

**Challenging the unthinkable: gay and lesbian parents  
between redefinition and exclusion in Italy**

Marina Franchi

London School of Economics, UK

Giulia Selmi

Università degli Studi di Verona, Italia

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**Abstract**

Despite the approval of the a law legally recognising same-sex relationships, and the on-going change of public attitudes towards Lgbt families and couples, the familial and parental projects of gay men and lesbian women keep being “unthinkable” within the Italian socio-cultural landscape, where the trope of nature is still a guiding ideal for the construction of both parental and kinship relationships. Drawing upon 29 qualitative interviews with gay men and lesbian women, we analyse how informants negotiate the persisting heteronormativity of the Italian context both in their intimate lives and in the

encounter with the public sphere. We discuss the tensions between a process of redefinition of traditional family and kinship roles, and the persisting exclusion of Lgbt families and couples from the public sphere.

**Keywords:** same-sex parents, heteronormativity, family, kinship.

## 1. Introduction

Questions regarding intimate and sexual citizenship are at the forefront of the Italian political and societal debate. The increased visibility in the public and political sphere of Lgbt (Lesbian, Gay men, Bisexual, and Transgender) experiences, and of the plurality of ways in which individuals arrange their intimate lives, clash with hegemonic understandings of the “Italian family” that have been informing the legal and welfare system in the past decades, provoking a strong, at time violent, heterosexist backlash (Bertone and Crowhurst 2012). Against this background Lgbt individuals organise their intimate lives, make reproductive choices and develop strategies to protect themselves and their most vulnerable next of kin.

This paper draws on 29 interviews with Lgb<sup>1</sup> individuals and couples in a long-term relationship with and without children, conducted in Italy between October 2014 and June 2015. Crucially, the time span preceded the changes in the law that happened in May 2016, when relationship rights of same-sex couples have been recognised. At the time of the interviews therefore, the public sphere thrived with discussions about relationships and parenting rights, the latter still not legally recognised at the moment of writing this article. The narratives collected allow us to think about how our interviewees narrate their familial relationships against the background of the difficult political negotiation and the intense social debate that characterised the writing of the law.

In particular, in this article we focus on how informants negotiate their kinship relationships in private, through detailed practices of meaning-making and how and if this

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<sup>1</sup> No self-identified trans person was involved in the sample. Therefore we will use the acronym Lgb to refer to the interviewees, and Lgbt to refer to the community at large.

labour survives the transition to the public sphere, and the encounter with the bureaucracy that deems them outside the law. Personal narratives are informed by and in relation to dominant public narratives (Somers and Gibson 1994) and cultural repertoires that our informants embrace or challenge, contributing to their transformation and to the construction of new stories (Plummer 2003). The heteronormativity that characterises Italian society represents the symbolic repertoire that shapes our respondents' subjectivities and public identities (Rosenfeld 2009). The analysis of their narratives allows us to highlight how «heteronormative discourses can be both challenged and subscribed» (Ryan-Flood 2005, 201).

## **2. Mission incomplete: Lgbt family rights between recognition and denial**

The Italian legislative system has been characterised by a tendency to shadow homosexuality in the public sphere (Bertone 2009), and an unwillingness on the part of the legislator to address the lack of rights of Lgbt individuals (Bonini Baraldi 2008). As Bertone and Gusmano argue, within the Italian public sphere it is possible to trace a strong resistance to «allowing discursive space even for a homonormative (Duggan 2003), familised subject» (2013, 261-262) despite the attempts made since the early 2000s by the Lgbt movements in Italy. This resistance comes in particular from representative of the Catholic Church and Conservative politicians who are opposing Lgbt rights to safety (Dolcini 2012) and are vociferously against recognising parenting rights outside the institution of heterosexual marriage (Lasio and Serra 2017).

The consequences of the inclination to denial of the legislator, and of the power of the conservative hierarchies of the Italian Catholic Church were ever so visible in the final text of the law that in 2016 granted legal recognition to Lgb couples. The Law 76/2016, so called *Cirinnà Law*, has been defined by many a watered down recognition of intimate citizenship rights (Mancina and Vassallo 2016). While on one side the law regulates unions in a way that is very similar to marriage, on the other, their definitions as *civil unions*, the removal of the duty to fidelity, and the exclusion of parenting rights from the final draft, place same-sex unions firmly as outsider to the institution of mar-

riage. The law has been once again instrumental in consolidating a heteronormative hierarchy of acceptable relationships and in ensuring that the conjugal space and the family as a consequence, is maintained as heterosexual (Billotta 2013).

Marriage and the family retain a high symbolic value in contemporary Italy despite the changes that are shaping intimate relationships (Bertone 2009a). The Italian welfare regime is infused with “familialism” whereby the family (expanded, to include larger kinship network) is assumed to function as a safety net for the most vulnerable (Naldini and Saraceno 2008). The welfare system does in turn sustain intergenerational dependence, and foster an asymmetrical division of work in which caring responsibilities are assumed to be undertaken by women (Naldini and Jurado 2009). These structural constraints uphold the notion of the heteronormative family at the core of Italy’s social fabric, even more so in the current precarious economic conditions and neo liberal policies (Bertone 2013). Those who cannot or don’t want to marry, or those who are forming alternative relations of intimacy and support are routinely excluded from a full enjoyment of citizenship rights.

In contrast with the national, some local and regional governments have been implementing non-discriminatory good practices and creating spaces for advocacy of Lgbt rights (Bertone and Gusmano 2011). The successful interaction of different stakeholders at the local level fostered the creation of cohabitation registries almost a decade before the national law of 2016. In over a hundred local governments in Italy, cohabitation registries granted some recognition to both heterosexual and same-sex unions outside the conjugal couple. With no effect at the national level local registries allowed access to housing benefits and to locally regulated services, such as childcare and health care. In 2014 then, increasingly frustrated by the lack of a national legislation, the Mayors of some of Italy’s biggest urban centres, decided to transcribe, in their local registries, same-sex marriages celebrated abroad by Italian citizens. This concerted action provoked heated reactions both from conservative Government Ministers and from representatives of the Catholic Church.

The opposition to the recognition of Lgbt intimate and sexual citizenship rights also pertains to parenting rights. This is clearly exemplified by the tensions that characterised the approval of the Cirinnà Law in 2016. Before the vote at the Senate on February

26th, the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stripped the step-child adoption from the bill, allegedly as a move to gain a solid majority and grant the approval of the law (Lasio and Serra 2017). In its original version the law aimed at regulating *step-child adoption*. The provision would have granted Lgb individuals, in a relationship legally recognised under the new law, the right to adopt their partner's children. This was seen as a good compromise to ensure parenting rights to those couples who had children via Art, since the law recognised only the rights of the parent who has biological ties with the children. While the draft of the law still privileged the biological bond between parent and child, it nonetheless granted recognition to social parents<sup>2</sup>.

During the months that preceded the approval of the Cirinnà Law, Lgbt parenting rights were moved to the forefront of the political and societal debate. Lgbt parents became more visible on media and in the public sphere, generating support as well as strong reactions. In particular, the increased visibility of gay men accessing surrogacy abroad elicited a violent backlash from right-wing politicians and conservative groups. The claims of the energized, strong opposition to the practice of surrogacy conflated with the discussion of the law recognising relationship rights (Trappolin and Tiano 2015). Voluntary as well as commercial surrogacy are illegal in Italy and were not part of the parliamentary debate; however they became a fundamental issue at the core of the societal debate in the months before the approval of the Cirinnà law<sup>3</sup>. The law, was framed, by those who opposed it, as either facilitating access to surrogacy abroad or as the preamble to the legalisation of surrogacy<sup>4</sup>. The debate was therefore punctuated by references to biology, blood ties and the 'natural family' and accusation of a marketisation of women's bodies and children (Lasio and Serra 2017).

The issue of surrogacy was not only condemned strongly by the conservative right but was also forcefully opposed by part of the Italian lesbian movement. During a national congress *Arcilesbica* positioned itself against surrogacy defined as a patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> This would have been again a partial recognition of rights, since the kinship relations would not have been extended to the extended family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles etc.).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/01/24/news/unioni\\_civili\\_boldrini\\_stepchild\\_e\\_normale\\_che\\_sia\\_un\\_diritto\\_-131941884/?ref=search](http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/01/24/news/unioni_civili_boldrini_stepchild_e_normale_che_sia_un_diritto_-131941884/?ref=search).

<sup>4</sup> <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/05/03/unioni-civili-torna-la-battaglia-contro-lutero-in-affitto-e-il-pd-nuovo16.html?ref=search>.

technology that place women as mere “container” of somebody else child (cfr. Bonini *et. al.* 2017). This position generated the strong reactions of other Lgbt groups and in particular of rainbow families associations.

As Lasio and Serra point out the opposition to the bill – and to the step-child adoption in particular – was framed around the primacy of blood as the embodiment of the natural order. As they state – drawing upon the analysis of the parliamentary debate –

gay and lesbian parents who do not have biological connections to the children are not considered “real parents”, even if they participate, as well as the biological parent, in child rearing. At the same time, under the primacy of nature, the biological connection is in itself the reason for considering the sperm donor or the woman who gestates the child as the “real parent” (Lasio and Serra 2017, 14).

This supposed challenge to the “natural order” of society is mirrored also in the discursive trope of the wellbeing of the child, allegedly jeopardised by the absence of complementary gender roles, hence reaffirming heterosexuality as the one and only prerequisite to (good) parenting; a rhetorical move that characterises most of the debates, in Italy and outside (Saraceno 2012; Lalli 2011).

Beyond the parliamentary debate, public attitudes towards Lgbt families and couples are changing, even if in ambivalent terms (Trappolin 2009). A survey conducted by Istat in 2011 reported that the majority of respondents defined same-sex relationships acceptable and over 60% of the respondents defined themselves in favour of a law that would recognise equal right to same-sex couples. However the data collected showed that only 21.9% of men and 25% of women interviewed agreed with the statement that a lesbian couple should be allowed to adopt a child. The percentages dropped to 17% and 21.7% for those agreeing that a gay couple should be allowed to adopt (Istat 2011). Further data suggest that adoption is the most approved path towards same-sex parenting (Petrucci *et al.* 2015; Ciccarelli and Beckman 2005), while Art and surrogacy are less approved of, hence technological mediation and the misalignment of biological ties are still perceived as problematic.

The above reveals how, while heterosexuality might, in specific instances, no longer be a *sine qua non* requirement for the recognition of rights, it «has not yet been displaced as the reference point for “equality” and “normality”» (Richardson and Monro 2012, 65) and is maintained as the norm that polices the boundaries of belonging and exclusion (Richardson 2000, 75). While on one side definitions of family are constantly broadened to include Lgb relationships, and same-sex parents are gaining more and more visibility, on the other side compulsory heterosexuality still prevents the legitimization of the generative potential of same-sex couples. The perception of an unbreakable link between procreating and parenting (Ferrari 2015) appears to keep Lgbt-parented families as “unthinkable” (Lignardi 2013) in the Italian public discourse. It is against this background of unthinkability, characterised by a tendency to denial, and a conservative opposition to the recognition of Lgbt rights, that we collected the interviews that we are going to analyse in the next section.

### 3. Methodology

In this paper we draw on 29 in-depth interviews conducted between October 2014 and 2015 with gay men and lesbian women that described themselves as in a long-term relationship. The interviews were collected as part of the European funded project Families and Societies<sup>5</sup> and focused on the daily life experiences of gay and lesbian couples and parents before the Cirinnà law was approved.

Three cities in the centre-north and three cities in the centre-south were selected to carry out the research. Alongside the socio-cultural differences in terms of family values and kinship ties between north and south, the six urban contexts were selected due to different features in terms of inclusive Lgbt policies (i.e. city registers of same sex part-

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<sup>5</sup> Family And Societies was funded within the 7th Framework Programme of the European Union and was aimed at investigating the diversity of family forms, relationships, and life courses in Europe, at assessing the compatibility of existing policies to family change, and to contributing to evidence-based policy-making. The data discussed in this article were gathered within the work package *Sexual Orientation, Family and Kinship* lead by Ined (Institut National d’Etudes Demographiques - FR) aimed at collecting qualitative data on same sex families and parents in France, Spain, Italy and Iceland. The overall aim was to analyze and compare Lgbt family experiences in relation to different legal system. For more information see: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu> and <https://www.lawsandfamilies.eu/>.

nership, policies against discrimination etc.) and the presence or absence of a strong Lgbt movement (i.e. number of association, advocacy programme with the local government etc.). This selection ensured we could gather varied life experiences against different social contexts. Within these six cities, participants were selected through a snowball sampling technique thanks both to personal contacts and a network of Italian Lgbt associations that supported the recruitment of participants.

On the whole we interviewed 13 men and 16 women. The youngest respondent in the group was 22 years old, while the oldest was 62. While we aimed to have an even distribution in term of age, in the sample those who are over 40 years old are overrepresented. This is a direct consequence of the focus of the research that aimed at collecting stories of people dealing with family issues (housing, planning parenthood, childcare, elderly care etc.); in Italy the average age when one becomes a parent is higher than the rest of Europe, and more so for people in a same-sex relationship.

Thirteen participants were parent or were expecting a child at the time of the interview. Seven women had (or were expecting) children within the same-sex relationship (six through medically assisted Art and one through home insemination); three women had children conceived while in a previous heterosexual relationship. Two men had children while in a previous heterosexual relationship, one gay couple had children through surrogacy and another one was fostering.

The interviews lasted on average between 1 hour and 1.5 hours and were transcribed verbatim. They began with a generative question on the couple/family story in order to encourage the participants storytelling (Riessman 2008) and then deepened through *ad hoc* questions about their process of visibility and identity negotiation among family members and acquaintances as well as in the social context; the encounter with the public sphere (i.e. public services, institutions); and their experience of discrimination and homophobia. For the purpose of this article we will draw particularly on the interviews collected with parents or prospective parents. The reason is twofold: first, the legal situation of same sex parents has not changed after the approval of the Cirinnà law, therefore the story we collected back then still mirrors the actual challenges of gay and lesbian parents and their children; second, same-sex parenting epitomizes the



tensions between the on-going change in family and kinship configurations and the endurance of heteronormative family models (Bertone 2015).

#### **4. Becoming parents within a same sex relationships in Italy: carving out for recognition**

Given the unthinkability (Lingiardi 2013) of same-sex parenting in the Italian context, gay and lesbian parents are called for a constant work to find room for their experience in order to make it culturally intelligible (Butler 1990) within a given set of heteronormative kinship and gender models. In the paragraphs that follows we analyse the process of “making it thinkable” both in the intimate space of families and acquaintances, and in the encounters with the “public”, i.e. public services and institutions. We argue that while, in the intimate space of the family, heteronormativity is challenged and manipulated, to create new meanings and roles to account for the specificity of these families configurations, in the encounter with bureaucracy and institutions, heteronormativity “strikes back” banishing these families out of the “legitimate” territory of kinship.

##### ***4.1 Family lexicon: stretching the boundaries of heteronormativity***

Naming practices appeared, in the interviews collected, part of the practices that negotiate parental roles and identities. These processes clash with the unthinkability of parenting within a same-sex couple and the lack of a vocabulary to encompass families outside the nuclear heterosexual couple. We focus here on strategies of naming within and beyond the kinship network. We investigate them not as a practices aimed at *describing*, but as intentional practices that draw upon, and manipulate, the available kinship repertoire in order to create a space where family configurations can be recognised. The analysis of the narratives collected allows understanding the ways in which heteronormative discourses on family and kinship «are both subverted and reinscribed» (Ryan-Flood 2005, 201).

The different strategies of naming parental roles as well as kinship networks are as diverse as families are (Gabb 2005). However, the analysis of the narratives collected highlights two different ways of negotiating the heteronormativity of kinship vocabu-

lary; either by manipulating it or by reclaiming it. Enrica's story is an eloquent example of the latter. Enrica and her wife married abroad and they conceived two children with the same known-donor.

That was the most important concept for me, that clearly we are both mothers... there are other families that distinguish the two roles [...]... we always felt both a mother, so to use other terms... if you are a female parent in Italy you are called Mamma, this is it... there are no alternative and so the children call us Mamma plus our names or Mamme when they need both of us... (Enrica, 44, center-north).

Enrica dismisses the idea that she and her wife should find a way of distinguishing their roles. Motherhood is created within the relationship with their children and their roles within it. The use of the same name for both mothers is crucial to underline the sameness of their roles towards their two children and in rejecting a distinction predicated on biological ties. Given a cultural scenario of denial of the very possibilities of the existence of two "mamma", Enrica seems to respond by forcefully finding space in the literal meaning of the term "a female parent" and affirming that the role of a female parent can be defined only through the word "mamma".

Chiara and Sandro adopt a different strategy that manipulates the existing parental vocabulary to create new words to account for the relationships with their children. Chiara is the social mother of two twins conceived by her partner through Art, while Sandro and his partner are the foster fathers of a teenager.

In the case of Chiara the word *mamma* coexists with the word "babba", the female declination (which doesn't actually exist) of the word *babbo*, an old fashioned and somehow sentimental way to call the father. In this case differentiation is welcomed by the two mothers as a play with the trope of the gender complementarity and the "missing father" and as a challenge to traditional gender family structure.

They call me *mamma* obviously. In a very spontaneous way, because I am always here... I live here... and consequently... *mamma*... they also call me *babba*.... This is something I am really proud of... it happened because of a bad cold they caught last winter... They could not say *mamma*... it came out as *babba*. I loved it

so much that I insisted on babba and now when they have to distinguish us they say mamma and babba... I think that babba really breaks every prejudice... (Chiara, 40, centre-north).

We do not feel the necessity to introduce ourselves... we arrive, that is what we are. Me and him, me, him and the boy [...] My partner once said to a guy who lived next to us and wanted to visit us: “Yes, I will be delighted (if you visit us), so you will meet my family: my (male) partner and our affiglio” we coined this term affiglio, that comes from affido (foster) and figlio (son) (Sandro, 49, centre-south).

In the case of Sandro what is manipulated is not the parental names, but the way of naming the child. The term *affiglio* coined by Sandro and his partner to define their relationship with their foster child can be interpreted as a way to legitimize their parental relationship and to broaden the ways in which a son-fathers relationship can be defined, beyond blood ties and heterosexuality. The term works also as a reminder of the relationship of fostering; it doesn't shy away from the complexity of a caring relationship at the same time as it opens a space to reveal the lack of a vocabulary to define it. By using the expression *affiglio* Sandro explicitly challenges the trope of “like if” (we were a couple and parents like others) (Cadoret 2008) and forces the boundaries of kinship to make room for their specific family configuration.

Naming helps challenging the resilience of biology and reconfiguring the kinship tree not only in relation to parenthood, but also in relation to the family of origin. The story of Maria, whose partner was pregnant at the time of the interview, is particularly eloquent in that sense.

My father's wife said “oh, so you are going to be a granddad again” and he said “oh yes and you... you will be a step-grandmother”. I looked at them and said: “What? How? What does step-grandmother mean? She is a grandmother like everyone else, what does step-grandmother mean? What are you talking about dad? You are getting it all wrong dad, you did not understand a thing because if she is a step-grandmother then I am a step-mum and if she is a second class grandmother,

than I am a second class mother... you did not get the memo [...] (Maria, 34, center-north).

Maria's parents have been divorced for a long time and the configuration of her family of origin became a leverage to reflect on blood ties and social construction of family roles. Being Maria the co-mother, her father won't have any blood ties with the newborn; however he uses the blood tie with his daughter to reclaim his role as grandfather, while defining his wife as a step-grandmother. Maria, however, rejects that distinction and extends the demand for recognition of her parenting role to her father's wife, refusing a hierarchy of relationships based on biology. In expanding the semantic space of the kinship vocabulary, Maria carves out a space for the reconfiguration of familial relationships that same-sex parenthood generates.

Whether our informants position themselves as within the family lexicon, or creatively modify it to signal the specificity of a role, the practice of naming appears to be in defiance of a heteronormative vocabulary. That same vocabulary that has been routinely used to place same-sex parenting experiences as outside of the realm of what can be said. By either subverting the say "the mother is one and only", re-gendering the word "babbo", or reclaiming a space for grandparents beyond blood, these narratives reveals the constructed quality of familial relationships at the same time as they make these family configurations thinkable.

The majority of our lesbian respondents opted for an anonymous donor. However, in the cases when the donor is known, he is envisaged to play a role in the life of the couple's child(ren). This role again requires a labour of "meaning-making" that ensures its thinkability and allows to define its boundaries. Gaia and her partner, for instance, went through the process of Art with a known donor they wanted to include in the family project.

G: Then we identify a donor, a friend that for various reasons was perfect and was willing to be part of the reproductive process but also was willing to take a chance with us on the possibility of forms of non-familial relationships, but sentimental re-

relationships...I don't know how to explain it... he was in principle at least, willing to create a relation of non-paternity with the new-born...

R: What do you mean by non paternity?

G: Not being a father from the legal point of view, hence not recognising (legally, the child), hence not taking on him the duties and honours of the role, but then being a male figure in the emotional universe of the boy or of the girl that though does not imply being a father. Now like... I am going to say the nearest thing I can imagine in my stereotyped universe, like an uncle, but then he might not be an uncle and we might want to call thingumabob and it means whatever will grow out of (the interaction between) the two of them... (Gaia, 41, center-north).

Gaia's quote reveals here the lack of a vocabulary to include parenting projects that cannot be constrained in the dyadic, heterosexual couple. The terms "relationship of non-paternity" and "non-familial relationship" point to the constraints that the traditional and heteronormative lexicon places upon the thinkability of this parental project, forcing it to define itself as a denial of the norm. The resilience of fatherhood is clearly understood as the one and only repertoire available to draw on in order to define an emotional relationship between a man and a child. At same time, it is also apparent, the attempt to overcome traditional parental roles and explore new forms of kinship relationships. It is worth noticing that while traditional kinship roles are defined in relation to either blood ties or via legal institutions, Gaia places great emphasis on the interaction between the new-born and the donor, exposing and embracing the constructiveness of parental relationships.

Beyond those directly involved in the parental project, friends also play a role and can find a place in the kinship tree. Kinship positions are manipulated and expanded to carve out space for significant relationships that go beyond blood ties.

There are different aunts that are happy to spend time with the children, they often pick them up, [...] from school...from the nursery because they like to spend time with them rather than because we need them to... [...] We called them aunts but they are no one's aunties... they are our friends ... almost sisters who have this aunt-like relationships with the children [...]. They are our ex-partners; we have

been together for 10 years. So there is a sisterly relationship...but it is a relationship that does not have a definition. I do not have words in Italian except to define a relationship of camaraderie that developed in time. So they build up this relationship with [the children] in time, [...] we don't ask anything from them except in exceptional circumstances. We let them build their relationship with Mirella and Manuela based on their desires and their time... (Enrica, 44, center-north).

Enrica and her wife's former partners have significant emotional relationships with the children and support them in case of need. While traditionally blood ties are both the premise and the constraint for care and support in family relationships, Enrica turns ex-partners into *sisters* – to describe the strength of the bond between them – and then into *aunts* – to describe the relationship with their children. As in the former examples, the words *sister* and *aunt* are borrowed by the traditional lexicon of kinship that keeps defining the symbolic space that makes family relationships intelligible. Their meaning, however, is manipulated to account for the “choiceness” of their familial project (Weeks *et. al.* 2001). Moreover, as in Gaia's narrative, great emphasis is placed in the active roles of the two daughters in creating a meaningful relationships: unlike kinship roles based on blood, these bonds find their strength in day by day interactions and support.

All the different strategies of naming analysed above can be interpreted as performative acts in Austin's terms (Austin 1962): our informants *do family relationships with words* either creating a new vocabulary or reclaiming an old one. In doing so they don't just describe their family configuration, but naming it, they actually bring it into existence and challenge the Italian landscape of unthinkability. The process of doing family with words happens within a heteronormative framework that keeps being the «fundamental organizing principle throughout the social order» (Green 2002, 521) as well as the social and symbolic repertoire available to individuals to shape both their subjectivities and their public identities (Rosenfeld 2009). Within the intimate space of family and acquaintances however, heteronormativity is challenged and subverted. Unlike the public sphere, where heterosexuality remains the one and only premise for recognition.

#### ***4.2. Heteronormativity strikes back: the encounter with public spaces***

A crucial issue discussed in the interviews collected was the interaction with institutions and bureaucracy. In a system that does not recognise the couple with children as a family unit, access to services can reveal and emphasise the unthinkability of the parenting project from its very beginning.

While same-sex parenting is not recognized in Italy, it is in several other countries in the world. Children born through surrogacy in Canada and the US – for instance – are legally recognised by fathers and have both their surnames. It's the case of Ernesto and his partner who after conceiving twins through surrogacy in the US, asked for the children to be registered at their local registrar and got their request rejected in the first instance exactly because the children carried both their surnames:

[After the children were born] we arrived in Italy... my partner went to the registrar and said "I had these two children and I want to register them" [...] [The employer] look [at the documents] and said "they have two surnames? No, we cannot put two surnames... there is something funny here, I think you are a couple and you want to give them both yours surname, but it is not allowed here" (Ernesto, 60, center-north).

The encounter with institutions, then, threatens the roles so carefully constructed within the family, banishing parents and their children to the realm of unthinkability. While two mothers or two fathers exist in the intimate space, at the level of the institutions, they are not allowed to be. It is the case of Paola, the biological mother of twins conceived through Art, who below recalls the application for her children ID cards. Paola declared to the public official that she was a single mother, in order to ensure the success of the procedure:

We went to the registrar to get [the children's] ID<sub>s</sub> done... I did declare to be the only parent... in front of the registrar's officer that most likely I see only once in my life, I did not have... I don't know... the courage or the will to explain that I was the only parent not because the father... but because I went abroad, because she is my partner... I did not explain to her the whole story. There are a bit.... I mean... In our story there are things that

cannot be taken for granted. I mean in a traditional family [this] can be taken for granted (Paola, 40, center-north).

The meticulous work of manipulation of kinship and family bonds done within the extended family is rendered moot outside of the kinship network. Blood ties are challenged and rewritten in the intimate realm of the family to carve out space for this new configuration, however, in the encounter with bureaucracy and institutions, blood comes back as the one and only element that qualifies parental and kinship bonds. The unthinkable of same-sex parenting calls for a constant re-telling of one's family structure to make it intelligible. Some of our respondents suggest that this narration is also a political act, since the story of that which is not supposed to be transforms the boundaries of the family in public discourses. However re-telling does not grant inclusion and, as in the case of Paola, might generate, *visibility fatigue*, caused by the lack of a legal recognition and the impossibility of her family to be "taken for granted". By *visibility fatigue* we mean the effects of the continuous coming out same-sex parents are required to perform in public spaces. While visibility can be a trigger for structural changes, the onus of change appears to be disproportionately on members of the Lgbt community. On one side, therefore, heteronorms go unchallenged in the public sphere, while on the other the continuous requests "to be seen" can put a strain on the individual.

The work of defining one's familial setting becomes particularly demanding once the children enter the school system where the "unthinkable" family needs to fit in forms and documents constructed on strong heteronormative assumptions. Carlotta, a social mother of a child conceived through Art, explains that the online enrolment to school and the tightly regulated forms, render the recognition of families "outside" the norm as *literally* impossible.

When you enrol the children to the nursery, you have to do it online and there is no possibility to write a female name as the other parent because the system does not recognise it as valid... there are a set of things that in practice are more difficult... so, actually, for the Italian State, Lucia is a single mum with a child (Carlotta, 36, center-north).



However, while forms and bureaucracy routinely exclude same sex parents, some of our respondents recall different, less exclusionary experiences with the people within institutions. This is the case of Enrica, who is the biological mother of only one of her two children. Her experience of participating in her daughter's school elections is representative of those instances when parental and kinship roles are acknowledged, despite the lack of legal recognition.

In relation to institutions, one of us does not exist... I mean if you have to do with a person, our experience tells us that that person even if she represents the institution, acknowledges (us) mamma and mamma... but if you have to do with forms and regulations... In theory, in Mirella's school I do not exist, I am a no one... I am not a parent I am a no one... For instance, when we did the election for school rep, I went... the teacher came to me and says "I cannot find your name, what shall I do?" [I said] "I don't know what you have to do. You tell me. Mirella has two mothers..." and she looked at me and said "and it is only you today?" "Yes" "Ok, then I will cross over Roberta's name and put yours"... so she deleted Roberta's name and put mine, she recorded my ID... it was a sort of act of civil disobedience (Enrica, 44, center-north).

Given the heated debates that occupy the public sphere, Enrica defines these acts as civil disobedience, but they can also be called acts of disobedience to the heteronormative framework. Erasing the name of the biological parent in favour of the non-legal one, as well as allowing both parents - despite their legal relationship with the child - to interact with public services - i.e. schools, paediatricians etc. - provides a space where same-sex parenting can be "thought about", can become thinkable.

## **5. Conclusions**

While undoubtedly public attitudes toward same sex family and parents have been changing over the last years, lesbian mothers, gay fathers and their children are still "unexpected" (Ferrari 2015) in the Italian social landscape because they radically misalign the nexus between gender, generativity and parenthood. The political debate appears to be particularly resistant to legally recognise parenting structures outside the

heteronorm. In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, parenting is the last entrenchment of a deeply conservative backlash.

Despite the lack of recognition and against the heteronormative cultural landscape gay and lesbian couples “do family” (Morgan 2011). As Morgan suggests, “family represents a constructed quality of human interaction or an active process rather than a thing-like object of investigation” (1996, 16). Within this framework rather than new family forms, the investigation above reveals a set of social practices through which interviewees create new ways of doing family and of being recognized as such. The lexicon of the family appears to be crucial: the analysis revealed how parents manipulate the available kinship repertoire to carve out space for their experience. This process of meaning-making appeared on one side bounded by the heteronormativity of the family vocabulary while on the other opened up spaces for a subversion of the privilege of blood ties as the only possible ways of making legitimate kinship. The challenges to heteronormativity therefore take here a very particular form. (Ryan-Flood 2005, 200) In a space where the “natural family” dominate public discourses and is at the core of the welfare system, the act of questioning blood ties has the subverting potential of challenging heteronormative constructs. Drawing on Ahmed (2004) our respondents overcome the opposition between assimilation and resistance, and appear to «inhabit norms differently» (2004, 155).

However, this creative process of meaning making is rendered moot when one has to engage with bureaucracy and institutions. The bureaucratic apparatus within the Italian familistic system has, as its reference unit, the heterosexual nuclear family. Kinship practices that deviate from that norm are not recognised by the rigid bureaucratic structures. Forms, modules and public officials act as gatekeepers of the legitimated territory of family and kinship materializing the impossibility to carve out a space of recognition. Being the condition *sine qua non* that shape sexual citizenship (Bertone 2013; Richardson 2000), hegemonic heterosexuality in contemporary Italy, renders the process of doing families fragile and predicated on the recognition of one’s immediate kinship network and acquaintances.

Nonetheless, the individual acts of finding spaces within the system and requiring the recognition of one’s familial project, can be ascribed to those *destabilising* practises and

discourses that are travelling from the political margins to the centre, bringing with them generative potential.

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