

Lesbian parents reconciling work/family responsibilities

**Summary Report
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Introduction

This report outlines some of the key findings of a study undertaken with lesbian parents in New South Wales in 2006. The study involved qualitative semi-structured interviews with lesbian women caring for children. The study arose from my experience of undertaking interviews with heterosexual women (Smyth *et al*, 2005) on reconciling work/family responsibilities. As a feminist, I was shocked about the lack of movement in the gendered roles described by heterosexual women in the interviews. As a lesbian parent, I also knew that in some households raising children the rigidity around roles was being challenged. The study was funded by the University of Sydney's Research & Development Grant program. This enabled me to employ Mayet Costello to work with me on the research, including interviewing lesbian parents.

Recruitment

Similar to other Australian research (McNair *et al*, 2002) this study faced the challenge of accessing a relatively small, stigmatized group. Existing demographic data on lesbian parents is poor and unlikely to be comprehensive (Millbank, 2003; McNair *et al*, 2002). Census data, for example, only captures co-habiting same sex parents who choose to identify. Recruitment strategies with hard to reach communities tend to rely more on informal processes to generate purposive samples rather than a more randomized or representative sample (Bradford *et al* 2001 cited in McNair *et al*, 2002). In the absence of demographic data that adequately captures the complexity of lesbian parent circumstances the ability to generalize from small purposive samples is limited (McNair *et al*, 2002: 42).

Much of the available research has of necessity involved small, unrepresentative samples, recruited using convenience sampling – however this methodology is seen to have some validity for marginalized population groups (Bradford, Ryan, Honnold and Rothblum, 2001 cited in McNair *et al* 2002: 40)

Accordingly, an advertisement seeking participation in the study was disseminated through: Rainbow Babies (lesbian parent social group); known lesbian support groups; the lesbians in health email list; Pink Mountains (a website which focuses on the Gay and Lesbian community in the Blue Mountains); services with specific lesbian programs; ACON and, women's health centres. A number of participants also came to learn about the study from word of mouth promotion. Specific effort was made to include culturally diverse women, Aboriginal women and women residing outside Sydney. In the original research plan we had intended to also recruit participants by placing an advertisement in a well-known Sydney-based lesbian magazine (LOTL) however we had quickly and unexpectedly recruited women to the capacity of the research through these other recruitment strategies. We were somewhat surprised at the extent of interest in the study, including being contact by women in other States in Australia and overseas. This interest highlights the need for larger research projects exploring the experiences of lesbian parents in Australia.

The participants

Seventeen families participated in the study. Initially we only intended to interview one partner/parent in households, however, four couples asked to be interviewed together. The remaining 13 interviews were done with one partner/parent only. Over half of the families lived outside of Sydney, mostly in the Illawarra and the Blue Mountains.

The vast majority (77%) of lesbian parents in the study were aged between 36 and 45 years. Four women were raising children alone, one's partner lived separately and the remainder cohabited. In seven families the youngest child was pre-school, four primary aged children and four teenage children. Seven families had only one child at the time of the interview, five had 2 children and four had three or more children. About an equal number of children were conceived in lesbian relationships as heterosexual relationships, with one household having a mix of lesbian conceived and heterosexual conceived children. This confirms anecdotal perceptions of a baby boom among lesbian couples and signals a shift from heterosexually conceived children being raised in lesbian families.

The lesbian parents in the study were highly qualified, with 81% holding a bachelor degree or higher. Health care dominated the occupations of participants however there was a wide range of other prestigious occupations such as journalism, public relations, communications, science management and law. Nearly two thirds of participants were employed in the public sector with the remainder working in the private sector, the non-government sector and self-employed.

Census data

Unpublished Census data from the 2001 Census was obtained to provide a more comprehensive profile of lesbian parents in New South Wales. These tables are not published by the ABS due to concern about the accuracy of the figures and the potential risk to confidentiality raised by small numbers in some circumstances. There are a number of caveats to be born in mind when using Census data. Firstly, the data is not a count of sexuality. The figures describe co-habiting adults of the same sex that identify their relationship status as ‘de facto’. If lesbian couples do not co-habit they will not appear in the data. Likewise, if two women who co-habit with children do not identify their relationship status as ‘de facto’ they would also be excluded from the data. Secondly, given the historical lack of acknowledgement of same sex people it is probable that a proportion of the gay and lesbian community would not choose to identify as such on the Census. There is no way to know how large or small that proportion may be. With these caveats in mind, the figures provide some useful insight into lesbian parents.

Table 1: Female same sex de facto couples (Australia and NSW)

	Number	With no children	With dependent children
Lesbian couples (Australia)	8792	7431 (84%)	1361 (16%)
Lesbian couples (NSW)	3471 (39%)	2970 (86%)	501 (14%)

Source: Unpublished ABS tables

Table 2: Number of children in female same sex de facto households (Australia and NSW)

	1 child	2 children	3+ children	Total
Lesbian couples (Australia)	763 (56%)	422 (31%)	177 (13%)	1361
Lesbian couples (NSW)	289 (58%)	143 (29%)	69 (14%)	501

Source: Unpublished ABS tables

According to the 2001 Census there were 8792 female same sex couples in Australia. Of these the vast majority (84%) did not have dependent children aged 0-17 years residing with them. Of those that did (1361) have children over half (56%) had one child, 31% (419) had 2 children and the remainder (13%) had three children aged between 0-17 years.

Over one third (39%) of de facto lesbian couples resided in New South Wales (3471). Parenthood in New South Wales was similar to the national level with 501 couples (or 14%) of de facto lesbian couples in New South Wales having dependent children, once again the majority with 1 child (58% or 289).

Data was available for the Sydney Statistical District and the remainder of New South Wales. Sydney has long been thought of as the centre of lesbian settlement in the State which this data confirms. Three quarters of the de facto lesbian couples in the State (2624) lived in Sydney compared to 847 in the remainder of the State.

Table 3: Geographic spread

	% Women NSW	% Lesbians NSW	% Lesbian Parents NSW
Sydney (SD)	49.7	75.1	57.7
Other	50.3	24.9	43.3

Source: Unpublished ABS tables

The picture for de facto lesbian parents, however, was somewhat different. 43% of lesbian parents resided outside the Sydney basin. Additionally, de facto lesbian families were slightly larger outside of the Sydney SDA, with 49% having more than one child compared to 37%. This may reflect housing costs in Sydney, with lesbian families like other families seeking larger housing being forced outside of the Sydney basin.

Data on three groups of women will be included in the remaining discussion: de facto lesbian parents; de facto lesbian couples; and women aged 20-44 years in New South Wales. The third have been chosen as a comparison with lesbian parents as this group is most likely to include women with dependent children. However, it should be noted that this is not an exclusively parents group as some of these women will not have dependent children. Individual data for lesbian parents and lesbian couples relates to only one partner of the couple (referred to as the 'reference person').

Labour force participation rates are calculated by comparing those in employment or seeking unemployment with the total number of women. Among the general women's population the participation rate for 20-44 year olds was 69.2%, for lesbian parents it was 76.6% and for lesbians without children it was 90.4%. These high rates of participation among the lesbian community are likely to reflect views around dependency.

Table 4: Labour force experiences

	Percentage of Women aged 20-44 years NSW*	#Percentage of Partnered Lesbians NSW	#Percentage of Lesbian Parents NSW
Participation Rate	69.2	90.4	76.6
Employed Full time	51.6	65.8	43.1
Employed Part time	39.4	20.4	28.7
Unemployed	6.6	3.2	
Not in Labour force	27.0	20.4	22.3

*This data includes all women, not just parents

#This data is for 'Person 1 in Household' only (ie. The first person on the Census form)

Not only is the lesbian community more likely to be in the labour force, it is also more likely to be working full time. 65.8% of lesbians worked on a full time basis compared to 51.6% of all women aged 20-44 years. 43.1% of lesbian parents in New South Wales worked full time, 28.7% worked part-time. Nearly 40% of all women aged 20-44 worked part-time. 27% of all women aged 20-44 were classified as ‘not in the labour force’ compared to 22.3% of lesbian parents and 20.4% of lesbians without children. In terms of work/family responsibilities this would suggest lesbian parents are not using part-time employment to the same extent as other women to reconcile these demands. It also suggests that the bias in the social security system does not act as a disincentive to participation.

The lesbian community is also a highly qualified one. Just over half (51.2%) of lesbian couples without children and 40.9% of lesbian parents have a university degree compared to 13.6% of all women in New South Wales. TAFE qualification levels are more similar between the groups of women, with 16.7% of all women, 18% of lesbian parents and 15.7% of lesbians without children having certificate level qualifications. There are significantly more unqualified women (56%) among the general community than among the lesbian community (35.9% among parents and 28.5% among non-parents).

Table 5: Educational qualifications

	Percentage of all Women NSW	#Percentage of Partnered Lesbians NSW	#Percentage of Lesbian Parents NSW
University degree	13.6	51.2	40.9
TAFE	16.7	15.7	18
Not applicable	56	28.5	35.9

#This data is for ‘Person 1 in Household’ only (ie. The first person on the Census form)

The lesbian community appears to have similar cultural diversity as the general population of women in New South Wales. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women comprise 1.8% of women, 1% of lesbian couples but 3.2% of lesbian parents in New South Wales. 12% of all women were born in a non-English speaking country compared to 8% of lesbian parents and 7.8% of lesbian couples.

Table 6: Cultural diversity

	Percentage of all Women NSW	Percentage of Partnered Lesbians NSW	Percentage of Lesbian Parents NSW
ATSI	1.8	1	3.2
NESB (country of birth)	12	8	8

#This data is for 'Person 1 in Household' only (ie. The first person on the Census form)

Key findings

The following sections describe the key findings from the qualitative interviews. The experiences of lesbians who parent in relation to parenting, caring and domestic work, paid work, lesbian identity and social policy are reported below.

On parenting

The approach to parenting evident among participants was strongly influenced by the nature of the relationship at conception of the child. All parents whose child or children were born into their current lesbian relationship portrayed a commitment to shared parenting. Whilst biology was seen as affecting early relationships (particularly during breast feeding) efforts were made to ensure the sharing of parental responsibilities, rights and opportunities. The non-biological parent in these households were viewed as ‘co-parents’

Just the relationships that we have [is wonderful], the way we are together. Sometimes seeing Chloe come to resemble Sarah is very charming

[The best thing about being a lesbian parent is] having Emily, and having the experience of parenting with someone you love and you know, mostly it's a very joyful experience.

Among those parents with children conceived in a previous relationship the biological mother took a stronger parenting role than her new partner. This included those families in which the children were conceived in previous lesbian relationships as well as those conceived in previous heterosexual relationships.

On a day to day basis, I guess as Jo and I live in the same house with Anna, the expectation is that I will make decisions about Anna. Jo has an opinion, and a very strong opinion about some things. I have actually modified some of the ways I do parenting, based on Jo. At a practical level as well I tend to do more of the personal care of Anna as well.

In those households where a new relationship is formed following the birth of a child negotiating ‘new parenting’ roles is a significant transition. The age of the child/ren and the involvement of other parents all influenced this negotiation. Two of the

lesbian parents currently caring for children alone identified this as a contributing factor to being single.

At this point I can't, I struggle with the idea of cohabiting with someone else and I'm extremely mindful of not entering into a domestic, for want of better words, domestic relationship with anyone until the relationship's been well and truly tested and in my mind that's easily two years, easily and so I wouldn't be introducing anyone to my daughter

For those parents with teenage children the introduction of a 'new' parent into the family could be a source of conflict, particularly in relation to setting boundaries and expectations.

There's been a lot of anxiety around that; I'm just trying to describe it in a way that gives a clear message. I don't know. It's been quite a challenge, quite a struggle; when we first started our relationship; my two children were not in any way receptive to it. I think a lot of negativity around that, at the time, was coming from my ex-partner, who was feeding them, in a way, and they were young at the time, so they were quite sort of vulnerable to having that influence, so it was a bit of a struggle to begin with, even to really get them to accept that she was going to be my partner, and that we were in a relationship. So, it then became quite a challenge to become even what you'd call co-parents. It would have been my desire and my partner's as well, but there's been a pretty rocky road.

For the new parent in these circumstances role definition could be complex, as one participant so aptly put it:

[I think of myself] more as a friend. It's really hard to define it. I wouldn't call myself [their mother]. They've got enough mothers and parents actually. They've also got their birth Dad too. I suppose I'd call myself a friend really.

Parenthood was a source of considerable joy and pleasure for most of the women interviewed, despite the many challenges. These challenges, like other parents, related to reconciling working and family responsibilities, the angst often associated with adolescence and the desire not to be subsumed by parenthood. They also faced the additional challenge of confronting homophobia and social disapproval of their families. Regardless of these challenges many women spoken eloquently of the richness children brought to their lives.

And I think both Mary and I had quite lovely early childhoods ... we both will do [childlike things] with Lily and that feels so kind of fruitful and creative. It means all these things grow out of it and we get this increased understanding of ourselves and each other and just do things that we do together. The stories that we tell and the way that we walk down the street because walking down the street with a 4-year-old can, you know, it's either really fast or really slow. And that's very, very enjoyable.

I think any parenting experience is a very rich and complex human experience, so you have those moments wishing they would go away, [but there are] all those pleasurable things about having them. They are funny and they are good company. They are very different to each other and I enjoy them and the way they are in the world and they make me laugh. They remind you of your own inner child. We went skiing one year and Alice stands at the top of the hill and points the ski down and rips to the bottom. I am much more cautious, Jo is too. Anna is like "let the child run free Mum." That is good

For lesbian parents with teenage children spending time and being available for their children had added importance. Despite the general trend for women's workforce participation to increase with children's age these lesbian families made decisions concerning work that enabled greater involvement in their children's lives. These included starting their own businesses, working from home, reducing hours and changing jobs to be closer to home.

If he's down doing training at the beach, well I can be down there doing something as well, so we're there together. It's not like just driving and drop them off, going and doing something else so we don't actually spend that time together.

I think if you're not around you miss stuff, and the conversations that happen, they – it's not like on my time, it's on – if I was going to go "okay, lets go and have a talk" she say "what are we talking about", but it's that kind of popping in to the kitchen while I'm cooking dinner "Do you know what happened at school today" stuff that you know – and if you're not here, you don't do that. So I think that that's important. And I think that that's more important as they get older in those early teenage years, just to be around.

On caring and domestic work

Within both the academic literature and general public men's lack of participation in caring and domestic work is still identified as a major barrier for women's workforce participation. A study undertaken with heterosexual women in 2005 (Smyth *et al*, 2005) highlighted the resentment and angst within their relationships created by their perceptions of unequal responsibilities in relation to caring and domestic work. This resentment and angst was, to a great extent, absent from the lives of the lesbian women interviewed for this study. When asked to compare their relationships to heterosexual relationships many lesbian women highlighted how they managed caring and domestic work as a major difference. Some also commented that unlike heterosexual relationships unpaid work wasn't that important.

I think having lived with a man before where a lot of stuff just automatically came back to me for some strange reason, yeah I think it's very different. I remember when Trudy and I first moved in together, I went to work one day and came home and she'd cleaned the sink and stuff and I was like "god someone's done it", so yeah – so I think that's different, we share things more I think.

I don't know that I think that deeply about housework! I just get the broom and clean it up, I haven't really thought about it.

Interestingly, this was not a reflection of the 'equality' of caring and domestic work. The families made pragmatic decisions about the division of unpaid work, informed by opportunity (who could do it) and preference (who liked doing it).

So it just kind of comes down to who likes what or who's got time as well. So when I'm home well I do more and when she's home well she does more. We're flexible ... I think it fell into place and then sometime later we realised that's what we were doing and we did discuss it.

The 'heat' was taken out of the issue of unpaid work through the acknowledgement of these tasks as 'work', including child rearing. In this way 'guilt' was less of an issue for these women with more of a sense of being able to come to a settlement between work and family responsibilities. Similar to heterosexual women though this settlement was very dynamic and subject to change.

I think neither of us have an automatic assumption that someone else will do housework for us. So that probably means we're a lot more appreciative of each other's efforts.

I think there's an acknowledgement that child rearing is work, there's a lot of hard work involved in that so if I get home and I don't get a chance to do the washing up it's not because I'm being lazy, it's because she's been challenging and I think because Sara is a woman and has raised two children she understands that as well.

On paid work

Paid work played an important part in the lives of many participants. Many held senior positions in organisations or had considerable professional status. Most constructed their work as a 'career' not something to generate income only.

I couldn't do the job I have got [and work three days] and I couldn't be a manager as it is a small organization with only 80 people so you can't have key people managers working part time. I am thinking about changing jobs only because I am ready for the next step in my career and it would mean taking a bigger job so...

Among the lesbian women interviewed there was an assumption of workforce participation, reflecting the economic and social reality of lesbian women. Embedded within this assumption was a rejection of dependency – either on another individual or the State. Among the participants four were not currently working, two of whom were sole parents and one receiving a disability pension arising from a work related injury.

Information was collected about each parents' workforce participation to understand household workforce participation. When only one partner was interviewed she was described as 'parent 1' and her partner was 'parent 2'. When both parents were interviewed they were randomly allocated with one as 'parent 1' and the other as 'parent 2'. This was not done on the basis of biological relationship to the children (as this proved complicated). Tables 1, 2 and 3 below indicate the workforce participation of each parent in the household.

Employment status (parent 1)	No.
Not currently working	3
Part time	6
Full time	6

Employment status (parent 2)*	No.
Not currently working	1
Part time	1
Full time	9

*Data was not collected for all households in relation to Parent 2

Household workforce participation	No.
Not applicable*	3
NCW/Unemployed	1
Part time/Full time	5
Full time/Full time	5

*This refers to sole parents. Two of the sole parents were not currently working (both had pre-school children) whilst the third was employed full time (her child was primary school aged).

This indicates that both parents working full time is more common than in other family types, in which the predominant pattern of household workforce participation is part time/full time.

Work and family responsibilities were not seen necessarily as ‘in conflict’ however there was an awareness of the compromises facing parents. One third of participants took active steps to shape their work lives around their family responsibilities. These steps included changing jobs, reducing hours and not taking promotional opportunities. These steps were viewed as positive changes however for others the tension between work/family responsibilities was an ongoing concern.

In terms of the way it's working in with my family life now, it's going very well. I dropped the parts of my work that had, you know, clear deadlines and all that kind of stuff. It doesn't really matter when I do it that often.

I would be ecstatic if Alex negotiated a four day week instead of a five day week. 'Cause I think she misses out, it's not that I feel cheated, I don't want to work any more than I'm working, I just think she misses out, and she feels that too.

For economically independent lesbian women the ‘penalty’ of parenting may be more severe particularly in terms of superannuation and retirement incomes. Unlike most heterosexual women lesbian women cannot rely on a share of the superannuation that flows from higher male salaries to support their retirement. Time out of the

workforce, either on a full time or part time basis, has the potential for significant long term consequences.

Look, it (parenting) compromises you, without a doubt, and I mean we all know it does. Not only now, but in terms of our longer term financial positions, with our superannuation and all the rest of it, I mean, women are always going to be behind the eight ball.

In terms of workforce participation the lesbian women experienced similar patterns of fluidity to women more generally. Upon the birth of a child there was a marked reduction in workforce participation, particularly but not solely for the birth mother. This reflected a desire to spend time with their new child but also to breastfeed. Like mothers more generally, part time work was most notable among those lesbian parents with pre-school children. Possibly reflecting their workplace 'power' (most participants were professionally qualified, in high prestige occupations and had significant full time work histories) many of the lesbian women were able to negotiate their preferred return to work arrangement. However, like their heterosexual sisters, only a minority viewed returning to work on a flexible basis as a 'right'. Many came to 'agreements' with employers after considerable negotiation and compromise (on their part), even in the context of supportive policies. As the following quote indicates the 'culture' of the organisation was really important in enabling parents to reconcile work and family responsibilities.

I think those provisions are essential but the culture of the organisation has an impact on how or whether people feel they can actually take advantage of them because being entitled to flexi time is one thing, being encouraged to take flexi time holidays, and to have no repercussions when you apply for [carers] leave or sick leave or anything like that, is different.

On lesbian identity

The impact of parenthood on the women's lesbian identity was very marked. Many described themselves as 'parents' rather than 'lesbian parents'. For a number of women parenthood had distanced them from ways in which they had previously given expression to their lesbian identity. Some women spoke of no longer going to venues, drinking with friends or socialising in a predominantly lesbian network. This distance developed due to the different demands rather than active exclusion from lesbian culture. Parenthood, particularly once children were at school, brought lesbian parents

into greater contact with other parents, regardless of sexuality. For those in partnered relationships this shift in identity appeared not to cause concern as their worlds became very 'family' focussed. The shift in identity from 'lesbian' to 'parent' was however more of an issue for those lesbians with the sole care of children.

I just mostly don't think of myself as a lesbian parent. I think myself as a parent and Ria as a parent. It's very rarely that the lesbian parent comes up for me.

It is but also being at different stages of your life because you are parenting, like a lot of our friends, our closest friends, two of them have children but they're grown up now and the other two don't have any children but they've got young nieces and nephews. So people's family commitments have changed quite a lot over 20 years, 15 years we've known each other and everyone's at different stages of their lives.

At the same time as feeling like 'just parents' there was recognition of the unique aspects of raising children in a lesbian household. These included the closeness of relationships, the consciousness of deciding to parent but also the surprised joy of doing something unexpected.

It's nice there are two mothers and I think there is something about the mothering role that is a little different to the social role of fathering and I think a woman who is even in the paternal position still behaves in a maternal way and I think it's great for Ria as a woman who would never have had children, if it was up to her to bear them. It's fantastic to see how she is as a mother. And her mother adores seeing Ria as a mother and I suppose there is maybe - maybe there is some kind of sense of how actively we chose the kind of family that we had to see those choices be such good choices.

Relationships with parents, particularly mothers, were strongly affected by the decision of lesbian couples to parent. Many of the lesbian women indicated their relationship with their mothers broke down when they became pregnant. Whilst some used humour when explaining this (*I think both Penny's and my parents said "oh are you sure it is a good idea to have a baby? What about a nice little dog instead?"*), for others it was clearly a continuing source of distress. All however found that on the birth of a child the relationship improved and often became much closer. In fact, grandparents played an important role in many of the children's lives including

through the provision of regular care. In comparison with the heterosexual women, these lesbian families appeared to be able to access informal care to a greater degree.

Actually it was when I first got pregnant was the really very bad patch with my mother, probably as bad as when I told her I was with Jill. Well we had a very funny discussion when I told them Jill was pregnant and I told them very categorically that I expected them to be grandparents because I was going to be a mother to Gus and I expected them to be grandparents to Gus which was completely ridiculous, to which my mother obviously responded by saying no I will not, he's not my grandson and he never will be. And the funny thing is that they've established their own relationship completely independent of me and independent of Jill and I think now that my mother forgets that he's not actually her biological grandson, it doesn't really matter.

There was considerable anxiety among the lesbian women about the impact of their sexuality on their children. The lesbian women were concerned how institutions such as schools, hospitals and other settings would react and the impact of this reaction on their children. This anxiety, in the main, was not based on actual experience. In general the lesbian women were pleasantly surprised by the lack of discrimination they experienced. Most reported experiencing no discrimination from institutions such as schools or the health system. Some lesbian parents took active steps to minimise the possibility of discrimination and were vigilant about ensuring their children's well being.

I mean, the neighbourhood are very accepting and friendly and there was nothing in the hospital or midwife brethren that we went through. There was nothing that was, or the fertility clinic or, you know, seeing doctors, although the doctors had to interview us and say, you know, why did you go through assisted conception? We had to say because, you know, Leah's sperm count is very low.

So anyway, that's my...it hasn't touched us. And whether or not we've just been lucky or...in terms of violence or hatred or discrimination, it just really hasn't touched us and at this point it hasn't touched Molly. But we've tried with her also to be very positive as well. At school it's very open that she has two mums and that it's no...

I think giving a child the tools to cope with what you foresee as going to be some inevitable challenges that they'll have because they're your child. Which is no different again to...in this society at the moment, being a Muslim child at school or something. So it's one of the challenges or the difficulties. How best to ensure that you're child is resilient to things.

On social policy and recognition

The social policy context in which lesbian families find themselves is very complex and confusing. This complexity was a source of underlying anxiety for some women interviewed. Whilst a number of State based laws have been reformed to include same sex families some Commonwealth laws continue to be silent on same sex family rights and responsibilities. There were two areas on social policy of most relevance to lesbian families: social security law and family law.

In terms of social security law, the non-recognition of lesbian relationships affected the biological mother's eligibility to a number of payments. As only the income of the biological mother was included in assessments, lesbian parents were eligible for higher levels of Child Care Benefits and Family Tax Benefit as well as being eligible for Parenting Payment Part B. There was considerable variation in accessing these benefits among the families. A number access Parenting Payment Part B whilst on unpaid maternity leave, creating a de facto state supported maternity leave payment. Others didn't apply at all, for political reasons, whilst others took advantage of some but not all benefits.

Look, I have to say that it's, I feel like that's, because the government doesn't recognise same sex couples we haven't gone down the track of getting a sole parent pension or anything like that. But they only calculate the childcare benefit on my income so we benefit, compared to my heterosexual friends our childcare's very cheap. So we benefit, thanks Johnnie.

I kind of think, I know it's terrible but I think well I've worked all my life, it's the one thing that I can get from the government in my favour in terms of being a lesbian so bugger it. If their homophobia works in my favour great, I kind of like it in some ways. It's sort of like you can get to them. No problem, I'll take your money.

It appeared lesbian families engaged with their rights to social security as a moral or political matter, not a financial matter. Whilst most welcomed the additional money it did not significantly alter their decisions in relation to work (*I think if there was absolutely no support, I'd be doing the same work I am now. I don't think any of our choices relied on what's available or what's not.*) Like their heterosexual sisters, the

money was a bonus but not instrumental in their decisions concerning workforce participation. One or two families were very confused about their entitlements.

Parent 1:

Yes I did in the beginning I had single mother's benefit. Then one lawyer said you're absolutely not entitled to that and you'll have to pay it all back so stop it right now. So I just rang up and stopped it because I didn't know what else to do. But our accountant said you're mad.

Parent 2:

Then another lawyer said no that's intended to support the children and you're completely entitled to it.

Parent 1:

But it's not clear, you should either know that you are entitled to it legally and clearly, or not entitled to it, you know given the means testing. But there's also things like \$600 baby bonus that the federal government dished out a couple of years ago. Because neither of us are registered with Centrelink for any kind of benefit nobody got the \$600. I remember going to work that weekend and everyone was talking about how they were going to spend their money, because all the other mothers got their \$600, \$1200, \$1800 or whatever and we were talking about what they were going to do with the money.

Parent 2:

Yeah it's the stress of not knowing what's been legal, what's been illegal.

Of more ongoing concern to the lesbian families however was the lack of parenting rights of the non-biological parent. The invisibility of the co-parent was an ongoing cause of anxiety for many of the women interviewed, although this anxiety appeared to reduce over time as the child or children became older. In one case, the non-biological parent expressed concern about her 'parenting rights' in the event of a relationship breakdown. This was heightened by the involvement of the child's biological father in parenting the child. She was afraid that her lesbian co-parents rights would be over-ridden by the rights of the biological father. In other cases, whilst this fear was present, relationship changes hadn't affected the lesbian co-parents rights. A small number of the participants were parenting children from previous relationships in a collaborative and co-operative fashion. For others, the fear related to sudden death or injury of the biological parent.

I worry about if something happens to me because Sue's not registered on the birth certificate. I remember when [our daughter] was born I was really annoyed that the way the form is structured it's mother and father. That really annoyed the crap out of me. There was no option for other parent, other genders. It really annoyed me that it was gendered. So if

something happened to me I'd be concerned that legally that my family would have a claim for [our daughter] even though Sue's her mother. So that does scare me the lack of legal recognition if something were to happen to me. Absolutely, look I'm quite sure that if something happened to me my mother would try to take [our daughter].

Given the history of institutional homophobia and injustice to lesbian women in Australia these fears, whilst not founded on experience, are understandable. A small number of lesbian families in the study had sought legal protection through Family Court Parenting Orders, Living Wills and other arrangements. The majority were hopeful that these protections would never be required but wanted the safeguards they provided.

I think the answer to your question is yes, if there was legal recognition of the relationship it would simplify and clarify your status. And it would remove the complexity and confusion around those issues. There are those complexities that are not there for heterosexual couples.

A formal legal recognition of the rights of the co-parent was seen as of much greater importance than eligibility for additional social security benefits.

Conclusion

Lesbian parents, according to the ABS Census data, remain a small proportion of the overall lesbian community. Approximately 1 in 5 lesbians have dependent children living with them. Data from the 2006 Census will shortly be available that will enable a comparison over time to test anecdotal evidence of a 'baby boom' in the lesbian community. Whilst the ABS Census data suggests most lesbians in New South Wales live in the Sydney metropolitan area, a greater proportion of lesbian parents raising children live outside Sydney.

Parenting was viewed positively by the lesbians interviewed, bringing enriching new relationships and experiences. For those lesbians who believed they would never have children, parenting was surprising and rewarding. For many lesbians the decision to have children was not welcomed or supported by their parents. This lack of support reflected homophobic fears about the impact on children of their mother's sexuality. In most cases this antagonism dissolved shortly after the birth of the child. It is

concerning, however, that at a time of considerable stress (the birth of a child) some lesbian families are experiencing hostility from key sources of support. The potential for homophobia to isolate lesbian parents is increased by the shift in identity away from the lesbian community. For this reason initiatives such as Rainbow Babies have an important role to play in supporting lesbian parents.

The lesbians in this study experienced work and family responsibilities in tension, rather than in conflict. This tension required active management and negotiation. The strong rejection of dependency (either on a partner or the State), however, underpinned high levels of labour force participation. Most of the participants had strong workforce histories and higher education qualifications. Despite apparent work place 'power' only a minority took a 'rights' perspective towards their negotiation with their employers. This was similar to the experiences of heterosexual women (Smyth *et al*, 2005). This is interesting finding highlighting the fundamental inequality of the employment relationship: even highly educated, skilled and experienced women who parent find it difficult to assert 'rights'.

Social policy was, at the same time, both central and peripheral to the lesbian women's lives. Social security benefits were, in general, peripheral and not significantly shaping the women's decisions. This was similar to the heterosexual women: the additional income was a bonus but not substantial enough to make a significant difference. The one exception to this would be the use of Parenting Payment B as a de facto state funded maternity leave payment. The lack of parenting rights of the non-biological parent was however of central importance. There was an undertow of anxiety – 'what if?' – in their family relationships. This anxiety was particularly marked during the early years of a child's life, once again a period of heightened stress. Clarification of the rights and responsibilities of lesbian parents would be an important step in alleviating stress and supporting the parenting efforts of a vulnerable minority.

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