

DO THEY HAVE A CHOICE?  
REPRODUCTIVE PREFERENCES AMONG  
LESBIANS AND GAYS IN SLOVENIA

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INTRODUCTION

In Western Europe the contemporary gay and lesbian political agenda is increasingly dominated by the issue of personal relationships (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1999a). Gay and lesbian partnerships and families are both generators of social changes in late modernity and also the “consequences” of these changes. Homosexual marriages and related regulation of partner relations and rights, as well as the issue of the adoption of children, inevitably confront norms of reproductive behaviour, which rest on the exclusive link between heterosexuality and reproduction, and thus preclude parenthood from homosexual identities. Gay and lesbian families and partnership are trapped in the heteronormative social framework, which has a dual effect. On the one hand, it is exclusive, and hence the source of many difficulties for homosexuals, but on the other, it also pressures gays and lesbians into adopting traditional heterosexual patterns, norms and conduct. The social pressures imposed by heteronormative society are also reflected in the strongly self-controlled preferences of gays and lesbians regarding parenthood and the high level of their awareness about the negative consequences of homophobia and violence that would potentially affect the children of same-sex couples.

Additionally, the reproductive preferences of especially the younger generations of gays and lesbians can be interpreted in a different context, too. According to Slovenian research findings on youth, young people in Slovenia increasingly postpone strategies regarding parenthood and family life, and although family life seems to be important for young people (Ule et al. 1996, 2000; Renner and Švab 1998; Renner et al. 2005, 2006), parenthood is not the first priority in their lives. It seems that such value orientation holds true also for young gays and lesbians who often report other subjective priorities than parenthood and creation of their own family (Švab and Kuhar 2005).

This article uses data from the first sociological research on everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia to analyse their reproductive preferences.<sup>1</sup> We were interested in the opinions gays and lesbians hold regarding parenthood, and the influence of heteronormative society on their views and potential decisions. The first part presents a short overview of our survey research findings regarding the wishes and plans of our respondents about parenthood. Subsequent parts analyse material gained from focus group interviews. The main goal of this article is to demonstrate that the reproductive preferences of gays and lesbians in Slovenia are largely influenced and conditioned by the social context that does not accept gays and lesbians, and especially reject any kind of parenting that falls out of the heterosexual matrix.

#### WHO WISHES TO HAVE CHILDREN?

According to Slovenian survey results 42% of respondents wanted to have children, 40% did not want a child, while others were undecided. There were no significant gender differences in this respect. The percentages of men and women who wanted to have children were the same, but more women than men were undecided, and fewer women said that they did not want to have children. These differences between genders, however, are not statistically significant (see table 1).

TABLE 1  
DESIRE TO HAVE CHILDREN BY GENDER

|              | Gender   |            | Total (%) |
|--------------|----------|------------|-----------|
|              | Male (%) | Female (%) |           |
| Yes          | 39.4     | 39.7       | 39.5      |
| No           | 39.7     | 33.8       | 37.7      |
| I don't know | 15.4     | 21.2       | 17.4      |
| Other        | 5.5      | 5.3        | 5.4       |
| Total        | 100      | 100        | 100       |

NOTE: F = 0.916; DF = 3; SIG = 0.433.

The desire to have children varies with age. Younger lesbians and gays want to postpone this decision seeing family life and similar issues as distant events in their life courses. On the other hand, older respondents

<sup>1</sup> The research comprised two empirical parts. The first, quantitative included face-to-face structured interviews on a sample of 443 gays and lesbian carried out from April to June 2003. Sampling was done using the snowball method. The second, qualitative part of the research, was carried out from May to July 2004, included group interviews with 7 focus groups (4 male and 3 female) that included 36 people. The director of the research project was Alenka Švab. For details see <[www.mirovni-institut.si/glb](http://www.mirovni-institut.si/glb)> and Švab and Kuhar (2005).

expressed a kind of resignation and acceptance of the fact that in Slovenia a homosexual person has only a small chance of having a child. The share of older gays and lesbians who do not wish to have children is higher than that of younger ones. The proportion of younger respondents who did not want children was also high, however there was a greater chance that they would postpone decisions regarding family life. For the same reason, there are also many undecided young gays and lesbians (see table 2).

TABLE 2  
DESIRE TO HAVE CHILDREN BY AGE (IN PERCENT)

| Age          | 16 to 20 | 21 to 25 | 26 to 30 | 31 to 40 | 41 and more | Total |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------|
| Yes          | 52.5     | 45       | 41.6     | 31       | 15.4        | 39.5  |
| No           | 37.5     | 26.5     | 34.5     | 48.7     | 69.2        | 37.7  |
| I don't know | 7.5      | 25.2     | 20.4     | 11.5     |             | 17.4  |
| Other        | 2.5      | 3.3      | 3.5      | 8.8      | 15.4        | 5.4   |

NOTE: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AGE GROUPS WERE STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT ( $P = 10.877$ ;  $DF = 3$ ;  $SIG = 0.000$ ).

There is an interestingly high share of those who do not want children in the third and fourth age group, especially if we take into account the share of the undecided, which is significantly smaller in comparison with the second and the third age group. When becoming older, gays and lesbians probably become reconciled with the fact that in Slovenia the chances for them to have children are slim. Women without male partners in general are not entitled to artificial reproductive treatment, and at the same time gay and lesbian couples cannot adopt children in Slovenia.

#### RATIONALIZATION OF DESIRE

Because of the absence of socially prescribed patterns of reproductive behaviour for same-sex couples (as there are for the heterosexual population), gays and lesbians may create new ways of family and living arrangements like "families of choice" (Weston 1991; Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy 1999a). Their statements, views and decisions about parenthood are left to be subjective to a greater extent than one might expect to be the case in the heterosexual population. Gays and lesbians are free to create their own reproductive choices that do not exist within the matrix of heteronormative reproductive behaviour, and can therefore reinvent the dominant discourses about family life.



When you declare yourself as a lesbian, you find out that life is not just about templates that are imposed on straight couples, but much more (Eva, 26).<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, having fallen out of the heterosexual reproductive matrix, they are exposed to the pressures of the heteronormative social context since same-sex parenthood is socially perceived as undesirable and made legally impossible. In this way, gays and lesbians are exposed to several obstacles, problems and fears regarding parenthood and children. Reasons for not having children or expressing reservations regarding parenthood may have various objective and subjective backgrounds,<sup>3</sup> but in some cases the rejection of potential parenthood can in itself be a mechanism to deal with the heteronormative reality and with the obstacles that arise from social contexts that are unfavourable to gay and lesbian parenthood.

The desire to become a parent remains a question of principle for both gays and lesbians in Slovenia. According to the stated statistics, a significant share of gays and lesbians would like to have children, but as focus group participants stated, they are also aware that the chances in this respect are slight. They also expressed anxiety regarding potential negative reactions on the part of the society, and effects on their potential children. Some openly admitted that they suppress thoughts about having children, because of fear that any serious consideration of how to get their own child would be too burdensome given the small chance.

I haven't thought about these things often, because I don't have the courage for this, because I would immediately become depressed. . . . Because I think, on the one hand gays and lesbians are robbed of a basic mechanism of socialisation. We are absent in the part in which children are added into the partnership. . . . And this part can be very crucial in the development of every individual. . . . Maybe a family with a child would be a qualitative shift in the way of thinking (Borut, 30).

In facing the limited possibilities of becoming a parent, gays and lesbians use various coping strategies. The most common is some form of rationalisation of the situation. Some gays and lesbians completely dismiss the idea of becoming a parent by stating clearly that they do not want to

<sup>2</sup> All names mentioned here are invented. The number next to the name indicates the age of the participant in the focus group.

<sup>3</sup> In some cases, sexual orientation is not directly linked to the decision of not having children. Some do not want to have children and explicitly state that this has nothing to do with their sexual orientation: "All this care [for children]—I don't know, the fact that I'm a lesbian has nothing to do with my desires" (Amalija, 26).



have children at all, and expressing an anxiety that they will most probably never become parents. Such anxiety is present in everyday life, for example in facing heterosexual peers, who have already become parents:

And then they [some friends from high school] became parents and suddenly they started to show their children around. When you meet them, they are with their children—Then I ask myself: “What is this? When am I going to be a parent?” Or when I go through the park and see fathers of my own age playing with their children. And this burdens me because then I start to think about it (Gašper, 27).

The anxiety may even lead to the experience of guilt and denial of the right to parenthood:

I have this need and desire and I admit it. At times it seems to me a bit controversial. As if I felt guilty for having that desire, because I'm gay. In the past year and a half I sort of got rid of it. Of course I can have that desire, where is it written that I cannot? (Gašper, 27).

Concerns about the negative impacts of heteronormative social contexts on potential parenthood and children may also lead to the argument often presented in public debates about the right of gays and lesbians to parenthood, namely that heteronormative society is not mature enough to accept same-sex families and the fact that gays and lesbians are parents. Although stated in a different context than in the arguments against gay and lesbian parenthood put forward by conservative opponents, some gays and lesbians also express such arguments indirectly:

I don't know, I wouldn't have a child because of this society. I wouldn't like that child to be picked on by everybody. Although, I know it would be picked on for other things too—no, and I'd also like to get more from life, not only—perhaps when I'm older (Vivika, 27).

I don't accept the argument that we cannot adopt because we are not progressive enough. But, on the other hand, I think that if I myself find it sometimes difficult to endure all these states of mind in our society, then perhaps it wouldn't be any easier for the child either. . . . Can you create a context free of these prejudices at all? (Gašper, 27).

Replacement of actual parenthood by taking over social roles similar to parental roles (e.g. being an uncle or an aunt, a family friend and similar) is another mechanism of dealing with questions of parenthood. For some gays and lesbians having contacts with children (other than their own) from their social networks of friends and family members is



enough to satisfy their desires for having children to a certain degree:

I have no need to have my own child. I have just enough contacts with children (Ksenja, 30).

Some even create an idea of imaginary motherhood which functions as a sort of replacement for a real motherhood—another mechanism to deal with anxieties regarding gay or lesbian parenthood:

I got used to my imaginary motherhood or to have motherhood and children on an imaginary level. . . . I became reconciled with this. . . . As lesbians, we cannot give birth to children out of a lesbian love. I'm always telling this to myself (Ksenja, 30).

Gays and lesbians use various coping strategies related to potential parenthood as at present none of the societies (not even the Western ones) seems to be completely open to gay and lesbian parenthood and family arrangements: “Stigma in various forms, despite all the changes that have taken place, is always a potential experience of lesbians and gays, however ‘respectable’ the relationship” (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1999b, 313). However, the extent of using such strategies and the level of self-suppressing of the desire of becoming a parent can largely depend on the extent a society is pervaded with homophobia and the “institutional hatred of homosexuality” (Stacey 1996, 107). As Slovenia is a country with a high rate of homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians (Švab and Kuhar 2005), frequently expressed anxieties of our respondents regarding their reproductive preferences are probably a reflection as well as a direct product of the given social circumstances.

#### DO GAYS AND LESBIANS HOLD CONVENTIONAL VIEWS ON PARENTHOOD?

Within gay and lesbian family and living arrangements various forms of social parenthood are becoming increasingly practised in Western countries (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1999a; Stacey 2006). Some of our respondents were also in favour of unconventional options of parenthood and family life.

If I had a very good female friend, who would let's say be a lesbian and would also like to have a child, and neither of us could become parents, then we could make an alliance. This is only one idea on how the thing could function (Andrej, 25).

However, others in contemplating their possible options for acquiring a child, often emphasize biological aspects parenthood. As in the case of the heterosexual population, some gays and lesbians seem to be also



more in favour of biological parenthood:

It's a little bit tragic that you cannot have a child physically with a woman you love. This seems to me a very painful side of the issue (Vida, 28).

And I also dislike it a bit that it cannot be the child from both of us (Monika, 26).

Social parenthood or adoption on the other hand is often seen as a fall-back option. Although frequently mentioned, it is often framed within an ethical awareness, and not explicitly as a realistic option of becoming a parent:

Although I would absolutely adopt every child if he or she needs help. This is not a problem (Miha, 38).

I don't have any need to have my own child—like for example, it seems to me the same case as to buy a dog with pedigree while so many dogs are in the shelters (Maruša, 27).

All participants in the focus group interviews actually talked about *potential* options regarding parenthood as none of them were parents themselves. Facing the situation where one actually decides to have a child can produce additional anxieties. In that case one might confront some ethical questions that can also represent barriers to becoming a parent:

Yes, of course I thought about that [how to become pregnant], yes, but it's a torment for me. Another way is to have sex with someone just like that—but—how can one go and look around for some guy just to be inseminated? And you don't get pregnant immediately and you go into a discotheque ten times. When you start to think about it concretely it becomes a torment. And then you can also have a child with someone you know. No way would I ask a friend to inseminate me. I think, what kind of a man could he be to inseminate me and then the child would be just mine and he wouldn't want to have anything to do with him/her. You don't find such people around. Therefore I was quite in distress for some time (Tara, 30).

Besides the often expressed importance of biological aspects of parenthood, some gays and lesbians have reservations regarding the unconventional options of becoming a parent, especially those which result in unconventional family living arrangements:

I don't think it's fair to go with one woman just to make her pregnant. The option that one gay couple and one lesbian couple have a child together—I don't approve of that. If I wanted a child I would adopt him/her, although this also has some other negative



aspects—a child could reproach me with the fact that I'm not his father, “You have chosen me from a catalogue!” (Matjaž, 25).

Then, there is that other option—that one partner has a child. If my girlfriend, ok, my wife, had a child, then I'd not be a part of that picture. I'd not be a part of that child. I don't like this idea (Vivika, 27).

It seems absurd to me to make a reservation with Ryan Air and fly to London to have an appointment with a doctor for artificial insemination and then fly back home. It's absurd. It looks to me like a film of Almodovar's. I cannot see myself in this option (Tara, 30).

Some gays and lesbians might hold traditional views on parenthood and emphasize the importance of the (two) gendered role-model of (heterosexual) parenting for the “proper” psychological development of children, and biological aspects of parenthood that are commonly incorporated in the ideology of heterosexual parenthood.

I do not agree with children growing up in homosexual partnerships, because a child really needs a strong father and a tender mother and two gays or two lesbians cannot give him/her that. No way (Gabrijel, 40).

This can lead to the question whether such statements could be interpreted as conventional and conservative views on parenting. While we do not have a clear answer, we can assume that (at least some) gays and lesbians do not differ regarding some views on parenting from the heterosexual population, thus conventional views on parenting are present to a certain extent regardless of sexual orientation. On the other hand, one cannot overlook specific social contexts that might influence gay and lesbian (un-conventional) views on parenting. They might function as a (self-defence) mechanism through which gays and lesbians deal with social stigma of homosexual parenting and also with personal desire of becoming a parent.

The importance of the “proper” upbringing of a child and the concerns regarding gender roles, gender identity and even future sexual orientation of a child, expressed by our respondents, can be related to the fact that heteronormative societies neither acknowledge the existence of gay and lesbian parenthood nor provide social patterns to be followed by them in this respect. This might put pressures on gay and lesbian parents not only to invent new parenting practices on a daily basis but also to prove to the society and to themselves that they can successfully carry out parental roles. Polaskova (2007) notes, for example, that some gay and lesbian parents expressed concerns regarding particular aspects of their children's healthy development, and some were even “proud to express their joy over the fact that their three-year-old daughter was





trying on high-heeled shoes” as a sign of child’s healthy development. Although previous research extensively reports on findings emphasizing that there is no difference between the psychological development of children living in heterosexual or homosexual families (Golombok 2001; Clarke and Kitzinger 2005), it is clear that influence of traditional ideas of parenting and views that arise from two-role model theory are still very much persistent, also in the gay and lesbian population.

The rather traditional views on parenting and proper upbringing of children may also be linked to the widespread and socially imposed high imperatives of parenting, putting pressure on parents to provide their children with as good an education, upbringing and welfare as possible (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1999; Švab 2001). As heterosexual parents, same-sex parents too perceive the care and well-being of the child as the most important responsibility and they may place it over and above the relationship itself (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1999a, 96).

I’d have them [children] but on the other hand it seems to me that once you’re a mother you cannot simply say “now I won’t do it any more, I’ll go on a ten-day holiday.” I think it is a great responsibility and for the time being I don’t see myself in this (Ana, 26).

I do want to have a child, but first I want a job, and lots of money—for the child. And an apartment with a separate room for the child (Monika, 26).

Falling out of the matrix of heteronormative parenthood and lacking social recognition, gays and lesbians face obstacles that bring additional pressures on the issues of parenting and upbringing, not characteristic for the heterosexual population. The imperative of supportive parenthood—being always there for the child at all costs—may also arise from social anxieties regarding same-sex families, and consequently the predictable negative reactions that children of these families would face due to the parents’ sexual orientation (Švab and Kuhar 2005; Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1999a, 96).

I would like to have children but definitely won’t have them, because I’m a lesbian. There is an option but this would mean that I had to come out 100% everywhere and absolutely, and only then have a child to whom I could offer an absolute support (Eva, 26).

Although they are aware that the problem originates in a homophobic society, responsibilities for the consequences of homophobic reactions are transferred to gays and lesbians themselves, emphasizing the importance of the “right” upbringing of children in homosexual families.

In their view, the task of homosexual parents is to protect the child by preparing him/her to handle the homophobic reactions of society:

The thing is only in the upbringing of a child: if the child is unprepared for the treatment on the part of society, it is the same as if it is unprepared for teasing because it is not a Slovene (Martin, 25).

Although such interpretations of gay and lesbian parenthood are in good faith, they also unintentionally reproduce negative views on same-sex parenthood by consenting to the argument that homosexual orientation of a parent in itself would have negative effects on a child in the form of homophobic reactions on the part of society.

Such and such numbers of children live in families where fathers or mothers are alcoholics, or they live only with mothers . . . and if those children grow up, why couldn't they grow up in homosexual relationships? (Igor, 27).

Such defensive arguments can easily fall into the trap of reproducing discriminatory distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual parenthood, and are common in debates about same-sex parenthood, for example in the debates about the notion that children (especially boys) need male role models. Although arguing against the role-model theory, defensive arguments are usually based on idea of replacement of the male role model within the broader family and kinship networks or in society at large (i.e. children of same-sex parents have sufficient number of role-models within a kinship network and in other spheres of social life). Polaskova (2007) states for example, that some parents in her research "were confident about sufficient exposure to gender role models via their wider family social network." By such argumentation gays and lesbians unintentionally remain in the context of role model debates, which in turn sustain traditional understandings of gender and sexual development (Clarke and Kitzinger 2005) and a social organisation of family and private life that favours heterosexual living arrangements.

## CONCLUSION

Research on everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia (Švab and Kuhar 2005) revealed a specific process of privatisation of everyday life of gays and lesbians. The pressure of the heterosexual norm compels many gays and lesbians to restrict the expression of their same-sex orientation to seemingly safe private spaces. Gay and lesbian parenting and non-heterosexual living and family arrangements in general seem to be a prominent example of this phenomenon. Drawing from the statements of gays and lesbians when talking about their parenthood and reproductive preferences, it could be said that it is exactly the issue of parenthood where gays and lesbians are caught in the closet to the most radical extent, leading to a denial of possible parental identity and roles and putting pressures of the issue of upbringing on gays and lesbians themselves.

While some Western countries are facing the so-called “gayby” boom, “a situation wherein lesbian women and gay people are opting into parenthood in increasing numbers” (Dunne 2000, 12), it seems that in general non-heterosexual parenthood is still tabooed (Golombok 2001; Švab and Kuhar 2005). Out of the stories of non-heterosexual parenting, identified by Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy (2001), in Slovenia only the story that non-heterosexual identity precludes parenting is being told, while the stories of non-heterosexuals becoming parents either in a (past) heterosexual context or by negotiating various other options (adoption, artificial insemination, co-parenting etc.) are very rare, hidden in a private sphere or made impossible.

The analysed statements of gays and lesbians in Slovenian research show that gay and lesbian thoughts about parenthood are primarily shaped by the obstacles imposed by a heteronormative society. Their preferences regarding parenthood and children are either suppressed or rationalised. Often, a fear of the consequences of their sexual orientation might have on their potential children, precludes the idea of becoming a parent anyway. The consequences of this fear are additionally reinforced by the mere fact that gay and lesbian parenthood still has no legal background in Slovenia and some options of becoming a parent (such as adoption and assisted insemination) are not legally available for gays and lesbians.

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