

Lesbian Motherhood and the Artificial Insemination by Donor Scandal of 1978

Abstract

In January 1978, the London Evening News informed its readers of its shocking discovery that British lesbians were conceiving babies by Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID). Assisted by a respected London gynaecologist, Dr David Sopher, the women were planning and raising children in the context of lesbian relationships, challenging conventional family models and the widespread presumption that lesbianism and motherhood were mutually exclusive identities. The debate which was sparked by the Evening News expose and taken up in Parliament, the national and local media and on the streets in the subsequent weeks, offers an insight into attitudes toward lesbian motherhood in the late 1970s. This article explores constructions of lesbian mothers and the impact on the experiences and identities of lesbian mothers themselves. The late 1970s marked the beginnings of a shift in practices of conception by British lesbians from lesbians who conceived their children in the context of previous heterosexual relationships, to women who utilised AID and other forms of donor insemination to forge new family structures, and this article analyses the stories of some of these women as they emerged from the 1978 debate.

Keywords

lesbian history, lesbian motherhood, artificial insemination by donor

*

In the first week of January, 1978, British lesbians – and the wider population – were confronted with the shocking headline: ‘Dr Strangelove: The Belgravia man who helps lesbians have babies’.¹ The London *Evening News* revealed that respected gynaecologist, Dr David Sopher, member of the Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Medical Association and the British Association of Manipulative Medicine, Clinical Assistant at The London Hospital, Examining Medical Officer for the Royal Courts of Justice and the London Electricity Board and Registrar at the King Edward Memorial Hospital, Ealing and Hillingdon Hospital, had been secretly enabling lesbians to have babies by artificial insemination from his private practice in Lower Belgrave Street. ‘Working against the advice’, the paper (misleadingly) declared, ‘of the British Medical Association, he has been responsible for the birth of 10 babies to lesbian couples in Britain and abroad.’² Dr Sopher and Sappho, the lesbian organisation which had referred lesbians to him, had planned to keep the

¹ *Evening News*, 5 January 1978, 1.

² Ibid.

practice secret for a further ten years, until such time as ‘the children would be teenagers and the results would speak for themselves’, but *Evening News* reporter, Joanna Patyna, had brought their activities to the attention of the British public.

Both the caution expressed by Dr Sopher and Sappho and the intensity and extent of public debate which followed from the *Evening News* exposé, highlight the contested nature of lesbian motherhood in this decade, an aspect of much broader social debate about sexuality and the family. Historians have noted that, by the late 1960s, a backlash was becoming increasingly evident against the ‘permissive society’ which many believed that decade to have fostered. A body of legislation reforming laws on obscenity, censorship, abortion, prostitution, family planning, homosexuality and divorce, amongst others, marked a shift in attitudes away from state controlled morality toward a more modern model of individual responsibility.³ Some Anglican theologians had begun openly exploring questions of sexual morality, suggesting that behaviour which had once been condemned clearly as a sin might now be acceptable if justified by love. Simultaneously, cultural and social shifts, including the rise of consumerism, improved living standards, the growing social and economic influence of youth and the increasing availability of films, books and magazines with sexual content, together with the role of television in bringing these new social and cultural forces into the homes of ordinary people, brought about a liberalisation in sexual attitudes (if not behaviour). As Hera Cook has noted: ‘There was an erosion of moral authority, not just of Christian morality but of a consensus-based morality, seen as correct and upheld by society as a whole’.⁴ Opinions, however, were divided as to how to interpret these changes and, whilst the emergence of the Women’s Movement and gay liberation indicate that some felt the reforms had not gone far enough, others condemned ‘permissiveness’ as encouraging ‘disbelief,

³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The regulation of sexuality since 1800* (London, 1981).

⁴ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004), 286.

doubt and dirt.⁵ In 1964, Mary Whitehouse launched her 'Clean-Up TV Campaign' (renamed the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association in 1965), initially directed toward the BBC, but ultimately broadening out to attack sexual permissiveness and defend the family in all areas of society. As the post-war political consensus around full employment, state welfare and a mixed economy began to break down in the late 1960s, in the context of rising inflation and rates of unemployment and growing industrial unrest, support began to grow for her view that liberalising attitudes toward sexuality represented a fundamental threat both to the family and to the fabric of society as a whole. By the mid-1970s, Mary Whitehouse's voice – now increasingly strident and influential in political and wider circles – had been joined by a chorus of others. The Nationwide Festival of Light and the Responsible Society both protested against 'moral pollution' and opposed sex education initiatives and attempts to lower the age of consent. The perceived sexualisation of the young was a particular focus of concern and, in 1976, Conservative MP, Jill Knight, was instrumental in the founding of a Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group which opposed the provision of birth control to young people.

These debates were eagerly reported in a press aware of the sales potential of stories concerned with sexual morality. Since W.T.Stead's notorious investigation into child prostitution in 1885, journalists had recognised the reader appeal of sexual morality scandals and, in the century which followed, sought to reproduce the sensational impact of his investigation.⁶ As Adrian Bingham notes in his study of sex and the British popular press:

⁵ Mary Whitehouse, *Cleaning Up TV* (London, 1967), 23, cited in Martin Durham, *Sex and Politics: The Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years* (London, 1991), 9.

⁶ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992), chs. 3 and 4.

The episode entered Fleet Street mythology and encouraged many future editors and journalists to launch crusades on sexual issues... Some of these campaigns provoked a conspicuous reaction from the police and Parliament, others did not; but they all helped to shape public opinion, by supporting particular versions of sexual morality, defining the boundaries of acceptable sexual expression, and consolidating stereotypes of 'deviants'.⁷

In the twentieth century, newspapers came to occupy a highly influential place in British culture, with most adults regularly reading at least one national newspaper and, by the 1970s, the editors of several popular newspapers were open about their intention to place sex at the heart of their content. The London *Evening News* eagerly embraced this approach in the 1960s and 1970s and, by the time of the 1978 lesbian AID scandal, journalist Joanna Patyna and assistant editor, Stuart Kuttner, already had an established track record as investigative journalists specialising in sexual exposés. The *Evening News* had played a crucial role in the downfall of Liberal Leader Jeremy Thorpe, following persistent allegations of a homosexual affair with Norman Scott, and had obtained a scoop which resulted in a police investigation into Thorpe's alleged attempted murder of Scott.

Although lesbianism had, in contrast to male homosexuality, received relatively little press attention in the 1960s and 1970s, the lesbian AID story was not the only major press scandal touching on the subject in 1978. In 1976, Labour MP Maureen Colquhoun had confirmed that she was leaving her marriage and was living with a 'girl friend'. The topic simmered on in the press through 1976 and 1977, but it was not until 1978, following growing tensions between Colquhoun and her local constituency party, that the media began to explicitly refer to her lesbianism and make pejorative remarks on her alleged 'gossiping about' her sexuality. Dubbing her 'Maureen the

⁷ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford, 2009), 159.

Mouth', the *Sun* claimed: 'Ordinary voters are not yet ready for an anything goes society. Wouldn't it be better if she simply shut up?' while Jean Rook in the *Daily Express* complained: 'If Ms Colquhoun has, at 49, had a lovely torrid change of love life, that's her business. I wish she'd stop making it mine. I wouldn't want to live with her. So whatever she's found, she should hug it to herself. And not bore the pants off me by gossiping about it.'⁸

If the 1970s saw a gradual increase in media discussion of lesbianism in general, few readers of the British press would have had cause to consider the concept of lesbian motherhood before the London *Evening News* revelations. Nevertheless, there were, of course, a significant number of British women in the 1970s and earlier who might have identified as both lesbians and mothers. The majority of these women conceived and raised their children in the context of heterosexual marriages. Women in post-war Britain experienced considerable social and cultural pressure to adopt the conventional roles of wife and mother and this reached a peak in the 1960s with marriage becoming almost universal in that decade.⁹ As a result, many women married before recognising that they were attracted to their own sex, while others married in the hope that it would 'cure' them of their homosexual desires.¹⁰ After the birth of children, married lesbians often found themselves faced with very limited choices: marriage typically offered financial security and a socially sanctioned environment in which to raise their children, while leaving their husband to pursue life as a lesbian could entail loss of custody and access to their children, the condemnation of family and friends and a much more precarious financial and social existence. In these

⁸ *Daily Express*, 5 April 1978; Susan Hemmings, 'Horrific Practices: How lesbians were presented in the newspapers of 1978', in Gay Left Collective (ed.), *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London, 1980), 160.

⁹ Jane Lewis, 'Marriage', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2001), 74.

¹⁰ Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-war Britain, 1945-71* (Manchester, 2007), 76-106; Amy Tooth Murphy, "'I conformed; I got married. It seemed like a good idea at the time": domesticity in postwar lesbian oral history', in Brian Lewis (ed.), *British Queer History: New approaches and perspectives* (Manchester, 2013), 165-87.

circumstances, many women chose to remain in unhappy marriages. J.H. from Cheshire spoke for such women when she told lesbian magazine, *Sappho*, in 1978:

Have any of you out lesbians thought how lucky you are? You would call me bisexual because I live with my husband. I live with him because I have two children and they love him. What right do I have to take them away from him? I don't leave because I could not live without my children. I live an empty, lonely life and deserve an Oscar for my acting ability and the length of it. Why did I get married? Because as [previous correspondent] M.B. says in the same volume [of *Sappho*] "Miss Out Lesbian, just where were you in the Sixties?"¹¹

While J.H.'s experience was typical of many women who felt that marriage remained their only option, changing attitudes toward marriage, the family and sexuality in the 1970s began to alter the cultural landscape in which women were making these choices and the decade witnessed the beginnings of a major shift in practices of lesbian motherhood. Historians have identified a significant break in the marriage system which occurred in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Jane Lewis claims: 'Increases in divorce, cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage have contributed to the separation of marriage and parenthood.'¹² The 1969 Divorce Law Reform Act began the move away from fault-based divorce, requiring instead that couples wishing to divorce prove that their relationship had broken down, in one of five ways.¹³ The divorce rate increased considerably in the 1970s and 1980s, while changing attitudes toward sexual morality

¹¹ Letter from J.H., Cheshire, to *Sappho* 6:5 (1978), 9.

¹² Lewis, 'Marriage', 75.

¹³ On post-war debates about divorce, see also Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain: 1945-1968* (London, 1980), 69-74; Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530-1987* (Oxford, 1990).

meant that a growing number of couples were co-habiting before marriage. The development of gay and feminist political movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s contributed to the articulation of a new challenge to established concepts of gender and sexuality and an attempt to reframe cultural attitudes toward lesbians in particular. Lesbian and gay political groups such as the Gay Liberation Front urged their members to 'come out' and openly declare their sexuality to society.¹⁴ The Women's Liberation Movement was simultaneously challenging conventional notions of femininity and encouraging women to explore their independence and personal expression.¹⁵ Both movements developed critiques of the nuclear family as an oppressive institution which exploited women's labour and perpetuated sexist and heterosexist social attitudes. Through public demonstrations and interviews in the media, these movements sought to inform society at large about their ideas and ultimately to change public attitudes. In this context, a new generation of women embraced a lesbian identity at a younger age, before committing to marriage and motherhood. This opened up a space for a re-examination of lesbian motherhood and an exploration of the possibilities of conception and parenting outside of marriage.

For the many women who had previously married and had children before exploring their desire for other women, these same cultural and political changes presented both opportunities and difficulties. The lesbian and feminist movements offered encouragement and support to women who wanted to openly declare their lesbianism and many women found new friends, partners and a community through these movements. However, this emerging culture of sexual openness carried potential risks for married lesbian mothers, for whom the public declaration of a lesbian identity could result in a hostile divorce and custody battle with their former husbands,

¹⁴ Lisa Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles: An Oral History of the Gay Liberation Front 1970-73* (London, 1995).

¹⁵ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (London, 1982); Eve Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969-1979', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13:2 (2002), 171-90.

and ultimately the loss of their children. Lesbian mothers' rights, and in particular the issue of child custody cases involving lesbian mothers, became the focus of increasing activism over the course of the 1970s, fuelled by news of a growing number of lesbians who had lost custody of their children. Feminist journals such as *Spare Rib* reported on the issue and reviewed relevant US films and literature.¹⁶ Throughout the decade, a number of groups, including Action for Lesbian Parents and Wages Due Lesbians supported lesbian mothers who faced court battles for custody of their children and campaigned for lesbian mothers' rights.¹⁷ By 1977, the issue was sufficiently recognised in feminist and lesbian and gay activist circles to have been made the subject of 'Care and Control', the first play to be produced by Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company's Women's company.¹⁸

Coming at the end of a decade in which the concept of lesbian motherhood had, for the first time, been considered in the courts and in feminist and lesbian and gay activist circles, the AID scandal of 1978 offers an opportunity to reflect on attitudes toward lesbian motherhood in Britain at this time and points to the beginnings of a shift toward the use of Artificial Insemination by Donor as a route into motherhood for lesbians. Coverage of the issue in the mainstream media, lesbian and feminist journals and oral history interviews provides an insight into the growing awareness and use of AID by British lesbians in this decade and the ways in which reproductive

¹⁶ Marilyn Archer, 'Gay Wives and Mothers', *Spare Rib* 31 (January 1975), 26; 'Lesbian Mothers Unite', *Spare Rib* 47 (June 1976), 18; Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet into the Courts', *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976), 6-8; 'Letters', *Spare Rib* 52 (November 1976), 4; 'Lesbian Mother Wins Custody', *Spare Rib* 54 (January 1977), 17; 'Changing with my daughter', *Spare Rib* 60 (July 1977), 44-46; Susan Hemmings, 'In the best interests of the children', *Spare Rib* 74 (September 1978), 39.

¹⁷ Gillian E. Hanscombe and Jackie Forster, *Rocking the Cradle: Lesbian Mothers – A Challenge in Family Living* (London, 1982), 48-49; Marion Foy, 'Feminists in Scottish Assembly', *Spare Rib* 54 (January 1977), 28; Ruth Wallsgrove, 'A Guide to Lesbian Groups', *Spare Rib* 74 (September 1978), 26-29.

¹⁸ <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/gay-sweatshop/care-and-control/> Accessed 18 July 2016.

technologies helped to reshape the family structures and parental roles available to lesbians who wished to conceive and raise children in the context of a same-sex relationship.

Throughout the 1970s, lesbian organisation, Sappho, and its magazine of the same name provided a space in which women could voice their experiences and conflicts as lesbian mothers. Sappho had been founded in 1972 after the sudden demise of Esme Langley's Minorities Research Group (MRG) left British lesbians without a national organisation or magazine.¹⁹ Jackie Forster, the former Advertising Manager of MRG's magazine, *Arena Three*, stepped in to fill the gap and founded Sappho, acting as the magazine's editor until it folded in 1981. Born in 1926, Jackie Forster had a successful career as an actress and television presenter in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1950s she married arts critic, Peter Forster, but the couple divorced in 1961 following Jackie's first lesbian affair with the Managing Editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. In the early 1970s, when she became involved with Sappho, Jackie Forster was living in Connaught Square with her lover, Babs Todd and Babs Todd's two young children. Jackie and Babs had been exploring feminism through the Women's Movement since the late 1960s and Forster's emerging feminist consciousness, together with her personal experience as the lover of a lesbian mother, may have prompted her interest in the issue of lesbian motherhood.²⁰ Under her editorship, *Sappho* magazine regularly reported on the experiences of lesbian mothers; Sappho group held discussion meetings on the issue and, in 1974, founded a Gay Wives and Mums Group; and, in 1978, Jackie began research on her book, co-written with Gillian Hanscombe, *Rocking the Cradle: Lesbian Mothers – A Challenge in Family Living*.²¹

¹⁹ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*; Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500* (Oxford, 2007), 152-168; Alison Oram, 'Little by Little? Arena Three and Lesbian Politics in the 1960s', in Marcus Collins (ed.) *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London, 2007).

²⁰ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

²¹ Jacqui, 'Gay Wives and Mums Group', *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974), 8-11; Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle*.

Sappho's engagement with the issue began in 1972, when the group held a consciousness raising meeting in which 'unexpectedly most of the room voted they wished to have children.' The surprise expressed by *Sappho* at its members' desire to have children reflected a wider sense amongst lesbians and the broader community at this time that lesbianism and motherhood were incompatible. Throughout the post-war period, women's accounts and experiences of lesbian motherhood were framed as a choice between two irreconcilable roles: that of the lesbian or of the mother. Wider cultural discussion of lesbian motherhood prior to the 1970s was largely non-existent and cultural stereotypes tended to cast the lesbian as mannish, career-oriented and childless.²² While Sappho members surprised themselves and each other with the expression of their maternal desires, many agreed that they would 'rather be childless than endure heterosex' to conceive a child.²³ However, during discussion, a previously unknown alternative presented itself. Jackie Forster subsequently recalled:

There were two Australian women there, very quiet and they then said, when the groups were all chatting away and then we had a report back from each group, they said, 'Well why don't you try artificial insemination by donor?' We'd never even heard of it ... and we sat there open-mouthed, listening. And they said 'Well Britain and I think it's Sweden, are the only two countries where there needs to be no consent by husband. So single women, especially lesbian couples, can get it. But you know, you need a gynaecologist' and they said 'we have one'. And we said, 'Well do you suppose he'd come to the next meeting and tell us about it?'²⁴

²² Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*.

²³ 'Unto Us a Child is Born', *Sappho*, 1:9, 12.

²⁴ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

Despite the ignorance expressed by Sappho members, artificial insemination as a medical technique had been in use since the late eighteenth century, when Dr John Hunter successfully inseminated the wife of a London cloth merchant with her husband's sperm. In the late nineteenth century, an American physician inseminated the wife of an infertile Philadelphia merchant with anonymous donor sperm, and this use of AID in cases of a husband's infertility continued throughout the twentieth century. Artificial insemination was also proposed by some eugenicists in Australia and Britain as a possible technique for improving the quality of the population, while Australian, Marion Louisa Piddington, advocated its use for lonely widows and single women unable to find husbands in the aftermath of the First World War.²⁵ However, uptake of AID was limited by strong moral and religious objections, including condemnations by the Vatican in 1949, 1956 and 1960 and a British report headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1948, which recommended that AID be made a criminal offence. Artificial insemination was, according to Simone B. Novaes, regarded by moral and religious authorities as 'inappropriate interference by a third party in a couple's intimate affairs and encouragement of an illicit sexual practice, masturbation', while AID 'was considered outright as adultery'.²⁶ By the 1970s, ethical concerns around AID had become relatively muted, however, and it was not until 1978, when the lesbian mothers' scandal and the subsequent breakthrough in IVF treatments following the successful birth of the first IVF baby, Lisa Brown, in July, reactivated the issue, that debate again became heated.

Practical difficulties also remained well into the post-war period, with uncertainties over the best timing for insemination and the need for advances in cryogenics to enable sperm to be frozen and to remove the need for a donor to be available during an insemination. Following on

²⁵ Martin Richards, 'Artificial Insemination and Eugenics: Celibate motherhood, euteleogenesis and germinal choice,' *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 39:2 (June 2008), 211-221.

²⁶ Simone B. Novaes, 'Social integration of technical innovation: sperm banking and AID in France and in the United States', *Social Science Information* 24:3 (1985), 570.

from the discovery of glycerol, a cryoprotective agent, in 1949, and the development of a liquid nitrogen freezing technique in 1964, the freezing and subsequent thawing of semen became viable and sperm banks were established in France and the US in the late 1970s. While in France, a network of institutional sperm banks known as CECOS was established, which adopted an agreed set of ethical principles, in the US, sperm banking developed in a more ad hoc and less regulated manner, with frozen semen being stored in small quantities by private clinicians or by larger university or laboratory-based sperm banks.²⁷ The situation in the UK appears to have more closely reflected that in the US, where the majority of clinicians preferred to use fresh rather than frozen semen, and drew on a relatively small pool of donors from the university student population, with a heavy reliance on medical students. Unlike in France, donors in the US and UK were paid and, while ethical guidelines restricted the availability of AID in France to married or long-term heterosexual partners, at least 10 per cent of US practitioners surveyed in 1977 and 1978 offered AID to single women wishing to have children without a male partner. Similarly, in the UK, a lack of centralised regulation meant that individual practitioners could decide whether to provide the service to single women and lesbian couples.

Having been made aware of the existence of AID, the Sappho women decided to organise a further meeting which would provide an opportunity for members to discuss lesbian motherhood in all its forms. This meeting took place in November 1972 and was attended by ‘a mix of heterosexual and homosexual single women, homosexual couples, homosexual parents, Women’s Liberation [and the] courageous lone male gynaecologist who was invited as a guest.’²⁸ The meeting broke into smaller groups, which each explored a different route into parenting, from adoption and fostering to marriage and AID. The AID group considered the question of whether AID should be available to lesbians as a means of conceiving and raising children without the

²⁷ Ibid, 567-584.

²⁸ ‘Unto Us a Child is Born’, *Sappho*, 1:9, 12.

direct involvement of a man. Although the women in this group agreed that they would not want to have a child by a man, they were also reluctant to make use of AID as an alternative, noting that, while there were no legal obstacles to the use of AID, the medical profession was strongly opposed and they ‘fear[ed] that society would never accept the situation of homosexual couples giving birth and bringing up their own children’.²⁹ In open discussion, the invited gynaecologist reinforced this impression that strong medical and social opposition existed, commenting that, following a consultation with a female homosexual couple who had come to him requesting artificial insemination, he had contacted the Chairman of the British Medical Association’s Ethical Committee. He reported:

I asked if anything of this nature had ever been discussed or had there been any literature about it? The [BMA] had never come across anything like this. They had never considered homosexual couples. Legally there is nothing to prevent artificial insemination for homosexual couples, but the ultimate power in the BMA is respectability and you may create more problems by forcing the issues.³⁰

Despite the reluctance of many medical practitioners to offer AID to lesbians, a small number of lesbian couples did achieve pregnancies through this method in the UK in the early 1970s. Dr David Sopher, the London gynaecologist who attended Sappho’s 1972 meeting on lesbian motherhood, was persuaded by his experience with Sappho members to make AID available to lesbians and went on to provide AID to six lesbian couples during the 1970s. This service was provided discreetly, from Dr Sopher’s practice in Belgravia, following referrals from

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

Jackie Forster. Dr Sopher initially met with interested women and carried out full examinations before recruiting a suitable donor for the insemination process. However, over time, Jackie Forster recalled, Dr Sopher began to question the necessity for his intervention and encouraged some women to take control of the process for themselves. She explained:

And then he said to himself, well what am I doing all this examination of healthy fertile adult women, I do all this sort of stuff with infertile women and infertile men, so he said: 'Why don't you do it yourself? I mean all you've got to do is collect sperm, provide it, you know, and if you want to use my lab for testing.' Anyway, we surged ahead with all this and you know, we were doing a right trade. Fairy godmothers, we called ourselves, going around collecting sperm and putting it in the office fridge ... until the women came and picked it up, because we went very carefully into ... what happens if the guy suddenly gets real parental urges and wants ... contact so we insisted that the guy would never know the woman he got pregnant and the woman would never know who the father was ... And we were having a merry time.³¹

Sappho magazine reported on the progress of readers who were considering and accessing AID throughout the decade. In May 1974, under the headline, 'Easter '74 A.I.D.', Babs Todd described her experience of meeting Sappho's first AID baby on the day of his birth. She reflected:

I'm very grateful that I saw him on the day he was born. I don't think I have ever been so profoundly moved. It is not as if the miracle of birth is a new thing to me. I have two children of my own ...

³¹ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

When I came home, it struck me how I'd never been able to swallow the dogma of the Virgin Birth and how I'd never said, when reciting the Creed, the 'born of the Virgin Mary' bit.

And here he was – is – a Virgin Birth made possible by science. And I was allowed to hold him in my arms, and felt very proud and very humble.³²

In 1976, a further article announced the christening of 'Sappho Son No.3', Martin Gareth Simon, together with a baby photo and poem by his mother.³³ The piece was accompanied by photographs of 'Benjamin (Sappho Son 1)' and 'Matthew (Sappho Son 2).'

However, in November 1977, undercover reporter, Joanna Patyna, attended a Sappho meeting, posing as a young lesbian called Joanna Allison. When she explained that she wished to discuss a personal matter, Jackie Forster invited her to visit the Sappho office, which she did. Jackie subsequently recalled:

She arrived on 9th December nervous and diffident. Eventually she related that she and her friend had known each other since they were twelve years old. They had fallen in love with each [other] – each being the first love and had lived together for three years. They had decided to have a baby; she, Joanna was to be the mother. Did I know of the organisation for AID?³⁴

³² Babs, 'Easter '74 A.I.D. [AD?], Sappho, 3:2 (May 1974), 14.

³³ *Sappho* 4:12 (1976), 15-16.

³⁴ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

Jackie Forster asked her to subscribe to *Sappho* and provided her with Dr Sopher's contact details, together with those of a lesbian mother who had agreed to tell her what was involved. In her subsequent *Evening News* article, Joanna described how she and a colleague had attended a consultation with Dr Sopher which:

lasted some 20 to 25 minutes. In addition to [my contact details] ... already noted by his receptionist, Dr Sopher asked for the name of my GP (although he assured me that he would not be contacting her). He also asked us how long we'd been living together, and when I replied, "three years," Dr Sopher commented that it indicated "a stable enough relationship." The only other question he asked related to the regularity of my menstrual cycle, from which he then calculated a suitable date for the artificial insemination to take place.³⁵

Patyna emphasised that the consultation had not included any medical examination, which Sopher claimed to be unnecessary, given that most women did not undergo such an exam before becoming pregnant. He did, however, assure her that full tests were carried out on the donor. The women were told that, although Dr Sopher would provide the donor semen and make a room available in the clinic, he would not be carrying out the insemination himself. This task would be left to the women, to ensure that Joanna was relaxed and in a more 'receptive state.' The fee for the treatment was £12 per insemination, half of which money was paid to the donor. Noting that these rates were extremely low in comparison to the £150 fee frequently charged by Harley Street doctors treating infertile heterosexual couples, Dr Sopher explained that he 'believed he was providing a worthwhile service on the grounds ... that the alternative of indulging in a casual heterosexual

³⁵ *Evening News*, 5 January 1978, 1.

relationship would be abhorrent to women like us.³⁶ Joanna visited Dr Sopher a further two times on 23rd and 24th December for semen.

On 3rd January 1978, Jackie Forster recalled, the donor who had provided Joanna's sperm telephoned the Sappho office to say that he had received a call from Stuart Kuttner, an *Evening News* journalist. Kuttner had told him that photographers had pictures of the donor's visits to Dr Sopher's surgery and the *Evening News* would like to interview him about his experience as a donor. They had already traced his home address and interviewed his neighbours. Jackie attempted to contact Joanna, who stalled before finally agreeing to come to Sappho office on the evening of the 4th January. She arrived with Stuart Kuttner and, revealing herself as an undercover journalist, told Jackie that, with the information and photographs they had obtained on Dr Sopher and the other lesbian family Joanna had been introduced to, they were planning an exposé of lesbian AID on the next day's front page. Advised by a Fleet Street contact, Jackie Forster encouraged the lesbian family to seek an injunction and was able to prevent their names and pictures being included in the story.³⁷

Joanna Patyna's story created a media sensation, and dominated the press throughout the UK and Ireland for several weeks. Questions were raised in Parliament and Mrs Jill Knight, Conservative MP for Edgbaston and founding member of the Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group, declared:

I am not concerned with the lifestyle of the lesbians, nor would I condemn them. But it is very worrying from the point of [view of] the children that this should be permitted. A child needs above all a normal and natural family environment. I cannot imagine that it is in the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jackie Forster, 'Every media man comes to the A.I.D. of the family', *Sappho* 6:3 (1978), 5-7.

best interest of children to be born in such circumstances. The “Brave New World” should not lose sight of the fact that they are not little nuts and bolts but living, feeling and breathing children.³⁸

Tory shadow minister, Dr Rhodes Boyson, called for legislation outlawing the practice and declared: ‘To bring children into this world without a natural father is evil and selfish. This evil must stop for the sake of the potential children and society, which both have enough problems without the extension of this horrific practice.’³⁹ In the initial media frenzy, Dr Sopher went into hiding and many lesbian mothers felt under threat from the media and society at large. Reflecting on the events of January 1978 two years later, Susan Hemmings, herself a lesbian mother, claimed:

During the course of the artificial insemination ‘scandal’ ... many of us simply could not go into newsagents, launderettes or any public place without hearing anti-lesbian abuse, that is, from members of the public who assumed us to be part of them and their mentality. It is no exaggeration to say that even our nights were invaded by ... dreams where fascists were in power.⁴⁰

The effects on the lives of lesbian mothers and their children were long-lasting, she reflected: ‘Lesbian mothers, some of whom were actually beginning to fight openly for custody of their children, were regorganised into anxiety, as their families again began to abuse them, and their

³⁸ Hugh Davies, ‘Doctor Helps Lesbians Have Babies by AID’, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 January 1978.

³⁹ ‘Ban These Babies’, *Evening News*, 6 January 1978.

⁴⁰ Hemmings, ‘Horrific Practices’, 158.

children again stopped inviting school friends home.⁴¹ Letters sent to *Sappho* magazine during the scandal expressed horror at the attitudes being voiced in the media. One lesbian mother told fellow *Sappho* readers how the affair had exacerbated her existing anxieties and sense of vulnerability:

Like the majority of gay women – especially those with AID children – I was horrified to learn that Dr Sopher’s name has now become well-known to the public via the newspaper reports and television programmes. As I, too, have been personally involved with AID for the last year, you will appreciate that I am most concerned to know what the future is likely to hold...It’s no wonder that I envisage a future where all illegitimate children are taken away from their mothers and given away, without consent, to “Mums and Dads” regardless of whether they could be potential child-beaters. I also envisage gay people being rounded up and their rights to have children taken from them. It’s small wonder that I can see the future world like this – especially as society is now trying to enforce the second of my fears.⁴²

Regular *Sappho* columnist, ‘Amazon’, recognised that many lesbians would feel attacked as this letter-writer did, but exhorted readers to resist paranoia. She urged:

Nevertheless we must try to keep a sense of proportion. When the audience of “Any Questions” bursts into rapturous applause at Ms Rook’s vituperations, when “phone-in” audiences speak of lesbians as though we were less than human, it is all too easy to let paranoia take over. “Back to the closet” “Pull up the drawbridge”. We tend to believe that

⁴¹ Ibid., 157.

⁴² Letter from E.B., S.Wales, *Sappho* 6:4 (1978), 9-10.

the mass media not only reflects public opinion but also has the power to create it. This may be true... On the other hand it may well be that the majority of people are too busy with their own concerns to be very interested in a prolonged season of gay-baiting. I devoutly hope so.⁴³

Despite the increasing sense of embattlement felt by many lesbians and lesbian mothers during the scandal, however, Jackie Forster also recalled this as a landmark moment of collective action on lesbian mothers. On 6th January, about 50 women and men from Action for Lesbian Parents, *Spare Rib*, and Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company invaded the offices of the London *Evening News* in protest at the sensationalist nature of the reporting. They demanded interviews with Joanna Patyna and the newspaper's editor, staging a sit down protest amid chants of 'Our bodies, our lives, the right to decide ... Every woman's right to have a baby ... Lesbian mothers unite.'⁴⁴ A few days later, the *Evening News* published a response to their article from lesbian mothers, under the headline: 'Lesbians reply to the Evening News'. Complaining that the paper 'continually suggests that lesbians are freaks with no right to bear children', the women asserted:

During our conversation with the Editor of the Evening News, Mr Louis Kirby and Mr Stuart Kuttner, an Assistant Editor, one woman asked if they realised what the likely effect of these articles would be.

'I don't know,' Mr Kirby replied. 'I would hate to think they would lead to victimisation of lesbians.'

⁴³ 'Amazon', *Sappho* 6:3 (1978).

⁴⁴ Philip Jordan, 'Lesbians stage protest over babies story', *Guardian*, London, 7 January 1978; 'Editor made to explain anti-lesbian "trickery"', *Morning Star*, 7 January 1978.

People outside were shouting ‘burn them’ at that very moment. We were spat at by one of the journalists. That’s the kind of hatred this sort of journalism encourages.⁴⁵

Over the weekend, a wall outside Joanna Patyna’s London flat was spray-painted with the slogans ‘Lesbian Mums are OK’ and ‘Here lives a gutter reporter’ and an *Evening News* van was spray-painted with the words ‘Lesbians fight’.⁴⁶ Reflecting on these events in a subsequent oral history interview, Jackie Forster recalled her sense of elation at discovering that Sappho was not alone in its conflict with the media, but was supported by other lesbian and gay groups and by straight feminists. She explained ‘all this was done without Sappho’s knowledge’ and it was not until one activist, Jackie Plaster, was taken to court for spray-painting the *Evening News* van, that Jackie Forster was able to join a lesbian mothers’ rights demonstration outside Mansion House Magistrate’s Court and speak to the women involved. Jackie recalled:

And we all turn up, everything’s there, Sappho and Wages Due Lesbians and ‘Radicalesbians castrate men’, every single banner you could imagine around the Mansion House. Of course being so close to Fleet Street they were all there. And they came and photographed us all and ... I said [to these other women] ‘Why didn’t you tell us what [you were planning?] They said ‘We didn’t want to get Sappho involved because you’ve got enough on your plate anyway, however, we felt so strongly about this, because this is a woman’s issue, it isn’t just a lesbian or a straight woman’s issue.’ ... I met [Jackie Plaster], I was so moved, I said ‘I can’t get over you putting yourself on the line for lesbians’. She said ‘I don’t see any

⁴⁵ ‘Lesbians reply to the Evening News’, *Evening News*, 10 January 1978.

⁴⁶ ‘Home is daubed in protest’, *Evening News*, 9 January 1978.

difference between lesbians and straight women. It's a woman's issue and the male-dominated press need attacking.⁴⁷

A report on the demonstration by Barbara Charles in *Spare Rib* made a similar argument, emphasising that the scandal was a matter of concern not just for lesbians and lesbian mothers, but for feminists and gay men as well. Charles claimed: 'The press in its reporting of this demonstration assumed that the women demonstrators were all lesbians – they were not. This issue is about our right as *women* to control our bodies.'⁴⁸

As the initial furore died down, journalists and readers across the country settled down to reflect on the question of lesbian motherhood, often considering the concept for the first time. Opinions were divided, with many condemning the practice of lesbian AID – and, indeed, lesbian motherhood more broadly – on the grounds either that lesbians would not make suitable parents, or that children should be raised in the context of a stable, heterosexual family. Dr Dilcas Short wrote in to the *Scotsman* to protest that: 'To condemn a child to be brought up by two neurotic and immature women is horrifying indeed. Every child has as great a need for a father as a mother to allow for normal growth, and to gain emotional balance. What chance would a child have in a lesbian household, to become balanced and happy? None at all in my view.'⁴⁹ Writing in the *Daily Express* on 11 January, to repeat comments she had previously made on 'Any Questions', Jean Rook similarly argued that lesbians were not fit mothers, describing lesbian relationships as 'more neurotic, passionate, jealous and highly-sexed than a standard marriage' and asserting:

⁴⁷ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

⁴⁸ Barbara Charles, 'Taking over the News', *Spare Rib* 67, 12.

⁴⁹ 'Lesbian's children', *Scotsman*, 11 January 1978.

We shouldn't be fooled into thinking we're entrusting a baby to two 'mothers', but to two women, one of whom fantasises herself as a man, who go into a bedroom at night for the purpose of making love.

That the 'mother' in a lesbian relationship wants a child for the 'father', as a hold on her partner and a proof of their love.

And that the whole conception is horrendous and, for the child's sake, can't be allowed.⁵⁰

Other commentators claimed to be tolerant of lesbians in general but concerned, in this instance, with the rights of the child. Presenting lesbian motherhood as a self-indulgence which debases human life and is the beginning of a downward spiral toward child sexual abuse, Frederick Whitehead told readers of the *Birmingham Post*: "The disasters that can befall children are already manifold. They can be deprived of a father by divorce, by death, by illegitimacy. They can be ill-treated by parents, battered by TV violence or bedevilled by chaos in schools. To expose, by deliberate decision, a further group of children, however small, to the probability of misery and personality conflicts must surely be condemned."⁵¹ This theme of the need for the community to give voice to the rights of children whose interests would otherwise be neglected, was echoed in numerous responses to the debate. Norman St John-Stevas countered calls by lesbian mothers for their rights as women to be mothers by asserting: "The flaw in this approach is that children do not exist to give satisfaction to parents but rather the other way round. We know from common sense and also from psychiatry that if children are to grow up with stable personalities they need a balanced home background, with both parents playing their proper roles."⁵²

⁵⁰ Jean Rook, 'Don't be fooled by this cosy "family" image', *Daily Express*, 11 January 1978.

⁵¹ Frederick Whitehead, 'Ill-conceived ambitions', *Birmingham Post*, 11 January 1978.

⁵² Norman St John-Stevas, 'Vexed question of insemination for lesbians', *Catholic Herald*, 20 January 1978. See also 'Speak up for the child', *The Journal*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 9 January 1978.

However, by the second week, the tone of reporting began to shift, with some journalists and, increasingly, readers, expressing sympathy and support for the situation of lesbian mothers. Three readers wrote into the *Scotsman* on 17th January, challenging the assertion by Dr Dilcas Short that lesbians were ‘neurotic and immature’. Angus Robbie argued: ‘There is far more chance of persons becoming neurotic and behaving immaturely if they are forced to play a role that does not come naturally to them. I would have thought that what a developing child needs more than anything is love and a couple that proclaim their love in the face of so much social disapproval have passed that test.’⁵³ This emphasis on love as the crucial element in good parenting was echoed by many supporters of lesbian mothers in the debate. Laura Gillan, writing in the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, claimed: ‘There’s no reason to suppose that a woman who happens to be attracted to a member of her own sex isn’t just as capable of being a good mother as a woman attracted to men. Small children need a warm, loving environment and they’re probably more likely to get it from two women than in many heterosexual homes where husbands are violent.’⁵⁴ In a letter to the *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, S.Warwick argued that lesbian couples offered a potentially better home than single parents because there were two of them. ‘Taking issue with a previous letter-writer, who had asserted that lesbian couples having children by AID were ‘pushing society even further down the slopes of degeneracy that abounds and grows in this permissive age,’ S. Warwick stated: ‘If anything, the children brought up having lesbian parents will be at an advantage compared with the children of widows or divorcees, because they have two parents.’⁵⁵ Lucy Orgill made a similar point in the *Derby Evening Telegraph*, but went on to stress that what really counted with lesbian mothers was that their children were wanted. She argued:

⁵³ Angus A. Robbie, ‘Are lesbians “neurotic and immature”?’ *Scotsman*, 17 January 1978.

⁵⁴ Laura Gillan, ‘Why shouldn’t lesbians make good mothers?’, *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 9 January 1978.

⁵⁵ S.Warwick, ‘Advantage of lesbian parents’, *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, 19 January 1978.

But what really counts with a child is the feeling of love, security and being wanted. And whatever else the children of gay women may suffer, they're wanted all right. Why else would a gay woman go through the preliminary hell which precipitates conceiving a child? ...

Weigh up her strong maternal instincts against that of the promiscuous typist, the prostitute who came unstuck, even the career woman who manages to fit in a quick pregnancy before going off again to pursue her career, leaving her child for somebody else to bring up from the age of six months, and it's not difficult to sort out the good mothers from the indifferent.⁵⁶

While many of the contributors to the debate sought to assert or contest notions of the 'good mother', locating lesbian mothers within a hierarchy of ideal women and family structures, others shifted the focus towards social attitudes more broadly. Countering the argument that children of lesbian parents would be exposed to bullying at school and ostracism in the community, Laura Gillan reflected: 'My only reservation is that there might be problems as the child grows up and finds that his "parents" relationship is regarded by some with horror. The answer surely is that society should change its attitude and become more tolerant of lesbians.'⁵⁷

As reporters began searching for further scoops in the debate, the stories of lesbian mothers themselves began to emerge, providing some insight into the motivations and family structures of British lesbians who conceived through AID in this period. Encouraged by Jackie Forster, in an attempt to present a more balanced view of the experiences of lesbians who conceived through AID, Janice Hetherington agreed to be interviewed by a journalist who wrote for both the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Observer*.⁵⁸ In the resulting article, she claimed to have been the

⁵⁶ Lucy Orgill, 'Their right to bear children?', *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 17 January 1978.

⁵⁷ Gillan, 'Why shouldn't lesbians make good mothers?'

⁵⁸ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.

first British lesbian to have a child by artificial insemination after being inseminated with the help of a doctor in Middlesex in 1971. She explained that ‘she had decided when she was in her teens that she was a lesbian and if she ever wanted to have children it would have to be by AID.’ She began the process in her mid-twenties, after she had lived with her lover, Judy, for two years. However, the couple faced some discouragement from doctors and she recalled: ‘They all thought I was a crank. I eventually found a sympathetic one, who agreed to help if I underwent psychiatric tests... But most psychiatrists I approached thought I was mad. They seemed to think it would have been acceptable for me to have heterosexual sex with any Tom, Dick or Harry and then have a child, but not to do it this way.’ Ultimately, Janice was able to obtain reports from psychiatrists confirming her sanity and fitness to bring up a child and the insemination was carried out. The doctor himself was the donor and Janice paid a small fee for the treatment, which resulted in the birth of her son, Nicky.⁵⁹ Janice Hetherington’s account highlights the significant variations in knowledge about AID in this period. While the Sappho women had apparently not been aware of the possibilities of reproductive technologies to facilitate lesbian motherhood in the early 1970s, Janice claimed to have decided a decade earlier that this would be her route into conception. The article describing her experience did not provide any details about the source of her information, although her frequent references to the long-standing use of AID in France point to one possible explanation. Class background may have been a factor in determining individual women’s awareness of and access to AID. Of the first Sappho couple to make use of AID, one was a psychologist; another set of mothers comprised a postgraduate student and two ‘professional women’; and Janice herself had been a teacher before setting up her own antiques business in Hampstead. As educated professionals, these women would have enjoyed greater access to information about reproductive technologies and their possibilities for lesbians, as well as being in a stronger financial position to pay the required medical fees. In their 1982 book on lesbian

⁵⁹ ‘My AID son – by a lesbian’, *Observer*, 8 January 1978, 1-2.

motherhood, Gillian Hanscombe and Jackie Forster stated that ‘AID is not generally available on the National Health Service, but there are an increasing number of centres in the country where it may be obtained, sometimes on a private or fee-paying basis.’⁶⁰ Although Dr David Sopher (and possibly other gynaecologists) was willing to significantly reduce his fees for lesbian mothers, the cost per treatment was still relatively high and would have been beyond the means of some interested lesbians.

A number of women’s stories suggest that some lesbians consciously saw AID as a means to have children in the context of alternative family structures. On 6th January, the London *Evening News* included a piece entitled, ‘The most remarkable family in Britain’, which told the story of the ‘*Sappho*’ family who had unknowingly assisted undercover journalist, Joanna Patyna.⁶¹ The article explained that student, ‘Helen’ had conceived her son ‘Michael’, by AID, over two years earlier, after some period of deliberation. Helen shared her London home with her lover, Julie, and Julie’s other lover, Alison. After some years of living together in a three-way relationship, Helen ‘suddenly became aware of a very pressing need to have a child – a tremendous urge to have a baby of her own.’ Julie recalled: ‘And one day she came home very excited because she’d heard about a doctor who would inseminate lesbians. Well, we didn’t take advantage of the service immediately. In fact we agonised about it for a year, wondering whether we’d be doing the right thing. I suppose what worried us most was the thought of breaking the rules – yet again!’ Ultimately, the decision to have a child was taken collectively by the three women, and the structure of the family reflected this. Julie explained that, although Michael called Helen ‘Mummy’, ‘The word Mummy doesn’t have all that much meaning for Michael. To him it’s just like any other name ... like Julie or Alison. For most children the person they call “Mummy” is the most important figure in their lives. I don’t think Michael makes that distinction. There is no one central figure in

⁶⁰ Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle*, 110.

⁶¹ Joanna Patyna, ‘The most remarkable family in Britain’, *Evening News*, 6 January 1978, 10.

his life – there are three.’ Anticipating a time when Michael would be at school and begin to ask questions about his father, Alison said the women would explain: ‘We’ll say: “No darling, you haven’t got a Daddy but you have Julie and Alison instead, and they love you very much.”’⁶²

Although Helen, Julie and Alison’s decision to have a child in the context of a three-way relationship was relatively unusual, many more women used AID to add to a family which already included children from previous relationships. When Janice Hetherington and her lover Judy conceived their son, Nicky, they were already co-parenting Judy’s daughter from a previous heterosexual relationship. Following Judy’s sudden death shortly after Nicky was born, Janice fought a lengthy court battle to gain legal custody of her daughter and subsequently raised both children with her new lover. A few days after Janice’s article appeared, the *Liverpool Echo* featured an interview with lesbian couple, ‘Lesley’ and ‘Christine’, who were also planning to use AID to augment their family. The women were already raising Lesley’s 6 and 8-year-old sons from previous heterosexual relationships, and were now hoping that Christine would become pregnant through AID. Lesley and Christine spent three years ‘thoroughly thrash[ing] out the pros and cons’ of conceiving a baby by AID and Christine described the process of seeking out treatment as relatively straightforward. She explained: ‘I went and saw my GP in Liverpool and asked about AID. She said there was no shortage of donors, and she didn’t even question the fact that I was single. She tried to get me an appointment with a gynaecologist in Liverpool, but she was too booked up so now she’s fixing for me to see one in London.’ Despite their joint role in the decision for Christine to become pregnant, and their assertion that sons, Jamie and Peter ‘have two parents of the same sex ... [and] now love both of us equally’, Lesley and Christine imagined their parenting of the new child in different ways from the equal co-parenting model described by Michael’s mothers. Lesley commented: ‘When the baby comes, I will play a much lesser role. Chris

⁶² Joanna Patyna, ‘The most remarkable family in Britain’, *Evening News*, 6 January 1978; ‘No father but three “mums” for test tube baby Michael’, *Liverpool Echo*, 7 January 1978.

will be a mother and I will be there to support her. She might go back to work or not, it's her decision. If she stays at home, we will live on my income.'⁶³ Accounts such as these suggest that small numbers of British lesbians were making use of AID in the 1970s to reimagine the conventional nuclear family of the period in creative ways, raising children with multiple parents who were performing a variety of roles, or forging families with a number of children conceived in a variety of ways to different biological parents.

However, wider social attitudes to lesbian motherhood and the raising of children outside of the conventional nuclear family had a significant impact on the daily lives of lesbian mothers and their children. The personal stories which emerged during the AID scandal indicate the extent to which many lesbian mothers were fearful of, and forced to confront, societal and familial rejection. Reflecting on the fears which she and her co-mothers had discussed prior to conceiving their son, Michael by AID, Julie described the women's concerns about what the donor was like, whether they could trust the doctor, and whether their child would be rejected by society. Ultimately, they did experience some difficult encounters with medical staff and officials at the time of Michael's birth. Helen was placed in a special ward because she was an unmarried mother, and the registrar who came to register Michael's birth was, in Julie's words, 'pretty snooty.' Similarly, while the women had the support of Helen's father, neither Julie nor Alison had told their parents, as they felt they would not understand. Studies of family and kinship in post-war Britain have typically argued that, despite a growing trend towards independence from families in young adulthood, women have remained reliant on extended family support to assist in raising children. In their recent re-examination of kinship structures in Bethnal Green, initially the subject of Young and Wilmott's 1950s study, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Dench, Gavron and Young found striking continuities in this regard across the post-war period.⁶⁴ They concluded: 'No one

⁶³ Anne Robinson, 'The city lesbian family who want a baby', *Liverpool Echo*, 12 January 1978.

⁶⁴ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1957).

with children dependent on them can be independent of others. As they realise this, the mothers in our study rediscover that conventional families offer wide and durable networks, and are an effective basis for securing support.⁶⁵ However, Julie and Alison's experience, and that of a number of other lesbian mothers whose stories were reported in the 1970s, suggests that the birth of children often resulted, not in a greater reliance on extended family, but rather in a breakdown in kinship ties for lesbian mothers.⁶⁶ Similarly, lesbian mothers faced hostility and social ostracism from neighbours who discovered their sexuality.⁶⁷

To conclude, the shift in practices of conception which began to take place in the 1970s from heterosexual relationships toward donor insemination prompted a re-evaluation of lesbian motherhood and its possibilities both amongst lesbians themselves and in the wider community. Despite the widespread condemnation of the practice in the British press in early 1978, AID continued to be available to British lesbians in subsequent decades. No legislation was passed to restrict its availability and the British Medical Association resisted attempts to interfere in its jurisdiction. The BMA and the College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists defended Dr Sopher's conduct as 'ethical and proper' and, in late 1978, the BMA produced guidance stating that the decision whether or not to provide treatment to lesbian couples should be an ethical one left to individual practitioners to decide for themselves.⁶⁸ Jackie Forster noted that the Secretary of the BMA's Ethical Committee had taken the trouble to telephone Sappho's offices to inform her personally, observing that he also 'wishes the press would stay out of it until they are qualified

⁶⁵ Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (London, 2006), 14, 114-16 and 236-9. See also Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris, *The Family and Social Change* (London, 1965); Nickie Charles, Charlotte Aul Davies and Chris Harris, *Families in Transition: Social Change, Family Formation and Kin Relationships* (Bristol, 2008). However, Angela Davis has found less reliance on extended families in her study of motherhood in Oxfordshire, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945-2000* (Manchester, 2012).

⁶⁶ *Sappho* 2:9 (December 1973), 11-14.

⁶⁷ *Sappho* 5:11 (1977), 11, 14.

⁶⁸ 'BMA for lesbian AID', *Family Planning Today*, December 1978.

enough to know what they are talking about!’⁶⁹ The media frenzy which followed from the *Evening News* exposé also had the unintended result of disseminating information about the possibilities of AID much more widely to lesbians in Britain and overseas. Jackie Forster reported that, in the days and weeks following the scandal, ‘we got a massive mail from single women and lesbians saying “Where can I get this sperm?” I was astonished. And lesbians were writing in saying “This is wonderful! We want to do this. Please tell us how” and all the rest of it.’⁷⁰ Whilst the *Evening News* scandal informed women about the specific practice of AID and prompted more women to seek out clinic-based donor insemination, it also sparked wider discussion in lesbian communities about a range of different modes of conception. As a result, increasing numbers of women also undertook donor insemination informally, in private arrangements between donors and potential mothers, and in so doing were part of a broader cultural shift in attitudes toward fertility treatment, morality and the family and the relationship between sexuality and conception.

⁶⁹ Jackie Forster, ‘Press Council Adjudication’, *Sappho* 6:11 (1978), 31.

⁷⁰ NSA, HCC (C456), F1607-F1612, Jackie Forster.