ Winnow, "Lesbians Evolving Health Care," 69.

⁷⁹ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 16–17.

⁸⁰ Winnow, "Lesbians Evolving Health Care," 70.

Cindy Patton, saw HIV/AIDS as an extension of the gay liberation movement and the feminist movement and saw the government's response as an attack on the community's Civil Rights.⁸¹

One mode of activism was through debates in the gay press and strategizing.⁸² Both gay men and lesbians advocated in the press for their shared belief in safer sex as opposed to pushing abstinence. They proposed that the only effective response to the crisis would be through love and unity in the community.⁸³ However, lesbian writers took these theories a step further, weaving in feminist rhetoric and addressing the role misogyny played in sexual practices. They reiterated the arguments they deployed in the women's health movement in the decade prior regarding informed consent and self-care and asserted that feminist ideology would aid in prevention.⁸⁴ These sentiments became the blueprint for the safe-sex rhetoric that gay men deployed in the AIDS epidemic.⁸⁵ They also rejected the notion that gay sex decoupled love from sexual practice and wrote such sentiments off as homophobic. They sought out messages that were grounded in love and emphasized safe sex without uplifting puritanical ideals. Marie Goodwin wrote, "Our love and sexuality are not mutually exclusive... We have at times been careless, but we were never immoral."⁸⁶ This was reflected in the writings of Cindy Patton as well. These writers' experiences in the women's health movement offered a valuable perspective on community building and responsibility and furthered the conversation on healthcare inequality during the 1980s.

Apart from writing theory, the lesbian community took tangible action to prevent transmission of the virus and care for those who had contracted it. Their knack for organization from previous activist work made them fit to lead their community, and they took on roles as healthcare and social workers.⁸⁷ They also did clerical work, led educational services, and held "caretaking" jobs.⁸⁸ According to Jackie Winnow, the community in San Francisco provided 100 women with AIDS with "housing, childcare, a day-care center, haircuts, a food bank, massage, counselling, meals, and other support services."⁸⁹ They also had experience in the mental health profession and nursing, and many of them volunteered to work with AIDS patients at San Francisco General Hospital when other healthcare workers declined to treat them out of fear of getting sick.⁹⁰ The

⁸¹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 11-12.

⁸² Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 236.

⁸³ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 243.

⁸⁴ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 244.

⁸⁵ Stewart and Rappaport, "Narrative Insurrections," 61.

⁸⁶ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 245.

⁸⁷ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 4.

⁸⁸ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 275-276.

⁸⁹ Winnow, "Lesbians Evolving Health Care," 68.

⁹⁰ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 18.

Lesbian Caucus of the Harvey Milk AIDS Education Fund held multiple blood drives between 1983 and 1987. Their flyers read "Our PWA's Need Blood," "Our Boys Need Blood," and "Lesbians: Help Solve an Urgent Crisis in Our Community."⁹¹ There was a multi-organization civil disobedience demonstration from the Women and AIDS Action Alliance to protest the silence about women with AIDS, and the flyer was printed in both English and Spanish.⁹² Each of these activities was undertaken by lesbians who had formed organizations such as the Women's Aids Network in San Francisco in 1982.⁹³ However, this passionate involvement and knowledge did not stop popular, male-led organizations from undermining their service and denying the risks that lesbians faced during the epidemic.⁹⁴

The lesbian community experienced their own internal ideological struggles, and a small number of lesbian separatists did not see HIV/AIDS as a women's issue worth fighting for.⁹⁵ Separatists were also hesitant to participate because they had either experienced or feared experiencing sexism from gay men.⁹⁶ Until the AIDS epidemic, the gay and lesbian communities were not united, and separatists were not used to working alongside men.⁹⁷ However, this was not a universal experience for lesbians, and many of them did not report being discriminated against by gay men.⁹⁸ Lesbian activists had a stake in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Apart from being in a broad community with gay men, some of them lost close friends to AIDS. Although some critics believed that working with AIDS would divide the lesbian community, activists continued to organize in the name of Civil Rights and gay liberation.

Another issue with lesbian separatism was that HIV/AIDS did affect many women, even though their health was not considered. Between 1981 and 1987, around four thousand women were diagnosed with AIDS, and that number rose

⁹¹ "Blood Drives," 1983–1987, item 9/12, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "Blood Drives," 1983–1987, item 10/12, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "Blood Drives," 1983–1987, item 12/12, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁹² "Women and AIDS," circa 1983–2000, item 12/26, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "Women and AIDS," circa 1983–2000, item 13/26, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

⁹³ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 277.

⁹⁴ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 278.

⁹⁵ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 21–22.

⁹⁶ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 20.

⁹⁷ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 19.

⁹⁸ Shackelford, "Unsung Heroes," 11.

to over twenty-five thousand by the early 1990s.⁹⁹ The women represented in these statistics primarily contracted AIDS through heterosexual contact, and women who engaged in sex work were also a high-risk group.¹⁰⁰ Class, too, contributed to infection rates and access to medical care, and the wage gap between men and women increased the class divide and, therefore, the risk.¹⁰¹ Concurrently, HIV/AIDS did not only affect heterosexual women. Lesbians were not immune to transmission, and many activists came across HIV-positive lesbians.¹⁰² Some may have developed HIV/AIDS through injection-drug use or blood transfusions.¹⁰³ However, there also existed the issue of "coming out," which similarly affected gay men. Some closeted lesbians participated in sex with men, putting them at risk for the virus and leading to improper representation in the statistics. Although lesbians had a low chance of transmitting the virus through sexual activity and contracted it less than men did, HIV/AIDS was still a women's issue worth fighting for, regardless of sexual orientation.

The radical lesbian activists in San Francisco were remarkably responsive to the needs of women of color. Although they did not always occupy the same spaces, their movements crossed over often, and white lesbian activists learned much of their strategies from women of color.¹⁰⁴ They educated themselves with materials from feminist activists and integrated their tactics and rhetoric into their organizational work with HIV/AIDS.¹⁰⁵ The radical lesbian activists who participated in anti-war efforts were also fighting for the sexual liberties of gay people of color in countries outside of the United States.¹⁰⁶ However, this solidarity in lesbian activist spaces did not alleviate the struggles that women of color were facing in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and black women were dying of AIDS nine times more often than white women in the 1980s.¹⁰⁷ Diane K. Lewis theorizes that this high rate of infection is a direct result of "a government policy of disruption of social services and neglect" in the black community.¹⁰⁸ She also outlines the effects of poverty and injection-drug use in San Francisco on these statistics.¹⁰⁹ Although AIDS may have affected women who were not injection-drug users, they could have encountered male sexual partners who were. The

⁹⁹ "HIV and AIDS—United States, 1981–2000," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, June 1, 2001, [online](#).

¹⁰⁰ Murphy, "Women with Aids," 72.

¹⁰¹ Murphy, "Women with Aids," 76.

¹⁰² Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 224.

¹⁰³ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 225.

¹⁰⁴ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 57.

¹⁰⁸ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Schneider and Stoller, *Women Resisting AIDS*, 61.

government's intentional silence on the health of women and people of color exacerbated this issue, and prevention strategies for women lagged behind the already delayed response to men's health in the crisis. They did not prioritize research about the early signs of AIDS for women, and clinical trials for treatment favored wealthy white men.¹¹⁰ As a result, lesbian HIV/AIDS activists had to fight for the visibility of underrepresented communities during the epidemic and challenged both the medical community and the government's notion that HIV/AIDS was not a concern for women.

VI. HIV/AIDS Activism by People of Color

Although AIDS disproportionately affected people of color, particularly the black community, they did not receive the same media attention, support from the gay community, financial support, or medical care. By the second year of the epidemic, the black community accounted for 20% of AIDS cases in the United States.¹¹¹ In 1983, Latinx people represented 14% of reported HIV cases.¹¹² The primary reason for their underrepresentation was the media's portrayal of AIDS as a disease of white gay men. Despite being represented in statistics, they were overshadowed in the social understanding of the epidemic. As previously indicated, AIDS research, including clinical trials for medication and treatment, primarily catered to white male subjects. Furthermore, the combination of racism and homophobia they experienced prevented them from being open about their sexuality, and they lacked the visibility of "out" white men.¹¹³ This helps explain the fact why many AIDS cases among people of color were self-identified heterosexuals and closeted men. The conservatism and structural racism of the Reagan administration reinforced the government's historical oppression of people of color.¹¹⁴ There was an air of distrust for the medical community, which had a long history of ignoring their health. Although the Shanti Project was praised for its volunteer work with AIDS patients, people of color did experience overt racism from some of its employees.¹¹⁵

Within the gay community, they also experienced marginalization, even though they shared the experience of being oppressed for their sexuality. According to Jennifer Brier, some of the major gay community organizations themselves "relied on a white gay identity as a universal model for gayness" and neglected the needs of people of color.¹¹⁶ Some gay men's inability to come out

¹¹⁰ Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 159.

¹¹¹ "30 Years of HIV in African American Communities: A Timeline," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2011, [online](#).

¹¹² "30 Years of HIV in Hispanic/Latino Communities: A Timeline," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2011, [online](#).

¹¹³ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 52.

¹¹⁶ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 47.

also prevented their participation in openly gay spaces. One of the largest organizations, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, was largely staffed by white men who were not equipped to understand the intersection of race in the epidemic, even though 24% of its clients were people of color.¹¹⁷ The S.F.A.F. attempted to correct their lack of diversity by hiring more diverse staff members in the mid-to-late 1980s, but their outreach campaigns still received indifference because their messages were not relatable, and some of their marketing language was offensive.¹¹⁸

In response to their lack of representation, or misrepresentation, by white-led organizations, gay men of color initiated their own outreach efforts. The Third World AIDS Advisory Task Force (T.W.A.A.T.F.), which was formed in 1985, was inclusive of all races. Their staff members were well versed on the effects that economics, incarceration, and drugs had on the transmission of AIDS.¹¹⁹ They worked alongside other organizations, including the Latino Coalition on AIDS and the Black Coalition on AIDS, to reach more people.¹²⁰ The T.W.A.A.T.F.'s 1985 brochure used inclusive language that was explicitly designed for women, black, Latinx, Asian, and indigenous queer people. The T.W.A.A.T.F. also held demonstrations and conferences with other AIDS organizations. On April 1, 1989, they helped organize the "People of Color Mobilizing Against AIDS" march.¹²¹ The flyer, printed in both English and Spanish, stated, "AIDS does not discriminate! AIDS can be stopped through education, prevention, and treatment!"

The National Task Force on AIDS Prevention (N.T.F.A.P.), a branch of the organization Black and White Men Together, stands out for its effectiveness. It was initially formed in 1985 by Calu Lester and Reggie Williams.¹²² According to their published mission statement, their goal was to create partnerships with other organizations, conduct research, and provide educational workshops.¹²³ It also stated that "all AIDS education plans...have to be culturally sensitive and appropriately targeted to our communities—even to specific segments within our

¹¹⁷ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 63.

¹¹⁸ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 63–64.

¹¹⁹ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 48.

¹²⁰ Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 60.

¹²¹ "People of Color and AIDS," circa 1988–1994, item 9/18, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "People of Color and AIDS," circa 1988–1994, item 10/18, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

¹²² "History, Goals and Objectives," 1988–1990, item 6/20, The National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

¹²³ "History, Goals and Objectives," 1988–1990, item 2/20, The National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "History, Goals and Objectives," 1988–1990, item 3/20, The National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

communities." The N.T.F.A.P. aimed to gather volunteers, conduct surveys, and develop a prevention model. However, organizations such as the N.T.F.A.P. initially struggled to gain funding.¹²⁴ Although they received a \$1 million CDC grant that would be spread out over five years, federal funding often restricted their actions and their messaging.¹²⁵ This was in part due to the Helms Amendment, which stated that federally funded programs could not use sexually explicit advertising and should promote abstinence.¹²⁶ After appealing to Nancy Pelosi, the N.T.F.A.P. became classified as a nonprofit, which made it easier to obtain funding.¹²⁷

Despite these struggles, the N.T.F.A.P. successfully advocated for gay men of color in San Francisco. Like many community-based organizations, they began releasing their own pamphlets on AIDS. One was titled "Black Community at Risk."¹²⁸ This pamphlet contained information on how AIDS is spread, corrected misinformation about transmission, and listed the warning signs of AIDS. It also included the address and phone number of their AIDS Education Unit in San Francisco. This unit offered presentations, socials, safe-sex workshops, information about legal services, educational materials, and volunteer programs. The N.T.F.A.P. organized a workshop called "Hot, Horny and Healthy!" that was open to everyone but were designed for gay and bisexual men of color.¹²⁹ They held support groups and organized retreats to include members in their planning process. The Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, as well as the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization, worked alongside the N.T.F.A.P. to hold conferences and develop joint outreach programs. Lastly, they distributed condoms at gay bars that men of color frequented and created informational video kiosks. After the loss of their leader, Reggie Williams, to AIDS in 1999, the organization unfortunately declined due to internal struggles.¹³⁰ However, it was a model for addressing the intersection of race and class in community care during the AIDS epidemic, which white-led organizations struggled to confront.

Conclusion

The responsibility for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in San Francisco during the first decade of the epidemic fell largely on the shoulders of the gay

¹²⁴ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 8.

¹²⁵ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 49.

¹²⁶ Padamsee, "Fighting an Epidemic," 1007.

¹²⁷ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 67.

¹²⁸ "African American Communities," 1988-1990, item 1/93, National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#). "African American Communities," 1988-1990, item 2/93, National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

¹²⁹ "History, Goals and Objectives," 1988-1990, item 4/20, The National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, *Calisphere*, [online](#).

¹³⁰ Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole*, 71-72.

community. The federal government remained intentionally silent on the crisis due to their prejudices toward marginalized risk groups. Until they were personally affected by the deaths of their own, officials did not act in a timely manner. This resulted in thousands of lives being lost, and by the time they offered aid, it was restrictive and ineffective. The government of San Francisco responded much sooner than the federal government and even appealed to the president to help. They allocated money and resources to education and care, built the first AIDS unit at San Francisco General Hospital, and supported major activist organizations. However, some of their approaches restricted the liberties of the gay community. As a result, the gay community carried much of the burden of caring for the public. They led prevention campaigns, raised money, held demonstrations, and volunteered in healthcare. The white male community organizations had their own shortcomings and often excluded people of color, women, and lesbians from their organizing. In response, women, lesbians, and people of color led their own organizations and initiatives to reach a larger audience with comprehensive education and community care initiatives. Although they are commonly left out of the narrative of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, these groups played a crucial role in caring for their communities and preventing the spread of AIDS.

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