

Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

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Author's Biography

Iris Elliott wrote the Marriage Equality report *Voices of Children: Report on initial research with children of LGBT parents (2010)*, which informed the Ombudsman for Children in Ireland's advice to the Irish Government that its civil partnership legislation risked breaching children's human rights. The report was submitted in evidence to Ireland's Constitutional Convention to inform its consideration of marriage equality. It was nominated for the 2014 GALAs (Gay And Lesbian Awards, Ireland).

Iris was awarded a PhD in Sociology for research into realising human rights in everyday life. She has an MA in Public Culture Studies, and an MSc in Health Promotion.

Her previous work includes: establishing the policy and public affairs function in the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health; facilitating the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's Policy Observatory; national and all-island policy advice with the National Disability Authority, Ireland and the Institute of Public Health in Ireland; health promotion (school, mental health); and social work (adult mental health).

Iris donated her fee for this research to HereNI in order to support its continued work with families.

Author's Dedication

For Brian, Colum and Miguel + Monica, Margaret, Conall and Doireann + Ceri and Nancy + Anne, Karen and Senan. Your families inspire me and radiate joy into my life.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Contents

Executive Summary	.....	2
Introduction	.....	4
Findings	.....	12
Methodology	.....	40
Conclusions & Future Work	.....	42
Bibliography	.....	47



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

This report contributes to the legal and social advocacy that is happening across the UK, in Ireland and globally in order to progress the human rights of families headed by lesbian, gay male and bisexual (LGB) parents. We are securing legal recognition and protection for these family relationships between children and parents, siblings and children and their extended family. We are gaining social recognition and support so that children and their families can participate and thrive within their communities and wider society. The starting point for this study is that the UK State in Northern Ireland has moral and legal obligations to ensure that the human rights of all members of our society are respected, protected and fulfilled; and to provide remedies where none exist currently.

The first purpose of this report is raise visibility. Children are being raised within families headed by LGB parents in communities across Northern Ireland: villages, towns and cities; and they have been for generations. That is why the voices of adult children are so important: to confirm and affirm their presence. There are many different pathways to parenthood: children are born within heterosexual relationships and then the family changes when one parent comes out and forms another family; and families are formed through adoption, assisted reproduction (with known or unknown donors), and fostering. Children may be raised in a family by a lone gay parent; two mothers or two fathers; or as part of a configuration of biological, social and step parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and grandparents: great at Christmas, as one of the adult children observed!

The second purpose is to present the experiences of these families. This study does not provide a comprehensive overview. What it does is highlight the quality of the families' lives, and what is important to them (such as next of kin status in health services, welcoming engagement within schools, provision of housing to their whole family unit, action by the police, representation by politicians, inclusion by neighbours, celebration within the lesbian and gay



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

community, and embrace by their extended families). The themes addressed are: pathways to family; experience of difference; experience of ‘coming out’; building resilience; living in Northern Ireland; public homophobia; education; health; housing; workplace; media; and opportunities for influence – policy, legal action and research.

The third purpose is to begin a road map about how we can progress the issues raised by the study’s participants: 3 adult children, 2 family groups (in Belfast and Derry) and 6 key informants from the human rights, equality, public service (health and education) and children’s sectors. Future work is identified in: direct work, legal recognition, policy implementation, service development, and research.

Whilst action called for is strategic and regional, the children and their families are clear that it is in everyday relationships that their families’ lives are enhanced. This is the central message of the report. Human rights may appear to be remote, legalistic and abstract but, as Eleanor Roosevelt wrote:

“Where, after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home, so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person.”

And so we all have the opportunity and the choice to be part of this change.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Introduction

“There are lots of families out there. It’s not you who is wrong; it’s people’s attitudes that are wrong. Even if it feels like you are in the minority, you’re in the right.”

(Adult child)

This report is part of a conversation that is happening across the UK, in Ireland and globally about the experiences of families headed by lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) parents. One focus has been legal recognition and protection for these family relationships between children and parents, siblings and children and their extended family. Another focus has been social recognition and support so that children and their families can participate and thrive within their communities and wider society. The contributors to this study welcomed it because it addresses: “an empty space where the conversation hasn’t happened” (Adult child).

Legal and social recognition for lesbians and gay men has progressed in waves of individual rights (decriminalisation – in 1982 in Northern Ireland, equality protections); couple rights (civil partnership); and now: family rights. This reflects the growing visibility and advocacy around children in families headed by LGB parents. LGB parents have been raising children for generations; and doing it exceptionally well according to a substantial body of international research, and the endorsements of leading professional bodies.¹ Children are

¹ A review of this evidence base, particularly meta-analyses and landmark studies, is included in the Irish ‘Voices of Children’ report (Elliott 2010), available on www.marriagequality.ie. It covers: diversity within LGBT families; feeling wanted and protected within their families; the impact of the lack of legal recognition; experiences of homophobia in private and public spaces, and the need for social change; education; health services; coming out as children of LGBT parents; the impact of age and life stage; and sources of support.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

being raised within LGB families in communities across Northern Ireland: villages, towns and cities; and they have been for generations.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey reported increasingly positive attitudes towards lesbians, gay men and bisexual people. However, NILT highlights the need for Northern Ireland society to address: (i) our understanding and valuing of what constitutes a family, (ii) our awareness of the presence of LGB families, and (iii) the diverse pathways to parenthood for lesbians and gay men. (Jarman 2010; Devine May 2013; McAlister, Carr and Neill 2013)

There are many different pathways to parenthood. Children are born within heterosexual relationships and then the family changes when one parent comes out and forms another family. Families are formed through adoption, assisted reproduction (with known or unknown donors), and fostering. Children may be raised in a family by a lone gay parent; two mothers or two fathers; or as part of a configuration of biological, social and stepparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. Great at Christmas, as one of the adult children observed!

The study's scope

This study does not provide a comprehensive overview of what the experiences of these families have been. Its data was generated by interviews with 3 adult children; focus groups with 2 HereNI family groups (in Belfast and Derry) of lesbian parents mainly of young children and a lesbian couple going through assisted reproduction; and interviews with 6 key informants from the human rights, equality, public service (health and education) and children's sectors. It highlights the quality of families' lives and what is important to them. The themes addressed are: pathways to family; experience of difference; experience of 'coming out' as a child of gay parents; building resilience; living in Northern Ireland; public homophobia, education; health; housing; workplace; media; and



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

opportunities for influence – policy, legal action and research. Illustrative quotes are used throughout so that you hear the voices of children and parents directly.

Drawing on this material, the report begins a road map for how we can progress these issues. Future work is identified in five areas: direct work with children and their families, legal recognition, policy development, service development, and research.

Whilst action called for is strategic and regional, a core message from the children and their families is that it is in everyday relationships that their family lives are enhanced. Therefore, everyone has the opportunity and choice to contribute to change.

Human rights and homophobia

The starting point for this study is that the UK State in Northern Ireland has moral and legal obligations to ensure that the human rights of all members of our society are respected, protected and fulfilled; and to provide remedies where none exist currently. Of central importance to this study are the Convention on the Rights of the Child's Articles 2 (non-discrimination), 12 (participation), 16 (privacy, reputation and honour) and 18 (family). As part of the peace settlement, Northern Ireland is provided with additional (politically agreed and socially mandated) human rights and equality protections under the 1998 Northern Ireland Act. The Act requires the Assembly and all Ministers to uphold and protect the rights guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights. However there is little evidence of these being realised for families headed by LGB parents. The adult children, families and some of the key informants spoke of the particular challenges of living in Northern Ireland; a society that they characterised as socially conservative and homophobic, and in particular overshadowed by fundamentalist, faith-based homophobia.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Homophobia has been defined as: “Negative attitudes toward homosexual people and homosexuality, which may be manifested in discrimination, hostile behaviour, or hate crimes.” “Institutional homophobia is reflected in laws, policies, practices, and the history of invisibility of gay people in the mass media” (Oxford Reference Dictionary, online). There continues to be striking examples of public homophobia (participants described former politician Iris Robinson as the embodiment of such public homophobia), and institutional homophobia (exemplified in the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Attorney General’s endeavours to stop gay couples being able to apply to adopt together - right up to the Supreme Court²). Despite the context of austerity, State actors in Northern Ireland channelled public money and civil servant resources into trying to hold back the tide of human rights: on adoption, and gay male blood donation³.

There have been advances in public attitudes towards LGB people and, to a lesser extent, their families but the range and level of homophobia reported by the adult children and family groups highlights that there is no room for complacency. A number of key informants cited the introduction of Civil Partnership as evidence that Northern Irish society has fundamentally and irreversibly changed. However, families’ reports of: invisibility, exclusion, discrimination, harassment, and hate crime, indicate that sustained action is

² The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) successfully challenged Articles 14 and 15 of the Adoption (Northern Ireland) order 1987 on the grounds that the eligibility criteria for adoption were unjustifiably discriminatory in breach of Art 8 and Art 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Neutral Citation No [2012] NIQB 77). The NIHRC was represented by Monye Anyadike-Danes QC and Laura McMahon BL.

³ The cost of the legal action to the State was conservatively estimated at £100 000. In the Northern Ireland political reviews of 2013, journalists commented that Minister Poots had been synonymous with unsuccessful legal action on gay issues: “the word ‘gay’ found itself in many of the headlines; “Edwin” and “Poots” were usually not far behind.” (Marie-Louise Connolly BBC, 31-12-2013).



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

required to challenge institutional, public and private homophobia and ensure rights.

“There needs to be a public debate on this issue in Northern Ireland. People are being treated differently because of their sexual orientation and that is something which should be challenged.”

(Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission)

There is a need for a public conversation about how families headed by LGB parents are treated, as part of the broader conversation on sexual orientation called for by the Equality Commission within its 2013 policy paper ‘Promoting Sexual Orientation Equality’. The Equality Commission called for the Executive to honour its commitment made in 2012, and repeated in 2013, to deliver a robust and comprehensive Sexual Orientation Strategy. To date, in 2014, we have had a pre-consultation in which the focus has been on ‘tolerance’ and not human rights.

As befits a Government that recorded a minus 40% net favourability rating last year (according to a Belfast Telegraph – Lucid Talk opinion poll, September 2013), parliamentary activity is increasingly out of step with the public mood. The repeated debates on marriage equality in the Assembly provided opportunities for groups of MLAs to showcase either their progressive or regressive views (three times in eighteen months, the latest in April 2014); but did little to advance human rights.

National and international solidarity

In contrast, progress on human rights commitments is evident in Britain with the introduction of marriage equality in England, Scotland and Wales. Some faith communities have played a leadership role for example the Church of England published the ‘Valuing All God’s Children’ guidance, which states that neither



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

the Christian faith nor the Bible can be used to justify homophobic behaviour and must not be tolerated in Church of England schools. Since the publication of the Voices of Children report in Ireland: the Ombudsman for Children raised concerns that the State was not meeting its human rights obligations, the issue was debated in the Constitutional Convention, the Government committed to hold a referendum on marriage equality, and the General Scheme of the Children and Family Relationships Bill was published⁴.

Internationally, a range of professional bodies has developed both positions and guidance for their members, which focus on the ‘best interests of the child’ in line with human rights; and emphasise that a parent’s sexual orientation is irrelevant to their abilities to raise a child⁵. There are a number of studies and resources for professionals engaged in direct work with LGB families, which could inform the development of similar resources for key health, social care and education professionals in Northern Ireland (Mallon 2007; Biblarz and Savci 2010; Averett and Hegde 2012; Kintner-Duffy et al 2012; Mallon and Serdjenian June 2012). The issuing of strong and unambiguous statements by professional bodies on the lines of those by their international colleagues would be an important act of solidarity with LGB families; and render a lot of the homophobic commentary on LGB families null and void.

⁴ The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality published a report on hearings in relation to the Scheme on the Children and Family Relationships Bill in May 2014 (31/JDAE/015). The Bill addresses family life issues including: parentage, assisted human reproduction, guardianship, access and custody rights, mediation, maintenance and reform of court practices. One of the impacts of this legislation will be to establish the legal relationship between the child and his or her non-biological parent.

⁵ In the USA this includes the: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Bar Association, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychoanalytic Association, American Psychological Association, Child Welfare League of America, National Adoption Center, National Association of Social Workers, North American Council on Adoptable Children, and Voice for Adoption (<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/professional-organizations-on-lgbt-parenting> [Accessed 5 May 2014])



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

It is important to develop work in Northern Ireland around the experiences and rights of children of families headed by gay parents as part of an transnational conversation; learning and levering change from progress in Britain, Ireland and internationally. A human rights based approach facilitates this national and international dialogue.

Human rights in everyday life: we can all contribute to change

Human rights may appear to be remote, legalistic and abstract but, as Eleanor Roosevelt wrote:

“Where, after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home, so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.”

The study has found that what has made the different for children and parents are the small acts of warmth, connection – and professionalism. Examples given were: parents including lesbian mothers in their chat at the school gates, organising a play date, and checking out: ‘how do I explain your family when my daughter asks?’; neighbours supporting a family when they were harassed; a school principal talking to lesbian mothers before their child starts at her school: ‘how can we welcome you?’ – and being clear to come to her if they experience any problems; friends continuing to be children’s mates when they find out their parents are gay; a nursery worker taking the time to have pictures and books in her room that represent all different types of families; a health visitor positively engaging with both new mothers; a GP referring a couple to public reproductive services; and a granny talking openly about her grandchildren with her friends at



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

church. These neighbours, teachers, health professionals, friends and family members are making a difference, every day.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Findings

The findings of the study are presented thematically as follows: pathways to family; experience of difference; experience of 'coming out'; building resilience; living in Northern Ireland; public homophobia; education; health; housing; workplace; media; and opportunities for influence: policy, legal action and research.

Data from the adult children, HereNI parents groups and key informants from the equality and human rights sectors is woven together in order to provide different perspectives on these central issues for LGB families in Northern Ireland.

Pathways to family

"I felt very loved and supported throughout my whole childhood....Loads of kids have something; having gay parents was just that."

(Adult child)

There are many pathways that lead to the creation of LGB families. Within this study we interviewed three adult children who had been born into families with heterosexual parents, whose mothers then 'came out' as lesbian. Amongst the mothers in the HereNI family groups in Belfast and Derry, the women had had children through heterosexual relationships, within lesbian relationships through fertility treatment and adoption; and there was a couple who were in the process of fertility treatment. The children were aged between 18 months to 17 years, and one mother had two adult children. There were sons and daughters, lone children and sibling groups. The families lived in cities, towns and villages. The range of study participants enabled the study to reach a rich diversity of LGB families.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

The mothers talked about the positives for children of having LGB parents. As intentional parents and parents who have won tough custody cases, they do not take their children for granted and are pro-active in supporting the children to anticipate their issues and those of other people who they meet (see Building Resilience below). One couple spoke of how their children think that having two mummies is: “the coolest thing”; a sensibility that is helped by media representation: “Like on Hollyoaks” (see Media below).

Children had been and were being reared in households with lone mothers and couples (a biological and a non-biological or ‘social’ mother) and biological fathers (for contact); and in family configurations that involved “step mothers” (a description used by one of the adult children to describe her mother’s ex-partner who had co-parented her during a lengthy part of her childhood). One adopted daughter had lived with her biological mother, lesbian foster carer, lesbian adopters, and her adoptive mother and a lesbian ‘step mother’ (her adoptive mother’s current partner). The adult children warmly described their step families, which were created when their mothers began relationships with women who already had children (and when their fathers formed new relationships and had children within these). They continued to have familial contact with their step families even after the mothers’ relationships ended.

“I knew mum was happy and that [name] was a nice person.”

(Adult child describing her mother’s relationship, which started when she was 5 years old)

The adult children and mothers described both positive experiences of co-parenting with biological fathers; and also hostile custody cases taken by biological fathers on the basis of the mother’s sexual orientation, which overshadowed families sometimes for several years.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

“I think he was pissed off that mum was a lesbian.”

(Adult child reflecting on her biological father’s reason for seeking custody)

One of the mothers described how her husband (who had been abusive to their children) had gone to court for full custody on the basis of her sexual orientation three times over a period of 3 years (each case lasting around 1 year). On one occasion she was on the stand for 6 ½ hours; and the questioning ending only when she asked the judge if she had to continue. The father’s legal team referred to her as a ‘deviant’ and ‘pervert’ in court; and alleged that she had tricked a heterosexual man into marriage in order that she should have children. The children had to be assessed by social workers and psychiatrists (who produced supportive reports of the mother).

“Where were my human rights, and my children’s?”

(HereNI family group member)

Mothers who came out while they were in a heterosexual relationship had been threatened with being declared an ‘unfit mother’; with associated threats to: income, custody and committal to a mental health facility. Further, some mothers felt unable to leave violent relationships with men due to these threats. The adult children, mothers and key informants referred to the threat of mothers losing custody on the basis of their sexual orientation throughout the study. Several participants knew mothers who had been either threatened with custody proceedings, or who had lost custody on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Extended families were important for children as they grew up and in adulthood. Speaking about having male roles models through relationships with grandfathers and uncles, one adult child commented: “I don’t feel the absence



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

(of male role models)”. Having adults in their extended family who were gay was valued too.

Strong views were expressed about the experience of adoption including social workers’ stereotyped presumptions that lesbian (that is women only) households are automatically more nurturing. Adoptive mothers had found that there was little support for them and on occasion they were given inaccurate information about children’s histories and issues. Sometimes the children proposed for lesbians to adopt presented more significant challenges (older children, children with histories of sexual abuse or severe neglect, children with significant attachment issues and disabled children).

Whilst this study focuses on children who have been reared in families headed by out LGB parents, participants spoke of the closeted LGB parents they know who continue to raise their children within heterosexual family units in Northern Ireland. One described this as: “Having their cake and eating it”. By this she meant continuing to enjoy the privileges of living publicly as a heterosexual (including within faith communities) whilst being actively involved in LGB relationships and the LGB community.

Experience of Difference

The children valued being raised by loving parents; one talked about benefiting from having three parents (her mother, mother’s girlfriend and father). Her family’s difference exposed her to a lot of diversity. She described always having lots of interesting people in her life (recognising that this was a different upbringing from her friends). Consequently she grew up with an open mind. The mothers echoed these positives, observing that their children were: more tolerant, like people to be who they are; and develop their own characters. In light of the adult children’s comments about not having friends round to play at



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

their houses, it was welcome to hear the family groups talk about how their children's friends think that they are "cool parents" and come round a lot.

Having contact with other children who have gay parents or adults in their lives was repeatedly described as important; because then their family set up "wasn't an issue". One child: "didn't feel like I had to hold back" with a friend whose aunt is gay and whose family is very open. As with the Voices of Children study in Ireland, going to Women's Camp⁶ was fantastic.

"I saw loads of other kids. That was brilliant, to be completely immersed in that."

(Adult child)

An adult child commented that there has been a noticeable change within the LGB community more broadly. Community events such as Pride now include a family section: "absolutely incredible". They have a changed tone from when the adult children were growing up: from overtly sexual, angry and necessarily taboo breaking in the 1980s to: "a big family occasion – brothers, grannies, uncles and aunts" and a lot of public support along routes.

The mothers discussed the changes within the LGB community too, due to the introduction of Civil Partnership and the growing focus on LGB people having children. Whilst there had been a sense amongst previous generations of lesbians that parenthood was impossible, today the availability of a range of means has not only created change within the LGB community, but also shifted dynamics within extended families (such as the expectations of would-be grandparents; and greater recognition and inclusion).

⁶ Summer Camp is an annual gathering for women, with a strong participation by lesbian parents and their children.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

The HereNI family groups and adult children identified a number of emerging issues around LGB parenthood.

“What comes with Civil Partnership? What comes next is divorce.”

What are the consequences of Civil Partnership dissolution on children? Also, what are the access and custody consequences for LGB parents who have children as part of a relationship (CP or not) if the relationship breaks down?

What are the implications for LGB people who want to have children by themselves or within family formations that do not mimic a heterosexual, two parent model?

What are the cultural consequences for the LGB community of the drive for legal recognition and familial / societal acceptance based on a heterosexual model of coupledness and parenthood?

All of the adult children spoke of their awareness of their family being different. (There was a recognition that Northern Irish society in their childhood was very socially conservative; and that other children were treated differently too for example if their parents were divorced: “families were not as diverse as they are now”.) They were clear that it was other people who made them feel different: by asking direct questions about their family, asking where their dad was, dropping the topic into conversation, calling them “bastard” (an experience shared with children of lone parents), or talking about it “behind my back”.

“Other people made it a problem: ‘who’s that woman, who’s she? [referring to their mother’s girlfriend]...I didn’t have a name for her and people want a name”

(Adult child)



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

There were a couple of incidents that particularly stood out in the adult children's minds. This conversation took place when the child was around 4 or 5 years old.

“Someone said: ‘Your mum’s gay’. My friend said: ‘Is she, is she?’ The experience stands out in my mind of how she threw it in my face. I was a shy child and didn’t have the confidence to say back: ‘Yes, she is’.”

(Adult child)

Another child recalled the moment that she realised that some people viewed being gay negatively. This incident happened when the child was 8 years old.

“The girl sitting next to me on the bus was trying to get me to say rude words like ‘fuck’, ‘shit’ and I wouldn’t say them. Then some girls said: ‘say lesbian’; and I did because I didn’t think that was a rude word. The whole bus starting chanting: ‘[child’s name] is a lezzer’. I had a realisation: ‘Oh my God, people think this is a bad thing’. It hadn’t occurred to me that people thought like that.”

(Adult child)

Some of this peer behaviour was understood as part of growing up. It was recognised that kids are tough and will zoom in on difference.

The adult children reported that they were more open when they were younger. This was before they realised their families’ difference. Then they developed strategies to manage this difference in their social relationships and particular contexts like school. In primary school they wrote about their home life and talked about the different people at home. By secondary school they didn’t want to, or felt that they couldn’t, talk about their family. They avoided the subject, became very closed, stayed apart from their peers and found it difficult to talk



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

about themselves. This experience of difference impacted their self esteem. They wanted to be “normal”, not because they wanted their dad back in the house but because they wanted to like other kids.

“I remember hiding it to avoid getting picked on.”

(Adult child)

“I think I did learn to develop a thick skin, surround myself.”

(Adult child)

The sense of being different has continued into adulthood for some. For others there is a realisation that: “I am not that different”; leading them to anticipate how they will raise their own children.

“Whenever I have kids I will teach them to be tough, less sensitive.”

(Adult child)

Experience of ‘coming out’

Both the adult children and the mothers spoke of their ongoing experiences of ‘coming out’.

One of the adult children resented being in this position. Describing herself as an open person but also private, she talked about having to assess when to make the disclosure about her family. It is both bound up in her identity and who she is; but it’s not about her too. Whereas as a child she: “wouldn’t have gone there”; as an adult she doesn’t mind, doesn’t have a problem saying it and is not concerned about what others think. She enjoys being able to be open about her family. Essentially, she does not feel as vulnerable as an adult. However, as a child, she felt protective of her family and felt its vulnerability. Although she found some things difficult, she also felt a pressure to be OK, to defend her



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

family set up: “I’m alright, I’m fine, everything’s grand.” She reflected that she had boxed in quite a lot of the impact of being a child of lesbian parents: “I completely shut off.” With hindsight she realises that it *was* an issue and shaped who she was.

Children of LGB parents are aware of the power that society and the government have to judge their family; and (as one adult child put it) that they are being assessed: “I’m being used as the benchmark.” This pressure to be unaffected or to thrive was recognised by a key informant. He commented that children have to process their own, their family’s and society’s scrutiny of their sexual orientation: “What if I’m gay? How do I process that?” This level of psychological pressure combined with adolescence underlines the importance of support from peers, trusted others and services.

Another of the adult children talked about not being able to be open. When she didn’t know that there were any other gay families, she thought that she was the only person who had a gay mum. Children learnt to assess the safety of situations and people.

“I never lied about it if asked...but I wouldn’t have said....I was careful who I talked about it to.”

(Adult child)

“If someone asked I’d say: ‘Yeah, well my parents are gay, gauge their reaction.’”

(Adult child)

Mothers described a range of approaches to being out about their sexual orientation in different situations. Sometimes they are very out, sometimes



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

more subtly. In one family, it is the young children who out them: telling people – happily, proudly – that they have two mummies.

They had a range of reactions from other parents: some have been hostile (for example standing on the other side of the pavement), some whisper; others come up to the mothers and ask them how they can explain the family to their own children; and some of the mothers had experienced no negativity or curiosity from other parents.

The mothers talked about coming out to their children; and how they judged when this would be appropriate. One mother reported that her youngest child was upset that she had deferred telling him that she was gay until he was older; he wanted to be told at the same time as his siblings. The mothers thought that it was easier for their children to accept them being gay because there have been a lot of young people coming out as gay, and their children know a lot of them. The children's reactions to their coming out were influenced by how their parents are. "Once they see that you are strong", they respond to homophobia towards their family with: "It's other people's problem: 'what's wrong with you?'".

The key informants anticipated the following issues for LGB families: (i) bullying by other children, (ii) negative community perceptions, (iii) confusion about the status of social parents or 'step parents' who are Civil Partners and co-habiting spouses (particularly in settings such as health, education and housing), and (iv) access to religious practice due to faith communities' responses to LGB families.

Building resilience

There was strong consensus across all participants that it is important to build resilience in children of LGB parents. This includes preparing them for difficult questions, reactions and scenarios that they may experience in a way that a



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

child would understand: “Giving them an understanding but not in too intense kind of way” and “Build their resilience for people” (Adult child).

Whilst parents may be dealing with prejudice, one of the adult children stressed that parents should recognise that their children are dealing with a lot too. Therefore, parents need to go with it if their children want to fit in. (She used the example of the ‘About a Boy’ film where the son wanted to go to MacDonalds): “Doing something a wee bit normal. Even if it goes against their principles, go with it.” LGB families raising awareness about their existence and lives is valuable; but parents need to be conscious of how they go about this: “without making the children feel like specimens.”

One adult child described the value of a “toolkit of defence”. Resilience impacts how children both enjoy the positives of their family; and also deal with their sense of difference and experiences of homophobia. The following section describes resilience-building activities; and issues that children identified as needing support around.

Activities to build the children’s self esteem are of central importance; as are supportive adult figures and contact with other families with gay parents. For one child, the experience of contact with two other LGB families in their immediate neighbourhood helped her to see that they were living family life: “just the way we’re doing it, and other people are doing it too.”

Children need to have safe, supportive spaces and permission from parents to talk about their families: “Space to talk as a child”, “Not a segregated, ring fenced place where we all are from everyone else, but a safe environment with tacit permission to talk about it.” Just knowing that LGB families are being discussed is helpful: “Awareness that people are talking about this would be really good.”



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Creating environments that reflect LGB families is necessary. One adult child who is a teacher reflected that her teachers, while not negative were not pro-active “at that time”. In her own teaching practice she takes a pro-active and inclusive approach such as talking about LGB families and having different books in the classroom.

“People need to have an open mind. Just be open to diversity.”

(Adult child)

The children sought a language to describe their family relationships (as noted in Experience of Difference); terms variously used included “two mothers”, “my other mother”.

“Initially I called them ‘mummy one and mummy two’; I thought it would be cool, just for a while. I don’t think it lasted.”

(Adult child)

One adult child referred to a family in which the social mother was described as an aunt. She reflected that having a name for her mother’s girlfriend: “would have been dead on.” She now uses the term ‘step mum’ to describe her mother’s partner. She and her mum were embarrassed when people used the term ‘mum’s lesbian lover’. It may be easier for children growing up in LGB families today because the term ‘Civil Partner’ is recognised, and there is a growing awareness of LGB families. She observed that she didn’t think that people’s search for a term was homophobic; rather people want to: “put a label on someone, not because they are prejudiced.”

Mothers and some of the key informants gave examples of protective, anticipatory parenting. These included: agreeing each others’ parenting roles and responsibilities; selection of nursery, schools, and pro-active communication



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

with staff; ensuring children had male role models in their family and social circle; and providing age appropriate knowledge and language that enabled them to rebuff myths and stereotypes. Through such actions, parents incrementally supported their child as they gradually realised that their families are different. Mothers rehearsed scenarios with their children including questions and bullying. One said that she had told her daughter to respond to other's curiosity about why she had two mums with: "Because I'm lucky." They recognised the importance of supportive peers and friendship networks (for example one mother said that her daughters had EMO friends and that EMO culture was accepting). However, they were learning as they went along; as one commented: "There is no roadmap for that."

Children of LGB families experience internal, familial and societal pressures: to have a place in the world, to be proud of themselves and their families, to be 'normal', and to be an exemplary 'model child'; to protect and affirm their family; and to mediate between their family and the 'world' (including to provide sound bites). Young people are savvy about shutting down conversations about their lives. Therefore peer oriented, tailored activities are necessary to get past these dynamics so that children can talk at a deeper level and gain support. (This is discussed further in the Research section.)

Living in Northern Ireland

"The glass half empty is that we live in an Iris Robinson culture; the glass half full: gay and lesbian people have thrived in Northern Ireland; at times been subversive, but always there."

(Key informant)



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Families are subject to the “moral judgment of the environment” in which they live. Northern Irish society was described as: “insular, quite religious”, “behind the times a bit, but not backward”, “really, really conservative – it’s almost a default position”, feeling “very tight” and characterised by conservatism and sectarianism. References were made to the ‘Iris Robinson’ culture in the media as well as the cultural anxiety that links homosexuality with paedophilia. More broadly there is a sense around lesbian and gay sexual orientation: “not that it’s wrong, but that it’s not right.” When it comes to talking about children of lesbians and gay men, there is an immediate response of: “but how can they?” (One of the families who had moved from England chose to live in Donegal because they thought the south of Ireland felt more open).

“There’s an ingrained Christian morality that seeps in and gets everywhere; and you don’t lose that in a generation: ‘It’s all OK now’.”

(Adult Child)

The substantial and persistent influence of churches on public discourse, policy and services was referred to repeatedly as a primary source of the homophobia, discrimination and exclusion experienced by children and their families. One of the key informants suggested engagement with progressive faith communities to seek: a church-specific or ecumenical statement, a pro-active commitment to challenge homophobia, and a welcome for those children and families who believe in their religious doctrine.

In particular, the continued involvement of Protestant and Catholic churches in education was a source of concern. Views varied as to how influential the Catholic Church continued to be; its exposure through sexual abuse scandals led some to believe that it is not taken seriously and lacks credibility. However, the continued church control of some schools perpetuates a conservative culture around sexual orientation. There was some discussion around the varied



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

experience between those raised in fundamentalist Protestant communities and those raised in Catholic communities. Evangelical Protestantism's conservative culture around sexual orientation was thought to create a harder and harsher environment for families.

One of the adult children reflected that the fact that the north was not a progressive place when she was growing up; and speculated that the 'Troubles' may have created a fear of difference. She saw the increasing visibility of Pride as a sign of growing openness; and, at a family level, talked about how her biological grandmother is more open now, and how her social mother's mother (who is from a religious farming family) is a proud grandparent and will talk about her granddaughter at church.

Section 75 (the equality provision in the Northern Ireland Act 1998) was referred to repeatedly, with participants commenting that it had created greater awareness and political correctness. Although there is an issue about the protection of homophobic religious groups, Section 75 was thought to have reduced conscious discrimination and prejudice towards the lesbian and gay community.

The investment of peace money into community cohesion, equality and diversity was mentioned but there was uncertainty as to whether this had created change: "It must be having an impact but I'm not sure." Referring to her experience of an equality and diversity training course, one of the adult children reflected that no one spoke about homophobia for a significant time at the start of the course; and when the conversation started a large proportion of the group said that they didn't know any gay people.

There has been some societal shift in attitudes reflecting changes in how society deals with sexuality more broadly, and because of Civil Partnership. However, this shift was viewed as limited as illustrated by these two quotes.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

“Sexuality in general has become more: ‘oh, it’s cool to flirt with multiple sexual identities but when it comes down to it...”

(Adult Child)

“But that’s legal, not personal or emotional; and also very much into the model of a heterosexual relationship...People are threatened by Civil Partnership due to the privileging of marriage and family in our culture.”

(Adult Child)

A number of key informants referred to Civil Partnership as an indicator of change. Whilst it represents progress, the experiences of children and mothers described in this study suggest that this progress is in danger of being over-estimated.

The adult children were very aware of growing up in a prejudiced society, commenting that they had been self-conscious about bringing people to their house. During their childhood: “friends were prejudiced against gay people because of what they have heard.” As adults, some continue to feel this impact and are caught between, on the one hand, not wanting to self-censure and, on the other, feeling a persistent resistance to being open.

“That’s a way of not talking about it. Still as an adult I don’t want to go there; but I don’t want to talk about it. There’s a resistance.”

(Adult child)

Public homophobia

As well as experiencing homophobia within particular settings such as schools and within personal relationships, LGB families reported significant public homophobia including hate crime within their neighbourhood. Some families experienced a change over time from initial hostility to gradual acceptance;



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

others sought formal redress successfully with local politicians and the police. Incidents included local children shouting 'lezzies' through the door; and repeatedly harassing a LGB family's child on the street as he went home from school.

A group of young people who had been re-housed into a village from different areas targeted this child's whole family. Their targets included the LGB family, a Polish family and an older woman who lived alone. They attacked the LGB family's home (pelted it with eggs, uprooting plants and damaging garden ornaments) and shouted verbal abuse at the mother. She went to talk with the children's parents (one of whom said that she was intimidated by her own child); and then to a local councillor who approached the parents too (again to be told that they could not do anything to change their children's behaviour). When the mother went to the police they were very supportive and pro-active. They worked to disband the group, put on activities to engage the young people, made them repair the damage to the garden, and kept coming to the estate for several months. The neighbours were supportive of the family too.

One adult child spoke of hearing people talking on the street about gay people when she was young, describing them as weird and disgusting.

"Every time you hear that it's like an attack, and it makes you more fearful about saying who are – and you are little."

(Adult child)

Public homophobia was embodied by former politician Iris Robinson. Although her comments were noted, they were dismissed: "I laughed at her, making a hypocrite of herself" (Adult child); some thought that she had raised public awareness of how ridiculous homophobia is.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Education

Clearly, school is of central importance to children and their parents. Their varied experiences of schools was linked variously to ethos, culture, and denomination (if a faith based institution); and the presence of progressive / reactionary leaders and teachers. Sometimes ethos and attitudes towards their family informed parents' school selection, sometimes it did not. The Northern Irish focus on getting a 'good education' can trump a school's social and cultural ethos: "Class drives everything" (Key informant).

Parents invested considerable energy into researching schools; not relying on paper descriptions but talking with teachers (particularly about bullying policies). However, for some mothers there was a lack of choice. In certain urban districts and particularly in rural areas, there are no non-denominational schools. One couple described having their child baptised in order to access education, even though they did not want to raise him in that religious tradition.

The lack of options in Northern Ireland; and the challenge of finding a liberal and inclusive school were commented on: "I can't even think of a liberal school here, apart from Rudolph Steiner" (Adult Child). One of the adult children was moved to a Steiner school because of its ethos. She valued the diversity of families in the school community. Although she wasn't open about her own family still, she was aware that: "nobody thought it was odd" (Adult child).

As mentioned previously, the adult children spoke of becoming more self-conscious as they moved through school. They became more aware of their difference; of people talking about them: "I heard people whispering about me, asking who she (social mother) was"; and teaching staff's "small mindedness". Religious schools were described as: "not necessarily unkind but judgmental, quite a lot are judgmental."



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Whereas primary school was experienced as a freer place in which they spoke and wrote about their families, and their teachers were “kind”; secondary was perceived as a more difficult experience. (This may reflect the children’s growing awareness of their environment, social dynamics, and the challenge of negotiating difference during adolescence.) One of the adult children described a teacher completely changing her attitude and behaviour to her when she found out that her mothers were lesbian (from being ‘teacher’s pet’ to getting nought in tests and being shouted at a lot).

The adult children described both of their lesbian parents taking an active role in their schooling, going to school events and parent teacher evenings together.

The mothers’ groups described both very positive and very negative experiences for themselves and their children. One head teacher of a Catholic primary school had pro-actively spoken with both mothers, welcomed into the school, and advised them to come to her if they or their children had any difficulties (with other parents or children, either inside or outside of the school). She said that she would address any difficulties. This family had to move to another part of Belfast due to harassment by the children’s father; and their children started at another Catholic primary school. When one of their daughters was subjected to ongoing homophobic bullying, the head teacher said that they could not even discuss the matter as the bullying was on the grounds of sexual orientation, and the school’s Catholic ethos prohibited discussion. The parents noted that the second school had excellent paper policies on bullying and had won an excellence award for its respect for children’s rights. They commented that they would not be able to move their child until the end of the school year. This family had experienced prejudicial attitudes from other parents too for example they heard people whispering that their daughter had lesbian parents in the pew behind them at her First Communion.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

There was a sense amongst parents that some schools hide behind their religious ethos, when in practice the school ethos was down to school personnel (particularly the Principal, and the Board of Management). Schools were described as: “a law unto themselves”; and Principals are “kings of their castle”. Individual teachers had been found to be “fantastic” and “respectful” but, in a difficult situation, the Boards of Management were unsupportive. Key informants advised that, as well as creating direct change at a nursery and school level, change can occur through systems of inspection and reports.

Another family described the difficulties that they had encountered in a state school with a Religious Education teacher who was a ‘born again’ Christian. She was negative towards the family both because the parents were lesbians and atheists. The mothers commented that the teacher had expressed prejudicial views about people with disabilities too (describing them as ‘mutations’ and linking their disability to irreligious behaviour).

Parents reported that teachers insisted that they would only speak to the biological mother. Also, the absence of lesbian and gay literature in the school library meant that children do not have representations of their families and other children remained uninformed. A further insight into teachers’ views was provided by an adult child’s description of attending a diversity, equality training course with teachers at which some teachers were: “bitching about two lesbian parents” coming to the school. She was struck that: “there’s a little kid in that”; and the encounter made her realise that homophobia continues to be present in schools, that she “lives in a bubble....these attitudes exist”.

Parents had had positive experiences of nursery schools; one private nursery had sent their staff on an inclusion course and displayed the certificate. The mothers had experienced no difference in treatment and gave examples of thoughtful practice such as both mothers receiving a Mother’s Day card, and a



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

card 'to someone special' on Father's Day. They valued the fact that the nursery was honest when they were unsure so that they could talk issues through together.

The mothers identified the transition from nursery to primary school as a critical time: having to consider whether they should have their child baptised in order to access education, thinking about how to deal with a range of attitudes from the "staunchly prejudiced" to the very subtly homophobic.

The continued involvement of churches in education was a cause for concern amongst parents. The mothers said that it was important for parents to be proactive in schools: "the best thing is to be open", and to support their children in anticipating and preparing for difficult questions. One mother noted the possibility of opting out of Religious Education. One of the quandaries for parents was the view that the strongest schools academically are often church schools. Faith based schools were found to be limited generally around the sexuality and relationships curriculum. However, one Catholic Church secondary school was supportive of openly gay and lesbian students. Having even one supportive teacher had been found to make a huge difference to families' experiences. Reference was made to both integrated and Steiner schools as examples of good policy and practice. The group welcomed the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance in an integrated school in Newcastle.

One of the key informants challenged presumptions that church schools would be doctrinal, indoctrinal, and deny rights for example to freedom of conscience. Rather, she described evidence of critical thinking and a range of perspectives within teachers' practices. Issues of sexuality are addressed within an "appropriate context" that is on specific courses rather than on a whole school basis. This partial engagement with sexual orientation was thought to reflect schools' mediation of the need to be both progressive and also manage the



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

challenge of having fundamentalist, illiberal parents within the school community.

Although sexual orientation has been broadly neglected within education in Northern Ireland and there is sense that school is not a safe space for LGB students or the children of LGB parents, the view from key informants was that this is changing. The “capacity to be different” is definitely there. Three reasons for the change were identified.

The revised curriculum (since 2006), which focuses on interpersonal education, introduces Personal Social and Health Education, and addresses how schools deal with sexuality. This represents a shift from school discretion. There are some good materials developed but these do not deal directly with lesbian and gay issues. A new generation of teachers are being trained in this revised curriculum.

No Catholic schools in Northern Ireland are headed by a member of the religious (although some are still members of Boards of Management). This is believed to have created a different atmosphere within schools.

Changing social attitudes are reflected in the liberalisation of teacher training programme and teachers’ attitudes more generally.

Whilst there is some recognition of homophobic bullying, this tends to focus on LGB students. This study evidences that there is a need to extend this recognition to the children of LGB parents.

The experiences of children of LGB parents need to be integrated into existing training for key professionals and board members such as Schools Board of Management (particularly in areas of diversity equality awareness of family forms, homophobia, and the areas of inclusive good practice, child protection, parental consent and bullying). An aide memoire for school staff would be



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

valuable in terms of what is appropriate and inappropriate, offensive and / or detrimental to the child; as well as guidance about how to address issues when they arise either in a teaching or school context. Thinking through how sexual orientation can be addressed across the skills and themes of the whole curriculum would be a valuable investment; as would thinking through who delivers this material and how. Some schools may still consider that they are “not going there” regarding sexual orientation but that taboo needs to be addressed.

Health

A range of health services was discussed: accident and emergency departments, fertility services (private and GP), health visitors and school nurses.

In a health crisis attending an accident and emergency department (in Ireland, a particular issue for families in border areas), one couple encountered a clinician’s “obsession with biology”. They described the doctor thus: “clueless”, “couldn’t comprehend it” as he kept asking: “who’s the mother?”. They discussed the challenge of having to decide whether they stand up for their family identity on all occasions or whether they set it to one side in an emergency.

Discussing access to fertility services, some parents observed that: “Money essentially talks.” However, although money can buy access to treatments, one private clinic was found to be pushing tests that the couple subsequently found to be unnecessary. In contrast, this couple found their GP service to be: “100% supportive”, with good policies and procedures – and no money involved in the exchange.

According to the key informant in the health sector, professional practice with LGB families is: “no different” to working with other families. However there are specific legal issues to be addressed including clarifying parental responsibility or partner’s status (social mothers) if there is insufficient information on a client



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

file or child's birth certificate. Problems identified in the Voices of Children Ireland research such as access within health care settings should not be a problem in the north because such access is based on the closeness of relationships, being a 'significant other' to a child rather than blood relative status.

There was a view that health service staff were less prejudiced than in the education system because of an explicit professional value of non-judgment. However, individual staff could be problematic. Mandatory diversity and equality training could integrate training on working with LGB families. Guidance building on this training would be helpful; such as an 'aide memoire' card (A5 double sided) that covered legal status, management issues and responses and terminology.

School nurses address the issue of sexual orientation with Year 8 school children; at the moment this does not include children of LGB parents but, again, this is a way of integrating LGB families into existing systems of service, practice and learning.

Housing

Neighbourhood homophobia ranging from harassment to hate crime highlighted the need for safe, appropriate housing. Several LGB families had to move when they founded their family. A temporary housing experience highlighted the need to ensure that publicly commissioned provision in the voluntary sector must operate within an equality and human rights framework. One couple in a HereNI family group described how a male ex-partner harassed them from their home; and then the State-funded but faith-based organisation that they were referred to refused to accommodate the two mothers with their four children. It would house only the biological mother with the children, splitting the family unit and forcing the social mother into hostel accommodation.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Workplace

Workplace issues included the importance of integrating LGB caring responsibilities into workplace policies – both for children under 18years, and for adult children caring for ill and older parents. It was noted that Section 75 covers social parents in the public sector.

Media

Increased visibility and public representations of LGB people and families are essential to reduce children's sense of difference, and to enhance awareness and attitudes. Study participants referred to: Hollyoaks story lines, the film 'The Kids are Alright' ("just a representation of a family unit, it portrayed things that could go on in any family unit" (Adult child)), and the Marriage Equality 'We are Family' campaign (<http://www.marriageequality.ie/campaigns/wearefamily.html>).

However, there are negative homophobic images and discourses within the public domain generated by public figures; children have to deal with hearing that their parents are 'sick' and are going to 'hell' (see Living in Northern Ireland).

The adult children talked about how hard it was to never see their lives represented in books and television:

"There was nothing around that showed a gay family (...) I said to mums: 'There are no representations'. They said the girls on 'Birds of a Feather'. I said: 'It's not the same.'"

(Adult child).

Opportunities for influence: Policy

The key informants identified a number of public policy opportunities. At a regional level these included: the Sexual Orientation Strategy (Office of the First



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

and Deputy First Minister), the 'Our Lives, Our Children' Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016 (Office of the First and Deputy First Minister), 'Making Life Better' Public Health Strategy 2013 – 2023 (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety), and the Framework for Children's Services (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).

A review of the Department of Education issued Pastoral Guidance for Schools (1999) may be one route to enhance practice in schools. The Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment is another important body to engage with regard to revising the curriculum and associated resources.

The important of service policy and guidelines were highlighted too – particularly those around commissioning, regulation and good practice.

Key informants cautioned about the considerable influence of churches on Government policy; and the consequent challenge of realising human rights and equality policy for LGB families.

Opportunities for influence: Legal action

Legal action has delivered radical and relatively quick change in the fulfilment of the human rights and equality of LGB families. There are a number of bodies within Northern Ireland that are well placed to engage in strategic public litigation including: the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (which can take cases in its own name following the adoption case), the Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People, and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Given the persistent (if diminishing) institutional, public and private homophobia in Northern Ireland; the glacial progress of the Sexual Orientation Strategy; and the urgent need to address the issues raised in this research, legal action



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

increasingly appears to be a primary route to realising the human rights of this group.

Opportunities for influence: Research

There was considerable support for the development of a participatory research agenda through which families, and particularly children, would co-produce studies around their lives. UNICEF Ireland developed a model of participatory research with migrant children that could work well with children of LGB families⁷.

Noting the value of human rights and equality systematic reviews of research, policy and legislation that have been undertaken by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, it is clear that such a baseline study needs to be commissioned around children of LGB parents.

The particular circumstances of Northern Ireland evidenced in this study (and given legislative recognition in the Northern Ireland Act 1998) indicate that the State should fund research into the experiences of LGB families living in Northern Ireland today.

Given the reported public homophobia, a comprehensive baseline public attitudes survey (informed by the Northern Ireland Life and Time Survey) repeated at regular intervals, would provide valuable data for those involved in addressing the stigma and discrimination experienced by children and their parents. This would include general public attitudes, and the attitudes around

⁷ It involved a series of workshops to allow time for trust building, and the collection of emergent data as these relationships develop. They engaged the children through thematic artwork around meanings of family and home; and involved parents during some of the sessions in order to create dialogue between children and parents. The work was then curated in an exhibition. This was resource intense but a valuable investment; in the research team there was an overall facilitator, a facilitator for each child, two psychologists, as well as play therapists and a story teller working with a group of 15 children.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

specific locations (including schools, health services, housing, and political fora: the Assembly, Councils) and in the media.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Methodology

Participants

This qualitative scoping study draws on three data sources: semi-structured interviews with 3 adult children of lesbian parents; 2 focus groups with HereNI's family groups; and semi-structured interviews with 6 key informants within the human rights, equality, education, public health (health and education), and children's sectors.

The adult children were all female including two sisters. They were both into heterosexual families; and their mothers came out and went on to form families with lesbian partners.

The family groups met in Derry and Belfast and drew their members from across Northern Ireland; the mothers raised children (some of whom were now adults) in villages, towns, and cities. Within the family groups there were diverse pathways to parenthood including: birth within heterosexual relationships, assisted reproduction, and adoption. The relationships with fathers ranged from: positive co-parenting through to hostile custody cases, harassment and absence.

Recruitment

In order to identify the adult children, an email was circulated to LGBT e-lists and a number of individuals with the following text (HereNI was previously called LASI).

LASI (the Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiatives) are looking for adult children (aged 18 years and over) of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents to be interviewed for research funded by the Public Health Agency. If you lived in Northern Ireland for at least 5 years and would be able to give an hour of your time during February or March please contact the researcher Iris Elliott [email] for more information.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

In the event, the three adult children were recruited through community word of mouth ‘convenience sampling’. The two focus groups were run with pre-existing family groups; and the research took place during a planned meeting with members notified in advance. The key informants were selected due to their work role, their knowledge of human rights and equality (around sexual orientation, children), and their location within sectors identified as significant by previous research (health, education).

Ethical Considerations

An ethical protocol was developed for the study, which addressed ethical considerations⁸.

⁸ research participants fully understand what is involved in participating in the research process and how the research material will be used; research environment and process is supportive, safe and enjoyable, and promotes participation; research participants feel that they have been respected, their experiences heard, and the material that they have shared has been accurately recorded, interpreted and reported; data is anonymised in order to protect both the confidentiality and privacy of participants and also their families; data is securely held and then destroyed by the independent researcher; participants clearly understand that participation in the project is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time; material collected is used in a way that promotes the voice of children and young people who have LGBT parents and their inclusion in the work of LASI.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Conclusions and Future Work

This initial study contributes to the conversation about legal and social recognition for LGB families in Northern Ireland. It promotes the visibility of these families; presents their experiences from the perspectives of children and parents, and across generations; and begins a road map about what we can do together to progress the issues raised by children, parents and informants in key sectors.

The study describes the particular experience of being a member of a LGB family in Northern Ireland. As other parts of the UK, Ireland and societies internationally realise the human rights of these families it is important to share learning from progressive research, practice, policy and legislation.

The report concludes with the following section on future work: direct work; legal recognition, policy implementation, service development and research.

There is much to be done. Together we will achieve it, in solidarity and celebration.

Future work

The Sexual Orientation Strategy's pre-consultation document included a commitment to continue to work on the framework and support mechanisms including: "adopting a positive and pro-active approach to identifying, understanding and responding to the needs and choices of LGB people and their families."

This section identifies a number of supporting mechanisms for the State to take forward in collaboration with HereNI as the leading organisation working with



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

LGB families. Whilst the report links to the Sexual Orientation Strategy's family objective, there are also links to its other objectives:

- countering homophobia (by recognising the impact of institutional, public and private homophobia on the children of LGB parents);
- taking negative stereotypes out of policy making and decision-making (by eliminating the stereotype that gay people do not have children, and making these families and their needs visible);
- recognising the multiple identities of lesbian and gay people (recognising parenthood as a core identity); and
- promoting partnership (by engaging with HereNI, children, and LGB parents to co-produce policies, services, research and public awareness initiatives).

Direct Work

Supporting families – parents and children - is central to HereNI's work, through its family group, networks, and one-to-one work. As HereNI's work develops, it should be a touchstone for informing how LGB parents and their children are supported and celebrated in Northern Ireland.

Given the range of professionals engaged with families, it would be valuable for each of their professional bodies to develop an evidenced based public statement and guidance on this work; and to take a leadership role in dissemination the implications of legislation, policy and best practice. Regional, sectoral leadership should be provided by regulatory bodies through the development of quality standards and guidance; and commissioners through the development of contractual obligations and guidance.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Legal Recognition

Legal recognition of the relationships between children and their biological and social parents, and their extended families is the priority for realising the human rights of these children. Whilst the focus for legal protection has been on children under 18 years (particularly in the areas of health, education, housing, social welfare, care, insurance, property and inheritance rights), we need to ensure the establishment of a legal relationship between adult children and all members of their families.

Given the lack of progress through the Executive and Assembly, this report proposes the use of strategic litigation as the most effective strategy to realising these human rights in Northern Ireland.

HereNI and its allies are encouraged to consider the use of international spaces such as the UN Committee monitoring mechanisms to highlight the failure of the UK State in Northern Ireland to respect, protect and promote the human rights of these children and their families.

Policy Implementation

Noting the range of specific policy opportunities identified by key informants, this report proposes a coalition-based approach to policy work around LGB families that is characterised by the following:

- development of evidenced based policy positions based on research and good practice examples;
- securing specific reference to LGB families in policy, in addition to references to the wider LGB community;



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

- the identification of data gaps that produce weak Equality Impact Assessments on legislation and policy, and a research agenda to address these;
- engagement with senior opinion formers and decision makers who are LGB champions within organisations and Government;
- participation by LGB families and their organisations in policy monitoring and review for example the NICCY Youth Panel;
- State investment in development of the policy capacity and capability of LGB families and their organisations.

This study identified considerable confusion about the meaning and scope of parental responsibility and rights, and the rights of children. There is a risk that such confusion leads to defensive – and incorrect – practice by services and professionals. The State needs to initiate a programme of communicating relevant legislation, case law and policy through training, guidance and tailored communications to strategic and frontline services. This includes the implications of the adoption ruling in Northern Ireland; and (given the mobility of families) the introduction of gay marriage in Britain and (if passed) the referendum on marriage equality and the Children and Family Relationships Bill in Ireland.

Service Development

LGB people have children, of all ages; they have many pathways to parenthood and family configurations. Services (particularly health, education and housing) need to recognise this reality and provide appropriate, accessible and positive provision.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

Commissioners, regulators and professional bodies need to issue service standards and guidance, which are co-produced with LGB families. (These should include clear instruction to keep private views separate from professional service.) They must monitor progress on implementing regional standards, and review them for effectiveness and currency.

These requirements need to be build into strategic planning within public provision; and commissioners guidance for publicly funded services that are delivered by voluntary, community and private organisations. We note that human rights obligations remain with the State actor even when provision is commissioned.

Research

Over four decades of legal, psychological, and sociological research from Europe and North America has cumulatively declared as unfounded claims that lesbians and gay men are unfit parents. Historically, the impetus for such research has been to advocate within court cases around custody and legal recognition of same-sex relationships. The representations by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Attorney General in the judicial review of adoption legislation brought by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission highlight the continuing importance of this evidence base to refute homophobic assertions grounded in faith based prejudice rather than sound research.

This report asserts the importance of creating a positive and expansive child-centred local research agenda that will ask the questions that children identify as important, and generate evidence about how their lives can be enhanced in order that they can enjoy all their human rights. This will involve facilitating children, of all ages, to interpret their rights. This research can be valuably developed with allies in the children's sector including UNICEF.



Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

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Celebrating Families with Pride:

The experiences of families with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Northern Ireland

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