

SAME-SEX FAMILIES (IN SLOVENIA): THE NEW MINORITY?¹

ANA MARIJA SOBOČAN

The paper focuses on same-sex families, which are becoming a more visible family reality also in societies which don't legally recognize same-sex partnerships and don't allow adoption for same-sex partners. It discusses the realities of same-sex families in Slovenia, their life-world, their practices in the struggle for social recognition, as well as for their own secure position in two worlds: one of family and one of homosexuality. The discussion is based on the research about same-sex families in Slovenia: sixteen parents from same-sex families were interviewed in nine interviews, which were each conducted twice in the period between 2008 and 2011. The findings are valuable in shedding light on the shifts between visibility and minority position, which can also be used in forming suggestions for supporting these families. Also importantly, the paper familiarizes the readers with the life-world of same-sex families, still quite absent from the public discourse.

Keywords: homosexuality, same-sex families, family, minority, rights.

SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

In recent years, same-sex families are becoming more and more visible also in societies which don't legally or socially recognize homosexual parents and their children as a family, or discriminate against them on the basis of the parent's non-normative sexuality. Their visibility increasingly roots also in strategic considerations: visibility is recognized as a necessary behaviour or tool used to promote recognition and 'normalize' (make part of the mainstream) also non-normative identities. In this respect, a discussion connected with a certain group's minority position can contribute to understanding how group identity can be of importance in achieving specific goals, or negotiating a particular position. In this paper, such transitions between minority position and visibility as a space of struggle for equal rights will be discussed. The focus will be on same-sex families, which are becoming a more visible family reality also in societies which don't legally recognize same-sex

Adresa de contact a autorului: Ana Marija Sobočan, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, Topniška 31, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: ana.sobocan@fsd.uni-lj.si.

¹ The idea for the title came after: *LGBT Families – The New Minority* conference, and was coined by dr. Roman Kuhar.

partnerships, or does not allow adoption for same-sex partners. The paper is based on research among same-sex families in Slovenia, and on their realities, their life-world, their practices and their struggle for social recognition. These families are trying to secure their own position in two worlds: one of 'family' and one of 'homosexuality', as a minority in both of these worlds.

A minority, as a sociological group, is a group that differentiates from the dominant, majority group, in terms of social status, political power and/or other instances. The term often appears in discourses on civil and collective rights, and minority groups negotiate their position with different strategies. For example, Morton and Postmes describe minority group essentialism, a response to treatment received by the majority, which is linked to the perceived opportunities afforded by the social structure, and associated with feelings of empowerment (2009: 667). Nevertheless, essentialist ideas (essentialism as an aspect of identity expression) have two sides of the coin: on the one hand, they can provide a strong argument for the recognition of minority identity, on the other, majorities use essentialist ideas to support discrimination (Morton and Postmes, 2009). Minority essentialism is reported as a positive strategy by sexual minorities (*ibid.*), precisely because of the relative choice about identity identification: while some identities are marked and are immediately identifiable (such as are often ethnicity and gender), other can sometimes be kept invisible (such as sexual identity). Homosexual individuals can sometimes or usually choose or choose not to identify with the homosexual minority, they can manage their disclosure in interaction with the current environment: their identity isn't necessarily visible in all contexts. Non-normative sexual communities are often represented and experienced as both territorial and non-territorial, both coexisting with the 'normative community' but not a part of it, both spatially a 'counter-community', but not reducible to it; common to them are the binary of invisibility and visibility, and the move towards visibility is fraught with problems and contradictions (Moran, 2007: 435).

Also individuals – partners in same-sex families, might not always prefer to disclose their sexuality, even if their sexuality is no longer seen as what could be possibly called 'their own, individual' identity, but the whole family is marked by it. It is sometimes argued that coming out is associated with greater self-esteem and less anxiety, but nevertheless, visibility often makes same-sex families very vulnerable, especially in contexts where same-sex partnerships are not (legally) recognized as equal. This vulnerability can involve, for example: fear of losing custody of a child, rejection, disapproval, harassment in the immediate environment, extended families, stigma, harassment and discrimination in life-spheres of the family (school, job, health-care environments, etc.), etc. The decision against disclosure is intensified also by what Smith (1995, in Richardson, 2000: 269) calls the obligation of the 'homosexual citizen': in

return for certain rights of toleration, homosexual persons need to/are coerced to remain within socially and legally defined boundaries of the private, to remain closeted².

It could be claimed that also same-sex families (which are labelled with the homosexuality of the parents) are, thus, socially encouraged to be/remain hidden, as a result of silencing individuals, families and communities which are not heterosexual. Ward and Winstanley (2003) use the term 'absent presence' to encapsulate the dynamic of minority sexual identity and the role of silencing³ (Hancock and Tyler, 2001, in Ward and Winstanley, 2003). This ordering is based in binary oppositions, which are not equal, but exist in hierarchical relationships. Even more, as Derrida (1998) explained with his term 'différance', these terms are not only in hierarchy: the first, superior term is actually also defined by the second, inferior term.

This inferiority is often, or always, experienced by homosexual adults parenting together, at least in countries where same-sex partnerships are not recognized as equal. For example, the parents in Slovenia feel that together with their children, they are second-class citizens, not afforded the same rights by the state as other (heterosexual) citizens (Sobočan, 2009). In relation to homosexual citizenship, Richardson gives a telling summary of conceptualizations of lesbian citizenship, which shows the different sets of approaches for claiming citizenship: she writes about (1) partial or 'unjust' citizenship, which accounts on how lesbians are denied rights within legal and welfare systems, based on heterosexuality and the 'family', (2) Robson's (1992, in Richardson 2000) 'lesbian-specific' system of rules of justice governing claims to citizenship (lesbian citizenship not claiming a set of equal rights demands in the law which is founded on heterosexual or male laws), (3), Phelan's (1994, 1995, in Richardson 2000) 'space of citizenship', a claim to political participation and public recognition, which includes both specific demands by lesbians, while understanding lesbian identities as fluid and shifting – not all sharing the same concerns (Richardson, 2000: 264–265). These directions towards claiming equal citizenship speak of the issues and complexity of exclusion/discrimination and the political fights for equality and rights. They demonstrate that sexual minorities (individuals, families, communities) will have unique needs, as long as the sexuality of persons and parents is stigmatized.

² A study entitled *The Unbearable Comfort of Privacy* (2005) was published by Švab and Kuhar, on the results of the first research of the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia. They write about the transparent closet – a closet that discloses, but nevertheless keeps homosexual individuals inside.

³ They derive it from Derrida's concept of deconstruction, which helps to understand how truth is ordered in discourse and how certain terms come to be marginalized (*ibid.*)

SAME-SEX PARENTING IN SLOVENIA⁴

Sexuality and reproduction often become the focus of gendered national identity politics, not only in regions with high degrees of religiosity, for example, such as Poland (Kramer, 2003, Standish, 1998, in Smyth, 2006), The Republic of Ireland (Smyth, 2005, in Smyth, 2006), South Asia (Jeffery and Basu, 1997, in Smyth, 2006), the US (Ferree et al., 2002, Hill Collins, 1999, in Smyth, 2006), Italy (Krause, 2001, in Smyth, 2006), Israel (Portugese, 1998, in Smyth, 2006), but also in more secular contexts, such as Britain (Brown and Ferree, 2005, in Smyth, 2006), or Russia (Marsh, 1998, in Smyth, 2006). It has to be noted that the family⁵ as a concept always functions in the frame of current ideologies, and is an ideologically laden concept. In this context, it is presented as the sole possible/acceptable unit of reproduction – of humankind, nation and ‘proper’ values –, and until recent legislative changes in some countries, the family concept has been in opposition with homosexuality. This means that homosexual individuals have been, and often still, are excluded from the traditional frameworks of reproduction and family creation, and as writes Calhoun (2000), the term ‘family’ was used as a reactionary tool, repeatedly invoked to deny participation of gay men and lesbians in the civil society. The ‘omnipotent’ role of reproduction, perceived as a domain of heterosexual intercourse, was used as an argument speaking against the legitimacy of family structures with partners of the same sex as ‘un-natural’ and, at the same time, functioned as a tool of regulation – denying homosexual individuals and partners the right to assisted reproduction and adoption. Therefore, Weeks et al. (2001) claim that non-heterosexuals are at the forefront of wider changes to family life. Such an argument is supported also by Haines and Weiner’s (2000) discussion about the three challenges of the non-heterosexual family life to the normative family model (Haines and Weiner, 2000): ideological (it destabilizes fixed sexual roles and

⁴ Short historical overview: homosexuality was decriminalized in Slovenia in 1976; in the ‘80’s, a homosexual subculture is evolving. The first organized event that introduced the gay and lesbian movement in Slovenia was in 1984 (festival *Magnus*). Since 2005, same-sex partners can register their partnership by law, which is in many ways discriminatory, in comparison to different-sex partners’ unions. By an appeal, in 2009 the Supreme Court has advised that one of the articles be changed, which would introduce slightly more (but by far not full) equality with different-sex partnerships. This has not happened yet.

⁵ ‘Family’ is in this paper understood as a unit of adult(s) and children. Different terms will be used for the family structure of same-sex parents interchangeably – non-heterosexual family, same-sex family, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender) family. Mothers are labelled social mothers (parent who doesn’t have a biological tie to the child) and birth mothers (parent who has a biological tie to the child), abbreviations will be used in quotations (sm/bm). This labelling of families and parents is only terminological, but not also semantic – the terminological differentiation is only needed for one of the perspectives in this paper – to explore the position of non-heterosexual family and non-biological parent in relation to heteronormative family models. This differentiation is, thus, made only to render different positions and (social, legal) statuses of mothers to analysis, not to make distinctions in parental roles or definitions.

phantasms about who/what is/can be a mother), structural (it changes the family constellation, accepted as the only proper one), and biogenetic (reproduction is not anymore restricted to different-sex partners, it can avoid heterosexual intercourse and even the help of medicine). These challenges also fuel the 'fear' from non-heterosexual, non-heteronormative and non-nuclear family models, with warnings that they induce the erosion of the 'family' by being different from the norm.

The debate on what a family is and who has the legal and moral right to be a parent, was at the focus also in Slovenia for the past four years, when new family legislation was drafted, proposed and, finally, rejected⁶. The present law that regulates relationships between partners and children speaks only of the heterosexual partnership and marriage, which, practically, means that same-sex partners with children cannot use legal tools to deal with specific partnership needs, family needs and needs of the child in relation to both partners (see also Zaviršek, 2009). The legal 'invisibility' of a same-sex family as a unit is generated, framed and maintained also by the cultural attitudes towards non-heterosexual families and parents, who form, as can be claimed, a socially unwanted form of family life. Nevertheless, mostly because of the debates about the new family legislation, same-sex families have exited the social invisibly, and thus find themselves in an interesting position between experienced discrimination and (possible) recognition.

Until recently, stories of same-sex families and non-heterosexuals becoming parents were very rare, hidden in private or ignored in Slovenia (Švab, 2007, *cf.* Jakomin, 2006). Between (legal) invisibility and cultural stereotypes, same-sex parents in Slovenia seem to be in a constant position of negotiating their place between marginal status attributed to them by the broader heterosexual population, and possibly some kind of mainstream conformity, as parenting by lesbians and gays has until recently not been one of the agendas of the LGBT community (Sobočan, 2011). In the previous research it was visible that both of these positions are deeply experienced by the parents themselves: they feel that they are on the border of what is considered to be normative by both the homosexual and heterosexual community, and feel the need to express a 'sameness' of their family lives with the normative (heterosexual) family (Sobočan, 2009). Simultaneously, they have managed to introduce the topic of family rights into the LGBT agendas. The outcomes of these processes and experiences of the border-position are multiple. Some of them can be described with feelings of constant pressure of 'justifying' and demonstrating the 'appropriateness' of family life in non-heterosexual families. Also, these families are

⁶ The proposal of the new Family Code, among other things, introduced equality between same-sex and different-sex partners, with the use of the term 'person' instead of 'man' and 'woman' in relation to marital and familial relationships. The law was accepted by the parliamentary vote, but was later overturned by the vote at a referendum, initiated by civil society groups (right-wing, religious – Roman Catholic, etc.). These civil society groups object the adoption of the whole law based on and because of their disapproval of what rights it would bring to homosexual persons.

building a sense of belonging by forming a community that is both homosexual and parental. The parents are also constructing strategies of how to claim parental identity for both parents, both in the symbolic, as well as legal sense.

This border position constructs same-sex families as a minority group in both the heterosexual (dominant) and the homosexual (non-dominant) community. In this paper, I reflect how same-sex families in Slovenia deal with experiencing this minority status and discuss what kind of strategies they apply to counter their minority position. I will draw on a research among lesbian mothers comprised of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were carried out in the winter 2007 and spring 2008, and again in summer 2011, interviewing each respondent twice.

The principal method of sampling was the snow-ball method: I asked the interviewees to recommend me to their friends, acquaintances etc. and invite them to be part of the research. This proved to be the most appropriate way for recruiting individuals and families – with first establishing some indirect trust in the researcher. Additionally, adds (calls for participations) were published on *LGBT* websites, internet forums and Facebook: and a small number of participants was also recruited this way, by them contacting me in relation to the interview. This kind of dissemination of the research call contributed to recognisability of the research also for the latter phases – such as the interest of the media and dissemination of the research results. Finally, 16 interviews were conducted, with each respondent twice (32 interviews all together). The decision to interview each person twice was methodologically important, as I wanted to detect or investigate, if and how the perceptions, strategies and life-realities of the interviewees have changes in roughly three years. The principle focus of the research was to explore the everyday realities of same-sex families and their strategies for dealing with the environments they live in on the border between visibility (active claiming of rights) and invisibility (protecting against homophobia). The interview guide followed their life-course – from partnership, decision to have a child (where no children were present from a previous relationship) or approaches to claiming a parental status (where children were present from previous relationships), to discussing strategies of coming out both as homosexual parents in the heterosexual world, and as parents in the homosexual world. The questions allowed the respondents to answer broadly, discussing the various aspects of their partnership and family life, as well as responses from and experiences with the environment, expectations they have regarding more equality and their own active approaches to making their parental and family position more equal.

Interviews were conducted in nine families⁷, whereby seven interviews were conducted with both partners in the couple, and two interviews were individual.

⁷ This sample clearly does not allow for any generalizations, and it is not even the intention of this paper to homogenize the image of female same-sex families. What I believe it shows, is the diversity of experiences, which is of greater informative (and maybe even epistemological) value.

16 (lesbian) women were interviewed, ranging from their late 20s to early 50s. Most families were located in highly urban areas (the first and the second largest city in Slovenia, or their satellite cities), and one family in a non-urban area. In these families, 18 children are growing-up: 10 children were at this time attending kindergarten, four children were in primary school, three in secondary school and one at the university. Eight children were born in a heterosexual relationship (in three families), three children were conceived in a foreign fertility clinic with the use of anonymous donor sperm (in two families), one child was adopted abroad and six children were conceived by insemination at home, using donor sperm (in three families). In one case of donor insemination at home, it is intended that the donor remains unknown, in four cases the donor will optionally be revealed to the child and other significant persons, and in one case, the donor is also an active father, co-parenting with the female couple. In other cases, the children have more or less active fathers (children conceived in a heterosexual partnership), or have no information about where the donor cell originates (children conceived via anonymous donor insemination). The parents were in the current same-sex partnership on average for 9.3 years.

NON-NORMATIVE FAMILIES: CHALLENGING MODELS AND LAWS

“When you do something like this, you show there is a way, you give a model,” (Ines, social mother(sm)) one of the respondents told me. The research sample includes different paths of how these (lesbian) women became parents, but what is common to all is that two mothers, creating a family together are constructing a model that demands for a redefinition of what is considered traditional parenthood (Dunne, 2000). Most of the interviewees expressed a strong commitment to both parents being involved in mothering the child(ren), which is supported also by the lack of gendered roles between the parents and a more equal division of care-work. Almost all respondents clearly expressed a wish for a change in the law that would recognize the relationship between the social mother and her child, thus granting a legal status of the mother to both parents.

You become a mother automatically, if you give birth to a child. But I don’t feel any more a mother than my partner does (Cirila, biological mother(bm)).

In the absence of both women being recognized as parents, they invent ways to provide the social mother with recognition of having parental rights, which, in certain cases, began even before pregnancy.

She gave birth and I think also because for me it is easier to fight for my child than it would be for her. I have fewer problems saying to everyone that this is our child, so it makes more sense that she, and not I, is biologically connected to the child. For me, coming out is like a national sport: I tell everything to everybody. And I categorically refuse the question which one gave birth: I am the mother and that’s that (Zala, sm).

Attempts to downsize the symbolic and legal dissonance between the birth mother and the social mother were especially clear, when two women were planning to have children together, and they were conceived and born during the relationship. Some mothers also considered adoption, which might be the option that positions both parents most equally (Švab and Kuhar, 2005: 110), but they usually discarded that option, as joint adoption for same-sex partners is not possible in Slovenia. In reorganized families, where children have been born in a previous (heterosexual) relationship, it was also important to parents that the children accept the new parent. This was particularly challenging when this meant that, with a new partnership, the mother actually also came out as a lesbian to her children and others.

They have immediately accepted her [the partner] as their parent and completely accepted our relationship. They have realized that I am not completely theirs anymore, but also that they themselves have gained a lot, that they now have two parents that love them (Blanka, bm).

Eva, for example, has told me how her children appreciated the fact that in a relationship with a woman, their mother is finally happy after a long and violent (heterosexual) marriage.

In discussing what they think it means for the children to live in a family with two mothers, Alenka has clearly expressed that it is others who 'teach' children that there is something different about them, that they live in a lesbian family, not simply in a family:

If you ask a child about what it means growing-up in a lesbian family, a child would say: what do you mean, what is a lesbian family? Our children don't question the families they live in; they talk about it in kindergarten to other kids and for them it is nothing strange. You only understand that you live in a lesbian family when you face the remarks and stereotypes of others. It's the reaction of other adults, and then you know (Alenka, bm).

Generally, almost all women in the research would agree that there is nothing different about their family, and as Janja (bm/sm) said, "Average Slovenian family. Two kids and a dog. A flat and a car". This feeling of sameness was very important to many respondents, but what they identify as specific to growing up in a family with two mothers, is the unequal (legal) status of same-sex families and dealing with the reactions of the environment. They felt that they will be able to equip their children with enough self-confidence which will enable them to endure negative reactions and teasing from their peers. There seems to be a general consensus, that children in kindergarten environments are relatively 'safe', but many await the primary school setting as where first difficulties will surface. In one of the families, two children (attending secondary school and university) have 'outed' their mothers to their peers, and have both had good experiences with it.

Each family has its specificities that make you worry. So I have never said that it would be easier if we were straight [heterosexual] and one of us was a man, instead of two women (Cirila, bm).

At the same time, they see the experience of living in a same-sex parented family reality as making children more tolerant and sensible to diversity among people and other people's suffering. They also see that their children are more open and free to explore who they are, also sexually:

Yesterday, when you were doing the dishes [says to her partner], I gave you a kiss, and she [the daughter] said to the dog: 'You see, this is love!' She likes boys, but she also knows that she can like whoever she wants. Maybe most of the kids don't even know that it is possible, and that there is nothing wrong with that (Andreja, bm/sm).

THE PERSONAL-PUBLIC CONTINUUM

Lesbians who become parents, and women who are already parents, and then enter into a relationship with a woman, experience their family situation being looked at through the prism of sexuality, and have to come out (as lesbians) to be able to claim joint parental status.

Same-sex parents have a lot to negotiate, which the heterosexuals don't need to do. Who to tell, with whom to share the context, to whom to come out, whom to tell that the kid has two mums, from kindergarten to everyone around us. It never ends. Coming out is not a once-and-for-all, but you do it a thousand times, every day (Žana, sm).

Almost all respondents would agree that when a female couple gets a child, this would also entail a step outside the privacy of an intimate relationship. If they didn't do so before, most of them come out to the wider family, many times also to colleagues at work, neighbours 'identify' the nature of the relationship, in previously heterosexual families mothers come out to their children... One of the respondents, Renata, was more reserved about coming out to her children as she believes she has to protect them from the burden of (their) coming out in a (non-urban) environment, which is very homophobic and gendered, where marriages are occasionally still being arranged, and where, for example, when it became clear she was divorced and, thus, single, she got a male visitor in the middle of the night who wanted to have intercourse with her. Because she called the police for being harassed, she was harshly condemned by the environment. Renata believes that it would be easier for her and her children if they were living in an urban environment, for example, in the capital Ljubljana, but in the present situation, she thinks it is better to come out to the children when they were older (cc. 12 or in secondary school).

The parents chose the situations and people to whom they come out, and to what degree they explain any details in their family life, but in comparison to the first set of interviews (2007–2008), in the second set (2011) parents were more

consciously disclosing their family reality, in order to be able to claim their parental status and to conscientize the society. This process is important both for de-tabooing joint parenting of two mothers, as well as individual lived experience of parenthood, especially for social parents, who might even more deeply feel the legal, symbolic and cultural exclusion.

When the first child was born, I was very reserved in my parenthood, I felt that my role as a parent is not very well defined. I didn't feel as an equal parent, I felt I still have to articulate my parenthood – at the beginning I even told her [the birth mother] only she should push the pram in the city, in case anyone would ask anything... (Anita, sm).

The lack of models of same-sex family life, the roles of both mothers and legal recognition can be especially aggravating for those parents who don't know any other same-sex families. When Anita and her partner were planning to have their first child, they thought they were alone in this endeavour; when the child was born, Anita as a social parent, didn't even think of claiming any rights (parenting leave, etc.) that come automatically for (social or biological) fathers – she simply thought these are rights that belong only to recognized (heterosexual) parents. A couple of years later, with the second child, she first studied all the legislation to see if there are any 'blind' spots which allow also for some more inclusion of social parents of the same sex, and is now planning to fight for her and her children's rights.

It all depends on how you position yourself. If you put on an air of 'excuse me for existing', 'I apologize for having a girlfriend', then you expose yourself as a victim (Ines, sm).

Many social mothers report that in everyday situations they are accepted and recognized as mothers if they simply present themselves in this position, if they claim it for themselves.

I came to pick him up in the kindergarten and they ask me: 'Who are you?' And I say: 'His mum!'. 'How, mum?', 'Simply, I gave birth to him.' And she says: 'There is another, she comes to pick him up.' And I said, 'Precisely!' (Klea bm/sm).

One of the ways to claim parental identity and redefine family patterns is also by applying different naming strategies. In one family, one of the partners has taken the surname of the other partner. In some families, the children call their parents with a combination of 'mommy + name' (for example: "mami Klea" and "mami Ines"), to make their status not only intimately equal, but also clear to people around them. Others feel that this might be confusing for the child, but some social mothers admit that they feel good when they are being addressed as the mother of the child by family, kindergarten teachers, etc. Two mothers (living in the outskirts of a urban area) analysed their environment as very conservative and

narrow, so they decided the social parent would function as the aunt⁸ of the child. “*The teachers immediately identified us as physically very similar*”, said Alja (sm), thus demonstrating how quickly people adopt what is offered, in order to make things and relationships understandable to them.

There was an astrology chart drawn for our child by our relatives, and it says that the child will have a strong connection with the father. How do the stars know who the father is – is it the one in the bed besides the kid’s mother or someone else? (Zala, sm).

The family rhetoric is so strictly set, that same-sex families are only beginning to represent their kinship through strategies of entering the language of family, and at the same time trying to invent a new language that would be outside the heteronormative family orthodoxy.

This summer, we faced questions like ‘Where is your dad?’, and ‘You have ONLY a mum?’. I am very bothered by this ‘only’, very bothered. Immediately it is obvious that in Slovenia we don’t have a vocabulary, terminology... I replied, there is no dad, but we ARE a family! (Ines, sm).

Debates about lesbian women having children are also intrinsically related to the debates about the role, status and importance of fatherhood as a gendered construct (Short, 2007). In one family (in addition to those who had previously existed as heterosexual families), the responsibility and care of the child is shared by a male couple – and the father of the child has an active role. In other cases, the women speak of donors; mothers who have chosen to know the identity of the donor, usually keep it anonymous and plan to share it with child(ren) when they ask about it.

Over a year ago, she started to ask about fathers. I explained to her that there are different kinds of families – some of her friends have a mother and a father, some one of the two, and some have two dads or two mums. And she knows such families, so she could understand this (Katarina, bm).

What is unanimously important to all families is that there should be more representations of different forms of family life in kindergarten and school settings. This would serve for all children to learn about various family realities and it would be especially valuable to the children of same-sex families. Blanka has told me that she had spoken with the headmaster of their son’s school (located on the outskirts of Ljubljana), who has categorically refused to speak about homosexuality and lesbian and gay families, claiming these are topics not foreseen in the school curriculum. The school curriculums should, thus, be revisited and revised to be more inclusive.

The teachers say they don’t care about intimate things. And then once, they had to draw a family tree, and one of the teachers reacted to the drawing of our kid by saying that there should be only family on the picture, not friends. But we are all a family! (Janja bm/sm).

⁸ I have found such naming also in the article by Polaškova (2007).

BRIDGING THE ABSENCE: VISIBILITY OF (FEMALE) SAME-SEX FAMILIES

Until recently, it can be claimed, lesbian families in Slovenia have been almost completely invisible. Nevertheless, there have been changes in the past years, and visibility has brought also a promise of recognition. “*Open*⁹ has become too small for us,” a lesbian mother told me, talking about regular meetings of (predominantly female) same-sex families, which were initiated because of a recognized need to create a (safe) space of exchanging information, group support for those who already have children and those who will have them. All parents agreed especially on the value of children having peers that are in similar family realities, and the importance of children from same-sex families meeting each other. The group is important also politically, as it is the first joined voice of a significant number of same-sex families.

I find it important that nobody speaks in our name – we can now speak for ourselves, this group became an entity on its own, a partner in a dialogue (Anja, sm).

The parents have recognized also the role of same-sex family life being visible in public, as well as the importance of also non-*LGBT* individuals giving support and visibility to same-sex families. Anja, for example, has, in our first talk, (2007) told me how very uncomfortable she is, when other people (colleagues at work, etc.) are speaking about her family structure. In the second talk (2011) she spoke about how she recognizes such speech is important for the visibility of non-heterosexual families. All interviewees have reported that personal experience changes the attitude of people towards same-sex families – in their view, each person that knows such a family, or knows someone who knows it, will probably rethink his/her stereotypes about it.

Everybody is speaking about the negative public opinion on this issue. What public opinion? I have no problems in my contacts with the people around me – I am out at work, to my neighbours... Maybe we are living in the clouds, but we have no problems with people accepting us at all (Katja, sm/bm).

Contact theory might help to explain why most of the respondents have not had any significant negative experience when disclosing their family reality to others¹⁰. They have good neighbourly relations, received positive acceptance at work, but also have good experiences in institutional settings – Katja for example, has told their paediatrician that they are a same-sex family, and since then the paediatrician even started to look for ways to ‘bend’ the discriminatory elements in their health care service relationship. Recently, there are also more and more

⁹ *Open* is the first openly *LGBT* friendly café in Slovenia. *Open* was in the spotlight especially after a gay activist was attacked outside it during the pride week in July 2009, which triggered a number of events and support for the *LGBT* movement from public and political personas.

¹⁰ I don’t explicitly discuss it in the paper, as I want to stay with transferring the experiences that the respondents have shared with me (which are positive), but Slovenia still exhibits itself as a very homophobic society, which is supported by a fairly traditionalist culture. This is demonstrated by various research on homosexuality and violence, produced lately, and experienced also by the public reactions in the recent debates about homosexuality and family.

families that strategically plan to speak about their family to kindergarten and school teachers.

I can hardly wait for the kid to go to the kindergarten, so we can educate them, tell them everything! (Leni, bm), and her partner exclaims, O, why can't we go immediately?

The importance of 'educating' teachers lies in the fact that children should be able to freely talk about their family reality, without any confusions, secrecy or doubts. When Anja once came to pick up her son at the kindergarten, her son called out for his mummy. The teacher corrected him that it is not mummy (but Anja), and he replied that also Anja is his mummy. How others speak about the child's family reality and his parents is not insignificant, so some parents have also expressed their contentment about their own parents speaking to other relatives and their friends openly about their granddaughter or grandson having two mothers, as this is the environment in which the child also spends time.

It is important that people are offered a language they can use, because they usually don't find words to describe situations with which they are unfamiliar.

We have a rainbow flag on our balcony. There is a kindergarten nearby and kids go by everyday and ask their parents about the flag. And parents only say: 'this is just a flag with nice colours.' That is all. (Alja, sm).

NEW MINORITY – NEW RIGHTS?

Visibility is irreversible. No-one can anymore say we don't exist. Never again (Alenka, bm).

Discourses about what is different in same-sex families, and the almost uniform response of a vast research body, that there are no significant differences between children raised in heterosexual families and those raised in same-sex families (f.e. Victor and Fish, 1995; Patterson and Chan, 1996; Brewaeys and Hall, 1997; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Parks, 1998; Chan et al., 1998a; Tasker, 1999; Patterson, 2000; Perrin, 2002; Anderssen et al., 2002, Wainright et al., 2004) has been in the last three decades politically extremely important in securing possible legislative changes and changes in societal attitudes towards lesbian and gay parents. Nevertheless, these responses have, in a way, reproduced the barriers that they were set to eradicate, by setting heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and investigating how and if same-sex parenting is different/inferior (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 162), whereby the burden of proof was/is on gay and lesbian parents to demonstrate they are not less successful in their parenting. As report Stacey and Biblarz (2001), over the past decade of the twentieth century, a significant number of research with rethinking the 'no-difference' doctrine was also published, towards an agenda of investigating 'why and how are lesbian parents oppressed and how can we change that' (Clarke, 2000, Kitzinger, 1994, Kitzinger and Coyle, 1995, in Stacey and Biblarz: 163). Hicks proposes that the body of research on same-sex families should

be asking why contemporary discourses again and again generate and sustain the idea that same-sex families are essentially different and, thus, incomplete, deficient (Hicks, 2005: 165), relocating the debate on the appropriateness of same-sex parenting to investigating why certain family types are still structurally excluded and denied legitimacy, even existence (Sobočan, 2009: 82).

In Slovenia, the research and the debate on same-sex parenting and families is far behind, nevertheless, in the past years' time same-sex families have started to claim their place in public debates and their position in the realm of existing family realities. Most parents currently still feel that their family is the only same-sex family in the kindergarten or school, but that will probably also change, at least in the capital city. They have also secured a place in the *LGBT* movement agenda, and are, thus, a destabilizing force in two fronts – the heterosexual and the homosexual. This unique position, at times also lonely and disappointing, nevertheless presents a challenge to how we conceptualize homosexuality, but more importantly, how we theorize, understand and frame family, today. The minority position of same-sex families, in the mean time, remains a fact, reducing lesbian and gay parents to the aspect of their sexuality, denying them and their children equal rights. It remains to be seen how their minority position will further transform in each contexts – the context of the (heterosexual) family and the context of their (homosexual) identity. And it remains to be seen how this new minority group will change both contexts from inside.

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Această lucrare tratează subiectul familiilor cu parteneri de același sex, ce devin din ce în ce mai vizibile și în societăți care nu recunosc în mod legal parteneriatul de același sex și nu permit adopția în cazul acestui tip de parteneriat. Discută despre realitățile familiilor de același sex în Slovenia, despre viața lor, despre practicile acestora în lupta lor pentru recunoaștere socială ca și pentru poziția lor sigură în cele două lumi: cea a familiei și cea a homosexualității. Discuția se bazează pe cercetarea despre familiile cu parteneri de același sex în Slovenia: au fost intervievați 16 părinți din familii de același sex, în nouă interviuri, ce au fost efectuate de două ori, între 2008 și 2011. Rezultatele sunt relevante în a aduce lumină asupra schimbărilor produse în relația dintre vizibilitate și poziția minorităților (sexuale), ceea ce poate fi folosit, de asemenea, în sugestiile făcute spre sprijinirea acestor familii. De asemenea, important este că lucrarea familiarizează cititorul cu viața/lumea familiilor cu parteneri de același sex, încă absentă din discursul public.

Cuvinte-cheie: homosexualitate, familii cu parteneri de același sex, familie, minoritate, drepturi.

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