

**'The most radical, most exciting and most challenging role of my life': Lesbian  
motherhood in Australia 1945-1990**

In 1991, Mary Waterford told *Lesbians on the Loose* magazine:

Being a lesbian mother seems like the most radical, most exciting and most challenging role of my life. In the process I get to feel my deepest terrors for myself and my child, I get to feel the greatest pride in myself and my co-parenting partner and my child and I get to see my strength and courage in life with a fabulous boy who is lots of fun to be around. The joys are enormous, (as is the washing).<sup>1</sup>

When Mary made this claim in the early 1990s, it was possible to describe lesbian motherhood as a source of pride and joy, but this was not the case for much of the post-war period. Prior to the 1970s, lesbians with children, like many lesbians without children, typically sought to conceal their sexuality for fear of the social repercussions of claiming a marginal and despised identity. For lesbian mothers these concerns were magnified by the further threat of losing custody of and access to their children, should their same-sex desires become known. The history of lesbian mothers in the second half of the twentieth century has therefore to an extent been a history of struggle for recognition and rights: recognition of lesbian mothers' existence and the right to parent one's children. Simultaneously, however, shifting social and cultural frameworks, as well as increased access to knowledge of reproductive techniques, have shaped the possibilities open to women in combining motherhood with a lesbian identity. This chapter will trace some of these changes, exploring how women conceptualised and responded to the choices available to them and how they understood their roles and responsibilities as parents in this shifting landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Waterford, *Lesbians on the Loose* 17 (May 1991): 10.

Until the late 1970s, it was difficult for most women to conceive of the possibility of being both a mother and a lesbian. Lesbianism was subject to profound social taboos in Australia and cultural representations were restricted by censorship laws and religious condemnation. Female same-sex desire, like other forms of extra-marital sexuality, was widely considered unacceptable and contrasted with the approved female roles of wife and mother.<sup>2</sup> Typically, therefore, women of this earlier generation understood the decision to accept a lesbian identity as encompassing a recognition that they would not have children. For some women, who did not wish to be parents, this was an aspect of lesbian identity which proved unproblematic, but others described their inability to have children as a loss. Reflecting on their lives as lesbians, Mary and Sylvia, who were both born during the First World War and had lived together as a couple for sixty years or more, discussed Mary's sense of longing for a different life. Mary complained: 'Oh yes, it's a terribly unfortunate thing that you should be born like this, because you miss out on a great many things' and Sylvia added: 'Family, I suppose.' Mary continued: 'But I just think, sometimes I think to myself it's what a rotten way to be born, you know. When you see other people married with children and life's quite different.'<sup>3</sup> Although Mary and Sylvia represented their relationship and shared lives as very happy ones, Mary's account still hinted at a lingering wish that she could have had children

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<sup>2</sup> See Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mary and Sylvia [pseudonym] on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2008. This chapter draws on 100 interviews conducted by the author with self-identified lesbians for two projects, one exploring lesbian life in mid-twentieth-century NSW and another (funded by the Australian Research Council) examining lesbian practices of intimacy and parenting in Australia since 1945. The participants resided across Australia, ranging in age from 18 to 90 and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, although the women were predominantly of Anglo or European ethnicity. Thus while the sample represents a range of experiences, it has been difficult to explore the impact of race in shaping women's experience of lesbian motherhood.

and perhaps the social acceptance which came with heterosexual family life. Sandra, who was born thirty years later, in 1955, similarly explained the fact that she had not had children in terms of a lack of choice, commenting: 'I would have liked to have had a child, and if I was 20 years younger I kind of could now, but at the time it just was too complicated, and by the time it wasn't complicated I was a bit old to.' For women like Sandra, who recognised their desires for other women early in life, there seemed no possibility of combining an acknowledged lesbian identity with motherhood. The few women she knew who did have children had 'mostly ... had children by heterosexual sex when they were very young, or ... had been married and [left] their husband, because they realised they were lesbian.'<sup>4</sup>

As Sandra noted, the majority of women who combined motherhood with same-sex desires prior to the 1970s, were therefore women who were, or had been married or in heterosexual relationships. The cultural emphasis on marriage and motherhood as women's primary role in post-war Australia prompted many women to marry and have children despite an awareness of their attraction to other women, while others did not recognise their same-sex desires until after marriage. In an interview with lesbian and gay magazine, *Campaign*, published in 1981, 33-year-old mother, Liz, explained why she had decided to marry in 1968, despite having recognised her lesbianism as a teenager:

Lots of reasons. I had a boring job. I thought I could become a good housewife. I liked him – he was good company. I thought maybe it would 'cure' me. Financial and emotional security. Status, desirability as a woman, all of those reasons. After all, I thought, everyone gets married, has kids and lives happily ever after in the suburbs. That's all there was.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sandra Mackay on 2 July 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Simpson, 'The Simpson Case', *Campaign* 67 (July 1981): 12.

Liz had her first affair with a woman she had known from school after her marriage, but had remained living with her husband and son and pursuing secret relationships with other women for 13 years. Although little evidence has survived of the experiences of women in this position in the immediate post-war decades, it is very likely that Liz's experience was typical of many women in the 1950s and 1960s who lived outwardly conventional married lives and concealed their desires for other women. Women in this position frequently kept their desires for other women secret from everyone except the women with whom they were involved and destroyed all tangible record of their affairs, with the result that the only traces of such experiences which have survived are in rare letters to the lesbian organisations and magazines which emerged in the 1970s or retrospective accounts in oral history interviews. The penalties for exposure as a lesbian mother in the 1950s and 1960s typically included loss of custody and access to one's children in addition to the social and familial ostracism and loss of employment experienced by many lesbians. As a result, many women chose never to disclose their same-sex desires and evidence from this period is extremely limited, leaving historians to draw wider conclusions from a few isolated cases which have come to light. Historian Ruth Ford has described the experience of Joan, a married woman with four young children living in suburban Melbourne in the 1950s. When Joan fell in love with her English friend, Jean, the women maintained a 'secretive' affair for three years, occasionally going on holiday together and meeting during the day when Jean was able to take a day off work, until the strain became too much for Jean and she returned to England. Joan explained that although 'I've never felt such heartbreak as when she left', 'I stayed with my husband because

there certainly wasn't any Relief for if you left, and I certainly wouldn't leave my ... children.'<sup>6</sup>

A divorce case in Victoria in the early 1960s also revealed the same-sex relationship of a Mrs A, mother of five, and Mrs R in a small country town, which prompted Mrs A's husband to ask her to leave the marital home in 1959 after 23 years of marriage.<sup>7</sup>

The silence surrounding desire between women prior to the 1970s may also have enabled some women to raise children together without those around them recognising that they were in a same-sex relationship. In a 1973 letter to their lesbian daughter, a middle-aged couple wrote that:

The only instance we know of children being brought up by two women is the two P-boys, and then the little girl, who was adopted by Miss P- and Miss C-. There has never been the slightest overt indication of lesbianism there, whatever the private relationship is, but the problems both for the two women and for the boys in particular were severe, as you well know.<sup>8</sup>

Although the nature of these particular women's relationship and the precise difficulties they experienced are unknown, this reference to local children who had been adopted during the war and with whom the daughter had attended school, hints at the possibility that unmarried women were occasionally able to adopt and raise children together. Discretion was undoubtedly crucial in such circumstances and would also have enabled previously married women to set up home and care for their children together in apparent friendship and mutual support. In a child custody ruling in Brisbane in 1977, Justice Lindenmayer alluded to this practice, commenting that: 'the phenomenon of two separated mothers living together with

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth Ford, "'Filthy, Obscene and Mad": Engendering Homophobia in Australia 1940s-1960s,' in *Homophobia: An Australian History*, ed. Shirleene Robinson (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2008), 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> A v A [1962] Victorian Reports, pp.619-20, cited in Ford, 'Filthy, Obscene and Mad.'

<sup>8</sup> Letter dated 23 October 1973, reproduced in 'Happy Families', *Sappho* 2, no.9 (December 1973): 11-12.

their children is not so unusual that such gossip would necessarily follow, particularly if the women exercised some discretion in public.<sup>9</sup>

When lesbian and gay groups began to be established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the first women to contact these organisations were married with children. Elizabeth recalled that, when she joined Sydney lesbian social group, Clover, in the early 1970s, many of the women there had children from previous heterosexual marriages: 'There seemed to be quite a few married women, not, I didn't meet any that were living with their husbands at the time, they were divorced or separated or things like that but they had been married and there were children around quite a bit.' As a result the group typically met at 'quite decorous' private house parties, where the women could put the children to bed before taking part in barbeques or swimming nights.<sup>10</sup> While the majority of these women were separated or divorced from their husbands, others opted to remain married for a variety of reasons, including financial security, fear of losing custody of their children or in order to maintain a heterosexual family life for their children. As campaigning by lesbian and gay groups such as CAMP Inc (founded in 1970) and Gay Liberation (1972) began to prompt increased discussion and awareness of homosexuality, a growing number of married women acknowledged their same-sex desires to themselves and their husbands. While some husbands could react with understanding, attempts to combine married life with a declared lesbian identity often resulted in considerable strain for those involved. In 1975, Melbourne gay group, Society Five, received a letter from a woman who had recently moved to North Blackburn from rural NSW.

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<sup>9</sup> In the marriage of Brook, G.E. and Brook, H.L. (1977) FLC 90-325 at 76710.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by Ruth Ford with Elizabeth on 6 May 1992, Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives (ALGA).

She requested information about the organisation and details of the local gay scene, explaining:

I am 25 years old, married, with a 2 ½ year old daughter. My husband understands my need to be with another woman (thank God). I was involved with someone at home but my husband's job has taken me away from her (of whom I miss terribly). But I find myself very lonely and lost. Melbourne can be a very very cold place. And it frightens me to think we're here for good. And I really need someone. Maybe someone like myself, lonely or in need of other women.<sup>11</sup>

A sense of isolation was frequently described by women in this position, with few, if any, opportunities to reach out to a lesbian community. The following year, another married woman with 6- and 8-year-old children wrote in to *Cleo* magazine describing her circumstances. She had acknowledged her homosexuality to herself and her husband two years previously and, for the last few months had been sharing a bungalow behind the family house with her girlfriend. However, the situation was proving increasingly difficult and her letter revealed the difficult decisions faced by lesbian mothers in such circumstances. She explained:

I considered leaving him and taking the children with me elsewhere. Apart from the fact that he said he would do anything to prevent losing the children, I felt that my taking them would be unfair, as he is not to blame in any way for my sexuality... My main worry is the children – they accept Barbara and she is extremely good with them, but the tension is building within me and the antagonism towards Peter is eating my insides out. I don't want to continue living this life of double fronts. The children are equally fond of both of us but are beginning to sense the underlying tension. I feel the children would be much better in a normal heterosexual family situation – yet I do not want to leave them thinking I don't love them... I am in a profession which affords a good income. I could support them by myself.<sup>12</sup>

This woman's letter reveals the tensions experienced by many women who recognised or acted on their same-sex desires after marriage and children and found themselves torn between a wish to seek personal fulfilment and the love and responsibility they felt toward

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Society Five, 20 April 1975, ALGA Box 13/5.

<sup>12</sup> 'Cleo Adviser', *Cleo* 41 (March 1976): 76.

their children. As this letter-writer noted, some women, influenced by the widespread social belief that a heterosexual nuclear family was the ideal environment in which to raise children, felt that it would be in the best interests of their children to concede custody to the father. Others retained custody when they separated from their husbands but tried to conceal their lesbianism to avoid conflict with their former husbands. In 1977, Delphine, from Maroochydore in Queensland, wrote to *Campaign* magazine describing her experience as a lesbian mother of a 4-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl. Delphine was living with her girlfriend, Judy, and the children and had a good relationship with her ex-husband, who paid her maintenance and took the children every second weekend. However, neither her ex-husband nor her family were aware of her sexuality and she was beginning to find the situation intolerable. She explained: 'After 18 months of putting up a front, only inviting my parents at set times, and making sure Judy is out of the way when Matt comes to pick up the kids, I'm sick of it, and feel there would be little to lose by taking them into our confidence.' Her girlfriend, however, disagreed, arguing that their 'whole family's happiness depends on discretion and tact.' *Campaign's* agony aunt, Jane, reinforced the importance of discretion, painting a depressing picture of the possible consequences of coming out, ranging from poverty and relationship break-up to loss of the children, and concluding that 'you'd be crazy to rock the boat at this juncture.'<sup>13</sup>

With increased discussion of lesbianism in Australian society in the 1970s, attempts by lesbian mothers to conceal their same-sex desires and relationships became increasingly problematic, however, and a growing number of custody cases came before the courts

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Delphine, Maroochydore, Queensland to 'Jane's Column', *Campaign* 28 (1978): 56.



involving acknowledged lesbian mothers.<sup>14</sup> Although a small number of women were granted custody of their children, this was typically in circumstances in which the father had been demonstrated to be violent, an alcoholic or unsuited to childcare. This was the case in one of the first high-profile custody cases involving a lesbian mother, *Campbell v Campbell*, which was heard in South Australia in 1974. The judge in the case, Mr Justice Bright, claimed his decision as a landmark liberal ruling, noting that: 'The days are gone when courts will disqualify a woman from the role of parent merely because she has engaged or is engaging in some form of extra-marital sex, be it heterosexual or homosexual.' However, the judge's ruling made it clear that the mother's lesbianism was not in fact considered irrelevant: the father in the case was allegedly violent and the judge imposed several conditions on the mother's behaviour with regard to her sexuality and relationship with her lover, Linda:

I require an undertaking from the applicant [mother] to the effect that she will not sleep in Linda's bedroom with Linda over night or allow Linda to sleep in her bedroom with her over night, that she will not engage in or permit any acts of a sexual nature with Linda in the presence of the children or of other persons who might report those acts to the children, and that she will make arrangements for Dr Gerard [a child psychiatrist] to see the children at intervals of not more than one year so that he may satisfy himself as to the well being of the children. All these undertakings are to apply during the continuance of the homosexual relationship with Linda.<sup>15</sup>

Such restrictions were relatively common in cases in which a lesbian mother was granted custody of her children, reflecting a widespread judicial assumption that awareness of a parent's homosexuality would be detrimental to children and that being raised in a homosexual environment would have adverse effects on child development. Disagreement amongst medical professionals with regard to this issue, and the absence of any published research prior to Richard Green's 1978 US study of children raised in homosexual and

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<sup>14</sup> See Rebecca Jennings, 'Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody: Australian Debates in the 1970s', *Gender and History* 24, no.2 (August 2012): 502-17.

<sup>15</sup> *Campbell v Campbell* (1974) *South Australian State Reports* (SASR) 9, 25-29.

transsexual households, meant that it was extremely difficult for lesbian mothers to counter such assumptions.<sup>16</sup>

The majority of custody cases involving a lesbian mother prior to the mid 1980s resulted in the loss of custody by the mother, however. The Family Law Act 1975, which established the Family Court of Australia identified the 'best interests of the child' as the paramount consideration in custody disputes and judges were given considerable discretion to interpret this principle. In relation to lesbian mothers, judges frequently assumed that being raised by a lesbian mother was not in the best interests of a child, often implying or asserting in their judgements that lesbians were emotionally unstable, immature and prone to mental illness, frequently dominated by jealous lovers and over-sexed. While a father's remarriage typically strengthened his application for custody, as his new wife was considered a positive influence on the children, mothers' lesbian relationships were often characterised as posing a threat to the mother's parenting abilities. In the 1979 case of PC and PR, heard in WA, Justice McCall represented the mother's lover, Miss Argue, as predatory and domineering and referred to role-playing in their relationship. He noted of Miss Argue: 'I do not believe that she is an emotionally stable person and her frequent resort to psychologists can, to me, only be explained by a feeling of insecurity.'<sup>17</sup> Putting an end to a lesbian relationship in an attempt to gain custody of children was not necessarily regarded as an improvement either, however. In the 1977 case of Spry, Justice Murray commented in response to the mother's offer to do so: 'Mrs Spry is very dependent emotionally on Mrs Lightburn. If Mrs Spry were to forsake

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Green, 'Sexual Identity of 37 Children Raised by Homosexual or Transsexual Parents,' *American Journal of Psychiatry* 135 (1978): 692-7.

<sup>17</sup> In the marriage of PC and PR (1979) FLC 90-676 at 78609.

Mrs Lightburn, I am of the opinion that she (Mrs Spry) would suffer such unhappiness that her parenting capacity would suffer.<sup>18</sup>

The discrimination faced by lesbian mothers in the Family Court became a key focus of lesbian activism in the 1970s. Workshops on lesbian motherhood were relatively frequent at lesbian and gay and feminist conferences throughout the decade.<sup>19</sup> In 1976, a Lesbian Political Action Group, which developed out of the Lesbianism and Feminism Conference in Melbourne, included lesbian mothers' rights in its list of four demands, stating: 'We demand the right to bring up children whilst openly living as lesbians.' The issue of visibility was crucial to the Lesbian Action Group and other feminist and lesbian and gay political activism around lesbian mothers in this period. The ability to 'come out' and openly declare a lesbian identity was central to lesbian and gay politics and, as the Lesbian Action Group claimed: 'Many lesbians hide their lesbianism because of the threat or fear of losing their children on divorce. This situation makes it essential that lesbian mothers have the same custody rights as heterosexual women.'<sup>20</sup> In the late 1970s, a Sydney group began to collate evidence about lesbian and gay parents' experiences in the Family Court to share with others going through the custody process and, in 1979, the Gay Summer Offensive Planning Group in Melbourne produced a two-page flyer on parenting rights for lesbians and gay men which argued that the closed nature of Family Court hearings led to discrimination against homosexual

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<sup>18</sup> In the marriage of Spry, B.A. and Spry, R.W. (1977) FLC 90-271 at 76445.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1975, CAMP NSW organised six seminars on female homosexuality, one of which was on the 'homosexual mother': 'First Workshop/Seminar for International Women's Year', CAMP NSW 10 June 1975 (Ge 056207); Women's Liberation Conference, 1979, included a workshop on lesbian mothers: *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* Feb/March 1979, p.4

<sup>20</sup> Liz Ross, 'Lesbian Demands,' *Scarlet Woman* 4 (July 1976): 6.

parents.<sup>21</sup> By 1984, there was sufficient momentum to hold a lesbian mothers' conference: the Bridge the Gap forum in Melbourne.<sup>22</sup>

From the late 1970s onwards, a number of lesbian mothers' groups were established across Australia to support lesbian mothers and their children. Robyn Plaister was instrumental in founding a group in Sydney in 1976, connected with lesbian and gay campaigning group, CAMP Inc. The group was partly intended as a lobbying group to address the legal discrimination faced by lesbian mothers, but also functioned as a social group. As Robyn recalled:

I was also looking to develop a group which would allow lesbian mothers and their children to come together to meet each other, to be a support group. And also for the children of lesbian mothers to meet each other and work out how they deal with it in their world, in terms of being discriminated against by other kids in schools and things like that. I also was looking towards the partners, who did not have children, coming together to be supportive of one another and how they relate to lesbian mothers and their children, although that seemed to happen less. It became more a support group for lesbian mothers, but it worked effectively for quite a few years.<sup>23</sup>

A similar group was formed in Melbourne at around the same time and, between the late 1970s and early 1980s, Women and Children in Transition (WACKIT) provided support to lesbian mothers in Melbourne.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 'Child custody data compiled by Lesbian Mothers Group,' *Campaign* 38 (1978): 8; 'Gays Demand the Right to Care for Kids', Gay Summer Offensive Planning Group leaflet, 14 December 1979, Papers of Judith Power, Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive, No. 55, Series No. 55/3/9, University of Melbourne Archives.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of this event, see Barbara Baird, 'An Australian History of Lesbian Mothers: two points of emergence,' *Women's History Review* 21, no.3 (July 2012): 1-18.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Robyn Plaister on 20 December 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Papers of Judith Power, Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive, No. 55, Series No. 55/2/2, University of Melbourne Archives.

Despite the widespread political support for lesbian mothers, many women found the women's movement and lesbian and gay movement difficult and unsupportive environments for lesbian mothers. In 1977, a feminist wrote in to *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* to complain that:

We have all felt alienated from the women's movement at some stage of its / our development. This alienation can be most acute if you are a woman alone with a child... Occasionally one has to confront feminists who dislike children and feel oppressed by their presence. At these times one must beg for understanding and tolerance. Whilst such feelings are valid in general terms, they are contrary to feminist theory and lead to feelings of guilt in the mother.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly in the mid and late 1970s and early 1980s, much of the rhetoric and ideological debate emerging from feminist and lesbian feminist circles centred on a critique of the nuclear family and an emphasis on women as autonomous beings, which could result in a denigration of women's roles as mothers.<sup>26</sup> In an interview with three lesbian mothers, published in feminist journal, *Scarlet Woman*, in 1976, the women complained that they were accused of being 'mumsy' and a 'conditioned female' if they showed physical affection for their children, that they and their friends and lovers were criticised for 'liking' children and that many feminists refused to accept that they were lesbians if they had children, labelling them bisexual or heterosexual instead.<sup>27</sup> Practical difficulties also arose for women with children who wanted to participate in feminist conferences, activism or lifestyles. Judith Power described her experience of these difficulties in Victoria in the early 1980s, when she and her lover, Judy, were attempting to combine motherhood with a lesbian feminist lifestyle:

[The Women Patriarchy and the Future Forum, 1981, was] when I first really wanted to live communally. We had two womyn billeted with us (one of whom was Biff Ward from Canberra) and I loved the late night raves which all became part of the process of

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<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July 1977): 13.

<sup>26</sup> See Catherine Kevin, 'Maternity and freedom: Australian feminist encounters with the reproductive body', *Australian Feminist Studies* 20, no. 46 (2005): 3-15.

<sup>27</sup> 'As feminists, as lesbians, as mothers,' *Scarlet Woman* 4 (July 1976): 20-22.

moving to Talbot. Originally Judy and I wanted to live communally with other dykes in the city because of us both needing to keep contact with our daughters. But then we realised we needed to live in the suburbs rather than the ghetto to be near the kids and it was too difficult to live communally with kids coming and going on access visits etc.

Ultimately, Judith moved to Talbot in the country but kept a flat in the city for her access visits with her daughter, although after a few years this proved too expensive.<sup>28</sup>

The question of how best to parent children was also widely discussed in feminist circles throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In July 1979, *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* advertised a forthcoming meeting which was intended to explore the question of whose responsibility it should be to raise children and to discuss plans to establish a child-raising co-op.<sup>29</sup> Women-only communities such as the rural women's lands in Northern NSW, established in 1973, promoted an ideological commitment to communal childcare although there, as elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s, many lesbian mothers felt that the reality fell short of this ideal. The issue of the gender of the child was also a focus of much discussion, particularly in the 1980s as separatism became increasingly influential in some lesbian feminist circles. Concerns about the presence of boys at feminist events and in women-only spaces were widely discussed and some women felt that mothering boys at all was ideologically problematic. Jay Walker, who held a workshop at the 1991 Lesbian Conference in Sydney on 'breaking the ties' with her son, was not the only lesbian feminist to relinquish her male child for ideological reasons in this period. She explained: 'My political framework and lifestyle is separatist and having a male child in my life was a conflict.'<sup>30</sup> Other women

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Taylor, *Stroppy Dykes: Radical Lesbian Feminist Activism in Victoria During the 1980s* (Melbourne: Dyke Books Inc, 2012), 86.

<sup>29</sup> *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* (June/July 1979): 1.

<sup>30</sup> Conference programme, Lesbian Conference, July 1991, Sydney, p.13, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

regarded parenting male children as an opportunity to challenge patriarchal values and raise feminist men.<sup>31</sup> The parenting of girls, although less controversial, was also debated to some extent in feminist journals and at conferences, with parents largely agreeing on the importance of raising powerful, independent women and enabling their daughters to resist the many pressures and forms of discrimination they were expected to encounter in mainstream society.

In the 1970s, a small number of lesbian couples began to explore the possibility of conceiving children in the context of a lesbian relationship. Marion Paull and her lover travelled to the UK in the early 1970s to conceive their two boys before returning to Canberra. Marion explained: 'We had them because she wanted her own children, I like children, we could afford it, and we were able to organize artificial insemination.'<sup>32</sup> Reproductive technologies were beginning to open up new possibilities for lesbian motherhood in this period, but access to medical assistance was complicated by social attitudes toward homosexuality and single motherhood. In a letter to her parents on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1973, announcing the news of her first pregnancy, Marion's lover explained: 'I have had artificial insemination by donor six times since October 2<sup>nd</sup> last year, and the sixth one, in July, was successful. We have been planning this since the end of 1970, but AID was not possible in Australia because there is a legal

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<sup>31</sup> Margaret Bradstock, 'Old woman, old woman, who lives in a shoe', in *Beyond Blood: writings on the lesbian and gay family*, eds. Louise Wakeling and Margaret Bradstock (Sydney: Black Wattle Press, 1995), 38. See Rebecca Jennings, 'The boy-child in Australian lesbian feminist discourse and community,' *Cultural and Social History* 13, no.1 (2016): 63-79.

<sup>32</sup> Marion Paull, 'A letter from Australia,' in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc, 1992), 177.

requirement for the consent of the husband which does not exist here.’<sup>33</sup> In the UK, the two women identified a gynaecologist who was willing to assist them and made contact with lesbian group, Sappho, who supported them through the process, publishing baby photographs and announcements of the birth in *Sappho* magazine and celebrating the event as a ‘virgin birth’. The family returned to Canberra after conceiving their second child, who was born in Australia. The women faced disapproval of their decision to conceive children together from a number of sources, however. Replying to their daughter’s letter announcing her pregnancy, Marion’s lover’s parents wrote:

Mum and I were shattered and grieved by your news .... We can see the virtue of an upbringing being provided for a child who otherwise has none, although we would see an upbringing by a single woman as infinitely preferable to an upbringing in an overtly lesbian establishment, but we feel it grievously wrong to bring into the world a child to whom you do not offer ordinary family life, but only the household of a lesbian pair, which from the double bed on, proclaims its state to the world. What hope can you give the child of a normal acceptance by his/her peers, not only as a baby but at three, five, ten, fifteen, nineteen, twenty-one?<sup>34</sup>

Asserting repeatedly that an upbringing by a single mother would be preferable to one by a lesbian couple, they went on to note that, if their daughter recognised her mistake, she and the baby would be welcome in her parents’ home (without Marion). Women in the couple’s Women’s Liberation Movement circle in Canberra were also unsupportive, regarding motherhood in this context as a political betrayal. Marion recalled: ‘Straight sisters in the movement said we were once again aping heterosexual behaviour. Lesbians were heard to say it was disgusting and why couldn’t we have dogs like everyone else.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Letter dated 23 October 1973, reproduced in ‘Happy Families,’ *Sappho* 2, no.9 (December 1973): 11.

<sup>34</sup> Letter dated 30 October 1973, reproduced in ‘Happy Families,’ *Sappho* 2, no.9 (December 1973): 11-13.

<sup>35</sup> Paull, ‘A letter from Australia,’ :177.



While Marion and her lover chose to conceive their children with the assistance of a gynaecologist and using an anonymous donor, other women took a community-based approach. Claire and Robyn conceived their three children while living in London in the late 1970s and early 1980s and later returned to Sydney with them. After a number of visits to a gynaecologist, which were proving expensive, Claire recalled that they became aware of another option:

Then we saw an ad, that another woman was setting up a group of women who wanted to have children and a group of gay men who lived all around the Oval.

So we went to the meeting, the collective meeting with those women and those men ... So then we started using those men. They just had a house near the Oval Station and you'd ring up and say, today's the day and whizz down there and there'd be a little jar of sperm, freshly collected ... We thought that we wouldn't know [whose sperm it was]. The whole idea was, these were committed men who were prepared to do it and it was a group of them. So they'd arrange it between themselves when any woman notified them.

As these men lived some distance from Claire and Robyn's house, they also made an agreement with two heterosexual men they knew to use their sperm. Claire explained that, although the intention of the procedure devised by the group was that the sperm donor would remain anonymous, it became apparent after the birth of each child that it was possible to deduce which donor's sperm had been effective from the appearance of the baby. Adapting to this new information, the mothers chose to tell their children, with the permission of the men concerned, who their sperm donors were, and the family maintained irregular contact with these men thereafter.<sup>36</sup>

In Australia, women began to conceive using artificial insemination or self-insemination in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Maura spent much of the 1970s considering her options with

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Claire [pseudonym] on 7 May 2012.

regard to motherhood, before ultimately giving birth to her son in December 1979. She explained:

In December 1974, I decided that I was not going to find a man who'd agree to a pregnancy and then make himself scarce – I would need to find alternative means of conception ... My problem was mechanical – how to get egg and sperm together. I believed I had the knowledge and personal resources to overcome this mechanical problem. Leichhardt Women's Health Centre told me about using a Dutch Cap (diaphragm) to hold the sperm against the cervix. I adapted their advice to suit my needs and limits of personal dexterity.<sup>37</sup>

Louise Wakeling and Margaret Bradstock met in the early 1970s and raised Margaret's three children from a previous marriage together. Not long after, Louise began discussing the possibility of conceiving a child herself but, as Margaret explained: 'at that stage heterosexual copulation was the only known way to get a baby.'<sup>38</sup> In 1983, when the couple again attempted the issue, a brief heterosexual affair still seemed the obvious solution to them, but '[a]bout this time, two of the first DIY babies in Australia had been conceived and born, and we began to consider that option.'<sup>39</sup> The women initially planned to use a pool of donors and the diaphragm method, which Margaret recalled was 'the way other women had done it', but then became aware of the possibility of using a syringe to inseminate and used this method until their son, BeBop was conceived.

Artificial insemination through a clinic was beginning to emerge as an option for lesbians in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, although access varied in different states and depending on the attitudes of specific clinics. Deborah Dempsey has noted that 'there was a very small window of opportunity for Victorian lesbians to obtain clinical donor insemination'

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<sup>37</sup> Maura, cited in *Mothers and Others: An exploration of lesbian parenting in Australia* ed. Prue Borthwick and Barbara Bloch (Jam Jar Publishing, 1993), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Bradstock, 'Old woman, old woman,' 34.

<sup>39</sup> Bradstock, 'Old woman, old woman,' 35.

through a few Melbourne hospitals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before the Infertility (Medical Procedures) Act 1984 (Vic) restricted access to married couples only.<sup>40</sup> Some Sydney-based and regional NSW clinics offered donor insemination to lesbians and single heterosexual women from at least the mid-1980s. Barbara Wishart and Barbara Creed conceived their daughter, Ishara, using artificial insemination around 1980. Barbara, who had considered the possibility of motherhood as a lesbian for some time, recalled that: 'After much thought I decided to use artificial insemination, a means of achieving pregnancy which was consistent with my lesbian sexual preference.'<sup>41</sup>

As women began to plan and conceive children in the context of lesbian relationships, attitudes toward parenting roles gradually shifted. In the immediate post-war decades, lesbians raising children typically conceptualised the biological mother as the 'mother' or 'parent' of the child, while her lover was placed in a supporting role, regardless of the nature of her relationship with or commitment to the child. The absence of a recognised parenting role for women in this situation was apparent in the lack of agreed terminology. When Prue Borthwick and Barbara Bloch wrote the first Australian guide to lesbian parenting in 1993, they called their book 'Mothers and Others'. Similarly, when Marion described her experience with the two children she and her lover had conceived in London in the early 1970s, she referred to herself as the 'nonmother' in contrast to her lover, who had given birth to the children, whom she referred to as the children's 'mother.' She commented that: 'I

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<sup>40</sup> Deborah Dempsey, "Beyond Choice: family and kinship in the Australian lesbian and gay 'baby boom'" (PhD diss., La Trobe University, 2006), 55.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Wishart, 'Motherhood within patriarchy – a radical feminist perspective,' in *All Her Labours*, ed. Women and Labour Publications Collective (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger Pty Ltd, 1984), 88.

won't talk about the role of the lesbian nonmother, except to say that it is a difficult one.<sup>42</sup> Despite often living with and caring for the biological children of their lovers for many years, 'nonmothers' had no legal status and received no social recognition of their role in the children's lives. Many lesbian couples reflected these wider social assumptions in the designation of their respective roles, regarding the biological mother as the primary nurturer and guardian of the children. However, such assumptions could leave the 'nonmother' in an anomalous position, unsure of her precise role and responsibility toward the children. Chloe reflected that some of the 'big[gest] disagreements and big[gest] rows I ever had with girlfriends was usually over the children, about the right way to treat children'. Recalling her first relationship with a lesbian mother in Townsville in the mid-1960s, she explained:

A lot of the time when I had relationships with women with children, these kids have got a perfectly good mother - that's their - my girlfriend - and so I thought I had to take a father role. I thought I had to do that. My own father was not a very good role model, so all I knew was to be like my father, which was very critical. It took me many, many years to - and many relationships, and many fights with girlfriends to realise that the way I related to children was not the best.<sup>43</sup>

When Chloe's first relationship ended after three years, there was no expectation that she would retain contact with the child and this was relatively common in similar relationships at this time. Maria also referred to the difficulty in conceptualising the 'nonmother's' role in her long-term relationship with Jane, who had three children from a previous marriage. Although Maria did not recall any conflict over the issue, she commented:

We sort of just fell into, I guess, something that suited all of us. Which was - I was more kind of like an aunty or an advocate. I wasn't the one who would discipline them or who - and Jane initially, at least, didn't want me to do that. Because she didn't want the kids to get really attached and she didn't know how long I was going to hang around, so she was protecting them from disappointment... And yeah, I think they experienced lots of things with me in that role that they wouldn't otherwise have done. I don't think they'd ever been camping. We all went backpacking together and enjoyed a lot of things in the

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<sup>42</sup> Paull, 'A letter from Australia,' 178.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Chloe Bardsley on 1 May 2012.

natural world that they hadn't had much experience of ... They probably see me more of a stepmum role now as adults than they would've as children ... I guess they've just found the language for it that's become - lesbian relations are more acceptable. During their adolescence it was something they wanted to hide because they didn't want to be bullied and that's difficult.<sup>44</sup>

Maria and Jane met in the early 1980s and their approach to parenting roles therefore reflected both a longstanding practice in lesbian couples where the children were conceived in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship and a historically specific fear of the custody implications of being more open about their relationships. As Maria noted: 'we had lesbian friends who had lost custody of their children, access to their children, simply because of being lesbian. The ex-husbands had taken it to court and declared them as unfit mothers because of that. So Jane was - there was no way that she was going to let that happen to her.'

However, in families where children had been conceived as a result of a shared process involving a lesbian couple, women began to conceptualise both women as 'mothers.' Although Marion used the term 'nonmother' to describe her relationship with the two boys she planned and conceived with her lover in the early 1970s, in other ways she clearly understood her relationship to the children to be a parental one with lifelong responsibilities. She and her co-mother separated after eight years but this did not result in her loss of contact with the children: she explained that 'we still see lots of each other, even going away for holidays together as a family. We all have the same family name.'<sup>45</sup> When Claire and Robyn conceived their children in the late 1970s, Claire understood her role as that of a mother, regardless of her biological relationship to each child. Robyn gave birth to their first child, who was followed by two more children whom Claire gave birth to. Describing the birth of

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Maria [pseudonym] on 6 October 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Paull, 'A letter from Australia,' 178.

the first child, Claire recalled a sense that recognition of her role as mother to her new son was something she needed to fight for:

I definitely saw my role as a mother. I always tell this story that when I went to the hospital - I was there at the birth and everything but the next day when I was nursing him, walking up and down the ward at the West London Hospital, I said to him - I leaned over and I said to this tiny baby, we have got a job to do, [Chris] We're going to show the world that I'm your mother. I set him a task. So I did see it.

As their children grew older and began to attend school in Australia, Claire described the ongoing challenges of claiming the role of mother in this context:

[Robyn] goes at things as if she's - I think she goes as if she's the victim and has got to fight. I mean, I'm from a much more middle-class background, assuming that they'll accept me. But we'd lived in the west, we got involved at the schools, did everything at the schools, did more than. But as I said, [Robyn] goes in fighting. I don't. So we were accepted and we made sure the school contacted both of us always. But we made a point of doing that. I felt like you've got to come out all the time, coming out for yourself and your children all the time. That was difficult.<sup>46</sup>

The difficulties of parenting children in a social context in which only the biological mother was recognised as a parent were raised by many women who conceived children in lesbian relationships in the 1980s. Mary, who conceived her son through insemination in 1985, told *Lesbians on the Loose* magazine in 1991 that her son now felt he had four mothers: herself and J, who had planned the conception together, and, following the break-up of their relationship, the two women, S and R, who were their current lovers. Despite his understanding of his family, however, society only recognised one of his parents. Amongst the many challenges of being a lesbian mother – including the pressure to be a successful mother, isolation and fears of rejection – Mary noted: ‘Invisibility of lesbian mothers is hard – it’s often assumed that I must be a deserted single parent. Co-parenting is often invisible

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Claire [pseudonym] on 7 May 2012.

both blatantly and subtly. J's parents are E's most devoted grandparents yet they will introduce him to their friends as "the child of a friend of J's."<sup>47</sup>

Recognition of the existence and experiences of lesbian mothers remained limited and contentious in the period 1945-1990. In the immediate post-war decades, the identity 'lesbian mother' was widely unintelligible and many women who experienced same-sex desires felt obliged to choose between adopting a lesbian identity or lifestyle and becoming a mother. Although the conceptual category of the lesbian mother gained increasing traction in the 1970s, this remained a highly contentious identity, vilified in the Family Court and simultaneously defended and viewed with suspicion in activist circles. In practical terms, the creation of supportive communities in the context of feminist and lesbian and gay politics opened up new possibilities for some mothers to explore and act on their same-sex desires, but the increased visibility promoted by these movements created new challenges for women who hoped to combine lesbian relationships with the mothering of children born in heterosexual contexts. Increased awareness of the possibilities opened up by reproductive technologies and donor insemination techniques resulted in a growing number of women conceiving children in the context of lesbian relationships in the late 1970s and 1980s and this trend had broader implications for how women understood their roles as parents. However, as Mary's comment in 1991 demonstrates, the category 'lesbian mother' remained constrained, frequently limited to the biological mother of a child and obscuring the much more complex meanings of motherhood emerging in same-sex parented families in this period.

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Waterford, *Lesbians on the Loose* 17 (May 1991): 10.

Throughout the 1990s, lesbian mothers remained a minority within the lesbian community and the 2001 census suggested that approximately 20% of lesbian couples had a dependent child living with them, mostly conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship. However, the experience of lesbian motherhood became more common in the 2000s, as Australia began to participate in the international phenomenon of the 'gay baby boom.' Increasing numbers of self-identified lesbians sought information on conceiving children outside a heterosexual relationship, fertility clinics began to target this demographic and the lesbian and gay media devoted increasing space to discussion of the practicalities and political and ethical implications of lesbian parenting. Nevertheless, legal and socio-economic structures continued to shape women's access to and experience of parenting. Access to fertility services for lesbians remained controversial and regionally differentiated and it was not until 2014 that the state of Victoria became the last state to introduce legislation permitting lesbians to access fertility treatment on the grounds of social infertility.<sup>48</sup> As Barbara Baird has noted, individual women's access to treatment has been constrained by economic barriers, which have limited the fertility choices available to working-class lesbians and those on low incomes.<sup>49</sup> For lesbian co-mothers, the ongoing struggle to achieve recognition of their parenting role was addressed at a legislative level in the Federal Family Law Amendment (de facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Act 2008 although social attitudes have continued to impact on their experience.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Deborah Dempsey, 'ART eligibility for lesbians and single heterosexual women in Victoria: How medicalisation influenced a political, legal and policy debate,' *Health Sociology Review* 17, no.3 (2008): 267-279.

<sup>49</sup> Baird, 'An Australian History of Lesbian Mothers'.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Bacchus, "'Go forth and wrestle with the legal system": Some perceptions and experiences of lesbian parents in rural Australia,' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 53, no.1 (March 2018): 18-33. Lesbian and gay adoption has also now been legalised in all Australian states in legislation enacted between 2002 and 2018.