Negotiating Sexual Citizenship: Lesbians and reproductive health care

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Presentation overview

- Sexual citizenship in a comparative perspective
- Lesbian experiences of reproductive healthcare spaces
- Policy implications
- Future research
Research sample

- Interviews with 68 lesbian parents in two countries – Sweden and Ireland

- Focus on lesbians who have children in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle - ‘gayby boom’
Lesbian parenting in Sweden

- The registered partnership laws in Sweden specifically prohibited parenting possibilities, including access to NRTs and adoption.

- Lesbian and gay parenting has been a topic of considerable political and media debate since the late 1990s and the laws on adoption and assisted reproduction were recently changed.
**Lesbian parenting in Ireland**

- Currently no possibility for recognition of same sex relationships
- However, possible for lesbians to obtain donor insemination privately
- Lesbian and gay couples recruited as foster carers
The Path to Parenthood

Consequences of spatial exclusion:

‘We had these clinical examinations and I did some x-rays and anyway the next step was an operation, laparoscopy and that’s quite, to me it’s quite a large step and we somehow stopped there and we were talking, discussing and I felt that my drive [...] wasn’t big enough for that step [...] and also there’s legal difficulties in Sweden anyway, you’re not allowed to do IVF, it’s difficult to say now afterwards whether I’d have gone through the whole programme if it had been legalised [...] Maybe I might have, but we were kind of lying every time that we entered the clinic and eh I don’t know.’

- Susanne, Swedish participant
Transnational networks

- Links between different countries through DI and IVF – e.g. Sweden, Denmark, the US, Finland, Russia

- “Isn’t this totally stupid. These little sperms have to travel around the whole world and me too before they will get into me.....”
  – Ylva, Swedish participant
**Necessary subterfuge**

A: Then the next time she [doctor] met me, just me and her and then she said I must ask questions about your social status because [...] she found out in the papers that I was living with a woman and then I had to say that well I lived with a woman in the past and now I lived with Sven

I: And you had to say you were bisexual

A: [...] yes she said because you know it’s forbidden if it turns out that you’re a lesbian and [...] she looked in my eyes and said I want you to be honest now okay and I said yeah [...] and I had to look into her eyes and I hated it because I had to lie and I said of course you want the truth and the truth is I’m bisexual, I have had an affair with a woman for many years and then I met Sven, blah blah blah. Shit and I felt it was, it was horrible, I hated it. But at the same time I hate, I’m forced into this thing because I can’t do anything else and I need this help to understand what’s happening with my body [...] It’s been very hard, and I hate to play this role thing, because I’m always honest

- Anita and Ingela, Swedish participants
**Educating the ‘caring professions’**

- Midwives, nurses and doctors often had little or no awareness of lesbian parenting.

- Participants constantly had to educate medical staff about their needs.

- Participants reported feeling continually stressed about coming out to potentially unsupportive staff.
Assumptions of heterosexuality

‘My experience in the hospital wasn’t great at all in terms of Maeve’s [partner] involvement when I was miscarrying, they didn’t really understand or accept or whatever the fact that she was my partner. I don’t think they quite got it [...] so that was very hard.’

- Gráinne, Irish participant
Assumptions of heterosexuality

‘When we went to the hospital [...] especially one older male doctor [...] we told him that we were both mothers but he didn’t want to see me like a mother, he wanted to see me like Margareta’s [partner] friend. And we didn’t take that discussion then but it doesn’t feel good [...] I will have to fight in some situations I think.’

- Linnea, Swedish participant
Assumptions of Heterosexuality

At the hospital they were saying do you want to call your husband. I said I don’t have a husband, do you want to call your boyfriend, I don’t have a boyfriend [...] and if they had of said do you have a girlfriend, but there was just that and I think I was feeling very vulnerable, I was in pain so I was very like oh bother all of this bother all the straight people like all these questions, questions, questions [...] because I’d had nine months of this you know and em and I was tired of it you know, tired of it all.

- Mairéad, Irish participant
Homophobic discrimination and heteronormative expectations

‘I felt there was one [midwife] that was a bit moralistic [...] she was giving out to me about pushing [...] I’d been pushing for hours and I was getting very tired [...] no matter what I was doing I couldn’t push him out [...] she [midwife] was tired and stressed but there was a touch, just a touch moralistic about it, this shouldn’t be happening anyway, you know lesbians.’

- Aisling, Irish participant
Homophobic discrimination and heteronormative expectations

‘When I was really bad I felt like I’m going to hang myself or throw myself out of the window or something [...] and then when I called to this helpline, this nurse who was answering, she was really really homophobic and [...] she almost dropped the phone when I told her that I was living with Annika [partner] and I felt like this you know, I really needed help and she asked with really, she was so you know scared or upset or whatever, so she almost screamed ‘and where is the father’ you know and like, and I said he is, I know who he is and he is here and all this but he can’t help me with this. And then she just said that you should have thought of that before, she said to me. She was really a pain in the ass, really. After that phonecall I felt like I’m going to jump, I felt so bad.’

- Ulrika, Swedish participant
Homophobic discrimination and heteronormative expectations

‘He didn’t announce, it was just suddenly he’d stand there in the door and I was trying to sleep and I was bleeding and the milk was…and he just came in and sat down for hours and talked about other things, his private life and…I didn’t have the strength, he wasn’t that close to us. He was the father to her [child] but he wasn’t that close to me, he wasn’t my husband. [...] But because he was the father to her he was always welcome and [...] you [partner] should be the one who is always welcome and he should have this special time of the day when visitors come. [...] The hospital didn’t do wrong but it made a little bit of a problem because it was a very strange family, they didn’t know how to deal with it. They tried to be nice.

- Åsa, Swedish participant
Future research and policy recommendations

- Sexual health and education in a global perspective
- The needs of lesbian and gay citizens
- Transsexual rights – recognition, healthcare
Conclusions

- Need for improvements in service provision
- Towards an inclusive sexual citizenship