

MOTHERHOOD IN THE BOSOM OF LESBIAN COUPLES: NOVELTY AND PERSISTENTE IN THE FAMILY AND MATERNAL MODELS

Elixabete Imaz

**Departamento de Filosofía de los Valores y Antropología Social,
Universidad del País Vasco
elixabete.imaz@ehu.es**

Abstract

In February 2004 a judicial resolution that gave the parental rights to a woman for the biological daughters of her female partner¹ caught the attention in the press for a few days, bringing to the surface publicly motherhood in the bosom of lesbian couples that until that moment had remained almost unperceived. Later the legalisation of homosexual marriages promoted, for a few weeks, a heated debate with respect to the possible bad effects this could bring about on children brought up by a homosexual couple. The debate, however, tended to centre on the masculine couples and hardly mentioned a situation which is in fact being produced more or less invisibly since 1988; the formation of lesbian families via the resource of reproductive techniques.

My interest in lesbian motherhood derives from the belief that it is necessary to widen the concept of motherhood, excessively enclosed in a unique, inflexible family idea, that is to say, a nuclear family comprised of a man, a woman and their children. It is for that reason that I suggest talking about "other" mothers, giving reflections around different models of motherhood that enrich the family study. For that I used interviews carried out with lesbian women during the gestation of their first child.

In this presentation I refer exclusively to women who form a basis of a couple have attended the Fertility Clinic seeking a pregnancy as from an unknown donor. Respect to other possibilities, this way of forming a family has four characteristics that mark its specific character:

- a) the wish to be a mother as the origin of filial attachment.
- b) taking advantage of the existence of a legal gap;
- c) the non-existence of a father;
- d) the existence of a biological link with only one of the women which automatically becomes a legal link.

In relation to the socialization of the children and the roles established between different members of a family, the internal relationships established in lesbian families, are of enormous investigation interest as the relationships can be established in the the bosom of these families, the stereotypes about the masculine and the feminine are necessarily going to be restated and reconstructed. The primary socialisation of these children will start from different coordinates precisely in the domestic, the most immediate, context where the relationships and stereotypes of gender seem to maintain the most resistance and strength. In the same way, the resocialisation and learning that the situation demands of the two women appears as an interesting experience of the emergence of changing models and values.

A constant factor in the interviews is the reference to the parents of both members of the couple, that is the children's grandparents. The grandparents are often mentioned and are born in mind in the definition of the family project. Often the mention of the grandparents is joined by a feeling of fear and guilt. In effect, the

women are aware that their motherhood, often puts their own parents in a difficult situation, either towards their respective daughters, or their closest surroundings, without having had the option, unlike the daughters, of taking the decision. The initial attitudes before the announcement of a pregnancy are diverse, but often are negative: from the reactions that have to do with fear and their daughter's legal and economic debility, repugnance and lack of knowledge about artificial insemination, a fear of what will be said. But the later experience is usually that after a few months the people accept the new born babies as their own grandchildren. In any case, the acceptance of their condition as grandparents and the way they administer that can also be an extremely interesting resocialisation in mature people who find they need to restructure their stereotypes of gender and family conceptions in a context of strong affective implication.

In spite of all these questions, it is important to reflect if this new type of family implies a profound restructuring of family models. These couples defend their right to be "parents like others" (Cadoret, 2002), and this claim implies a questioning relative to the family institution in the measure that it states that the paternal figure is not essential and that the homosexual sexuality is compatible with bringing up and educating a child. Further to this vindication the conception of the family does not move away excessively from the family model constituted as from independent domestic units and organized round an adult couple who cover the responsibilities and rights on the children that are under their tutorship. On the other hand, there is the question of up to what point these experiences propitiate the rupture of the hegemonic model of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1998) which is constructed as from the over-responsibility of the mother in bringing up children (Imaz, 2005).

Bibliography

Cadoret, A. 2002. Des parents comme les autres. Homosexualité et parenté. Paris: Odile Jacob.

Hays, S. 1998) Las contradicciones culturales de la maternidad. Barcelona: Paidós

Imaz, E. 2003. Estrategias familiares y elección reproductiva: notas acerca de la maternidad lesbiana. ANKULEGI-Revista de Antropología Social 7:69-77.

Imaz, E. 2005 'Condicionantes sociológicos de la fecundidad' in B. Arregi (ed.) Reproduciendo la vida, manteniendo la vida: reflexiones sobre fecundidad y la familia desde la experiencia de Euskadi, Leioa: Servicio Editorial EHU/ UPV.

¹ Consúltese en hemerotecas el 17 de febrero de 2004.

² Este trabajo forma parte de la investigación destinada a la realización de mi tesis doctoral sobre el tránsito a la maternidad de las mujeres vascas contemporáneas y que dirige Teresa del Valle Murga.