

SAME-SEX PARENTING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: RIGHTS, CHALLENGES, AND REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the challenges faced by same-sex parents in contemporary society, emphasizing the impact of cultural norms, legal barriers, and financial burdens on their parenting journeys. The increasing visibility of same-sex families, often referred to as the 'gay baby boom,' reflects a broader societal shift towards inclusion and acceptance. The paper calls for comprehensive policy reforms to dismantle systemic barriers and ensure equal parental rights for all families. Key recommendations include expanding adoption rights, facilitating access to assisted reproductive technologies, and promoting positive representations of diverse family structures in media and public discourse.*

Key words: *Same-sex parenting, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive technologies, parental rights.*

1. Introduction

Becoming a parent impacts an individual's life trajectories, shaping their perspectives and influencing their future aspirations. When approaching this life-changing experience as a couple, the idea of welcoming a new member into the family compels partners to confront various doubts and questions on both the tangible and the emotional implications tied to parenting. Intentional parents can find themselves contemplating how the arrival of a child might alter their daily routines, time management, resource allocation, and even the dynamics of their relationship (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013; Bachrach & Morgan, 2013). Envisioning oneself as a parent can also lead to self-reflection regarding personal identity. Aspirations, values, and life goals can be reassessed considering shared challenges and responsibilities that parenthood may bring (Dommermuth et al., 2011; Giddens, 2005; Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2016). One significant concern involves creating a secure and stimulating space for the child, which often intertwines with anxieties regarding the responsibilities linked to education and upbringing (Shreffler et al., 2017). Cultural and social expectations can add another layer of complexity, amplifying doubts about parental adequacy in terms of caregiving skills, financial stability, and the availability of emotional support (Billari et al., 2009).

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While such questions concern most prospective parents, they become even more pressing for some category of people in socio-cultural contexts where traditional family models dominate, parenthood is strongly shaped by societal expectations. Specifically, imagining oneself as a parent while being in a same-sex relationship introduces not only the standard emotional and practical concerns of parenting but also a set of unique challenges—social, cultural, and institutional—which this paper aims to illuminate. Despite a growing body of research demonstrating that family structure is far less important than the quality of parenting in determining a child’s well-being, same-sex couples continue to face external judgment, prejudice, and systemic obstacles (Golombok, 2015; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

For instance, in Europe, a significant percentage of citizens still believe that same-sex parenting can have a negative impact on children (FRA, 2020). This perception stems from an heteronormative culture that associates successful parenting with specific elements, including parental heterosexuality, biological parentage, marital co-residence, and monogamy (Bastianoni, 2009; Héritier, 1979; Takács & Szalma, 2020). According to Kimmel (2003), heteronormativity is a multifaceted social phenomenon emerging from the interplay of misogyny, bipolarization, essentialism, and religious prejudice. Misogyny marginalizes femininity, contributing to a social framework in which characteristics associated with women are perceived as subordinate to those linked with men. Bipolarization simplifies identities through a binary lens, dividing individuals into either the heterosexual majority or marginalized sexual minorities. Essentialism frames heterosexuality as a “natural” and universal norm, reinforcing perceptions of non-heterosexual identities as deviant. Finally, religious prejudice often justifies discriminatory views with moral convictions rooted in faith.

Same-sex couples preparing for parenthood may also encounter legal and institutional hurdles that affect their family-building options. In some countries, restrictive adoption laws or assisted reproductive technology (ART) policies disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ individuals. Legal recognition of both partners as parents can vary, potentially leaving one partner without parental rights or responsibilities.

For same-sex couples, the desire to become parents often also involves navigating spaces where visibility and acceptance remain limited (Kazyak et al., 2018; Park et al., 2016). The fear of being judged or excluded can discourage open conversations about parenthood, leading to feelings of isolation or self-doubt. Additionally, in some countries media representations of parenthood often fail to reflect diverse family structures, perpetuating the notion that traditional family models are superior or more valid.

2. Navigating the Challenges of Same-sex Parenting

The challenges faced by same-sex parents across diverse cultural contexts are both profound and multifaceted. A central issue is the persistence of stereotypes suggesting that a child’s well-being depends on the presence of both a mother and a father. This belief is rooted in gender essentialism, which assumes that mothers are inherently nurturing while fathers are providers, despite the lack of scientific evidence supporting such claims (Henderson et al., 2017; Hicks, 2013; Kranz et al., 2018; Segatto & Lombardi,

2022). These stereotypes, which assigns specific caregiving roles based on gender, can lead same-sex couples to question the completeness of their family structure (Scandurra et al., 2019; Van Houten, 2020).

The absence of positive, publicly recognized role models often leaves couples questioning their parenting abilities and struggling to find acceptance. This lack of representation can perpetuate feelings of isolation, making peer support networks crucial (Lau et al., 2023). Engaging with other same-sex parents can provide essential validation and reassurance, helping prospective parents understand relational dynamics and caregiving practices. In many countries, informal support groups have emerged as safe spaces for same-sex couples, though they remain limited in rural areas where conservative views prevail (Frost et al., 2016; Monaco & Nothdurfter, 2023). Despite these challenges, online platforms and forums where same-sex parents can share experiences and seek advice have increased (Pralat, 2021; Rabun & Oswald, 2009). These digital spaces are particularly valuable in contexts where in-person support is scarce or stigmatized.

Extended family support also plays a key role in shaping parenting experience. For many prospective parents, knowing they can rely on their family of origin can mitigate their anxieties. Families that embrace same-sex parenting contribute positively to the emotional well-being of both parents and children.

Various studies have highlighted the challenges faced by same-sex prospective parents. For instance, many people still face resistance by their family of origin, often rooted in generational beliefs about family norms (Oswald, 2002). Negative reactions to coming out can strain family ties, leaving same-sex parents without the emotional and practical support typically offered by family networks (Gato et al., 2020; Power et al., 2015). When same-sex prospective parents experience conflicts with their families of origin, they often seek to build alternative social networks to establish meaningful connections in supportive environments, such as friendships (Knauer, 2016; Leal et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2013). In the context of the Italian CoPInG research, same-sex parenting associations have been described as valuable resources capable of offering support, guidance, and emotional assistance, both during the decision-making process and after the child's birth (Sicora & Fargion, 2023).

A central factor in the decision-making process for same-sex couples considering parenthood is the legal context. Imagining themselves as future parents often involves navigating significant legal barriers related to the recognition and protection of their family structure. Laws concerning access to reproductive technologies, adoption, and legal recognition of children vary widely across the world (ILGA, 2025), creating a complex legal landscape. For instance, in the United States, Bauermeister (2014) observed that legal restrictions, such as bans on same-sex adoption, significantly reduce parenting intentions among same-sex couples.

Research underscores the importance of legal recognition for same-sex unions and marriages in shaping parental aspirations. A study by Riggle et al. (2017) highlighted how legal recognition positively affects not only individuals but also their perception of becoming parents. Legal protection for couples reduces anxiety and uncertainty associated with parenthood. This finding aligns with other studies (Murphy, 2013; Park et al., 2020) demonstrating that individuals in legally recognized relationships report lower distress levels compared to those who lack legal protections.

Inclusive legal frameworks are essential for improving the well-being of sexual minorities seeking to become parents. Legal recognition not only provides a solid foundation for family security but also helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and systemic discrimination. Same-sex couples particularly benefit from environments where their parental rights are legally safeguarded, as this positively influences their self-perception and parenting expectations. Conversely, in contexts where legal protections are limited or absent, such as in Romania, same-sex families often face systemic barriers. Romania's constitutional definition of marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman results in a lack of parental rights for same-sex couples, creating additional stress and limiting options for family formation (Monaco & Corbisiero, 2022).

3. The Costs of Same-sex Parenting

Beyond legal barriers, same-sex prospective parents must also consider the significant financial costs associated with family-building. Due to restrictive laws, in many countries, such as Italy, one of the few options available to same-sex couples seeking parenthood is traveling abroad to access ARTs (Carone, 2021; Guerzoni, 2017; Monaco & Nothdurfter, 2021), where laws may be more inclusive.

Accessing ARTs in foreign countries involves high direct costs, including fees for medical procedures, hormonal stimulation, laboratory work, embryo transfer, and donor gametes. These services are rarely covered by public healthcare systems for non-resident patients, making the process almost entirely privatized. Additionally, prospective parents incur a wide range of indirect and logistical costs that further escalate the financial burden associated with cross-border family-building. Among the indirect expenses, compensation for surrogate mothers—where legally permitted—can represent a significant portion of the overall cost, especially for intentional fathers. Other indirect costs include fees for psychological assessments, both intended parents and, in some jurisdictions, of the surrogate, aimed at ensuring the emotional preparedness and stability of all parties involved. Legal consultations also play a crucial role, as navigating the complexities of cross-border surrogacy or gamete donation often requires expert guidance to ensure parental recognition and citizenship rights for the child. Logistical costs are equally demanding and include international travel to and from the country where treatments or procedures are performed, as well as the cost of extended accommodation during the various stages of medical intervention. Meals and daily living expenses while abroad, often for weeks or months, add to the financial strain. In many cases, one or both partners must also take unpaid leave from work, resulting in lost income that compounds the overall economic impact. For couples who need to make multiple trips—for example, for egg retrieval, embryo transfer, and follow-up care—these costs can multiply significantly over time, making the entire process even more prohibitive.

These cumulative expenses can push the total cost of family formation to tens of thousands of euros, making parenthood financially unfeasible for many (Smietana, 2018). Such economic obstacles are particularly acute for younger or less affluent couples, disproportionately excluding those with fewer resources and exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities.

Equally significant are the emotional and psychological costs. The distance from home, language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and cultural unfamiliarity often contribute to an emotionally taxing experience. Being in an unfamiliar environment while undergoing physically and psychologically demanding fertility treatments heightens feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and isolation. Furthermore, the lack of immediate access to one's social and familial support network during critical stages of the reproductive process can intensify stress and mental health strain (Gianino, 2008).

The combination of financial and emotional challenges raises broader concerns about the elitism of assisted reproduction practices. The opportunity to build a family through ARTs abroad has effectively become a privilege reserved for economically advantaged individuals and couples. Restrictive legal frameworks, coupled with the high costs of cross-border reproductive care, reproduce and reinforce systemic inequalities within LGBTQ+ populations (Blanchfield & Patterson, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2012; Kolk & Andersson, 2020; Riskind et al., 2013; Tate et al., 2019).

Studies focusing on lesbian motherhood underscore how financial considerations decisively shape reproductive choices. Research by Tate and Patterson (2019) shows that intentional mothers often perceive the economic cost of parenthood as a primary barrier, resulting in more cautious and less frequent decisions to have multiple children compared to women in gender-diverse couples. This highlights how economic vulnerability intersects with gender to further constrain access to family life, calling for a critical reflection on how structural inequalities influence reproductive autonomy within the LGBTQ+ community.

4. Discussion

Envisioning oneself as a parent in contemporary society is not only the outcome of personal desire, but a process also shaped by sociocultural norms, legal frameworks, and material conditions. For same-sex couples, this process is further complicated by enduring stereotypes, structural inequalities, legal limitations, and significant financial and emotional challenges (Shenkman, 2019; Simon et al., 2018). These intersecting factors create a layered landscape of obstacles that differentiate the path to parenthood for LGBTQ+ individuals compared to gender-diverse or heterosexual couples.

Legal restrictions and bureaucratic barriers often force same-sex couples to travel abroad to access ARTs, incurring high financial costs and significant psychological strain. Indirect expenses such as legal consultations, translation of documents, psychological support, and time away from work compound the burden. In countries where access to ARTs remains highly restrictive for same-sex couples, these challenges can be exclusionary, privileging those with sufficient economic capital.

At the same time, the need to navigate unfamiliar healthcare systems abroad, coupled with the absence of immediate social support, contributes to a sense of isolation and vulnerability. These factors are amplified by societal narratives rooted in gender essentialism, which continue to idealize family models centered around heterosexual and gender-diverse parenting. Such narratives promote the idea that a child requires both a mother and a father, thereby invalidating same-sex families and producing internalized doubts about parental adequacy.

Despite these barriers, same-sex parenting is becoming increasingly visible and widespread across many parts of the world. In several Western contexts, the rising number of families headed by same-sex parents has been labeled as a “gay baby boom” (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). This phenomenon, often viewed as part of a generational shift (Patterson & Riskind, 2010), signals a growing willingness among younger LGBTQ+ individuals to live openly, assert their identities, and pursue parenthood with fewer reservations. Such developments also reflect a broader transformation in societal norms and expectations, challenging traditional conceptions of family and expanding the cultural repertoire of kinship.

Viewed through a critical and sociological lens, the “gay baby boom” represents more than a demographic trend. It embodies a demand for recognition and legitimacy of diverse family forms. This shift is closely connected to broader claims for sexual citizenship and equality, where the right to parent is seen as a core aspect of full societal participation (Asquer & Odasso, 2020). Choosing to become parents in defiance of entrenched norms and institutional obstacles, same-sex couples contribute to reshaping cultural narratives around love, care, and family life. Their experiences underscore the need to redefine family beyond biologically or heteronormatively based models, emphasizing instead emotional bonds, caregiving practices, and mutual responsibility (Piazzesi et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that children raised by same-sex parents fare just as well in emotional, psychological, and educational outcomes as those raised by different-sex parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Golombok, 2015). This reinforces the argument that it is the quality of parenting—and not the gender or sexual orientation of parents—that matters most. Therefore, the parental aspirations of same-sex couples must be acknowledged as equally legitimate and meaningful, contributing to the ongoing diversification of family life.

In this light, same-sex parenthood is both a private choice and a public statement—an affirmation of belonging and a challenge to the dominance of traditional family structures. Recognizing and supporting these families is essential to building inclusive societies that value relational diversity and uphold the principle that all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, have the right to parent.

5. Conclusions

To promote equality among different family forms, societies must implement concrete actions. Legal reforms are essential to eliminate discriminatory barriers in areas such as adoption, access to ART), and the recognition of parental rights (Pacilli et al., 2011). However, legal equality alone is insufficient. It must be accompanied by sustained cultural efforts aimed at dismantling heteronormative assumptions and embracing plural and inclusive models of family life. In this sense, public education campaigns, inclusive school curricula, and accurate media representation can play a key role in reshaping collective imaginaries around parenthood. These initiatives help create environments in which all families feel acknowledged and valued (Salvati et al., 2019). Promoting positive representations of same-sex parenting can also counteract the stigmatizing narratives

that circulate in many cultural and institutional settings.

The path forward requires also collaborative engagement among policymakers, civil society, and local communities. Thus, ensuring that family diversity is acknowledged and protected demands commitment also from the broader social fabric (Grilli & Parisi, 2016). Embracing the full spectrum of family configurations means recognizing that love, and care—rather than adherence to traditional norms—should constitute the foundation of parenthood (Jilley & Masullo, 2023).

Equally crucial is the role of professionals who work directly with families. Social workers, educators, healthcare providers, and legal practitioners occupy key positions in either reinforcing or challenging normative biases. Their training should explicitly include content on family diversity, anti-discrimination strategies, and supportive tools tailored to the needs of same-sex parents and their children.

Encouraging collaboration between academic researchers and frontline practitioners can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, facilitating the translation of empirical insights into actionable strategies that foster equity, inclusion, and social justice in everyday family life.

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