

Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship

Róisín Ryan-Flood

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Reviewed by Tracey Jensen

Interest in the lives of lesbian mothers has usually centred around their ‘impossibility’, whilst the limited empirical research into lesbian motherhood has been concerned to compare the quality of their children’s’ lives to those born to heterosexual parents. Either way, lesbian mothers have been considered interesting only in terms of what they can or cannot reproduce of heterosexual motherhood, rather than being in themselves worthy objects for study. It is into this field that Róisín Ryan-Flood’s extraordinary book delves, examining lesbian mothers not as chimeras or pretenders, nor as newly ‘out’ women with children born of a heterosexual past, but as complex subjects, choosing motherhood within their lesbian relationships and engaging in and reformulating sexual citizenship. As she convincingly argues, it is time to stop seeing ‘lesbian’ and ‘mother’ as oppositional categories and to explore where the sexual and gender politics of lesbian lives have taken parenting in terms of kinship, reproductive equality and familial categories.

Drawing on interviews with 68 lesbian parents, Ryan-Flood weaves their experiences of motherhood across her three axes of analysis; context, kinship and normativity. Her participants speak of their reproductive decisions and of processes that necessitated travel, technology and a good deal of legal-political talk. They discuss how they manage both assumptions of heterosexuality and myths of homophobia in order to transform discourses of biological and social relatedness and familial care in the everyday spaces of parenting. These mothers describe the divisions of labour within their families, their employment and childcare arrangements and the relationships they develop, or negate, with donor fathers, extended family and queer friends. They share their strategies

for developing familial names and nouns that made sense in their intimate families and that their children could use with confidence in the wider world.

What makes this book both special and timely is the potency of its cross-national comparisons. Ryan-Flood takes her research questions into two very different European social contexts – Sweden and Ireland – and examines with flair and precision the ways in which the social subjects at the heart of her research are also spatial subjects. The particular discourses of gender, equality and citizenship in these two countries impact in complex ways upon the decisions and processes through which queer subjects produce accounts of themselves and their families. Managing a great deal of comparative material, both from the interviews and beyond, Ryan-Flood argues that the challenges to heteronormativity presented by lesbian motherhood are neither even nor stable, since heteronormativity itself varies across social context. Lesbian mothers in Sweden expressed clear preferences for involved donor fathers, reflecting the Swedish model of participatory fatherhood and gendered equality, whilst Irish lesbian mothers emphasised the importance of choice and independence from donor fathers. This reflected their legal vulnerability, but also demonstrated the benefits of their relative political invisibility. This innovative consideration of specific lesbian lives within their local contexts prompts Ryan-Flood to propose a compelling and novel case for *multiple* heteronormativities. The strength of this book is that it does not romanticise lesbian mother renegotiations of kinship, and that it sees them as neither assimilative nor transgressive. Rather, Ryan-Flood views these processes as sometimes ethical or political expressions, and sometimes necessary compromises made in the gaps between the possible.

The complexity and subtlety of Ryan-Flood's analysis prevents a simplistic reading of actions and decisions made by lesbian parents as either oppressions or resistance. Rather, they are often, as this book demonstrates, pragmatic accommodations within the limits of policy and the law. As such, Ryan-Flood argues that any political attempts to make sexual citizenship more equitable must pay attention to how heteronormativity is constructed cross-nationally. This timely book will be of interest to academics and researchers interested in social changes and challenges around the

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institution and everyday practices of the family, in social policy and family law and reproductive technologies, as well as to scholars of queer theory and to those interested in lesbian and queer lives.

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