

## Making a Mockery of Family Life? Lesbian Mothers in the British Media

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### ABSTRACT

In Britain, the legal treatment of lesbian mothers and co-parents has improved considerably over the past 15 years (Harne et al, 1997). Despite this, they are still vilified in occasional outbursts in the popular press. This article identifies arguments against lesbian parenting employed in a recent front-page 'fury' article in a British daily tabloid newspaper, The Sun. Encouragingly, of the five arguments about the 'dangers' of lesbian parenting that can be identified in earlier legal battles (such as the 'risk' that children grow up gay, or become 'gender confused'), the only one which this article manages to present very convincingly is that of social stigma. Concern that the children of lesbians may experience name-calling or exclusion is, of course, a problem of discrimination and not a problem that is intrinsic to lesbian parenting (in contrast, say, to an argument about 'the psychology of lesbianism'). The rhetorical force of the piece comes from easily deconstructed journalistic techniques rather than coherent arguments. The sharpest condemnation of these women is actually for having a child whilst on welfare benefits. It is, therefore, economic concerns about 'state dependency', rather than sexuality per se, which fuel the attack. The imagined financial self-sufficiency of heterosexual families which underpins this argument is outdated in its presumption of a bread-winning, male head of household. The fact that two days before the UK's 1997 General Election, the birth of a baby to a lesbian couple was granted front-page coverage is a sobering reminder of the hostility that lesbians still face through the scrutiny of their 'fitness to parent' and the intrusive condemnation of non heterosexual domestic arrangements and relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

This is how the new British book Valued Families: The Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook by Lynne Harne and Rights of Women (The Women's Press, 1997) begins:

There are now far more lesbians openly raising children than at any time in the past. More lesbians are choosing to have children through donor insemination, and the opportunity for lesbians to foster or adopt children has become a reality. Coming out as a lesbian no longer means that the courts automatically regard a mother as unsuitable to bring up her children, and lesbian co-parents can now receive legal recognition of their parenting role. (p xi)

This advice book updates the 1986 edition and shows how much things have changed in Britain over the past ten to fifteen years, from the idea that lesbian mothers were deviant, sexually irresponsible women whose children would grow up 'scarred', might be 'in danger', and were 'at risk of growing up gay' (Harne et al, 1997). It testifies to the progress that has been made as a result of feminist campaign work, and the broader shifts in gender relations and sexual mores in Western cultures. The book asserts with confidence and the support of research findings, that 'being brought up

by lesbian parents can be positively beneficial for children' (p xi). Indeed, some of the researchers whose work has been invaluable for legal practitioners in the UK, such as Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok, are contributors to this Special Issue. Research on the 'outcomes' for children growing up in US lesbian households has been available for longer and is often of larger samples, but courts in the UK do value (even numerically smaller) British studies.

However, despite this good news in the legal sphere, the institution of heterosexuality remains the privileged site of romantic and sexual investments, and the heterosexual nuclear family the privileged site for childrearing. The power of these normative ideas are such that other forms of sexual and familial relationships are belittled, denied or even condemned (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). The British media evinces fury and condemnation in its sporadic outbursts against lesbian mothers and other women whose fitness to mother is deemed questionable (see, for instance, Alldred, 1996). A recent newspaper article in a British daily paper, The Sun, reported 'fury' at the birth of a baby through self-insemination to a lesbian couple. The Sun is Britain's largest circulation national daily newspaper. It is one of the tabloids (as opposed to the 'quality' broadsheets) and is part of Rupert Murdoch's News International conglomerate. The arguments made against lesbian parenting were not specific to this piece, indeed the themes are all too common at various sites throughout Western culture. Such meanings form the context in which lesbians live and love, and into which we publish research, even when some specific academic contexts are less prejudiced. In the light of its contrast with increasing legal recognition and respect shown to lesbian mothers and co-mothers, I will examine this newspaper article thematically, seeing it as a text which is both reflecting and reinforcing certain cultural discourses.

Some of the arguments against lesbian mothering that used to be heard in court - and the offensive questioning of a woman about her sexual practice - might now seem laughable had they not caused such pain to individual women. However, these arguments can still be alluded to, even where they would not be stated explicitly and so can still do damage. This newspaper article is interesting for the disjunction between the passionate language of 'fury' and the paucity of actual objections raised, and the prominence of the piece is remarkable given the events occurring in British politics at the time.

#### FRONT PAGE FURY

The headline 'Lesbians Pay £5 for a Baby' dominated the front page of The Sun on Tuesday, April 29th, 1997. The article was continued on page 4, where it occupied nearly the whole page, and included statements from the women concerned, as well as comment from public figures and the newspaper's resident agony aunt. A third of the editorial on page 6 was devoted to the issue (and the rest was about Tony Blair). Under the heading 'Family Values', it declared that: 'Lesbians advertising for sperm degrade the act of procreation'. It is ironic that a paper which is infamous for its soft-porn photographs of topless 'Page 3 girls [sic]' can simultaneously be so sanctimonious about procreative heterosex. The readers' telephone poll that day also took up this issue, asking readers 'Should lesbians have children?'. (The following day's paper claimed that: 'Sun Readers Want Lesbian Mums Ban', although no figures were given).

In the days before the British General Election of 1st May, 1997, there were confident whispers of a landslide victory for the 'Left of centre' Labour Party, and that the Blairs would replace the Majors as the occupants of 10 Downing Street. In general, British national newspapers have quite blatant political party allegiances which tend to persist over time. However, on the day after the election campaign was declared in March came: 'An historic announcement from Britain's number 1 newspaper: THE SUN BACKS BLAIR: Give change a chance'. The Sun had switched allegiance from the Conservative (or Tory) Party, the Government in power under John Major, to the Labour Party under Tony Blair's leadership as 'New Labour'. The paper swung its full weight behind Blair as the Election Eve edition headline shows: 'Who Blair's Wins: Britain's Crying Out for Him'. It is remarkable, therefore, that two days before an election, at a time of national news abundance and of the paper's own new and passionate editorial message, the issue of lesbian parenting was deemed fit for front-page fury. It is also significant that an article of this tone still has a place after this supposed 'ideological' shift to the Left. I will return to this briefly later.

Underneath the main headline, the sub-header is 'Fury at DIY pregnancy'. In a British context, DIY stands for 'do it yourself'. For some years it has referred to home improvements, but more recently it has been used to describe community activism that eschews conventional politics and services. In each case, 'doing it yourself', is in contrast or preference to having professionals do it. Here it constructs a lesbian woman's pregnancy by self-insemination as amateurish. It implies that the conception is improper because it's outside of institutional or male control (Radford, 1991). As the agony aunt, Deirdre, notes, had they had enough money to pay a private clinic - (the National Health Service had refused Rachel because of her sexuality) - we might never have heard of them. Although they may have been saved this public scrutiny, their desire to parent would have been subjected to the intense professional scrutiny reserved for those who fall outside the 'normal' category of women for whom motherhood is still seen as 'natural' (Marshall, 1991; Morell, 1994). Requesting reproductive services brings a medical gaze upon both desire and 'fitness to parent' that fertile heterosexual couples seldom have to face (Allred, 1996; Woollett, 1991).

Exactly whose 'fury' the headline refers to remains unspecified. However, even unattributed, the word gives the article its tone. As often in tabloid journalism, the headlines promise heights of scandal which the article fails to deliver. Readers' interest is caught and their appetites whet, but many Sun readers must laugh at and mock the often exaggerated, salacious and corny headlines. Other journalistic techniques are employed to undermine the status of this (self-identified) lesbian 'family'. I will describe the explicit arguments made against lesbian parenting together with some of the implicit ways in which negative associations are made and more extreme arguments alluded to, through the framing of the article and the phrasing of the points.

### BUYING BABIES?

As the article unfolds, we learn that the '£5 for a baby' was, in actual fact, £5 paid for an advert through which a lesbian couple recruited a donor. However, moral outrage is conjured by making it sound as if they bought a baby. It is intriguing that this moral tone can be maintained once it is revealed that their crime was not buying, marketing or eating babies, but hoping to raise one lovingly! The front page photograph is of two smiling women, the one in the foreground beams proudly as she holds a baby girl in a checked dress. It seems a happy, relaxed, posed for picture, a genuine 'family

snap', rather than an intrusive snapshot to which they did not consent. Either they gave the journalist this picture, along with the one of heavily pregnant Rachel standing face-to-face with Ellen, or allowed the Sun photographer in, believing that the article would be sympathetic. The only real grounds for claiming the article to be an 'Exclusive' are that these lesbians trusted a tabloid journalist to interview them. Of course, the layout and selection of headlines and quotations would have been the sub-editor's, not the journalist's, work.

The article begins: 'A **JOBLESS** lesbian couple sparked fury last night...'. Having 'jobless' in capitals sets up a line of criticism over their employment status that is continued a few sentences later: 'The lesbians pick up £200 a week in state benefits - and four-month-old Chloe's father will contribute nothing.' Of course, the mother of a small child might find herself equally criticised for going out to work, but here the real concern appears to be about 'tax-payers' money' being spent on welfare benefits. They are referred to as 'state benefits', rather than more sympathetic names like 'social security' or 'welfare benefits', and referring to 'the lesbians' puts distance between them and the 'families' that might be seen as deserving of the Family Credit benefit. The prominence of this line of attack is significant given the weakness of the arguments made against lesbian parenting later in the piece.

Such hostility to people on benefits when they are constructed as undeserving or as 'underclass' might have been expected of the old (Conservative-allied) Sun, but to have this from the 'New Sun' (supporting New Labour) can be viewed as an indication of shrinking ideological difference between the British political parties. It illustrates New Labour's 'tough line' on social issues, such as the 'Welfare to Work' proposals. Labour's shift away from socialist principles has introduced into the vocabulary the sarcastic use of the word 'New' to suggest policy U-turns or false continuities. With an increasing separation of politics from ideology, it becomes easier to see how a newspaper could switch between the two main parties.

The article's second sentence is: 'Crop-haired Rachel Henshaw, 24, gave birth to daughter Chloe after a gay Brazilian student answered their plea.' In a sentence with a lot of information to convey, 'crop-haired' is accorded significance (and this description of the father quietly activates hostility against some of The Sun's regular targets.) Whilst cropped hair may be mainstream fashion for women (and men) in contemporary British culture, there remain some associations of dyke or butch. This implicitly mobilises a discourse of 'unfeminine', contrasting it with 'true femininity' with which nurturant motherhood is associated. It can be seen as a veiled undermining of her fitness to parent either through ideas of 'proper women', or associations that the 'respectable working-class' readership may have of crop-haired with 'yobs', 'thugs' and, perhaps, the underclass. (A headline on page 2 positions New Labour and the readership in relation to 'yobs': 'Horrorified' Blair declares war on yobs').

#### THE STATUS ACCORDED LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Rachel and Ellen live together with Ellen's five-year-old daughter. Rachel is quoted saying: '..We're a perfect family', and Ellen: "My little daughter sometimes asks if Rachel is her daddy. She says she loves her. We try to explain she is mummy's partner. As the girls grow older, of course we will tell them everything'. Rachel even describes herself as having 'desperately wanted a baby' and having 'maternal instincts'. However, despite indicating that they embrace discourses of romantic love; of parental love for their child; of planning a child together; and of themselves as a

family, the article itself never describes them as a family. They are 'the lovers', not 'partners'. This sounds passionate (so at least challenges the image of lesbian sex as 'handholding'), but transient, and so less stable and committed than 'partners' and less permanent than a family. Implying that the relationship is based on passion and sexual love can reinforce the idea of selfish people driven by their desires. Indeed, the agony aunt declares that they 'have put their longing to be mums before Chloe's need to grow up in what feels to her and would be accepted by her peers as a normal home'. This leaves unquestioned the desires of heterosexual people to have children and assumes for them a moral high-ground of less selfish reasons. Fanshawe (1996), for one, criticises the juxtaposition of homosexuals to 'family values' in recent popular rhetoric, and indeed, the newspaper article's wording (e.g. 'the lesbians') foregrounds the differences between this 'family' and 'the family' which is presumed to be heterosexual and biologically fertile (Van Every, 1991).

The other front-page visual claim on our attention is a picture of two of The Spice Girls, the all-girl band who've taken the British pop scene by storm. They are wearing nurses' uniforms and have their skirts hitched up and their bare legs interlocked. There is clearly a homoerotic undertone - as with much of their publicity - and the centre-page spread on the 'doctors-and-nurses' theme promises that in tomorrow's edition they are 'in bed together!' It is assumed that The Spice Girls' public playfulness about lesbian sexuality will not offend Sun readers, but the commitment of two women to each other and their child will! This presents lesbianism as acceptable as a form of (heterosexual) titillation, but not as a form of actual relationship. It admits lesbian desire, but sees it as girlish frolicking which will either be outgrown, or curbed by the institutions of heterosexuality, family and marriage. It undermines these women's relationship by constructing lesbian relationships as immature and retaining a privileged position for heterosexuality as the 'real thing'.

#### THE DANGERS ATTRIBUTED LESBIAN MOTHERING

Once again, vagueness about the sources of comments, such as 'The arrangement was branded an "absolute disgrace" by politicians and child-support groups', allows strong statements to have an impact whilst only being attributed to unnamed people and ambiguously named organisations. However, the article ends with statements from public figures who are positioned as moral commentators.

'Moral crusader' Victoria Gillick finds it grotesque that 'Two women have rejected men, but want a man's baby', and a Church of England Minister suggests that the child be adopted because 'Lesbianism is immoral'. A Conservative Member of Parliament asks 'Who is going to pay to bring up this child?', adding that 'a child needs a father not two mothers.' A Conservative ex-Minister of Health describes the women as 'looking after their own self-interests and ignoring the child's problems.' Even the relatively liberal agony aunt, Deirdre, reiterates the accusation of selfishness. She says she understands that gay people can long to be parents too, but 'To choose to have a baby with no means to support it and when you know the child may face prejudice and bullying is immature and selfish.' Selfishness is an enduring theme in criticisms of mothers and remains powerful because it is constructed as antithetical to true, virtuous motherhood (see also Alldred, 1996). This is the article's strongest attack on these women's fitness to parent. The idea that women 'let their hormones rule their heads' buys into the discourse of women as driven by passion, not reason, and hence in need of surveillance. It constructs these women as immature and, as lesbians, at risk of being either too feminine, or not feminine enough!

The criticisms of these women can be compared with concerns about lesbian parenting that have been raised in court (from Harne *et al*, 1997; Saffron, 1996 and Woodcraft, 1997). Five issues identified can be summarised as: gender identity, gender conformity, homosexuality, abuse and social stigma. A British judge in a 1992 case called a psychiatrist to respond to the following three issues of potential concern (from Woodcraft, 1997): firstly, that the child might be involved in sexual activity in the home - to which the psychiatrist emphasised that paedophilia has no link with homosexuality and that most sexual abuse of children is committed by heterosexual men; secondly, that the child would grow up gay - for which there is no evidence (see Tasker and Golombok, 1995); and thirdly, that the children would be subjected to taunts and teasing. Neither of the first two 'arguments' are raised in this newspaper article, so perhaps feminists' contestation of these associations and empirical research has had some impact here. Deirdre is convinced the child will face 'prejudice and bullying' and, presumably, social stigma is what is meant by 'the child's problems'. Children face discrimination on a range of issues, and bullying is often about weight or social skills, and is certainly not particular to family form. In the case described by Woodcraft (1997), the expert argued that the child would be better equipped to deal with any taunts if she lived with women who felt positive about being lesbians, than with a heterosexual father's new family who were homophobic. The issue of social stigma is of real concern, but, as Harne *et al* (1997) note, for courts to assume it, can reinforce such prejudice. The two remaining issues concern children's psychosexual development. A child's 'gender identity' refers to their sense of themselves as male or female, and 'gender-role behaviour' to their conformity to gender stereotypes. These two, along with whether children 'grow up gay', are psychological concerns, and the 'children need a father' argument could be seen as a weak attempt to mobilise these, but in the context appears to be about fathers as providers. Tasker and Golombok's (1995) research provides evidence for responding reassuringly to these concerns and we may also want to challenge normative ideas about what boys and girls should be. These psychological arguments would present a more powerful case against lesbian parenting, but are not effectively deployed in this piece.

The most forceful arguments against lesbian parenting in the article are about social stigma and financial provision for the child. For instance, Deirdre does not present arguments about the nature of lesbian parenting itself, that is, problems intrinsic to the lesbian parent-child relationship, such as about the mental health or psychological qualities of lesbians. Instead, her main points are both social, rather than psychological. Stigma is a social problem of discrimination, and the child's financial support is one of economics and social welfare. Economics, or what it seen as 'tax-payers' money', is a core concern underlying this fury about these women having a child. It is not their sexuality, but their receipt of benefits that fuels the condemnation.

#### **CORRUPTION: NEW LABOUR AND OLD PREJUDICES**

For a newspaper newly embracing the Labour Party there is an interesting preponderance of Conservatives amongst the moral commentators. Earlier concerns about children and gay men spoke of the risk of 'corruption'. This has faded, or is, at least, not voiced explicitly. Of concern today, to those on the Left, is the corruption of the Labour Party's ideas about welfare and social issues by right-wing discourses of 'morality'. The fact that *The Sun's* party political allegiance can swing from Conservative to Labour whilst key ideological areas such as 'family values' stay the same suggests either internal contradictions within the paper's perspective or within

New Labour's position. Perhaps both points apply. Any newspaper will contain a range of discourses on any given topic and there is no reason to assume consensus amongst staff at The Sun, and New Labour's commitments to progressive social reform and equalities issues are of concern to many on the Left in Britain. More broadly, the idea that the Left/Right ideological distinctions of Western politics are collapsing, is relevant here too.

Are these women making a 'mockery of family life' as the editorial claims? Lesbian mothering can only be understood as 'a mockery of family life' where family life is understood as being defined by the financial dependence of women and children on men. Judges, now used to seeing lesbian mothers, treat them as mothers first and lesbians second (Woodcraft, 1997), and attacks on lesbian mothers are like those on mothers (and women) in general (Harne et al, 1997). The particularly harsh treatment of lone mothers in both the UK and US condemns women for having families independently of men.

The themes identified in this particular newspaper article are not uncommon amongst representations of lesbian relationships and mothering in Anglo-American dominated cultures. They are reminders that heterosexuality and the family remain powerful social institutions despite many sites of liberalisation, (including some aspects of the legal sphere), and because they are presented as the sites of romantic and nurturant love, alternative forms of sexual and parental relations are undermined. Because the nuclear family claims romantic and nurturant love for itself, alternatives become harder to forge and sustain since they receive less social recognition and because ritual and expression are limited (McIntosh, 1997).

Criticisms that lesbians face about their relationships and domestic arrangements, are not 'lesbian problems' and neither ought the concern over stigma to be 'this child's problem'. Right-wing discourses of 'family values' sometimes link heterosexuality, family form, and parenting in ways that are essentialist. They not only obscure, but pathologize alternatives. Such is the sometimes hostile context in which women who are lesbian live and love, and therefore, of course, the context in which our research about lesbian lives is heard. We must ensure that our empirical work, and the way we present it, cannot implicitly reinforce these themes. The following chapters in this Special Issue identify some of the ways in which the institution of heterosexuality impacts on the lives of lesbians in particular national and cultural contexts. They also demonstrate moments and ways in which women resist such pressures. By examining the normative presumptions within discourses of 'the family', we may be better placed to articulate criticisms, and by exploring through empirical research the precise forms taken by discourses of 'the family' in the lives of particular women, we may be better able to recognise and support the alternative sites of nurturant and romantic love.

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