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Lesbian mothers in contemporary Italy

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The goal of my research on the subject of lesbian motherhood (Daniela Danna, *"Io ho una bella figlia..." Le madri lesbiche raccontano*, Zoe, Milano 1998) was to explore the ideology and the reality of a phenomenon that in contemporary Italy is still considered as a paradox. This paper is therefore based on a double approach: 1) field research carried out in 1996 involving contact with 52 women who had had children and had relationships with other women, whether they identify themselves as lesbians or described themselves using other words and concepts; 2) a review of the public debate about lesbian mothers, fuelled in the press by reports that examined two women couples that used medically assisted insemination to become pregnant in 1988 and 1994, by the European Parliament's Resolution of 1994 asking member states to permit adoption by homosexuals and the parliamentary debate about the proposals of law regulating new reproductive technologies.

These halves could be called the "private part" and the "public part".

The private part consists of in-depth interviews, the majority of which has been completed with persons to whom I was introduced by friends or acquaintances in the local lesbian or gay and lesbian organizations. A smaller part answered to announcements I placed in the gay and feminist press. The methodology of the second part was simply to consult the collections of press reviews by gay and lesbian groups as Informagay in Turin, CDM in Milan, and my own press collection, retrieving the documents these articles were based on and talking to some of the main actors in the public debate. Field research involved travelling and visiting the women who agreed to be interviewed in their homes or in other settings of their choice. The length of the interviews varied from thirty minutes to more than three hours. The majority were single person interviews, but in some cases I interviewed both partners at the same time. I guaranteed anonymity to everyone, though some of them, who belong or belonged to political movements, preferred to use their name or their nom de plume.

I had great difficulty in finding women living in the South willing to be interviewed. Some informants warned me about the extent of cover marriages that these women get into. This is a reality that I found in the North of Italy, too, but at least some of the women who had this double life were willing to talk about their experience.

My choice of talking about "lesbian" mothers, notwithstanding the differences in the self representation of the interviewees, stems from the need to use an objective measure of the

sentimental and sexual bonds between those women and my preference for a word ("lesbica" in Italian) that underscores the gendering of the experience of same-sex relationships.

I interviewed them at length about their reasons for having children, about how they handled their sexual diversity at different stages of their children's growth, about their relationships, about handling the diversity of their families with the agencies they had to contact as mothers: kindergartens, schools, the larger family, the judiciary in case of a separation and divorce, and so on. This was the case for the large majority of the interviewees, and though it is true that I encountered the biggest fears of being discovered by women who had babies by assisted insemination- who consequently nearly always refused to let themselves be interviewed- I am still confident that portraying lesbian motherhood in Italy as a post-marriage phenomenon will not give a distorted picture of the reality.

In this paper I will focus on an issue that goes across the public and the private parts of my research: the question of discrimination of lesbian mothers and the attempts by the conservative part of society to reconstruct the ideology of a male-dominated family: the right of the father disguised as well-being of the child.

The public debate analysis shows that we are talking about a process of tabooisation, more than simple discrimination, where two things are taken for granted: that such a thing as a lesbian mother is a product of the new science breaking the natural boundaries, and that the damage done (by society itself) on the children exposed to the risk of stigmatisation justifies a total reproductive ban on lesbian women.

The focus on New Reproductive Technologies (NRT) must be understood with a knowledge of the catholic point of view. As a result of "acts against nature" (masturbation), the collection of semen was deemed a sin by the Catholic Church.

In 1958 and 1963 two bills were introduced that tried to prohibit assisted insemination as another form of adultery. They had not been discussed in Parliament, nor had the later proposals until February 1999, when one of the two Chambers of Parliament (Camera) approved a very contradictory and restrictive bill, prohibiting the donation of semen or eggs and introducing the concept of "rights of the embryo", while recognising entitlement also to cohabiting heterosexual couples instead of to only married ones. The prohibition by the Church clashed with the huge interests of the clinics practicing these techniques, some of which are Catholic hospitals.

"So the baby of the scandal is born" was the title of the article appeared on 15.11.88 in the daily paper Corriere della Sera about the birth of the child of "Benedetta and Donatella", a lesbian couple from Milan who used medically assisted insemination. "For us it is only an orphan..." was the title of a similar article, which appeared in another big daily paper, la Repubblica, the same day, quoting the words of a theologian. "Child with one mother too

much", declared to the press the psychoanalyst Ammanniti: "In Italy, the fact of two women raising a child is a scandal, but it is not the first time. As an example, many people grew in nuclei formed by a mother and an aunt and a grandmother, but it didn't cause any damage because the law of the father continued to exist in the mother who transmits it" I must admit I do not know whether there are psychoanalytical studies on the influence of "a single model" (to be read as: "models by only one of the two sexes"), nevertheless such studies are never cited. In 1988 the opinion leaders selected by the press appeared to be more favorable to the lesbian couple than those who pronounced themselves on the identical case of 1994, where the jurist Stefano Rodotà was left nearly alone to defend the rights of the "single woman". The association Arci Gay Donna, founded in 1989, fully supported the choice of "Benedetta and Donatella", and will choose it as a topic of one of its very first political moves: the organisation of a conference entitled "Making children without men" (Bologna, 17.5.91), which introduced Italy to information about self-insemination.

Historically children have always been women's responsibility, not only when the women were abandoned as a result of pregnancy out of wedlock, but also in arranged weddings, not to mention the nearly 100% female staff composition of nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools.

From the statistics collected by the national institute ISTAT on the use of one's time, based on a study carried out in 1988-89 on a sample of 19,728 families, what turns out is a negligible participation rate by fathers to the education of their children. The study suggested that fathers spend time with their offspring only if they can play with them. Despite of the declarations of adhesion to an equal subdivision of the tasks (see Indagine multiscope sulle famiglie, also by Istat), it was obvious from the survey that when women carry out a paid job, the time dedicated to working for the family is reduced remarkably, but their free time also diminishes. On the contrary, if the wife works, it was found that the husband rarely dedicates more time to housework. On an average day women in fact dedicate 2 hours and 35 minutes less than the men to their professional job and approximately half an hour less for commuting: nevertheless their free time amounts to an hour and a quarter less than the men's. If we limit ourselves to consider working women (working time is in average 6.3 hours for the males and 5.8 for the females) we see that every day women use three hours more for domestic work and caring for dependents than men do (this includes helping with homework, reading and playing with children smaller than 13 years old), and twenty minutes more for shopping for goods and services. For example, the data on domestic work in families of workers with children less than 10 years old show that women spend 4.3 hours against 1 hour for men with the same occupational condition. As a result, the working males enjoy 2.3 hours more free time every day.

The study also showed that 74% of mothers dedicate 3 or more hours to attending their children, while the percentage of fathers who spend this much time with their children is 18%. We could think that maybe this is "quality time". It does not look like that: fathers choose to play with the children only when they are not tired.

But the "need for a father" was not furthered in the press.

When the European Parliament approved the Resolution on the Rights of Homosexuals, on 8.2.1994, the Italian press dedicated much time and energy to the issue, but only to the parts of the resolution where gay marriage was advocated (omitting the following phrase: "or an equivalent institution") and the possibility to adopt was advanced. Citizen reaction to these reports, according to a Doxa survey, showed that 37% of the 507 interviewed persons were favorable to the resolution, 54% contrary, and 9% did not take any position. As far as the adoption was concerned (once again there was no mention of children born to lesbians), the same 37% were favorable to the idea, if it regarded a couple of women, a share that came down to 23% if the couple was male. The contrary opinions were, respectively, 54% for a lesbian couple and 71% for a gay male couple.

Carlo Casini, MEP and leader of the Movement for life, declared to the press that: "the good of every child who is born is to be able to call dad and mom two persons of different sex, a right sanctioned by the Italian law on the adoption and solemnly reformulated in the resolutions of the European Parliament on artificial procreation in 1989".

Another survey was commissioned by Panorama to the Institute Cirm on 22.2.1994, with a sample of 466 persons. The result is radically different from the Doxa survey of less than a month before, perhaps because of the unification of lesbians and gays, but perhaps also because of the effect of the media campaign against "giving children to the homosexuals". To the question "Do you consider it right that a stable couple of males or females can adopt a child?" 77% answered "no". For only 15% it was right, and 8% remained without an opinion.

The National committee of bioethics felt itself called into cause. With admirable timing, four years after its foundation by a governmental appointment on June 28th, 1994 (Gay Pride Day), the committee disclosed a document on NRT. Its members reached a "wide consent" in forbidding access to NRT to couples of persons of the same sex and to single women. These and the other prohibitions are justified with the safeguard for the good of the unborn child: "Such criterion suggest that, in general, the better condition in which a child can be born it is being conceived and raised from one couple of adults of different sex: a married couple, or at least stably tied by community of love and life".

These reports must be placed within the campaigns against homosexuality, a few months from the Resolution of Strasburg on the equity of rights for homosexuals in the European Community. The approach of "no giving children to the homosexuals" has been used by the

reactionary forces in order to contrast the growing indifference, tolerance, respect and in many cases favour with which homosexuality is regarded among the new generations and in the leftist part of society, as proved by the tens of thousand signatures gathered in favour of the "unioni civili" (the recognition of gay and lesbian couples) and repeated opinion polls.

In 1994 the target of the press hunt was a lesbian couple from Savona, also in the Northern part of Italy. The writer Ferdinando Camon commented: "the little girl does not have a father, but not even a mother: because the mother is the wife of the father, and not a single one of the two mothers fulfills this condition".

The gynecologist Carlo Flamigni, otherwise a champion of the laical side opposing the catholics, declared himself to be supportive of the "right of the child to have a traditional family, not rejected and neglected from the social fabric", which is implicitly represented as a compact block of the worst conservatorism and traditionalism united against same-sex relationships. Even admitting that the refusal of the diversity would be assured (the experience of my interviewees is much varied), why then there is no discussion about prohibiting procreation to other groups victim of prejudice as blacks, immigrants, or Jewish people?

The gynecologist who assisted the couple, Giuseppe Ambrassa, was suspended from the association Cecos because the regulations did not approve of helping single women or widows. It remains mysterious in which of the two categories a lesbian couple cohabiting for four years, as in the case of Savona, must be placed. The national president of the Cecos, Emanuele Lauricella, at first defended Ambrassa, inspired by the respect which the European Parliament had granted to new conceptions of the family, including gay unions. He also underlined that: "In America, the Bioethics Committee, composed of protestants, non religious and catholics, has given since a long time its approval to this kind of experiences, and the observation of the children of homosexual couples has not found particularly negative consequences". Two days after, he gave in to the pressure and decreed the suspension of Ambrassa, who has nevertheless continued to help lesbian women, at least until a ban on insemination of "homosexual couples" was imposed by the medical doctors' professional association.

In April 1995 the National Council of the Federation of the orders of medical surgeons and dentists approved a document using "the good of the unborn child" as principal criterion. It follows, according to the Council, that artificial procreation must be always prohibited "outside stable heterosexual couples". The Federation decreed it dishonourable to concede medical attendance in the insemination of women not conjugated nor cohabiting with a man, while establishing disciplinary sanctions for the professionals who help them. The decision, taken in April 1995, is premonitory to the legislative provision that with much certainty will confirm it.

The discrimination that most of the legal proposals and drafts that NRT endorse through the Commission of Social affairs (an internal parliamentary body) is targeted against "homosexual couples" and single women in the access to NRT. This is a serious attack on women and their ability to choose how to use their reproductive abilities. Not all feminists approve of this position, however. Among the lesbian groups there are Arcilesbica and the Table of the rights of lesbians who protested the decision of the Doctors' Federation. But it is a fact that among thirteen bills presented in parliament about NRT, only one, whose first signer is Antonio Saia (PRC, the Communists), asks that all women of age should be entitled to ask for medical assistance. Another one, by Giovanna Melandri (PDS, Democratic Leftist Party) addresses the condition of curing the woman's or couple's sterility.

Some single women and lesbian couples do not want to be tied to men. This view is interpreted as interrupting the continuity of the patriarchal appropriation of offspring. However, they do not supply any guarantee that the male child born of a woman will grow on the tracks of the Virility of the father, or that the daughter will absorb the usual deference towards the male authority. This is what is at stake: the defense of the traditional structure "Family", to give renewed prestige to male social status, damaged by capitalist competition and its crises, and the attempt to attribute to females all the tasks that the savings in the public sector are taking away from the welfare state.

Many interviewees reported that during their experiences with separation and divorce, they feared that their lesbian relations would be used against them in court by former husbands. The cases in which the blackmails effectively took place are not few. The mothers yielded to these threats, fearful of the possibility of being morally massacred in the courts, agencies that are among the most conservative and patriarchal: women were admitted among the judges only in the Seventies. Lawyers themselves advise women who find themselves in this situation to yield and not expose themselves to a public debate in which the adverse part would find support in a number of experts ready to declare the non suitability of a lesbian to take care of children. The fact that there are no precedents of discussions about custody to an openly lesbian mother in Italy makes the prospect of being the first successful woman particularly awkward, given the negative attitude already demonstrated by the press.

The approval of a law that reserves access to NRT for heterosexual couples would give a strong foundation to the prejudice against custody to openly lesbian mothers. And there is another aspect of the restrictive bills about to be discussed in parliament that are cause for concern, this time from the point of view of women who would like to become mother resorting to the insemination but without medical aid: the "self-insemination". Jail is foreseen for those who practice NRT without authorisation, and among these techniques the simple assistance in insemination is placed. Of this crime could be convicted the intermediaries

between donor and aspirant mother that guarantee the mutual anonymity: a practice already used by the lesbian would-be mothers in many Western countries. Perhaps the same self-insemination would be included, although for obvious reasons this crime would be very difficult to prove.

One of the children of lesbian mothers whom I interviewed, told me that at the age of 12 he spoke to his class about the two families in which he lived: the separate mother and her fiancée, and, on the other hand, the father, with whom he spent a weekend every two weeks. The reaction of the class? "Nothing particular. My professor was calm, my classmates didn't say anything. I am popular in the class. In my class, and it is the exception in the school, "gay" is not used as an insult, and this seems strange to me, because it is a common game. I think it is by chance". Certainly it isn't: the knowledge of true homosexuals, as the two mothers of this boy, helped in undermining prejudice. And another son of a lesbian mother answered in this way to the not so well hidden fear that "giving children to homosexuals" will turn them into gays: "So what if it were true?"