



# The Future of Bisexual Activism

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In 1990, “The Bisexual Manifesto” was published in a new periodical dedicated to the bisexual community, *Anything That Moves*.<sup>1</sup> Written collaboratively by participants in the Bay Area Bisexual Network, the publisher of the periodical, the manifesto has stood the test of time as a representation of the collective consciousness of the bisexual community:

We are tired of being analyzed, defined and represented by people other than ourselves, or worse yet, not considered at all. We are frustrated by the imposed isolation and invisibility that comes from being told or expected to choose either a homosexual or heterosexual identity.

Monosexuality is a heterosexist dictate used to oppress homosexuals and to negate the validity of bisexuality.

Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we have “two” sides or that we must be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don’t assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility, or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity, or unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits that cross all sexual orientations. Nothing should be assumed about anyone’s sexuality, including your own.

We are angered by those who refuse to accept our existence; our issues; our contributions; our alliances; our voice. It is time for the bisexual voice to be heard.<sup>2</sup>

The frustration of the bisexual activists of the time is clear in this text. They faced monosexism, being told bi equals two equals male and female, and fought against stereotypes. They felt marginalized, ignored, and silenced.

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For the purposes of this article, “bisexual” includes all people with the capacity to be sexually and/or romantically attracted to more than one gender while acknowledging that individuals may use other labels to express the great diversity of possibilities within this definition. The bisexual community is made up of all those who meet this definition, whether they participate in the community or not and regardless of the personal label they choose to use, if any.

Since the publication of “The Bisexual Manifesto,” many significant changes have occurred in the legal and social landscape, which led the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) to conclude:

Since the 1980s, Americans have grown more supportive of LGBT people and their equality. Today, overwhelming majorities of the general public favor non-discrimination laws, inclusive hate crime laws, comprehensive anti-bullying laws, and relationship recognition for gay and lesbian couples. In addition, states and cities across the country have successfully enacted laws that are improving the lives of LGBT people.<sup>3</sup>

The issues mentioned by MAP have all been marquee ones for the LGBT community, with many organizations spending years on legal, political, and grassroots actions to bring these changes about. However, none of the advancements address bi-specific issues.

Any casual review of any online discussion of the bisexual community, as well as more formal surveys, shows that today’s bisexual activists face many of the same issues that were written about in 1990.<sup>4</sup> How do the general changes in the LGBT community affect the work of bisexual activists, if indeed there has been any change at all? And where should bisexual activists go from here?

## ))) Defining the Bisexual Activist

No discussion of the bisexual community can occur without addressing the issue of labels. In the 1800s, “bisexual” referred to people we would now call “intersex.” Over the course of the twentieth century, “bisexual” came to mean people who were attracted to both men and women. With the rise of transgender activism, the bisexual community embraced the fluidity of both gender and sexuality. As “The Bisexual Manifesto” makes clear, the modern bisexual community recognizes the multiplicity of genders.

“Bisexual” is the most commonly recognized word to describe someone attracted to more than one gender. It is the term used most often in the names of organizations, in surveys, and by researchers. Misunderstandings persist about

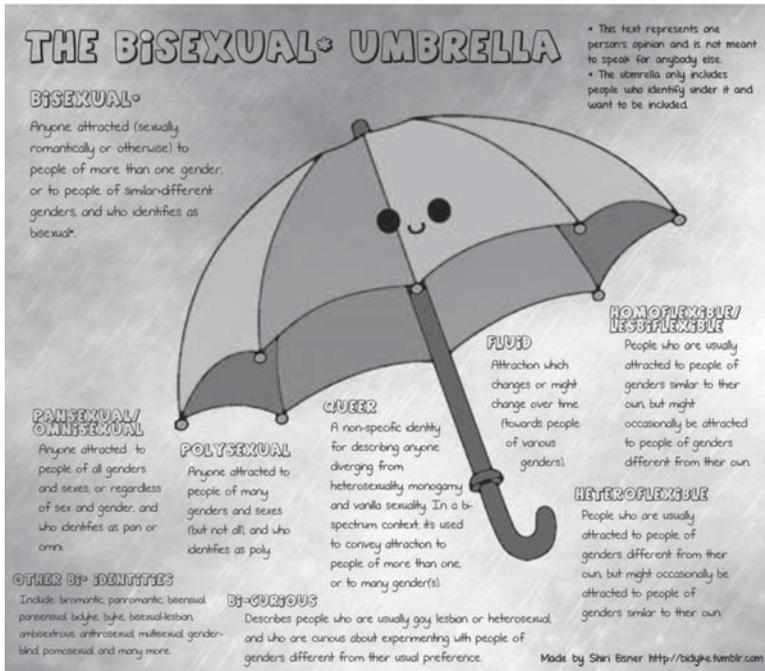


Figure 1. The Bisexual Umbrella<sup>3</sup>

the meaning of the word, the most common of which is that since “bi-” means “two,” it must refer to male and female. However, the “bi-” in “bisexual” refers to “self” and “other.” This usage is more in keeping with bisexual being part of a spectrum that includes heterosexual and homosexual, since the prefixes “hetero-” and “homo-” indicate “different from” and “same as.”

Many people have found that the word “bisexual” itself does not include enough nuances to describe their personal identity. The result has been a multitude of labels, each subtly different but all describing ways in which an individual may be attracted to more than one gender. Although individuals may vary in their choice of personal identity labels, there is still a need to form community and be able to identify like-minded people. To this end, there is a growing movement to use bisexual as the community label—or umbrella term—illustrated in Figure 1.

This unity under a single term for organizing community, political, and social justice work is what will give the bisexual community strength in the future. As

more survey and research data is collected on gay, lesbian, and bisexual populations separately, a unifying term will become even more important. Although knowledgeable researchers may try to apportion people who choose “other” into useful categories, the choice of “other” does not provide as powerful a story as being willing to be grouped under a community label that is commonly understood and already in use by larger institutions.

However, the bisexual community and bisexual activists must continue to honor the use of personal labels as a way of empowering individual identities and allowing for more nuanced conversation within the bisexual community. Acknowledging the huge variation of sexual and romantic expression within the bisexual community honors its traditions of inclusion and acceptance. In addition, “queer” is associated strongly with bi youth, bi people of color, and the trans community, all of which are unrepresented at the organizational level. Bi activists may find that being inclusive of intersectional bi identities will necessitate using more community terms in the future.

Having addressed what “bisexual” is for the purpose of this article leads to the question: What is a bisexual activist? Everyone has their own image of what an activist is. In the current bisexual community, activists come in many types, but they are all focused on the same idea: taking action to effect change to benefit the bisexual community.

Action may mean direct action such as marches, rallies, or protests—legally sanctioned or not. Other activists concentrate on community organizing by creating opportunities for bisexuals and allies to come together to build community through shared meals, community projects, or activities. Activists may work to change attitudes and policies in existing power structures from the inside, or they may create new institutions for specific purposes such as education, research, or providing direct services to the community. Activists may work alone or as part of an organization. Although this is a wide definition of “activist,” it allows a discussion of the future path of people trying to effect change as opposed to the future of the bisexual community in general.

### ))) What Are Bi-Specific Needs?

The bisexual community has specific needs that are not addressed by general LGBT activism. It is only in recent years that data on bisexuals has been gathered separately from data on lesbian, gay, and transgender people. Even the small amount of data available now points to significant needs in the bi community that will not be addressed without bi-specific activism.

Bisexuals have significant mental and physical health disparities compared to gay, lesbian, and straight people.<sup>6</sup> Current survey data leads researchers to identify biphobia and bi erasure as two of the main causes of health disparities for the bisexual community.<sup>7</sup> Bi erasure is when a person's bisexual identity is ignored or explained away, often by using the person's current or most recent partner as the definitive indicator of the person's sexual orientation.<sup>8</sup> On surveys of mental health, bisexuals have significantly higher rates of substance abuse, anxiety, and depression.<sup>9</sup>

Fear of discrimination prevents many bisexuals from being out at work, to friends and family, or to health-care providers. Bisexuals are less likely to be out at work than their gay and lesbian counterparts: 49 percent of bisexuals are not out to any coworkers, as opposed to 24 percent of gays and lesbians.<sup>10</sup> Being closeted has well-documented negative impacts on mental and physical health and is a contributing factor to the health disparities experienced by bisexuals.

Stereotypes of bisexual women as promiscuous and hypersexual contribute to the high rate of rape reported: 46 percent of bisexual women report having been raped versus 14.7 percent of straight women and 13.1 percent of lesbians.<sup>11</sup> Stereotypes of bisexuals as indecisive or unable to commit are believed to contribute to difficulties with career advancement and professional recognition.<sup>12</sup>

Since negative stereotypes of bisexuals are at least as pervasive in gay and lesbian communities as they are among straight people, bisexuals often have difficulty finding safe spaces to share experiences or spend time with like-minded people. The bisexual community was left behind by lesbian and gay communities, and the scars are still fresh.

### ))) Community History: Where the Future Is Rooted

Bisexual activists have always been a part of modern LGBT history, but their sexual orientation is often overlooked or mislabeled. In a report on bisexual invisibility in 2011, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission observed, “[m]any gays and lesbians have accused bisexuals of trying to ‘ride their coattails.’ In fact, bisexuals have often been leaders in the movement.”<sup>13</sup> Bi invisibility is rooted in assumptions made about people in the LGBT community: men are assumed to be gay, women are assumed to be lesbians, and people with opposite-gendered partners are assumed to be straight allies. All of these assumptions erase the presence of bisexuals in narratives of all types.

In addition to working in LGBT organizations, bisexuals have a rich history of their own organizations and resources. In the 1970s and 1980s, bi activism

included the founding of a number of bi organizations and starting publications by, for, and about bisexuals and bisexuality. Significant effort and time were also put into gaining acknowledgement and acceptance in lesbian and gay organizations, which were making social and legal progress of their own. Unfortunately, the gay community promoted “gay” as the only appropriate identity label, while separatist feminism had a strong impact on the lesbian community, making bisexual women unwelcome in many lesbian spaces. In these and many other ways bisexuals were made to feel invisible or unwanted in spaces that many felt should be safe.

With the addition of more publications, regional gatherings, and national meetings, the bisexual community had a growing, unified voice by the late 1980s. However, the community could be hard to find, particularly if you lived outside a few large urban areas such as New York, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, or Minneapolis. The 1990s saw an increase in groups specifically organized for the bisexual community and its allies—organizations that still operate today. Books written by bisexuals for bisexuals became more readily available; with the publishing of *By Any Other Name* in 1991, bisexuals everywhere could read the stories of other bisexuals and not feel so isolated.

By the early 1990s, the addition of “bisexual” to gay and lesbian organization names was on the rise. A lot of energy in the 1990s was spent trying to get equal respect for bisexuals inside of existing LGBT organizations. Unfortunately, most additions were in name only. Even though most organizations listed “B” and “T” in their names or their mission statements by the late 1990s, the messaging and programming was still centered on gay and lesbian identities and goals.

With the beginning of the millennium, gays and lesbians were gaining more societal acceptance. The “just like you except in the bedroom” marketing of marriage equality was gaining traction. As mainstream acceptance of gays and lesbians increased, the gay and lesbian community’s tolerance for bi and trans individuals decreased. Perceived as having “complicated” stories, bisexual and transgender stories and identities were routinely set aside in favor of good polling numbers and simple soundbites. LGBT people of color and working-class people were among other demographics that were erased in favor of attractive marketing campaigns.

Bisexuals working in LGBT organizations often faced barriers to leadership positions and rampant mistrust if they claimed their bi identity. In surveys of bisexuals about bi erasure and biphobia, people are clear that they find it everywhere. However, it is within LGBT organizations that the discrimination cuts the deepest. The places that should be safe aren’t, so the bisexual community has begun to construct its own institutions.

It is also in the 2000s that data started to be collected on the bisexual community separately from lesbian, gay, and trans communities. Social media allowed bis across the country and around the world to connect and provide peer support. The rise of blogging gave bi thought leaders a platform for sharing ideas. Self-publishing and podcasts become two more channels to reach isolated bis and connect organizations. Bi erasure became more difficult as access to data increased and the bi community established a stronger online presence.

### ))) Current Gains

Engagement by governmental and LGBT organizational leaders with bisexual thought leaders and the bisexual community is increasing. In 2013, bisexual leaders were invited to the White House for briefings with staff regarding bi-specific issues. White House engagement continues, and in 2014, for the first time, a bisexual leader stood behind the president as he signed an executive order. These are important markers of official recognition not only of the bisexual community but also of the need to engage with bisexual activists.

The National Institutes of Health has approached leaders in bisexual health about funding for meetings with community members and researchers with the goal of addressing health disparities experienced by bisexuals. Social networks of bisexuals and allies have increasing traction with media outlets and have been speaking out against biphobic articles and harmful media representations of bisexuality. After many years of engagement, in 2013, GLAAD adopted media guidelines drafted by the bisexual community and has become an advocate for bi inclusion and bi-positive reporting.

In the United States, the organizations dedicated to the bisexual community are three 501(c)(3) nonprofits, a few long-standing community groups, and many smaller community organizations that are largely dependent on a few dedicated individuals to keep them going. Even now, a limited number of LGBT organizations offer programming aimed at the bisexual community, and what programming is offered is usually limited to formal or informal discussion groups. Although the *Bisexual Community Needs Assessment 2012* made clear that bisexuals need more community spaces, decreasing the disparities experienced by bisexuals will require additional programming, research, and support as well.<sup>14</sup>

Two more organizations are working on their 501(c)(3) status, and the networking between leaders and organizations has increased. The Bisexual Leadership Roundtable was formed in 2013, providing a way for national leaders and activists to stay in touch about local, regional, and national work.

All of this progress in the past few years sets up bi activism for the next stage. An important part of bi activism has always been providing community connections and support. However, the bi community needs so much more. That will only come with better funded, more stable organizations committed to improving the lives of all bisexuals.

## ))) Vision of the Future

The future of bisexual activism is rooted in bisexual community history and will be supported by the advancements made in the past few years. However, bisexual activism has to move beyond improving bi visibility and looking for acceptance from the rest of the LGBT community.

The future of bisexual activism must be grounded in a few basic ideas:

- First, bi activists must embrace the intersectionality of the bisexual community, ensuring everyone benefits from positive changes as they are made.
- Second, bisexual organizations and activists must position themselves as strong partners when working in coalition with both LGBT and non-LGBT organizations.
- Third, bisexual activism needs to operate within a social justice framework with the larger goal of creating a just and equitable society.

Success can be measured in many ways; however, it is imperative that bisexual activism make measurable progress toward decreasing the health and social disparities experienced by bisexual individuals.

There is a lot of groundwork to be laid to be able to move into this future. Bisexual activism will need to educate communities and institutions to give them an understanding of the specific needs of bisexuals and the bisexual community. Small advancements in this area have shown that when effective, education leads to greater engagement from foundations, governmental agencies, and large nonprofit grantors as well as community organizations and employers. In addition, there is a need to develop other types of bi organizations such as foundations for bi-specific philanthropy and 501(c)4s and PACs for political impact.

As bi organizing moves into the larger arenas of national activism and governmental engagement, there will continue to be a need for local and regional activism. Work at local and regional levels supports individual bisexuals through creating community, providing important community research and programming, and being a first point of contact for outreach and education.

## ))) The Challenge and Opportunity in Intersectional Identities

The bi community has significant overlap with other marginalized communities, which creates both challenges and opportunities. People who identify as part of the bisexual community are more likely to be people of color than in the gay, lesbian, or straight communities.<sup>15</sup> Many people in the trans community are attracted to more than one gender. The bi community also has significant overlap with communities such as polyamorous, swinger, and kink.

Although people may be active members of multiple communities, it seems that most people put their volunteer time and activist energy toward one identity at a time. This is a challenge for bi activism. Members of the bi community need to be educated about the need to be an active part of the community and why it is as important as being an active part of the other communities to which they belong. In interview surveys, there is a repeated theme of bisexuals in committed relationships not feeling a need to be a part of the bisexual community, nor feeling a need for one. However, building and empowering a community is very important for the advancement of social, legal, and political change. In addition, local community provides an easily contacted resource for newly out bisexuals to get information and for all bisexuals to have safe space to be themselves.

The opportunity offered by the many intersectional identities in the bisexual community is twofold. First, the bisexual activist community can gain activists who have valuable experience working on other issues. Second, these intersectional identities create opportunities for strong coalitions with other communities.

Cultural competency for bi activists will need to be a priority so bisexuals with other marginalized identities are fully included in the work. Bisexual activists cannot afford to whitewash bisexual issues or make the mistakes of second-wave feminism, where class and race divided the movement. Bi activists must do the hard work of being inclusive of all the identities bisexuals encompass. This will require that individuals as well as organizations educate themselves about white privilege, class discrimination, ableism, and male privilege, among others, and move forward with a strong social justice foundation for all their work.

## ))) Social Justice in the Bisexual Community

Social justice work is based on the acknowledgement of the structural advantages some people have due to factors not under their control, such as

race, gender, or sexual orientation, as well as factors that can be changed but may be beyond the resources of an individual, such as education or socioeconomic class.

Social justice work seeks to address structural barriers to opportunity. It is a huge scope of work, and most organizations working for social justice do so within a narrower mission. Bisexual organizations are by definition social justice organizations because they work to improve the lives and opportunities of people who are marginalized because they are bisexual. However, the work of empowering the bi community in a social justice framework means looking beyond the issue of bisexuality to see how bisexuals are marginalized because of factors other than their bisexuality and working to address those forces, both within the bi community and elsewhere.

### ))) Partners in Activism

As bi activists move into the future, they will continue to find common cause and mutual support with the trans community. The way in which the two communities challenge traditional understandings of the role of gender in relationships and the importance of gender identity in social structure is nothing less than radical. Although some people create distrust between the bi and trans communities, the reality is that both communities challenge traditional understandings of binary gender and often find themselves unwelcome and misunderstood in LGBT settings. Future activism together will give both communities strength.

Although many LGBT organizations are more open to dialogue with bi activists than at any time in the past, bi activists must look beyond LGBT organizations for future partners. Entrenched biphobia makes the work of educating LGBT organizations a significant project in itself, but there are also other partners and resources available to bi activists outside the LGBT community.

Bi leaders have started to work with non-LGBT organizations as part of a larger national discussion of social justice and equity in our society. Just as the marriage equality movement succeeded at the ballot box in Minnesota by creating a coalition that included religious, civic, and business organizations, so too bi activists need to form connections with organizations and communities that recognize the need to decrease the health disparities and social discrimination experienced by bisexuals.

))) **Barriers to Activism**

Because of the demographics of the bisexual community, it lacks many resources. Higher levels of poverty mean lower levels of personal discretionary funds and a need to focus time and energy on ensuring basic needs are met.<sup>16</sup> Bisexuals are more likely to have children, which decreases available time, energy, and money for nonprofit groups or even for participating in community.<sup>17</sup> High numbers of individuals with depression and anxiety take their toll on volunteerism.<sup>18</sup>

One of the largest challenges currently facing bisexual leadership is a lack of paid staff. Currently, there are no individuals either within bisexual organizations or within LGBT organizations who are known to be paid to work full-time supporting the bisexual community. This lack of staff creates three types of problems for activists.

First, trying to create and maintain relationships with large, staffed organizations and with governmental agencies is hard with all-volunteer organizations. Work schedules don't match up, time and funds for travel or meetings are all carved out of personal resources, and decision making can be a slower process in a community organization. Staffed organizations are aware of the limitations of all-volunteer organizations and may be reluctant to engage fully with them.

Second, the programming capacity of all-volunteer organizations, no matter how well organized or led, is limited compared to the impact staffed organizations can have. All-volunteer organizations are dependent on the time and talents available from volunteers, and they tend to center around one or two dedicated individuals in each organization. This structure is fragile and prone to loss of institutional knowledge as well as unpredictable follow-through on plans as the life circumstances of key volunteers change.

Finally, a lack of paid staff also affects the funding sources available to organizations. The stability of day-to-day operations implied by paid staff makes it easier to qualify for larger grants. In some cases, having a paid staff is a requirement to even apply. Grantors and foundations carefully check potential grantees. Organizations must be stable with a proven track record of successful programming with measurable outcomes. This type of tracking and reporting is not common in all-volunteer organizations. Rarely do these groups have the resources for recording attendance at every event, surveying participants, and writing the reports necessary to show stability and fiscal responsibility. Grants usually require organizations to be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a nonprofit, such as a 501(c)(3). The 501(c)(3) status requires annual reporting to the IRS and certain responsibilities and liabilities for the directors that can be a burden for small organizations.

Marginalized communities survive on grant funding. Although there are some models being developed independent of the granting system, grants are still the way most nonprofit organizations fund a significant amount of their programming. There is currently a lack of granting opportunities for bi-specific programming. Some grantors do not recognize that the bisexual community needs specific programming and so do not put out bi-specific requests for proposals (RFPs), which drive the granting process. In 2012, of the \$19.5 million granted for LGBTQ funding, less than 1 percent (\$452,251) was granted for bi-specific programming. It is worth noting that almost \$440,000 of those grants were awarded by the American Bisexual Institute to fund research.<sup>19</sup>

Besides staffing and funding, bisexual organizations need to be able to work in coalition with other organizations, many of which represent other marginalized communities. Working with other marginalized communities has unique challenges. Participants need to educate themselves about each other to limit micro-aggressions. Trust has to be built between individuals and between organizations. People come to the table with pain; as one pithy saying goes, “hurt people hurt people.” Who is in the role of ally, and who is in the role of being supported when everyone is disenfranchised? Who sets the cultural tone of working groups when multiple marginalized identities are represented at the table? These are not new questions for coalition leaders, but they need to be answered within the context of bisexual activism. Among all the other cultural issues to navigate, regional differences across the United States mean there is no “one size fits all” solution to describe how marginalized communities collaborate.

## ))) Building Strong Supports for Activism

There are four key elements needed to move bi activism forward. First, there needs to be a better understanding by grantors and other institutions about the needs of the bisexual community. Second, the bi community needs to have organizational structures in place to allow grantors and institutions to work effectively with bisexual organizations. Third, bi individuals need to understand where and how they can get involved as activists and why it is important to do so. Fourth, there must be high-quality research on the bi community to identify needs and provide evidence about the disparities experienced by bisexuals.

Bi activists will need to build on the current progress being made with large LGBT organizations and the U.S. government. Training in bi cultural competency needs to become a requirement for directors, leaders, and staff so everyone is on the same page about bi-specific needs and the appropriate ways to engage

the bisexual community. Bi activists need to continue working to build credibility with these institutions in order to be involved in cultural competency training and providing expertise on topics related to the bisexual community. This expertise and training are available now, and some organizations are beginning to engage. However, many organizations still do not understand there are bi-specific issues, much less why they need to engage with the bisexual community or provide funding and support for bi-specific programming.

Although working with other organizations on joint programming is important, securing funding for bi organizations to support activism is crucial. As discussed above, the bisexual community has many challenges related to funding because of the structure of bisexual organizations. Even as the bi community moves forward as a volunteer-focused, community-driven movement, organizations must gain the financial stability to support paid staff and fund community gatherings.

One type of education that needs to happen is within the bi community. In all communities, there are individuals who see a need to form and participate in community events and those who don't. People who do not perceive the need for community often depend on friends and chosen family for personal support. However, it is only by forming a strong community that bisexuals can effect wider change. Bisexual activists need to cultivate an understanding of the importance of community organizing and participation in order to strengthen existing organizations and build new ones. Conferences and other types of community gatherings are one way to work toward this understanding.

The final piece of building strong structures is community research. Although there has been research on bisexuals, too much has focused on the question of whether bisexuality is real and not enough on the needs of bisexual-identified people. Most general survey research lumps LGBT together as a single data point, masking the differing experiences of each community. Even when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender data are collected separately, the quality of the questions, the methodology, and the definitions used within the survey can skew data so it is less useful. By making sure the community is engaged with researchers, many of these problems can be reduced or eliminated.

### ))) Moving Forward

The future of bisexual activism will require a new set of skills, a new level of organizational commitment, and a broad vision. However, it builds on both a rich history of an inclusive community and a new commitment by activists to

national coordination and leadership. Bisexual activists will be creating more types of organizations to support this work, including political fundraising organizations, research institutions, and foundations. Although this vision is ambitious, the energy, momentum, and expertise present in the bisexual community today provides just the place to begin such an ambitious undertaking.

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