# Lesbians' Experiences of Marriage, Motherhood, and Divorce in England and Wales: 1945-1999

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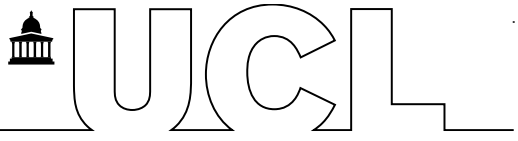
I, Ellen Hope Durban confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



# Abstract

This thesis is the first extensive examination of how women – who sexually desired women – negotiated marriage to men, motherhood, and divorce in post-1945 England and Wales. These women, despite their desire for other women, ceded to economic and social pressures to marry and often remained married for many years, especially after having children. Some found means to balance relationships with women with obligations to their husbands and children. Others either suppressed their desire or divorced. This thesis explores the domestic lives of married lesbians, which have been obscured by the focus on "coming out" narratives and on the experiences of lesbian mothers who litigated custody. Many wives identified as lesbian, which challenged contemporary perceptions of a lesbian identity and continues to challenge the concept of a nuclear family. Lesbian mothers were influenced by contemporary media that asserted that lesbian wives always or nearly always "lost" custody of their children in court upon divorce. This thesis corrects enduring misconceptions about lesbian custody cases through examination of the methodological issues of using contemporary media. It also argues that the *Children Act 1989* had the greatest effect on the outcomes of custody cases involving lesbian mothers. Activism by the homosexual and feminist communities was a much less significant force driving change: it was limited to helping lesbian mothers operate within the existing legal framework and was hampered by lack of funds and volunteers. Until the 1980s and 1990s, lesbians were a significant minority of wives.

# Impact Statement

This thesis illustrates that examination of sources used by legal professionals – transcripts of judicial decisions (judgements) and legal scholarship – is invaluable for modern historians for uncovering narratives of lives hitherto unknown. Historians of previous periods, including medievalists, have used criminal cases as a means of revealing queer lives. When scholars engage with legal history, they should provide informed analysis of reliable sources such as judgements and law reports, which are readily available via legal databases. Judgements provide verbatim judicial discourse and outcomes. Legal scholarship provides invaluable insight. Understanding the legal framework, case history, and terminology is essential preparation for historians, and all other non-legal scholars, to incorporate legal cases in scholarship. Historians intent on examining legal history should be more critical of reports on legal cases in newspapers. Through a methodological shift from relying on newspaper articles and other contemporary media to examining judicial discourse in judgements available in legal databases, this thesis corrects the historical record of lesbian custody cases in post-war England and Wales.

Twentieth-century lesbian custody cases remain topical in 2025. A recent exposé for BBC Sounds appealed for compensation to lesbian mothers who did not get custody of their children.[1] In 2021, the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate commissioned historian Kirsten Plötz to examine discrimination in the courts against lesbian and bisexual mothers from 1946 to 2000, sparking a debate regarding the recognition and rehabilitation of separated mothers and children.[2] A similar study was planned by the Ministry of Family Affairs for the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. This thesis, as the first extensive examination of married lesbian mothers' experiences of marriage and divorce in England and Wales, reveals that few lesbian

[1] Sophie Wilkinson,' Missing Pieces: The Lesbian Mothers [sic] Scandal,' *BBC Sounds* (08 December 2024) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0025vb2> [Accessed 15 January 2025].

[2] Kirsten Plötz "... in constant fear" A Historical Study of the Legal Consequences of Divorce for Mothers with Lesbian Relationships and their Children in West Germany with Special Reference to Rhineland-Palatinate (1946-2000) (Ministry for the Family: Mainz, 2021).

mothers litigated custody but that all lesbian mothers were influenced by the widespread dissemination that courts did not award custody to lesbians. Many mothers relinquished custody in negotiations outside of court.

This thesis prompts scholars of all disciplines to rethink what many define as “heterosexual marriage”. When social and economic pressures encouraged women to marry, women who desired women married men. This narrative is particularly relevant in today’s uncertain political climate. In countries where homosexuality is illegal, or even socially unacceptable, persons who are not heterosexual often continue to hide or ignore their sexuality, entering lavender marriages or quietly passing as heterosexual. Marriage remains a means to control lesbianism without the need to criminalize same-sex activity. This thesis provides a body of research that will be useful for historians and other scholars interested in personal relationships, marriage, motherhood, and divorce. This research will also be of interest to scholars interested in the formation of sexual identity and sexual practice.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AID | Artificial Insemination by Donor |
| ALP | Action for Lesbian Parents |
| CHE | Campaign for Homosexual Equality |
| CMAC | Catholic Marriage Advisory Council |
| DOB | Daughters of Bilitis |
| FAN | Feminist Archive North |
| FAS | Feminist Archive South |
| FAWTAR | From a Whisper to a Roar |
| FRIEND | Fellowship for Relief of the Isolated and Emotionally in Need and Distress |
| GLC | Greater London Council |
| GLF | Gay Liberation Front |
| GWMC | Gay Wives and Mothers Collective |
| GWMG | Gay Wives and Mothers Group |
| ILIS | International Lesbian Information Service |
| KMG | KENRIC Mothers Group |
| LAGNA | Lesbian and Gay Newspaper Archive |
| LCG | Lesbian Custody Group |
| LRFG | Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group |
| LISN | Lesbian Information Service Newsletter |
| LMA | London Metropolitan Archives |
| LMM | Lesbian Mothers' Movement |
| LSE | London School of Economics |
| LUM | Lesbian United Mums |
| MRG | Minorities Research Group |
| NLGS | National Lesbian and Gay Survey |
| NMGC | National Marriage Guidance Counsel |
| NOOL | National Organisation of Lesbians |
| *NoW* | *News of the World* |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |
| ROW | Rights of Women |
| SMLC | South Manchester Law Centre |
| WLM | Women's Liberation Movement |

# Introduction

In 1941 when she was nineteen, J.R. fell in love with a woman. The two women lived together for eight years before they 'drifted apart' and the other woman returned to Scotland with a young man.[3] J.R. was devastated. Eventually, she met a man at her workplace with whom she 'got on like a house on fire'.[4] Twenty-five years later, she explained how she came to be married:

> When he asked me to marry him I didn't tell him about myself but I did say I wasn't in love with him. He said that it would possibly come in time, but I lived in hell that first year of marriage, and I knew then I could not carry on. I decided to tell him about myself, and to my great surprise he was very understanding and considerate.[5]

They adopted a baby girl whom they raised together until her husband died in 1974. J.R. remained faithful throughout her marriage: 'In all those years of living together I was never in contact with a gay woman'.[6]

Like many women before her, J.R. knew of her desire for women but married a man, had children, and remained faithful and committed to her marriage until her husband's death. She married during the "golden age of marriage", roughly from 1945 to 1970, when marriage was nearly universal.[7] But by 1974, when J.R. became a widow, the position of marriage as an institution was weakening due to massive changes in the moral and religious fabric of society. The rate of marriage had begun its steady decline whereas divorce rates skyrocketed following changes to family law.[8] During the last three decades of the twentieth century, the institution of marriage and

[3] J. R. Essex, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 4:1 (1975) 15.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] The rate of marriage for single women over the age of sixteen peaked in 1972 before its continual decline. Office for National Statistics (ONS) *Marriages in England and Wales: 2017* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2017#numbers-and-rates> [Accessed 21/04/2025].

[8] The *Divorce Reform Act 1969*, instituted on 1 January 1971, introduced grounds for divorce based on "irretrievability": couples could divorce by mutual consent after living apart for two years or after five years without consent.

family structure experienced unprecedented changes due to various legal, moral, economic, and social causes. From a time beginning with the homosexual and feminist liberation movements, women were less likely to enter marriages while increasingly likely to raise children outside of marriage and exit existing marriages.

During the years examined in this thesis, 1945 through 1999, the law defined marriage as the voluntary union between a man and a woman.[9] Any references in this thesis to wives, husbands, or marriage, means marriage between a man and a woman. I avoid using the terms “heterosexual marriage” and “straight marriage” as both imply a union between two heterosexuals.[10] The subjects of this thesis are women who married men, but who acknowledged their sexual desire for women. Many of the wives identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual before, during, or after their marriages and I use these terms in this thesis. I use the term “women who desired women” to describe women before they claimed, and those who never claimed, a non-heterosexual identity.

## Literature Review

Historiography on women’s passionate relationships with other women before World War II acknowledges their coexistence with marriage, explored through correspondence, diaries, and fictional accounts. Lillian Faderman argues that society encouraged women’s romantic (asexual) friendships in the eighteenth century as both a prelude to marriage and as an emotional outlet for married women as they ‘did no harm to the essential fabric of society’.[11] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains that women’s passionate relationships in mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century

[9] Lord Penzance's statement in *Hyde v Hyde and Woodmansee* (1866) LR 1 P&D 130 that 'Marriage as understood in Christendom, may be defined as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others' became the accepted definition of marriage in this country, and the latter part forms the introduction to the civil marriage ceremony in England. Same-sex marriage gained legal recognition in the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013*.

[10] “Opposite-sex marriage” is a more accurate descriptor.

[11] Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981) 75-77.

America were a salve for married women.[12] Such relationships may have comforted some unhappily-married women, but in Martha Vicinus' exploration of intimate friendships of upper-class women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries she argues that when a lesbian sexual relationship interfered with a woman marrying or with a marriage itself, men took action to keep the women apart.[13] Sharon Marcus argues that women's relationships in Victorian England were 'central to femininity, marriage, and family life': that female friendships co-existed happily with traditional marriages.[14] Sheila Jeffreys explored the connection between homosexuality and frigidity – a woman's lack of enthusiasm for sexual intercourse with men – in the 1920s when sexologists and marital advisors 'conscripted' women into marriage with 'harmonious' marital relations.[15]

Historiography on lesbians in the post-war period examines either public lives, such as activism and public social spaces, or private relationships in the home. Jill Gardiner, Rebecca Jennings, and Alison Oram have examined lesbian nightlife culture. Arguably the most famous venue, the Gateways Club, a lesbian bar in London from 1945 to 1985, features prominently in the historiography. Gardiner's extensive examination of the club through the histories of eighty members, reveals a space where lesbians socialised, regardless of whether they were closeted outside the club.[16] Jennings also employs oral histories to explore how nightclubs and bars in cities fostered lesbian subculture and the development of a lesbian identity.[17] Examining the youth culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, despite its focus on

[12] Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, 'Female World of Love and Rituals: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America.' *Signs* 1:1 (1975) 1-29.

[13] Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004) 69-79.

[14] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* Princeton: (Princeton University Press, 2009) 1.

[15] Sheila Jeffreys. 'The Invention of the Frigid Woman,' in *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 165-185.

[16] Jill Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club 1945-1985* (United Kingdom: Rivers Oram Press, 2004).

[17] Rebecca Jennings, 'The Gateways Club and the Emergence of a Post-Second World War Lesbian Subculture,' *Social History* 31:2 (2006) 206-225; Rebecca Jennings, 'Lesbian Bars, 1920s- 1970s,' in *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500* (Oxford: Greenwood Publishing, 2007) 131-148.

heterosexual romance, Oram reveals that young lesbians found ways to connect through lesbian parties and clubs.[18] In exploring the activism reacting to the artificial insemination by donor (AID) scandal, Jennings argues that the exposé made public alternate routes to motherhood to both lesbians and wider society.[19] Jeska Rees revealed pushback against lesbians in the women's movement, Matt Cook examined lesbian separatists in Leeds, and Paul Baker explored the activism against Section 28.[20] This research adds to our understanding of how women who claimed a lesbian identity built a social community and engaged in activism for both the women's and gay liberation movements.

In a chapter in her 2007 monograph, Jennings pioneered examination of lesbian's domestic lives in post-war Britain. Hampered by the dearth of appropriate housing and role models, lesbians carved out domestic lives either by emulating or challenging dominant heterosexual gender roles.[21] In 2013, Amy Tooth Murphy remarked on the dearth of scholarship on postwar lesbians' private, domestic lives.[22] Through examination of oral interviews, she contrasts the narratives of self-identified lesbians who had rejected what she terms 'hetero-domesticity': marriage to men. The divorced women had difficulty reconciling their marriages with their current lives.[23] Nearly a decade later, in 2022, Oram examined LGBTQ households in a chapter in

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[18] Alison Oram, "You Just Let Your Hair Down": Lesbian Parties and Clubs in the 1960s and Early 1970s,' in *Let's Spend the Night Together: Sex, Pop Music and British Youth Culture, 1950s-80s* (UK, Manchester United Press, 2023) 132-151; See also Beth Charlton, *'I felt like I was part of something': Lesbian Space, Social Life and Networks in Late Twentieth Century London,* Unpublished thesis, University College London, (2025 forthcoming).

[19] Rebecca Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood and the Artificial Insemination by Donor Scandal of 1978,' *Twentieth Century British History* 28:4 (2017) 570-594.

[20] Jeska Rees '"Taking Your Politics Seriously": Lesbian Feminism and the History of The Women's Liberation Movement in England,' in Sonja Tiernan and Mary McAuliffe (eds), *Sapphists and Sexologists: Histories of Sexualities* Volume 2. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009. 87-105; Matt Cook, 'Split Scenes in Leeds,' in Matt Cook and Alison Oram (eds) *Queer Beyond London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 42-68; Paul Baker, *Outrageous!: The Story of Section 28 and Britain's Battle for LGBT Education* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022).

[21] Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 76-106.

[22] 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: Manchester University Press, 2013) 167.

[23] Ibid.

her and Cook's look at queer lives in four English cities. While the state focussed on providing housing to traditional nuclear families, mothers with children, couples, and single people made their homes wherever affordable housing was available[24] The next year, Jennings published the first extensive exploration of lesbians' intimate lives in British and Australian homes. She explores women's lesbian relationships when society and the state supported and encouraged the heteronormative family.[25]

Historiography on lesbians in the twentieth century focuses on women living their lives as lesbians – from their "coming out" narratives and beyond.[26] This is also evident in oral histories, where interviewees emphasise their life after coming out.[27] Tooth Murphy notes that the divorcées she interviewed had difficulty reconciling their marriages within narratives of lesbian identity and often chose to disassociate from their married selves, as if their married selves were different people.[28] Similarly, Martha Robinson Rhodes remarks that several lesbians in their oral interviews in the Hall Carpenter archives distanced themselves from their past by explaining the context in which they married.[29] While Rhodes examined the lives of persons who had come out as bisexual, some women in this thesis had previously come out as lesbian before self-defining as bisexual and living with men. In her recent monograph, Jennings examined the narratives of lesbians who became mothers while married to men in the

[24] Alison Oram, 'Urban Accommodation: Queer Homes, Households and Families,' in Cook and Oram. *Queer Beyond London*; Matt Cook examines gay men's private lives and acknowledges that some gay men married and had children in *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth Century London* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[25] Rebecca Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies and Family Life: Desire, Domesticity and Kinship in Britain and Australia, 1945-2000* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

[26] Emily Hamer, *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London: Cassell, 1996); Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain;* Jennings, *Tomboys*; Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex Between Women in Britain from 1780 to 1970* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[27] Jane Traies, *Now You See Me: Lesbian Life Stories,* (Wales: Tollington Press, 2018) and *The Lives of Older Lesbians: Sexuality, Identity & the Life Course* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) explores the lives of older lesbian women in Britain, several that were previously married; See also Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson, *Women Like Us* (London: The Women's Press, 1992); Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group (eds) *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories.* London: Routledge, 1989.

[28] Tooth Murphy, '"I Conformed; I Got Married"'.

[29] Martha Robinson Rhodes, *Bisexuality and Multiple-Gender-Attraction in Britain, 1970 – 1990: A Queer Oral History*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020.

post-war period. She notes: 'Married lesbians were a significant and visible presence in the lesbian communities of the 1960s and 1970s, but the difficulties of reconciling this history with post-1970 narratives of lesbian autonomy and openly declared sexual identities has obscured their place in lesbian histories of the post-war decades'.[30] Married lesbians in the post-war period in the USA have recently gained the attention of historians. Lauren Jae Gutterman examined the lives of American wives who desired women within the confines of marriage and Daniel Winunwe Rivers explored homosexual parents' relationship with their children.[31] Many lesbian wives were invisible: they were in the closet in their suburban homes with their children and husbands.

Historians have thus identified a lacuna – the examination of married lesbians in Britain – and the benefits from future scholarship. Sue Allen and Lynne Harne noted as early as 1988, that although the lesbian custody issues in the 1970s raised awareness of lesbian mothers, the difficulties of generations of lesbian mothers 'remained largely hidden'.[32] Similarly, Tooth Murphy argues for the vital need to document the lives of invisible lesbians to understand how they transitioned from married life with their husbands 'into lesbian lives at different phases of life and by different paths'.[33] Whilst Jennings has focused on lesbian parenting outside of marriage to men, in one chapter in her most recent monograph she examines lesbians who succumbed to social and economic pressures – the 'post-war domestic ideology' – to marry and have children.[34] She claims that examination of married lesbians and their relationships will prompt us to 'rethink our understanding of the post-war nuclear

[30] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies,* 101.

[31] Lauren Jae Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2019) 33; Lauren Jae Gutterman, '"The House on the Borderland": Lesbian Desire, Marriage and the Household, 1950-1979,' *Journal of Social History* 46:1 (2012) 1-22; Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Daniel Winunwe Rivers, '"In the Best Interests of the Child": Lesbian and Gay Parenting Custody Cases, 1967-1985,' *Journal of Social History* 43:4 (Summer 2010) 917-943.

[32] Sue Allen and Lynne Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers – The Fight for Child Custody' in Bob Cant and Susan Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records (Routledge Revivals): Thirty Years of Lesbian and Gay History, 1957-1987* (London: Routledge, 1988) 183.

[33] Tooth Murphy, '"I Conformed; I Got Married",' 168.

[34] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 126.

family'.[35] In agreement with Jenning's groundbreaking work, this thesis provides a thorough examination of lesbians who remained married for many years, either denying their desire for women or balancing relationships with women with their responsibilities to their families.

Examining the lives of heterosexual women, historians have sought to explain the changing twentieth-century landscape of romance and love, marriage, and motherhood. The post-war golden age of marriage came to an end in the early 1970s, when the rate of divorce, numbers of lone mothers, and incidence of cohabitation began to soar. The concept of companionate marriage – emotional closeness and a shared domestic life of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers – has endured as a powerful ideal since it was observed by Ben Lindsey and Wainwright Evans nearly a century ago.[36] During the interwar period, the ideology of companionate marriage had limited reach. Many of the men and women, most of whom married between 1930 and 1950, interviewed by Simon Szreter and Kate Fischer emphasized the practicalities of marriage, of separate but complementary gender roles, over ideas of romance and sex.[37] Marcus Collins traces the rise of companionate marriage, or "modern love". He employs the term mutuality: 'intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing, companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure'; a concept that he says rose in popularity during the interwar period and reached its pinnacle in the 1960s before the rise of individualism.[38] Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield emphasize the prominence in the 1950s of the shift from marriage as an institution to marriage as

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ben B Lindsey and Wainwright Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (London: Brentano's, 1928).

[37] Simon Szreter and Kate Fischer, 'Love and Authority in Mid-Twentieth-Century Marriages: Sharing and Caring,' in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Williams (eds), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain Since 1800* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 132-154; Simon Szreter and Kate Fischer*, Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 194.

[38] Collins, Marcus. Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain. London: Atlantic Books, 2003.

companionship or teamwork between spouses.[39] Claire Langhamer argues that from 1920 to 1970, the key factor in decisions to marry shifted from pragmatism to love and that post-war affluence and the welfare state enabled love to become 'the primary basis for lifelong partnership'.[40] Not everyone experiences lifelong partnership though. Widows and divorcées may have experienced love that bloomed late in life: Charlotte Greenhalgh argues that aspirations of love and marriage are not confined to the young and encourages historians to look beyond teenage courtship, first weddings, and young families.[41] This thesis examines how lesbian wives fell in love with other women after many years of marriage and child rearing, which often precipitated divorce. Although lesbian wives had pragmatic reasons for remaining married, especially those who had children, many separated or divorced after falling in love with other women.

Historians have offered numerous explanations for the increase in the rate of divorce in the last three decades of the twentieth century.[42] Divorce rates spiked immediately following the implementation of the *Divorce Reform Act 1969*, which allowed long-separated spouses to divorce by mutual consent after living apart for two years, or after five years separation without consent.[43] Alana Harris, in her examination of the marriage guidance movement, argues that experts at the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (CMAC) and the National Marriage Guidance Counsel (NMGC) advocated 'true married modern love' as an extension of divine love: 'patient and kind, non-self-seeking and ever persevering'.[44] Romance and physical attraction were no

[39] Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945-59,' in David Clark (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life & Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944-88)* (London: Routledge, 1991) 7-32.

[40] Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 56.

[41] Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'Love in Later Life,' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 144-160.

[42] ONS. *Divorces in England and Wales: 2022*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2022> [Accessed 21 May 2025].

[43] Stephen Cretney, *Family Law in the Twentieth Century: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 375.

[44] Alana Harris, 'Love Divine and Love Sublime: The Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Marriage Guidance Movement and the State,' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 216.

basis on which to sustain a modern marriage. Langhamer concurs that love was an 'unreliable foundation upon which to build life-long commitment'.[45] Both Lawrence Stone and Pat Thane attest that after the mid-twentieth century, marriages were more likely to end by choice rather than death.[46] In his epic examination of divorce, Stone acknowledges that although the reasons to divorce were numerous, including secularization and separation of parenthood from matrimony, changes to the law made divorce more accessible to those who wanted to end their marriages.[47] When lesbian wives acknowledged their desire for women, often either themselves or their husbands filed for divorce.

Historians have also made a closer examination of motherhood. Finch and Summerfield explore how women faced pressure in the immediate post-war years to contribute to the rebuilding of Britain through full-time motherhood within marriage.[48] Recently, Angela Davis has examined motherhood, based primarily on oral interviews of primarily married mothers living in Oxfordshire. Testimonies illustrate a variety of experiences, while substantiating demographic trends in marriage and mothers preferencing raising young children over engaging in paid work.[49] Alternatively, Helen McCarthy explores women combining unpaid caring responsibilities with paid work.[50] Historians have also examined the tribulations and origins of single mothers. Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land, and Jane Lewis, noting the growth from the 1970s into the 1990s of families headed by lone mothers, many who were divorced or never-married, explore how the realities of lone parenting contrasted the perception of lone mothers as a social problem and drain on the state.[51] Thane and Tanya Evans also examine

[45] Langhamer, *English in Love,* 7.

[46] Thane Pat, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Postwar British Culture,' in Richard Besse and Dirk Schumann (eds), *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 193-210. Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 383-422.

[47] Stone, *Road to Divorce,* 383-422.

[48] Finch and Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction'.

[49] Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

[50] Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[51] Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

experiences of single mothers in the twentieth century, noting how families, the fathers, and the state strove to support single mothers, who were recognized to be most likely to live in poverty. They note that during the Conservative governments of the 1980s and the 1990s, mothers raising children without fathers were subject to outspoken attacks as scroungers on the welfare state.[52] Recently, April Gallwey has examined the experiences of unmarried mothers in the 1950s and 1960s through oral histories.[53] This thesis emphasises that lesbians were a significant minority of mothers, whether married, divorced, or single. Mothers' sexuality affected their interaction with the wider public, including physicians, their children's teachers, and employers.

Although there is a growing body of scholarship on post-war domestic abuse in England and Wales, there is scant historiography.[54] Margaret Williamson reveals that magistrates in four Yorkshire courts from 1945 to 1970 favoured keeping marriages intact and thus tolerated a certain amount of violence towards wives.[55] Refuges for women escaping violent male partners began across in 1971 and Teri Chettiar explores how anti-psychiatrists, feminists, and the battered women's refuge movement raised awareness of the incidence of violence in white middle-class families in the 1970s.[56] This thesis reveals how lesbian wives experienced rape, domestic abuse, and murder. Some endured abuse throughout their marriages and others suffered abuse after their husbands learned of their sexuality, which could continue after divorce. Wives agency was significantly affected by the threat of domestic violence and its impact should not be overlooked. This thesis situates lesbians within the nuclear family, as wives and mothers. Many women who desired women had

[52] Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 169-194.

[53] April Gallwey, 'Love Beyond the Frame: Stories of Maternal Love Outside Marriage in the 1950s and 1960s,' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 100-123.

[54] See R Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life, 2nd ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[55] Williamson, Margaret. '"Fair Wear and Tear": Attitudes to Marital Cruelty in England, 1945-60', Journal of the Social History Society 8:2 (2011) 233-254.

[56] Teri Chettiar, *The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) 197-232.

boyfriends, had premarital sex with men, had shotgun or white weddings, had sex with their husbands, raised children, found employment, and divorced. While many of their situations were similar to that of heterosexual women, their motives, feelings, and consequences of their actions were coloured by their desire for women. Thus, this thesis challenges scholars to rethink "heterosexual" relationships and experiences and also to redefine the nuclear family as not exclusively heterosexual.

## Methodology

This thesis uses a broad variety of sources to examine the experiences of married lesbian mothers in the latter half of the twentieth century. Examining what mothers wrote about their experiences and what others said about them provides a balanced study. Foremost it uses personal testimonies written by mothers in the 1960s through the 1990s which provide both evidence that lesbians were married in these decades and also mothers' thoughts on their experiences either during or soon after marriage or divorce. Married lesbians wrote letters to early lesbian magazines*, Arena Three* and *Sappho*, and to newsletters for KENRIC and its KENRIC Mothers' Group (KMG). Married lesbians also wrote letters to the editors of feminist and gay magazines. The South Manchester Law Centre (SMLC) published transcripts of oral interviews with six lesbian mothers about their relationships with the fathers, many aspects of being a lesbian mother, and their experiences of struggling to raise their children. All six mothers were white, five were married, four got custody of their children, and three told stories of physical abuse. The mother who never married, despite having legal custody of her children, did not live with her three children after she separated from their father. Lesbians also wrote responses to the National Lesbian and Gay Survey (NLGS), a project similar to Mass Observation, that began in 1986 to collect autobiographical narratives from homosexuals. Voluntarily, women, single or married and young and old, occasionally wrote to agony aunts about their desire for women and lack of desire for men. Narratives that women voluntarily composed in the 1960s through the 1990s provide women's immediate recollection of experiences and events which contrast starkly with oral histories conducted decades later.

Responses from agony aunts illustrate society's views on the aetiology of homosexuality and were part of wider discussion in the media about lesbians.

Women's and girls' magazines predominantly reinforced the heteronormative life course of marriage and motherhood, but beginning in the 1970s occasionally published articles that were sympathetic to lesbians and sometimes included stories about married lesbians and lesbian mothers. Newspapers printed sensational articles about lesbian mothers regarding custody cases, AID, fostering, and adoption. Right-wing publications were negative on lesbians raising children, whereas feminist journalists wrote compassionate stories of children and their lesbian mothers and polemic articles on lesbian custody for left-wing newspapers.

Examination of the gay and feminist press provides insight on what never-married members of the lesbian community thought about lesbian wives. Readers of lesbian magazines debated whether married lesbian mothers were truly lesbian. Some of the scholarship on the women's liberation movement (WLM) and gay liberation also illustrates dislike of married lesbian mothers by members of the lesbian and feminist communities. Pushback is also apparent in personal advertisements in gay and lesbian magazines, where some lesbians specified they were not interested in relationships with wives or mothers. Married lesbians advertised for friendship and love, but also sexual liaisons and mutually-beneficial arrangements with men.

I blend these reflections on married lesbian mothers with oral histories, some existing and some from my own interviews. I use testimony from the following collections of queer oral histories: the Hall Carpenter Oral History Archive, funded by the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1985; *From a Whisper to a Roar* (FAWTAR) created in 2019-2020; *West Yorkshire Queer Stories,* which started in 2018; and Speak Out London – Diversity City from 2021, now at the London Archives (formerly the London Metropolitan Archives). This thesis also uses published compilations of oral histories, such as the collection of nineteen interviews recorded by Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson for a documentary funded by Channel 4 in 1988 and the forty interviews for the Brighton Ourstory Project. In existing oral interviews, although lesbians sometimes included accounts of dating men, marriage, and divorce, they favour coming out narratives and their lives afterwards. Interviewees compose narratives to fit within what Penny Summerfield calls a 'memory frame', which allows

them to maintain composure throughout the retelling such that past events support their current position.[57]

Existing oral interviews were conducted in times with different cultural references and with objectives different from my own. Important milestones for cultural change, such as partial decriminalization of male homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and legalization of same-sex marriage influence the discourse in oral interviews. The media attention regarding medical intervention for gender dysphoria influenced my interviews in 2023. Unprompted, two of my interviewees recounted that they had been confused about their gender when they were girls in the 1950s and in retrospect both felt relieved that transitioning had not been widely available. The focus of my interviews was women's formation of their domestic lives with men, whereas over a decade earlier, Tooth Murphy interviewed women about their domestic lives with their female partners.[58] Earlier interviewers often focussed on women's experiences of activism and their lives after coming out, whereas I was also interested in why women chose a heteronormative lifestyle and how they conducted their married lives. In existing oral histories, women often disclosed having been married as an afterthought: as an anomalous interlude in their lives. Although illustrative of the propensity of women to marry in the mid-twentieth century, many existing histories lack the detailed accounts of married lives that I seek.

To create oral histories that focus on lesbians' narratives of their lives before coming out, I interviewed eight mothers. I also interviewed two retired legal professionals, a sociologist who had conducted the first studies on the children of lesbian mothers, and two women who had worked for the Rights of Women (ROW), an organisation that provides legal advice to women. I contacted these activists directly by email, but to find lesbian mothers to interview, besides advertising at various lesbian organisations across England, I gave three presentations about my research to LGBTQ social groups in London and Brighton. Despite numerous women

[57] Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/Composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History,' in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, Penny Summerfield (eds) *Feminism & Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000) 100-101.

[58] Tooth Murphy, '"I Conformed; I Got Married".

at these presentations offering to share their stories, I received no responses to my follow-up emails. I attribute this silence in part to women's reluctance to recall their often-traumatic stories of marriage and divorce: a period of life that conflicts with their current lifestyle. Women's reluctance to share their firsthand experiences may also be due to their distrust of me: a new, unpublished academic. The eight mothers who agreed to be interviewed shared a belief in the value of their life stories' contribution to my research and historiography on lesbians. Evelyn Pittman had herself conducted interviews for *FAWTAR*. Pam Alldred is Professor of Children, Youth and Community at Nottingham Trent University and provided two interviews: one as a mother and one as a past employee of ROW. The remaining six mothers had previously been interviewed by Jane Traies, who approached them on my behalf. The barrister and solicitor whom I interviewed also promised to contact some of their old clients, but no interviews resulted.

The mothers I interviewed were white and born in England. Six identified as lesbian and two as bisexual, although the latter had both claimed a lesbian identity when young. Of the two bisexual women, at the time of the interviews one was married, and the other was living with the father of her children. Of the six women who identified as lesbian, four were born just before or during World War II, married in the late 1950s or early 1960s, remained married between sixteen to twenty-two years, and each had one significant relationship with a woman since separating from their husbands in the 1970s or 1980s. The latter two interviewees were both born in 1955, married in 1978 or 1982, and separated after seventeen or twenty-two years. Of the six lesbians, one divorced after twenty-five years of marriage before she fell in love with a woman, so custody was not an issue. Of the remaining five lesbian mothers, one experienced an amicable divorce: Val raised the children with maintenance paid by her ex-husband. The other four chose to leave their children with their husbands and did not litigate custody. Two maintained good relationships with their children, who were teenagers when their parents separated. One mother kept in regular contact with her adult son but had not spoken for seven years with her daughter, who was ten when her parents separated. The fourth mother who had left her children with her husband subsequently had no contact with either of her children or her grandchild.

The stories the women related were shaped by the interpersonal dynamics of the interview – what oral historians refer to as "intersubjectivity".[59] For my interviews, especially with mothers, I worked to establish commonality and a safe, non-judgemental environment in which to share intimate life stories. Oral historians emphasize the importance of creating a space where interviewees feel free to speak candidly about their experiences – to describe not only what they did, but how they felt about what they did. They propose reducing the researchers' power and increasing the cooperative construction of narratives.[60] I conducted one interview at UCL with a mother with whom I volunteer at Queer Britain, and the remaining mothers welcomed me into their homes. Conducting interviews in the mother's homes allowed them a level of comfort, such as sitting in a favourite chair, and a level of power, in that they directed the start and end of the recording. I usually spent an hour chatting with each mother before starting the recorded interview, which allowed them opportunities to ask questions. All were curious about my impetus to conduct my research: specifically, whether I identified as lesbian, if I had been married, and if I had children. Motherhood is an enduring identity and was the basis for an empathetic connection between me and my interviewees. Three of the interviewees acknowledged that I would understand what they were explaining, as we shared similar experiences of motherhood and divorce. Age was also a common attribute, as the mothers and I all have adult children. This degree of connection meant that sometimes they did not feel it necessary to explain further as they felt I would understand. Therefore, for the sake of the audio recording, I would sometimes ask for further explanation. Interviews were unstructured, in that I did not ask a prescribed list of questions, but rather open-ended questions such as "please begin by telling me about your childhood". Aware of my research interests, mothers talked about their relationships with their ex-husbands and their children. Thus, the mothers co-produced their narratives in line with my research

[59] Lynn Abrams, 'Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity,' in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[60] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London: Routledge, 2016). Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/Composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History' in Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, Penny Summerfield (eds) *Feminism & Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000); Lynn Abrams, 'Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity,' in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

objectives. Voluntarily divulging intimate details, such as one mother's fantasies during sex with her husband, illustrates that the intersubjective relationship provided a safe, non-judgmental environment for each interview.

Examination of scholarship from other disciplines provides further insight into the lives of lesbian mothers. Women underwent medical treatment before, during, and after marriage, sometimes seeking a cure for their desire for women and sometimes seeking help to adjust to their circumstances. Research studies on the children raised by lesbian mothers indicate that their psychosexual development was like that of children raised by single heterosexual mothers but also illustrate activism to help lesbian mothers fight for custody of their children. Sociological studies of marriages where only one spouse was heterosexual provide insight on how lesbians coped with marital obligations.

As this thesis examines mothers' experience of divorce it uses legal scholarship to provide an explanation of the legal framework in England and Wales in which lesbian mothers divorced. Legal scholarship also provides analysis of lesbian custody cases. My search of legal databases located transcripts of judgements from Court of Appeal cases that provide judicial discourse, summations of events prior to and after separation, and outcomes. Thus, judgements often reveal intimate details of marriages such as whether the wives were pregnant at their weddings. However, judgements from the Court of Appeal do not include the voices of the mothers or the fathers or anyone else who may have testified at the courts of first instance. Nor do the judgements provide much insight into the race of the litigants, as the judgements often identify the parents only by their initials and never included race. However, judgements occasionally list the occupations of mothers and fathers, and the use of Legal Aid indicates incomes below a minimum threshold. The Court of Appeal cases were about adjudicating custody, not finances, of the divorcing parents.

Contemporary media – newspapers, the gay and feminist press, and advice books that describe custody cases – are far less dependable for details about the cases and judicial discourse than judgements and legal scholarship. *Chapter Three: Divorce* identifies and addresses two methodological issues with contemporary media that lead to biased and inaccurate narratives. This thesis uses contemporary media as a source of mothers' recollections of their court experiences, and judgements and

legal scholarship for summation of court proceedings. When possible, this thesis compares reports in contemporary media to the judgements, illustrating how contemporary media sensationalized reported lesbian custody cases and inaccurately represented judicial discourse.

## Overview of Thesis

Chapter One examines the pathways to marriage for women who at some point in their lives acknowledged desire for women. It argues that women's indoctrination from childhood that marriage and motherhood was their expected adult life course, supported by social and economic pressures, was so persuasive that even women who had experienced significant emotional and physical relationships with women married men. In contrast to stories of coming out, this chapter provides a unique examination of women who desired women yet chose a heteronormative life course of marriage and motherhood. Without positive role models, without the information or language to articulate their sexuality, young women yielded to external pressures to marry. Print media, particularly before the 1970s, reinforced that motherhood within marriage was the epitome of female aspirations whereas a lesbian lifestyle was abnormal, deviant, and difficult. A wedding was the gateway to socially-approved motherhood and adulthood. It was a life course that many women accepted without question. Despite the softening of economic and social pressures that reinforced women's expected gender roles, women who desired women continued to marry men for practical reasons through the 1990s. This chapter adds to the understanding of lesbians' paths to coming out by providing a detailed examination of women's conscious or unconscious rejection of their desire for women and decision to marry men. To the historiography on marriage and motherhood, this chapter illustrates how women who desired women continued to marry for pragmatic reasons throughout the late twentieth century.

Chapter Two examines lesbian wives' experiences of marriage. First it examines how wives confronted and sought to understand their desire. Often, mothers decided to remain married for the sake of their children. Some buried their sexuality and others found means to have relationships with women while maintaining their marriage, with or without the knowledge of their husbands. This chapter argues that for many women of the post-war period, it was so engrained that they must be the

primary caregivers of their children, that they remained married at least while their children were young. Many of the same economic and social factors that drove them to marry influenced them to remain married. Lesbian wives also remained married, at least until the children were near adulthood, because they feared they might be separated from their children upon divorce.

Divorce is the subject of Chapter Three. Firstly, the chapter explains statutes, process, and terminology of divorce in England and Wales. Through examination of common law, it summarises the key legal arguments against lesbian parenting, aiding understanding of what lesbian mothers faced in custody disputes. Next, it examines what many mothers could have gleaned from newspapers, the gay and feminist press, and advice books published about lesbian custody in the 1960s through the 1990s: that lesbian mothers almost always did not get custody of their children in court. This chapter argues that the widespread dissemination of the idea that lesbian wives were profoundly disadvantaged in custody disputes with their husbands influenced all lesbian mothers. Married lesbians decided if and when they divorced and if and how they should fight for custody. The contemporary and historiographic focus on lesbian mothers who were not awarded custody in court has inadvertently silenced the history of the majority of lesbian mothers who did not litigate for custody of their children. This chapter identifies the methodology that led to this silence and examines the wide variety of experiences of lesbian mothers.

Chapter Four centres on an examination of debates over the identity of wives who desired women in the two earliest lesbian magazines, *Arena Three* and *Sappho,* from which two conflicting lesbian identities emerged. The chapter provides a unique insight into the formation of a lesbian identity in the 1960s and 1970s. Lesbians who never married – “single readers” – comprised the major demographic of both magazines. Single readers differentiated themselves from wives and divorcées: they often defined lesbians as women who rejected a heteronormative lifestyle and maintained emotional and physical relationships only with women. This chapter argues that for many wives, their sexual desire for women defined their lesbian identity. Wives who had extramarital affairs with women with no intention of leaving their marriages were especially problematic for single lesbians who continued to articulate antagonism for married lesbians in the 1990s.

The final chapter is the first extensive examination of the activism and support specifically for lesbian mothers who left their marriages in the 1970s through the 1990s. It introduces the two key organisations, one volunteer-driven and the second semi-professional. The chapter examines how these organisations raised awareness, helped lesbian mothers navigate the legal system throughout their divorces, and instigated surveys and psychiatric studies. The chapter argues that activism in the 1970s and 1980s for lesbian mothers fighting for custody with their husbands was limited to helping mothers work within the existing the legal system. Access to sympathetic, knowledgeable solicitors encouraged and enabled more mothers to contest financial and custody considerations upon divorce, both in settlements outside of court and during litigation. The psychological studies, undertaken by a handful of scientists, defeated one of the two main arguments used in court against lesbian mothers raising children. The chapter attributes the increasing possibility of positive outcomes for lesbian mothers in the 1990s to activism that developed a core of legal professionals who were willing and able to fight for custody on lesbian mothers' behalf and new statutes that changed the nature of divorce. This chapter also argues that there was minimal support for activism for married lesbian mothers because they were a disliked minority of a marginalized community and the mothers themselves were disincentivized to participate.

Women who bowed to economic and social pressures to marry in the post-war period faced the dilemma of how to resolve their desire for women with their responsibilities to their children and husbands. Divorce, at least not immediately, was not always the solution.

# Chapter One: Deciding to Marry

In 1984, Janet recalled that she had disregarded her early feelings for women when she got married in the late 1970s. She did not have her first relationship with a woman until she was a married mother. She explained how she had negated her feelings and labelled her early desire as "crushes":

> When I first slept with a woman I thought of all the women I'd loved before, but there'd been no sexual realisation. When you first call yourself a lesbian it's the point of knowing, realising something which isn't new in you. I had always loved women. I could have loved them sexually, but I hadn't. Those feelings were pushed down – those incredibly intense feelings which get negated by labelling them as crushes. Then I had to go and do something "normal" like get a boyfriend. I fell for all that. And I thought I wasn't going to conform like all the previous generation[s] had, but I did.[61]

Janet's narrative was a common one: she buried her desire for women and conformed to a heteronormative life.[62] Other women had significant relationships with women before marrying men, such as Vick, who had enjoyed a passionate friendship with a girlfriend in the military before both women settled down to marriage and motherhood after World War II.[63] Harne, a lesbian mother and activist, summarised the situation succinctly in 1988: women got married and had children because 'we felt at the time that there were no other options open to us: it was just what women did, and because we did not know any better'.[64]

This chapter examines the paths to marriage for women who had some awareness of their attraction to women and not men, although most did not identify as lesbian before marriage. Many women only recognised their early preference for women in retrospect. The first half of this chapter examines young women who were unsure about their sexuality. Lacking a positive script for a lesbian lifestyle, women sought information in magazines for lesbians, pseudo-scientific books, and novels. Women also sought guidance from women's magazines, particularly from agony

[61] SMLC, *Our Lives: Lesbian Mothers Talk to Lesbian Mothers*, (Manchester: Manchester Law Centre, 1984) 13.

[62] See also 'Late Starters', *Gay News* 136 (February 9-22, 1978) 20.

[63] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 51-54.

[64] Allen & Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 189.

aunts. Underage women were sometimes treated by medical practitioners. More often than not, these treatments reinforced a heteronormative life course. The second half of this chapter interrogates lesbians' justification for marrying. Many claimed they had suppressed their desire for women to be like everyone else or in hopes that marriage would cure or lessen their desire for women. Others said they had married to please their mothers, or because they did not dare defy their mothers. Many wanted children and believed marriage was the only means to conceive and raise children. Others got pregnant and were forced into shotgun weddings. A few women arranged lavender marriages to gay men.

Mentions of married lesbians in the historiography are usually limited to a brief explanation that lesbians married because they were confused about their sexuality, thought marriage would "cure" their desire for women, wanted economic security, or conformed to social expectations.[65] Only recently has examination of married lesbians gained traction by historians. Examining the economic and cultural forces that impelled lesbians to marry in the USA. Gutterman states: 'no matter how passionate such women's same-sex relationships were, they could not confer the economic stability, social recognition and personal fulfilment through the roles of wife and mother that marriage seemed to offer'.[66] Rivers concurs, and adds that fear of anything non-traditional during the Cold War reinforced mandatory heterosexuality in America.[67] Jennings included a chapter on lesbian wives in Australia and Britain in her recent monograph where she argues that some women consciously suppressed their desire for women and married 'feeling that marriage offered them social acceptability or greater economic security while others did not make a clearly articulated choice between lesbianism and marriage'.[68] She adds that some women, who understood

[65] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 99-126; Jennings, *Tomboys*, 79; Gardiner. *From the Closet,* 4.
[66] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 33.
[67] Rivers, *Radical Relations,* 12-18.
[68] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies,* 104.

that to be a lesbian was to reject marriage and motherhood, chose to marry to have children.[69]

This chapter supports Gutterman, Rivers, and Jennings' conclusion that marriage offered women who desired women economic stability and social status and until the late 1970s, the only respectable pathway to motherhood. As Jennings conveys, many women did not fully understand their sexuality when they married. Although some women consciously accepted marriage proposals hoping for a cure or chose to marry gay men, most married because that was what every other young woman was doing. This chapter argues that women's indoctrination from childhood that marriage and motherhood was their expected adult life course was so persuasive that even young women who had experienced significant emotional and physical relationships with women married men. Marriage was the milestone that signified adulthood, independence in their own homes, and the beginning of their own families. Although some women who desired women may have married expecting marital bliss, most married purely for pragmatic reasons. By the 1970s, the softening of economic and social pressures that reinforced women's expected gender role combined with the liberation movements made it less likely for young women to choose marriage, including those who desired women. Nonetheless, some women who desired women continued to marry in the 1990s.

## Unsure of Their Sexuality

The separation of girls and boys common in English schools enabled adolescent girls to develop homo-social relationships. These intimate relationships were alternately called "crushes", "raves", "pashes", or "flames". Initially believed to be innocent, even formative, for future heterosexual relationships, Vicinus noted that society's concern for crushes' immoral influence on girls arose in the 1920s; early sexologist Havelock Ellis proposed that separate schools for boys and girls

[69] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 129.

encouraged homosexuality, particularly in females.[70] By the post-war period, the potential for crushes to corrupt young women into homosexuality was well-established; the very schools that were meant to prepare girls for their heteronormative adult roles in society might be encouraging love between females. Intense female crushes were known to be commonplace in girls' schools, argues Rosemary Auchmuty, and left unchecked, were feared to influence girls into a life of lesbianism.[71] However, there were opposing views that sexual experimentation between young women was not harmful. The Women's Federation claimed, in an official memorandum prepared for the Wolfenden Committee on Homosexuality and Prostitution (1954-1957), 'that "a homosexual relationship between women can be a highly positive and constructive influence", that the "promiscuous Lesbian" was rare, and the corruption of young children unknown among lesbians'.[72] Annabel Faraday argues that closing girls' schools, where crushes were likely to flourish, was a strategy to discourage lesbianism and reinforce heterosexist ideology in the inter-war period.[73] Was school-age desire for another female part of normal sexual experimentation (with no risk of unwanted pregnancy) that could lead eventually to a relationship with a man, or did it indicate deviant sexuality?[74] Jennings argues that this ambiguity allowed young women to ignore their desire for women and to 'engage in heterosexual relationships'.[75] I agree with Jennings, in that numerous women claimed that although they had suspected or acknowledged their desire for women, they set themselves a heteronormative life course and got married.

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[70] Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume II, Part Two Sexual Inversion* (USA: F A Davis, 1910) 325; Martha Vicinus, 'Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships,' in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr (eds), *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Lesbian and Gay Past* (London: Penguin, 1991) 228-229.

[71] See Rosemary Auchmuty, *The World of Girls* (London: The Women's Press, 1989) 134-138.

[72] Lesley A Hall, 'Sexuality,' in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 65.

[73] Annabel Faraday, 'Lessoning Lesbians: Girls' Schools, Coeducation and Anti-lesbianism Between the Wars,' in Carol Jones and Pat Mahoney (eds), *Learning Our Lines: Sexuality and Social Control in Education* (London: The Women's Press, 1989) 23-45.

[74] Oram and Turnbull note that many women who had girlhood crushes also had adult heterosexual relationships. Oram and Turnbull, *Sourcebook*, 129.

[75] For a discussion of how girls constructed a lesbian identity, see Jennings*, Tomboys,* 17-43.

Labelling female desire as a crush – a temporary desire or a passing phase – young women ignored or justified their feelings for other women and married men through the 1990s. In the 1950s, explained Mrs. M.R.C. of Cheshire to *Arena Three* readers, 'lesbianism, even to enlightened girls, was something you were supposed to "outgrow" after your teens, or confined to the Forces, schools and institutions'.[76] Sylvia recalled that she had always been 'happier in the company of girls and women' and had experienced crushes on some of the nuns in her convent school. Nonetheless, she married in 1965 at age twenty-three.[77] Jo, although she never married, recalled being worried about having a crush on her gym teacher when she was thirteen in 1968. She explained that crushes were personal and a bit shameful: 'No-one ever spoke about their "crushes." Were we all too well brought up, or just terrified of being called a lesbian?'[78] She also recalled feeling relief when she read in a magazine that most girls experienced a "crush" on other females. Anna Durell, who ran the national office for Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) in the 1980s, claimed that many people widely accepted the passing phase theory. Unsure of their sexuality, she said that 'enormous numbers of people spend years of quiet misery waiting for the "phase" to pass'.[79]

Many young women in the immediate post-war period were uncertain how to articulate their feelings for females. Informing the process of women seeking to understand their sexuality in the mid-twentieth century, Victoria Golding argues that 'invisibility and silence characterised young women's exposure to queer female desire'.[80] The word "lesbian" was not commonly used until the 1940s, while other gender-specific terms such as 'female homosexual' and 'female invert' were still in

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[76] Mrs. M.R.C. Cheshire, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:4 (April 1969) 5.

[77] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[78] Jo Somerset, 'I Was a Teenage Jackie Reader,' in Amanda Sebestyen (ed), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (Bridport: Prism Press, 1988) 224.

[79] Anna Durell, 'At Home,' in Bruce Galloway (ed), *Prejudice and Pride, Discrimination Against Gay People in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 8.

[80] Victoria Golding, 'Naming Desire: Information Seeking and Breaking the Silence Around Queer Female Desire in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain,' in Róisín Ryan-Flood and Amy Tooth Murphy (eds), *Queering Desire: Lesbians, Gender and Subjectivity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024) 328-341.

use.[81] Women needed to be aware of the social construct of lesbian and to have positive role models before they could claim the identity.[82] Many women claimed that when they were young they lacked the language to describe their feelings for other women. Diana recalled that she had been inarticulate about lesbianism as a young Jewish girl in London in the 1950s:

> I had a crush on the history teacher. I don't know at what point one knows one's a lesbian. There wasn't sufficient reference. I knew that I loved the history teacher, and then I knew later on that I loved other women, but I would never have dreamed of doing anything about it for a long, long time because this thing of being inarticulate about true feeling was deep, absolutely deep.[83]

She lamented that in the 1960s, she did not have the 'vocabulary, and a license and permission' to be a lesbian.[84] Similarly, Evelyn recalled that as a teenager in the 1970s she had intimate experiences with some other girls but she did not know the word lesbian: she said she 'didn't really know anything about it'.[85] In her interview she referred to Jerome Bruner's theory of language: without the language to articulate a concept it is very difficult to understand the concept. She explained that in regard to one's own homosexuality, 'you might have something, you know, floating around on it on the fringes at the back of your mind somewhere, but because you have no language for it – because you have no understanding that other people pursue that path – it's very difficult to follow unless your feelings are very very strong'.[86] Difficulty in articulating their sexuality contributed to some young women not readily adopting a lesbian identity.

Some young women, however, were familiar with the word lesbian but found it problematic to apply it to themselves because of its negative connotations. The word lesbian and its derivatives, such as "lezzie," were schoolyard taunts. A *Sappho* reader explained: 'In the nineteen-forties to be a lesbian was a terrible thing, and there was

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[81] Oram and Turnbull, *Sourcebook,* 204.

[82] Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present,* (London: Quartet Books, 1977) 101.

[83] Diana Souhami, *FAWTAR/7,* 3 January 2020.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023.

[86] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023; Jerome S Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1966).

no one to go to for understanding as there is to-day'.[87] Pat knew she was gay when she was a teenager in the 1960s but was so very frightened of homosexuality that she 'did what turned out to be a very silly thing and got married'.[88] Linda, a lesbian who was divorced and raising her three young daughters at age twenty-six in 1984, recalled how she did not relate to lesbians when she was a teenager in the 1970s:

> It was a long time before I came to think of myself as a lesbian. I'd had encounters with girls at school. We used to have snogging sessions. I thought what I was doing was something that everyone did, but when I got to 15 and was still doing it, I realised that's what they call "queer" so I stopped. We all used to call lesbians names because we thought they must be perverts . . . . . but what we were doing was alright. I thought they were all butch, and I just couldn't imagine what they did to each other . . . . . dildoes or whatever. I just knew I wasn't one of them I was just being normal and natural.[89]

Women who married, but later came out as lesbian, illustrate how difficult it was for young women to accept their sexuality when society was homophobic.

## Seeking Information

In the 1950s and 1960s, sexuality, and particularly female homosexuality, was routinely not openly discussed in society, either in private or in public. Many young women were unlikely to know any lesbians and lacked lesbian role models, either personal acquaintances or notable personalities. During her interview in 2023, Jane reasoned that, when she was a teenager, if she had known someone in her family or her circle of friends who could have acted as a role model, she would have come out as a lesbian sooner. She explained that during her formative years from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, she had not known any lesbians:

> I did not have anybody, any point of reference. There were books: the Well of Loneliness. There weren't movies, there weren't articles in papers, there was no representation, really, that I was aware of.
> . . .
> I had no role models. There was nothing on the TV. There was nothing in the media. No famous people. There was nothing. … If something came out to

[87] J.R. Essex, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 4:1 (1975) 15.

[88] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 24.

[89] Ibid, 15.

> the public's awareness it was always associated with shame and embarrassment. And it was always about a man; never about women![90]

Many women would have found it intimidating to ask for advice from a parent, teacher, or clergyman. In 1967, an *Arena Three* reader who was engaged to be married explained her difficulty in finding someone to talk to about her feelings for women. She had tried discussing the subject with her mother, who showed no understanding, and had no current friends with whom she felt she could be honest: 'I have never had any real understanding talks with anyone about my feelings, except whilst I was at Training College, where I had a few sympathetic friends'.[91] Jo recalled in 1988, that as a young teenager twenty years earlier, she read the popular girls' magazine *Jackie*, ogled the boys in an adjacent school, and planned to marry by age twenty-six. In reality, she had been lonely and desperate to talk with someone: 'How I wish I had been able to confide in someone my fears about being abnormal because I really *really* liked our gym teacher'.[92] While recounting her childhood during her interview, Val described having crushes on two girls at school as a teenager in the 1950s. When she confided in her grandmother that she feared that she only loved women, her grandmother dismissed her fears: "Oh it's all right darling, all women feel like that at your age".[93] Although Val asked her grandmother about sexuality, many other young women searched for alternate sources of advice and information.

An often less embarrassing approach was to seek information about homosexuality from print media. Before the late 1960s, novels, women's magazines, and newspapers only occasionally included portrayals of lesbianism, according to Jennings, and scientific and pseudo-scientific books 'constituted the most widespread, detailed, and authoritative source of information about lesbians'.[94] Women could use these materials to help them interpret their feelings about women, but awareness of

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[90] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[91] Enc. 'Firsthand (2)', a publication of MRG, 4:3 (March 67).

[92] Somerset, 'I Was a Teenage Jackie Reader'.

[93] Interview with Val Bond, 17 August 2023.

[94] Rebecca Jennings, '"The most uninhibited party they'd ever been to": The Postwar Encounter Between Psychiatry and the British Lesbian, 1945-1971,' *The Journal of British Studies* 47:4 (2008) 886.

and access to them varied according to class, education, and geographic location. Women with higher levels of education might have read the pseudo-scientific literature while working-class women may not even have read inexpensive paperback novels. Visiting a library or a bookstore to seek books about homosexuality was often intimidating, especially when such books had to be requested from behind the counter. Vicky recalled her embarrassment when she asked for *The Well of Loneliness* in a public library in the 1950s:

> I'd heard about this book and I went to the library. When I went and asked for it, I was met with an absolute wall of silence. And I can remember this girl looking at me and saying, "Oh well, you have to order that book.' Her whole attitude was absolute coldness. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife and I remember going absolutely scarlet and wanting to get out of there as quick as my little legs would carry me.[95]

Jennings clarifies that some paperbacks were available at news-stands in railway stations and at stationers, although unlikely on shelves in libraries.[96] A small library, compiled by Julie Switzur for the Minorities Research Group (MRG) and moved to KENRIC in 1966, contained fiction featuring lesbians, copies of *Arena Three* and the *Kinsey Report.* As these titles were either not available in public libraries or embarrassing to request, the private library was a 'lifeline' for members.[97] However, access to such books was more difficult for most women and even those who managed to borrow or buy books risked exposure by having such books in their possession. A woman who was engaged to be married offered her small collection of paperbacks to the *Arena Three* library since she felt she could not explain the possession of novels about lesbians to her fiancé.[98] Women, both single and married, often felt they needed to be secretive in their own homes regarding literature about homosexuality.

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[95] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts: Lesbian and Gay Lives of 50s and 60s Brighton* (Brighton, UK: Queen Spark Books, 1992) 92.

[96] Jennings, *Tomboys,* 81, 32.

[97] Gardiner, *From the Closet*, 77.

[98] Enc. 'Firsthand (2)', a publication of MRG, 4:3 (March 67).

### Early Magazines for Lesbians

Two early magazines for lesbians provided information about lesbianism, promoted a positive image of lesbians, and facilitated communication between women via letters to the editor, contact advertisements, and in-person meetings. *Arena Three*, published by MRG from 1964 until 1971, was succeeded by *Sappho* from 1972 through 1981.[99] Women paid for subscriptions to receive issues of each magazine, although *Sappho* was increasingly available on newsstands in the late 1970s. To know about the existence of *Arena Three*, women had to have seen an advertisement, read about it in a newspaper or magazine article, or have read someone else's issue. Rachel recalled seeing an advertisement in *Spare Rib* for a lesbian magazine and lying to her parents about it: 'I don't know what it was but anyway I sent for that, and I told my mum and dad that it was a prospectus for university, that I'd be getting some prospectuses but actually it was this lesbian magazine [laughs]'.[100] Some women did not subscribe to *Arena Three* for fear of family members finding issues in the post.[101] Barbara recalled how she had first read about *Arena Three* in an advertisement in the *Sunday Telegraph*. She explained: 'there weren't any gay magazines that I knew of, like they've got now, *Pink Paper* and God knows what – everything was hush-hush'.[102] Neither magazine achieved large circulation: 1000 for *Arena Three* and 3000 for *Sappho,* although many women likely shared their issues with others.[103] Wives read *Arena Three*, and while some wrote in to advise young women not to make the mistake of marrying, others thanked MRG for educating the next generation. Mrs. S.R. explained that all women should be indebted to the founders of MRG in helping 'to prevent such a large scab of married lesbians in future generations'.[104] She figured

[99] For more information about *Arena Three* and *Sappho,* see *Chapter Four.*

[100] Jen, West Yorkshire Queer Stories, (19 September 2019), <https://wyqs.co.uk/stories/bradfords-lesbian-scene/full-interview/> [Accessed 08 October 2023].

[101] M.G. (Surrey), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:2 (1971) 9.

[102] Brighton Ourstory Project. *Barbara Bell: Just Take Your Frock Off* (Ourstory Books: Brighton, 1999).

[103] Georgina Turner describes Diva, launched in 1994 as the first commercially-viability "mainstream" lesbian magazine. Georgina Turner, 'CATCHING THE WAVE. Britain's Lesbian Publishing Goes Commercial', *Journalism Studies* 10:6 (December 2009) 769 – 788.

[104] (Mrs.) S.R. (Surrey), 'The Married Woman – 2 -,' *Arena Three* 4:6 (June 1967) 16.

that as more women became aware of the possibility of living with other women, fewer would make the mistake of marrying men. K.P. agreed with this idea; she believed that if MRG had been around earlier she would not have made a 'copper-bottomed mess' of her life by marrying in 1949 at age twenty-five.[105] She explained that *Arena Three* benefitted both the present generation by disseminating information about lesbians and older married lesbians by facilitating 'contact with their own world without having to commit themselves to anything overt, and without hurting anyone'.[106]

### Pseudo-Scientific Books

Beginning in the post-war period, several pseudo-scientific books on sexuality were published in paperback form and available for purchase for a few shillings. These books disseminated psychoanalytical theories of arrested development in colloquial language and proliferated contemporary tropes about lesbians with significant additions of the authors' own biases. Several books focused on homosexual males, with some mention of females.[107] In the 1960s, paperback books on homosexual women began to appear, disseminating the Freudian theory of acquired inversion without critique.[108] D.J. West extended Freud's theory that children were not predisposed to one sex or the other and offered his own view of there being a fine line between heterosexuality and homosexuality, stating although 'they have normal, happy relations with the opposite sex, they can still enjoy occasional homosexual activities'.[109] Dale Brittenham went further than West by emphatically stating that 'since most humans are fundamentally bisexual, there are many more girls and women who feel desire for sexual contact with a member of their own sex than those who ever

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[105] K.P. (West of England) 'The Married Woman - 1 -,' *Arena Three* 4:6 (June 1967) 14.

[106] Ibid., 12.

[107] Eustace Chesser, *Odd Man Out: Homosexuality in Men and Women* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959); Alex Comfort, *Sex in Society* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963); D J West, *Homosexuality* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960); Kenneth C Barnes, *He and She* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

[108] Benjamin Morse, *The Lesbian: A Frank Study of Women Who Turn to Their Own Sex for Love* (Connecticut: Monarch Books, 1966); Anthony Storr, *Sexual Deviation* (London: Penguin Books, 1964); Dale Brittenham, *Lesbian Exposure* (London: Lovecrest Books/The Ortlan Press, 1966).

[109] West, *Homosexuality,* 12.

experience it'.[110] Many of these books attributed lesbianism to misandry, fear of men, or unsuccessful heterosexual relationships, and suggested possible cures. One of these titles was reprinted as many as six times throughout the 1950s and 1960s, attesting to the popularity of pseudo-scientific books.[111] Maggie, who married in 1958 and had two children before confronting her attraction to women in 1974, recalled in 2023 that *Love Between Women* by Charlotte Wolff was one of the first books on homosexuality that she read.[112] The editor of *Arena Three* provided a positive review of *Love Between Women*, but not all readers agreed with her.[113] Besides being 'full of sweeping generalizations' a reader wished that Wolff had stressed the 'naturalness' of lesbianism and 'lack of drama in the situation' for most lesbians.[114]

Although readily available, pseudo-scientific books offered negative portrayals of lesbians. Jennings surmises that young women's reading of pseudo-scientific literature reinforced the 'broader cultural message of conformity of marriage and motherhood' and influenced their attitudes about their own sexual desires.[115] She also suggests that readers may have had difficulty understanding the psychological concepts and language.[116] Although some women may not have fully understood what they read, women either accepted or rejected their interpretation of psychological concepts to suit their understanding of their own feelings. In 1992, Dorothy explained that when she was young she knew of 'Freud's theory of the latent homosexual phase' and so she assumed she would 'grow out of' her 'lustful feelings for females'.[117] Other women claimed they had not associated their experiences with what they read about homosexuality. Betty, who came out in 1970 after marriage and children, told *Gay News* that she had crushes on women as a teenager in the 1940s 'but no more than

[110] Brittenham. *Lesbian Exposure*, 43-44.

[111] Storr, *Sexual Deviation*.

[112] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023; Charlotte Woolfe, *Love Between Women* (London: Duckworth, 1971).

[113] *Arena Three* 8:4 (May 1971) 16-17,19.

[114] C.E. & V.G. (Kent), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three,* 8:7-12 (1978) 7-8.

[115] Jennings, '"The Most Uninhibited Party",' 891, 888.

[116] Ibid., 891.

[117] NLGS, *What a Lesbian Looks Like: Writings by Lesbians on Their Live and Lifestyles* (London: Routledge, 1992) 10.

usual'.[118] She stated that she had not applied what she knew about homosexuality to herself:

> Theoretically, I knew quite a lot about homosexuality. I had a very open upbringing. I was fully aware of the facts. I just didn't apply them to myself at that stage because I was very involved with men.[119]

One woman recalled that she had never connected her feelings with the medical descriptions in the textbooks and encyclopaedias in the library.[120] Diana Chapman of MRG recounted that she had a stack of Pelican books on psychology that said that lesbianism was immature and that she should marry and have children. She concluded she 'must try simply get on with being a normal woman'.[121] Chapman had relationships with men, but she never married.

### Fiction

Some found it easier to relate to fictional representations of lesbians, although the lesbians in most novels suffered unhappy endings.[122] *Arena Three* regularly reviewed middlebrow literature and provided suggestions for novels to read.[123] In Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness,* the protagonist chooses a solitary life as she told her female lover to return to the embrace of a man. Even though it was banned in 1928 for being obscene and not reprinted and distributed in Britain until 1948, women managed to read copies during this period. Barbara recalled that a gay friend leant her a copy, which she figured he had smuggled in from Paris during the ban in Britain.[124] Two lesbians who never married claimed the story was wonderful, but not all lesbians

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[118] 'Late Starters', *Gay News* 136 (February 9-22, 1978) 20.

[119] Ibid.

[120] NLGS, *What a Lesbian Looks Like*, 10.

[121] Diana Chapman, NSA, HCC (C456), F2088, as cited by Jennings, *Tomboys*, 83, Jennings, ""The Most Uninhibited Party",' 891.

[122] For a discussion of lesbians in fiction, see Faderman, *Surpassing.*

[123] For example, see Clare Barringer, The Fringe Benefits of Marginal Reading,' *Arena Three*, 7:1 (January 1970) 10; See Amy Tooth Murphy, 'Arena Three Magazine and the Construction of the Middlebrow Lesbian Reader,' in Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s: The Postwar and Contemporary Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) 185-199.

[124] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Barbara Bell*, 49.

liked the book.[125] Nina stated that she did not have the courage to explore lesbian sex in her early relationships because Hall had written that 'women can't make love to each other'.[126] Jane, who did not identify as lesbian until after marriage and children, had read *The Well of Loneliness* when she was a teenager in the 1970s but recalled it was depressing. She had instead been drawn to mainstream fiction about 'an enclosed world of women', such as *Little Women*, although in her interview she questioned whether she liked such books because of her innate desire for other women or whether reading such books contributed to her desire for other women.[127] Popular schoolgirl stories that portrayed significant relationships between girls as an alternative to girls' all-consuming focus on boys were available in bookstores until the 1970s. According to Auchmuty, they disappeared because they were too positive about female friendship and love: providing 'a major piece of evidence for the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality in twentieth-century Britain'.[128]

Women could also find representations of lesbians in lesbian pulp-fiction novels: affordable, paperback novels that were widely available in the 1950s and 1960s and sold very well in Britain. Katherine Forrest contends that lesbian pulp-fiction novels in the United States raised awareness that lesbians were not one-of-a-kind.[129] Although the books also raised awareness in Britain, depending on which of the hundreds of titles they read, young women might have taken disparate views of lesbianism. Most lesbian pulp-fiction novels employed formulaic narratives with homophobic undertones, where each main character either suffered a tragic end or returned to the embrace of a man. The moral undertones of the novels endorsed heterosexual normative ideals.[130] However, Tooth Murphy and others have highlighted

[125] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts,* 92.

[126] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us*, 119.

[127] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023; Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Ryless, 1996).

[128] Rosemary Auchmuty, *The World of Girls* (London: The Women's Press, 1992) 107, 133, 179-180.

[129] Katherine V Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels 1950-1965* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2005) xviii.

[130] Faderman, *Surpassing,* 355; Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*, xiv; Amy Tooth Murphy, 'The Kitchen: Lesbian Pulp Fiction's Radical Conventionalism,' in Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook (eds), *Queering the Interior* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) 52-53.

that amongst the majority of male authors writing to a predominantly male audience, a small group of lesbian authors managed to publish positive depictions of lesbians, thereby 'having the power and positioning to speak to lesbian readers seeking alternatives to heterosexuality'.[131] Women's recollections of reading pulp fiction, even amongst women who never married, varied widely. The editor of *Arena Three* recalled that she had first seen the word lesbian in a treasured paperback that she bought in a newspaper shop in Hereford. She explained that she had immediately identified with the title: 'I looked at it and thought, *Women Without Men*. Hmm, that's me!'[132] Miss J Purvis told *Arena Three* readers that she only recalled two novels with happy endings: 'All the others are full of messages and misery'.[133]

## Seeking Guidance from Woman's Magazines

Many women read and were influenced by magazines that were targeted at women and girls. These magazines enjoyed their widest circulation in the 1950s and 1960s. "Women's weeklies," magazines published every week, were read by sixty percent of women over sixteen in Britain in 1964. Girls as young as eleven read women's weeklies in addition to teenage weeklies.[134] Angela McRobbie argues that scholars should not underestimate the ideological influence on girls who read *Jackie*, the teenage weekly with the greatest sales in Britain from 1964-1976.[135] According to Laurel Forster, at the end of World War II, magazines focused on 'rebuilding British homes, families and society and called for increased women's participation in this new

[131] Tooth Murphy, 'The Kitchen', 53; See also Miller, M. 'Secret Agents and Public Victims: The Implied Lesbian Reader,' *Journal of Popular Culture* 35:1 (2001) 37-58; Barale, Michele Aina. '"When Jack Blinks: "Si(gh)ting Gay Desire in Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker,' *Feminist Studies* 18:3 (1992) 533-549; Yvonne Keller, 'Pulp Politics: The Strategies of Vision in Pro-Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965,' in P J Smith (ed), *The Queer Sixties* (London, Routledge, 1999) 1-25; Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Greyhound Bus Station and the Evolution of Lesbian Popular Culture', in Sally Munt (ed), *New Lesbian Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 95-113; Diane Hamer, '"I Am a Woman": Ann Bannon and the Writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s,' in Mark Lilly (ed), Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays (London: Macmillan, 1990) 47-75.

[132] Gardiner, *From the Closet*, 95; Langley's treasure book is about lesbian inmates in a women's prison; Reed Marr, *Women Without Men* (London: L Miller, 1957).

[133] Miss J. Purvis, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:5 (1971) 5.

[134] W D McClelland, 'Women's Press in Britain,' *Gazette* (Netherlands) 11:2-3 (1965) 152-153.

[135] Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000) 67, 114, 115.

era'.[136] Marjorie Ferguson adds that women's magazines disseminated post-war social policies and encouraged the female labour force 'back to the kitchen'.[137] Cynthia White argues that five years after armistice, although women's magazines covered a wider scope of topics, their focus narrowed women's sphere to the confines of the home.[138] Women turned to women's magazines for moral guidance and advice on courtship and marriage.[139] Magazines promoted the heteronormative life course for females: to date boys, marry men, have babies, and buy products for the home. Leaving their parents' homes to marry and establish their own home was both a signifier of maturity and an aspiration for both men and women, although as Langhamer notes, the post-war housing shortage forced many young couples to scale back their expectations and continue living in their parent's homes.[140] Short stories reinforced notions of romantic love, where couples lived "happily ever after". Articles focused on how to find the right man to marry and how to make a welcoming home for their breadwinning husbands. Advertisements pushed consumer products promising success as a wife and mother. Ferguson surmises that the first and foremost theme that emerged from the three women's weeklies with consistently the highest numbers of readers from 1949 to 1974 was 'love and marriage – and the family – as the peaks of female experience and satisfaction'.[141] The second theme identified by Ferguson, self-determination, was built upon in magazines for teenage girls published in the 1960s, which advocated independence, self-expression, and fulfilling one's potential. Penny Tinkler argues that monthly teenage magazines offered no solution to how these optimistic ideals conflicted with the realities of early marriage and motherhood,

[136] Laurel Forster, 'Introduction,' in Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s: The Postwar and Contemporary Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) 4.

[137] Ferguson, *Forever Feminine,* 21.

[138] Cynthia L White, *Women's Magazines: 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970) 134-139-141.

[139] Ibid.,134-135; See also Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, (London: Virago, 1986) and Angela Partington, 'The Days of the New Look: Consumer Culture and Working-Class Affluence,' in Jim Fyrth (ed), *Labour's Promised Land?* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995) 247-63.

[140] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 179-184.

[141] Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*, 44.

the prevailing demographic trend.[142] McRobbie explores how *Jackie*, the teenage weekly with the greatest sales in Britain from 1964-1976, presents what she terms "romantic individualism": girls' individual competition for men that ironically ends when they win a man and subsequently relinquish their individuality to the demands of the romantic relationship.[143] At least in the post-war period till the 1970s, magazines for women and teenagers both reflected and reinforced the heteronormative life course.

Women who questioned their sexuality also read women's magazines, alongside their friends and sisters, and many were influenced to conform to idealised feminine gender roles. One anonymous *Sappho* reader who had married at nineteen in the 1960s reflected: 'In 1960 you knew you would marry, sooner than later, in church, have a baby and live happily ever after. The script had already been written, down to the last stitch in the curtains, in the women's weekly magazines'.[144] E.V. of Surrey, who had married and started a family before realizing her desire for women, described to *Sappho* in 1974 how she was miserable trying to conform to expectations:

> I married young, totally ignorant in all aspects of marriage. I think why I married was not out of love but a sense of duty, family pressure, it was the right thing to do – and it was expected of me. For years I tried to conform to be what every woman's magazine said a young wife should be. God I was miserable![145]

Through problem pages in newspapers and magazines, women and men had the opportunity to anonymously ask specific questions and read "expert" advice to other readers' questions. The golden age of marriage overlaps with what Adrian Bingham calls 'the golden age of newspaper problem columns'.[146] Agony aunts enjoyed their greatest popularity from the mid-1930s into the 1970s. Receiving hundreds of letters each week, agony aunts who were syndicated in newspapers and were regular features of women's magazines, were some of the most recognised

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[142] Penny Tinkler, '"Are Your Really Living?" If Not, "Get With It!": The Teenage Self and Lifestyle in Young Women's Magazines, Britain 1957-70,' *Cultural and Social History* 11:4 (2015) 597-619.

[143] McRobbie, *Feminism,* 67-117.

[144] Mass Observation Archive, *Directive Replies, G2043, Summer 1990*, woman born in 1940.

[145] E. V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (1974) 12.

[146] Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 52.

journalists of their time.[147] Notable advice columnists include Marjorie Proops of the *Daily Mirror* and Claire Rayner of *The Sun*. In the first two decades following World War II, popular newspapers gave agony aunts greater license to discuss sexual problems.[148] Langhamer attests that readers' questions to agony aunts about how to authenticate feelings of love illustrate the mid-century shift in the approach to marriage from pragmatism to romance.[149] Bingham argues that 'newspaper problem columns and related features were regarded by many readers as an important source of advice and guidance on personal and sexual questions at a time when there were relatively few accessible sources of information about such matters'.[150] Tracey Loughran argues that agony aunts finessed a fine line between speaking with authority and remaining approachable.[151] Bingham concurs, stating that they combined 'the authority of doctors and counsellors with the intimacy of a friend or family member' and that they 'represented convenient, approachable, and knowledgeable figures to whom readers could turn, at a time when many people felt it difficult to discuss sex in person'.[152] As such, Bingham claims that readers valued the advice offered.[153]

Agony aunts addressed controversial subjects, such as homosexuality, in their advice columns and in articles. An agony aunt in a Welsh newspaper claimed she routinely received letters from young women engaged to be married who hesitated due to their desire for other women.[154] The editor of *Arena Three* commended Proops for her article in *Woman* in November 1969 about 'the most misunderstood of all the

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[147] Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 52.

[148] Ibid., 76.

[149] Claire Langhamer, 'Everyday Advice on Everyday Love: Romantic Expertise in Mid-twentieth Century Britain,' L'Homme Z. F. G. 24:1 (2013) 46.

[150] Bingham, 'Newspaper Problem Pages,' 52.

[151] Tracey Loughran, 'The Most Helpful Friends in the World': Letter Pages, Expertise and Emotion in British Women's Magazines, c.1960-80,' in Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s: The Postwar and Contemporary Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) 137.

[152] Bingham, *Family Newspapers,* 77.

[153] Ibid.*,* 82.

[154] 'A Confession that Disgusted her Husband,' *South Wales Echo* (12 February 1972) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

facets of love – the love of men for men, women for women'.[155] An *Arena Three* reader concurred: 'I know some (the National Press) have printed articles on lesbians – none so successful in their understanding as 'Dear Marje', who must have given much comfort and hope to so many of her readers'.[156] Young women concerned about their sexuality also wrote to *Arena Three* for advice. In one of the last issues, the editor published a sample letter and explained that it was indicative of the real problems MRG was asked to solve by both men and women who had no one else to ask.[157]

As Bingham suggests, readers were susceptible to readily accepting advice that reinforced normative gender roles and heterosexuality for women. Jane, whilst justifying in her interview her reasons for marrying, recalled how an agony aunt's disregard for girls' crushes on other females had influenced her to date boys:

> There was a magazine at the time for teenage girls called Jackie and the problem page there would routinely publish letters from girls saying "I have a crush on my gym teacher" and the answer was always "Don't worry. When you grow up, you will grow out of that when you meet the right boy". So, you know, who are you at 13 to disbelieve a grown up telling you that? So you had boyfriends. I had boyfriends all through my teenage years and early twenties.[158]

Jane sincerely thought she would one day find the right boy, 'because it had been all she had ever been told really' and eventually married at age twenty-seven in 1982.[8] Agony aunts dismissed and trivialized attraction to girls as a temporary, adolescent phase and advised young women they would feel differently when they met the right man. Occasionally, agony aunts referred readers to organisations for further information. While their referrals may have been helpful to some readers, it implied that homosexuality was a "problem" or "psychosexual difficulty" that required a remedy, as they sometimes stated explicitly.[159] One agony aunt presented bisexuality as preferable to lesbianism, likely because a bisexual women could marry and have a

[155] 'The Press,' *Arena Three* 6:12 (December 1969) 3.

[156] Margaret and Helen, Shropshire, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:10 (October 1970) 7.

[157] 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:1 (February 1971) 9.

[158] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[159] 'May I help you? Clare Shepherd Invites Your Questions,' *Woman's Realm* (7 May 1966); *She* (March 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate; 'Lesbian Fears,' *Manchester Evening News* (18 October 1972) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

"normal" life.[160] Overall, into the late 1970s, agony aunts stressed that heterosexuality was desirable and preferrable to lesbianism.

Agony aunts repeatedly dismissed young women's concerns about their interest in females as a temporary phase or crush that they would outgrow before developing an appropriate interest in males. In *Women's Realm* in 1966, a teenage girl asked for help from agony aunt Clare Shepherd because she was desperately worried she was homosexual: she had no interest in boys. Shepherd explained that many boys and girls experienced a 'homosexual stage' but as they matured they developed an interest in the opposite sex.[161] Paul James assured a girl in 1972 that 'homosexual tendencies occurring in boys and girls at your stage of development need not give undue cause for worry because they will most probably give way to heterosexual feelings'.[162] The agony aunts at *OK and HI!,* a weekly magazine, stated that curiosity about other girls was 'perfectly normal' and that it was 'a natural part of the growing up process' and that 'very often, young people think that they are homosexual when, in fact, it's just a crush or a phase that they are going through'.[163] Also in 1976, an agony aunt called "Jenny" dismissed a sixteen-year-old girl's concern that she preferred girls to boys, and explained that such a preference was natural at age sixteen and encouraged the girl to be more gregarious and 'explore life more'.[164] Siobhan recalled writing to Proops that she thought she was a lesbian, did not like boys, and did not want physical contact with them. She recalled that Proops had replied: 'Don't worry dear, you'll grow out of it'.[165] Siobhan was upset with Proops' dismissal: 'She dismissed me in this one line… and I just felt like screaming, it was

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[160] 'Am I Normal?' *OK and HI!* (13 December 1975) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[161] 'May I help you? Clare Shepherd Invites Your Questions,' *Woman's Realm* (7 May 1966). Ca Agony Aunts <1970, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[162] Paul James, 'Early Years that Decide Our Future,' *Birmingham Evening Mail* (2 September 1972) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[163] 'I Think I am a Lesbian,' *OK and Hi* (10 July 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate; *OK and Hi*, (30 October 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[164] *Manchester Evening News* (11 November 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-1979, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[165] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts,* 19.

awful'.[166] Although dismissing girls' desire for other girls as an immature phase upset some girls, it also assured them that a future with a man was still possible.

Agony aunts trivialised women's dislike of men or admiration of women as not homosexual. Mary Grant advised a 24-year-old woman who said she could not 'tackle men anymore' because they made her sick, not to mistake an 'anti-men phase for a permanent preference for your own sex – these are by no means the same thing'.[167] In 1975 a teenager in sixth form questioned if she was a homosexual because she had a crush on a female teacher. The agony aunts at *Ok* and *Hi!* assured her she was normal for a girl in an all-girls school and explained: 'There's a great deal of difference between liking and admiring another woman, and wanting to have a deeply involved relationship with her, and if you try to stand back a bit from yourself, we think you'll be able to see the difference'.[168]

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, agony aunts suggested young women who preferred girls or disliked boys had simply not yet met the right boy. "The Cathy and Claire Page", the problem page in *Jackie*, often suggested that the solution to the deviation from the norm – all-consuming interest in boys – was the reassurance that all girls eventually meet "the right one". Having a boyfriend was touted as the unequivocal universal goal of girls.[169] For example, in 1964, an eighteen-year-old woman admitted that she could not tolerate kisses from boys. She said she would 'shudder and tense up' when boys came near her and wondered if there was something wrong with her.[170] Cathy and Claire assured her that she had not yet met the right boy: 'You're obviously a girl who thinks a kiss is pretty important, so you keep yours for that Special Someone'.[171] A sixteen-year-old girl feared she had inherited

[166] Ibid.

[167] Mary Grant, 'I'm Different,' Woman's Own (8 March 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-1979 LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[168] 'Am I Normal?,' *OK and HI* (13 December 1975) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[169] McRobbie, *Feminism,* 94-96.

[170] 'The Cathy and Claire Page,' *Jackie*, 14 (11 April 1964) 10 Ca Agony Aunts <1970, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[171] Ibid.

lesbianism from her aunt because she was not physically attracted to her boyfriend. Grant advised that most boys and girls worried and wondered about their sexuality and just because she was not attracted to her current boyfriend did not mean she would not be 'turned on' by the next one.[172] Furthermore, Grant surmised that it was unfair to assume that her aunt, who shared her home with another woman, was a lesbian. 'Her apparent lack of interest in men may mean she's never met a man she's been attracted to – or who's been attracted to her'.[173] In 1976, a father wrote to Proops about his and his wife's despair over their daughter living with her female friend. Proops replied that although his daughter was convinced she was a lesbian, she cannot 'be entirely sure she will never be able to love a man'.[174] Agony aunts suggested, well into the 1970s, that desire for women could change to desire for men when a woman met the right man.

In the latter half of the 1970s, agony aunts continued to emphasise that heterosexuality was desirable and normal. In 1976, when challenged, the agony aunt for *She* magazine explained that although some girls have relationships with other girls, particularly those 'who are lonely or upset, or away from home at college or university', most girls 'eventually sort their feelings out in favour of heterosexuality and go on to get married and have children'.[175] She felt that a heterosexual life course was the preferable outcome 'because even today the lot of the person who opts for "gayness" is not easy'.[176] Furthermore, she advised those 'who are worried by occasional "gay" feelings' to not 'take them too seriously'. Also in 1976, Glenys Parry, Chairwoman for CHE, challenged agony aunt Susan Smith for advising a fifteen-year-old girl that she would grow out of her desire for other girls. Parry emphasised that 'it is perfectly possible to be homosexual and lead a happy, fulfilled and productive

[172] 'Mary Grant's Problem Page', *Woman's Own* (26 November 1977) Ca Agony Aunts <1970, LAGNA Bishopsgate.
[173] Ibid.
[174] 'Dear Marje,' *Daily Mirror* (9 June 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.
[175] *She* (September 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.
[176] Ibid.

life'.[177] Smith replied that a girl at fifteen was too emotionally immature to confront that she could be a 'latent homosexual'.[178] In 1977, a nineteen-year-old woman told agony aunt Irma Kurtz she was 'disgusted' with herself and explained her dilemma that it was impossible for her to 'feel like a normal heterosexual' or to be a 'happy lesbian'.[179] Although Kurtz replied that homosexuality was not socially acceptable and could be controlled with psychiatric help, she also stated: 'Homosexuality is neither better nor worse than any other kind of sexuality; its sorrows are different but no more than the sorrows of heterosexuality, its joys not unlike those of heterosexuality'.[180]

In the 1970s, gaining awareness that an increasing number of specialist organisations had begun to counsel homosexuals, agony aunts sometimes referred girls and women to these organisations for further assistance.[181] In 1971, agony aunts were advised to direct enquiries about homosexuality to *Arena Three*. After watching the lesbian documentary, 'The Important Thing is Love' on television, a man wrote to Proops requesting the address of *Arena Three*, and subsequently wrote to the editor.[182] C.W. from Gloucester was angry that agony aunt Denise Robins in a recent issue of *She* did not refer a young lesbian to *Arena Three* and suggested that the editor send a copy to Robins for her to forward to the girl.[183] Subsequently, *Arena Three* also sent issues to Claire Raynor for her column in *Petticoat* and to *Woman's Own* after its publication of an article on lesbians.[184] Gerry recalled seeing a letter to Proops in *Woman's Own* from someone who thought they were gay. Gerry took the advice from Proops and wrote to an organisation, likely CHE, who told her about *Arena Three,* to which she then subscribed. However, she felt that she could not identify with

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[177] 'Is This Advice Helpful?' *Herts Advertiser* [St Albans] (5 March 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[178] Ibid.

[179] 'Agony Column: Irma Kurtz Helps,' *Cosmopolitan* (October 1977) Ca Agony Aunts <1970, LAGNA Bishopsgate.

[180] Ibid.

[181] See *Advice and Counselling.*

[182] T.F. Southampton, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:3 (April 1971) 14.

[183] C.W. (Gloucester), 'Free Speech', *Arena Three* 8:2 (1971) 9.

[184] Free Speech', *Arena Three* 8:6 (July 1971) 7; 'What Does Your Best Friend Mean to You?,' *Woman's Own* (12 June 1971).

women ‘who had come to terms with themselves’ and who ‘were into the gay scene’ and instead she tried to educate herself about homosexuality through any books she could find on the subject.[185] In 1976, agony aunts referred women to CHE, Intergroup, Gay Switchboard, Icebreakers, Albany Trust, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), National Union of Students Gay Rights Campaign, and Parents Enquiry.[186] Agony aunts recognised that women who questioned their sexuality could benefit from counselling.

The popularity of advice from agony aunts diminished in the late 1970s, in line with reduced circulation of women’s weeklies and newspapers and the decline of the rate of marriage. Agony aunts had perpetuated the belief that a heteronormative life course was natural and preferable to a life of homosexuality: a woman’s goal in life was to marry. Many young women followed this advice and married. Others, however, needed a little more convincing: they sought – or their families sought for them – medical treatment for their “homosexual inclinations”.

## Medical Treatment

The theory that homosexuality was an illness lingered into the late twentieth century, even after the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973. Men had been treated for homosexuality since the 1950s and there is sparse but definitive evidence that psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists also treated women to convert them to heterosexuality.[187] Helen Spandler and Sarah Carr propose that from the medical records that were available in 2019, treating women for homosexuality occurred but was uncommon in England

[185] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts*, 71.

[186] *Women’s Own* (10 July 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79 LAGNA Bishopsgate; Mary Grant, ‘Where Can I Meet Other Gay Girls?’ Woman’s Own (10 July 1978) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate; ‘Help for Bisexuals,’ *Record Mirror* (August 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-1979 LAGNA Bishopsgate; *She* (September 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[187] Michael King, Glenn Smith, and Annie Bartlett, ‘Treatments of Homosexuality in Britain Since the 1950s-an Oral History: The Experience of Professionals,’ *British Medical Journal* 328 (January 2004), 492-432; Glenn Smith, Annie Bartlett, and Michael King, ‘Treatments of Homosexuality in Britain Since the 1950s-an Oral History: The Experience of Patients,’ *British Medical Journal* 328 (January 2004), 427-429.

during the 1950s to the 1970s.[188] A 1967 study of forty-three homosexuals detailed that two women, both eighteen and 'partners in a lesbian "affair"', completed aversion therapy treatment.[189] Medical treatment of female homosexuality may have become more common in the 1970s with greater visibility of lesbians. Carr agrees with Jennings' theory that working-class, less-educated women may have involuntarily seen psychiatrists within the National Health Service whereas middle-class women with the motivation and economic means to seek treatment in the private sector may have been treated with less-invasive psychotherapy.[190]

Women reported having had aversion therapy when they were teenagers. One woman recalled that when she was eighteen and engaged to be married in the early 1960s, she underwent aversion therapy against her will in Graylingwell, a psychiatric hospital in Chichester. She explained that she had suffered a nervous breakdown due to the strain of 'living a straight life' although being homosexual: 'I was engaged, and as the wedding day got nearer and nearer, and I just couldn't hack it'.[191] She explained that aversion therapy did not alter her sexual orientation:

> The psychiatrist told my parents about being a lesbian, and, against my will, my mother signed a consent form for aversion therapy in the hospital. For the next six weeks I was given injections [to induce vomiting] and electric shocks when pictures of women came up on screen. I was made physically ill at the sight of women doing anything. For three months I felt terrible. It put me off women. I could not face being anywhere near them. What it didn't do was make me like men.[192]

She rejected a heteronormative lifestyle of marriage and motherhood and subsequently frequented the Gateways Club for the next twenty years.[193] In the *Lesbian Information Service Newsletter,* Joan described the treatment she had received during twelve months in an asylum in 1953-1954 when she was seventeen:

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[188] Helen Spandler and Sara Carr, 'Hidden from History? A Brief Modern History of the Psychiatric "Treatment" of Lesbian and Bisexual Women in England,' *The Lancet. Psychiatry* 6:4 (2019) 289-290.

[189] M J MacCullock and M P Feldman, 'Aversion Therapy in Management of Forty-three Homosexuals,' *British Medical Journal* 1967, Volume 2 (3 June 1967) 595.

[190] Jennings, '"The Most Uninhibited Party"'; Spandler and Carr, 'Hidden from History,' 289-290.

[191] Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 45.

[192] Ibid., 42; A remarkably similar story is reported in Brighton Ourstory Project. *Daring Hearts,* 35-6.

[193] Ibid., 272.

> I received a course of deep insulin treatment which was a massive injection of diabetic insulin producing a diabetic coma, then a tube was stuffed up my nose and a thick glucose mixture forced down the tube to bring me out of the coma; often this induced a form of epileptic fit and I still don't know what the purpose was![194]

Joan spent a further eighteen months in an asylum – which she described as a nightmare – until she successfully deceived the medical practitioners that she was straight.

Women recalled having been forced by their parents to undergo treatment following discovery of their relationships with other girls. Two participants in the National Gay and Lesbian Survey in 1992 explained they had undergone involuntary treatment. Isla recalled that her teachers recommended her parents take her to see an 'educational psychologist' about her 'unnatural friendship' with a female student with whom she had been sexually intimate. Dorothy recalled having therapy after her mother discovered she had made a pass at a teacher.[195] In an article in *The Sunday Times,* a woman explained that her parents forced her to see a psychiatrist in 1972 after her mother discovered love letters from her girlfriend. The psychiatrist disregarded her love for her girlfriend as a crush that she would outgrow. Five years later, the two young women were still together.[196] Therapy for underage girls was meant to discourage homosexual desire and relationships with other females.

Women who reached adulthood before the 1970s, who were unlikely to have any positive lesbian role models or know much about lesbianism much less sexuality, sought information in pseudo-scientific books, novels, women's magazines, and from agony aunts. Information they read reinforced the inevitability of motherhood within marriage. Some parents, learning of their daughters attraction for other girls, may have sent them for medical treatment.

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[194] 'Lesbian Tales,' *LISN* 6 (January 1988) 12.

[195] NLGS, *What a Lesbian Looks Like*, 10.

[196] David Robson, 'Jilly Cooper Goes to a Meeting of Homosexuals,' *The Sunday Times* 8078 (7 May 1978) 42.

## Getting Married

Especially before the liberation movements of the 1970s, a major contributing factor for women – including women who desired women – to marry was that they did not realise they had other options. Despite greater opportunities for education and employment, many women upheld the expected life course of marriage and children. In the 1960s and 1970s, studies indicated that ninety-four percent of teenage girls expected they would marry and become mothers.[197] This was especially likely true of working-class women. Sigourney, a mixed-race woman born in 1960 to a single mother and raised in foster care, met her husband when she was fifteen, married, and had six children. Leaving her husband in 1988 and joining a feminist group in Streatham was a life-changing experience: 'Suddenly I realised that I had a voice and suddenly I realised I had choices'.[198] It had never occurred to her that she had options other than marriage and motherhood:

> To me when I was growing up, it didn't occur to me. I thought my path would be that I would meet some guy, get married, have a few kids and look after them and that's it. That's what happened. And I didn't know that I could go to work and earn my own money and I could have a career and I could not date men, I could be by myself and not need anybody or I could date women. I never even thought none of that. It wasn't, it was just not even like a tiny little thought in the back of my mind. It just didn't even, I didn't know that that existed.[199]

Like Sigourney, many women who desired women were influenced by normative gender roles: they married and raised children with their husbands. Many thought marriage was their only option.

Women who came out as lesbian during or after marriage recalled a wide spectrum of knowledge and experiences of desire for women before their weddings. Many had married young, as was the trend up until the 1970s, without much awareness of their sexuality. Many did not think about being heterosexual, much less

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[197] See Karen Dunnell, *Family Formation, 1976* (London: HMSO, 1979) 77 and Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (London: Routledge, 1968) as cited in John R Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages: 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 314. See also Irene Rauta and Audrey Hunt*, Fifth Form Girls: Their Hopes for the Future*, (London: HMSO, 1975).

[198] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32*, 25 August 2019.

[199] Ibi.

homosexual. Women's experiences of desire for women lay somewhere from a vague feeling of attraction to long-term, emotional, and physical relationships. Many divorcées had difficulty retrospectively explaining confusion about their early desire for women. Judy is a typical example of a woman who did not realise the significance of her relationships with women. Born in Brighton in 1949, she got married before she was twenty. She recalled that although female relationships were especially important to her, she had been confused about her feelings. Judy explained: 'probably there was a sexual element to quite a lot of my important friendships with them, but I wasn't aware of that at the time'.[200] She had experienced affairs with both men and women before she had married. When she left her husband, she got involved in the women's movement. When discussing lesbianism with a group of women, she only then realised that she was a lesbian:

> I'd had affairs with four women before that, but each time I hadn't really thought about it in terms of being a lesbian. I just thought it was a kind of freak experience. That it was just a one-off thing. And in the middle of all that I got married, so I wasn't really admitting it to myself.[201]

Other women married with full knowledge that they desired women. Shirley told *The Sunday Times* that she had known she was homosexual when she got married at age eighteen in the 1960s. She married a man she had known for four years and had 'liked an awful lot'.[202] She said that he also knew she was homosexual, but he thought 'it was something that could be sorted out, that he would be able to change'.[203] She said that her marriage never worked sexually and after about four years her husband began having affairs with women. Wives may have known they desired women but not necessarily fully understood their sexuality. For example, one *Sappho* reader explained how she and another woman had an intimate relationship before they both

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[200] Angela Stewart-Park and Jules Cassidy, *We're Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women* (London: Quartet Books, 1977) 39.

[201] Ibid., 33.

[202] Michael De-la-Noy, 'Women Together and the Child Between,' *The Sunday Times* 7941 (August 24, 1975) 27.

[203] Ibid.

married men. She asked: ‘How were we to tell that the same sort of feeling wouldn’t develop for our men in marriage’?[204]

For women who had some level of awareness of their sexuality – from “just an inkling” to long-term intimate relationships – the following sections examine how lesbians justified marrying men. An unconscious desire to conform to women’s prescribed gender role underpinned many lesbians decisions to marry. Like Gutterman’s findings in the USA, many lesbians described that they wanted to be like everyone else: to be “normal”.[205] A few lesbians hoped that having husbands and children would help diminish or eradicate their desire for women. Others related pressure from parents and especially mothers to marry and produce grandchildren. Some women had wanted children or got pregnant unexpectedly. Likely only a small percentage of lesbians arranged lavender marriages with gay husbands.

## Wanting to be Like Everyone Else

Ignoring or denying their desire for women, some women conformed to cultural expectations: they said they had married to be “normal” like their friends and family. Hannah Charnock argues that from 1950 to 1980, teenage girls’ heterosexuality was shaped by their relationships with other girls: concern with what other young women were experiencing with young men informed women’s expectations.[206] Young women who felt attraction to girls nonetheless conformed to heteronormative expectations to date boys, many of them marrying. Evelyn met her future husband at college and married in 1978 at the age of twenty-three. From an Irish Catholic family, Evelyn explained there was ‘some sort of silent expectation’ to marry: her older brother and sister had also married at age twenty-three.[207] Other women dated men but never married. Jo Sommerset claimed that she lived a fantasy as a teenager in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She described how she ogled boys and ‘mooned around’ after one

[204] I.N. Hants, ‘Heteraecetera,’ *Sappho* 3:9 (1975) 11.

[205] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor’s Wife*, 46.

[206] Hannah Charnock. “Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950-1980,” *The Historical Journal* 63:4 (2020) 1032-53.

[207] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023.

of her brother's friends, while wishing she had someone in which to confide her fears about being 'abnormal'.[208] Rosie, who was born in 1960 in Devon, recalled that she 'went to school with people who just wanted to be married and pregnant, preferably by their 16th birthday'.[209] Although she tried to be like everyone else when she was young and was briefly engaged to be married, she eventually stopped trying to be heterosexual and started dating women. While the trend was to marry at increasingly young ages until 1971, I suggest that many women who desired women married without fully understanding or accepting their sexuality. School leavers who found employment, joined the military, or who attended university had more time to mature and explore their sexuality. Consideration that girls who felt desire for other girls also felt social pressure to have boyfriends lends credence to Charnock's argument that "heterosexual relationships" conveyed social status to girls within their peer groups.

Lesbians often described that they married men who were most likely to fulfil their roles as fathers and breadwinners and who were decent and kind. Langhamer notes that pragmatically, 'men and women looked for spouses able to fulfil clearly gendered roles – notably so in the years before the Second World War'.[210] Men were expected to financially support their family while women were expected to be able to cook, clean, and care for the children. Sigourney explained that her husband 'was a good man, in as much as he worked hard and he provided well for me and the children'.[211] She had a big house, an au pair to help raise her six children, and lacked no material comfort. A few divorced lesbians recalled that they had been in love with their ex-husbands and others expressed fondness or appreciation of their ex-husbands. For example, Jen, who was born in 1961, recalled that although she had previously been in love with a woman, she married Simon, whom she described as 'a kind, sensitive and gentle man who was highly intelligent in both sciences and the arts'.[212] At the time she had found his adoration irresistible and intoxicating. Sylvia,

[208] Somerset, 'I Was a Teenage Jackie Reader,' 225.
[209] Rosie Garland, *FAWTAR/29* (18 December 2019).
[210] Langhamer, *English in Love,* 54.
[211] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32,* 25 August 2019.
[212] Jen, *West Yorkshire Queer Stories*.

nearly sixty years after her wedding, explained that she also was attracted to her husband's adoration. She stated: 'I think the thing that attracted me to him is that he thought I was wonderful and I think he really, really did love me'.[213] Sylvia omitted claiming to have been in love with her husband when they married. Several lesbians avowed they had not been in love with their fiancés. Stephanie, although she had relationships with girls as a teenager and had come out to her mother when she was seventeen, married three times before she settled into a monogamous relationship with Lucy. She explained that she took 'a cold-blooded approach' to marry her first husband because otherwise she thought she would 'have a very lonely life as an openly gay woman'.[214] She thought she had loved her second husband, but he ended the marriage when their daughter was a few months old. Her third marriage was one of convenience: 'I told him the night before our wedding that I wasn't in love with him, but I felt it was too late to back out'.[215]

Some women internalised homophobia and married to live a "normal" lifestyle: it was much easier than living openly as a lesbian. Ann Menasche, in her study in the late 1980s in the USA, determined that some women who self-identified as lesbian had returned to a heterosexual lifestyle mainly due to internalised lesbophobia and sexism; nearly half of the women in her study explained they wanted to 'fit in better with the heterosexual majority'.[216] Some women thought it was impossible to live independently of men as a lesbian, especially if they were not white or not living in a major city. R.P. from Oxfordshire described to *Sappho* how difficult it would have been to be out as a lesbian in a small English village:

> In this small village the word "lesbian" conjures up a hairy-legged, vulgar, strident female. What we are and how we behave sexually are subjects I suppose, for jokes by the drunks at pubs. The attitude of the still-primitive

[213] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[214] Beverly Kemp, 'Married but Gay,' *New Woman* (November 1994) 106 cited in *KMG* No. 26 (November 1994).

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ann E Menasche, *Leaving the Life: Lesbians, Ex-Lesbians and the Heterosexual Imperative* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1998) 59-65: Menashe also claimed women wanted approval from family, to raise children in a 'heterosexual family', to avoid job discrimination, and economic security and privileges.

> villagers is frightening. My daily help, a kindly woman, described with relish how a pair having been discovered were stoned out of the village.[217]

Marie postulated that it was very difficult for a black woman to be single and independent, much less to live as a lesbian in the 1960s. Born in Barbados, she moved to England to work for London Transport in 1960 at age twenty-one. Although Marie had experienced relationships with women, she explained that she started dating men because she was lonely: 'I think that at that time it was very difficult for white women to be out as lesbians, but for Black women it was difficult even to be single and independent'.[218] Marie had two children and at least two significant relationships with men before she accepted that she 'fancied women' in later life.[219] In 1974, a mother of two young children told *Sappho* that she had married to conform despite knowing she had 'gay tendencies'.[220] She said she 'desperately wanted to conform to what society termed "normal"'.[221] Jackie, a pregnant bride in the 1970s, said that 'the general reaction to homosexuality, even in the middle seventies, was still very hostile' and so she decided to marry and have a 'normal life'.[222] Gill told *The Sunday Times* in 1975 that although she knew she was homosexual, she married in the early 1960s to prove to her father that she was like every other young woman.[223] The stigma of homosexuality continued throughout the 1970s and increased in the 1980s, making marriage more appealing to some women.

## Hoping for a Cure

In the 1950s and 1960s women sometimes thought that if they got married, their desire for women would disappear: marriage was a "cure". Jan recalled having a relationship with another young female nurse for two years in 1953-1954 before both married and had children. Jan had thought there was something wrong with her –

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[217] R P. Oxon, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:1 (1974) 12.

[218] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 158.

[219] Ibid.

[220] R. L. Beds., 'Heteraecetera: Married Gays,' *Sappho* 3:5 (1974) 10.

[221] Ibid.

[222] Jackie Miller, 'A Life Worth Waiting For,' *KMG* No. 21 (June 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[223] Michael De-la-Noy, 'Women Together and the Child Between,' *The Sunday Times* 7941 (August 24, 1975) 27.

being attracted to women – but reasoned that by getting married she would not get any more crushes on women.[224] Dorothy, who also wed in the 1950s, explained that she also had believed that getting married would somehow eliminate her sexual attraction for women. She realised after her wedding that she still had sexual feelings for women and admitted that her marriage was a 'total disaster'.[225] The editor of *Arena Three* noted 'that it was a popular myth that if a girl will only get married and have some children, all that "schoolgirl crush nonsense" will magically come to a sudden stop'.[226] She also explained that many of the letters she received from wives were like the following reader's admission: 'I got married when I was 20, in the hope that it would "change" me, but it made not a scrap of difference'.[227] Langley printed several such letters. In 1967, a young woman described how she had resigned herself to marrying a man whom she did not love or desire:

> I am happy enough in the company of my fiancé – and look forward to marriage and a family and hope that in a way my feelings may fade. But many times do I crave for the love, both physical and spiritual, of another woman.[228]

Mrs. H.I. of Bedfordshire explained that she had married hoping that family life would cure her "problem" – she felt that homosexuality could be suppressed – and wondered how other *Arena Three* members had dealt with the issue.[229] Mrs. E.J.S. from Cheshire explained that, as a young woman, she had worried about her lack of interest in men and described how she came to marry in 1953:

> The emotional posturing of my friends over romances either just beginning or just broken off, struck me as completely ludicrous. Surprisingly, I had no difficulty in attracting boy friends. So, not wanting to be "different", I indulged in the same amusements and made the same silly noises as everyone else. There was no-one in whom to confide about my "abnormality", and I had reasoned out for myself that I must be "frigid" – a condition I could successfully hide by "good acting", and which would miraculously disappear when I met the right man, married and had children.[230]

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[224] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 142-3.

[225] Ibid., 130.

[226] Madam Chairman, Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:3 (March 1969) 6.

[227] Mr. ---- ----, 'New Year Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:1 (January 1965) 11.

[228] Enc. H.P., 'Firsthand (2)', a publication of MRG 4:3 (March 1967).

[229] Mrs. H. I. (Beds.), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 11.

[230] Mrs. E.J.S., Cheshire, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:4 (April 1969) 5.

Charlotte explained that she wed when she was young because 'it was commonly held that homosexuality was an aberration that could be "cured" by marriage and motherhood'.[231]

Into the later decades of the twentieth century, women continued to believe marriage was a cure for their homosexuality. Dozens of lesbians reported in a 1974 survey by the Women and Psychiatry Group that their psychiatrists and GPs had advised them to marry and have children – to fulfil a 'traditional woman's role' – to cure depression and anxiety.[232] A twenty-nine-year-old woman suffering with depression claimed her doctor prescribed anti-depressants and told her to continue taking the medication until she found herself a husband.[233] In 1983, Durell surmised that many young women who desired women 'tragically accept the well-meant but lethal advice of family doctors or friends that "marriage will cure it"'.[234] Lisa Power stated in 1995: 'Countless undoubted homosexuals married and lived in misery, making whole families unhappy, in the belief that this would cure their homosexual impulses – a belief held to this day by some'.[235] Five percent of the respondents to Traies' survey of older lesbians claimed they married because 'they thought it would make them heterosexual'.[236] In the 1992 NLGS, Joy explained that she had married an old family friend when she was twenty. She recalled that she had thought marriage would cure her desire for women: 'I felt very drawn to him and went into a phase of thinking I could be "cured" – though I realised immediately that the sexual side of marriage was a disaster for me'.[237] Although lesbians continued to marry in hopes their desire for women would diminish, they only set themselves up for failure.

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[231] Mrs. Charlotte Cubitt, 'Honesty the Worst Policy – Readers Reply,' *Arena Three* 4:7 (July 1967) 11.
[232] 'Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 3:4 (1974) 5.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Durell, 'At Home,' 8.
[235] Power, *Plenty of Bubbles*, 91.
[236] Traies, *The Lives of Older Lesbians,* 62.
[237] NLGS, What a Lesbian Looks Like, 30.

## Placating Parents

Lesbians sometimes explained that one reason why they married was to placate their parents, especially their mothers, who often had expectations of grandchildren. In the post-war period, Langhamer contends that parental influence on who their daughters courted diminished as young people gained greater autonomy both socially and financially.[238] She notes that parental influence remained significant through the end of the 1960s. That lesbians attributed marrying to fulfilling their parents' expectations from the 1950s into the 1980s attests to the strength of parental influence. Despite having a significant relationship with another woman in the military, Vick claimed she had succumbed to pressure from her mother who told her to 'settle down, get married, have kids'.[239] Another woman who wrote into the NLGS claimed that despite having had numerous affairs with women while in the army, she married in the late 1970s and had three children. She wrote about her parents' desire for her to have a husband: 'I was an only child and I knew Mum and Dad were desperate for me to settle down'.[240] During her interview, Evelyn also recalled marrying in 1978 to appease her mother. Although at one point she claimed she had been a 'bit of a rebel teenager' and thought she might not marry, she knew her mother would have been disappointed.[241]

Wanting to see their daughters settled in their own homes, parents sought to influence their daughters' social lives and employment. Selina Todd argues that working-class mothers during the interwar period influenced their daughters' search for employment: not only did the daughters' wages contribute to the familial household, but the right employment could raise the daughter's social standing and improve her opportunities for marriage.[242] During the immediate post-war decades, for many women, both working-class and middle-class, employment after leaving school was

[238] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 122-124.

[239] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us*, 51-54.

[240] NLGS, *What a Lesbian Looks Like*, 75.

[241] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023.

[242] Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-war England,' *Twentieth Century British History* 15:2 (2004-01) 119-142.

viewed as a temporary interlude before marriage and children. Women sometimes met their future husbands at their place of employment. Other women, especially those who were not attracted to men, might have preferred to be financially independent. However, women who did not find a suitable occupation to be able to support themselves were more likely to yield to parental pressure to marry. In her interview, Sylvia explained that in the early 1960s, options for working-class women were limited. Her first job was in a solicitor's office, which she liked very much. She learned how to type but abhorred shorthand. Although she was interested in the legal profession, she thought she had no hope of success because of her background. Her second job was with an Indian bank. She explained that her mother insisted that she marry: 'My mum kept on about me being married and I thought "well what else am I going to do?"'.[243] Her mother, who dominated her life, perpetuated class inequality. She dissuaded Sylvia from further education and pushed her into marriage:

> I almost got myself sorted out with an accountancy course because I was quite good at banking although I had been naff for maths at school. But I went and signed up for an accountancy course and my mother went berserk: "Why are you doing this? You are going to get married. You don't need to do this. This is ridiculous. You will never…" And she kept on and on. So I didn't do it. I could never stand up to my mother. She was very dominant in my life. Couldn't stand up to her. So I didn't do the course. And actually, there is nothing much left for a working-class girl. If you don't get yourself enough money to keep yourself, you start looking around to get married – for someone to keep you. That's all that is left. In 19, it would have been 1964-65.[244]

She then concentrated on making herself like every other young woman: being sociable at dances and eventually getting married.

Other working-class women in the immediate post-war period decided to marry on their own accord when they felt they had no other options to support themselves. Maggie, born in 1939, explained in her interview how she worked in various jobs before she resolved to marry. First, she trained as a nurse but quit because she hated the discipline. She then worked briefly in an office before becoming the assistant matron in a boarding school in Skegness, which she hated even more. When she returned to

[243] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[244] Ibid.

her parents' home she explained that her mother was furious: 'She'd been boasting that I'd gone away to train to BE something'.[245] She then tried working at a drycleaner and then a retail shop before the youth employment office sent her to learn typing and shorthand. She then found work in a solicitor's office. There she met the man whom she married at age nineteen in 1958 – even though he did not share her Catholic faith – thinking that it was the only option left. She doubted the union: 'Two weeks before the wedding I had a horrible thought that maybe I was doing the wrong thing and maybe I should give it up and go and be a nun'.[246] She separated from her husband after sixteen years and divorced in 1980.

## Children

Dating young men could lead to sexual experimentation, which sometimes resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. Especially before 1967, when abortion was partially legalised and the pill was made available to single women, women had few choices but to continue their pregnancies to term.[247] Single pregnant women could seek advice from the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child, established in 1918 over concern for the welfare of single mothers and their illegitimate children.[248] Barbara recalled the disgrace of her cousin getting pregnant in the late 1920s and that her father rarely let her out of his sight because he was afraid of her 'getting in the same boat'.[249] By the 1950s and 1960s, unmarried motherhood was constructed as both a moral and social problem. From the 1960s through the 1980s, it was also increasingly negatively viewed as a material problem, with the growing backlash against the welfare state.[250] The fear of pregnancy underscored young women's relations with men, notes Langhamer.[251] Sandie recalled dating boys when she was a teenager in the 1950s. Her mother was terrified of her daughter shaming

[245] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023.
[246] Ibid.
[247] *Abortion Act 1967; NHS (Family Planning) Act 1967.*
[248] Langhamer, *English in Love,* 143.
[249] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Barbara Bell*, 30.
[250] Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood,* 122.
[251] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 46-47.

the family with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy: 'My mother's greatest fear was that I was going to become pregnant and bring disgrace on the family, because it was sort of shock/horror thing in those days, getting pregnant, and mother couldn't think of anything more awful than her daughter coming home pregnant'.[252] Single women who got pregnant were social outcasts: they failed society's expectation to procreate within marriage.[253]

Marriage was a solution to an unplanned pregnancy. In the post-war period, with couples increasingly likely to have premarital sex, there was an increased risk of an unexpected pregnancy.[254] Langhamer explains that in mid-century Britain, 'there was a powerful social expectation that a pregnant woman would marry the father of her child', although 'attitudes towards pre-marital pregnancy were not uniform across or within classes'.[255] Nonetheless, Thane and Evans note the rising moral panic over unwed mothers in the 1950s and that by the 1960s the rate of illegitimate births nearly doubled.[256] Langhamer notes that Rachel Pierce's study illustrated that an engagement ring often justified premarital sex and a resultant pregnancy accelerated the wedding date.[257] Jan, who wed after her relationship with a woman ended in 1953, explained: 'I got married partly because I was pregnant, but I also quite liked him – for a man, he was quite considerate. … and he was kind to me'.[258] Anne recalled that her family concealed her unplanned pregnancy and hurriedly arranged her marriage when she was eighteen in 1968. She explained that having children outside of marriage was still viewed as shameful: 'the swinging sixties hadn't quite reached their northern

[252] 'Sandie,' *Daring Hearts*, 24.

[253] For further discussion of single mothers, see Thane and Evans, *Sinners?;* Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood*.

[254] Martin P. M. Richards and B Jane Elliott, 'Sex and Marriage in the 1960s and 1970s,' in Clark (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life & Social Change,* 39-42.

[255] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 143.

[256] Thane and Evans, *Sinners?* 82-84; See also the oral histories of lone mothers in Gallwey, 'Love Beyond the Frame,' 100-123.

[257] Rachel M. Pierce, 'Marriage in the Fifties', *The Sociological Review* NS (March 1963) 221-222; Langhamer, *English in Love,* 159-160.

[258] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 142-3.

town'.[259] Notably, six of the eleven wives in the known lesbian custody cases in the Court of Appeal were pregnant at their weddings, which occurred from 1967 through 1983.[260] Rushing to the altar due to an unplanned pregnancy was not the ideal way to begin a marriage and it is not surprising that many ended in divorce. But not all unexpectedly-pregnant women married, like one young women who gave birth at age fifteen in 1970, after her 'one and only experiment with heterosexual relations'.[261]

Despite the myth that lesbians disliked children, some women who desired women married because they wanted children. Janice wrote to *Arena Three* in 1965 about lesbian mothers: 'Many, if not most, people think it extremely odd, almost a contradiction in terms, that a woman should at the same time love her own sex and be a mother. The two states, although not madly compatible, are not exclusive'.[262] She explained that 'longing for a child can be a most intense emotion – strong enough to lead into marriage those who might otherwise remain outside it'.[263] In Traies' study of older lesbians, slightly more than ten percent of respondents said they married to have children.[264]

Many women did not consider single motherhood as an option. Cohabitation was gaining acceptance beginning in the 1970s, but society continued to be uncomfortable with raising children outside of marriage. Sharon recalled that although she and her boyfriend had been living together for a year in the 1970s, they married when she was twenty-one partly because they both wanted children and partly because 'marriage was the sort of thing everyone was doing'.[265] Sharon followed the status quo: all her friends were married and her boyfriend wanted 'to settle down, get

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[259] Susan Golombok, *We are Family: What Really Matters for Parents and* Children (London: Scribe Publications, 2020) 5.

[260] *Markovic v Markovic; S v S (Custody of Children)* [1980] 1 FLR 143; *Eveson v Eveson; Walker v Walker; Re "A" (A Minor)*; *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* [1991] 1 FLR 223.

[261] 'Personal Texts,' *Sequel* No.3 (March 1978), vi.

[262] Janice O'Brien (New Zealand),'Some Problems of the Lesbian Mother,' *Arena Three* 2:11 (November 1965) 2.

[263] Ibid.

[264] Traies, *The Lives of Older Lesbians*, 62.

[265] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 29.

a house, have a family'.[266] In her interview, Jane explained that what began as a friendship with a man she met in a drama group in 1981 developed into marriage. They married in 1982 to have children:

> We married because I desperately wanted to have a baby. Suddenly something happened to me … I never thought – you hear about biological clock and you think – I wanted to have children and it was such a visceral, amazingly strong sensation that now I really need – I REALLY NEED – to have a baby! And I got married, if I am being really honest, because it just felt too unconventional not to.[267]

Jane was a conventional girl who grew up in a conventional family: her mother was a home maker. She always said that all her life she knew she wanted to be a mum. She said she had looked specifically for a man who would be a good father. The heteronormative life course was boyfriend, marriage, home, and children. Although women gained greater control of their reproduction by the 1970s, many women – including lesbians – continued the norm of raising children within a nuclear family in the last decades of the twentieth century. Having children within marriage was so deeply embedded in society that some lesbians sought to marry gay men with the objective of children.[268]

## Conformity Through "Lavender" Marriages

In a practice colloquially referred to as "bearding", a person concealed their homosexuality by appearing in public with someone of the opposite sex. Some women learned at a young age to deflect peer pressure by pretending to like and to be seen with boys. Siobhan recalled feeling pressured to like boys by other girls in her all-girls convent. She said she had pretended to like the most popular boy so that she had an excuse not to have a boyfriend. Then she picked a 'really sickly bloke' whom she used to walk with 'when everyone paired off and walked down the road with their boyfriends'.[269] Other women told of how they invented boyfriends when they were

[266] Ibid.

[267] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[268] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 97 (June 17-30, 1976) 29; 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 168 (May 31-June13, 1979) 37; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 188 (April 3-16, 1980) 57.

[269] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts,* 16.

young to appear to be like other girls. In 1976, one girl admitted to an agony aunt that she had invented a boyfriend and even engraved the name Steve on an I.D. bracelet to disguise that she was a lesbian.[270] In 1987, Susanna wrote to a newsletter about how she concocted stories about a boyfriend to 'keep up appearances', because she did not want anyone to think she was a 'lessie'.[271]

Some lesbians and gay men actively sought homosexual partners of the opposite sex to be companions at social events. Homosexual men advertised for companions in the *Gay News* in the 1970s and early 1980s.[272] For example, a 34-year-old "executive", recently divorced, gay man was very specific in his advertisement. He wanted a gay or bisexual girl between twenty-five and thirty for 'non-gay social events' and insisted she 'must be attractive and intelligent'.[273] Although less frequently than men, women advertised for male companions. Two 'gay girls' sought 'two gay men' for 'purposes of appearance and platonic friendship'.[274] Appearing to be romantically linked to a person of the opposite sex helped both gay men and lesbians to pass as heterosexual to family, friends, and people at their place of employment.

Some lesbians and gay men married homosexuals of the opposite sex, so called lavender marriages, to present as a nuclear family. A wedding ring was the ultimate cover as society assumed married persons to be heterosexual. In 1974, a married lesbian from Hampshire presumed that marriages where the wives were lesbians worked without stress only when the husbands had no interest in the physical side of the marriage or had homosexual tendencies, as was her experience:

> My own marriage works for a number of reasons. We are somehow on the same wavelength. Not only has my husband homosexual tendencies, but he fully realises this and isn't hung-up about it. He can discuss this with me

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[270] 'I Think I am a Lesbian,' *OK and HI* (10 July 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[271] 'Lesbian Tales,' *LISN* 5 (December 1987) 14.

[272] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 94 (May 6-19, 1976) 26; 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 114 (March 10-23, 1977) 38; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 184 (February 7-20, 1980) 48.

[273] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 190 (May 1-14, 1980) 53.

[274] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 40 (February 14-27, 1974) 18.

> openly, which in turn, helps us to enjoy sex. He also understands my need for a female lover and appreciates the fact that I am "free".[275]

Several wives, who advertised for female companions through KENRIC, noted that their husbands were gay.[276] Maureen recalled that she had married a gay man in the early 1970s to appease her family: 'We lived in the same flat and it kept the families quiet'.[277] Lavender marriages may not have been the ideal solution for all women. Gutterman details how three gay husbands in the USA abused the power imbalance in their marriages, either through domestic violence, economic abuse, or simply by treating their wives as domestic help.[278] However, for many couples, a lavender marriage was a workable solution to combine parenthood, an acceptable family unit, and their homosexuality.

Some divorced lesbians specifically chose gay men for their second husbands. In 1982, a 36-year-old divorcée advertised to marry a gay man of 'any race or religion'.[279] Thirteen years earlier, Mrs M.D. told *Arena Three* that after she divorced her husband of twelve years she then lived with a gay man ten years her junior who helped raise her five children. She said she was concerned about maintaining 'an outward appearance of "normal" family life for the sake of the children': 'We are not ashamed of the way we are, but where children are involved they must be guarded to a great extent – at least from those who do not understand'.[280] Some divorced lesbian mothers felt that a second marriage to a gay man was an attractive option. Besides economic benefits, they could dispense with conjugal relations and provide the appearance of a heteronormative family to shield their children from stigmatization and dispel any suspicions of lesbianism from their ex-husbands.

Lavender marriages were often open marriages. In 1977, a young gay man wrote to agony aunt Proops for advice about marrying a lesbian. He explained that his

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[275] M B Hants, *Sappho* 3:4 (1974) 11-12.

[276] 'Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (October 1974) 3, LMA/4720/06/01/004; 'Contacts,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (April 1994) 16, LMA/4720/05/01/020.

[277] Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 112.

[278] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife,* 42-43.

[279] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 231 (January 7-20, 1982) 44.

[280] Mrs. M.D. (Bromley), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:3 (March 1969) 6.

parents were obsessed with him getting married and that the young woman's parents were also pressing her to marry. They were considering marrying each other to please their parents while discreetly leading separate lives. Although a lavender marriage was practical for appearances, Proops was concerned about the couple living with the subterfuge and what would happen in the future when either spouse fell in love and wanted to leave the marriage.[281] In 1988, Elizabeth Wilson wrote of her experience of sharing her female lover with a lesbian married to a gay man.[282] Personal advertisements in *Gay News* also indicate that lesbians married gay men in the 1970s and 1980s: both women and men advertised for potential spouses. Women advertised for gay men with 'a view to marriage', for 'no-strings marriage', or for a 'marriage of convenience'.[283] A 21-year-old 'gay girl' candidly advertised for a 'very wealthy, lonely gay gentleman' with a 'view to marriage'.[284] Gay men advertised for lesbians to marry for friendship and appearances – 'companionable marriage' – and some offered financial benefits.[285] One gay bachelor explained that marriage 'could be financially rewarding for the right person' and yet another offered 'marriage and business partnership' to an ambitious gay girl.[286] Some gay men were straightforward about their expectations, such as a young man who sought an intelligent lesbian for a 'platonic marriage' and explained that he needed a wife 'for social and family reasons' and was not interested in a physical relationship.[287] Another '100% gay guy' wanted to marry a '100% lesbian'.[288] "Married with children" was cover for one's homosexuality

[281] Marje Proops, 'Should They Wed to Hide Their Secret?', *Daily Mirror* (17 February 1977).

[282] Elizabeth Wilson, 'Memoirs of and Anti-Heroine,' in Cant and Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records,* 42.

[283] 'Multiple Classified Advertisements', *Gay News* 37 (December 13-January 9, 1974); 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 65 (February 27-March 12, 1975) 20; 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 68 (April 10-23, 1975) 26; 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 70 (May 8-21, 1975) 26; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 190 (May 1-14, 1980) 53.

[284] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 94 (May 6-19, 1976) 26.

[285] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 66 (March 13-26, 1975) 26; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 184 (February 7-20, 1980) 48; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 188 (April 3-16, 1980) 57.

[286] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 184 (February 7-20, 1980) 48.

[287] 'Mixed Personal', *Gay News* 127 (September 22-October 5, 1977) 38.

[288] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 225 (October 1-14, 1981) 36.

and marriages where neither spouse was heterosexual could be a convenient and pragmatic solution for finances, social standing, career advancement, and parenting.

Bisexual women and men also advertised specifically for bisexual partners of the opposite sex for relationships and marriage, and possibly children.[289] For example, bisexual men advertised for bisexual women for a 'lasting loving friendship', 'friendship/marriage', or outright for marriage.[290] Two attractive, bisexual young women advertised for a couple of 'gay/bisexual men for friendship, possible marriage'.[291] Pam, who had come out as a lesbian at university in the mid-1980s, described how she had shared a flat with her gay best friend. Both identifying as bisexual, Pam explained how she and her male partner had 'heterosexual cover' under which to raise their three children.[292] She noted that persons at her children's school saw her sharing a house with the father of her children and recognised that it would be different if everyone on her street knew she was living with a woman.[293] A partnership between a male and a female bisexual allowed both partners to enjoy the privileges of a heterosexual lifestyle.

Some lesbians married men to help either the men or themselves immigrate to the UK. Both women and men advertised for mutually-beneficial associations (MBA) with homosexuals of the opposite sex in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.[294] One American lesbian advertised to meet a UK man for possible marriage.[295] Fearing having to return to China, one man bluntly advertised for help from a gay girl 'for friendship and possible marriage', as he was 'a respectable Chinese man' who wished

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[289] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 224 (September 17-30, 1981) 40; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 226 (October 15-28, 1981) 39.

[290] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 224 (September 17-30, 1981) 40; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 184 (February 7-20, 1980) 48; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 224 (September 17-30, 1981) 40.

[291] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53.

[292] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

[293] Ibid.

[294] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 178 (November 1-14, 1979) 48; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 206 (January 8-21, 1981) 45; ' 'Contacts,' *Lesbian London* 19 (October 1993); 'Contacts,' *Lesbian London* 22 (February 1994) 14; 'Contacts,' *Lesbian London* 25 (June 1994) 10.

[295] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 210 (March 5-18, 1981) 41.

'to remain with his guy in England'.[296] Heterosexual men from outside the UK also sought lesbians. A 'discreet & trustworthy' male musician from San Francisco advertised for a 'young female British citizen of any race for M.B.A.'.[297] Lavender marriages between international men and lesbians were means for lesbians to immigrate the UK or to help men do so. Occasionally, British lesbians sought to marry international gay men to move to other countries to remain with their partners.[298]

## Conclusion

The motherhood within marriage mandate was so persuasive and pervasive that women rejected their desire for women and instead chose a heteronormative life course. Especially before the gay liberation movement, women struggled without the knowledge and language to understand and articulate their sexuality. Most avenues of information for young women, whether advice from agony aunts or pseudo-scientific books, reinforced a path of marriage and motherhood. Some women hoped that their desire for women would subside or be cured by marriage while others intentionally sought open marriages with gay or bisexual men to masquerade as heterosexual. Many of the women's stories in this chapter echo the sentiments of heterosexual women who married in the post-war period, such as being ignorant about sexual relations when they married, bowing to their parents' insistence to see them married with children, and marrying men they thought would be good fathers and providers.[299] Many lacked the economic capital or the courage to live independently. Others determined marriage as the best means to conceive and raise children.

Although a lesbian lifestyle was increasingly a positive and available option for women from the 1970s onward, some women who desired women continued into the 1990s to have children with husbands or with live-in male partners. There was no

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[296] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 189 (April 17-30, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 190 (May 1-14, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 196 (July 24-August 20, 1980) 51.

[297] 'Contacts,' *Lesbian London* 25 (June 1994) 10.

[298] 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 188 (April 3-16, 1980) 57; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 53; 'Mixed Personal,' *Gay News* 189 (April 17-30, 1980) 53.

[299] See Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham (eds), *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk about Their Lives* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

sudden shift to every woman who desired women leaving their marriages or eschewing marriage. Although the rate of marriage declined from 1972 onwards, it was difficult for women to wholesale discard the motherhood mandate.[300] Like many wives, being a wife and mother did not turn out to be the ultimate fulfilment they expected. The following chapter examines what happened after the wedding, when wives confronted their desire for women.

[300] Despite the fact that women can control their reproduction with modern birth control technology – essentially eliminating the biological inevitability of becoming a mother – women still have a motherhood mandate to bear and raise at least two children. See Nancy Felipe Russo, 'The Motherhood Mandate,' *Journal of Social Issues* 32 (1976) 144.

# Chapter Two: Experiences of Marriage

An anonymous subscriber to *Arena Three* said she was ignorant about homosexuality when she married before World War II: 'the idea that women could love one another, emotionally and physically, had never occurred to me'.[301] Although she fell in love with another woman while in the military, she returned to her husband after the war. She explained how she had regretted her decision:

> By returning to my husband after the War I did us both a great wrong. Although I managed to repress my lesbian feelings most of the time, and now have a grown-up family, our marriage has not been a happy one – how could it be? We have not shared a bed for many years; now in middle age we are both frustrated and unhappy. Had I been courageous and honest enough to admit to my lesbianism after the War, how different both our lives would have been. He was young enough then to find someone who could have given him happiness; I could have been myself, whether I found happiness or sorrow.[302]

She longed for the love of a woman, for the 'wonderful love and "togetherness"' that she knew could exist between women.[303] Many other wives acted similarly: they took their wedding vows seriously and denied their desire for women. Some conceived more children, a further commitment to marriage. Others sought counselling. For wives who accepted their desire for women, their dilemma was how to reconcile their love for women with their chosen roles as wives and mothers.

Oram related a similar story of a woman called Noreen, who remained married from 1961 until her husband's death thirty years later despite several lesbian affairs with her husband's knowledge. Oram attributes this propensity to remain married to 'issues of social respectability, lack of an independent income, the prospect of losing custody of children and the difficulty of finding alternative housing'.[304] Jennings agrees, clarifying that in the 1950s and 1960s, divorcées were stigmatised, and single parenthood was economically difficult and socially marginalised. She further argues

[301] One who hadn't the courage, 'Free Speech: A Call to Courage,' *Arena Three* 8:7-12 (1971) 7.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Cook and Oram, *Queer Beyond London*, 176.

that before the 1970s, wives were more likely to remain married, either suppressing their desire or discreetly having affairs. Beginning in the permissive 1960s, 'many married women opted to tell their husbands about their same-sex desires, hoping that it would be possible to openly pursue lesbian relationships alongside marriage'.[305] Jennings notes occurrences of wives' infidelity with other women in Britain and Australia and Gutterman and Rivers provide similar evidence in the USA.[306] Gutterman argues that the marital home 'served as the centre of family life, yet it allowed access to lesbian communities and sheltered lesbian affairs'.[307]

I agree with Oram and Jennings on the variety of reasons that contributed to lesbian wives' decisions to remain married: many of the same pragmatic reasons why they got married also impelled them to remain married. However, this chapter argues that many lesbian wives' foremost concern was to remain as the primary caregiver of their children, even if that meant remaining in loveless or abusive marriages. In the 1970s, increasing numbers of lesbian wives wanted to leave their marriages and live openly with their female partners, and many did so. However, the wide dissemination from the mid-1970s onward of the assumption that lesbian mothers would not get custody of their children in court (discussed in Chapter Three) influenced many wives to remain married at least until their children were teenagers.[308] Although this often meant sacrificing self-fulfilment, lesbian mothers sometimes found space for lesbian desire within marriage. I agree with Jennings that, especially during the sexual freedom of the permissive sixties, some lesbian wives were able to enjoy extramarital affairs with the knowledge of their husbands and to fulfil their expected gendered roles in the family.

This chapter provides an extensive, granular examination of lesbians' experiences of marriage in Britain. Divided into four sections, it first examines how wives confronted their desire for women. Sexual relations with their husbands were an

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[305] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 115, 108-109.

[306] Ibid., 113-119; Gutterman, '"The House on the Borderland"; Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*; Rivers, *Radical Relations*.

[307] Gutterman, '"The House on the Borderland",' 3.

[308] See *Custody Disputes in Print Media*.

issue for many wives and many sought advice and counselling. Seeking to remain married they joined lesbian mothers' groups, consulted grassroot organisations for spouses in mixed marriages, and sought advice from marriage counsellors. The second section examines how, once wives accepted their desire for women, they often chose to remain married. Children were a major factor in their decisions. Lesbian wives often feared revealing their sexuality to their husbands. While sometimes their disclosures resulted in divorce, domestic abuse, and even death, some husbands accepted and even encouraged their wives' sexual relationships with women. The final section explores the many ways in which lesbian wives balanced their family life with extramarital affairs.

## Confronting Desire for Women

Although some women were aware of their sexuality before they got married, many claimed that they only discovered their desire for women after their weddings. Some were married for decades before they accepted and acted upon their desire for women. Not every woman acted on their first love. Often, they agonised between their commitment to their husbands and children and their desire for a relationship with another woman. Conjugal relations were often a major issue. Although many found ways to endure or avoid sex with their husbands, others considered suicide or divorce. Frustrated with their physical and emotional relationships (or lack thereof) with their husbands, wives either dreamed of or actively sought women for friendships. Sometimes these female relationships precipitated divorce, but many women managed extramarital relationships while continuing their lives as wives and mothers: cooking, cleaning, and having sex with their husbands.

Conjugal relations were problematic for many lesbian wives. Mid-century, brides were expected to be virgins, yet mutually-satisfying sexual relations, as noted by Langhamer, were a key indicator of love within marriage.[309] Historians suggest that young women were often inadequately prepared for sex and motherhood: often naïve

[309] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 184-185.

and ignorant about the mechanics of sex between men and women. Sex was a taboo subject in many households and although the *Education Act 1944* recognised a need for sex education in schools, the rollout in schools was haphazard.[310] The CMAC, as noted by Harris, had identified a need 'to impart medical information and advice to those preparing for marriage, particularly surrounding the place of sex within the marital relationship' in the 1940s.[311] Of the 1037 married, divorced, widowed, or separated women in Geoffrey Gorer's 1971 study, sixty-three percent said they were virgins before marriage.[312] Ignorant and virginal, brides were sometimes immediately disgusted by sexual relations with their husbands on their wedding night. Wendy admitted that when she got married at age twenty-one in 1965, marital relations came as a shock: 'I was revolted by the sexual act with a male'.[313] Sharley described her confusion and ignorance about sexuality when she was young. Although she 'wasn't very turned on by men' she said she got married in the 1940s due to 'all sorts of pressures'.[314] She said she also found 'anything sexual rather disgusting' and after her second child was born, she tried to commit suicide to avoid sexual relations with her husband.[315] E.V. from Surrey told *Arena Three* that it was only after she and her husband adopted children that she realised she was not like other married women. She explained: 'conventional love stories and sex films left me stone cold'.[316] She limped along in her marriage until she could not bear it any longer; she dreaded going

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[310] Angela Davis, '"Oh No, Nothing, We Didn't Learn Anything": Sex Education and the Preparation of Girls for Motherhood, c.1930–1970', *History of Education* 37:5 (September 2008) 661-677; Lesley Hall, 'Birds, Bees and General Embarrassment: Sex Education in Britain from Social Purity to Section 28,' in Richard Aldrich (ed), *Public or Private Education?: Lessons from History* (London: Woburn Press, 2004) 93-112; Beier, L M, '"We Were as Green as Grass": Learning About Sex and Reproduction in Three Lancashire Communities, 1900-1970.' *Social History of Medicine* 16:3 461-480; Gallwey, 'Love Beyond the Frame,' 100-123.

[311] Harris, 'Love Divine and Love Sublime,' 195.

[312] Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today: A Study of the Views and Experience of the Under 45s* (London: Nelson 1971) 33, 47.

[313] Wendy Jones, 'Interview on Lesbianism,' Authorised transcription of a BBC recording on 15 March 1965, *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 5.

[314] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 75-77.

[315] Ibid., 75.

[316] E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12; E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:1 (April 1974) 10.

to bed with her husband each night.[317] Other women, distraught by their marital obligation to have sex with their husbands but feeling that divorce was not an option, considered suicide. Mrs. H.M. explained to *Arena Three* readers in 1965 that she was revolted by her husband's lovemaking:

> My greatest problem is that I just can't bear my husband making love to me. It absolutely revolts me. I am bruised where I pinch myself to stop myself screaming "No!" when he's making love. But he is very touchy about this particular aspect of our married life – I suppose it is his male pride, and I just don't dare tell him how I feel. For this reason also I can't go to the Marriage Guidance Council. The only thing to do seems to be to leave him. But where can I go with four children? … I have even thought of suicide, but I am too much of a coward for that.[318]

In contrast, she said her first experience with a woman was 'really marvellous'.[319] Similarly, other wives who had been disappointed or had felt inadequate or frigid in bed with their husbands, said they had found sex with women was wonderful.[320] Gillian told the *Evening Echo* in 1967 that she had fallen in love with another married lesbian mother and that for the first time in her life she found her sex life satisfying. She admitted that she had never really enjoyed sex with her husband and had reasoned that she was 'sexually a cold person' and similar to many other women.[321] Sigourney, who met her husband at the age of fifteen in 1975, also claimed she found marital relations unfulfilling, but admitted she had not known anything different at the time. She described how her much-older husband was not affectionate: 'Sex for him was a function. You know, he jumped on, bang, bang, bang, jumped off and I lay there and thought of England until it was over'.[322]

Sex with men was certainly not a cure for lesbianism, as sometimes assumed, and for many it was an aspect of marriage that they endured. Through her studies about maintaining mixed marriages in the 2000s, Amy Pierce Buxton found that some

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[317] E V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12.

[318] Mrs. H. M. (Essex), Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 12.

[319] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us* , 77.

[320] Ronit Lentin, 'How the Daily Lie Gave Way to a Lonely Life of Truth,' *The Guardian* (14 May 1985) 8.

[321] Jean Ritchie, 'Beyond the Pale,' *The Evening Echo* [Hemel Hempstead] 619 (4 November 1969) 8.

[322] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32,* 25 August 2019.

wives who identified as lesbian continued sexual relations with their husbands after coming out 'for their husbands' sake, not their own pleasure'.[323] Some lesbians allowed their husbands to assume they were bisexual. Hazel, in her forties in 1987, allowed her husband to believe she was bisexual to help him accept her desire for women.[324] Sylvia explained that in 1980, when she first told her husband she was gay, she quickly amended her orientation to bisexual because she thought he would be better able to cope with the latter.[325] Wives employed various coping mechanisms, from tolerance to avoidance. Jane recalled that her mother's experience helped her set low expectations for sexual intimacy with her husband. Since her mother had explained that she had completely lost interest in sex after having children, Jane expected the same to happen to her. Jane gauged that her sex life had been 'good enough', but admitted that she had fantasized about women during sex with her husband: 'If I am being really honest then what I was often thinking about was women'.[326] Another young wife, said that she began to tire of sex with her husband after five children. She explained how she found sexual fulfilment in marriage: 'my one pleasure was masturbating – fantasizing I was touching another woman'.[327] Nonetheless, some wives were much less inclined to accede to their husbands' sexual demands, especially over time. Catherine married when she was pregnant in 1968 and had four children with her husband. They both knew she was a lesbian, but he was willing to live as husband and wife if full sexual relations continued. She gradually concluded that she had to leave the marriage, and they separated after fifteen years of marriage.[328] Other wives had managed to avoid sex with their husbands altogether,

[323] Amity Pierce Buxton, 'Works in Progress: How Mixed-Orientation Couples Maintain Their Marriages After the Wives Come Out,' *Journal of Bisexuality* 4:1-2 (2004) 69; See also Amity Pierce Buxton, 'Counselling Heterosexual Spouse of Bisexual Men and Women and Bisexual-Heterosexual Couples: Affirmative Approaches,' *Journal of Bisexuality* 6:1-2 (2006) 105-135; Amity Pierce Buxton, 'Reflections on Bisexuality Through the Prism of Mixed-Orientation Marriages,' *Journal of Bisexuality* 11:4 (2011) 525-544.

[324] Romans, 'Daring to Pretend,' 101.

[325] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[326] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[327] 'A Remote Experience … *Sequel* No.3 (March 1978).

[328] Ronit Lentin, 'How the Daily Lie Gave Way to a Lonely Life of Truth,' *The Guardian* (14 May 1985) 8.

like one anonymous *Arena Three* reader, who disclosed in 1971 that she had not shared a bed with her husband for decades.[329]

Some wives might have derived some pleasure from conjugal relations, either because sex was part of a loving relationship with their husbands or perhaps because they were bisexual. Evelyn got married in 1978 and divorced her husband in 2003. Five years later she fell in love with a woman for the first time; she was fifty-three years old. Voluntarily reflecting on her sexuality during her 2023 interview, Evelyn described her life as having two halves: 'I had a long, very straight start in life and, whatever is left to me, I am all about the women'.[330] Identifying as lesbian, she wondered if she might have been bisexual when she was young because she was 'quite comfortable with sex with men'.[331] She contrasted her experience with those of other previously-married lesbians who did not enjoy sex with men. Evelyn said the women 'were quite emotionally engaged with men but when it got to the physical side they were "ooh, this doesn't feel right"'.[332]

Some wives claimed their first sexual relationship with a woman was an epiphany that awoke their libidos: the contrast between sex with their husbands and sex with women was sometimes startling. Jackie was married and in her thirties when she first slept with a woman. She described how the experience was unexpected: 'One night I was talking to her and I don't know how it happened – from talk to getting into bed – but it did. I was so alive, adrenalin flowing'.[333] She surmised that her love affairs with men were not at the 'same pitch or intensity'.[334] She also theorised about society's presumption that women were sexually passive: 'Society assumes that men have sexuality, women just have feelings. But women have discovered we have a powerful

[329] One who hadn't the courage, 'Free Speech: A call to courage,' *Arena Three* 8:7-12 (1971) 7.
[330] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Joy Melville, 'Women in Love with Women,' *New Society* 59:1002 (January 28, 1982) 138.
[334] Ibid.

sexual drive'.[335] In 1984, Beth explained that she had not considered she was anything but heterosexual until she slept with a woman. After she left her heroin-addicted male partner when she was three months pregnant, she started life afresh two hundred miles away. She said she was surprised when she first slept with a woman: 'It was sudden and decisive' and she knew she would never again sleep with a man.[336] Sometimes women needed to experience relationships with both men and women for them to realise that they preferred the latter. Sylvia noted: 'I was living in a very black and white, grey world, before I came out. … Once that you actually accept you are lesbian, I tell you, it is like living in technicolor'.[337]

Confronting and accepting their attraction to other women – to their best friends, co-workers, or women at church or their children's schools – could be confusing and troublesome. Mrs. E.J.S. from Cheshire did not accept her desire for women and yet she shared her story with *Arena Three* in 1969. She had married in 1953 knowing that she had no interest in men: she thought herself frigid and abnormal. After fourteen years of marriage and three children, her husband died unexpectedly. As a 38-year-old widow, she described her feelings about her recent tryst with a woman:

> Recently, due to an "incident", I discovered that I <u>am</u> capable of feeling – albeit only as a "freak" – and have to live with the knowledge that for fourteen years I cheated a good man. Frigidity I can live with, but being unclean – never!
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> D.S. should realize that everyone doesn't want to "have what it takes to qualify for the title Lesbian"… I'd rather have leprosy.[338]

Women often did not act upon their first inclination. Maggie recalled that she had first felt attraction for another woman when she was in her thirties in the 1970s: she had been married for over a decade and had two children. When a Dutch female student came to stay with her family over the summer, Maggie said she 'fell for her badly' but was confused by her feelings.[339] She did nothing and the woman went back to the

[335] Ibid.

[336] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 20.

[337] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[338] Mrs. E.J.S., Cheshire, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:4 (April 1969) 6.

[339] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023.

Netherlands: Maggie was left with her “problem”. Many wives did their best to ignore their attraction to women and instead committed themselves to their marriages. Sylvia was married and in her thirties in the 1970s when she began to realise her desire for women. Decades later, she recalled that she had thought to herself: ‘Button up, be quiet, get on with it.” You are married, you’ve got a child, got a nice home’.[340] She said she had a second child ‘to sort of cement myself into the marriage’.[341]

It was not unusual for wives’ first love for women to be unrequited. Sylvia recalled that after five years at home with two young children, she had felt that her life was closing in and shutting her down. She explained that when she began a job as a library assistant in the late 1970s, she felt attraction to a female co-worker – another married woman – who did not reciprocate her feelings:

> I worked with a woman who was very good and she took an interest in me. ... But she took me to the theatre. She took me to her home. She was having trouble with her marriage. And I knew what was happening. And it is terrible: you can’t stop it. … I declared myself to this woman who freaked out: “No no” you know “I’m not like that and I don’t want anything to do with you really. I am good friends with you and I love talking to and love being with you and having you to my house but no, no I am not, I am no lesbian, I am not gay”.[342]

In 1971, a childless wife in Worcestershire explained to *Arena Three* readers how falling in love with her best friend helped her realise that she was a lesbian: ‘I am married but have always deep down, known that I am lesbian, but it didn’t really come to me until I fell in love with my best friend after I was married’.[343] She said she had ‘suffered mental torture’ because her love was unrequited: ‘I know I can never tell her how I feel; she could never accept me as a lesbian. Being a married lesbian is just as lonely as being a single one’.[344]

Unhappily married, some wives yearned for the love of another woman. In 1971, an anonymous wife whose unrequited love made her realise she was a lesbian,

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[340] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[341] Ibid.

[342] Ibid.

[343] Anon, Worcestershire, Free Speech,’ *Arena Three* 8:3 (April 1971) 12,14.

[344] Ibid.

hoped one day she would find a female partner with whom she could 'have a long and happy association'.[345] A lesbian wife in Bedfordshire in 1974 admitted that she was trying to find the courage to divorce her husband and make a fresh start in life. She had not yet found 'the one': the woman with whom she wanted to spend her life. She admitted that if she was 'fortunate to meet "the one", nothing on this earth, be it marriage, children, hell or high water, will ever prevent me from being with her'.[346] Jackie longed for a relationship with another woman in the 1990s, after two decades of marriage, although she admitted to the KENRIC Mothers Group (KMG) that a relationship with a woman 'seemed like an impossible dream, an unobtainable goal'.[347] She recalled how she had felt no connection with her husband: 'I still remember every morning of my married life waking up next to my husband, it was like being with an alien being, an imposter almost'.[348]

## Advice and Counselling

Lesbians sometimes sought advice and counselling to help them reconcile their sexuality with their roles as wives and mothers. Initially, they may have written to an agony aunt or contacted a gay help line. They also sought help from homosexual organisations, professional marriage counsellors, the church, and grassroots counsellors for couples where one spouse was not heterosexual. They sometimes had medical treatment, either to help them understand their feelings for women or in the hopes for a cure for their homosexuality.

Some wives sought guidance and support from other lesbian wives. In the 1960s, wives expressed to *Arena Three* their desire to discuss their common issues. One of MRG's objectives was 'to provide a centre wherein homosexual women can meet others for discussion of their differing views, problems and interests'.[349] In 1965,

[345] Anon, Worcestershire, Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:3 (April 1971) 12,14.

[346] R. L. Beds., 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:5 (1974) 10.

[347] Jackie Miller, 'A Life Worth Waiting For,' *KMG* No. 21 (June 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[348] Ibid. After leaving her husband Jackie met a friend through KENRIC, and their friendship grew into love.

[349] Katherine A Hubbard, 'Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid.' *Journal of Homosexuality* (2021) 575.

Mrs. H.I. from Bedfordshire was the first reader to propose it would be beneficial for wives to discuss their mutual problems. She asked if 'there may be some members who have managed to overcome the whole problem rather than just suppress it, and could advise others how to do so?'[350] No readers responded to her inquiry, but wives in following years continued to suggest a self-help group for wives.[351] Although the editor had previously estimated that forty percent of subscribers were married, separated, or divorced, she concurred that indeed there was not sufficient interest among subscribers to establish the proposed 'married women's group' and asked if any 'keen letter writers' were interested in starting a correspondence club.[352] Again, nothing happened. In 1969, another married subscriber, who lived on the border of Kent and Sussex, wrote that she 'should very much like to hear from other married readers, especially those with children, as to how to cope with the problems they inevitably must have'.[353] Despite recognizing that they had mutual concerns of being married with children, *Arena Three* subscribers did not gather or correspond with each other in the 1960s. As mothers concerned with the daily care of their families, they had precious little extra time to devote to self-help groups, especially those that required time and money to travel.

Several women split from MRG in 1965 to form KENRIC, an organisation exclusively committed to enabling lesbians to connect socially with each other, advertising events via its newsletter. KENRIC continues in the 2020s to encourage and facilitate the lesbian community; it is 'the UK's longest-running lesbian social group'.[354] Despite changes in social attitudes towards marriage and homosexuality since the 1960s, lesbians continued to marry or opt to remain married into the 1990s,

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[350] Mrs. H.I. (Beds.), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 11.

[351] Editor, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:11 (December 1966) 14; B G (Devon), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 4:1 (January 1967) 14.

[352] New Year Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:1 (January 1965) 11; Wendy Jones, 'Interview on Lesbianism,' Authorised transcription of a BBC recording on 15 March 1965, *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 3-6; Esme Langley, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:11 (December 1966) 14; B G (Devon), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 4:1 (January 1967) 14.

[353] Mrs. R. (Sussex), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:2 (February 1969) 5.

[354] *About KENRIC*, <https://www.kenriclesbians.org.uk/about-us> [Accessed 12 September 2023].

when KENRIC began organising lesbian mothers to network. Like the discourse in *Arena Three*, the initiative began with a few mothers expressing interest in talking to other mothers.[355] In 1987, Frankie advertised to organise a conference for married lesbian mothers to exchange ideas:

> Are you, Kenric member, also married? Have you or your partner, found living these two contradictory lifestyles restricting, confusing or depressing? I am willing to organise a forum to exchange ideas. If you would like to take part, send details of the distance that you are prepared to travel and the time when you could attend a conference (weekday, weekend, evening).[356]

Later in 1987, yet another mother suggested forming a support group for lesbian mothers.[357] Finally, in September of 1992, Babs Greenwood began a group called Lesbian United Mums (LUM) with the motto, 'Don't stay Mum, join LUM'.[358] The initiative received a tremendous response, and together with Julie Burchell, Greenwood produced three newsletters in 1992.[359] Greenwood's initial idea was for KENRIC members to exchange stories of motherhood via a correspondence circle, but she quickly decided to 'open the group to all, advertising with Accept, Gemma, Quaker Gay Group, and The Samaritans'.[360] Burchell continued the exclusive group, called the KENRIC Mothers' Group (KMG), producing a monthly newsletter for four years. Aimed initially at single or divorced mothers, although likely with a female partner, to help them 'find and support each other, to build contacts and relationships, and to find suitable partners should this be required!'.[361] Lesbian mothers, both married and single, subscribed. In July 1996, despite receiving £100 from the KENRIC Committee to continue covering the costs of producing and distributing the newsletter, Burchell decided to publish quarterly. Her decision was based on lack of enthusiasm, including her own waning interest, and readers contributing fewer

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[355] 'Calling lesbian mothers in the South East!', *KENRIC Newsletter* (April 1986) 6, LMA/4720/06/01/012.

[356] 'Calling all Married Lesbians,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (March 1987) 7, LMA/4720/06/01/013.

[357] 'Lesbian Mothers, *KENRIC Newsletter* (July 1987) 10.

[358] 'Noticeboard,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (September 1992) 3, LMA/4720/06/01/018.

[359] Ibid.

[360] Ibid. 'Noticeboard,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (December 1992) 5, LMA/4720/06/01/018.

[361] Val Brown, KENRIC Chair, 'Soapbox,' *KMG* No. 32 (June 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

articles.[362] Mothers' concerns and priorities change as their children age. Burchell published the last print issue of the KMG newsletter in autumn 1996.[363]

Although KMG and its newsletter disappeared, the desire for mutual support for married lesbian mothers continued. In early 1999, a mother requested KENRIC start another group for mothers, as the isolation and the separation of married lesbian mothers persisted:

> I'm sure there are a lot of lesbians who feel as "Mums", we are not 'true lesbians' if you follow my meaning. Unfair really, and not true, we learnt the hard way, or found out our true identity, after marriage, or later in life. Please consider this, as the isolation is worse when one has a child.[364]

The secretary replied that she would suggest to the KENRIC Committee to add a contact section specifically for mothers in the newsletter and to organise events for mothers and children.[365] On the eve of the twentieth-first century, there were still married lesbians who expressed that they were isolated, unhappily married, and misunderstood by the lesbian community.

Some wives sought advice from agony aunts. Letters to agony aunts published in newspapers and women's magazines publicised the presence of wives and mothers who desired women and perpetuated myths about the aetiology of homosexuality. In 1971, agony aunt Ann Stuart referred to homosexuality as a 'condition' about which there was a 'lot of ignorance and misunderstanding'.[366] She illustrated her own ignorance when she theorised that a reader's negative experience with a man – an unplanned pregnancy outside of marriage – had destroyed the reader's 'faith in men – many of whom are entirely selfish' and caused her to seek friendship and affection from another woman'.[367] However, Stuart maintained that medical intervention could not cure homosexuality. In 1975, agony aunt "Lucie" urged a married lesbian mother

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[362] Julie Burchell, *KMG* No. 41 (Autumn 1996) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[363] See also *Into the 1990s.*

[364] Correspondence from Sue Martin to Tina Savage, (15 February 1999) LMA/4720/05/01/002.

[365] Correspondence from Tina Savage to Sue Martin, (19 February 1999) LMA/4720/05/01/002.

[366] 'Ann Stuart: Love For Another Woman', *Yorkshire Evening Post* (18 August 1971) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[367] Ibid.

to seek counselling for her 'tragic problem' at either the Albany Trust or FRIEND.[368] In 1976, a married woman explained to Proops that she felt 'sick with self disgust' because she had responded positively to a divorced woman's kisses and cuddles when they were both 'tipsy' with alcohol; she hated herself for behaving 'unnaturally'.[369] Proops explained that everyone has 'hidden homosexual tendencies' and dismissed her response in that it was the alcohol that made her 'revert to something children often do'.[370] Agony aunts reiterated common myths about homosexuality, and similar to the advice given to girls, either dismissed or trivialized women's desire for other women.[371]

Lesbian and gay help lines were other avenues of inquiry for lesbian wives. Durell explained that a referral by Deidre Sanders, an agony aunt for *The Sun*, to the London Lesbian Line in 1981 resulted in 250 phone calls from married lesbians. The referral was in response to a published letter from a married lesbian, which was 'a conflation of several hundred similar letters which she had received'.[372] Durell claimed that one third of the 130 calls each week to the London Lesbian Line were from married women who had fallen in love with other women. She noted that 'most were incredibly relieved to have been able to discuss this with another lesbian at all, and totally daunted by the idea of leaving their marriage and attempting to establish a lesbian relationship'.[373] Agony aunts in the 1970s also recommended women seek advice from marriage guidance counsellors and CHE.[374]

Wives, with and without their husbands, sought help from professional marriage counsellors, with varying degrees of success. Counsellors from the CMAC

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[368] 'Problem Post: I Now Love a Woman More than My Husband,' *Luton News* (6 February 1975) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[369] 'Dear Marje', *Daily Mirror* (21 October 1976) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-1970, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[370] Ibid.

[371] See *Seeking Guidance from Woman's Magazines*.

[372] Durell, 'At Home,' 8.

[373] Ibid. 9.

[374] John Worth, 'Life's Like This: I Dare Not Tell My Husband,' *Evening News* [London] (14 February 1972) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate; Jean Austin, 'Jean Austin Answers Your Problems: Is This an Unhealthy Friendship?,' *Luton Evening Post* (01 August 1973) Ca Agony Aunts 1976-79, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

and some from the NMGC drew upon Christian principles and utilized modern psychology to impart that true modern married love 'could be learned (and practiced) and their role was to impart such rational, scientific, comprehensible knowledge.'[375] In the 1970s, Sarah went for 'sexual counselling' with her husband: they had experienced 'sexual problems' and Sarah believed she was frigid.[376] She claimed the counsellor laughed and dismissed her concerns of lesbianism. She and her husband assumed the professional counsellor must be correct. Maggie, who separated in 1974 and divorced six years later, recalled that she had undergone a lot of counselling, before, during, and after her divorce. She also tried marriage counselling at a very expensive Catholic institution in London, where the counsellors gave her a lot of support.[377] She also sought advice from the Church of England, where she met a 'very sympathetic priest'.[378] Maggie also tried Quest, a support group for Catholic homosexuals.[379] The apparent misogyny in Quest – 'it was all about making the tea … my opinions didn't matter' – incited her to start a group just for lesbians called Catholic Sisterhood.[380] There she met Sylvia, who was experiencing the same 'trauma'.[381] Sylvia explained that she had realized she was gay after marriage and children and had sought help from the Catholic church without success:

> I tried to get counselling from the Catholic church, which was a disaster. I talked to this guy… and he started asking me how I reacted to pictures of naked women… and I thought okay, I am in far too delicate a situation to be

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[375] See Jane Lewis, David Clark, and David Morgan, *Whom God has Joined Together: The Work of Marriage Guidance* (London: Routledge, 1992); Harris, 'Love Divine and Love Sublime,' 216; Jane Lewis, 'Public Institution and Private Relationships: Marriage and Marriage Guidance 1920-1968,' *Twentieth Century British History* 1:3 (1990) 233-263.

[376] Maggie French, 'Loves, Sexualities, and Marriages: Strategies and Adjustments,' in Ken Plummer (ed), *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences* (London: Routledge, 1992) 92.

[377] The CMAC began in 1948.

[378] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023.

[379] Quest began from a group of gay Catholics meeting in November 1973; Michael Stephens, *Gay Catholics in Britain: The Story of Quest 1973-83* (Surrey: Victoria Printing Works, 1983) 1; Other religious support groups included Friend's Homosexual Fellowship and the Gay Christian Movement; For information on the latter see Robin Green, 'The Church,' in Bruce Galloway (ed), *Prejudice and Pride, Discrimination Against Gay People in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 139-164.

[380] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023.

[381] Ibid.

> tampered with by an amateur like you. And I put the phone down. She then talked to a nun in London, who talked about balancing things: my life as a wife and a mother and being a lesbian and we talked about the balance. At the *Sappho* meeting I got the telephone number of something called the Catholic Lesbian Sisterhood and in my mind's eye I saw a lot of polishing candlesticks and you know God what on earth are they like.[382]

In 2023, Maggie and Sylvia had been together for forty-two years, married since 2015.

From the mid-1970s, there was another avenue of help for lesbian wives who wanted to remain married: grassroots organisations who counselled spouses in mixed marriages. One of the earliest grassroots counselling groups began meeting at the South London Gay Centre in 1974.[383] Three men began separate groups in the 1970s.[384] Penny and Ray Edwards, who had discovered he was gay after twelve years of marriage and two children, initiated Support and Information in Gay Married Associations (SIGMA) to support and inform heterosexual partners in mixed marriages both in London and in rural areas through counselling and conferences.[385] SIGMA counselled mostly straight wives with gay husbands. An article in *Gay News* in 1991 described SIGMA as a self-help group for women about "caring and helping families keep together"'.[386] In 1984, Norman Cross began a nationwide campaign to help married gay men and women maintain their marriages.[387] These grassroots organisations disappeared in the mid-1980s: at least there is no evidence of them continuing to advertise in the gay press.[388] I attribute this decline of counselling organisations in part to the decreasing numbers of married homosexuals in the 1980s:

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[382] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[383] 'London Centre Launches Appeal,' *Gay News* 60 (December 5-18, 1974) 5.

[384] 'Married Gays Meet,' *Gay News* 80 (October 9-22, 1975) 9; 'Wedlocked,' *Gay News* 88 (February 12-25, 1976) 6; 'Support for Marrieds,' *Gay News* 177 (October 18-31, 1979) 13.

[385] *Conference Report – Homosexuality: Social Needs and Social Policies, (University of Essex).* (6 April 1979) 7. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DDVILH606137184/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=009e7d93&pg=10> [Accessed 15/05/2025]; See also 'SIGMA Conference,' *Gay News* 198 (September 4-17 1980) 34; ''Olympia: Pervert Chases Nutter,' *Gay News* 219 (July 9-22 1981);' SIGMA,' *Capital Gay* (2 October 1981) 4.

[386] John Russel Taylor, 'Ask the Children?,' *Gay News* 168 (April 3-16, 1980) 23; 'Penny Edwards,' *Capital Gay* 496 (31 May 1991) 14.

[387] 'National Drive to Help Married People,' *Capital Gay* 159 (14 September 1984), 14.

[388] 'What's On,' *Capital Gay* 159 (14 September 1984) 16-17; 'Every Week…,' *Capital Gay* 250 (11 July 1986) 14.

the popularity of marriage continued its downward trend and greater numbers of homosexuals eschewed marriage and came out.

Married with children, some wives experienced years of anxiety, with or without counselling, trying to understand their sexuality. After Sharley's son was born in the 1950s, she had psychiatric treatment for post-natal depression. Initially she did not accept her analyst's prognosis that she was a lesbian. She said she had been 'utterly shattered' and 'went on a spree of sleeping around with men' to prove she was not a lesbian.[389] C K from Kent, a mother of two children, experienced two failed relationships with other married women in her neighbourhood in the early 1970s during the latter part of her seven-year marriage. The first woman broke off their relationship and spread malicious gossip that she was queer. The second live-in relationship ended when the other woman returned to her abusive husband. She said that the relationships put her into a deep depression for which she sought psychiatric care.[390] Some women reported in a 1974 survey by the Women and Psychiatry Group that doctors thought sex with men was a panacea for lesbianism. One wife explained: 'My GP told me to put myself on the pill, then to spend a week in bed with my husband and I would be cured!'.[391] *Sappho* astutely commented on the double standard: doctors were unlikely to prescribe marriage, fatherhood, and sex to men who were depressed.[392] Pat had known she was gay since she was fourteen, but married nonetheless. She explained that after telling her husband about her desire for women she underwent professional counselling in hope of a cure. She saw a psychoanalyst, a psychotherapist, and then a psychiatrist before she finally realised that nobody could help her.[393] Joy, in her response to the NLGS, told her story of how she had suffered her first nervous breakdown after eight years of marriage. She looked for help from a psychiatrist, who admonished her transgression with another woman. She recalled

[389] 'Late Starters', *Gay News* 136 (February 9-22, 1978) 20.
[390] C K of Kent, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:5 (1974) 10.
[391] Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 3:4 (1974) 5.
[392] Ibid.
[393] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 24.

that her psychiatrist told her to 'behave myself, be thankful I had such a good, long-suffering husband, and get back to the kitchen before he changed his mind about me!'.[394]

Counselling for gay men and lesbian women by homosexual organisations began in 1963. Chettiar argues that early counselling services, which aimed to help sexual minorities adjust to the social alienation and stigma of homosexuality and develop the emotional stability to sustain monogamous, intimate relationships, 'were a central – although now overlooked – feature of queer liberation'.[395] The volume of these services increased dramatically following the *Sexual Offences Act 1967*. Albany Trust, formed by the Homosexual Law Reform Society in 1958 to promote 'the psychological health of criminalized homosexual men' and overturn 'the social stigma attached to homosexuality', began counselling in 1963 in response to demand.[396] Albany Trust did not support the pathologization of homosexuality and opposed aversion therapy, which was rising in popularity at the time among medical professionals. CHE created their own counselling and "befriending" service in 1971, called Fellowship for Relief of the Isolated and Emotionally in Need and Distress (FRIEND), which became its own entity in 1973. In January 1973, CHE's first National Women's Conference on Homosexuality discussed the problems of 'married gay and bisexual women' and where they could go for help.[397] In 1973, the GLF launched Icebreakers to provide counselling and dispel oppression of homosexuals by psychiatry.[398] By 1975, FRIEND noticed an 'upsurge in the number of people who were both married and gay' who were contacting them.[399] Doris, who knew she was a lesbian before she married, explained that her husband of twenty years forgave her for her desire for women and that she received counselling at FRIEND:

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[394] NLGS, *What a Lesbian Looks Like*, 31.

[395] Teri Chettiar, *The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) 145-147.

[396] Ibid*,* 153.

[397] 'Come Together', *Gay News* 15 (January 1973) 5; 'Refreshing Radicalism', *Gay News* 17 (February 1973) 5; Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, 159

[398] Chettiar, The Intimate State, 160.

[399] Colin Harrison, 'It's All Right for Pop Stars…,' *Gay News* 104 (October 7-20, 1976) 16.

> I am and always have been lesbian. After over twenty years of marriage my husband has discovered the fact. He is a great guy and a very understanding person. Though the discovery threw him badly, he has taken it very well. Oddly enough his forgiveness is harder to take than his condemnation would have been … My husband and I have talked the whole thing over and he has agreed to give me a little elbow room. I'm now going to Friend (London). It helps to talk to others who understand. But he doesn't understand – how could he? – that I desperately need a woman.[400]

Increasing numbers of gay husbands and lesbian wives, with and without their heterosexual partners, sought counselling from FRIEND, who ran a telephone help line in the late 1970s.[401]

## Deciding to Stay Married

Marriage conferred respectability and heterosexuality. The title of Mrs. and a wedding ring conveyed status and privilege whereas society stigmatised divorcées, single mothers, and lesbians. Traies notes that many of the older lesbians in her 2016 study 'had kept their married names, sometimes for the sake of their children, but often as a heterosexual disguise or as a way of retaining what they saw as a socially-respectable status'.[402] Although women were increasingly likely to leave unhappy marriages in the last three decades of the twentieth century, children complicated divorce. Wives often stated that they stayed married, at least until the children were teenagers. Keeping a family together was often perceived not only as best for the children, but also made economic sense. Lesbian wives were under the same economic and social pressures to maintain their marriages as heterosexual wives, but they had the additional impetus to remain married rather than risk not living with their children after divorce. Almost anything lesbian wives might have read about custody cases involving lesbian mothers forewarned them of the likelihood of them not getting custody of their children in court.[403] While some lesbians were miserable – and some

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[400] *Sappho* 7:2 (undated, c.1979) 8.

[401] 'Where to Go in Gay Britain & Ireland', *Gay News* 144 (June 1-14, 1978) 23; Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

[402] Traies, *The Lives of Older Lesbians,* 63.

[403] For an examination of information available about custody cases, see *Chapter Three*.

experienced the trauma of both emotional and physical abuse from their husbands – others reported relatively happy marriages and abided by their marriage vows.

Economic reasons compelled women to remain married. French sociologist Christine Delphy argued in 1976 that marriage was a self-perpetuating state: the longer women remain married, sacrificing their careers to do domestic work in the home and raise children, the more it is necessary for them to remain married. Wives descend the economic ladder as husbands ascend, creating a widening gap between economic possibilities. Delphy extrapolated that unemployment or low wages may pressure women to either make their marriages work, or to divorce and remarry. She stated: 'from the woman's standpoint, marriage creates the conditions for its own continuation and encourages entry into a second marriage if a particular union comes to an end'.[404] Feminists in the 1970s highlighted that marriage curtailed women's autonomy. Francie Wyland of Wages Due Lesbians argued that many married mothers were dependent on husbands and tied to their marriages because of their inability to earn a decent wage:

> We cannot get out because we cannot afford to support our children on our own. Many of us who find our marriages so intolerable that we must end them are forced to leave our children behind – only the men have the money to keep them. And those of us who do try to escape with our children risk losing them in a court battle. One way or another, because we are poor, every mother faces the possibility of losing her children when she makes a fight against dependence on men, for her own autonomy.[405]

In 1967, women earned forty percent of what men earned, although statisticians concur that the pay gap between men's and women's earnings has since steadily narrowed.[406] Lower-skilled, lower-paid, and often part-time employment was often the only option for many mothers, divorced or married. In Gill Hague and Claudia Wilson's study of women who had suffered domestic violence from 1945 to 1970, several

[404] Christine Delphy, 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Marriage and Divorce,' in Diana Leonard Barker and Sheila Allen (eds), *Sexual Divisions and Society: Process and Change* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1976) 80-81.

[405] Francie Wyland, *Motherhood, Lesbianism and Child Custody* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1977) 5-6.

[406] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Abington: Routledge, 2014) 174; Francine D Blau and Lawrence M Kahn, 'The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations,' in *Journal of Economic Literature* 55:3 (2017) 790.

women ‘felt that they would not be able to provide a home and family life for their children without a husband and breadwinner’.[407]

Married gay women at the first National Women’s Conference on Homosexuality, organised by CHE in 1973, noted that lesbians remained married for economic reasons: ‘gay/bisexual wives were stuck with their husbands for financial reasons‘ and ‘the social security alternative was a hand to mouth existence’.[408] In 1978, Sharley claimed that economic reasons drove her to remain married and living with her husband in their marital home, albeit leading separate lives. Although her marriage collapsed in 1949, she never divorced: she still lived with her husband twenty-nine years later. She explained that living separately was not economically feasible: ‘We were offered a council house on the condition that I came back to live with him. Economically I had no choice’.[409] Sharley was fortunate to have the freedom to have relationships with women, but often lesbian mothers’ fear of the economic hardship of raising children on a woman’s salary or on social assistance was so great that they avoided relationships with women. Dorothy told her story of an intense, three-year relationship with another married mother in the 1960s. When her lover’s husband discovered the affair, her lover abruptly abandoned the relationship with Dorothy in favour of security for her children. Dorothy explained that married women her age who ‘liked women’ did not have a lot of options and justified her lover’s reasons for ending their affair: ‘She didn’t have the security at that time; she didn’t have a career; she was a mother of five children.[410]

Other wives who were concerned about supporting themselves and their children after divorce went back to work or to school to further their careers and increase their financial independence. Returning to a professional occupation, such as nursing, after years spent raising children was only possible with additional training.

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[407] Gill Hague and Claudia Wilson, *The Silenced Pain: Domestic Violence 1945-70* (Bristol: Policy Press, 1996) 33.

[408] ‘Refreshing Radicalism’, *Gay News* 17 (February 1973) 5.

[409] ‘Late Starters’, *Gay News* 136 (February 9-22, 1978) 19.

[410] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us*, 131.

Married when she was twenty in the 1950s, Mary had a son and a daughter before leaving her husband in 1968 and raising her children alone. She explained to *The Sunday Times* how she had 'worked furiously to train as a teacher and earn an external university degree' so that she could be financially independent and support her children.[411] Similarly, Harne recalled feminists arranging workshops for wives to learn manual trades like carpentry so that they could leave their violent husbands and be able to support themselves.[412] Some wives sought financial independence to enable them to leave their marriages.

Although it is not unusual for heterosexual women to remarry, some lesbian mothers also re-married, mainly for economic reasons. Some lesbians had two or more relationships with husbands or male partners before committing to a lesbian relationship. Linda, pregnant with her third child, despite her attraction to women, explained that she married a plumber in the early 1980s for economic stability and convenience:

> I'd never fancied him, but I'd been on my own with the kids for some time. Everybody needs somebody, don't they. I was pregnant and thought, having three kids will be so much easier with him around to help. He had money, he was really good with the kids and I felt I owed him something for all that he'd done for me. We had a beautiful white wedding. I never placed much importance on the legal bit. I thought oh, it's just a bit of paper. I can always get a divorce.[413]

It was difficult for women to raise children on their own, financially and emotionally, and lesbian mothers often viewed the nuclear family as the best option for raising their children.

Many lesbian wives felt they could not leave their marriages when their children were young; they terminated relationships with women to focus on their marriages and children. In the 1980s, Action for Lesbian Parents (ALP) and the Lesbian Line heard from married lesbians who felt unable to leave their marriages. ROW claimed that many mothers never acted on their desire for women 'in order to

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[411] Michael Pye, 'Inside the Lesbian Family,' *The Sunday Times* (January 15, 1978) 13.

[412] Interview with Lynne Harne, 13 July 2023. See *Husbands' Reactions* for further discussion of domestic abuse.

[413] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 16.

protect their relationships with their children'.[414] Jane was married with children when she had her first lesbian relationship with a fellow teacher. She ended the relationship after a few months when the other woman asked her to leave her marriage and her children. She recalled that she felt she could not leave her marriage while her children were too young to understand:

> She was very keen that I would leave my husband. Alex was 10 and Jen 8. And I knew as she was saying that that I can't do that… I couldn't imagine a world when I would sit down with my children and say "This is what's happening…". She was a child-free woman who'd only ever lived as a lesbian – never had a relationship with a man. And she said "oh, they will be fine. They will get over it." That was a clincher.[415]

The affair nearly ended her marriage, but Jane went to counselling with her husband. Decades later in her oral interview, Jane admitted she had said untruthful things to repair their marriage because she thought their marriage had to continue for the sake of the children. She credited her husband with being very generous: together they worked on their relationship and did not tell the children. Jane explained: 'It was the right thing to have done. Being a mum is part of your identity'.[416] Natalie, married with two young sons in the early 1980s, also fell in love with a woman who wanted to live with her. Decades later, she recalled that she had not been ready to leave her sons – she felt they would not want to come with her – and therefore she ended the relationship.

Many wives with young children chose to remain married until their children matured, sometimes balancing their marriages and their extramarital relationships. Allen and Harne explain that many older lesbians had '"waited out" their marriages until the children were adolescents, before beginning their lives as lesbians'.[417] In 1973, a lesbian wife who wished to remain anonymous explained in a letter to *Sappho* that she stayed married to keep the family together for her children: 'My children are

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[414] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook,* 142.

[415] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[416] Ibid.

[417] Sue Allen and Lynne Harne. 'Lesbian Mothers – The Fight for Child Custody,' in Cant and Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records,* 182-183.

happy and well-adjusted and I do not feel justified in breaking up this family as long as it seems to be the best thing for them'.[418] Another wife explained to an agony aunt in 1975 that her loyalty was torn between her children and her lover; all three adults were unhappy. She had 'led a very sheltered life, got married and had children but had always felt that something was not right'.[419] After falling in love with another woman in 1965, she foresaw many years of unhappiness while waiting for her children to mature before she could divorce. She felt that if more 'light could be put on this subject', then fewer women would make the mistake of marrying.[420] In 1987, Hazel, a married lesbian with three children, stated: 'The way I look at it is I made my decision to get married and to have children and I don't think I either want to throw it up or have the right to'.[421]

Sometimes both wives and husbands tried to stay together for the sake of their children.[422] In the 1970s, Janet was married with four children when she fell in love with Rosie, with whom she began a relationship. Janet and her husband worried about the children and tried to devise a solution: 'some way of living together for the children's sake'.[423] Having committed to her marriage for twelve years and no longer bothered by her husband's infidelity, Janet explained that she would have felt guilty about separating her children from their father:

> My feelings for him were all wrapped up in pity. I know now that it wasn't love because I've been in love since, and it wasn't love. I didn't feel as if I needed him because of the children. I could cope perfectly well on my own, but would have felt quite guilty about taking the children away from him. I also stayed with him because we'd been involved with each other for over twelve years, and you get committed in relationships. I'd never been involved with anyone else. He had affairs, but by that time I wasn't bothered.[424]

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[418] Name and address withheld, 'Heteraecetera, *Sappho* 2:7 (October 1973), 25.

[419] 'Problem Post: I Now Love a Woman More than my Husband,' *Luton News* (6 February 1975) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[420] Ibid.

[421] Pat Romans, 'Daring to Pretend? Motherhood and Lesbianism,' in Ken Plummer (ed), *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience* (London: Routledge, 1992) 101.

[422] Cheryl Tidmarsh, 'Over to You – the Sappho Survey Surveyed,' *Sappho* 5:9 (1977) 15-16.

[423] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 12.

[424] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 11.

Eventually, her husband decided to vacate the marital home and filed for divorce. Some marriages endured if the lesbian wife remained faithful to her husband. Despite intentions to remain together for the children, when a wife had a female lover, it was often the husband who decided to end the marriage.

## Husbands' Reactions

Wives often feared their husbands' reactions to news about their desire for women. For some, fear of their husbands' retaliation was so great that they hid their sexuality. Mary never told her husband she was a lesbian when she separated in 1968. She described him as a man 'who thought all homosexuals should be taken out, put against a wall and shot'.[425] Some husbands were understanding. Mrs. J. Stevens told *Arena Three* that she had left her marriage for another married mother in the 1960s. She explained: 'Our husbands were naturally upset at first but also far more generous and understanding, realising we couldn't help our feelings'.[426] However, many husbands had negative reactions: from shock to physical rage.

Husbands sometimes knew of or suspected their wives' sexuality. The editor of *Arena Three* explained that women had often told her that they had worried unnecessarily about telling their husbands: the men often knew already.[427] One *Sappho* reader explained that her husband had suspected the 'dreadful truth' for a couple of years.[428] After an initial shock lasting five days, she said he had been 'very understanding' and thankfully 'applied no pressure'.[429] Pat recalled she had dreaded her husband's response to her news. She described her apprehension: 'I sat there cringing [and] bracing myself, ready for the crunch'.[430] However, she said his reaction was the opposite to what she expected since 'he more or less knew already'.[431] In

[425] Michael Pye, 'Inside the Lesbian Family,' *The Sunday Times* (January 15, 1978) 13.
[426] Mrs. J. Stephens, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:3 (February 1970) 7-8.
[427] Melville, 'Women in Love,' 138.
[428] 'Name and address withheld, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 2:7 (October 1973), 25.
[429] Ibid.
[430] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 24.
[431] Ibid.

retrospect, she justified his lack of surprise: 'I don't suppose that's the sort of thing you can hide from your husband'.[432]

Husbands often had difficulty comprehending their wives' desire for women. A wife explained to *Sappho* that her husband felt that her infidelity threatened his family: 'it took a great deal of understanding to keep our home together for the children we both adore'.[433] Janet's youngest child was just a baby when she fell in love with a neighbour in the 1970s. She described how her husband, named Stuart, had no idea how to deal with her news that she was in love with a woman:

> Stuart at first thought it was really funny but then later on he couldn't handle it. The next year was awful, really intensely awful. He used to say "At least if it was a bloke I could go and hit him". So he was more threatened over this woman than he would have been over a man. He got pretty desperate. He once offered me a new Mini Clubman Estate, if I'd give her up. I couldn't believe it! I just burst out laughing and said "You really don't understand do you?"[434]

Janet's husband was not the only man to try to bribe his wife into staying married. Maureen recalled how, in the 1970s, her husband had been very upset to hear she was in love with another woman and immediately offered to buy her a new car if she would stay with him.[435] In an article in *The Guardian* in 1985, Catherine explained that her husband initially did not mind her relationships with other women. She noted: 'For a long period my husband and I even joked about it. … He thought lesbianism was only another of my notions'.[436] Eventually, she said he felt threatened: 'He knew he could not begin to compete. He could not hope to win me back by the same methods as before'.[437] Stephanie explained to *KMG* in 1994 that when the pressure of her clandestine affair with another woman became too great to bear, she finally told her

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[432] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 24.

[433] 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 10.

[434] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 12.

[435] Interview with Maureen Colquhoun*,* (2008), <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/Documents/Detail/interview-with-maureen-colquhoun/50520> [Accessed 21 November 2024].

[436] Ronit Lentin, 'How the Daily Lie Gave Way to a Lonely Life of Truth,' *The Guardian* (14 May 1985) 8.

[437] Ibid.

husband she was leaving him for a woman. His reaction was severe. She said: 'He went up the wall,' and explained that they did not speak for the next two years.[438]

Some husbands thought that improved conjugal relations would solve their wives' preference for women. Alison Hennegan, National Organiser of FRIEND, presumed that the medical opinion that lesbianism is a retreat from 'unpleasant heterosexual experience' reinforced a husband's belief that if he was a more proficient lover his wife would come to her senses: 'work at making heterosex as good as possible and all those silly fantasies will go away'.[439] During an interview for *The Evening Echo* in 1969, Gillian explained that her husband felt that he had failed her in bed – that he was to blame in some way for her preference for women.[440] Julia told *Gay News* that although her husband encouraged her to have sex with women, he got jealous when she developed a closeness with another woman. She explained: 'he began to ask if he had made me a lesbian' and 'he wondered whether, if he were good to me in bed, it would change me back again'.[441] Hennegan also explained there was a fine demarcation between a husband attempting to resurrect his marriage through sexual relations and rape:

> The line between a husband's dutiful attempts to "awaken" his wife's incipient heterosexuality and resentful sex executed in a spirit of revenge can be distressingly thin, and one quite often hears of women who have been raped by their husbands in the name of Normality. The very real fear that most women know of violence enacted by a physically stronger male is an important element here. I can remember a gay Catholic woman whose husband so dreaded her planned departure from her marriage home that he raped and impregnated her, knowing that she would never consent to an abortion and knowing too, that her doctor had said that another pregnancy and birth could kill her'.[442]

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[438] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.

[439] Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

[440] Jean Ritchie, 'Beyond the Pale,' *The Evening Echo* [Hemel Hempstead] 619 (4 November 1969) 8.

[441] Kevin Lee, 'What is Best for the Children…,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19 1980) 7.

[442] Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

Although the law did not recognise rape within marriage until 1991, there is evidence of lesbian wives being forced to have sex with their husbands.[443] A new statute in 1970 abolished husbands' entitlement to petition for restitution of conjugal rights: women could not be forced back into the marital bed.[444] Rape, including rape within marriage, received press coverage in the 1970s. Jill Tweedie, feminist columnist for *The Guardian* observed in 1972 that there 'must be thousands of households across the country where rape will be committed tonight, carefully camouflaged by the sacraments of marriage'.[445] The first rape crisis centre opened in North London in 1976.[446] A founding member of the Bradford Lesbian Line, which began in 1980, claimed the helpline received calls from women in violent relationships with men, including women who had been raped.[447] Alldred related that ROW's helpline in the 1990s often heard from lesbian mothers who were trying to get out of abusive relationships with the fathers of their children.[448]

Besides rape, some husbands were physically and emotionally violent towards their wives upon their disclosure of their desire for women. Julia described her experience of domestic abuse to *Gay News.* In the 1970s, her husband had been aroused by thoughts of her with another woman and had encouraged her to have an affair. However, when she came back from a holiday with a woman, she said he was moody, aggressive, and hit both her lover and herself. She thought he was jealous and said, 'he started to feel inferior'.[449] After several physical beatings from her husband, Julia petitioned for divorce on the ground of unreasonable behaviour. In 1984, Pat explained how she had recently accepted her sexuality after several years of substance abuse, a suicide attempt, and psychiatric treatment. After two children

[443] The House of Lords decided it was a crime for a husband to rape his wife in 1991. *R v R (Rape: Marital Exemption)* [1992] 1 FLR 217.

[444] *Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970*, s20.

[445] Jill Tweedie, 'A Little Rough Stuff…' *The Guardian* (3 January 1972) 9.

[446] Helen Jones and Kate Cook, *Rape Crisis: Responding to Sexual Violence* (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 2008) 8.

[447] Lorraine Birch, West Yorkshire Queer Stories (19 September 2019), <https://wyqs.co.uk/stories/bradfords-lesbian-scene/full-interview/> [Accessed 08 October 2023].

[448] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

[449] Kevin Lee, 'What is Best for the Children…,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19 1980) 7.

she said she finally found the courage to tell her husband about her sexuality. Pat described how he became emotionally and physically violent. She said: 'he decided he didn't like the idea of me being gay and he began to make life more difficult – mainly through verbal abuse or the occasional clout around the ear – nothing too drastic'.[450] She said their relationship continued to worsen and described how he beat her in front of their two young children:

> He clobbered me a few times. One particular occasion stands out in my mind. He was really laying into me and all I can remember are the two kids faces. They were sat screwed up on a chair, screaming – it was horrible. I kept yelling "Not in front of the kids" but it didn't make any difference. I'll never forget their faces, sat there huddled together.[451]

Both Pat and her children suffered trauma for her children witnessing their father beat their mother. Witnessing domestic violence is known to have traumatic effects on children.[452]

Other women described how their husbands had been abusive throughout their relationships. Women related stories of remaining married to violent men who were the fathers of their children because they felt they had no alternatives. In 1984, Linda recalled how she had begun living with a man when she was seventeen – she thought 'he was quite a catch' – although in retrospect she thought he hated women.[453] After she gave birth to her first child the following year, she said he became physically violent. She explained that she was frightened of what he might do: 'I thought he was capable of killing me'.[454] She endured six years of violence because she did not know how to leave him:

> I thought about leaving, but I didn't know how to set about it, where I could go. I didn't know about refuges. I once went back to my mum

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[450] SMLC*, Our Live*s, 25.

[451] Ibid., 26.

[452] Jack Chapman, 'Ill-Treatment of Children: The Social and Legal Context in England and Wales', in C Henry Kempe, Alfred White Franklin, and Christine Cooper (eds), *The Abused Child in the Family and in the Community: Selected Papers from the Second International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, London, England*, Volume I (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980) 51-60.

[453] SMLC*, Our Lives,* 14.

[454] Ibid.*,* 14.

> but he came and fetched me. I thought I'd just have to make the best of it.[455]

Eventually Linda called a taxi and took shelter in a refuge; it was the early 1980s. Jackie explained to KENRIC that, having married in the 1970s when she was pregnant, she had endured fifteen years of abuse. In retrospect in 1994, she knew she should have left at the first signs of abuse: 'I now know I should have taken steps there and then to get out, but due to family pressures, and what with a young baby to care for, stupidly stayed put'.[456] She explained that she was encouraged to leave her husband after feeling affinity with the women on a television drama series called OUT.

From the 1970s, there has been a growing body of scholarship, mostly sociological, on violence in the home. According to Janet Finch and David Morgan, 'domestic violences are to be understood, ultimately at least, in terms of the whole way in which the gender order is structured, the assumptions about what constitutes normal or legitimate behaviour for women and men'.[457] Although there is no historiography on domestic abuse of lesbians by male partners, there are legal records and historical evidence of lesbian wives suffering domestic abuse and even death at the hands of their husbands.[458] For example, several of the thirty-six lesbian mothers who responded to a 1984 survey revealed that their husbands had physically or sexually abused either themselves or their lovers.[459] Three of the six lesbian mothers who provided autobiographical accounts to the SMLC wrote of experiences of domestic violence.[460] Scholars should not underestimate the existence and influence of emotional and physical abuse in marriages and partnerships between women and men: either driving women to leave or to stay.

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[455] Ibid., 15.

[456] Jackie Miller, 'A Life Worth Waiting For,' KMG No. 21 (June 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[457] Janet Finch and David Morgan, 'Marriage in the 1980s: A New Sense of Realism?,' in Clark (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life & Social Change,* 70.

[458] The ONS limits collection of data on domestic abuse to opposite sex pairings.

[459] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 28; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 151.

[460] SMLC, Our Lives.

In early post-war years, Hague and Wilson suggest domestic violence was more hidden because it was less socially-acceptable than in previous historical eras.[461] By the 1970s, the battered women's refuge movement exposed the prevalence of domestic violence.[462] Many women remained married to abusive husbands because they did not have alternative living arrangements. Sharon left her children with her mother while she looked for employment and some place to live, but lesbian wives who were ostracised by their parents and siblings had fewer options for housing upon separation and therefore had greater impetus to remain married.[463] Women leaving their marital homes had to find alternative accommodation immediately. Before the 1970s, there was no help for women suffering domestic violence.[464] The first women's refuge for battered women opened its doors in Chiswick in 1971, and thirty were established across Britain by 1975.[465] The Women's Aid Federation of England began in 1974, but it was not until the late 1970s that new statutes sought to protect battered women and prioritise social housing for battered wives.[466] Lesbians also found shelter in women's refuges after fleeing abusive male partners.[467] Jackie escaped from her abusive husband in 1992. Taking her three children with her, they lived in a refuge, which she described as 'a real heaven on earth' after the 'hell' of her marriage.[468] For Jackie, the refuge provided camaraderie and support from other resident lesbian mothers. She explained: 'It is nice to know

[461] Hague and Wilson, *The Silenced Pain,* 33.

[462] See Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, 197-232.

[463] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 30.

[464] Hague and Wilson, *The Silenced Pain,* 7.

[465] Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom, 1970-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 235.

[466] *Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976*; *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977*; *Domestic Proceedings and Magistrates' Courts Act 1978*; See Susan Maidment, 'Domestic Violence and the Law: the 1976 Act and its Aftermath,' *The Sociological Review* 31:1 (May 1983) 4-25.

[467] See Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18; Lynne Harne Interview 13 July 2023

[468] Jackie Miller, 'A Life Worth Waiting For,' *KMG No. 21* (June 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

there are other mums in my situation, with whom to share the everyday experiences of parenting, but especially the aspects of being a lesbian mother'.[469]

Some husbands assaulted their wives, their wives' lovers, and sometimes also persons associated with their wives. Sometimes these assaults occurred after the women had left their marital homes. In 1979, *Gay News* reported that a jury in Leeds announced a verdict of not guilty for a husband accused of raping his wife's female lover in front of her and that his motive was revenge for their affair.[470] Abby Talmer, an American activist, noted that the 'sense of violation is particularly strong when one woman is raped in front of her lover in a calculated attempt by the rapist to destroy the bond that the two women share'.[471] In 1971, Patrick Bird pleaded guilty to wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm to Miss Simpson, his wife's female lover, and assault on a police officer. The court sentenced him to thirty months in prison. Two years after his wife had left him to live with Miss Simpson, after a night of drinking, he brought a straight razor to the women's residence. He slashed the face of Miss Simpson and when she fell to the floor 'he kicked her in the face and the back and on the legs until she became unconscious'.[472] Mr Justice Thompson explained that Bird had expressed no remorse for wounding Miss Simpson:

> After what he had put up with from her he said she deserved what she got. He said "Is she dead?", and when told that she would recover he said "Too bad. The bastard doesn't deserve to live. She ruined my life and I'm glad I did it. I'm only sorry you caught me".[473]

In 1986, Jeffrey James Jauncey was imprisoned for seriously wounding his wife's face with a knife, reportedly requiring over one hundred stitches. He successfully appealed to reduce his three-year sentence to two; the judiciary allowed for the 'unusual element of provocation' for the 'wife's boasting of the lesbian relationship and of the fact of sexual intercourse with the appellant's son'.[474] The following year, Owen Shearman

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[469] Ibid.

[470] 'Rape? She Was Only a Lesbian', *Gay News* 171 (July 12-25, 1979) 2.

[471] Abby Tallmer, 'Sexual Assault of Lesbians: Some Issues,' in NGTF Task Force Report (May 1984). *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DFVBIJ624009939/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=8b81bb0c&pg=2> [ Accessed 15/05/2025].

[472] *R v Patrick Bird*, 3.

[473] Ibid.

[474] *R v Jeffrey James Jauncey*, 4.

appealed his sentence of four years imprisonment on eight charges of physical violence against his wife, an employee at a women's refuge, a volunteer at the refuge, and a welfare rights worker. After fifteen years of a deteriorating marriage, Mrs. Shearman left the matrimonial home in 1986 with their two children to shelter in a refuge. She later admitted to having an extramarital affair with another woman. After midnight, Mr. Shearman broke into the house where his wife was living, kidnapped and attacked her and two others over several hours, and then attacked the fourth person. Mr. Justice Owen of the Court of Appeal was certain that Mr. Shearman's rampage was due to his obsession with his wife's lesbian relationship, but found no error in principle and did not find the sentencing to be excessive. The three judges dismissed the appeal.[475]

At least one man was convicted of killing his lesbian wife. Susan Liddell was a twenty-five-year-old mother of three children under the age of five. In 1975, her husband Paul Liddell killed her four days after she revealed that she was in love with a woman with whom she had been having an affair for three months. When Susan returned to the matrimonial home to show him how to operate the clothes washer, Liddell admitted in his statement to the police that he had lost control and killed her:

> "Something snapped" in his mind and he grabbed hold of her and started hitting her. He seems to have started by trying to strangle her, he then gave that up and struck her several times – first of all with a potato peeler and secondly with a screw driver. Those blows caused the wife's death.[476]

Liddell pleaded guilty to manslaughter by reason of provocation and the judge sentenced him to thirty months in prison. He successfully appealed, based on the 'very grave provocation' of the 'errant wife' and the effect on the children.[477] The Court of Appeal reduced Liddell's sentence to twelve months, releasing him from prison eleven months after killing his lesbian wife.[478] Newspapers and the gay and feminist press reported opposing views of Liddell's early release: 'Freedom for Killer of Sex-Taunt

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[475] *R v Owen Shearman*, 6.
[476] *R v Paul Edmund Liddell*, 4.
[477] Ibid., 6.
[478] Ibid., 6.

Wife' who had suffered 'enormous provocation' versus 'Lesbian Slaughter'.[479] Liddell's case was not unlike those of heterosexual couples at the time.[480]

Sometimes domestic abuse continued after divorce. Regardless of which parent had custody, the parents were routinely in contact when one parent had access to the children. Linda explained to *Sappho* how after her wedding in 1970, she suffered considerable physical injury from her husband before she petitioned for divorce in 1975 and got custody of their five-year-old son. She explained how the abuse continued during access visits: 'Every time his father comes to see him there are scenes and he's seen him hitting me – he's put me in the hospital five times'.[481] After Samantha's divorce, her ex-husband continued to find opportunities to physically abuse both her and her youngest daughter:

> He'd been back since we've been divorced and smacked me in the face, threatened our younger daughter and dragged her off screaming, thrown furniture around like paper. Stella called the police. They said they couldn't do anything because it was a "domestic".[482]

Risk of domestic violence continuing after divorce was a concern of ROW.[483]

Lesbian wives reported many incidences of abuse from their husbands. Sometimes women married abusive men, sometimes the abuse developed throughout the marriage, and sometimes revelation of the wives' extramarital affairs with women precipitated rape, mental abuse, and physical violence. While this abuse – especially extreme physical violence – often prompted separation and divorce, many women

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[479] 'Freedom for Killer of Sex-Taunt Wife,' *Daily Mail* (5 December 1975) 13; 'Lesbian-Slaughter,' *Gay News* (December 18, 1975-January 14, 1976). See also 'Wife's Sex Taunt Led to Killing,' *Daily Mail* (13 June 1975) 11; 'Sisters in the Law,' *Women's Report* 3:5 (July-August 1975) 16.

[480] Jane Asher was strangled to death by her husband in a fit of petty jealousy at a party where she had danced with another man. Tried in Winchester in 1981, her husband received a suspended sentence of six months for manslaughter; Jill Radford, 'Marriage License or License to Kill? Womanslaughter in the Criminal Law,' in Hannah Kanter, Sarah Lefanu, Shaila Shah, and Carole Spedding (eds), *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1981-83* (London: The Women's Press, 1984) 141-151; In 1985, Judge Thomas Tigot sentenced Peter Hogg to three years imprisonment for strangling to death his adulterous wife Margaret Hawkins Harriet Harman, 'Judge in Murder Case Criticised,' (8 March 1985) LSE/5ROW Box 15; 'Death and the Airline Pilot: The Manslaughter Law and Captain Peter Hogg,' *The Guardian* (11 March 1985).

[481] 'Gay Wives and Mothers,' *Sappho* 31 (January 1975) 26.

[482] Turan Ali, *We Are Family: Testimonies of Lesbian and Gay Parents* (Cassell: London, 1996.) 3.

[483] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

remained in abusive relationships. Practical concerns, such as where they would live or how they would support themselves and their children, often made it difficult for wives to leave their marriages.

## Space for Lesbian Desire Within Marriage

Reluctant to uproot the lives of their children and husbands, many women found ways to have relationships with women while meeting their obligations as wives and mothers. While many wives successfully hid their lesbianism from their husbands, others had husbands who suspected but ignored their sexuality. Some husbands tolerated their wives' infidelity while others actively desired and encouraged their wives to have sexual relationships with other women. Historiography on women's passionate relationships with other women before the twentieth century acknowledges their coexistence with marriage, explored through diaries, correspondence, and fictional accounts.[484] This section illustrates how women in the last half of the twentieth century managed extramarital affairs with women. While some women continued or reignited affairs with women they knew before marriage, some actively sought relationships with other women and others stumbled upon relationships with women in their community or at their places or employment.

### Secret Relationships

Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when male homosexuality was still illegal, wives were likely to be secretive about their lesbian affairs. Langhamer attests that mid-century, experts advised wives not to tell their husbands about their indiscretions.[485] Jocelyn, who married in the 1950s, conducted relationships with other women but did not tell her husband she was gay. She facetiously stated: 'I couldn't have just gone up to him and said, "Look here, old boy, I'm afraid I'm gay". You know, "I don't mind going on living with you but I'm going to be having affairs with women"'.[486]

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[484] Faderman, *Surpassing*, 75-77; Smith-Rosenberg, 'Female World of Love and Rituals'; Vicinus, *Intimate Friends.*

[485] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 194-196.

[486] Brighton Ourstory Project, *Daring Hearts,* 37.

While some husbands were ignorant of their wives' affairs, others "turned a blind eye". Gardiner claimed that 'all over London, mothers would tuck up their children in bed, kiss their husband's cheek, promise not to be back too late from their girls night out, before slipping off, heart pounding, to the illicit delights of the Gateways Club', one of several lesbian-only spaces that began after World War II.[487] Vito, who frequented the Gateways Club when she was in her twenties, explained that married women could have nights out with other women without their husbands realizing that their female relationships were sexual:

> Some of my friends went out with married women who were living with their husbands. I don't think the husbands knew, mostly, or they turned a blind eye. The women didn't want to put their marriage at risk. If there were kids involved, they would have had them taken away.[488]

From discussions with older lesbians, Allen and Harne conclude that wives were under such pressure to appear heterosexual and remain married that they secretly conducted relationships with women.[489]

Secret affairs were often difficult to continue for longer durations. Activist Pat Romans, who interviewed eight lesbians who concealed their sexuality from their husbands, explained in 1992 that the situation was not 'a wholly tenable one': 'they were engaged in various forms of deceit, necessary to protect the feelings of their husbands, and they experienced considerable frustration in the constant coping with a situation so difficult to maintain'.[490] Stephanie explained to *KMG* in 1994 that she hid her relationship with a woman from her husband for the final six months of her marriage. She used to 'sneak round to Lucy's for a couple of hours' and found the 'deceit and creeping around' to be horrendous.[491] She felt unfaithful and dirty when she had sex with her husband and that it was 'hell' for all three of them.[492] Val Brown, the Chair of KENRIC, noted in 1995 that married lesbian mothers who secretly had

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[487] Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 77; See also Jennings, 'The Gateways Club,' 211.
[488] Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 77.
[489] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 182-183.
[490] Romans, 'Daring to Pretend,' 101.
[491] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.
[492] Ibid.

affairs with women were sometimes 'vulnerable to a particularly nasty type of predatory lesbian who moves in on the family and then becomes violent and threatens blackmail on being asked to leave'.[493] Brown also noted that many married lesbian mothers lived in 'permanent terror' of 'being "Outed" to other kids – and their parents and teachers'.[494] Secret extramarital affairs for lesbian mother had significant risks.

## Advertising for Companionship

Although some wives found opportunities to visit lesbian bars, others found that placing personal advertisements for women in magazines was an accessible, secretive means to connect with other women. In the 1960s, wives advertised in *Arena Three* for friendships, pen friends, and companions.[495] The advertisements in *Arena Three* were tame compared to the sexually-explicit advertisements in *La Plume* and *Within*, two magazines that were print forerunners of modern dating apps such as Tinder and Grinder. Wives advertised for casual sexual encounters with other women and expressed interest in 'AC/DC girls', 'mutual pleasure', 'attractive females', and 'Lesbian Ladies who practice Tribadism'.[496] From the 1970s into the 1980s, wives sent advertisements to *Sappho*, *Gay News,* and *Sequel.*[497] Advertising in the *KENRIC Newsletter* began in the 1970s, but blossomed after the introduction of a special "Contacts" section in July 1984.[498] Women noted their geographic location, age, and marital status. One mother's mention of her race was an anomaly: 'Sincere isolated negro lesbian mother living in the Midlands, seeking new friends to brighten up my dull

[493] Val Brown, KENRIC Chair, 'Soapbox,' *KMG* No. 32 (June 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[494] Ibid.

[495] Mrs. B.B. (Devon) 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 1:11 (November 1964) 12; See also 'Classified Ads. – April, 1966,' *Arena Three* 3:6 (July 1966) enclosure.

[496] K.69, *La Plume*, No.17; K.100, *La Plume*, No.17; K.194, *La Plume*, No.17; K.202, *La Plume* No.17; H.245 *La Plume* No.15; C.2. *Within* No.3; C.105 *Within* No.3; C.156 *Within* No.3; C.158 *Within* No.3; D.26 *Within* No.4; *D.34 Within* No.4.

[497] 'Multiple Classified Advertisements', *Gay News* 37 (December 13, 1973 – January 9, 1974); 'Multiple Classified Advertisements', *Gay News* 260 (March 3-16, 1983) 15; 'Personal Texts,' *Sequel* No.3 (March 1978), xii.

[498] 'Contacts,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (October 1984) LMA/4720/06/01/012; 'Classifieds', *Spare Rib* 41 (November 1975).

and lonely life'.[499] Married lesbians advertised for female companions in *Capital Gay,* in the *KENRIC Newsletter* in 1980s and 1990s, and in *KMG* in the 1990s.[500] In 1996, Karen from Hertfordshire, a 37-year-old mother of two young children, was married to a much older husband who did not know she was gay. She explained to *KMG*: 'New to Kenric, KMG and everything, so feels isolated at the moment. WOULD like to correspond/meet others, particularly anyone locally'.[501]

In the KENRIC and KMG newsletters, women often thought to clarify their marital status: they noted if they were married in 'name only (honestly!)', 'married mistake but separating now', and 'married but living separate lives'.[502] Most wives did not specify if their husbands knew of their desire for women. Women relayed their desperation when they described their lives as 'married but depressed', 'married, yet so lonely for closeness with a woman', 'married but struggling', and 'married, confused + isolated'.[503] Wives often specified that they sought an emotional connection with another woman. One wife from East Anglia advertised that she desperately needed 'understanding companionship', and another 51-year-old wife from Milton Keynes expressed that she was 'lonely for emotional relationship – someone to be there for me'.[504] Women also expressed a desire for physical intimacy such as a 'friend for closeness, cuddles, and companionship on outings' and a 'possible loving relationship'.[505] The existence and frequency of personal advertisements illustrates that wives actively sought from other women both companionship and sexual encounters – the emotional and physical closeness that they lacked with their

[499] 'Contacts,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (December 1986) 6, LMA/4720/06/01/012.

[500] 'Classified – Women's Personal,' *Capital Gay* 42 (May 1987) 26.

[501] 'New Members' *KMG* No. 40 (July 1996) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[502] 'Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (October 1990) 14, LMA/4720/06/01/016; 'Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (August 1991) 11, LMA/4720/06/01/017; 'Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (May 1994) 16-17, LMA/4720/06/01/020.

[503] Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (March 1990) 14, (May 1990) 12, LMA/4720/06/01/016; Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (November 1991) 11, LMA/4720/06/01/017; Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (November 1993) 13, LMA/4720/06/01/019.

[504] Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (November 1991) 11, LMA/4720/06/01/017; Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (May 1992) 8, LMA/4720/06/01/018.

[505] Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (September 1990) 14, LMA/4720/06/01/016; Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (May 1993) 12, LMA/4720/06/01/019.

husbands. Wives, who were often quite isolated as stay-at-home mothers, found personal advertisements a popular means of connecting with other women. The advertisements provide further evidence that women who desired women continued to marry men and have children in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

## Consenting Husbands

Some husbands consented to their wives' sexual and emotional relationships with other women. While some women had been upfront about their sexuality with their fiancés, many others came out to their husbands during their marriages.[506] In 1969, one woman explained how she and another married mother had maintained their relationship alongside their marriages for fifteen years:

> Inevitably, the husbands found out. There were rows and threats… but we refused to part, and they didn't want divorces, so eventually we all settled down. Our families became friends, the children didn't mind an extra "Auntie".[507]

Sometimes husbands wanted to remain married because they loved their wives. One *Sappho* reader explained how her husband allowed her female lover to live with the family: he 'accepted the relationship rather than lose his wife whom he loved'.[508] Occasionally, men viewed their wives' lesbian affairs as titillating, thereby enhancing conjugal relations. However, accepting their wives' affairs with women was often a compromise for husbands to keep their marriages intact, especially if they had children. Following its first symposium in April 1974, the Gay Wives and Mothers Club reported that some wives had secretive affairs while others had husbands who tolerated, accepted or condoned the situation'.[509]

Beginning in 1964, wives, husbands, and couples joined MRG and received *Arena Three* in the mail. In late 1964, a married couple from Northampton inquired if there were 'any other young married couples among MRG members who'd like to

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[506] See Mrs. E.J.S., Cheshire, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:4 (April 1969) 5-6.

[507] Mrs. V.L. Essex, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:4 (April 1969) 6.

[508] Jacqui, 'Gay Wives and Mums Group,' *Sappho* 3:2 (1974) 9.

[509] 'Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 3:3 (June 1974) 4.

correspond with us, perhaps meet and compare notes?'.[510] Mr T.G. of London, who described himself as a 'heterosexual, married male' submitted his subscription, explaining that his wife 'may decide to join later'.[511] The editor explained that husbands often thought that *Arena Three* would provide helpful knowledge to their wives:

> A great many husbands have written in to us saying that they would like their wives to join, because their wives are suffering terrible nervous states, and they feel that it would be better for them to come to us and find out what lesbianism is about rather than get involved with some undesirable people who visit these terrible little clubs I was speaking about.[512]

One reader explained that her husband gained understanding and tolerance from reading *Arena Three*. Mrs A.F. from Yorkshire thanked *'A3'* in 1969 for unwittingly helping her marriage by enabling her husband to gain a 'sympathetic understanding of all homosexuals'.[513] She said her marriage had been a disaster, for she had tried everything to help him understand her homosexuality. Her husband, who was 'very straight and normal' considered male and female homosexuality to be 'revolting, disgusting, degrading'.[514] However, after her husband voluntarily read her issues of *Arena Three*, specifically the letters from married women, she said they were able to 'talk as civilised beings, and sort out our difficulties peaceably'.[515]

Maintaining an outward appearance of a happy family to friends, neighbours, and family was sometimes part of the concession wives made to stay married and have their girlfriends. Hennegan explained in 1977 how a lesbian wife had the difficult task of "keeping up appearances" to preserve her husband's honour:

> The gay woman who elects both to tell her husband and to stay with him frequently realises that she is going to have to sacrifice a degree of honesty in order to safeguard his position. He tends to be the one who has the sort of job which a lesbian wife is thought to jeopardise; in accordance with conventional thinking his "manhood" is more assailed by her homosexuality than is the "womanhood" of a gay husband's straight wife. In short, he stands

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[510] Mr. and Mrs. B. (Northampton), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 1:11 (November 1964) 9.

[511] He also stated that his feminist wife 'makes the point that her consent is not required before I make this application'. T.G. (London), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 1:8 (August 1964) 13.

[512] Wendy Jones, 'Interview on Lesbianism,' Authorised transcription of a BBC recording on 15 March 1965, *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 5.

[513] (Mrs) A.F.(Yorkshire), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:5 (May 1969) 5.

[514] Ibid.

[515] Ibid.

> to lose more face and the gay woman who remains married frequently finds herself expending most of her emotional energy in preserving it for him, exhausting and self-consuming'.[516]

Charlotte, a reader of *Arena Three*, explained that her husband detested her lesbianism, but was 'most anxious to preserve the façade of a happy family' and did not want to let her go.[517] Her family and friends knew she was a homosexual, but her husband wanted to appear happily married to his colleagues and their sons' friends.

Some married couples took a practical approach to their marriage: if the wife fulfilled her marital obligations – often including sexual relations – the husband condoned her extramarital affairs with women. Failure to perform a gender role was a reason to divorce.[518] A report in *Sappho* on the first symposium by the Gay Wives and Mothers Club in 1974 noted that when husbands accepted their wives extramarital affairs with women, 'the sexuality of either partner was not sufficiently important to the total relationship to damage what was otherwise a successful partnership'.[519] This "successful partnership" meant that the husband provided financially for the family and the wife was responsible for daily care of the children and marital home. Some husbands were willing to accept their wives' extramarital affairs with women if conjugal relations continued. In a newspaper article in 1978, a member of CHE related the story of a woman who married without realising she was lesbian. After the married couple moved in with the husband's mother, the two women fell in love. When her husband finally discovered the affair, the CHE member claimed 'he was furious, but still insisted on having sex with his wife three times a week'.[520] Ruth divorced in the 1960s, after nearly twenty years of marriage, after her first sexual relationship with a woman. Ruth explained that once divorced, she placed a personal advertisement for a female companion in *Sappho*, to which a husband and wife replied in person. She said the

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[516] Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

[517] Mrs. Charlotte Cubitt, 'Honesty the Worst Policy – Readers Reply,' *Arena Three* 4:7 (July 1967) 11.

[518] Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Divorce Talk: Women and Men Make Sense of Personal Relationships* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 68.

[519] 'Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 3:3 (June 1974) 4.

[520] Ibid.

husband was cognizant of his wife's "needs" and generously invited Ruth to live with them and their children on the condition that he continued to have sexual relations with his wife on the weekends. Ruth declined his offer.[521] In some instances, men considered conjugal relations part of their lesbian wives' gendered obligations, and sometimes wives' complied.

Wives sometimes found it difficult to balance their female relationships with their commitments to their husbands and children: they found it difficult to find time to spend with their female lovers. In 1974, two wives juggled their responsibilities of 'housework, meals, etc.' with spending a few brief hours with each other with the acknowledgement of both husbands.[522] They managed to see each other an hour each weekday and two nights out each week, and dedicated weekends to their husbands and families. Struggling to 'keep everybody happy and possibly nobody happy' they explained to *Sappho* how they managed a difficult situation:[523]

> How do we cope with this situation? Do we walk out grabbing our own happiness? Do we go on hoping that one day, when we are about ninety, we can come together without hurting anybody?! We both realise that in walking out we may well be worried about our families. Our husbands tell us that we have the best of both worlds – being kept by them and having one another. Sometimes we are sorely tempted to go and to hell with the best of both worlds!!![524]

Many wives expressed difficulties in maintaining a double life. Marie explained to *New Woman* that openly carrying on a lesbian affair while remaining married was stressful and she feared it might cause the end of her marriage. After seven years of marriage and three children she had fallen in love with a woman. She was not sexually attracted to her husband and realised she had been living a lie. Confronted by her husband a few weeks into the affair, she told him the truth. She explained that he had difficulty believing her story and said it would have been easier for him if she had an affair with a man: at least then he felt he could compete for her affections. Eventually, Marie's husband conceded to sharing her with her female lover. The couple continued to share

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[521] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us*, 84-85.

[522] 'Happy Families 1,' *Sappho* 2:12 (March 1974) 12-13.

[523] Ibid.

[524] Ibid.

a bed, but not any sexual relations. He started drinking and she was consumed by guilt. Although they were trying to stay married for the children, she admitted her marriage was in its final days.[525]

One husband accepted his wife's relationship with another women after their marriage ended. In the 1970s, a man, his ex-wife, and her lover lived together raising the couple's young daughter. Married in 1965, their daughter was born the following year. The marriage deteriorated over the next decade until the couple separated in early 1975 and the husband petitioned for divorce 'upon the ground that the conduct of the wife was such that he could not be expected to live with her'.[526] The court awarded the husband custody of their daughter. Nonetheless, the couple chose to live in a small country cottage near Ross-on-Wye, where they were joined a few months later by the wife's female lover. In a show of solidarity with his ex-wife, the ex-husband then appealed the decision to change the custody order to joint custody. Lord Justice Scarman of the Court of Appeal noted from his review of the welfare report that the household was 'more like a little community than a family' and that the parents were doing their 'level best, notwithstanding the marital difficulties and notwithstanding the lesbian association, for the little girl; and it is clear that the woman friend mingles into the team in an utterly inoffensive and probably in many ways in a charming way'.[527] The judges varied the order to joint custody.

Some married lesbians had affairs with women – with their husbands' acceptance – that lasted many years, even decades. Sharley managed a relationship with Georgina for twenty years during weekends and holidays, otherwise living with her husband. She explained to *Gay News* how they managed to see each other:

> We used to see each other on weekends. … We had nowhere of our own to go, so we usually went to friends. They would let us borrow their flats at the weekend and have them to ourselves. She would come to my house when my husband was away. When my annual leave came, I would take a fortnight and we'd go to Brighton or somewhere like that to have a couple of weeks

[525] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.

[526] *Gould v Gould.*

[527] Ibid.

> together. It was *terribly* frustrating. Getting through the weeks in between was the worst. I used to work jolly hard! I tried not to think about relationships at all, and kept myself very busy. You don't want to think; you just live for the weekends. [528]

Sharley explained that the 1950s were an 'extremely closeted decade' and she lived in fear of being "found out"; she admitted that 'the strains of conducting a gay relationship were enormous'.[529] Sharley and her husband never divorced, and she and Georgina never lived together.

## Lesbian Affairs Enhanced Marital Relations

Images, descriptions, and live viewing of women having sex with women provides sexual stimulation to some men. "Girl on girl" pornography for men is a recognised phenomenon with a long history.[530] In more recent decades, *Penthouse* magazine, according to Kathy Cavanaugh, claimed it received thousands of letters from women describing their lesbian experiences, many of whom were wives who were encouraged by their husbands.[531] Cindy Jenefsky and Diane Miller argue that pictorial representations of lesbian sex in *Penthouse* 'reinscribe heterosexuality, reassuring *Penthouse'*s consumers of the (hetero)sexual availability of the women within its pages'.[532] Images of women having sex have been acknowledged as requisite scenes in pornographic films and titillation for a male, heterosexual audience.[533]

*Arena Three* was published during the "swinging sixties", a time of sexual liberation. In 1964, at the end of *Arena Three's* first year of publication, the editor complained of the barrage of interest from men seeking pornography:

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[528] 'Late Starters', *Gay News* 136 (February 9-22, 1978) 20.

[529] Ibid.

[530] Faderman, *Surpassing*, 23.

[531] *Penthouse*, a magazine for heterosexual men, began publishing in the UK in 1965; Kathy Cavanaugh, '*Girl on Girl,' Letters to Penthouse XX Girl on Girl*, (New York: Warner Books, 2004) 134-137, 162-167, 216-222, 247-251, 267-274, 289-295.

[532] Cindy Jenefsky and Diane Helene Miller, 'Phallic Intrusion: Girl–Girl Sex in Penthouse,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 21:4 (July-August 1998) 375-385.

[533] Stephen Ziplow, *A Filmmaker's Guide to Pornography* (New York, Drake Publishers, 1977); Jenefsky and Miller, 'Phallic Intrusion'.

> We have also been inundated with approaches from lewd and sexually immature men in search of so-called "adult" literature, "saucy" pictures and similar rubbish. They wrote, telephoned or called personally on us unannounced and often anonymously. We took various steps to discourage this kind of curiosity and at the same time to encourage them to regard women, including Lesbian women, as whole human beings rather than mere sex-objects.[534]

Exasperated with men requesting issues 'in the belief it will provide them with erotic titillation,' Diana Chapman, one of the founding members of MRG, explained to *Arena Three* readers that to many men the word lesbian means 'a woman skilled in bizarre sexual practices – in which, furthermore, she is prepared to indulge for the benefit of these prurient gentlemen'.[535] Chapman was shocked by men's interest in lesbianism as pornography: 'We'd have men knocking at the door or ringing up'.[536] In 1966, Donald from west London wrote to *Arena Three* to explain that 'even quite normal men find themselves becoming sexually aroused when the thought of lesbians together occurs to them'.[537] Although MRG did not permit men to attend meetings, it allowed men to subscribe to *Arena Three* and advertise in its contacts section.[538] Men also placed sexually-explicit advertisements for lesbians in *La Plume*, such as a 'gentleman 40, with keen sexual appetite' who sought 'two lesbian ladies (25-40) to watch/participate'.[539] Also in *La Plume*, advertisers offered pornographic photos of women together: 'the most exciting and tantalizing poses ever'.[540] Women also took advantage of men's desire to view "lesbian sex" for material gain. Two women described themselves as 'beautiful, mini-skirted, young modern girls, marvellous bodies' and advertised for wealthy men – 'discreet older executive type gentlemen' – to watch them together.[541]

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[534] Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *News of the World* (13 December 1964) 4.

[535] DMC, 'More Thoughts on the "Public Image",' *Arena Three* 1:9 (September 1964) 7.

[536] Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, *Inventing Ourselves,* 53.

[537] Donald T. (West London), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:12 (December 1965) 28.

[538] Jennings, *Tomboys*, 137; 'Classified Advertisements,' *Arena Three* 2:10 (October, 1965) enc.; 'Classified Advertisements,' *Arena Three* 2:11 (November 1965) enc.

[539] H.237 *La Plume* No.15; C.161 *Within*.

[540] 'C.82,' *Within*.

[541] 'K.57,' *La Plume* No.15.

Men also specifically sought lesbians through *Arena Three* to marry. In 1966, Anthony from Sutton was persistent in his pursuit of a lesbian girlfriend: he sent three written requests and made two telephone calls to *Arena Three*. Although the editor hoped that in not responding to his request, she 'may have now managed to damp his peculiar ardour' she nonetheless printed his first letter.[542] He emphasised that he was heterosexual and against male homosexuality but not against 'females indulging in homosexual practices'.[543] He stated that if he married a lesbian he 'would encourage her to carry on with her lesbian activities'.[544] So strong was his ardour that he welcomed courting a pair of lesbians. Bob, a 39-year-old, black, heterosexual widower living in Hollywood sought a second lesbian wife in 1965. He claimed that lesbians 'make better wives' as his late wife of eight years had once been a lesbian.[545] The following year, a London man asked the editor to introduce him to a nice girl for him to marry. He explained that he would allow for her love of women as he did not think it would interfere with their marriage.[546]

Some husbands, titillated by thoughts of their lesbian wives in bed with other women, encouraged their wives' affairs and threesomes. The editor of *Sappho* explained that some husbands were excited by the news that their wives desired women: 'Some men say, crassly, "Ho ho, three of us'.[547] Wives were often not receptive to their husbands' enthusiastic ideas. Kim's husband, whom she married in 1976 when she was eighteen, fantasised about two women having sex. She recalled: 'I told him that I had feelings for women, but I think he was like, the typical man, you know, the thought of seeing two lesbians'.[548] In the 1970s, when a married mother fell in love with her single colleague from work, one of the first people they told was her husband. She explained that at first he thought it was a great idea because he imagined having sex with both women: 'he offered for Pauline to come and live with

[542] Ed., 'March Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:3 (March 1966) 15.
[543] Anthony Bartholomew (Sutton), 'March Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:3 (March 1966) 15.
[544] Ibid.
[545] Bob, 'Letter from a Gentleman in Hollywood,' *Arena Three* 2:12 (December 1965) 24.
[546] Mr. X (W. London), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:10 (November 1966) 15.
[547] Melville, 'Women in Love,' 138.
[548] Kim Stevens, *Speak Out London.*

us providing he could have a threesome with us'.[549] Phyllis Chessler, an American psychotherapist, estimated in 1986 that nearly a third of married lesbian mothers were bullied by their husbands into having sex with another woman.[550] In an article in *New Woman* in 1994, Stephanie explained that her third husband repeatedly suggested a threesome with another woman, becoming more persistent the more she refused.[551] Lesbian sex, as a prelude to heterosexual sex – particularly to titillate male voyeurs – was encouraged by some husbands. Husbands' plans sometimes backfired. When their wives expressed a preference for sex with women, or fell in love with other women, husbands often reacted negatively. In 1960, Julia married a lorry driver, with whom she had four children. She explained to *Gay News* that sometime in the 1970s her husband's interest in pornography illustrating lesbian lovemaking initiated a chain reaction that led to their divorce. He showed her pornographic magazines with photographs of women making love, which she said he found quite stimulating. Julia also found the images stimulating, and one day found the courage to share her desire for women with her husband. He suggested she have sex with another women on the condition that he chose the woman and "be involved." Eventually she met Gloria, and when her husband noticed the women's closeness he encouraged them to holiday together. Although the holiday was like a honeymoon, their happiness was short-lived: Julia's husband began beating her and she eventually petitioned for divorce.[552]

Some married couples found a workable solution in having an open marriage, where both spouses conducted relationships with women with full knowledge and acceptance. Journalist Victoria Brittain claimed in 1970 that some women managed to 'combine overt lesbianism with having a family and claim "the best of both worlds"'.[553] She provided the example of Sheila Whyment-Lester, who was twenty-nine years old,

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[549] Stewart-Park and Cassidy, *We're Here,* 10, 13.

[550] Phyllis Chesler, *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011) 444.

[551] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.

[552] Kevin Lee, 'What is Best for the Children…,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19 1980) 7.

[553] Victoria Brittain, 'Easing the Isolation of Lesbianism,' *The Times*, (2 November 1970) 8, reprinted in *Arena Three* 7:11/12 (1970) 10-11.

the editor of *Arena Three,* and mother of two daughters. She identified as a lesbian but had been happy in an open marriage for ten years. In 1975, Sheena was living with her four children and her husband in a big council estate in an industrial town in Lancashire. She told *Spare Rib* that she loved her husband, would not consider a divorce, and that they both had girlfriends. She explained: 'He has his girlfriends – sometimes I fancy them too'.[554] Lisa, who had married at age twenty-two in 1980, had her first lesbian relationship after fourteen years of marriage. She told her husband immediately, and she said he took the news 'surprisingly well'. She explained to the readers of *New Woman* that although they were 'happily married' and 'loved each other dearly', their sexual relationship was lacking: he was always the one to instigate sex and she complied to please him.[555] Neither spouse wanted a divorce and so they decided to stay together in an open marriage. In the early 1990s, after Jen's first affair with a woman – a year-long, intense, primarily sexual affair – she realised she had to leave her husband after a decade of marriage. She recalled that her husband was devastated, and suggested an open marriage.[556]

An open marriage was not always the perfect solution. Wives were split between trying to fulfil their expected gender role as caregivers and housekeepers and trying to maintain affairs with women. In an article for *New Woman* in 1994, Tess explained how she terminated her sexual relationship with a married mother because she found it difficult to cope with the wife's commitments to her family and her intention to remain married.[557] Caroline, a married mother with a husband who understood her sexuality, explained to members of the KENRIC Mothers' Group that it was difficult for a married mother to juggle time between her female lover and her family 'without someone feeling left out'.[558] She explained that a married lover would be the ideal solution: 'she would understand why I don't want to give up my family'.[559] She said

[554] Marilyn Archer, 'Gay Wives and Mothers,' *Spare Rib* 31 (January 1975) 26.
[555] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.
[556] Jen, West Yorkshire Queer Stories.
[557] Kemp, 'Married but Gay'.
[558] Caroline Wilson, 'Feedback,' *KMG* No. 29 (March 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.
[559] Caroline Wilson, 'Feedback,' *KMG* No. 30 (April 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

that she and her husband had 'both had "flings", but the women involved could not cope with our marital commitments so we all parted company'.[560]

## Conclusion

Regardless of why lesbians married men, once they had children they had greater incentives to remain married. Underpinning these incentives was the belief that a mother is the best person to raise her children. Unlike heterosexual mothers, lesbian wives had the additional impetus to remain married due to fear of the likelihood that they would not get custody of their children upon divorce. Therefore, lesbian wives in the last half of the twentieth century did what thousands of lesbian wives did before them: sacrifice the life they wanted for the sake of their children. Some wives suppressed their desire for women. Some curtailed relationships with women while their children were young. Others tried to balance extramarital affairs with their families, living in fear of their husbands discovering their infidelity. Some wives, though, had husbands who tolerated or encouraged extramarital sex. Nonetheless, regardless of how wives found space for lesbian desire within marriage, they were obligated to fulfil their gendered role, which included child care, housekeeping, and often conjugal relations. Some lesbian wives endured rape and physical and emotional abuse. Many lesbian mothers paid a high price to remain in the marital home raising their children. It is no surprise then, that some women turned to divorce.

[560] Ibid.

# Chapter Three: Divorce

In August 1975 in *The Guardian,* activist Anna Coote described how the court awarded custody of Pamela Bingham's daughter to her husband David:[561]

> Since she parted from David, Pamela had been living with a woman in a lesbian relationship. David had also been living with a woman – he had remarried. The view from the Bench was that Pamela lacked "femininity"; had a strong personality and a certain ruthlessness; and would not "sacrifice her lesbian proclivities" for the sake of the child. Lesbianism, according to the Judge, was unnatural and would give Sally an unhealthy attitude; her school friends might find out and taunt her with it.[562]

Coote claimed that hundreds of women were in a similar situation and proclaimed: 'It is virtually unknown for the courts to award custody or care to a lesbian mother where the child's father contests the claim'.[563]

Coote's article illustrates two methodological errors that were common occurrences in narratives in contemporary newspapers, the gay and feminist press, and advice books: it repeats mothers' recollections of judges' discourse, not the judges' verbatim statements, and assumes that nearly all lesbian mothers were not awarded custody in court. To address these methodological problems, this chapter examines judicial discourse in Court of Appeal judgements for a record of court cases and includes analysis of lesbian custody cases by legal scholars. To reconstruct women's experiences of divorce, it examines oral histories and narratives from contemporary media. To provide context and aid understanding of the legal framework for divorce and custody disputes, the first of seven sections in this chapter defines the terminology and describes the relevant statutes and common law. The next two sections contrast what can be known about the key arguments against lesbian parenting from legal records of custody cases in the Court of Appeal versus what

[561] By 1975, Anna Coote had coauthored a legal guide: Anna Coote and Tess Gill, *Women's Rights: A Practical Guide* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1974) and later co-authored a book on second-wave feminism: Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (London: Pan Books, 1982).

[562] Anna Coote, 'The Parent Divorced from the Child,' *The Guardian* (2 August 1975) 11.

[563] Ibid.

mothers and fathers could have read about custody cases in newspapers, the gay and feminist press, and advice books. The remaining sections reconstruct lesbian mothers' experiences of divorce from contemporary media, Court of Appeal judgements, and oral histories. The fourth section describes how either spouse came to petition for divorce. The fifth section interrogates why some mothers voluntarily relinquished custody, and the following section describes mothers' strategies to fight for custody. The final section examines how divorced mothers struggled with their sexuality: they made decisions with the knowledge that their ex-husbands could re-apply for custody or to change the conditions of access.

This chapter contributes to the wider historiography on marriage and divorce. In agreement with Langhamer, who identified a mid-century shift to basing life-long partnerships on love rather than practical concerns, this chapter argues that although lesbians had a great number of pragmatic reasons to remain married, when they left their marriages it was often for the love of other women: emotional and physical intimacy was lacking with their husbands. This agrees with Jennings, who concludes that lesbian wives were often disappointed by their feelings for their husbands that were 'not of the transformative and fulfilling quality they had been led to expect'.[564] While the chief impetus to remain married was for the sake of the children, the chief impetus for wives to divorce was for their own sake. As a minor point, this chapter adds to Stone's explanation of the increase in divorce following the *Divorce Reform Act 1969*. This chapter attributes the increase in wives petitioning for divorce and the increase of husbands' petitioning for divorce on the ground of unreasonable behaviour after 1971 in part due to lesbian wives embracing their sexuality and leaving their marriages.[565]

Historians have examined divorce involving lesbian mothers in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA, Australia, and Britain, each country with its distinct legal framework. Gutterman concludes that before widespread changes to marriage and divorce in the

[564] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 107.
[565] Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 404.

1970s, American wives were more likely to find means to conduct extramarital affairs rather than divorce. Jennings has highlighted the plight of married lesbian mothers in Britain and Australia: in her most recent monograph she provides an overview of lesbian mothers' experiences of divorce from mothers' narratives reproduced in contemporary media and oral interviews. Jennings identifies a shift from lesbians remaining married in the immediate post-war decades to increasing numbers getting divorced and beginning their lives as lesbians from the 1970s onward. She claims that duplicity and secrecy of extramarital affairs strained relationships with both their husbands and their lovers, often resulting in separation and divorce. [566]

Historians have also examined custody cases in the USA, Australia, and briefly in Britain. Rivers' examination of custody cases involving gay fathers and lesbian mothers in the USA from 1967 to 1985 reveals a gradual shift in the connection between 'sexual orientation and beliefs about what constituted a proper family'.[567] He argues that only after two decades of activism by the homosexual community did the courts and society loosen their dogmatic insistence that the heterosexual nuclear family was the proper place to raise children.[568] In her expansive book on lesbian wives in the USA, Gutterman explains that political action was inspired by the punishment the courts and society inflicted on wives who desired women who dared to leave their marriages. Jennings explores Australian lesbian custody cases set amongst the political activism for gay and lesbian rights in the 1970s, arguing that judges awarded custody to lesbian mothers who were discreet and respectable.[569] In her 2024 monograph, Jennings provides a short summary of custody cases in Britain in Australia: 'During the 1970s and early 1980s, British and Australian courts rarely awarded custody to known lesbian mothers'.[570] She contends that the threat of removing children prompted British and Australian mothers 'to conceal their lesbianism

[566] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 99-126.

[567] Rivers, Radical Relations, 54.

[568] Ibid., 53-79.

[569] Rebecca Jennings, 'Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody: Australian Debates in the 1970s' *Gender & History* 24:2 (2012) 502-517.

[570] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 174.

and to adopt a variety of strategies to conform to normative family models as closely as they were able'.[571] Specifically in Britain, Jennings claims that the chances of lesbian mothers obtaining custody of their children improved in the 1980s. She attributes this improvement to a shift in 'attitudes towards lesbian mothers and child development', due in part to psychological and sociological studies.[572] Jennings also recognizes that likely few lesbian mothers litigated custody, 'but the wider impact of court attitudes was much greater and helped shape approaches to lesbian parenting for decades'.[573]

Historians who have relied on secondary scholarship have made some bold claims. Oram in her recent monograph with Cook on queer lives in cities outside of London from the 1960s to the 1990s, claims: 'Laws biased in favour of men and heterosexuality meant that if challenged for custody on the grounds of their lesbianism (or even simply their feminist politics), the children would always be removed from the mother's care and custody awarded to the father'.[574] Jeffrey Weeks claimed in 2007 that lesbian mothers faced serious dilemmas: 'The more open they were about their gayness, the more likely they were to lose custody of their children – at one stage up to 90 per cent of lesbian mothers were losing custody of their children in contested divorce cases – and to face media caricature'.[575] This chapter emphasizes what legal scholars have acknowledged: that there has never been any means to determine representative statistics about custody disputes between lesbian mothers and their husbands.[576] It also reiterates legal scholars' analysis that courts promoted the nuclear family as the ideal environment for raising children.

In agreement with Jennings, I argue that the lives of nearly all lesbian mothers in the last three decades of the twentieth century were affected by the widespread

[571] Ibid., 175.

[572] Ibid., 126.

[573] Ibid., 175.

[574] Cook and Oram, *Queer Beyond London,* 178.

[575] Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007) 185.

[576] Anne Barlow et al, *Advising Gay and Lesbian Clients: A Guide for Lawyers* (London: Butterworths, 1999) 41; See also SMLC*, Our Lives*, 44; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers Legal Handbook*, 142.

dissemination of the assumption that all or nearly all mothers known to be lesbian did not get custody of their children in court. I have four secondary arguments. I argue that the historiographic focus on lesbian mothers who were not awarded custody in court has inadvertently silenced the history of the majority of lesbian mothers. This includes mothers who got custody, passed as heterosexual, negotiated outside of court, and those who either postponed or did not divorce. It also includes lesbian mothers who had children with male partners to whom they were not married. I disagree with Jennings and argue that it was likely more difficult in the 1980s for lesbian mothers to have custody of their children upon divorce due to the moral panic over the corruption of children and the fear of HIV/AIDS, set amongst the neoliberal government policies that prioritised the nuclear family. Although psychological studies in child development helped dispel the corruption argument in court, I attribute the improvement in the outcomes for lesbian mothers mostly to the development of a core of legal professionals who were willing and able to fight for custody on lesbian mothers' behalf. I also argue that reductions in the incidences of contested custody cases involving lesbian mothers and their husbands were due in the most part to the *Children Act 1989,* a statute that assigned parental responsibility to both parents.

## Legal Framework of Custody Cases

The record of lesbian custody cases is limited to those from the Court of Appeal and the High Court, which were the tip of the iceberg. A small fraction of divorcing parents asked the judiciary to decide custody arrangements for their children, an even smaller fraction of parents appealed, and even fewer Court of Appeal cases involved lesbian mothers. In 2022, I performed a rigorous search of legal databases, compiling the most comprehensive list of known lesbian custody cases: thirteen cases from 1965 to 1994, twelve from the Court of Appeal and one from the High Court.[577] Although I reserve an intensive interrogation of the judicial discourse to a separate piece of future

[577] I found all cases mentioned in secondary scholarship plus additional cases by searching for the keywords 'lesbian', 'homosexual', and 'custody' in the legal databases Lexis+ UK, Westlaw UK, VLexJustis, and BAILII. See *Appendix A* for a list of cases. In two additional Court of Appeal cases, lesbian mothers fought for access to their children.

scholarship, these cases provide evidence of circumstances, judicial discourse, and outcomes. Firstly, these cases reposition from 1980 to 1965 the earliest custody dispute where a court awarded custody to a mother who was known to be lesbian.[578] Secondly, as both fathers and mothers were appellants, some mothers won custody in the courts of first instance and in the Court of Appeal. In eight known cases lesbian mothers went home and raised their children.[579] I do not suggest that sixty-nine percent of the known cases won by lesbian mothers correlates to outcomes of all custody cases involving lesbian mothers. Nor do I suggest that we can extrapolate any trends: thirteen cases over nineteen years is too small a sample to make any reliable assessment about lesbian mothers' rate of success over time. However, the known cases evidence that some lesbian mothers were awarded custody of their children while others were not in both the Court of Appeal and the courts of first instance. However, contemporary media, despite occasionally acknowledging that they did not know about all cases, disseminated the unsubstantiated assumption that nearly all lesbian mothers did not get custody in court. This chapter considers why media repeated this narrative and the impact it had on lesbian mothers seeking to divorce.

It is impossible to know for certain when or if custody disputes involving lesbian mothers ceased. In my search of the legal databases from 1940 to 1999, I found no further judgements after 1994. This void of Court of Appeal cases does not mean there were not any cases in the courts of first instance in the late 1990s or later. Most legal scholars agree that lesbian custody cases continued into the 1990s, if not beyond. Anne Barlow et al state that there was a 'marked decrease' in these cases in the 1990s whereas Joanna Miles et al claims there was a 'flurry of reported cases' in the early 1990s.[580] Sarah Beresford, in her exploration of how English judgements create a legal

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[578] *Coffer v Coffer*. This finding corrects Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood,' 593; Golombok, *We are Family*, 16; Cook and Oram, *Queer Beyond London,* 178; Sarah Beresford, 'Get Over Your (Legal) "Self": A Brief History of Lesbians, Motherhood and the Law,' *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law* 30:2 (June 2008) 96.

[579] *Coffer v Coffer; Re B (TA) (An Infant)* [1970] 3 All ER 705; *Whitfield v Whitfield; Re P (A Minor) (Custody)* [1983] 4 FLR 401; *Re D and D (a Minor); Holder v Holder; B v B (Minors) (Custody, Care and Control)* [1991] 1 FLR 402; *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* [1991] 1 FLR 223.

[580] Barlow et al, *Advising Gay and Lesbian Clients,* 41; Joanna Miles, Rob George, and Sonia Harris Short, *Family Law: Text, Cases, and Materials,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 765.

'self', reports that lesbian mothers were still 'problematical' for the courts in the 1990s.[581]

Court of Appeal judgements – the verbatim words spoken by judges as recorded by the official court reporter – are available and accessible through searchable digitised databases. My comprehensive search found five cases included in the law reports plus eight unreported cases. Both reported and unreported cases are the official record of the judges' verbatim words and are therefore reliable sources of judicial discourse and outcomes. Reported cases anonymise the names of the appellants, respondents, and children and often include additional commentary provided by a barrister. In legal terms, "reported cases" are judgements in law reports. They are not the same as court proceedings and outcomes described, or "reported", by journalists in newspapers and magazines. Stories in the public press are much less reliable, as they are *stories* written from the mothers' or fathers' recollections of court proceedings. The press and the public were not allowed in family law courts to protect the privacy of the families. Law reports are compiled collections of cases thought to be potentially useful to legal professionals. They were not intended for a public audience nor to be a complete record or representative of all cases. Law reports contain roughly two percent of all judgements from each year. Editors of law reports predominantly chose cases that set precedent, mostly from the Court of Appeal or the House of Lords (now the Supreme Court), and mostly ignored cases from the courts of first instance. Judges could recommend cases they thought were noteworthy.[582] In the last century, before neutral citation for court cases in 2001 and digitisation of court proceedings, law reports were the key resource for legal professionals to find information about relevant previous cases.[583] It would have been unusual for legal

[581] Beresford 'Get Over Your (Legal) "Self",' 98.

[582] University of Oxford Legal Research and Mooting Skills Programme, 'Law Reports and the Doctrine of Precedent.<https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/legal-research-and-mooting-skills-programme/law-reports> [Accessed 06 October 2024].

[583] HM Courts and Tribunals Service assigns a neutral citation from 2001 onwards to uniquely identify judgment, a passage within, and whether it was reported. See Inner Temple Library, *Guide to Neutral Citations,* <www.innertemplelibrary.org.uk/research-and-training/guide-to-neutral-citations/> [Accessed 21 November 2024].

professionals to know anything about unreported custody cases in which they or their legal firms had not been involved, except in exceptional circumstances. For example, in a House of Lords decision, Lord Simon of Glaisdale explained that he obtained a copy of a judgement of an unreported Court of Appeal case only after reading about it in *The Times*.[584]

The law reports contain a greater than average percentage of lesbian custody cases: of the cases I found in the legal databases, thirty-eight percent had been reported. As two percent is the average for all cases, there was no silence of lesbian custody cases in the law reports. Additionally, the combination of the existence of very few Court of Appeal judges, and that five adjudicated more than one case with a lesbian mother, illustrates that several judges in the Court of Appeal were aware of previous lesbian custody cases.[585] Nonetheless, judges in the courts of first instance, spread across the country, may have been surprised when confronting their first case with a lesbian mother, especially in the 1970s.

Colloquially, and as used most often in this thesis, the term custody denotes both the responsibility for the daily care of children and the authority to make major decisions for them. For cases settled before 1991, "custody", "care and control", and "access" had to be decided. In strict legal terms, custody was the right to make major, long-term decisions that affected the life of the child, such as choosing a religion or an educational institution, whereas care and control was the daily responsibility for the needs of the child. The parent without care and control usually received one of many variations of access, the provision to visit with the children.[586] Occasionally, parents asked the court to only decide the terms of access.[587] The *Children Act 1989* changed the playing field of divorce: custody was no longer an issue to be decided. The Act

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[584] *Re D (An Infant) (Adoption: Parents Consent)* [1977] 1 All ER 145; One could request a copy of a judgement for a short period of time after the hearing. See Inner Temple Library, *Guide to Neutral Citations.*

[585] Sir Arnold John P, Orr, Stamp, Balcombe, and Ormrod, LJJ.

[586] John Eekelaar and Eric Clive with Karen Clark and Susan Raikes. *Custody After Divorce* (Oxford: Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, 1977) 17.

[587] Susan Maidment, 'A Study in Child Custody.' *Family Law* 6:7 (1976) 195-202.

introduced the concept of “parental responsibility”, which replaced “custody”, to reflect the change in thought that parents were responsible for their children and did not merely have custody, or possession of their children. Children were now autonomous beings with rights. The Act also defines “residence”, with whom the children would live and “contact” of the children with the other parent.[588]

Historically, fathers had near-absolute paternal right over their children in regard to religion, education, marriage, and custody. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mothers fought for legal equality with fathers over their children.[589] The *Guardianship of Infants Act 1925* was the first Act to proclaim that children’s welfare was to be the court’s ‘first and paramount consideration’ in decisions regarding the raising or custody of children.[590] The Act gave mothers legal authority over their children nearly identical to that of the fathers.[591] The exact wording was open to interpretation, and grievances that mothers’ authority was not absolutely equal to that of the fathers were rectified by the *Guardianship Act 1973.*[592]

In the 1950s and 1960s, society recognized mothers as the optimal caregivers of children. Experts emphasized the “naturalness” of full-time motherhood.[593] Two studies in the 1970s show that upon divorce, mothers got custody and care and control in nearly ninety percent of cases.[594] This bias was impetus for fathers to organise and fight against mothers’ perceived privilege and to assert the importance of both parents

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[588] *Children Act 1989* s1.3.

[589] See P H Pettit, ‘Parental Control and Guardianship,’ in R H Graveson and F R Crane (eds), *A Century of Family Law 1857-1957* (London: Sweet & Maxwell) 56-87; Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[590] *Guardianship of Infants Act 1925* s.1.

[591] See Stephen Cretney, *Law, Law Reform and the Family* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 155-183; Ben Griffin, 'Paternal Rights, Child Welfare and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Ireland', *Past & Present* (2020) 109-147; Helen Reece, ‘The Paramountcy Principle: Consensus or Construct?,’ *Current Legal Problems* 49 (1996) 267-304.

[592] Cretney, *Law Reform*, 181.

[593] John Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (London: Penguin, 1953); Donald W Winnicott, *The Child and the Family: First Relationships* (London: Tavistock, 1957).

[594] Maidment, *Child Custody & Divorce,* 61.

maintaining a relationship with children after divorce.[595] In the 1970s and 1980s, scientific discourse recognised the influence and importance of fathers in children's lives.[596] Sociologist Carol Smart notes that fathers' counter claim attests the strength of the assumption that children are best raised by their mothers. It was in this environment that many lesbian mothers fought for custody of their children.

Divorce was fault-based throughout the twentieth century.[597] In the postwar years before 1971, judges in family court granted a decree nisi: an order confirming that one of the grounds for divorce had been met. Grounds for divorce included five matrimonial offences: adultery, desertion, cruelty, habitual drunkenness, and incurable insanity.[598] Judges sometimes correlated a mother's conduct with her ability to parent: adulterous mothers risked judges awarding custody of their children to so-called "unimpeachable" fathers. However, a landmark case in the House of Lords in 1969 changed the correlation between marital conduct and parental ability: custody, access, and upbringing of children must be based on the "welfare principle", or in other words, what was in the best interests of the child.[599] The next February, the *Guardianship of Minors Act 1971* codified this House of Lords ruling, stating that the judiciary 'shall regard the welfare of the minor as the first and paramount consideration'.[600] Commenced in January 1971, The *Divorce Reform Act 1969* was a groundbreaking statute for divorce in Britain. It added "irretrievable breakdown" to the list of grounds for divorce, which had been shortened to adultery, unreasonable behaviour (cruelty),

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[595] Families Need Fathers, founded in 1974, remains active in 2025; See Julia Brophy, 'Child Care and the Growth of Power: The Status of Mothers in Child Custody Disputes,' in Julia Brophy and Carol Smart (eds), *Women in Law: Explorations in Law, Family & Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 105-106.

[596] Carol Smart, 'The Legal and Moral Ordering of Child Custody,' *Journal of Law and Society* 18:4 (1991) 486.

[597] The *Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020* removed fault-based grounds for divorce.

[598] *Divorce Reform Act 1937.*

[599] *J v C* [1970] AC 668.

[600] *Guardianship of Minors Act 1971* c.3 s.1.; *Guardianship of Infants Act 1925* s.1.; Cretney, *Family Law*, 572; The welfare principle was 'enshrined' in s 1 of the *Children Act 1989*, which codified many of principles of previous case law; Changing terminology of "custody" to "parental responsibility" reflected the change in thought that parents were responsible for their child and did not merely have custody, or possess their children.

and desertion.[601] Spouses could divorce by mutual consent after living apart for two years or after five years without consent, enabling long-separated spouses to divorce.

Although marital conduct, particularly who was responsible for the breakdown, was no longer deemed directly relevant in assessing whether a parent should care for the children, judges could consider a parent's conduct, such as an adulterous affair, to be irresponsible or neglectful of family life and therefore detrimental to the children's welfare. 'Character, personality, lifestyle or circumstances' – such as overt sexuality, lesbianism, or homosexuality – might sway the judges to not allow a parent to live with their children.[602] Judges considered the possible effects of mothers' sexuality and their lesbian relationships on their children. Smart noted in 1984 the similarity between the judiciary's treatment of adulterous mothers in the 1950s and 1960s and their treatment of lesbian mothers in the 1970s and 1980s. In both sets of circumstances, she argues, the judiciary interpreted the mother's sexuality as 'sufficient cause for abandoning the priority of the mother-child relationship'.[603] While this may have been a likely deduction in 1984, examination of all known Court of Appeal cases reveals that although a mother's sexuality was an important factor to consider, it did not outright disqualify her from parenting. In 1990, Lord Justice Glidewell concurred with Lord Justice Balcombe:

> I make it clear that I am not saying that the fact that a mother is living in a lesbian relationship is conclusive, or that it disqualifies her from ever having the care and control of her child. A court may well decide that a sensitive, loving lesbian relationship is a more satisfactory environment for a child than a less sensitive or loving alternative. But that the nature of the relationship is an important factor to be put into the balance seems to me to be clear.[604]

Arrangements for children of a marriage had to be settled before the judiciary could finalise a divorce: to produce a decree absolute. Most often, parents negotiated financial and living arrangements outside of court and the judiciary ratified their

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[601] Cretney, *Family Law,* 375.

[602] Maidment, *Child Custody,* 178.

[603] Carol Smart, *The Ties that Bind: Law, Marriage and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Relations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 124.

[604] *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* [1991] 1 FLR 223, at 229.

decisions in approximately ninety-four percent of divorces in the 1970s.[605] In the minority of divorces where the parents could not decide a division of property and custody of the children, they went to court to have the judiciary decide.[606] The judiciary had to choose between the mother and the father, satisfied that arrangements for the children were 'the best that could be devised under the circumstances'.[607] Although in exceptional circumstances, where it was 'impracticable or undesirable for the child to be entrusted to either of the parties to the marriage' the judiciary could decide to place children in the care of a local authority, this was the least desirable outcome.[608] Since established by the *Children Act 1948*, local authority children departments could receive children "at risk" into care. [609] The state intervening in the care of children by single mothers is outside the scope of this thesis.

Judges considered a number of factors when deciding with which parent the children should reside. Guiding principles included that young children were best raised by their mother (tender years doctrine), that siblings ought to be raised together, and that it was best for children to not be disturbed from their usual place of residence (status quo).[610] Status quo considered where the children had been living since their parents separated.[611] Judges evaluated parents' provision of adequate housing,

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[605] Eekelaar et al, *Custody After Divorce*; Maidment, 'A Study in Child Custody'.

[606] The *Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1958* required parents to explain how the children of a marriage would be cared for after divorce. Robert H Mnookin and Lewis Kornhauser, 'Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law: The Case of Divorce,' *The Yale Law Journal* 88:5 (Apr 1979) 951-955; Julia Brophy, 'Custody Law, Childcare and Inequality in Britain,' in Carol Smart and Selma Sevenhuijsen (eds), *Child Custody and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge 1989) 220; Maidment, 'A Study in Child Custody'; Eekelaar et al, *Custody After Divorce*, 8.

[607] Recommendations of the *Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce 1956 Report*, London: H.M.S.O., Cmnd. 9678 para 373 were given statutory force in *The Matrimonial Proceedings (Children) Act 1958* s 2 and the subsequent *Matrimonial Causes Act 1973* s 52(1).

[608] *Matrimonial Causes Act 1973* s43.1.

[609] See Janet Walker, 'Interventions in Families,' in Clark (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life & Social Change,*188-213; See also Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 176-178; Stephen Cretney, 'The State as a Parent: The Children Act 1948 in Retrospect,' in Cretney, *Law,* 203-245.

[610] Children were often left in the custody of the parent who had cared for the children since divorce. It was usually thought to be in the best interests of the child to not disturb their living arrangement, unless necessary. It is one of the reasons why child custody cases are to move quickly through the court, so if a change in living arrangement is to be made it will be made swiftly.

[611] While parents were separated and before the court granted the degree absolute, the children had to live with one of the parents. If asked, the court granted interim custody to either parent, often with access to the other. This was a temporary solution for daily care of the children.

including proximity to schools.[612] Judges also considered emotional and physical care of the children. Often, judges evaluated living arrangements in tandem with parents' new partners.[613] As judges considered it positive for children to be raised in the matrimonial home, custody of the children was often linked to financial concerns.[614] The courts had discretion to distribute any assets of the marriage. Wives were disadvantaged by a rule of thumb adopted by the courts in 1973 following a Court of Appeal decision: joint assets and joint income to be split one third to the wife (usually the non-earning spouse) and two thirds to the husband. This unequal division of assets, which continues to disadvantage mothers in family court today, was justified by Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls, on the basis that the husband would have the special expenses of employing a housekeeper, something the wife would not need to do.[615]

Satisfied that custody, care and control, and access was decided for the children, along with any division of assets and financial provisions, judges issued a decree absolute to finalise the divorce. However, until a child reached sixteen, either parent could re-apply to the court for a change in custody, care and control, or access. A change in accommodation, finances, or a second marriage were some reasons why divorced parents re-applied for custody. A preference for raising children in a heteronormative nuclear family influenced post-divorce applications by either spouse to alter arrangements for custody, care and control, and access.[616] For a mother known to be lesbian, if the father could provide a more heteronormative family environment in which to raise the children, perhaps a large house and a new wife to care for the children, he might successfully re-apply for custody. This potential to alter

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[612] In *Whitfield v Whitfield,* the father could not provide adequate housing for his new wife and seven children, and the judges awarded care and control to the lesbian mother.

[613] The importance of information about a step-parent or cohabitee is discussed in the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Supervision Provided in Relation to Maria Colwell*, H.M.S.O. (1974) paras 216-224; Eekelaar et al, *Custody After Divorce*, 6.

[614] Maidment, *Child Custody,* 178-179.

[615] Albie Sachs and Joan Hoff Wilson, *Sexism and the Law: A Study of Male Beliefs and Judicial Bias* (Oxford: Martin Robertson & Company, 1978) 143; See also *Watchel v Watchel* [1973] 2 WLR 366.

[616] Mnookin and Kornhauser, 'Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law,' 955.

custody arrangements was a crucial disadvantage to lesbian mothers, who lived in fear of losing custody.

From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, gay and feminist magazines, left-wing newspapers, and advice books told a different story than the legal record. They repeatedly disseminated that lesbian mothers always or nearly always did not get custody of their children in court. The SMLC admitted that 'we have no idea how many cases there really are' and ROW admitted in its 1986 guide: 'We have no way of knowing how many mothers have actually been through a legal custody dispute'.[617] Later in 1989, ROW stated: 'We simply do not know how many lesbian mothers come before the Courts'.[618] In the same document, ROW explained that it had 'endeavoured to collate what information is available by talking to lesbian mothers who have been before the Courts and to Lawyers who have been involved in disputed cases'.[619] ROW had no means to find these mothers except by advertising, word of mouth, or if they voluntarily came forward. Separate organisations made dismal claims about custody cases from small, inadequate samples. The Manchester Law Centre in 1978 based its claim on four custody cases sourced from unreliable sources: two articles in *Spare Rib* and two articles in *The Guardian*.[620] ROW's postal survey included eleven custody disputes that were decided in court between 1971 and 1984: too small a sample to be useful for analysis of a mother's chance of success.

There is a sample bias when gathering source material from mothers who willingly came forward to tell their stories. These were mostly the mothers who had not been awarded custody: the women with the loudest voices. Having lost their children, they were disconsolate and angry and had little to lose by telling their stories to the press. Shirley Risdon, who did not have custody of her young son in 1976 after a court battle, widely disseminated her story. She submitted an article about her experience

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[617] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 44; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers Legal Handbook*, 142.

[618] Lesbian Custody Project, 'The Present Climate,*' Legal Training Pack: Disputed Decisions Re Custody and Access of Children Where Lesbianism is an Issue*, LSE/5ROW Box 1.

[619] Ibid.

[620] Cohen et al, *Law and Sexuality,* 35-36, 171; The chapter also mentions two cases regarding access only.

to *Sappho*, gave an interview for a cover-page article in *Spare Rib*, related her story for a PhD thesis, wrote about homophobia in the judiciary in two articles in the *Family Law Journal*, and talked to others who relayed her story using different pseudonyms in four separate books.[621] Her recollection of the judge's statements in her article in the *Family Law Journal* has been cited in secondary scholarship without criticism.[622] All published works reported the case from the mother's perspective. Reliance on the recollections of mothers who did not get custody in court is not representative of all married lesbian mothers. As discussed in *Deciding to Stay Married,* some wives delayed divorce or never divorced. Some mothers were awarded custody in court or in negotiations outside of court. These mothers went home with their children, quietly celebrated, and lived in fear of their ex-husbands re-applying for custody while the children were young. Women who came to an agreement over custody and finances outside of court – the majority of women – negotiated in the shadow of law, believing that they were unlikely to be awarded custody in court.

A second methodological issue is the reliance on mothers' recollections of court cases. The press and the public were not allowed in courtrooms to witness private family custody disputes and did not have access to transcripts of the court judgements immediately following the hearings. By relying on mothers' recollections, the print media often misquoted judges. For example, articles in two newspapers and *Capital*

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[621] Shirley Kennington, 'Minus One,' *Sappho* 4:11 (1976) 11-12; Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts,' *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976) 6; Julia Brophy, *Law, State and the Family: The Politics of Child Custody*. Unpublished Thesis, University of Sheffield, 1985; Anon, 'A Case of Heads He Wins – Tails She Loses,' *Family Law* 6:8 (1976) 230-231; Shirley Risdon, 'The Homosexual and the Courts: A Critique,' *Family Law* 7:2 (1977) 78-80; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 9-10; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 109-110; Gillian E Hanscombe and Jackie Forster, *Rocking the Cradle: Lesbian Mothers – A Challenge in Family Living* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1982) 69-73; Dyer and Berlins, *Living Together*, 170. The *Family Law Journal* records 'A Case of Heads He Wins – Tails She Loses' as 'contributed'. As an anonymous author is unusual for any journal, I contend that Shirley Risdon was the author. The article does not cite a court case, and the details of the case and specific phrases, such as 'uncharted waters' are repeated numerous times in articles authored by the mother and in case studies in other primary material. Lastly, the second article, 'The Homosexual and the Courts: A Critique', which names Shirley Risdon as the author, refers to the initial article.

[622] Anon, 'A Case of Heads He Wins – Tails She Loses,' *Family Law* 6:8 (1976) 230-231 cited in Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 182; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 9; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 196; Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 172.

*Gay* from 1982 misquote Watkins LJ from a Court of Appeal case where the mother won custody.[623] *Spare Rib* was unusual in that it included the disclaimer: 'Court quotes are from notes written in court, not from official transcripts'.[624] Regarding a contested custody case in 1976 – Risdon's custody case – ROW provided direct quotations of the judge, citing not a judgement but the 'mother's notes taken from court'.[625]

A minor methodological issue is that to protect the identity of the mothers and their children, print media assigned pseudonyms. Print media also rarely cited actual court cases. This makes it near impossible to cross-reference a parent's story to an actual court case or verify dates and details. For example, Hanscombe and Forster neither cited specific court cases nor identified the mothers.[626] Lesbian, gay and feminist periodicals also deliberately used aliases.[627] Advice books published in the 1970s and 1980s on the legal rights of women, single parenting, and fighting for custody often failed to cite specific cases, or cited them incorrectly.[628] As mentioned earlier in the case of Risdon, her story is repeated eight times, either anonymously or with different aliases.

The result of the sample bias is that mothers who did not get custody in court dominate the narrative to the exclusion of the experiences of the majority of lesbian mothers. Mothers' mostly anonymous recollections are often the only means of any information about cases in the courts of first instance, and are useful to reconstruct women's experiences in court. However, they are not reliable sources for statements of the judges, welfare officers, psychiatrists, or counsel for either parent. Yet newspapers, the feminist and gay press, and advice books used mother's recollections uncritically. The result was the creation of a polemic argument that the courts "took

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[623] *Re P (A Minor) (Custody)* [1983] 4 FLR 401, misquoted in 'Lesbian and Her Lover Can Keep Girl of Five,' *The Daily Telegraph* (22 July 1982) 5; 'Judge Opposes Care in Gay Homes,' *Express and Star* (22 July 1982); *Capital Gay* 53 (23 July 1982). This press quote has been reproduced in Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 123; Cook, *Queer Domesticities,* 133; Durell, 'At Home,' 9.

[624] Stevens, 'Out of the Closet,' 6.

[625] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 9; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 196.

[626] Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle.*

[627] 'What Is Best for the Children ....' in *Gay News* 168 (6-19 March 1980) 6.

[628] Coote and Gill, *Women's Rights*; Wyland, *Motherhood*.

away" children from all lesbian mothers because their sexuality made them "unfit mothers".

## Custody Cases in the Court of Appeal

In early known cases before the *Divorce Reform Act 1969* commenced in 1971, judges either disregarded wives' lesbianism or considered it temporary and awarded them custody. Mrs. Patricia Spicer may have been one of the first lesbians to get custody of her children – in 1953 – although her relationship with Stella Ryan was unproven.[629] In the 1965 case where both parents had slept with their children's au pair, Lord Justice Salmon surmised that Mrs. Patricia Jean Coffer had 'recovered' from her 'temporary but strong unnatural attraction' for the young woman.[630] In a similar case in 1970, the judges dismissed a father's appeal for custody of his four-year-old daughter because the medical evidence indicated his wife's relationship with another woman was an illness from which she had recovered. Russel LJ stated that there was a 'physiological basis for her having at one time passed through a lesbian phase, namely post-puerperal depression'.[631] Drawing on the trope that innocent, married women could be corrupted by lesbians, the judge surmised that the wife had become infatuated with a lesbian who worked on the family farm, influenced in part by her depression following the death of her newborn baby. Such custody cases illustrate that society continued into the 1970s to pathologize homosexuality. Judges may have awarded lesbian mothers custody when they assumed the mothers had "recovered" from having relationships with women.

From 1971 onward, the known custody cases involved wives who left their marriages to live with other women. These wives were unlikely to remarry. Counsel for fathers provided two main reasons against lesbian parenting: that the children might be corrupted or stigmatised by exposure to their mother's homosexual lifestyle. The first reason, the "corruption argument", outlined concerns that children raised by

[629] *Spicer v Spicer* [1954] I WLR 1051.
[630] *Coffer v Coffer,* 3.
[631] *Re B (TA) (An Infant)* [1970] 3 All ER 705 13, 3.

lesbian mothers would be confused about traditional gender roles and their own gender, mature into homosexuals instead of heterosexuals, which was assumed to be negative, and in some cases to be subject to sexual abuse. Beginning in the 1970s, Mathew Thomson argues, research indicated a growing threat of physical abuse of children from within the family, with the acknowledgement of sexual abuse from the mid-1980s.[632] Bingham claims that the public press routinely covered child abuse from the 1970s through the 1980s.[633] After three independent psychiatric studies in the 1980s evidenced that children raised by their lesbian mothers did not suffer from psychological disturbances or disrupted psychosexual development, mothers' legal counsel had evidence to argue against the corruption argument.[634] The second reason, which endured into the 1990s – the "stigmatization argument" – claimed that children would be teased, ostracised, or bullied by their classmates. This argument was based on two assumptions: firstly, that classmates would learn of their mothers' sexuality and secondly that the classmates would articulate concern. Since these assumptions were based on what might happen, it was difficult to prove they would not happen, and so the argument endured. Legal scholars argue that the stigmatization argument was politically-correct: allowing judges to appear unprejudiced against homosexuality while remaining focused on the welfare of the child.[635]

The judiciary sought to place children in an environment that was a close facsimile of the nuclear family. Thane and Evans state: 'For the morally righteous the term "family" is reserved for households headed by married parents, ignoring the vast evidence of stable, successful families headed by single, or unmarried parents, far

[632] Mathew Thomson, 'Sexual Danger and the Age of the Paedophile,' in *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 153-183.

[633] Adrian Bingham, '"It Would be Better for the Newspapers to Call a Spade a Spade": The British Press and Child Sexual Abuse, c. 1918-90,' *History Workshop Journal* 88 (March 2019) 93.

[634] Barlow et al, *Advising Gay and Lesbian Clients,* 42; See also *Research to Dispel the Corruption Argument*.

[635] Helen Reece, 'Subverting the Stigmatization Argument,' *Journal of Law and Society*, 23:4 (December 1996) 486; David Bradley, 'Homosexuality and Child Custody in English Law,' *International Journal of Law and the Family* 1:2 (October 1987) 155-205; Kate Standley, 'Children and Lesbian Mothers: B v B and C v C,' *Journal of Child Law* 4:3 (1993) 134-137.

stronger than the evidence of dysfunctionality'.[636] Helen Reece claims that the perceived deviancy of a parent weighs negatively in the scales used by judges in custody cases.[637] She also argues that the custody cases were less about homosexuals being bad parents (as indeed judges asked for no proof of this), but more about that the heteronormative nuclear family was the normal – and therefore promoted as the preferred – family for raising children.[638] Reece disregards the corruption and stigmatisation arguments and argues that 'the true reason for the presumption against homosexual parenting, is that it is axiomatic or self-evident that normal is best, that the divorcée who approximates more closely to the nuclear family is better for the child'.[639] Ben Griffin argues that from 1925 to 1973, the paramountcy of the child's welfare provided a framework for courts to 'maintain normative status of male domestic authority'.[640] The judiciary's high regard of the nuclear family persisted despite the increasing rate of divorce splitting families apart. In 1990, judges in the Court of Appeal were still adamant that the nuclear family was the best environment for raising children; they upheld a father's appeal and sent his case to be reheard at the lower court.[641] Lord Justice Glidewell referred obliquely to the declining rates of marriage, increased separation of reproduction from marriage, and greater acceptance of homosexual relationships. He also insisted that the nuclear family consisting of a married mother and father was the "ideal" for raising children and emphasised that this belief was self-evident:

> Despite the vast change over the past 30 years or so in the attitudes of our society generally to the institution of marriage, to sexual morality, and to homosexual relationships, I regard it as axiomatic that the ideal environment for the upbringing of a child is the home of loving, caring and sensible parents, her father and her mother. When the marriage between father and mother is at an end, that ideal cannot be attained. When the court is called upon to decide which of two possible alternatives is then preferable for the child's welfare, its task is to choose the alternative which comes closest to that ideal.[642]

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[636] Thane and Evans, *Sinners?,* 5.

[637] Reece, 'Presumption Against Deviant Parents?' 9-21.

[638] Reece, 'The Paramountcy Principle'.

[639] Ibid., 291.

[640] Griffin, 'Paternal Rights'.

[641] Justice Booth subsequently awarded care and control to the mother.

[642] *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* [1991] 1 FLR 223, at 228.

Lord Judge Balcombe concurred: 'in our society it is still the norm that children are brought up in a home with a father, mother and siblings'.[643] He felt 'that such an upbringing is most likely to be conducive to their welfare', and that 'the child's welfare lies in which of the competing parents can offer the nearest approach to that norm'.[644] To the judges, any alternative to the nuclear family was less than ideal: such as children raised by single-parents, grandparents, or two lesbians. This approach likely continued into the twenty-first century. In 2012, legal scholars Alison Diduck and Felicity Kaganas stated: 'It is not entirely inconceivable that, faced with a choice between a same-sex and a heterosexual family, the court would still prefer the more "normal" family as being more conducive to the child's welfare'.[645]

As established earlier in this chapter, we do not have conclusive evidence of a downward trend in the incidence of lesbian custody cases, although most legal scholars agree that it likely began in the 1990s after the commencement of the *Children Act 1989*. This Act had an immediate, great effect as parents no longer had to dispute custody: with which parent the children would live became the contentious issue. It was not until 1997 that ROW surmised that prejudice against lesbian mothers had subsided in court and the prospects for lesbian mothers raising their children were more positive. ROW attributed this decline in part to the psychological studies of the children of lesbian mothers.[646] Solicitor Gil Butler claimed that the *Children Act 1989* was a turning point for lesbian custody cases. Before its implementation, she claimed that some husbands could not bear the thought of their lesbian wives getting a court order for custody. Butler states:

> Brenda Hale, Saint Brenda, changed those concepts and introduced parental responsibility. Before 1989, on divorce, the court had to make an order for custody. It just had to because that's what the law said. And it meant that that could sometimes open up a whole can of worms because I do believe that I acted in some cases where the only reason that the father was objecting to the children staying with the mother is because he couldn't bear the idea of

[643] Ibid., at 231.

[644] Ibid.

[645] Alison Diduck and Felicity Kaganas, *Family Law, Gender and the State: Text, Cases and Materials,* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2012) 438-439.

[646] Lynne Harne and Rights of Women, *Valued Families: The Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook* (London: The Women's Press, 1997) 45.

> her having a piece of paper that said she had custody. The 1989 Children Act got rid of not only the concept of custody, but also the court having to make an order about the children on divorce so that sort of swept away quite a lot of things.[647]

Anne Barlow et al attribute the decline of lesbian custody cases throughout the 1990s to more positive social attitudes toward homosexuality and a changed culture of divorce due to the *Children Act 1989*.[648] I agree with Barlow et al, in that fewer spouses fought over custody due to both parents having parental duties as defined in the *Children Act 1989*. I also contend that when spouses disagreed over residence, lesbian mothers did so with better-informed solicitors and barristers, thanks to the activism of ROW, and were more likely both to fight for custody and fight successfully. I contend that alternative families were contentious in the 1980s. According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, public opinion of homosexuality was at its lowest in 1987, which the survey attributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to Section 28, but improved through the 1990s.[649] Press coverage of debates leading up to the commencement of Section 28 reflected societal concerns of homosexuals' influence on children.[650] Some feminists were concerned that section 28 gave the 'green light to judges' to award custody to the husbands of lesbian mothers.[651] Child abuse also made headlines in 1987 with the Cleveland scandal, where 121 children were removed from their parents' care for suspected sexual abuse following a controversial anal sphincter test.[652] These moral panics in the 1980s were set amongst the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher's conservative governments, for which the traditional

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[647] Interview with Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.

[648] Anne Barlow et al, *Advising Gay and Lesbian Clients,* 41.

[649] From 1983 to 1993, fifty percent or more respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey thought homosexuality was always wrong, peaking at sixty-four percent in 1987. *British Social Attitudes 30: Personal Relationships*, 1 <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/202308/bsa30_personal_relationships_final.pdf> [Accessed 03 September 2024].

[650] Section 28 of the *Local Government Act 1988* prohibited local schools and councils from 'promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.

[651] Scarlett MacGwire, 'First Comes Prejudice,' *The Guardian* (25 April 1988).

[652] See Beatrix Campbell, *Unofficial Secrets. Child Sex Abuse: The Cleveland Case* (London: Virago, 1988); Nick Basannavar, *Sexual Violence Against Children in Britain since 1965: Trailing Abuse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

nuclear family's self-sufficiency was seen as the keystone. Families headed by single mothers, be they heterosexual or homosexual, did not fit the male breadwinner model.[653]

Known custody cases in the Court of Appeal in the 1970s and 1980s indicate two arguments used against lesbian mothers: exposure to lesbian relationships would corrupt the children's psychosexual development and children would be teased by their classmates. The overarching reason judges gave preference to fathers having custody is that the fathers with their new wives were a closer facsimile to the ideal nuclear family for raising children than two lesbians. Nonetheless, in certain incidences, in both the Court of Appeal and the courts of first instance, judges gave custody and care and control to lesbian mothers.

## Custody Disputes in Print Media

Newspaper reports on divorce cases in the 1950s and 1960s raised awareness that wives were lesbians and not merely victims of seduction by lesbians from outside the family.[654] Oram positions this awareness in the 1950s but this chapter supports Jennings' argument that awareness began in the 1960s.[655] *The Times* reported on the Spicer divorce in 1954, where the judge found no evidence of Mrs. Spicer's physical association with another woman.[656] In 1965, reporting that both Mr. and Mrs. Coffer had sex with the family's au pair, *The Daily Mail* specified that the wife had 'admitted' she had 'lesbian tendencies'.[657] The press sensationalised the wife's lesbian affair, down-played the husband's adultery, and did not report that the father unsuccessfully

[653] See Ben Jackson, 'Free Markets and Feminism: The Neo-Liberal Defence of the Male Breadwinner Model in Britain, c. 1980 – 1997,' *Women's History Review* (2019) 297-316; Philip A. Thomas, 'The Nuclear Family, Ideology and AIDS in the Thatcher Years,' *Feminist Legal Studies* 1:1 (1993-03) 23-44.

[654] A Girl Lies Dying in the Shadow of the Gallows,' *NoW* (24 February 1952), 7; 'Death Sentence on Stretcher Girl', *Daily Mail* (22 February 1952); 'The Vicar Drank Cups of Tea in Secret,' *NoW* (6 June 1954) 7.

[655] Alison Oram, 'Love "Off the Rails",' 52-53.

[656] 'Wife's Association with a Woman: Husband Granted Decree Spicer v Spicer,' *The Times* (18 June 1954) 13.

[657] 'A Girl Called Carmen and an Astonishing Eternal Triangle,' *Daily Mail* (16 May 1964) 11.

appealed custody of the three children given to their mother.[658] Also in the 1960s, several left-wing newspapers ran sympathetic articles about lesbians, particularly lesbians who were married.[659] Lesbian wives were not the final taboo: lesbian mothers were more challenging for society to comprehend. From the mid-1970s, newspapers and the gay and feminist press reported on lesbian mothers and custody cases, with advice books for lesbian mothers appearing from 1977 onwards.

## Newspapers and the Gay and Feminist Press

From the mid-1970s through the 1990s, wives were increasingly likely to read about lesbian custody cases in contemporary media. Those who were secretive about their sexuality were less likely to risk subscribing to or casually purchasing gay and feminist magazines and literature, but newspapers were readily available. Right-wing newspapers publicised several wins by lesbian mothers, albeit from the father's view that the children would be morally corrupted through exposure to their mothers' lesbianism and feminism. Left-wing newspapers and the gay and feminist press articulated a dismal picture of lesbian mothers in court: that their sex lives and parenting ability would be closely scrutinised, that they would be unlikely to be allowed to raise their children, and that any access they might have to their children would be severely restricted. In the criminal law context of rape trials, women's sexual history was often examined, which lends credence to recollections of lesbian mothers being questioned about their sex lives.[660] Articles were noteworthy and polemic. Illustrating severe manifestations of homophobia, narratives of mothers losing custody supported

[658] The Court of Appeal dismissed the father's appeal, Lord Justice Salmon surmising that the mother had recovered from her lesbian tendencies and blamed her temporary aberration on the au pair. *Coffer v Coffer.* See also 'Loves of Carmen – a Husband and his Wife,' *Daily Mirror* (16 May 1964) 5; 'Wife's Conduct with Girl was "Cruel" to Husband,' *The Daily Telegraph* (16 May 1964) 15; 'Au Pair Girl,' *The Times* (16 May 1964) 13.

[659] Taking the Mist Away from Lesbianism,' *The Sunday Times* (London) 7348 (15 March 1964) 6; Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *NoW* (13 December 1964) 4; Monica Furlong, 'Is it Fair to Go On Ignoring These Unhappy Women?,' *Daily Mail* 21400 (16 February 1965) 6; 'We Decided We Were in Love,' *The Sunday Times* (London) 7426 (12 September 1965) 74.

[660] Scholars continue to debate the use of sexual history in rape trials See Joanne Conaghan and Yvette Russell, *Sexual History Evidence and the Rape Trial* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023); Zsuzsanna Adler, *Rape on Trial*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1987). See also Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11* (11 October 2019).

an emotionally-charged cry to battle for parental rights of all lesbian and gay parents. A positive effect of these reports was that at least one group of women were incited to organise to help lesbian mothers fight for custody.[661] Although the reports forewarned mothers of the opposition they might face in court, they also discouraged mothers from fighting for their children. Jill Radford, who joined ROW in 1986, noted six years later: 'For lesbian mothers the selective reporting of [anti-lesbian] decisions is dangerous because it may lead to their thinking they stand no chance in court'.[662] This section examines the extent that newspapers and magazines promulgated that lesbian mothers did not get custody in court and later sections examine how this assumption affected mothers' agency in divorce.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, various left-wing newspapers and the gay and feminist press included articles about divorced lesbian mothers that were sympathetic but upheld the assumption that lesbian mothers would not get custody of their children. In 1974, *Gay News* reported that solicitor Joan Rubenstein had claimed that 'many women have been advised not to bother to fight for custody of their children' and that other mothers 'lost their children when their homosexuality was revealed in court'.[663] *The Sunday Times* published a compassionate article about two divorced women raising two daughters that stated: 'A judge will usually not give a mother custody of her own children if she's living with another woman, and the father makes a claim'.[664] *Spare Rib* claimed that 'custody is always awarded to the father' and that a lesbian mother's sexual orientation 'was sufficient to prove she is an unfit mother'.[665] *Women's Voice* stated; 'if the lesbian mother's previous husband has remarried, then she has no hope of keeping her child'.[666] *The Guardian* reported that ALP had been involved

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[661] Anna Coote's article in 1975 inspired a small group of women to form ALP. See *Chapter Five: Activism for Lesbian Mothers.*

[662] Jill Radford, 'The Lesbian Custody Project,' *Health Care for Women International* 13:2 (1992) 236; Jill Radford, 'Rights of Women – Twenty Years of Feminist Activism,' in Gabriele Griffin (ed), *Feminist Activism in the 1990s* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) 51.

[663] 'Lesbian Mothers,' *Gay News* 60 (December 5-18, 1974) 7.

[664] Michael De-la-Noy, 'Women Together and the Child Between,' *The Sunday Times* (August 24, 1975) 27.

[665] 'Lesbian Mothers Unite,' *Spare Rib* 47 (June 1976) 18.

[666] 'The Rights of Lesbian Mothers,' *Women's Voice* 14 (February 1978) 14.

with only two cases where lesbian mothers were awarded custody in court, both exceptional cases. 'Otherwise lesbianism is enough on its own to loose [sic] a woman custody, and in many cases women have lost all access as well'.[667] *The Guardian* related one case where a lesbian mother did not get access to her children and restrictive conditions of access in other cases:

> Where access has been granted, judges have often gone out of their way to lay down absurd conditions. The implications of which are disgusting and insulting to a high degree. Time and again judges stipulate that no signs of affection shall be shown between the couple. Sometimes the mother's lover is told to stay out of the house the whole time the children are visiting. On one particularly unpleasant occasion, the judge ordered that when the mother had her little girl to stay, every time the child went to the lavatory the mother's lover was to go to the other end of the house.[668]

Later that year, *Spare Rib* was equally negative about lesbian mothers' chances: 'The judge always awards custody to the father. The most the mother can hope for is "access"'.[669] *Gay News* reviewed the *Guide to Gay Custody* and repeated that lesbian mothers would need to restrict their behaviour in court, have their homes scrutinised, and even limit contact with their female partners.[670] By the 1980s, anyone who had sought information about lesbian custody cases in the gay or feminist press had many opportunities to note that 'Lesbians nearly always lose custody of their children if the father chooses to fight for them'.[671] *Outwrite*, the international feminist magazine, stated in 1983: 'MANY LESBIANS CANNOT LEAVE THEIR MARRIAGES because of the likelihood of losing their children' (emphasis original).[672]

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[667] Polly Toynbee, 'What Makes Lesbians So Particularly Dangerous as Parents,' *The Guardian* (16 January 1978) 9.

[668] Ibid.

[669] Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts,' *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976) 6; See also 'Changing with My Daughter,' *Spare Rib* 60 (1977) 44–46; Susan Hemmings, 'In the Best Interests of the Children,' *Spare Rib* 74 (1978) 39.

[670] Alison Hennegan, 'Play the System,' *Gay News* 142 (May 4-17, 1978) 25.

[671] Lynne Harne, 'Lesbian Custody and the New Myth of Fatherhood,' *Trouble and Strife* 3 (Summer 1984) 12; See also Lynne Harne, 'Lesbian Mother's Custody Conference,' *Spare Rib* 129 (April 1983) 22-23; *Gay News* 239 (April 29, 1982 – May 12, 1982) 44; *Gay News* 262 (March 31, 1983 – April 13, 1983) 29; 'Parenting: The Politics of Parenting – Lesbian Mothers Out on a Limb?,' *Spare Rib* (August 1987).

[672] North West London Lesbian Custody Group*, Outwrite* 11 (February 1983) 5.

The press also reported five Court of Appeal cases where mothers went home with their children in 1976, 1982, 1983, 1990, and 1994. Reports in the right-wing press were just as provocative and anti-lesbian in 1994 as they were in the 1980s. The left-wing press reported the first win as exceptional and not precedent-setting. In 1976, Jean Whitfield won custody of her twin daughters in the Court of Appeal; the father had remarried and had no viable options for accommodating seven children.[673] The *Women's Report* and *Spare Rib* stated that the case did not set any precedent and *The Guardian* claimed this case was 'the first time the courts have taken the view that being a homosexual does not *automatically* make a woman unfit to have custody of her children' (emphasis added).[674] In 1982, the Court of Appeal dismissed a father's appeal to have his daughter placed in care of the local authority instead of the care of his lesbian wife.[675] The following year, when Judge Braithwaite reversed his earlier decision and sent two girls to live with their mother and her lesbian partner, major newspapers were divided in sympathy between the mother and the father.[676] Right-wing newspapers continued in the 1990s to criticise lesbian mothers.[677] In 1990, the press reported that a father lost his appeal for custody of his daughter.[678] In 1994,

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[673] *Whitfield v Whitfield*. Gillian Linscott, 'Lesbian Mother Wins Custody of Twins,' *The Guardian* (November 5, 1976) 4.

[674] 'Sisters & the Law,' *Women's Report* 5:1 (November-December 1976) 5; 'Lesbian Mother Wins Custody,' *Spare Rib* 54 (1977), 17; Eleanor Stephens, 'Must a Loving Mother Love Men?,' *The Guardian* (12 November 1976) 9.

[675] *Re P (A Minor) (Custody)* [1983] 4 FLR 401; 'Lesbian and Her Lover Can Keep Girl of Five,' *The Daily Telegraph* (22 July 1982); 'Lesbian Mother to Keep Child', *London Evening Standard* (22 July 1982); 'Judge is 'Uneasy Over Lesbian Mother and Child,' *The Guardian* (22 July 1982) 4; 'Girl Can Stay with Lesbian Mother, Say Judges,' *Daily Mail* (22 July 1982) 25; 'Lesbian Mother Wins Custody,' *Daily Express* (22 July 1982).

[676] *Re D and D (a Minor);* 'Lesbian Given Custody of Her Daughters,' *The Daily Telegraph* (17 February 1983); 'Lesbian Wins Back Children,' *Daily Express* (17 February 1983); 'Lesbian Mother Wins Battle for her Children,' *Daily Mirror* (17 February 1983); 'Woman to Woman,' *The Guardian* (11 January 1984); 'Sisters Must Return to Lesbian Mother,' *The Times* (17 February 1983); Sally Staples, 'No Child Should Have to Suffer this Trauma,' *Sunday Express* (20 February 1983); Philip Wrack, 'Sunday Punchline,' *News of the World* (20 February 1983); Gill Martin, 'Heartache,' *Daily Express* (12 April 1983); Daily Mail Reporter, 'Lesbian Tug of Love,' *Daily Mail* 26954 (February 17, 1983) 15.

[677] See Pam Alldred, 'Making a Mockery of Family Life?: Lesbian Mothers in the British Media,' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 2:4 (1998) 9-21.

[678] Robert Pearson, 'Court Overturns Lesbian Mother Custody Decision,' *The Independent* (25 August 1990) 5; 'Father Fights to Win Child from Lesbian,' *Daily Mail* (25 August 1990) 14; 'Lesbian Mother's Child Care Order to be Re-heard,' *The Daily Telegraph* (3 September 1990) 18.

right-wing newspapers across the country rallied on the side of a father who had lost his appeal to have his two children live with him most days of the week.[679] Following a full-page article on the case, *The Sun* reported that nearly 18,000 readers called its switchboard to say the judge was wrong to have given the mother custody.[680] Right-wing newspapers expressed significant backlash against lesbian parenting into the 1990s.

The feminist and gay press also printed stories of lesbian mothers raising their children after divorce, although often not presented as major wins for lesbian mothers in feature articles: many were told by the mothers in letters to the editor. *Arena Three* mentioned a range of experiences of a few divorcées. Although B.G. had no contact with her children since her divorce in 1963, Mrs. M.D. raised her five children after divorcing her husband of twelve years, and E.S. had legal custody of her son and daughter, with alimony, for thirteen years since her divorce in 1958.[681] Although it is unclear in these instances whether the mother was known as a lesbian when she divorced, in one of its last issues in 1971, *Arena Three* warned that a husband of an unfaithful wife had the power to retaliate and make her homeless and childless:

> He might, like many husbands over the years, insist you leave the matrimonial home. He might claim natural custody of the children and justify his action that you are UNFIT to bring them up. (emphasis original)[682]

The lack of discourse about custody cases in *Arena Three* indicates that there were few custody disputes where the mothers were known or suspected to desire women in the 1950s and 1960s, when the divorce rate overall was low. When children were old enough for their mothers to no longer fear losing custody to their ex-husbands, mothers were more likely to share their stories of raising their children. In the 1970s,

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[679] 'Father Loses Daughters to Ex-wife and Lesbian Lover,' *Daily Express* (3 September 1994); 'Lesbians Preferred,' *Daily Mail* (3 September 1994).

[680] 'Much to Bear: Dad was Praised by Judge but Still Lost Tots,' *The Sun* (9 September 1994); 'Fury at "Lesbian Parents" Ruling, *The Sun* (10 September 1994).

[681] B.G. Devon, 'Free Speech, *Arena Three* 8:5 (1971) 6; Mrs. M.D. (Bromley), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:3 (March 1969) 6; E.S. SE Kent, 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 8:3 (1971) 12.

[682] A Marriage Guidance Counsellor, 'An Open Letter to a Housewife,' *Arena Three* 8:6 (1971) 4.

more lesbian mothers told stories of raising children from their marriages in various gay and feminist magazines. A sixteen-year-old daughter explained to *Spare Rib* that she and her sister had lived with her lesbian mother since her parents divorced ten years earlier in 1966: 'my father accepted my mother's lesbianism and made no attempt to remove my sister and myself from her care'.[683] Linda from Milton Keynes explained to *Spare Rib* that she had petitioned for divorce on the ground of desertion and was awarded custody of her son in 1974.[684] *Sappho* included several stories of divorcées raising children in the 1970s. Two wives who fell in love both had custody of their daughters. One woman's husband was happy to have her care for their daughter and the other mother experienced a bitter custody battle, although the judges eventually decided the children should live with the two women.[685] In 1974, E.V. from Surrey explained how she persevered against negative odds to gain custody of her eleven-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son.[686] D.J. from Lancashire explained in 1975 that the court gave her custody and maintenance 'without any trouble at all'.[687] L.M.B. succeeded in court to gain custody of her two sons and urged *Sappho* readers to fight for custody.[688] Joan related to *Sappho* in 1978 that she had won custody of three of her four children after a three-year dispute with her husband and 'frustrating battles with the Camden authorities'.[689] Stories of lesbian mothers raising their children were overshadowed by feature-length articles on lesbian mothers who did not get custody in court.[690] There was greater focus on mothers without custody than celebration of the mothers with custody.

## Advice Books on Lesbian Custody

Advice books on lesbian custody were overall negative about lesbian mothers' chances of success in court. The advice books were also similar to the newspapers in

[683] 'Letters', *Spare Rib* 52 (November 1976) 4.
[684] Marilyn Archer, 'Gay Wives and Mothers,' *Spare Rib* 31 (January 1975) 26.
[685] 'Happy Families 2,' *Sappho* 2:12 (March 1974) 13, 20.
[686] E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12.
[687] D.J. Lancs, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:9 (1975) 11.
[688] L.M.B., 'Custody and the Gay Divorcee,' *Sappho* 5:5 (1977) 17.
[689] Kirstine McDougall, 'Lesbians, Rape and Custody,' *Sappho* 6:9 (1978) 22.
[690] 'The Politics of Parenting – Lesbian Parents Out on a Limb?,' *Spare Rib* (August 1987) 57.

their use of emotive language. This convincing, polemic rhetoric, although well-intentioned, influenced readers.

By the late 1970s, lesbian mothers had available two pamphlets and a small book that provided information and advice on custody disputes. All were pessimistic about the chances of success – 'the odds are against you' – and many included provocative statements.[691] Wages Due Lesbians printed a thirty-six-page booklet about motherhood, lesbianism, and child custody. In it Wyland implied that anyone can remove children from the care of lesbian mothers: 'Lesbian women have such a degree of powerlessness that almost anyone who comes along – parents, relatives, husbands, the Children's Aid – can lay claim to our children and win'.[692] The second publication, a booklet of fourteen pages by ALP, was available by post for twenty pence in 1978. It referred to 'the currently almost impossible task of winning a contested custody case' and stated:

> If homosexuality is the deciding factor in your case (which most judges go out of their way to deny) there is only a slim chance of winning a case where both sides are equally matched in the type of provision for the child(ren) (accommodation, money, etc) or where the father is only relatively worse off in this respect than the mother (where the mother is a lesbian).[693]

It included the experiences of a few lesbian mothers and advised on strategies for custody proceedings in court. In reviews of the booklet, *Gay News* reported that it provided practical but grim advice on a 'protracted and draining (financially and emotionally) battle', *Sappho* reported that it predicted 'a gloomy, rather than optimistic outcome' for custody battles in court, and the newsletter for the WLM summarised that it was difficult for a homosexual parent to win custody and that the judiciary 'are particularly wary of granting homosexuals custody of their children'.[694] Also in 1978, the Manchester Law Centre published a more extensive book on homosexuals and the law, which avowed: 'So far very few gay parents have been given custody of the

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[691] Action for Lesbian Parents, *The Guide to Gay Custody* (1978).

[692] Wyland, *Motherhood,* 9.

[693] Action for Lesbian Parents, *The Guide to Gay Custody* (1978) 1.

[694] Alison Hennegan, 'Play the System,' *Gay News* 142 (May 4-17, 1978) 29; 'Books,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 25; 'The Guide to Gay Custody,' *WIRES* 51, 5.

children if their sexuality has been brought to the attention of the court'.[695] Lesbian mothers had to wait until 1986 for an extensive guide to lesbian custody disputes.

Feminist author and journalist Gillian Hanscome together with Jackie Forster, editor of *Sappho*, began interviewing lesbian mothers across England and Wales during the summer of 1978 and published *Rocking the Cradle: Lesbian Mothers, A Challenge in Family Living* in 1981. Although not purporting to give advice, the book illustrated many of the issues lesbian mothers faced. In the preface, Hanscombe and Forster claimed:

> In cases where husbands have fought their lesbian wives for custody of the children, the mothers who lost their children – because the court assumed that a lesbian cannot be a proper mother – suffered the normal grief and despair that any normal mother would suffer when forced to give away her children.[696]

In the chapter *Courts of Flaw*, they stated that 'the judicial system nearly always awards custody to the father when a custody case is contested by a lesbian mother'.[697] Hanscombe and Forster's use of emotive language evoked fear, as claiming judges could deem them to be "unfit mothers" and "take away their children" would upset any mother. *Rocking the Cradle* is an excellent primary resource of anonymous personal histories but is an unreliable source of outcomes, judicial discourse, and analysis of lesbian custody cases. Neither author was a historian or legal scholar. *Sappho* folded the year *Rocking the Cradle* was published, but Forster's interest in lesbian mothers likely influenced her to publish letters to the editor on the subject in *Sappho.*

In 1982, a solicitor and the legal correspondent for *The Times* published a paperback about the legal issues of couples who live together. They retold Risdon's narrative and made the usual generalization about lesbian custody cases:

> In general, judges tend to favour mothers over fathers when it comes to a decision about which parent the child is to live with. But if the mother is a lesbian, judges look at it very differently. There have been very few cases where a lesbian mother has been granted custody of

[695] Cohen et al, *Law and Sexuality,* 33.

[696] Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle,* 10.

[697] Ibid., 67.

> her child against the objections of the father, especially if he has remarried and is able to provide the child with a new mother figure.[169]

In 1984, The SMLC printed a forty-five-page booklet available for ninety pence about six lesbian mothers' experiences of coming out and leaving their male partners, with or without their children.[698] None had fought for custody in court. The SMLC claimed it had not intended to provide guidance for fighting for custody, but instead hoped to illustrate the permutations of emotional turmoil and practical considerations of lesbian women having children before coming out. The SMLC claimed that few lesbian mothers fought for custody in court, but 'those that DO get publicity through the courts are isolated and sensationalised'.[699] Meanwhile, women who pursued alternatives to fighting for custody in court did not 'get any publicity, so these women remain invisible'.[700] The SMLC argued that this imbalance of publicity encouraged the myth that there were not many lesbian mothers whereas it claimed: 'The truth is we are everywhere'.[701]

Also in 1984, ROW published a report of its postal survey. ROW reprinted most of the report within its 1986 advice book, which included advice on legal procedures and preparing for a court case. On the first page ROW claimed that in 1986, 'many lesbian mothers still lose custody of their children solely on the basis of their sexuality'.[702] On page three ROW made the more restrained claim that 'not all lesbian mothers lose custody of their children but the statistics and personal accounts of lesbians who have fought custody cases can make depressing reading'.[703] The statistics to which it refers are those from its postal survey of thirty-six respondents, of which eleven fought for custody in court.[704] To conduct its survey, ROW advertised in feminist and lesbian magazines, asking to hear from lesbian mothers who specifically

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[698] SMLC, *Our Lives*.
[699] Ibid., 2.
[700] Ibid.
[701] Ibid.
[702] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 1.
[703] Ibid., 3.
[704] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial,* 1984.

'have experienced problems over getting custody, access, or with social service, or just generally about how your and your children's lives have been affected by attitudes towards lesbianism'.[705] Advertisements explained that ROW was 'conducting a survey to find out just how prejudiced the legal and welfare systems are towards lesbians with children'.[706] As ROW sought negative experiences, its resulting advice book paints a pessimistic picture of lesbian custody cases. The book provides many narratives, including a description of mothers' negative experiences in court:

> Lesbian mothers can be personally devastated by the experience of going to court where many face nothing short of blatant injustice. A lesbian mother may find that her entire life is put on trial; her personal relationships, politics, and whole personality can be scrutinised and attacked. She can be subjected to insulting comments and remarks from the judge and the father's lawyers with little recourse. The legal system seems determined to undermine her decision to live as a lesbian and independently of men.[707]

It was not until 1997 that ROW surmised that prejudice against lesbian mothers had subsided in court and the prospects for lesbian mothers raising their children were more positive.[708]

## Roads to Divorce

This section interrogates the roads to divorce for women whose desire for other women was an underlying difficulty in their marriages. Sometimes it was their husbands, learning of their lesbianism or not tolerating extramarital affairs, who petitioned for divorce. Other times it was the wives who separated and began divorce proceedings. Often women agonised for years before separating. Reasons to divorce are complex.

### Husbands Who Chose to Divorce

In the post-war period, fidelity was increasingly considered important to a marriage.[709] Langhamer correlates this shift to an increased emphasis on love and sex

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[705] 'Gemma,' *Gay Scotland* 13 (March-April 1984) 28.

[706] Ibid.

[707] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 1.

[708] Harne and ROW, *Valued Families,* 45.

[709] Richards and Elliott, 'Sex and Marriage in the 1960s and 1970s,' 42-44; Warren Colman, 'Fidelity as a Moral Achievement,' in Christopher Clulow (ed), *Rethinking Marriage. Public and Private*

to marriage.[710] Although some husbands accommodated their wives' extra-marital affairs with women as discussed earlier in *Consenting Husbands* in the previous chapter, many objected to their wives' infidelity. Langhamer highlights that a double standard was evident: husbands were generally intolerant of wives extramarital affairs and wives had more reasons to look the other way.[711] Langhamer, of course, was referring to wives' extramarital affairs with men, but I contend that husbands were similarly intolerant of their wives affairs with women. Antony Grey of Albany Trust noted in 1969 that husbands were less tolerant of their lesbian wives than straight wives of their homosexual husbands.[712] Harrison, the organiser of one of the earliest groups for spouses in mixed marriages in 1976, noted that most members of his group were gay men since 'there is some evidence that once a married woman desires a gay relationship her marriage tends to break up'.[713] Husbands sometimes sanctioned sexual relations but objected to their wives forming emotional connections. Val recalled that her husband did not mind her having sex with men during the late 1960s and early 1970s but had warned her not to fall in love. Val had three affairs with men, but when she fell in love with another woman her husband was devastated.[714] In *Sappho* in 1974, E.V. explained that her husband felt threatened by her affair with a woman: it was 'such a blow to his manly pride that the sky fell in'.[715] Julia explained to *Gay News* in 1980 that her husband felt inferior: as if he had failed her in bed.[716] Wives' infidelity with women was often difficult for husbands to accept.

Upon learning of their wives' desire for women, husbands sometimes threatened to separate their wives and children, either to try to force them to remain

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*Perspectives* (London: Karnac, 1993) 71. Cited in Claire Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England,' *History Workshop Journal* 62:1 (2000) 88.

[710] Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England'.

[711] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 194-196.

[712] Jean Ritchie, 'Beyond the Pale,' *The Evening Echo* [Hemel Hempstead] 8.

[713] Colin Harrison, 'It's All Right for Pop Stars…,'*Gay News* 104 (October 7-20, 1976) 16.

[714] Interview with Val Bond, 17 August 2023.

[715] E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12; E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:1 (April 1974) 10.

[716] Kevin Lee, 'What is Best for the Children…,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19 1980) 7.

married or to punish them for their infidelity. Smart argues that 'children form part of a nexus of power within family relations' and as such husbands sometimes sought to punish their wives by separating them from their children.[717] In marriages involving lesbian mothers, husbands' threats may have been homophobic reactions. From the mid-1970s forward, as the public became more aware of lesbian mothers not getting custody in court, husbands may have been even more likely to threaten separation of mothers and children. Kath explained how her violent partner initially accepted their separation in the mid-1980s: he left her and their three children in the house. She claimed he had not wanted to look after the children: 'There were times when Bobby, the eldest, wanted to go and be with his Dad but he wouldn't let him, saying he couldn't look after him'.[718] However, when her husband discovered her lesbian lover, she claimed he suddenly felt she was no longer capable of caring for the children. Kath claimed that 'he was going to get those kids off me by whatever means he could'.[719] Sometimes, as divorce proceedings neared, husbands' initial progressive attitudes towards their wives' newfound sexuality turned vindictive. In 1972, to one mother's surprise, her husband had initially taken the news of her relationship with another married mother 'very well and agreed not to take custody of the children'.[720] However, when it came to separation and divorce, she explained how he fought for custody of their daughters:

> That was fine until he left home and realised just what had happened. All hell was let loose. He plagued me. He threatened me. He begged me to go back. Worst of all he threatened to take my children away. G. and I went through sheer hell for a whole year until his divorce came through and I was granted custody of my children. I had a real fight on my hands to keep them.[721]

She claimed her husband blamed her female lover for taking his place and turning his children against him. By the early 1980s, when it was well-known that lesbian mothers did not get custody in court, husbands' threats were more menacing. In 1984, Pat claimed that when her husband learned about her female lovers he threatened to

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[717] Carol Smart, 'Power and the Politics of Child Custody,' in Carol Smart and Selma Sevenhuijsen (eds), *Child Custody and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1989) 1, 5.

[718] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 6.

[719] Ibid., 6.

[720] 'Happy Families 2,' *Sappho* 2:12 (March 1974) 13, 20.

[721] 'Happy Families 2,' *Sappho* 2:12 (March 1974) 13.

throw her out of the house and take the children away from her. She said she panicked and desperately tried to find some way to leave with the children. She explained his threat: 'He told me he'd fight me in Court for them and there was no way I would get them, because of what I was'.[722]

Husbands could make life miserable for their wives, either by poisoning the children's view of their mothers, physically abusing mothers or children, or disclosing their wives' lesbianism when filing for divorce. Husbands sometimes told the children about their mothers' lesbianism before ending the marriage. In 1974, E.V. explained to *Sappho* readers that her husband reacted poorly to the news of her love affair with a woman. She said he told their children that she was deviant:

> The children were never to associate with me again. I was a "moral danger" and not fit to be with them.' … Life became a nightmare. My children were bombarded with this night and day, they became so insecure and mixed up. Their mother was warped and twisted and half a woman. He used them as a weapon against me.[723]

She said he told her to get out of the house and never try to see the children again. Eventually, she got custody of her children. In 1972, a married mother explained to Proops that her husband had reacted with disgust and horror when he learned of her love for another woman. She described that she had lived a life of pretence, for she had married and had children despite knowing that she found women attractive and men uninteresting. When she told her husband of the affair, she said he told their children and forced her out of the marital home. Although she was trying to adjust, she said her life was 'in shreds'.[724] A lesbian mother could quickly find herself homeless, childless, and without immediate means of financial support.

Husbands petitioned for divorce based on the ground of cruelty evidencing their wives lesbianism.[725] The *Matrimonial Causes Act 1937* did not define the offense

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[722] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 25-26.

[723] E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12.

[724] Marje Proops, 'Dear Marje: Feelings to Hide,' *Daily Mirror* (21 December 1973) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[725] Daniel Greenberg (ed), *Jowitt's Dictionary of English Law*, 6th ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 2023).

of cruelty: its application in divorce cases was a subjective construction.[726] The judiciary developed the definition of cruelty from an 1897 House of Lords decision that claimed 'that there must be danger to life, limb, or health, bodily or mental, or a reasonable apprehension of it, to constitute legal cruelty'.[727] The ground of cruelty was almost exclusively used by wives before 1971, but at least four husbands successfully petitioned for divorce on the ground of cruelty for their wives' relations with other women.[728] In 1947, Mr. Gardner received a decree nisi on the ground of cruelty; his wife's 'unnatural relations with other women' and 'neglect of her marital home and duties' had negatively affected his health and furthermore he had 'reasonable apprehension of future injury' from his wife's 'sexual irregularities'.[729] In 1952, Mr. Davies alleged cruelty on his petition for divorce. He feared his wife was 'indulging in unnatural practices' after a servant had reported seeing her in bed with a young woman.[730] In 1954, Mr. Spicer alleged a lesbian association between his wife and another married woman. Both women denied the allegation and although the judge found evidence that 'the wife admittedly formed an affection for another woman', he found no evidence of a physical relationship.[731] Satisfied that Mrs. Spicer had not heeded her husband's entreaties to end the relationship with the other woman and that she had caused him 'actual physical injury as well as a reasonable apprehension of future injury to his health should her conduct continue', the judge pronounced a degree nisi on the ground of cruelty.[732] In 1965, Alan Coffer also obtained a decree nisi on the ground of his wife's cruelty: she admitted to having conducted 'an

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[726] Robert Chester and Jane Streather, 'Cruelty in English Divorce: Some Empirical Findings.' *Journal of Marriage and Family* 34:4 (November 1972) 706-712. Unfortunately, the authors did not examine the few husbands in their study who claimed cruelty as a ground for divorce.

[727] *Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce 1956 Report*, London: H.M.S.O., Cmnd 9678, 39.

[728] The *Matrimonial Causes Act 1937* extended the grounds for divorce, which previous specified adultery only, to include unlawful desertion for three years or more, cruelty, incurable insanity, incest, and sodomy.

[729] *Gardner v Gardner* [1947] 1 All ER 630.

[730] *Davis v Davis* [1952] 2 All ER 854.

[731] *Spicer v Spicer* [1954] I WLR 1051; Judges at this time required solid evidence of a physical relationship to warrant the ground of adultery; judges were wary of couples colluding to provide evidence of adultery.

[732] *Spicer v Spicer* [1954] I WLR 1051.

association of a lesbian character in the matrimonial home with the au pair, a Spanish girl'.[733]

The *1969 Divorce Reform Act* replaced the ground of cruelty with the ground of unreasonable behaviour, which was as subjective as the former, although perhaps broader in scope. In 1973, Donald Whitfield's divorce petition referred to his wife's 'association with the Women's Liberation movement and the homosexual associations'.[734] In 1980, Raymond Eveson obtained a decree nisi 'relying on the breakdown of the marriage and the wife's lesbian behaviour'.[735] The rate of husbands petitioning for divorce on the ground of cruelty was relatively small and stable at one to two percent until 1971, after which the rate of petitioning on the ground of unreasonable behaviour began a steady increase, as did the incidence of wives petitioning for divorce.[736] These increases were due in part to an increase of lesbian wives coming out in the 1970s.

## Mothers Who Chose to Divorce

Divorce was a difficult reality for wives, particularly before the 1970s, when motherhood within marriage was widely revered as the epitome of women's experience and conversely divorce and single parenthood was stigmatised. As explored in Chapter Two, women remained married for social and economic reasons, and also for their children. As society's views on marriage as a lifelong endeavour softened, and as more and more women came out, lesbian wives were more likely from the 1970s onward to prioritise their happiness and leave their marriages. Thus, applying Langhamer's argument that love became 'the primary basis for lifelong partnership' in the post-war period, women left loveless marriages to begin lives with the women whom they loved.[737] Jane and Helen were two such women. Both married

[733] *Coffer v Coffer.*
[734] *Whitfield v Whitfield.*
[735] *Eveson v Eveson.*
[736] Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 404.
[737] Langhamer, *English in Love,* 56.

with children, they had been colleagues for seven years before they fell in love, left their husbands in 1999, and spent the rest of their lives together.[738]

Some wives were happy being mothers and liked their husbands, but felt that something was missing from their marriages. Natalie described her husband as 'the very nice, loving boy that he was when I married him' but admitted that her marriage 'lacked something'.[739] Women had the expectation of emotional and physical intimacy with their spouses. This desire for "something more" – an intimate connection – was not unique to lesbian wives. Passion, argues Langhamer, was an 'indicator of emotional authenticity' by the middle of the century.[740] Some wives explained that their marital relationships lacked affection and sexual passion. According to Durell, wives who called the London Lesbian Line in the 1970s said they '"were fond of and respected" their husbands, had wanted children and loved them, but were generally troubled by the feeling that something was lacking from their sexual relationship in marriage'.[741] Val recalled that before she had married in 1961, she had discovered masturbation after reading a book and knew 'what promise her sexuality had'.[742] She shared that she had never experienced satisfying sex with her husband and had never had an orgasm with a man, despite three extramarital affairs with men. Another lesbian wife, who had wed at age sixteen in 1968 when she got pregnant, explained her lacklustre marriage: 'I suppose I have a good marriage and should be happy, but I am afraid there is something lacking, especially on the sexual side, although I have to admit I have become used to him'.[743] Sigourney met her husband when she was fifteen years old in 1975 and was a stay-at-home mother who loved her six children. Sigourney recalled how, in the late 1980s, she had started feeling that there had to be more to life than housework and going to church. For the first time in her life she had

[738] Interview with Jane Waring, , 23 September 2023.
[739] Interview with Natalie Collins, 3 August 2023.
[740] Langhamer, *English in Love*, 49.
[741] Durell, 'At Home,' 9.
[742] Interview with Val Bond, 17 August 2023.
[743] Personal Texts,' Sequel No.3 (March 1978) xii.

lacked for nothing material, but she complained that her much-older husband had not been affectionate and that their sex life had been dispassionate:

> And so I wanted for nothing when I was with him, in terms of material things, but still I didn't have any affection or any love and tenderness in my life. But at the same time, because I never knew it, I was kind of okay with that. I just went along. I focused very much on my children. And piled all my loving into my children, so all the things that I didn't get and I thought I should have, I gave my children.[744]

She described her husband as emotionally unavailable: 'He's a Jamaican man and he wasn't all into this holding hands and loving stuff'.[745] She left him when she was twenty-eight in 1988. Although mothers obviously had some degree of sexual relationships with their husbands, some described sex with women as markedly different. Sigourney described her first relationship with a woman:

> A real connection of love and tenderness and care, we were having sex and that was amazing. I've never, I mean the first time I had sex with a woman, I remember laying there afterwards with a smoke and a cigarette and just kind of being in what I can only describe as a sense of bliss and just thinking to myself, and now in my mid 30s I'm thinking to myself, "My God, 35 years of my life and this has been here and I never knew about it.[746]

Wives intimate physical relationships with other women illustrated the shortcomings of sex with their husbands.

Wives also lamented the lack of companionship with their husbands. Evelyn recalled that her husband, to whom she had been married from 1978 till 2003, was a lovely man, a good father, and kind. She described how she had remained married for ten years after realizing the marriage was in trouble: 'gradually over the years I felt that we were moving apart … he was less willing to do things and to engage … and just very slowly but surely … our paths seemed to diverge'.[747] Other wives described how their marriage no longer worked for them because they felt that they had changed. Natalie, who married in 1965 at age twenty-two, recalled that going back to school when she was thirty-five years old changed her outlook on married life. She said:

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[744] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32,* 25 August 2019.

[745] Ibid.

[746] Ibid.

[747] Interview with Evelyn Pittman, 21 March 2023.

‘Suddenly my world changed and I felt that I had come to life again’.[748] Confused and frightened, she had felt like she had lost herself and explained: ‘I had become my children’s mother, my husband’s wife, my mother’s daughter, my sister’s sister, and I didn’t know who I was’.[749] Although it was a wonderful time of personal growth, by the time she had finished her degree, her marriage of seventeen years ‘was really rocky and awful’.[750]

Marriages that failed to live up to the ideal of companionate marriage were likely on the path to divorce. Meeting someone who satisfied the need for emotional and physical intimacy that was lacking in their relationships with their husbands could often be the impetus for wives to divorce. Solicitor Butler reasoned that ‘when the relationship with another woman happened it really wasn’t the cause of the breakdown of the marriage – it was probably the catalyst’.[751]

For many wives, deciding if and when to divorce was a choice between doing what they thought was best for their children versus what was best for themselves. Some felt it was wrong to separate their children from their fathers: they believed it best for children to be raised by their mothers and fathers as a family. Many also believed that they were the person best able to care for their children. These beliefs were manifested in the guilt mothers often felt for breaking up their marriages.[752] But the 1970s experienced a shift from wives remaining married at all costs, believing it was best for the children, to ending unhappy marriages and choosing to put themselves first. Mrs Stevens, who had left her husband for another married woman, explained to *Arena Three* in 1970 that both women had ‘thought a great deal before leaving about what would be best for everybody’.[753] Although they had tried to end their relationship several times, they eventually concluded ‘that remaining married was

[748] Interview with Natalie Collins, 3 August 2023.
[749] Ibid.
[750] Ibid.
[751] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[752] See *Relinquishing Custody*.
[753] Mrs. J. Stephens, ‘Free Speech,’ *Arena Three* 7:3 (February 1970) 7-8.

doing more harm to our children and husbands than getting out and being together'.[754] In 1996, Francoise, who was divorced and living with her daughter, urged married lesbian mothers at KENRIC to reconsider prioritising the nuclear family and to leave their husbands for the sake of their own happiness: to 'be happy be being yourself, the real you'.[755] She admitted that before her divorce she had to challenge her own assumptions and stereotypes to 'imagine a happy family which would not include a man'.[756] Although Francoise accepted that financial worries were tough hurdles to overcome for any wife considering divorce, she claimed that to stay married 'the price is heavy, it is living a lie, a pretense at "normality"'.[757] She claimed that children would prefer their mothers to be happy, rather that martyrs, even if it meant divorce:

> But ultimately, it is your life, and when your children are older they will feel rather sad about all the pretense, deceit, and the unhappiness it causes. They may also feel responsible for the life you chose, and the status quo you imposed (i.e. our mothers gave up her chances at being happy for our sakes). … I bet they would prefer to be proud of you for breaking the mold and for taking the risks of being a happy person, even if that meant splitting up with their dad.[758]

Francoise questioned why women continued 'to content themselves with the traditional "caring role" and sacrifice their own needs and aspirations'.[759]

In the 1970s through the 1990s, divorce was a difficult proposition as lesbian mothers would have been aware that their chances of winning custody in court were slim to none. Despite the negative proclamations of the press, mothers had agency to remain married while the children were young, pass as heterosexual until the divorce was settled, or contest custody openly as a lesbian. As explored in Chapter Two, women often waited until their children were older and custody was no longer an issue.

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[754] Ibid., 7.

[755] Francoise Battin, 'Open Letter to Pamela Shallcrass and the Anonymous Woman Who Wrote the Article Entitled "From a Married Lesbian",' *KMG* No. 38 (March 1996) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[756] Ibid.

[757] Ibid.

[758] Ibid.

[759] Ibid.

Some wives wanted a divorce because they felt they could no longer maintain the façade of a happy marriage and endure their marriages any longer. Four years after her wedding in 1970, R.L. told *Sappho* that she had realised that 'the awful mistake' she had made could not be easily rectified. She had two young children. She explained her position: 'I am not living at all. At the moment I am trying to find the courage to make a fresh start'.[760] In 1968, a lesbian mother described her divorce in an issue of *Mental Health*. Although she sought the help of psychiatrists over a period of three years while she tried to make her marriage succeed, she described her homosexuality as 'an unexploded bomb'.[761] After ten years of marriage, on the brink of a nervous breakdown, she decided to separate. Although wives often described leaving a marriage as risky or brave, some wives nonetheless instigated divorce proceedings.[762] Sylvia recalled that when she had realised she was gay in 1980, she had 'managed to function' but soon felt she could not stay in her marriage.[763] She attempted to articulate her feelings of desperation:

> There was this period of time where I existed in total exhilaration of profound terror. Because I had no idea what was going to happen to me. I was 38 years old. I had no career. I had nowhere to live, except the marital home. Home was getting more and more difficult. I was getting frustrated and more and short-tempered with the kids. I can't cope with this and I said to him I am leaving.[764]

Sometimes, despite their husbands' acceptance of their sexuality, wives determined they could no longer continue their loveless marriages. In 1985, Jane told *The Guardian* that both she and her husband knew she was a lesbian before they married. After three children, psychiatric treatment, and much upheaval in the family, Jane explained that she decided to leave:

> I found great pleasure and satisfaction in having children and I love them dearly. I too, had a kind, considerate husband who also believed he could live with me as a lesbian. However, for various reasons, remaining at home

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[760] R. L. Beds., 'Heteraecetera: Married Gays' in *Sappho* 3:5 (1974) 10.

[761] 'Conspiracy of Ignorance,' *Mental Health* (Summer 1968) 17.

[762] Women's agency for petitioning for divorce increased following the Divorce Reform Act *1969;* B Jane Elliott, 'Demographic Trends in Domestic Life, 1945-87,' in Clark (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life & Social Change,* 91-92.

[763] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[764] Ibid.

> was too great a strain, and in order for both me and the family to survive I left – a very hard and risky decision.[765]

In a separate article in *The Guardian*, Catherine explained that she decided to end her marriage despite her husband's acceptance of her lesbianism. She had gradually realised she was lesbian over fifteen years of marriage: 'When it started to occur to me I may be lesbian it was frightening'.[766] She liked having children and explained that having a nice husband made it more difficult to end her marriage: 'It makes me feel I am looking for trouble, choosing unhappiness and loneliness'.[767] Catherine summoned the courage to separate in 1983, although she reckoned she could return to live with her husband: 'because I am so used to him, because he looked after me for such a long time and because we had good times together'.[768] Leaving a comfortable life with their family was not easy.

Choosing to divorce was often a difficult decision. Husbands chose to divorce for a variety of reasons: perhaps they could not condone their wives' infidelity, their wives had ended conjugal relations, or they were homophobic and did not want their children near their lesbian mothers. While some wives deliberated for years before petitioning for divorce, others made quick decisions when they made an intimate emotional and physical connection with another woman and realised what had been lacking in their marriage. Sometimes, it was a mutual decision to end the marriage. To divorce, spouses had to decide how to split assets of the marriage and with whom the children would live. Often, mothers wanted to continue raising their children after divorce, but sometimes, for various reasons, they relinquished custody.

## Relinquishing Custody

Some lesbian mothers did not fight for custody because they thought they had no chance of winning, having been discouraged from the literature on lesbian custody

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[765] EK Ceeney, 'Who Wants to Remain Invisible Woman?' *The Guardian* (21 May 1985) 24.
[766] Ronit Lentin, 'How the Daily Lie Gave Way to a Lonely Life of Truth,' *The Guardian* (14 May 1985) 8.
[767] Ibid.
[768] Ibid.

cases, by their legal counsel, or by their husbands. One *Sappho* reader exclaimed: 'My ex-husband has them. Being a well-known gay I've no chance at custody'.[769] This fatalist approach continued into the 1980s. Sylvia, who left her marriage in 1981 to live with Maggie, retrospectively rationalised not fighting for custody. She said she had assumed that the chances of a lesbian mother winning in court were slim:

> In the eighties and nineties, the legal world was a minefield for lesbian women. I was told forget it because it all depends on the judge you appear in front of and if he happens to be a family man you are – anything you do is going to go down the tubes.[770]

Pat also left her two daughters with her husband in the early 1980s thinking it was hopeless to try. She explained in 1984: 'I'd heard so many stories about lesbian mothers losing custody in the Courts and I knew I wouldn't stand a chance of getting them'.[771]

Solicitors sometimes counselled lesbian mothers to not litigate for custody. In the early 1970s, before much had been publicised about lesbian custody cases, advising lesbian mothers not to fight for custody was likely based on assumptions of homophobia by the judiciary. In newspapers and the gay press, women criticised solicitors for advising them to settle out of court.[772] In 1974, E.V. explained to *Sappho* that three different solicitors had advised her not to fight for custody: 'In their knowledge no lesbian had ever won a case. (This I later found to be untrue)'.[773] At an information session in late 1974, solicitor Joan Rubenstein claimed that 'many women have been advised not to bother to fight for custody of their children'.[774] A survey conducted by ROW of mothers who were involved in custody disputes between 1974 and 1984 revealed that over half of the eighteen respondents said they had avoided going to court because they were either legally advised or believed that winning in

[769] Cheryl Tidmarsh, 'Over to You – the Sappho Survey Surveyed,' *Sappho* 5:9 (1977) 16; See also 'Letters: Custody of Children,' *The Guardian* (18 August 1975) 9.

[770] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[771] SMLC*, Our Lives,* 28.

[772] E.V. Surrey, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12; 'Action for Lesbian Parents,' *Gay News* 107 (November 18-December 1 1976) 9; Paul Newman, 'Custody of Children,' *The Guardian* (18 August 1975) 9.

[773] E.V. Surrey ,'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 12.

[774] 'Lesbian Mothers,' *Gay News* 60 (December 5-18, 1974) 7.

court was impossible.[775] By the 1980s, the assumption that lesbian mothers would not get custody in court had been well publicised. Marg explained to *Spare Rib* in 1983: 'I was told by my solicitor that I would not get custody, should I be fool enough to contest it, so I made the decision not to put myself and my children through the trauma of a court case with the knowledge that I would not win anyway'.[776] In 1997, Harne and ROW explained they continued to hear from lesbian mothers who had contacted reputable law firms and 'been advised that because they are lesbians, they stand no chance of winning residence orders for their children'.[777]

Sometimes, a mother's fear of appearing in court was so great that she did not fight for custody. Judith Walker, a barrister who had represented several lesbian mothers, described a 1970s' case where the mother voluntarily gave her husband custody out of fear of the repercussions of a court battle:

> I have just had a case where the woman decided to let her husband have custody, in exchange for getting good access to them. She decided she couldn't face the fight in court. The publicity, and what it would do to the children frightened her. If she hadn't been lesbian she would certainly not have given up her children without a fight. I tried to persuade her she might win, but she was afraid.[778]

In 1984, Linda explained how her husband and his mother had conspired against her and threatened to drag her 'through every Court in Europe'.[779] In desperation, she gave her baby daughter to her husband. She explained her panic: 'I was shitting myself. I just couldn't handle it. I gave up. I said he could take the baby'.[780] At the last moment, Linda's husband reconsidered the practicalities and inconvenience of caring for a baby and allowed her to keep their daughter.

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[775] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 34.

[776] Marg Kewell, 'One Woman's Experience,' *Spare Rib* 129 (April 1983) 22.

[777] Harne and ROW, *Valued Families*, 59.

[778] Polly Toynbee, 'What makes lesbians so particularly dangerous as parents?...,' *The Guardian* (16 January 1978) 9.

[779] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 18.

[780] Ibid.

Some mothers chose to leave their children with their husbands in the matrimonial home, although they often expressed remorse for having done so. At age forty in 1984, when her sons were both young teenagers, Natalie decided to separate from her husband. She did not come out to him at that time; she recalled that 'I just said I had had enough – I wanted out'.[781] Initially, they lived separately in the matrimonial home. She explained the painful experience of leaving her children:

> I'd waited until they were old enough. I knew they wouldn't come with me. And I couldn't ask them to come with me to anywhere else. You know they were in their home. And they loved their dad. They loved me. It was a very painful and difficult time. … I hurt him terribly and it was very painful for my kids.[782]

Her son was fifteen and she thought it desperate to uproot him from all his friends while her ten-year-old daughter was "daddy's favorite". She thought they would manage without her.[783] Sylvia, when she decided to come out and live as a lesbian in 1981, felt she that living as a lesbian was not compatible with raising children. She recalled her thought process:

> It is a terrible thing to do to leave my kids, but I've got to do it. If I don't do it I will top myself. I cannot stay there anymore, and I am also quite OCD. Really I can't be all things and two things to people. I can't be a loving wife and mother, and I can't be a lesbian. I am either one thing or the other. I can't combine these. I chose to come out and be lesbian and I have never, ever, regretted it.[784]

Although Sylvia was happy to have her children live with their father, she wanted to be able to visit and to make joint decisions about their education. Sylvia explained that she did not get joint custody: 'They did not do it for lesbians in those days'.[785] Jane told her story of leaving her home and children with just a toothbrush and a clean pair of knickers: she left with the clothes on her back. In 1999, she had been married for seventeen years and was a mother of two teenagers when she and a female colleague confessed their love to each other and went home and told their husbands. She

[781] Interview with Natalie Collins, 3 August 2023.

[782] Ibid.

[783] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

[784] Ibid.

[785] Ibid.

explained: ‘We had no idea what to do or where to go. We literally both just left’.[786] Her children remained with her husband in the matrimonial home. Instead of insisting they sell the house, she accepted her husband’s offer of a nominal sum for her share of its value. Jane explained: ‘I just felt so guilty that I would have signed pretty well anything other than, you know, signing away my children’.[787] She felt that if she had forced her husband to sell the house and split the money it would have caused her children more pain and grief. Jane explained: “When you feel you’ve done enough damage as any person should rightfully do in any lifetime, you don’t want to do any more’.[788] She and her new partner visited charity shops to outfit their new flat. “I did not want the things – not because it would not have been useful to have plates and bowls and cooking equipment and saucepans – but because… this is new. This is my life. I am not bringing that stuff from that life to here’.[789] Twenty-four years after leaving her husband, Jane was still upset about the trauma she felt responsible for causing in the lives of her children. She recalled that at the time she felt that leaving was her only option. Her feelings had been contradictory: she felt she was being both ‘cruel and selfish’ and at the same time not the ‘least bit sorry’ because she knew she wanted a life with her female partner.[790]

Mothers who decided to leave their children with their ex-husbands – and the guilt they felt for having done so – illustrate the pervasive belief that mothers must care for their children. Kath explained her maternal feelings: ‘I feel, like any mother, that nobody else can look after my kids the way I can’.[791] Mothers felt guilt for not caring for their children and guilt for enjoying the freedom of being relieved of daily caregiving. Marg told *Spare Rib* that in late 1980 she had made the difficult decision to leave her children with their father based on financial considerations and advice from her solicitor. Although she admitted she had enormous guilt for having left, she described

[786] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.
[787] Ibid.
[788] Ibid.
[789] Ibid.
[790] Ibid.
[791] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 8.

that she was grateful for having 'a degree of freedom' that mothers who had custody will never know.[792] She felt their situations were much worse than her own. Marg further explained that she shied away from conversations with feminists as she felt that no one would understand. At the 1983 Lesbian Mothers' Custody Conference she explained that she was one of only two mothers who 'rather sheepishly admitted that we did not go for custody of our children'.[793] Responses by the other lesbian mothers – that she did not want her children – compounded her guilt. She explained: 'I suspect that we lesbians who have left (*not* abandoned) our children don't talk much about it'.[794] Leaving one's children with their father was so unthinkable that few mothers felt they could disclose their decision. In 1988, Sigourney thought she had to fight for her children until another woman suggested that she had other options. Sigourney's husband had tried to keep her from leaving their marriage by threatening to keep the children, but she called his bluff. She recalled the advice from a female friend who encouraged her to leave: 'Well, why is it that women always have to have the children? As long as you can see your children, why can't you be the person who has them on the weekend and then you have your life?'.[795]

Like many other wives, Pat had felt that she had to decide between staying with her children in a loveless marriage or starting a new life with the woman with whom she had fallen in love: she could not have both. Pat's separation from her two daughters was particularly heartbreaking, but not atypical. In 1984, she described that despite knowing she was gay since she was fourteen, she had married and had two children. Pat explained that after telling her husband about her sexuality, she underwent therapy for nearly two years. After gaining confidence, she experienced numerous relationships with other women, all with the knowledge of her husband. He knew but did not approve and as a result she claimed he both verbally and physically abused her, sometimes in front of their daughters. Pat described how she had suffered

[792] Marg Kewell, 'One Woman's Experience,' *Spare Rib* 129 (April 1983) 22.
[793] Ibid.
[794] Ibid.
[795] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32*, 25 August 2019.

a nervous breakdown at one point and had felt like committing suicide, but used drugs and alcohol to cope:

> Eventually I could see that the kids were beginning to suffer. I'd put them to bed and go out but it got to the stage where I was reaching for the bottle as soon as I woke up. I was always depressed. I was always drunk. I was drugged up to the eyeballs. I can admit to myself now I was probably an alcoholic. A bottle of Bacardi was nothing every day and an average 15 pints of beer every night. It's a wonder I didn't kill myself that way. Somehow I still managed to look after the kids. They were all I lived for – they were everything. I had to hang on. I had to keep going for their sake.[796]

Finally, Pat's husband gave her an ultimatum to either pull herself together or leave. She said that she believed that her husband would take good care of their daughters and left when they were three and six. While she had hoped she would continue to be more involved in their lives, especially when they were older, she admitted that she regretted having 'missed a big chunk of their little lives'.[797]

The inability to earn a decent living was a barrier to lesbian mothers raising their children after divorce. Joan told her story to the *Lesbian Information Service Newsletter (LISN)* about how, in the 1960s, after telling her husband she was a lesbian, she took her two young children and left the matrimonial home. She claimed the National Assistance Board had refused her monetary aid as she had a husband for support to whom she could return. She explained that the state took her children when she fell ill with pneumonia and did not return them when she recovered as she had no accommodation for her children.[798] In the post-war period, housing was the greatest obstacle facing lone mothers: a shortage of council housing prioritized nuclear families and even if single women had funds to pay for accommodation it was difficult for them to rent or buy a house or flat.[799] For some mothers, so great was their fear of financial difficulties of raising children by themselves, they relinquished custody to their husbands. In the 1960s, two married lesbian mothers told *The Evening Echo* that they

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[796] SMLC *Our Lives,* 26.

[797] Ibid.*,* 29.

[798] 'Lesbian Tales,' *LISN*, 13.

[799] April Gallwey, 'Love Beyond the Frame: Stories of Maternal Love Outside Marriage in the 1950s and 1960s,' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 112-114.

had fallen in love and planned to leave their husbands and live together. One of the wives did not have a career before marriage but planned to get a job and hoped to be able to support both women. Doubting that she would be able to earn enough to support their children, she explained that she had reconciled her children living with their father, even to the extent of his new wife caring for her children:

> It may sound selfish, but I'm quite happy for my husband to keep the children – if he can provide a better home for them than I can. Of course he can financially – he's a business executive with a high salary – but I'm not sure that he will be able to give them the attention and love that they need. If he can – supposing he gets married again and has all the comforts of family life to offer them – then I am quite happy for them to go to him.[800]

Marg gave a similar explanation to *Spare Rib* in 1983. She said she had left her children with their father in the marital home in part because she did not know how she could support herself, much less two children:

> I had what I stood up in, no money of my own, no career to return to. I'd left school at 15 with no expectations of earning much even if I could find anyone to employ me after a ten year break from work and all the loss of confidence which that involves. My children, a boy age nine and a girl of 11, were used to living in comfortable surrounding, their friends around them, and no financial worries, so who was I to take them into the unknown?[801]

Working-class mothers were particularly disadvantaged in negotiations. One mother, lacking a financial safety net, told ROW that she did not fight for custody because she had nowhere to live with her children after leaving the matrimonial home. Another told ROW that she had agreed to her husband's demands outside of court, feeling that her poor finances weakened her negotiating position.[802]

Some mothers who decided not to fight for custody, or having fought for custody and lost, fought for access to their children. Two known Court of Appeal cases regarding access occurred in the 1970s. In 1976, Beverley Ann Taylor was living with Mrs. Bradshaw when she appealed for weekend staying access to her children. Both judges were concerned about contact between the thirteen-year-old daughter Mandy and Mrs. Bradshaw.[803] Allowing the appeal, the judges permitted Mandy to stay

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[800] Jean Ritchie, 'Beyond the Pale,' *The Evening Echo* [Hemel Hempstead] 619 (4 November 1969) 8.

[801] Marg Kewell, 'One Woman's Experience,' *Spare Rib* 129 (April 1983) 22.

[802] ROW, Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook, 165.

[803] *Taylor v Taylor*, 4.

overnight on weekends, although Lord Justice Ormrod added the restriction that 'until further order Mandy is not to be brought into contact with Mrs. Bradshaw'.[804] He also arranged for the Welfare Officer to monitor the situation. A year later, Mrs. Markovic and her partner Mrs Inglis had unrestricted staying access to the former's ten-year-old daughter and six-year-old son. Mr. Justice Latey in the court of first instance awarded Mrs. Markovic staying access – that the children could visit overnight with her – 'but on condition that the children were not brought into contact with the dangerous Mrs. Inglis'.[805] A month later Mrs. Markovic successfully applied to remove this restriction on access. Mr. Markovic subsequently unsuccessfully appealed this undertaking.

Lesbian mothers, as did heterosexual mothers, made difficult, emotional decisions to leave their children with their husbands upon divorce. In retrospect, mothers gave reasons that were varied and complex. Criticism of these mothers plays into the gendered assumption that mothers should be the one responsible for daily care of the children. Regardless of which parent lived with the children, lives of the family were disrupted.

## Fighting for Custody

Many lesbian mothers wanted to raise their children after divorce; they wanted to live free of their husbands but not separate from their children. Some women decided to pass as heterosexual and did not tell their legal counsel about their sexuality. These women often hid their sexuality from everyone, including their children. Sometimes, when a father knew about his wife's lesbianism he either did not want to expose her sexuality in court or had no evidence of her affairs. In other circumstances when a mother knew of her husband's intention of arguing against her having custody due to her lesbianism, she had no choice but to fight for custody as a lesbian mother. Mothers also had to determine if they could negotiate with their husbands for custody instead of going to court for a decision.

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[804] Ibid., 6.

[805] *Markovic v Markovic*.

It was difficult for women in the 1970s to find solicitors who were familiar with lesbian custody cases and who were willing to fight for custody. The activist group ALP advised choosing legal representatives who were competent and sympathetic, although not necessarily women. ALP thought that using a female barrister was disadvantageous: 'the judge is more likely to listen to a man than to a woman'.[806] Nonetheless, wives may have sought female law professionals, who were outnumbered by men in the field. Divorce cases were often heard in County Court, where since 1967, both solicitors and barristers could represent petitioners. Divorce cases could also be heard in the High Court, which required representation by barristers. Although women could be called to the Bar since the passage of the *Sex Disqualification Act 1919*, there were only 258 female barristers in 1975 (seven percent of all practising).[807] Less than half of the female barristers in 1972 were doing matrimonial work.[808] Although law was traditionally a male-dominated profession, the number of women increased as prejudices against them were 'slowly but grudgingly' decreasing.[809]

Gill Butler was 'a female solicitor with an unpopular cause': she had a reputation for representing lesbian mothers.[810] Her reputation grew in part because other solicitors did not want to associate with homosexuals. Butler explained that there was no pink pound in the 1980s and that solicitors did not 'want to touch these cases with a long barge pole'.[811] After becoming a solicitor in 1979, she began a small law firm in Greenwich with a male colleague where she said they gained repute as "Bolsheviks" because they did 'not act for men who were charged with violence against women'.[812] Butler reflected positively on her representation of lesbian mothers: 'I was

[806] ALP, *Guide to Gay Custody*, 8.

[807] Helena Kennedy, 'Women at the Bar' in Robert Hazell (ed), *The Bar on Trial* (London: Quartet, 1978) 149.

[808] Ibid., 154, 165

[809] Helena Kennedy, 'Women at the Bar,' in Robert Hazell (ed), *The Bar on Trial* (London: Quartet, 1978) 148-149.

[810] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[811] Ibid.

[812] Interview with Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.

very lucky in my career to have a period of time when I think it was making a difference, not just to the individuals you were representing but to women outside'.[813]

Butler admired mothers who fought for custody, particularly because she thought that the odds were not in their favour. Her first lesbian client was in 1984, at which time Butler believed that 'the vast majority of [lesbian] women where there were contested cases were losing custody of their children'.[814] Butler recalled: 'These were horrible cases when you sat in court', to hear statements like 'animals don't do it' and questions like 'do you have sex?'.[815] She estimated that 'the easiest option for some would be to just keep it all secret and live another life but I think they just felt they couldn't, and they weren't going to just say goodbye to their kids because some lawyer had told them it wasn't worth fighting'.[816] She was amazed by the determination of mothers who went into court saying 'I am not going to give up my children because I am in a lesbian relationship'.[817]

Mothers desperate to keep their children searched diligently to find sympathetic solicitors. Mothers found Butler either through ROW or via local gay and lesbian switchboards.[818] Butler said she had one client who made at least ten phone calls before contacting her and claimed: 'I don't think it is possible to overestimate the importance of the local gay and lesbian switchboards', which referred wives to ROW.[819] Women from all over the country contacted her. She said she often got clients who had been to their local solicitors and been told 'you haven't got a chance', 'don't fight', or 'give it up'.[820] That is why she thinks so many women did not get custody in

[813] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[814] Interview with Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.
[815] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[816] Interview with Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.
[817] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[818] See *Chapter Five: Activism for Lesbian Mothers***.**
[819] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[820] Ibid.

the early cases: legal professionals were unsympathetic and advised women that fighting was pointless.[821]

Divorce required payments to solicitors and barristers. Beginning in 1950, persons who passed a means test had access to financial aid for their divorce due to the *Legal Advice and Assistance Act 1949*.[822] For all but one of the thirteen known Court of Appeal cases between 1971 and 1994, both parties used Legal Aid. Butler recalled that while her clients were eligible for Legal Aid, most of their husbands were not. Only one of her clients paid privately. Legal Aid helped to level the playing field in that mothers, who were often under the income threshold, could have legal representation.

## Strategy: Passing as Heterosexual

Fearing they might not get custody if their desire for other women was known, one strategy was for wives to remain closeted: 'to tell or not to tell was a big issue'.[823] Women who did not disclose their sexuality to their solicitors may have subsequently got custody of their children. A young lesbian mother named Mary told *The Sunday Times,* how in 1968, when few if any lesbian custody cases had been publicised, she had assumed she would have 'legal trouble' over custody if anyone knew she was a lesbian.[824] An anonymous lesbian mother explained to *Mental Health* in 1968 that her psychiatrist advised her to not mention 'her private problem' and so she petitioned for divorce on the ground of cruelty.[825] Although she was aware that she was entitled to a share of a large house that she had helped to purchase, a share of its contents, and maintenance in proportion to her husband's salary, she said she left with the children 'in exchange for peace and the minimum amount of maintenance laid down by the

[821] Interview with Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.

[822] Kayliegh Richardson and Ana Kate Speed, 'Restrictions on Legal Aid in Family Law Cases in England and Wale; Creating a Necessary Barrier to Public Funding or Simply Increasing the Burden on the Family Courts?,' *The Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 41:2 (2019) 137.

[823] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[824] Michael Pye, 'Inside the Lesbian Family,' *The Sunday Times* (January 15, 1978) 13.

[825] 'Conspiracy of Ignorance,' *Mental Health* (Summer 1968) 17.

national assistance board'.[826] Val described her amicable separation and divorce in 1975-1977, after fourteen years of marriage. Both Val and her husband agreed the children should live with her. She claimed that her husband had known about one of her three affairs with men and may have suspected her affair with a woman. Val had not told her husband about her sexuality because she thought he could have used it against her during their divorce. She had resolved not to leave her children: she said she 'would have stayed with him whether he liked it or not'.[827] Both spouses saw marriage guidance counsellors and solicitors. They established a maintenance agreement for the children and separated in 1975, the decree absolute issued two years later. Val and her husband remained friends: he remarried twice, and she married Betty, celebrating their fortieth anniversary in 2023. Sometimes husbands knew about their wives' lesbianism, but did not make an issue of it in court. Linda from Milton Keynes explained to *Spare Rib* that she had divorced in 1974 after becoming infatuated with the woman with whom she and her husband were having a threesome. She had petitioned for divorce on the ground of desertion and got custody of her son. She said that neither she nor her husband mentioned her lesbianism in court.[828] We will never know how many mothers passed as heterosexual and gained custody of their children, but they risked consequences if their husbands discovered their sexuality.

Fearing their children could inadvertently reveal their sexuality to their fathers, some mothers hid their relationships with women from their children. Linda separated from her husband in the early 1980s and raised their daughter and her two older step-sisters. At the time of separation, she had not had a physical relationship with another woman, although she thought her husband was suspicious. She explained that she had tried to hide her first relationship with a woman from her children, but found the lying and secrecy stressful. She said that it strained both her relationship with her lover and with her children: 'I was lying to them. I wasn't telling them where I was going,

[826] Ibid.

[827] Interview with Val Bond, 17 August 2023.

[828] Marilyn Archer, 'Gay Wives and Mothers,' *Spare Rib* 31 (January 1975) 26.

staying away for two days, leaving them with someone else and feeling really guilty'.[829] She described how, when her lover stayed overnight for the first time, her older children could not wait to tell her husband: 'they'd known all along that something secret was going on'.[830] Once her husband knew, she said 'he started on about not having his daughter near any 'dirty freaks of nature'.[831] Linda described that she felt that she had to comply with his demand to restrict visitors to the house, for fear that he would take the children:

> I knew his game was to wait until he was nicely set up, then he'd take her. I was just trying to keep him sweet, hoping he wouldn't. I still couldn't face a Court case, and I knew even if I got away from him, I'd still have to face up to everything eventually wherever I went.[832]

She said she knew he was planning to take his baby daughter away from her, but she hoped he would not try because she could not cope with a court case.

Advice books discussed the strategy of passing as heterosexual. ALP advised in 1976 that mothers who were not open about their sexuality with their spouses would have to continue their subterfuge for years after the divorce, perhaps even not residing with other women, as their husbands could re-apply for care and control until the children reached the age of sixteen.[833] However, ALP did not suggest that wives hide their sexuality from their legal advisors. In 1978, the Manchester Law Society explained the risk of denying one's homosexuality in court: 'If the judge disbelieves you then he will think you are a liar on top of everything else and therefore almost definitely an unsuitable person to look after a child'.[834] Hanscombe and Forster suggested in 1981 that some mothers concealed their sexuality as a strategy in custody proceedings.[835] In 1986, ROW also discussed the pros and cons of coming out to husbands, family, and friends but was ambiguous as to whether a lesbian mother should come out to her solicitor. ROW stated: 'If you think the father does not

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[829] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 17.
[830] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 18.
[831] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 18.
[832] SMLC*, Our Lives*, 18.
[833] Action for Lesbian Parents, *The Guide to Gay Custody* (1978) 2.
[834] Cohen et al, *Law and Sexuality,* 29.
[835] Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle,* 91.

know you are a lesbian, or you are hoping he does not bring the subject up, or you intend to deny it, then you have to decide whether to tell her'.[836] In addition to the advice books, articles on lesbian custody sometimes introduced the idea of remaining closeted during divorce proceedings because lesbian mothers could be 'penalized for being "too honest"'.[837]

Regardless of this sometimes-ambiguous advice, solicitors who knew their clients were lesbian may have advised them not to voluntarily disclose their sexuality, but most certainly did not advise them to lie under oath. Perjury would damage mothers' credibility in court, ultimately risking not getting custody of their children. A barrister who was experienced in lesbian custody cases explained at a 1986 conference about lesbian and gay parenting that not being open about being a lesbian was a dangerous strategy:

> [The] first decision for the woman is whether or not to be open about being a lesbian. The man can threaten to use this but may not actually bring it out. There have been cases where it has not come out, but this can be dangerous as custody cases may be reopened and it could then be disclosed that it wasn't revealed before. If the social worker knows that the woman is a lesbian, then the court will undoubtedly know. Barristers are required not to withhold the truth if told; social workers, if they know, probably feel obliged to disclose.[838]

Planning to hide a woman's sexuality raised issues of professional conduct. If a judge determined there was a conspiracy to mislead the court, 'their case would be sunk'.[839] Butler informed clients about the risks of lying about their relationships. She advised that the woman's credibility 'would be shot to pieces' if the judge found out she was lying.[840] For wives who were intent on not divulging their relationship with women – to run their cases as if they were heterosexual mothers – Butler advised them to find a solicitor other than herself, because it would be detrimental to engage a solicitor with

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[836] ROW, *Legal Handbook*, 35.

[837] 'Lesbian Mothers,' *Gay News* 259 (February 17-March 2 1983) 11.

[838] *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Report of a Conference Held at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre* (11 October 1986) 13, LMA/4616/03/007.

[839] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[840] Ibid.

a reputation for representing lesbian mothers if you were going to claim you were not lesbian.[841] Sharon, who fought for custody of her two children in the early 1980s, successfully concealed her sexual relationship with Annie from her legal counsel, her husband, welfare officers, and the judge. She explained that she had "sacked" her feminist barrister in London who was known for winning difficult cases. Although Sharon had believed otherwise, the barrister explained that she could not lie about the relationship and refused to continue representing Sharon unless she was open about her sexuality.[842] Between fighting for custody as a lesbian mother or sacking the barrister, Sharon chose the latter. She feared that if she was open about her lesbianism the judge would not give her custody of her children. In her husband's divorce petition, she said he had claimed that she had lesbian friends who had an unnatural influence over her. She reasoned that her husband had no proof of her relationship with Annie and claimed that his accusations of lesbianism were delusional. Sharon explained that she thought she had impressed the welfare officer and the judge: she had dressed and acted like a professional, provided appropriate answers to questions, and denied ever having a sexual relationship with another woman. She also claimed that the judge had not believed her husband's accusations that she was a lesbian, even if she had "dabbled" with women, and awarded her custody, care and control of her two children. It was more important to Sharon to win custody of her children than to be open about her sexuality. She explained: 'Even before I identified myself as being a lesbian, that to "come out" would have affected the case disastrously. In short, I would have lost'.[843] Sharon was one mother who successfully hid her sexuality, despite being advised otherwise, to gain custody of her children.

There was a real risk of wives being outed in court, as some husbands knew more about their wives' sexuality than they let on. At least one wife's sexuality was discovered in court with dire consequences. During a 1978 Court of Appeal case, despite the mother denying a relationship with "Mrs. D", the father produced evidence

[841] Ibid.
[842] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 31.
[843] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 29-34.

of the relationship. The wife had sworn in an affidavit that her husband falsely alleged 'she had been indulging in lesbian practices' and both she and Mrs. D denied a homosexual relationship in their testimonials.[844] At a later hearing, the husband produced a recording of a telephone call between his wife and Mrs. D as evidence of their lesbian relationship. Judges Stamp and Orr dismissed the wife's appeal, and the children remained in custody of the husband. Mothers who disclosed their sexuality in court risked not getting custody of their children, but so did mothers who hid or denied their sexuality; lying about one's sexuality was a strategy that could backfire.

## Settling Out of Court

In the majority of cases – ninety-four percent of divorces in the 1970s – wives and their husbands decided outside of court who would raise the children.[845] Divorces were sometimes amicable; some couples mutually agreed that the mothers should raise the children and the fathers would pay maintenance. Jane recalled the amicable split between her friend Nicky and her husband in the 1980s. She said that when Nicky was thirty and her daughters were ages three and four, she told her husband she was in a relationship with a woman. The couple agreed to a division of childcare and finances: Nicky continued to raise the children in the matrimonial home. Jane described that they separated 'and sorted it out without even a piece of paper: they just chatted and made an agreement and kept to it'.[846] The couple finally divorced decades later, when Nicky wanted to marry a woman. However, in many cases negotiations over money, the marital home, and the children were contentious. Spouses often traded financial considerations for custody and access arrangements. Husbands sometimes threatened to reveal their wives' lesbianism in court, even if they did not want custody, to force their wives to cede financial support and/or the marital home.[847] This was similar to a power play by husbands who tried to use the children

[844] *S v S*.
[845] Eekelaar et al, *Custody After Divorce;* Maidment, 'A Study in Child Custody'.
[846] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.
[847] Brophy, 'Child Care and the Growth of Power,' 111.

as leverage to keep their wives from separating. Sigourney recalled how her husband had threatened to keep the children to persuade her to remain in the marriage in 1988:

> It wasn't an easy period. Because also, he wouldn't let my children go. That was his hook. He would say that you can't take the children. If you take the children, I will fight you in the courts and I have money. I didn't have any money. And you won't win. I'll tell the courts that you're a bad mother, all the church was backing him on that. So, I was like, okay, well as long as I can see my children.[848]

Although Sigourney eventually came out as lesbian, it was not as issue when she separated.

Spouses negotiated finances and children in the 'shadow of the law'.[849] As the media widely disseminated that judges did not award custody to lesbian mothers, husbands who knew of their wives desire for women had increased bargaining power. Sometimes fathers demanded restrictions on the mother's personal life. At Jude's conciliation meeting in 1984, she agreed to remain living in Dorset and stop going to Greenham Common 'or any other radical place' in trade for joint custody and care and control.[850] In the early 1980s, Linda explained how her solicitor advised her not to ask her husband for financial support based on his threat to fight her for custody. Her husband had rummaged through the rubbish bin to find a piece of paper on which she had written her thoughts on lesbian feminism, trying to find evidence of her lesbianism:

> When we arrived outside of Court, he suddenly produced these bits of paper he'd found in my bin, all pasted onto card, and said *"You try and screw me for maintenance and I'll show the court this and go for custody."* He was acting on his solicitor's advice. My solicitor advised me to drop the application for maintenance so that the lesbian allegation would not come out. And I hadn't even slept with a woman.[851]

ROW was cognizant that husbands held greater positions of power in marriages, which affected negotiations upon divorce. ROW stated: 'We are worried that women will be subtly pressured into agreements that are unfair and know from our own

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[848] Sigourney Ennis, *FAWTAR/32,* 25 August 2019.

[849] Mnookin and Kornhauser, 'Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law,' 950.

[850] Jude Cobley, 'Legal Briefing: Lesbian Custody "A Mother's Perspective",' (November 1988), *Legal Training Pack: Disputed Decisions Re Custody and Access of Children Where Lesbianism is an Issue*, LSE/5ROW Box 1.

[851] SMLC, *Our Lives,* 17.

experience this often happens outside the context of conciliation'.[852] Bernice Goodman, an American sociologist, maintained that the US legal system oppressed lesbian mothers, who constantly feared not getting custody of their children: 'In divorce and custody actions, husbands use lesbianism as a way to kidnap their children, as a way to force low financial settlements, withdraw child support, or to blackmail wives to have sexual relations'.[853] According to Butler, lesbian wives had similar experiences in England. She explained that sometimes a wife would not 'ask for any money so long as the husband did not prevent the children from living with her'.[854] Butler referred to this as 'terrible blackmail'.[855] She said: 'Some of these men didn't even want the kids; they just didn't want their wives to have them'.[856] Wyland noted that to keep her children, a mother may either be forced to cede a portion of the marital property or remain married to avoid impoverishment.[857] For mothers who were known to be lesbian, the assumption that they were unlikely to win custody in court greatly reduced their bargaining power outside of court.

Husbands sometimes blackmailed their wives for financial gain or for sexual favours. Hennegan said 'I can think of gay women whose lovers are vulnerable to blackmail who regularly consent to sex with their husbands because it is the price demanded for the husbands' silence'.[858] Jane explained that her husband threatened to reveal her sexuality in the newspapers in 1999 during their separation. Due to Section 28, Jane had feared she might lose her teaching job. Although he never carried out his threat, she said he was vicious about the money and had not shared it fairly; 'the only thing he could defend was his money and he would have defended that

[852] ROW, *Families Need Fathers: National Access Conference* (12 November 1982) LSE/5ROW Box 6.

[853] Bernice Goodman, 'Some Mothers are Lesbians,' in Elaine Norman and Arlene Mancuso (eds), *Women Issues and Social Work Practice* (Itasca: F E Peacock Publishers, 1980) 156.

[854] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[855] Ibid.

[856] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[857] Wyland, *Motherhood,* 17-18.

[858] Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

to the death'.[859] Although she was glad to not have gone through a courtroom battle, she said she suffered financially in the negotiations. Litigation would have been vitriolic, and both Jane and her husband wanted the divorce over quickly. Negotiations outside of court did not favour lesbian mothers. Wives who got custody of their children may often have done so at a financial cost.

Divorce is often emotionally-charged and stressful, and sometimes husbands used unusual tactics to punish their wives, often without thinking what was best for the children. Sometimes these tactics backfired. Janet told the story of her divorce in the early 1980s. Six months after Janet vacated the matrimonial home, she received divorce papers from her husband. Her husband alleged she had cut her hair short, started wearing men's clothing, and had left the children for her lesbian lover, neglecting both her children and family life. But he also had only asked for reasonable access; she could have custody and care and control. Janet told how her solicitor explained that if this went ahead – the father did not want the children, and the lesbian mother had neglected them for her lover – the children would be put into care of the state. She said she challenged her husband that surely he did not want their children put into state care, and he relented. The divorce was finalised and the children remained with Janet. She rationalised that her husband had wanted to punish her: 'It had just been Stuart trying to get at me through the legal system'.[860]

Some mothers would do almost anything to not be separated from their children. Many women, although we will never know how many, decided to continue passing as heterosexual during the divorce process so that they would get custody, as heterosexual mothers most so often did. Passing had its risks and consequences. There was the risk of fathers discovering the mothers' lesbianism and contesting custody upon divorce or anytime afterwards, forcing mothers to continue the charade until the children reached sixteen. There was also the risk of a lesbian mother being outed in court and thereby losing the confidence of the judiciary. Most often though,

[859] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.
[860] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 12.

spouses negotiated finances and custody outside of court. Lesbian mothers were at a disadvantage since it was well known they would not get custody if the case progressed to court. Not all mothers fought for custody.

## Following Divorce

Access visits, maintenance payments, and timely division of matrimonial assets often continued as contentious issues between divorced parents, regardless of whether one of the parents were homosexual. Several heterosexual wives wrote to ROW asking for help regarding difficulties over finance and custody issues, including children wanting to live with their mothers despite their fathers having care and control.[861] Sometimes, if children were adamant about living with their mothers, fathers acquiesced to their preference. Butler recalled that in her only two court cases where the judges awarded custody to the fathers, the children returned to live with their mothers:

> One thing that really stands out in my memory is that in two of those cases where the children were sent to live with the father, I got cards a few months later from both of them, although they weren't connected, telling me that the children voted with their feet and had gone back to live with mum. I've always wondered how many children actually did in the end go back. That would be really interesting to know, but it's not been possible.[862]

Parents sometimes ultimately settled for what the children wanted or changed their minds about caring for the children, even if their decisions conflicted with the decisions of the court. In 1981, Sylvia moved out of her marital home, leaving her fifteen-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter living with her husband. Before school the next day, her husband brought the children to Sylvia so she could fix their hair. Six months later, her husband asked if their daughter could come and live with Sylvia and her partner Maggie because 'he wasn't coping'.[863] Sylvia admitted her reluctance: 'I'd had a taste

[861] Jan Campbell, 'Letter to ROW,' (19 November 1985) LSE/5ROW Box 6; Ms H.F.L. White, 'Letter to ROW,' (25 September 1987) LSE/5ROW Box 6; Mary Latham, 'Correspondence to ROW,' (2 September 1988) LSE/5ROW Box 9.

[862] Gill Butler, *FAWTAR/11,* 11 October 2019.

[863] Interview with Sylvia Daly, 17 August 2023.

of freedom from motherhood and it was wonderful'.[864] Maggie advised that she might regret refusing her daughter and so the daughter came to live with them.

Divorced lesbian mothers were never free of the influence of their ex-husbands. Mothers who had joint custody had to consult with their ex-husbands over critical matters for the children. For mothers who had care and control, they were limited to where they could live so that the fathers could have access. In 1988, Jude related how her life with her children was restricted in the four years following her divorce:

> I am living in an isolated town where I am watched over, threatened and criticized by my ex husband. I have to live with gossip, with the fear of losing my job because of prejudice. Currently I am wanting to move, so I am treading very carefully and having to choose a place to live that my ex approves of and will agree to.[865]

Mothers who lived with their children feared their ex-husbands challenging custody or access anytime until the children reached age sixteen. Although Butler did not recall any fathers who came back wanting custody, the threat that fathers could contest custody or access was sufficient to dissuade mothers from living with other women, or even seeking relationships with other women. In 1968, one lesbian mother who was raising her children alone after divorce described that she found finances difficult and sometimes panicked at the 'increasing restrictions' her husband placed on their lives.[866] She explained that he suspected her homosexuality and expressed that 'he would like the children back when they are a little older'.[867] She also described that she had fallen in love with another divorced mother and had joyfully planned to live together in a happy home with all their children. However, they decided never to see each other again when they realised that 'neither husband would allow such a union to take place. Each husband referred to the '"sickness" of the friend'.[868] Additionally,

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[864] Ibid.

[865] Jude Cobley, 'Legal Briefing: Lesbian Custody "A Mother's Perspective",' (November 1988), *Legal Training Pack: Disputed Decisions Re Custody and Access of Children Where Lesbianism is an Issue,* LSE/5ROW Box 1.

[866] 'Conspiracy of Ignorance,' *Mental Health* (Summer 1968) 17.

[867] Ibid.

[868] Ibid.

her friend feared losing her job. Fear of ex-husbands contesting custody or access often affected mothers relationships with other women and with their children.

Disputing custody after divorce could be extremely disruptive. The lives of one mother and her young daughter were unsettled for six years due to the father contesting custody. Deborah married when she was pregnant in 1983 and then separated when her daughter was fifteen-months old. Her husband left Deborah and their daughter in the matrimonial home and subsequently petitioned for divorce. The judge issued the decree nisi in 1987: the parents had joint custody, the mother had care and control, and the father had reasonable access. Deborah had a brief relationship with a man before falling in love with a woman, with whom she began living in 1988. Meanwhile, her husband had remarried and was living in a two-bedroom maisonette in Shrewsbury. He then made an application for the daughter to live with him and his new wife, and the judge made an interim order that he should have care and control. Six months later, the judge gave care and control back to Deborah. The father then appealed the decision, which was upheld. The lower court reheard the case and subsequently awarded care and control to the mother. From separation to this final judgement, six years elapsed. Deborah explained that both she and her daughter had lasting negative effects from the experience. Her daughter 'was very insecure for years about whether she would be moved again'.[869] Deborah counted the days until her ex-husband could no longer re-apply for custody: 'I dream of the day she turns sixteen and I can forget the threat, admittedly now only a threat on paper, that my custody of her can still be challenged'.[870]

Mothers who had passed as heterosexual during their divorce were often concerned about changes to or loss of access should their relationships with other women become known to their ex-husbands. A mother in 1970 explained to *Arena Three* that although she felt completely herself for the first time in her life – living with a woman she had met through a personal advertisement – she was heartbroken to

[869] *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal);* Ali, *We Are Family,* 121.
[870] Ali, *We Are Family,* 120-121.

leave her two sons with her husband. She claimed she dare not reveal her new relationship to her ex-husband lest she jeopardise access to her sons.[871] In 1983, a lesbian mother who paid maintenance to her ex-husband who cared for their two young children, anonymously told *the Guardian* about her reluctance to challenge in court her right to better access: 'The adverse publicity which might accrue could irreparably damage my relationships, both with my partner and with my children. Ultimately my financial and professional security might be damaged, affecting my ability to provide a home for my children to visit'.[872]

Some mothers had conflicted feelings about being open about their sexuality with their children. While some mothers feared that the children might divulge information to their fathers, others were complicit with their children in hiding their desire for women. Elizabeth felt she had to tell her daughter that she was a lesbian 'in order to prepare her for possible custody cases'.[873] Other mothers sometimes delayed explaining their sexuality to their children for fear of their reactions, which varied from sympathy through ambivalence to anger. Although one daughter at first reacted to her mother's lesbianism with absolute shock in 1976, she also felt relief because she had sensed that something was different about her mother. She explained to *Sappho* in 1976 that she was sympathetic to her mother living two completely different lives:

> The weekday one which a sense of responsibility forced her to accept and the other which she could only live at weekends. I can see that this is no easy task when you are trying to bring up three kids and when you are afraid to reveal your whole self to them in case they cannot cope.[874]

Clare's son was seventeen when she had her first relationship with a woman, two years after separating from her husband in the mid-1980s. She explained that although her son was not pleased with his parents' separation and was sensitive about her new relationship, she thought he was mature in his acceptance of her lesbianism. Clare recalled: 'And when I did ask him directly about it sometime later

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[871] (Mrs.) H.S. – Manchester, *Arena Three* 7:6 (July 1970), 13.

[872] Ann Cassidy, 'An Access Order Cannot Open Closed Doors: OPEN SPACE,' *The Guardian* (21 June 1983) 8.

[873] Elizabeth and Ruth, 'Changing with My Daughter,' in Martin Hoyles (ed), *Changing Childhood* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1979) 156.

[874] 'Portrait of a Gay Wife and Mum,' *Sappho* 4:7 (1976) 14.

he said he was just glad I'd found someone, and I think it was probably a real relief to him that I had, in the sense that he stopped feeling responsible for me, I think!'.[875] Natalie did not begin a serious relationship with a woman nor come out to her sons until they were adults. She said that 'they had picked it up over the years that I was interested in women and it wasn't a big deal at all'.[876] Anne, who left her family in 1993 to live with her girlfriend, explained to the KENRIC Mothers' Group that her three children assured her they would always love her, no matter what: 'I would always be their Mum'.[877] She explained they realised it was best for her to be true to herself: 'I know they still hurt, so do I, but they have come to realise that for me, it was right'.[878] Jane admitted that telling her teenage children in 1999 why she was leaving their father for her female colleague was the most difficult thing she had ever done. Her children had opposite reactions to her news. Jane recalled her daughter yelling 'You fucking weirdo! You have ruined my life. You are an absolute cow!' and storming out of the room to which her son replied, 'I don't think you are weird mum, but I am going to play on the computer now'.[879] Her daughter was devastated and angry for the first year before she softened her attitude towards her mother.

Some women, at least in the early 1970s, had internalised homophobia and been concerned about the possible effects of their lesbian relationships on their children. One divorced lesbian mother, raising her two daughters together with her partner's daughter, expressed to *Sappho* her anxiety about her daughters becoming lesbians: 'Our three beautiful girls, so far, have shown no signs of homosexuality'.[880] Two divorced women, raising two daughters ages ten and eleven from one of their marriages, were concerned in 1975 that 'the children might develop what the judge called an unhealthy attitude': that their lesbian relationship might influence the children

[875] "Clare," West Yorkshire Queer Stories (06 June 2016), <https://wyqs.co.uk/stories/im-a-mother-who-became-a-lesbian/ > [Accessed 09 October 2023].

[876] Interview with Natalie Collins, 3 August 2023.

[877] Anne Fairbrother, 'How I Came Out – Eventually!' *KMG* No. 23 (August 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[878] Ibid.

[879] Interview with Jane Waring, 23 September 2023.

[880] 'Happy Families 2,' *Sappho* 2:12 (March 1974) 13,20.

in ‘homosexual behaviour’.[881] One of the women explained the basis for their concern and expressed relief that the girls were exhibiting heteronormative desire for boys:

> The elder girl had a terrible crush on me to begin with, so we try to make sure we have male friends around. I don’t think the girls attach a great deal of importance to our relationship as such. Their crushes are all on male pop stars now.[882]

Another young mother wrote to Proops questioning if her relationship with another woman could harm her children. Since her husband had left her and their two young children in 1970, she had been very lonely until she fell in love with a woman.[883] Another mother, realizing her preference for women when her children were young, divorced and raised her children alone because she thought lesbian relationships were too volatile to be a good environment for raising children. She stated: ‘I chose to live alone as I could see all around me homosexual relationships breaking up constantly, and I regard this as too much of a risk to take when the well-being of my children was most important’.[884] Elizabeth, who had lived with her eleven-year-old daughter since her divorce eight years earlier in 1971, expressed her conflict between providing a stable home life for her daughter and exploring her new-found sexual attraction to women. She wanted to give her daughter the security of home with a monogamous, long-term relationship with another adult, yet she admitted she eschewed monogamy in favour of experiencing the gay club scene in the early 1970s:

> This was a time of liberal sexual politics, and like many of my contemporaries I was curious to explore the possibilities of sexual attraction. I had experienced it as a girl but (since it was ‘deviant’) had subsequently firmly repressed it. But now I re-entered a phase of being sexually attracted and attractive to women, and this became a principle source of affirmation of my lesbian nature – it was, as it were at that time, how I knew I was one. But how was I to experiment sexually, present the ‘family’ face to my child and the custody court, *and* oppose the myths of normality encumbering my child’s development?[885] (emphasis original)

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[881] Michael De-la-Noy, ‘Women Together and the Child Between,’ *The Sunday Times* 7941 (August 24, 1975) 27.

[882] Ibid.

[883] Marje Proops, ‘Dear Marje: Feelings to Hide,’ *Daily Mirror* (21 December 1973) Ca Agony Aunts 1970-1975, LAGNA, Bishopsgate.

[884] Cheryl Tidmarsh, ‘Over to You – the Sappho Survey Surveyed,’ *Sappho* 5:9 (1977) 16.

[885] Elizabeth and Ruth, ‘Changing with My Daughter,’ in Martin Hoyles (ed), *Changing Childhood* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1979) 158.

She felt her desire to explore her sexuality at age thirty-six was restricted by her responsibilities as a mother and the fear of not getting custody of her children.

Some mothers were alienated from their children – and sometimes also their grandchildren – due to influence from their fathers. Regardless of which parent got custody, sometimes the father disparaged the mother to the children. Several mothers who did not have custody complained to ROW that the worst thing about their divorces were the revengeful slurs that fathers told the children, including telling them about their mothers' sexuality or that their mothers did not love them. Even some husbands who did not have custody tried to poison their children against their mothers. Lynne recalled that when her husband had access visits, he told their daughter that her mother was 'a slut' and that 'he just said awful things about me'.[886] Fortunately her daughter, of whom she had custody, began to realise her father's motives when she turned fourteen. Kath's relationship with her children also suffered from their father's negative evaluation of her sexuality. Despite Kath having custody because she was unwed, all three children lived with their father. Both he and his mother debased Kath to her three children, the oldest being eight and ten years old. She planned to explain her situation to her children when they were old enough to understand and form their own opinions about her. 'They've heard a lot from Joe and very little of my side. Little Bobby uses words like "queer". Claire doesn't really understand why I'm not with her – not really'.[887] Kath felt her baby daughter was lost to her:

> But the youngest could be told anything about me. I feel I've lost her even more than I've lost the other two. I miss her the most. She's changed such a lot. It feels like she's someone elses little girl, she's being brought up differently . She calls Joe's girlfriend "mum". She doesn't run to me. She was only 2 when he took her. I'm frightened I'll never be able to be close to her, that we will have lost that bond, that her memories won't be long enough. All she knows is that her mum gave her up.[888]

Maggie, who discovered her desire for women and left her husband and two children aged eleven and fifteen in 1974, was subsequently shunned by her family. She

[886] Interview with Lynne Harne, 13 July 2023.

[887] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 8-9.

[888] Ibid., 8-9.

attributed her exile to her husband's attitude. She had 'an awful fear' about what her husband told her children behind her back, such as: 'Your mother doesn't love us anymore'.[889] He would not let her see the children. Neither her own mother or sister would help: 'She was absolutely horrible to me – you see I was a sinner'.[890] In her interview almost fifty years after her divorce, Maggie divulged that she had little contact with her children and had never met her granddaughter.

Relationships between lesbian mothers and their children after divorce ranged from complete alienation to loving support and understanding. Strategically, some mothers chose to delay relationships with women until the children were mature; they were sometimes conflicted between living for themselves and living for their children. Fathers' homophobia and attitudes towards their ex-wives was a key factor in mothers' relationships with their children, whether the children lived with them or not. After divorce, lesbians continued to juggle their relationships with women and with their children, while being aware that their ex-husbands could contest care and control or access until the children turned sixteen. Most had to deal with homophobia from society as well as internalised homophobia.

## Conclusion

Upon divorce, the judiciary sometimes awarded lesbian mothers custody of their children. While official court records evidence lesbian wives getting custody as early as 1965, personal testimonies indicate that the judiciary was sometimes hostile to lesbian mothers who wanted to raise their children with their female partners. Society did not welcome mothers raising children outside the nuclear family. Foregrounding the experiences of a few lesbian mothers who unsuccessfully litigated custody, media published pugnacious narratives that proliferated the assumption that all or nearly all lesbian mothers did not get custody of their children in court. This assumption affected the lives of all lesbian mothers – married, living with male partners, or divorced – in the 1970s through the 1990s. It affected when and if they

[889] Interview with Maggie Redding, 17 August 2023.
[890] Ibid.

would divorce, if and how they would challenge their husbands for custody, and how they conducted their lives after divorce.

Mothers agonised over doing what they thought best for their children and what was best for themselves. Not all mothers chose to raise their children after divorce. Mothers who left their children in their fathers' care often felt remorse for not staying, while mothers who got custody sometime felt remorse for raising children away from their fathers. Often, when wives made the difficult decision to break up their families, they had realized what was lacking in their marriages: emotional and physical intimacy with their husbands. They had either formed a relationship with another woman or were seeking another woman. These wives divorced for love, rather than remain married for the numerous practical reasons why they married in the first place. In this manner, lesbians were similar to heterosexual women: with many of the pragmatic reasons for marriage weakening in the second half of the twentieth century, they also based life-long commitment on love.

# Chapter Four: Othering Married Lesbians

In her 1978 article about women who discovered their homosexuality later in life, Veronica Harvey, a lesbian and a regular contributor to *Gay News*, explained how she had previously questioned the authenticity of wives who called themselves lesbians. In the 1960s, she had been perplexed by lonely wives advertising for female companions in *Arena Three*. Admitting that gender role stereotypes had biased her assumption, Harvey had been furious that wives pretended to be lesbians:

> How could she profess to be a *true* lesbian *and* be married? I went further: how dared she, as a married woman, *pretend* to be a lesbian, too?! It was an enigma which continued to puzzle me as I pored over the small ads in *Arena 3*, spotlighting the isolation of mothers-of-two stagnating in respectable, claustrophobic suburbia.[891] (emphasis original)

Harvey's anger illustrates that the concept of a married lesbian was contentious in the lesbian community in the 1960s and 1970s. Two conceptualisations of a lesbian identity emerged from the debates about wives in early lesbian magazines. One identity was formed by women who had rejected a heteronormative life course and embraced emotional and physical attachments exclusively with women. They labelled themselves "single lesbians" or "real lesbians".[892] These labels differentiated them from "married lesbians": women who lived with their husbands – who presumably had sex with their husbands – yet sexually desired women and who may or may not have been physically and emotionally involved with other women. Married lesbians constructed a different lesbian identity than single lesbians. Harvey's initial hostility towards married lesbians, whom she had considered pretending to be lesbian, softened by 1978 when she wrote her sympathetic article about 'the older woman, poised perhaps between a foundering marriage and her first lesbian experience or

[891] Veronica Harvey, 'Late Starters,' *Gay News* (February 9-22, 1978) 19.

[892] Single lesbians had never been married to men, although they may have been in dedicated relationships with other women or considered themselves married to their female partners. These women also sometimes labelled themselves "gay women" or "homosexual women".

relationship'.[893] Readers of early lesbian magazines, like Harvey, expressed varying degrees of empathy, but questioned whether wives were truly lesbian.

MRG published *Arena Three* from 1964 to 1971 and Sappho produced *Sappho* magazine between 1972 and 1981. *Arena Three* was the first magazine for lesbians, bravely established when male homosexuality was still illegal in England and Wales.[894] The editors of both magazines were outspoken, visible advocates for lesbians. One goal of both magazines was to disseminate information about lesbians. Esme Langley, the editor of *Arena Three*, declared in 1964: 'We hope, by means of publicity and education, including meetings, debates, lectures, conferences and intelligent Press, radio and television comment, to create a better informed public opinion on the subject of female homosexuality'.[895] Homophile associations, seeking to integrate homosexuals into polite society, advocated a respectable public image for homosexuals. *Arena Three* was concerned that representation of lesbians in psychiatry and the media agreed with its own respectable image of lesbians.[896] Hoping to establish *Arena Three* as a 'proper, decent magazine,' Langley sought to disassociate it from the lesbian trope of highly-sexualised, promiscuous women.[897] Jennings notes that the avoidance of any sexual content in the magazine also inadvertently 'echoed another familiar post-war medical trope – the insignificance of physical intimacy in lesbianism'.[898] Written content of the magazine, including fiction, book reviews, and articles, was deliberately not sexually-explicit. Through selective review of middlebrow fiction, Tooth Murphy argues, its editor reinforced that the magazine and its readers were decent and middle-class.[899] Although sexually-explicit

[893] Veronica Harvey, 'Late Starters,' *Gay News* (February 9-22, 1978) 19.

[894] Georgina Turner examines the limited distribution of *Arena Three* (1000) and *Sappho* (3000) considering the 1994 launch of Diva, the first commercially-viability "mainstream" lesbian magazine. Turner, 'CATCHING THE WAVE'.

[895] Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *News of the World* (13 December 1964) 4.

[896] An additional initial objective of MRG was to 'collaborate in research into the homosexual condition, especially as it concerns women', but by the 1970s, amid the anti-psychiatry movement, *Sappho* did not share that goal. 'Editorial Note,' *Arena Three* 1:1 (January 1964) 2. See also Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 161-165.

[897] Hall Carpenter Archives, 'Diana Chapman,' 53.

[898] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 28.

[899] Tooth Murphy, 'Arena Three Magazine'.

pictorial representations of lesbians are noticeably absent from the pages of *Arena Three,* Langley was surprised by the interest shown by men seeking erotic titillation. She noted in 1965 that *Arena Three* received requests from 'porn-birds' in response to a small advertisement in *The Sunday Times,* and that the men's 'faces must have fallen sadly on finding that "A3" does not, repeat not, represent lesbians as "vicious sex-maniacs"'.[900]

Early magazines enabled lesbians from across Britain to establish a community. A goal of both *Arena Three* and *Sappho* was to enable women to connect with each other. Readers explained in early issues that they were surprised and delighted to have discovered like-minded women: they had previously thought themselves to be unique and alone in the world.[901] Hoping to relieve the loneliness of isolated lesbians, both organisations arranged in-person meetings and included a small advertisements sheet with each edition. The community extended beyond the pages of the magazines: both *Arena Three* and *Sappho* initiated cross-pollination with international organisations, such as the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in the USA and the COC, the Dutch homophile organisation.[902] Although public social spaces for lesbians existed in the post-war period, some lesbians, particularly wives who had commitments to children and husbands, found that connecting through letter writing, telephone calls, and informal social events was often a more attractive and accessible alternative to the bar scene. In 1971, Charlotte Wolff noted that the personal column facilitated 'pen-friends and meetings of like-minded members, who have no opportunity to make friends with other lesbians in their own milieu'.[903] Similar to the DOB in America, which published the lesbian magazine *The Ladder*, Wolff explained that MRG fulfilled the 'function of intimate communities, where members can shed the

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[900] ERL, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:8 (August 1965) 10; See also Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 26-28.

[901] D.P.M. (Somerset), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 1:10 (November 1964) 13; See also Ceri Ager's recollection of answering letters to *Arena Three* in Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 39-40.

[902] 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: Rivers Oram Press, 2007) 65. The DOB began in 1955 in San Francisco and provided inspiration for MRG.

[903] Charlotte Wolff, *Love Between Women* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 86.

mask they have to wear in the outside world, and can be themselves'.[904] Contributors often remained anonymous, using pseudonyms or identifying themselves by their first name only or their initials and location. Anonymity allowed women to be candid about their opinions and sexuality: lesbian magazines were a safe space. By the 1970s, *Sappho's* intent was in line with gay liberation. Georgina Turner states that 'Sappho was concerned with getting people together, and getting them out of the closet: it was the visible culture of lesbian existence and proud of it'.[905] For women who were isolated across the country and especially for wives, monthly magazines were the only contact they had with other lesbians.

*Arena Three* and *Sappho* provided a discursive platform for women to debate a lesbian identity before the internet. Although readers' similarities were the impetus for subscribing, their differences, such as appearance, class, and marital status, were sometimes contentious. Hamer argues that respectable, middle-class lesbians sought to disassociate themselves from visibly-homosexual, working-class butch lesbians and Jennings concurs that appearance was contentious.[906] Jennings and Tooth Murphy agree that *Arena Three* catered to a predominantly middle-class, professional audience, evidenced by its aims, content, and construction of a respectable public image.[907] Langley encouraged the debate on lesbian identity from the first issue of *Arena Three*, which contained one article about seeking the public image of lesbians and a second article questioning whether homosexuality was an 'acquired neurosis' or an inborn predisposition.[908] Discourse on married lesbians, fuelled by increased awareness that wives sought extramarital affairs with other women, added to debates of nature versus nurture and promiscuity versus monogamy.[909]

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[904] Ibid.

[905] Turner, 'CATCHING THE WAVE,' 773.

[906] Hamer, *Britannia's Glory,* 172-175; Jennings, *Tomboys*, 158-159.

[907] See Tooth Murphy, 'Arena Three Magazine,' 186-187; Jennings, *Tomboys*, 134-172.

[908] Hilary Benno, 'Scouting for . . . THE PUBLIC IMAGE,' *Arena Three* 1:1 (January 1964) 3-4; D.M.C., 'Bent or Straight Mates?,' *Arena Three* 1:1 (January 1964) 7-8.

[909] Historians have examined *Arena Three* to show how geographically diverse women developed a lesbian identity. See Hamer, *Britannia's Glory;* Jennings, *Tomboys;* Jennings, *A Lesbian History of*

Historians have examined how girls and women adopted a lesbian identity in homosocial spaces in post-war Britain. Jennings argues that from the 1920s, 'commercial bars and nightclubs have played an important role in the development of identities and communities based around same-sex desire'.[910] In her examination of the Gateways Club, Gardiner explores how women interacted while dressed as butch and femme.[911] Examining adolescent girls' expression of lesbian sexuality from 1945 to 1971, Jennings explains that before facing social conventions as they matured into adulthood, girls had opportunities to express lesbian sexuality at school. Where sex education was minimal or absent, girls had few sources of information about lesbianism, and crushes were alternately deemed normal or deviant.[912] The gay press, argues sociologist Paula Rust, played a role in creating the lesbian community by shaping its image.[913] In agreement, Jennings argues that *Arena Three* was the first collaboration to establish a collective lesbian identity and provides a unique snapshot of contemporary ideas about homosexuality.[914] Evident from the letters to the editor, Jennings also notes that the lesbian community in *Arena Three* did not unanimously support married lesbians: 'some readers expressed open hostility towards them'.[915] *Arena Three* and *Sappho* are rich sources of information about married lesbians, when there is little else available. In her examination of letters to the DOB in America, Gutterman notes that single lesbians' sympathy and understanding of wives who conducted extramarital affairs with women changed to brutal criticism in the 1970s and lesbian feminists had zero tolerance by the 1980s.[916]

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*Britain;* Tooth Murphy, '"I Conformed; I Got Married"'; Oram, 'Little by Little?'; Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies.*

[910] Jennings, 'Lesbian Bars, 1920s- 1970s,' in *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 131, 131-148.

[911] Jill Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 17-43.

[912] Jennings, *Tomboys*, 134-172.

[913] Paula Rust, *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics* (New York, New York University Press, 1995) 7-24.

[914] Jennings, *Tomboys*, 134-172.

[915] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 111.

[916] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 135-162.

Contributing to the historiography about the formation of lesbian identity in the twentieth century, this chapter contends that two conflicting lesbian identities emerged in the 1960s and 1970s from debates about married lesbians in early lesbian magazines, *Arena Three* and *Sappho*. By othering wives – by arguing what a lesbian was not – single readers defined a lesbian as a woman who had an emotional and physical connection with women and who had rejected a heteronormative lifestyle. Wives provided an alternative definition, arguing that they were lesbian because they desired only women, despite being married with children. Building on Jennings' argument that 'sex matters in intimate relations between women', this chapter contends that to some wives, desire for sex with women defined their sexuality.[917]

This chapter begins by showing how in the 1960s, despite many lesbians having had sexual experience with men before coming out, many readers othered wives for their continued conjugal relations and commitment to their families. Wives' infidelity, which many often thought negatively affected their families and their lovers, conflicted with the respectable, middle-class image of lesbians that *Arena Three* hoped to disseminate to the public. The middle section of the chapter illustrates the animosity between heterosexual and lesbian feminists in the women's liberation movement. This animosity was evident in *Sappho*, published in the 1970s, where single readers often labelled wives as bisexual and expressed their dislike of wives' privileged position. Single readers, who were the major demographic of both magazines, sought to differentiate themselves from married lesbians, whom they deemed promiscuous, deceitful, and non-monogamous.

## Minorities Research Group and *Arena Three*

In 1963, Esme Langley spearheaded a group of women – Cynthia Reid, Diana Chapman, Julie Switzur, and "Paddy" Dunkley – to form the first social and political organisation for lesbians in Britain.[918] They called themselves the Minorities Research Group, a 'dishonest title' but one that Chapman thought was a safe option since Antony

[917] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 20.

[918] Jennings, *Tomboys*, 136. Hamer, *Britannia's Glory,* 166-169; 'Editorial Note,' *Arena Three* 1:1 (January 1964) 2.

Grey of Albany Trust had frightened them with the possibility of being prosecuted for 'uttering an obscene libel'.[919] Reid explained that the title was inoffensive and respectable: 'it didn't reveal itself as a homosexual organisation or as a specifically female homosexual organisation and the term "research" lent a certain air of respectability'.[920] Male homosexuality, after all, was illegal when MRG began.[921] MRG published the first British magazine for lesbians: *Arena Three*. Chapman explained that they were hoping to disseminate that 'lesbians were just ordinary people, not nutcases. Or at any rate, no nuttier than anyone else'.[922] To avoid any potential legal conflict, *Arena Three* was available only by subscription.

From its inception, MRG acknowledged that some lesbians were married. Membership was open to any woman aged twenty-one and over who was single, widowed, divorced, separated, or married. During its publication, marriage rose to its pinnacle of popularity: by 1971 more people than ever were getting married at increasingly younger ages.[923] In 1964, Langley emphasised that many married women were lesbian: 'We know dozens of cases of wives falling in love with their maids or au pair girls or even the woman next door. They don't want to. It just happens. And that is the tragedy of it'.[924] Langley also noted that *Arena Three* had received over 150 letters from married women in the four weeks preceding Christmas 1964, the first year of publication.[925] She complained of a 'major headache' caused by 'the enormous no. of unhappy married women who want to join MRG and *relax* from the strains of a

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[919] 'Diana Chapman on Arena Three,' *Out 3* (February/March 1977) 3.

[920] NSA, HCC (C456), F2109, Cynthia Reid, cited in Jennings, *Tomboys*, 136.

[921] *Arena Three's* first issue was in January 1964, and the *Sexual Offences Act 1967*, which decriminalized sexual acts between men aged 21 and over in private, received royal assent in July 1967 (same as commencement date).

[922] Diana Chapman, 'Mummy of Them All,' *Out* 3 (February/March 1977) np.

[923] For an exploration of demographic trends in of marriage, childbearing, and divorce, see Elliot, 'Demographic Trends'.

[924] Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *News of the World* (13 December 1964) 4; *See also Arena Three* 2:7 (July 1965) 1.

[925] 'New Year Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:1 (January 1965) 11; Wendy Jones, 'Interview on Lesbianism,' Authorised transcription of a BBC recording on 15 March 1965, *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 3-6.

miserable "home" life"'.[926] MRG insisted that wives provide their husbands' written consent. Langley feared that married lesbians put MRG 'at risk of becoming involved in "enticement" or "alienation of affection" lawsuits or divorce cases, and threatened its members with being publicly branded as "wife-stealers," "home-breakers," or "corrupters of the innocent"'.[927] This restriction prevented MRG from allowing some wives to join, such as Mrs. B.B. from Devon, whose husband 'was not the type to begin to understand' her 'difficulties' and would not give his consent for her membership.[928] The DOB, the American precursor of MRG – founded in 1955 and committed to 'promoting the integration of the homosexual into society' – did not employ a similar restriction on wives but similarly facilitated them to connect to the broader lesbian community.[929] Although requiring husbands' permission prevented some wives from connecting with other lesbians through *Arena Three*, MRG lifted the restriction after the first twenty-four months of publication.[930]

As managing editor, Langley was known to be possessive and controlling of the magazine.[931] Born in 1919 in Yorkshire, she was an unmarried mother of three children who had published an autobiography about single motherhood.[932] Anxious to raise a positive public profile, Langley expressed her views on lesbianism to several major newspapers and at speaking engagements. She publicly identified as a lesbian by name and photographs when most other women preferred anonymity.[933] Langley encouraged readers to contribute articles and suggest topics for future issues. Readers, eager to share their opinions on articles and letters from previous issues,

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[926] Esme Langley to Barbara Gittings, 6 November 1964, 1-2, box 57, folder 12, Barbara Gittings and Kay Lahusen Papers, New York Public Library, cited in Jennings, *Unnamed Desires,* 110.

[927] Ibid, cited in Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife,* 77; See also Diana Chapman, '25th Anniversary Sub-Committee of KENRIC Questionnaire,' (January 1990) LMA/4720/04/02/01.

[928] Mrs. B.B. (Devon) 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 1:11 (November 1964) 12.

[929] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife,* 78-79.

[930] Esme Langley noted that subscriptions to *Arena Three* would no longer be restricted by either age or marital status in January 1966; 'Editorial Notes,' *Arena Three* 2:11 (November 1965) 1; Wives who said they did not have their husbands' permission: *Arena Three* 1:11 (November 1964) 12, *Arena Three* 2:3 (March 1965) 14.

[931] Jennings, *Tomboys,* 135.

[932] Antony Grey, 'Esme Langley,' *The Independent* [London] 1830 (28 August 1992) 25; Ann Bruce, *Why Should I be Dismayed?*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1958).

[933] Hamer, *Britannia's Glory,* 179-180.

wrote letters to the editor and supported MRG through donations.[934] If *Arena Three* continued to receive mail on the scale experienced during its first year of publishing – 'thousands of letters, including many from overseas' – then it only printed a small selection of letters received.[935] Through selection of letters for publication, on which she occasionally commented, and writing articles and book reviews, Langley, herself a lesbian mother, influenced the discourse in *Arena Three*.

The majority of *Arena Three* readers were not married. Many of them expressed their dislike of married lesbians and differentiated between 'latent lesbians who have been married and found they could not continue living with their husbands' and wives who never intended to leave their marriages.[936] The latter drew particular criticism from single readers, who presumed unfaithful wives had their cake and ate it too: they enjoyed the privileges of marriage and yet they also had extramarital affairs with women. Ostracised from society, and also often shunned by their families, single readers resented lesbians who maintained social standing as wives and mothers. In response to these criticisms, Langley and wives admonished single lesbians for their lack of empathy and acceptance. In 1969, Langley emphasised the need for greater tolerance and castigated readers who disliked married lesbians, surmising that a liberal attitude was 'a good and honourable standard that might well be aimed for by the toffynosed type who is so uppity about "those marrieds"'.[937] The following year, M.H. of London chastised single lesbians for being critical and unsympathetic – for 'crowing in judgement' – toward wives who desired women.[938] She stated: 'The fortunate backslapping unmarrieds can thank their lucky constellations that they are saved the unhappiness, guilt and heartsearching their lesser counterparts may endure'.[939]

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[934] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us*, 39.
[935] Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *News of the World* (13 December 1964) 4.
[936] E.C., Hampshire, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 5:5 (May 1968) 15.
[937] ERL, 'The Press,' *Arena Three* 6:12 (December 1969) 3.
[938] M.H. (SE London), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:5 (May/June 1970) 14.
[939] M.H. (SE London), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:5 (May/June 1970) 14.

Married lesbians defended their position: they insisted that they did not have the best of both worlds but were instead caught between their lovers and their families. K.P. argued that she fared worse than her lover because she was forced to choose: 'being ground to a fine powder between the millstones of the girl she wants and the man she has got'.[940] Mrs. S.R. described married lesbians as 'human blobs of misery hidden as best they can be all over the country, together totalling one colossal whole of misery, a shocking indictment of society as we know it'.[941] She explained that married lesbians paid a 'terrible price' to maintain their roles as wives and mothers:

> They are in mental hospitals: in neat little semis yelling at their children: sitting at desks writing poetry and novels: queueing in doctors' waiting rooms with imaginary ailments: visiting psychiatrists in search of a "cure"; loving their children and crippling them with guilt: searching – via the bottle, the pills, the occasional friend, for peace: weeping in their living-rooms: striving to live an impossible role: shrivelling with every possible device their great capacity for love: fighting with their husbands: fighting with themselves: battling, within the normal framework of permissible housewifely friendships, against impossible desires: shocking intimates: all this in the name of decency.[942]

Yet another reader, M.H. of London, described how it was difficult for a married mother to reconcile her love for another woman with her love for her children. She claimed the tragedy was obvious: that the husband, the children, and the wife suffered.[943]

## Sexual Experience Relation to Sexual Identity

*Arena Three* readers had a wide variation of sexual experiences with men. Some had never had sex with a man nor could imagine having sex with a man. At the opposite end of the spectrum of sexual experience, women were married, regularly had sex with their husbands, and had children. In between were women who had experienced sexual relations with their boyfriends, live-in male partners, and husbands before rejecting a heteronormative lifestyle.[944] Some had been revolted by their first

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[940] K. P. (West of England) 'The Married Woman - 1 -,' *Arena Three* 4:6 (June 1967) 14.

[941] (Mrs.) S.R. (Surrey), 'The Married Woman - 2 -,' *Arena Three* 4:6 (June 1967) 15; This quote also appeared in the anonymously published 'Conspiracy of Ignorance,' *Mental Health* (Summer 1968) 17-18.

[942] (Mrs.) S.R. (Surrey), 'The Married Woman - 2 -,' *Arena Three* 4:6 (June 1967) 15.

[943] M.H. (SE London), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:5 (May/June 1970) 14.

[944] In Charlotte Wolff's 1971 study, sixty percent of the 106 self-identifying lesbians had previously had one or more male sexual partners. Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 210.

and only sexual experience with a man; unfortunately for some women this occurred on their wedding night and for others the resulting pregnancy precipitated marriage. Langley was likely referring to married lesbians when she expressed her opinion that 'the majority of Lesbians contrary to popular belief, do not automatically shrink from the idea of a man making love to them'.[945] Some married lesbians strongly disagreed with Langley, as they found sex with their husbands physically revolting.[946]

Surveys indicate that many women who identified as lesbian had previous experiences of sexual relations with men. In *Arena Three's* second year of publication, Langley estimated that forty percent of the over 600 subscribers were married, separated, divorced, or widowed.[947] Of the fifty women who responded to a survey in its last year of publishing, forty percent identified as either married or divorced.[948] Also in 1971, of the 106 self-identifying lesbians in a study by Charlotte Wolff, sixty percent previously had one or more male sexual partners and nearly 39 percent were married, separated, divorced, or widowed.[949] *Sappho* conducted its own survey in 1977: thirty percent of the 187 respondents were either married, separated, divorced, or widowed.[950] Surveys in the 1980s revealed similar figures. Hanscombe and Forster noted that all the lesbian mothers and nearly all the lesbian partners they interviewed for their 1981 book had experienced sexual relations with men, even those who conceived their children through artificial insemination. Additionally, they noted that lesbians in older age groups were either wives or divorcées.[951] KENRIC noticed a similar percentage in its 1985 survey of 587 members. Whilst nearly all respondents identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual, 37 percent indicated that they were married,

[945] Ron Mount, 'Women Only,' *News of the World* (13 December 1964) 4.

[946] See Mrs. H. M. (Essex), Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 12.

[947] E. R. Langley, 'Editorial Notes,' *Arena Three* 2:7 (July 1965) 2; Wendy Jones, 'Interview on Lesbianism,' Authorised Transcription of a BBC Recording on 15 March 1965, *Arena Three* 2:6 (June 1965) 5.

[948] 'Questionnaire,' *Arena Three* 8:3 (March 1971) 3.

[949] Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 210.

[950] Cheryl Tidmarsh, 'Questionnaire,' *Sappho* 5:8 (1977) 17-21.

[951] Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle*, 23.

divorced, or widowed.[952] Later surveys revealed larger numbers of self-identified lesbians who previously had sex with men. In 1992, 250 women responded to a voluntary survey in *Lesbian London*, a free monthly magazine. Although 93 percent identified as lesbian and only 7 percent as bisexual, 85 percent revealed that they had experienced sex with a man, 20 percent admitted they would consider having a sexual relationship with a man in the future, and 33 percent 'admitted feeling themselves sexually attracted to a man'.[953] In Traies' 2016 survey of women who identified as lesbian and had been born before 1950, over half had been married, some more than once. Of the nine respondents born before 1926, six had been married.[954] Gardiner theorises that the reason there seemed to be fewer lesbians than gay men on the gay scene in the 1970s was because many lesbians were married: 'it was more common for women to realise later in life that they were attracted to other women'.[955]

As it was not uncommon for women to have had sex with men before coming out, single lesbians othered wives for their continued commitment to their husbands. Single lesbians expressed difficulty comprehending how wives could identify as lesbian, yet in practice, live with – and have sex with – their husbands. E.C. from Hampshire reasoned that 'if a woman can bear to sleep with a man, she isn't really lesbian' for 'it would be impossible, aesthetically and otherwise' for a lesbian to have an affair with a man.[956] Based on their own experiences of recognizing and accepting their desire for women, many *Arena Three* readers avowed that lesbians only had sex with women and therefore wives who had sex with their husbands must be heterosexual: wives' practice of having sex with their husbands disqualified them from claiming a lesbian identity. Single lesbians were also suspicious of wives who claimed they only realised their lesbianism after years of marriage and several children. A married reader, Mrs. R from Sussex, explained that she discovered her 'innate

[952] 'Total Number of Questionnaires Returned and Analysed 235', (1985), LMA/4720/04/02/01; 'Kenric Membership Profile,' (1985) LMA/4720/04/02/01.

[953] 'Life & Loves of a London Lesbian: Survey Results – Part Two: SEX,' *Lesbian London* 10 (October 1992) 4, LMA/4540/03/001.

[954] Traies, *The Lives of Older Lesbians,* 61.

[955] Gardiner*, From the Closet*, 219.

[956] E.C., Hampshire, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 5:5 (May 1968) 15.

homosexuality after several years of marriage and children' and then realised what she lacked in her relationship with her husband.[957] One reader challenged discovering homosexuality late in life. D.S. from Essex responded: 'As for Mrs. R., well words fail me, for after so many years of marriage she finds out now that she has Lesbian tendencies? Never in this world can I believe that piffle'.[958] Although single lesbians may have felt they had "always" been lesbian, and wives may have thought they had "become" lesbian, Sara Ahmed explains that 'even lesbians who feel they were ''always that way,'' still must ''become lesbians'''.[959] Ahmed notes that different women had different time frames for "becoming lesbian", but not all readers of *Arena Three* and *Sappho* considered temporal differences a possibility. Rejecting heteronormative aspirations of marriage and motherhood – what Tooth Murphy terms hetero-domesticity – and choosing not to have children was a prelude to identifying as lesbian for many women.[960] D.S. explained that she did not think she was alone in her belief that wives were not "real lesbians" and implied that only heterosexual women had husbands and children:

> All true Lesbians must feel the same about that letter of hers, I would advise her to think again and ponder on just what a real Lesbian is, looks like, feels like and acts like, then perhaps she will perhaps, tuck the kids in bed as usual and sleep happily with her husband, knowing that she just hasn't got what it takes to qualify for the title LESBIAN.[961] (emphasis original)

Her statements illustrate resentment of married lesbian mothers, considering she herself was resigned to be childless. Single women often rejected wives' claims to be lesbian.

## Objections to Extramarital Affairs

Some readers expressed their dislike of wives' infidelity. These objections were consistent with society's disapproval of extramarital heterosexual sex: as the

[957] Mrs. R. (Sussex), 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 6:2 (February 1969) 5.

[958] D.S. (Essex), 'Free Speech, Away With Religious Conflict,' *Arena Three* 6:2 (February 1969), 6.

[959] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Object, Others* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006) 100.

[960] Tooth Murphy, '"I Conformed; I Got Married",' 129.

[961] D.S. (Essex), 'Free Speech, Away With Religious Conflict,' *Arena Three* 6:2 (February 1969), 6.

incidence of infidelity rose during the 1960s through the 1980s, attitudes towards infidelity became less tolerant.[962] They objected to wives hurting the women with whom they had relationships, being unfaithful to their husbands, neglecting their children, and damaging the public perception of lesbians. To many, lesbians who were in loving, monogamous relationships with women were more acceptable personas of lesbians than women who sought casual sexual encounters. The latter perpetuated the trope of the promiscuous, libidinous, predatory lesbian.

By the mid-1960s, *Arena Three* readers had noted that married lesbians often remained married, which was to the detriment of their lesbian lovers. A trained psychiatric nurse described her married, bisexual patient as a woman who wanted 'security and respectability from her husband, and love from her women friends', but could not reject either.[963] Many readers felt that wives regarded their lesbian lovers as second-class to their husbands and children, and many wives acknowledged that they privileged their husbands and children over their female lovers. Mrs. K.K. from London was 'dreadfully worried' about her young female lover who had 'grown much too fond' of her and asked her to leave her family.[964] She explained that she could not abandon her husband and children and therefore had no choice but to end the relationship with her female lover. Single lesbians provided personal testimonies of suffering in relationships with wives. One anonymous reader explained that she had subscribed to *Arena Three* in 1966 hoping to make friends and "find herself" but eventually scorned all married women. She admitted being taken for all she could give in affection – her second tryst with a married woman having been disastrous – and castigated all married members of MRG as 'the worst possible types'.[965] Miss W.K., another single reader, cautioned other lesbians to avoid wives and explained the misery, loneliness, and frustrations of her own relationship with a married mother, to whom her children and husband – the "Lord and Master" – came first:

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[962] Richards and Elliott, 'Sex and Marriage,' 42-44; Warren Colman, 'Fidelity as a Moral Achievement,' in Christopher Clulow (ed), *Rethinking Marriage. Public and Private Perspectives* (London: Karnac, 1993) 71. Cited in Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England,' 88.

[963] C.M.W, 'Bisexuals and "Butches",' *Arena Three* 2:7 (July 1965) 8.

[964] Mrs. K.K. (London), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:9 (September 1965) 10.

[965] A very ex-member, 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 3:6 (July 1966) 15-16.

> A date can only be made on the infrequent occasions when the husband is out. Meetings have to be cancelled at the shortest notice owing to one of the children being ill, or for some other family reason. Mostly it is not possible even to ring up, when a few words on the telephone would restore equilibrium or help over a bout of depression. The week-ends are completely taboo, because the Lord and Master is at home. In fact, one is lonelier than lonely, tolerated marginally if one is lucky and with the modest hopes of a few hours of the inestimable comfort of being together constantly being frustrated.[966]

J.H. begged all married women to avoid single woman who were looking for love with 'a heart full of emotion' and who would get hurt by the 'infernal triangle'.[967] J.G. from London admitted in 1970 that she had no tolerance or sympathy for any wife involved with another woman. She asked if any unfaithful wife could clarify 'how she reconciles her extra-marital sex life with her marriage vows' and 'what future she can offer any woman with whom she becomes involved'.[968]*Arena Three* readers surmised that wives' lesbian lovers would be hurt by the relationships, as wives would not leave their marriages.

Concern about extramarital affairs destroying families was part of the wider concern about the representation of lesbians in the media. Married women seeking extramarital sexual affairs with other women did not fit *Arena Three's* attempt to position lesbians as ordinary citizens who happened to do things differently in the privacy of their bedrooms. Readers also expressed concern about the media's image of lesbians. A single reader from Gloucester in 1965 argued that the public image of the lesbian as a 'warped, unbalanced woman' should be altered to that of the average lesbian who was 'too normal and unremarkable in their habits and activities to be picked out by any chance acquaintances or colleagues'.[969] Butch lesbians, whose masculine clothing and appearance made them visible to the public, were also of concern to some readers.[970] Several readers were upset about the public image of lesbians presented in an article written by Jean Ritchie in the *Evening Echo* in 1969

[966] Miss WK (SW7), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 4:7 (July 1967) 12.
[967] J. H. (Salisbury), *Arena Three* 4:1 (January 1967) 15.
[968] J.G. Highbury, London N., 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:1 (January 1970) 9.
[969] Miss M.S. (Gloucester), 'Mailbag,' *Arena Three* 2:10, (1965) 12.
[970] Hamer, *Britannia's Glory*, 173-176.

about two married mothers who fell in love and subsequently left their families.[971] Having received letters from readers that 'were mostly very intolerant and positively vile,' Ritchie was 'shocked by such holier-than-Christ intolerance by other lesbians'.[972] Several readers were concerned that Ritchie's article was negative for the 'somewhat fragile image' of lesbians: two married women leaving their families was not representative of lesbians nor an image to be publicised to a conservative readership.[973] Liz from Hertfordshire felt that the two wives 'and their somewhat sensational story were not the picture of lesbians we wanted published to all and sundry'.[974] She continued to say: 'surely we should do what we can to make sure that what is presented to society is factual, highly representative and calculated to encourage tolerance'.[975] Thus she alluded that despite acknowledging that lesbian wives can break up families, such representations should be kept from the public. Tolerance, as Liz suggested, was the reason for presenting a respectable lesbian persona. Two readers from Hampshire agreed: they disliked 'Lesbian "dirty linen"' receiving 'public ablution' in a newspaper as they felt it undermined their attempts to prove 'that most Lesbians do not rank with drug addicts, alcoholics and Pimps'.[976] Several *Arena Three* readers were adamant that married lesbians whose infidelity damaged their families' lives were negative for the overall image of lesbians, particularly during a decade when marriage was nearly universal. The assumption that married women, including married lesbians, remained married "till death do us part" endured throughout the 1960s. Some readers agreed with the *Arena Three's* intent to craft a positive lesbian image to encourage tolerance from society.

In the 1960s, *Arena Three* readers who were married and those who were not had opposing conceptualisations of a lesbian identity based on ideas about sex and

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[971] Jean Ritchie, 'Beyond the Pale,' *Evening Echo* [Hemel Hempstead] 618 and 619 (3, 4 November 1969).

[972] Liz – Herts., 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:1 (January 1970) 9; ERL, 'The Press,' *Arena Three* 6:12 (December 1969) 3.

[973] Liz – Herts., 'Free Speech,' *Arena Three* 7:1 (January 1970) 9.

[974] Ibid., 8.

[975] Ibid., 9.

[976] L.D.U. & A.E.H. (Hants.), *Arena Three* 7:2 (February 1970) 6.

marriage. Wives reasoned that their sexual desire for women made them lesbians: they felt obliged to have sex with their husbands. Many had a progressive view of marriage: they cared for their children, completed their housework, had sex with their husbands and yet found emotional and physical companionship with other women with or without the knowledge of their husbands. Lesbians who had never been married expressed a more traditional view of marriage: that extramarital affairs – with women or men – compromised marriage vows. Despite evidence that a significant proportion of single lesbians had experienced sex with men before coming out, many single readers felt that wives' practice of remaining married and continuing to have sex with their husbands disqualified them from claiming a lesbian identity. Single readers also expressed dislike of wives' infidelity harming wives families and their female lovers.

The lesbian community's perception of married lesbians and a lesbian identity changed at the end of the 1960s in step with changes in the perceptions of homosexuality and marriage. Male homosexuality had recently been partially-decriminalized, and the GLF encouraged men and women to come out: gay was good and gay was different.[977] Previous integrationist politics were superseded by more radical activism. Feminist critique of marriage grew louder as the rate of marriage declined from 1972 onwards. Sympathetic to the goals of the GLF, *Arena Three* underwent a relaunch in 1970, attempting to appeal to a wider audience.[978] Teenage girls wrote to *Arena Three* giving their full names and addresses, proud of their lesbianism.[979] *Arena Three* needed to change with the times or fold. Struggling financially, Langley met with a group of women including Jackie Forster and Babs Todd at the Museum Tavern in Bloomsbury to discuss strategies to expand readership: to 'break through the advertising barrier'.[980] Dissension at this meeting

[977] Michael Mason, 'Out of the Closets on to the Streets: Gay Men's History,' in Emma Healey and Angela Mason (eds), *Stonewall 25: The Making of the Lesbian and Gay Community in Britain* (London: Virago 1994) 99-100.

[978] Alison Oram, 'Little by Little?,' 73-79.

[979] Hamer, *Britannia's Glory*, 184-185; Miss Kate Tallon, 'Social News: Minority Voice,' *Arena Three 6:7* (September, 1969).

[980] 'Diana Chapman on Arena Three', *OUT No. 3* (February/March 1977) 3.

made it obvious that MRG and *Arena Three* could not continue. Without Langley, the remaining women organised to produce a new magazine for lesbians called *Sappho*. Other magazines targeted to lesbians and feminists began publishing in the 1970s. In the year *Sappho* published its first issue, 1972, *Gay News* began reporting on topics concerning both gay men and lesbians and the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* began publishing concerns of all women. In 1975, the WLM published its own national internal magazine, *WIRES,* joining *Shrew*, the monthly magazine representing the women's movement, published monthly since 1969. The 1970s was a tumultuous time in sexual politics and the discourse in *Sappho* reflected readers' issues with lesbians and the WLM.

## Lesbians and the Women's Liberation Movement

Lesbians had an uncomfortable fit with both gay liberation and women's liberation, separated in the former by gender and in the latter by sexuality. Although involved with the GLF from its beginning, lesbians were a minority and many felt that gay men were as sexist as straight men.[981] Turning to the newly-formed women's movement, lesbians were initially not welcomed there either. When the Women's Group of the GLF – which met separately beginning in January 1971 – asked to join the WLM, its secretary Maysel Brah rejected the request in writing: 'lesbians couldn't be part of women's liberation'.[982] Not to be dissuaded, many lesbians attended the first WLM conference at Ruskin College in Oxford the following month.[983] This observation sustains Natalie Thomlinson's suggestion that the WLM in its early years, which had an 'exclusive, small group structure' dominated by white, middle-class women, was not particularly accessible or approachable.[984]

[981] Weeks, *Coming Out*, 200.

[982] Power, *No Bath*, 117; Maysel Brah and her husband Harpal Brah made themselves organisers of the Skegness conference in October 1971. See Lent, *British Social Movements,* 71-72.

[983] Jennings, *Tomboys*, 176.

[984] Natalie Thomlinson, Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968-1993 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 40.

From its inception, lesbians were both active participants and problematic within the women's movement.[985] Although not all lesbians were feminists and not all feminists were lesbians, due to the public often erroneously conflating lesbianism and feminism, heterosexual feminists had difficulty with lesbians in the women's movement. 'The public reaction to the reawakening of feminism was to dismiss us all as bra-burning lesbians' explained Janet Dixon, who was active in both the GLF and the WLM from their beginnings.[986] She felt discomfort in the women's movement because 'the reaction of the WLM was strenuously to deny this "insult"'.[987] The tension centred on the historical desire of heterosexual feminists to not be labelled as lesbians.[988] Chapman explained that heterosexual feminists were emotional about the distinction: 'there are thousands in the women's movement who would throw up their hands with horror at the thought that they might be lesbian'.[989] For some heterosexual feminists, their dislike of lesbians in the WLM was a deep, emotional, and divisive distinction.

Nonetheless, lesbians gained formal recognition from the WLM in 1974. In April, the Canterbury Gay Women's Liberation Group (CGWLG) organised the First National Lesbian Conference (NLC) at the University of Kent in Canterbury. Open to 'gay women' only, attendance totalled approximately 300.[990] The CGWLG acknowledged that lesbian mothers would benefit from the campaigns and demands of the WLM regarding abortion, contraception, and nurseries. Other campaigns, such as equal pay, benefitted all women.[991] Approximately 120 women sent a resolution to

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[985] Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back in Anger: The Women's Liberation Movement in 1978,' *Women's History Review* 19:3 (July 2010) 337-356; Rees, '"Taking Your Politics Seriously"'; Weeks, *Coming Out,* 96-97; Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 174; Menasche, *Leaving the Life*, 180; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Revolution: Lesbian Feminism in the UK 1970-1990* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) 107-111.

[986] Janet Dixon, 'Separatism: A Look Back in Anger,' in Cant and Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records,* 72.

[987] Dixon, 'Separatism,' 72.

[988] Elizabeth Wilson, *FAWTAR/9* (5 November 2019).

[989] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 102-103.

[990] *First National Lesbian Conference*, RM/55. Bishopsgate.

[991] *University of Kent at Canterbury Students Union*, RM/55, Bishopsgate; Similarly, the Gay Women's Group in Bristol noted in October 1974 that 'lesbians can be raped, become pregnant and need a

the organising committee of the upcoming WLM's Sixth National Conference in Edinburgh to schedule workshops on lesbianism, 'the largest undiscussed issue in the WM'.[992] The response by the organising committee affirmed the feelings of most attendees of the NLC: that the WLM was uneasy about lesbians in its ranks and 'afraid to confront the issue[s] of sexuality, independence and self-sufficiency'.[993] The organising committee stated that it was strongly against the resolution and told the NLC to postpone proposing a lesbian workshop at the conference. Under pressure from the NLC, the organising committee compromised to allow a series of workshops that would be reported in the plenary session. The NLC met again in London to plan workshops focused on lesbian concerns including separatism, radical feminist lifestyles, monogamy and jealousy, lesbians and the women's movement, lesbians and the gay movement, lesbians and the revolutionary left, lesbians in the National Union of Students (NUS), and lesbian mothers.[994] The subsequent WLM conference recognised the oppression of lesbians, overwhelmingly adopting a sixth demand to end discrimination against lesbians and the right for all women to self-define their sexuality.[995] Lee reported in *Sappho* on the historical significance of the recognition of lesbians with the WLM's adoption of the sixth demand: 'Women's liberation has now publicly allied itself with the cause of lesbian sisters. From this time forward they are committed to struggling with us against our specific opposition'.[996] For the first time, in 1974, the WLM formally recognised lesbians within it ranks.

Despite this formal recognition, lesbians noted continued antagonism from heterosexual feminists. Later in 1974, participants at the "Women in CHE" National Conference in Nottingham called for closer cooperation between gay and heterosexual women. *Gay News* reported that suspicion had arisen between the two groups due to

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simple, safe and easily available abortion….or she might find herself an unsupported mother on Social Security. Huge numbers of lesbians have children, many still live in marriages with men and suffer all the economic hardship, all the associated guilt and shame put on mothers in this country.' *Gay Womens Group*, *LSE/HCA/MURRAY/2/7.*

[992] *First National Lesbian Conference,* RM/55, Bishopsgate.

[993] Ibid.

[994] Ibid.

[995] Ibid.

[996] Lee, 'Women's Lib and Lesbians '74,' *Sappho* 3:4 (July 1974) 6.

heterosexual women denying claims that '"Women's Lib" was full of dykes' and gay women taking offense.[997] Judy Barrington, a feminist activist and poet who was briefly married in 1969, believed that the WLM's recognition of lesbians in its the sixth demand had only superficially mended the differences between straight women and lesbians.[998] In 1977, she claimed that the rift continued because of the high number of lesbians in the WLM, and the likelihood of the public assuming its members were lesbian:

> …there are many straight women who feel very threatened by the high proportion of lesbians in the movement. It's a very real problem because I can really sympathize with the situation of a woman who is first getting involved in the movement and is liable to be accused of being a lesbian before she's ever even thought about it. Even though I had in fact had lesbian experiences, if that had happened to me when I first joined the movement, then I might not have got involved as quickly as I did. It's a real problem, but I don't know how to solve it.[999]

Heterosexual feminists in the WLM sought to differentiate themselves from lesbians by their sexuality, yet ironically, as discourse over the power imbalance in heterosexual relationships developed over the 1970s, some heterosexual feminists eventually chose to be lesbian.

Revolutionary feminists proposed political lesbianism as the solution to women's subordination in heterosexual relationships. Wives and mothers were oppressed by the nuclear family.[1000] The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (LRFG) defined a political lesbian as 'a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men'.[1001] Men were the enemy and any woman in a relationship with a man – referring directly to heterosexual feminists – supported male supremacy. Heterosexual feminists literally slept with the enemy. Political lesbianism disagreed with the sixth demand that

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[997] 'Women Threaten Breakaway,' *Gay News* 58 (November 7-20, 1974) 4.

[998] The sixth demand, added in 1974, read: The Right to a Self Defined Sexuality. An End to Discrimination Against Lesbians.

[999] Stewart-Park and Cassidy, *We're Here*, 37.

[1000] See Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, 55-56.

[1001] Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981) 5; For a discussion of political lesbianism and heterosexuality, see Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Revolution,* 97-112; Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 178-179

all women had the right to self-define their sexuality.[1002] Although the LRFG specifically noted that women did not have to have sex with women, some women embodied their politics and slept with women.

Women's sexual autonomy was divisive in the women's movement.[1003] Many heterosexual feminists were not eager to abandon their relationships with men and were defensive and angry at the suggestion that they should do so; they objected to the political restriction of their sexuality. Lesbians who had struggled with homophobia before coming out and who felt that lesbianism was innate objected to the idea that any women could choose to be lesbian. Activist Power recalled how she felt second class because heterosexual feminists became lesbians 'for purist political reasons' and she 'was a lesbian for lust'.[1004] Many lesbians also disliked the duplicity of political lesbians whom they felt could choose at will to revert to heterosexuality, enjoying its many privileges including male approval, greater protection from physical attacks, and financial advantage.[1005] Lesbians used the debate over political lesbianism to expose "heterosexual privilege".[1006] Privileges came at a cost for lesbian wives, many who endured sex with their husbands, disguised their feelings for women, and remained in loveless marriages. Wilson explained lesbians' perceptions of political lesbians: 'You would hear a lot about how they were a lesbian and so on, and then next thing they'd gone off with some boyfriend'.[1007] The London Lesbian Offensive Group explained in 1982 that lesbians were 'tired of being exploited by heterosexual and "bisexual" women for a sexual "experience"'.[1008]

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[1002] For a discussion of the WLM's sixth demand See Emma Wallhead, 'A Political Sexual Revolution: Sexual Autonomy in the British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s,' *Twentieth Century British History* 34:2 (2023) 354-376.

[1003] See Rees, 'A Look Back in Anger; Rees, '"Taking Your Politics Seriously"'.

[1004] Lisa Power, *FAWTAR*/*20,* 31 July 2019.

[1005] Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, Love Your Enemy?, 8.

[1006] Rees, '"Taking Your Politics Seriously",' 88.

[1007] Elizabeth Wilson, *FAWTAR/9,* 5 November 2019; For her views on political lesbianism, see Elizabeth Wilson, 'Forbidden Love,' in Elizabeth Wilson with Angela Weir, *Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics, and Experience in the Women's Movement* (London: Tavistock, 1986) 169-182.

[1008] London Lesbian Offensive Group, 'Lesbianism in the Women's Liberation Movement,' *Gay News* (October 14-27 1982) 10.

In the early days of the women's movement in the 1970s, lesbian mothers felt they were often shunned by both heterosexual and lesbian feminists and the gay and straight communities. In its review of the "Women in CHE" National Conference of the Women's Movement held in November 1974 in Nottingham, *Gay News* reported that lesbian mothers complained of hostility from other lesbians:

> Even though they might not consider themselves bisexual, their gay sisters assumed that they must be and mistrusted then in the same way as they mistrusted the sincerity of bisexual women. Many gay women had married simply to conform – perhaps in the hope that marriage would make them heterosexual. But they found it didn't work, and ended their marriages. They often found their children were a problem in a relationship between themselves and a childless lesbian. The children represented a threat to the partnership. They also noticed how hostility increased with the number of children they had. You could be accepted by gay women, very often, if you only had one child. But with three, it was very difficult to find a place in the gay world.[1009]

In *Move's* report on the second National Lesbian Conference in Nottingham in December 1974, it stated: 'Gay Mums feel that they are being rejected and oppressed by all sections of the community including the Women's Movement and other lesbians'.[1010] A mother who attended the conference explained to *Sappho* that both lesbians and heterosexual mothers rejected her: 'Lesbians won't accept me because I am a mother and I have living evidence of a heterosexual act. Separated, divorced and unsupported mums near me won't get close because I'm a lesbian'.[1011] Lesbian mothers sometimes internalised this prejudice. Harne – 'a lesbian, a mother and a feminist' recalled in 1988: 'In the early lesbian feminist movement of the seventies, it felt as if you were not a real lesbian if you had children'.[1012] Furthermore, she added that 'there was still the idea around that a real lesbian was one who had never been in a heterosexual relationship' and that 'having children is anti-feminist'.[1013] Activist Romans, in her examination of lesbian mothers, explained that both society at large and the lesbian community disapproved of lesbian mothers' dual identity, the latter

[1009] Women Threaten Breakaway,' *Gay News* 58 (November 7-20, 1974) 4.
[1010] Spartica, 'Conferences Past and Present,' *Move* 5 (January-February 1975) 10.
[1011] Jacqui, 'Lesbian National Conference of the Women's Movement,' *Sappho* 3:8 (1975) 10.
[1012] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 189.
[1013] Ibid.

whom often labelled married lesbians 'pretend lesbians'.[1014] She quotes an anonymous woman: 'Lesbians are disapproving because they say if you are a real lesbian you won't go messing about dealing with children and men and semen and such things'.[1015] Sue Allen of ALP stated that WLM workshops on 'the issues of lesbian custody, on the raising of boy children, and on the difficulties mothers have in attending conferences,' were attended mainly by lesbian mothers. She explained that discussion 'would often bring up the fact that we got so little support from our sisters'.[1016]

Lesbians continued in the 1980s to express lack of support and understanding from heterosexual feminists. Following a workshop on anti-lesbianism in the WLM at the Lesbian Conference in 1982, a small group of lesbians formed the London Lesbian Offensive Group (LLOG) and a sister group in Birmingham, the Birmingham Lesbian Offensive Group (BLOG).[1017] Concerned about anti-lesbianism by heterosexual feminists, the LLOG wanted anti-lesbianism to be recognized as political oppression:

> All of us have come up against, and greatly suffered from, anti-lesbianism from women who identify themselves as feminists. It is time for anti-lesbianism to be identified as a political oppression. We are angry that heterosexual feminists do not take responsibility for being members of an oppressive power group, do not appear to recognize or challenge the privileges which go with that, nor do they bother to examine how all this undermines not only our lesbian politics, but our very existence.[1018]

As late as 1989, Radford of ROW remarked: 'Lesbian mothers face the problem of being marginalized in the homosexual community as well as in a straight world'.[1019]

Lesbians were very active in the WLM from its inception. However, some heterosexual feminists had underlying antagonism towards lesbians in their ranks,

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[1014] Romans, 'Daring to Pretend,' 104.

[1015] Ibid.

[1016] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 187.

[1017] London Lesbian Offensive Group (LLOG) 'Anti-Lesbianism in the Women's Liberation Movement,' in Hannah Kanter, Sarah Lefanu, Shaila Shah, and Carole Spedding (eds), *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberations Movement 1981-1983* (London: Women's Press,1984) 255-260.

[1018] London Lesbian Offensive Group, 'Anti-Lesbianism'; 'Or When is a Sister Not a Sister?,' *Gay News* [London] (October 14-27 1982) 10-11.

[1019] Jackie West, 'Call for Lesbian Mother Solidarity,' *Leeds Student* (3 March 1989) 4 LUA/PUB/002/LS/451.

particularly radical lesbian feminists and their pushback against heterosexuality as a patriarchal institution that oppressed all women. Conversely, lesbian feminists were antagonistic towards women whom they perceived to have heterosexual privilege, including lesbian mothers. Historians argue that identity was the most divisive dispute within the women's movement.[1020] Adam Lent states: 'Movements were accused of being controlled by white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexuals who imbued their organisations with values and goals that were relevant to their own needs rather than those of other oppressed groups'.[1021] It was during these turbulent times of feminism that *Sappho* began publishing.

## Sappho

After *Arena Three* folded in 1971, its advertising manager, Jackie Forster, and a handful of women began publishing *Sappho*, a magazine 'published and written by homosexual women for homosexual women'.[1022] Hoping to relieve the loneliness of isolated lesbians, *Sappho* arranged monthly meetings and included a small advertisements sheet with each newsletter to enable women subscribers to connect directly. Maureen Colquhoun, a member of parliament from 1974 to 1979, who subscribed to *Arena Three* and then *Sappho*, described the magazines as lifelines that allowed women to discover that 'there were other people who had very similar problems and were prepared to write and talk and discuss them in the magazine'.[1023] *Sappho* continued *Arena Three's* tradition as a valuable conduit of communication for women in communities scattered across Britain.

If Langley was the poster child for lesbians in the 1960s, Forster, the editor of *Sappho*, was their poster dyke in the 1970s. She publicly announced she was a "roaring dyke" at Speaker's Corner in 1969, was one of the first women to come out

[1020] See Adam Lent, *British Social Movements Since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*.

[1021] Lent, *British Social Movements*, 153.

[1022] *Sappho* 1:1 (1971) 2, 15; The name was self-explanatory: 'Sappho was married and had a daughter. Her homosexual relationships dominated her life': 'About Sappho,' *Sappho* 1:1 (1972) 4.

[1023] Jackie Forster, 'Remarkable Women – Maureen Colquhoun MP. Labour,' *Sappho* 6:3 (1978) 16.

on British television in the early 1970s, and contributed to various television programmes on lesbians and homosexuality. Born in London in 1926, she married in 1958, fell in love with a woman, and divorced in 1961.[1024] Despite her feminist agenda, she occasionally used her husband's surname and the title "Mrs".[1025] She was a journalist, a television presenter, and an author. When she began *Sappho* in 1972, she was living with Babs Todd and her two children from a previous marriage. Jennings attributes Forster's interest in lesbian motherhood to her relationship with Todd and her 'emerging feminist consciousness'.[1026] Separate from *Sappho*, she co-wrote a book on lesbian motherhood.[1027] As editor, she influenced *Sappho's* position on lesbian mothers, championing lesbians' right to motherhood: she organised a conference for lesbian mothers, began a list of sympathetic solicitors for lesbian wives fighting for custody, and helped the first lesbians access AID.[1028] Similar to Langley, Forster influenced the discourse on married lesbians in *Sappho* through selection of letters, comments on the letters, and articles.

A few wives explained to *Sappho* that they were only interested in having sexual encounters with other women and had no intention of leaving their marriages. One wife who had recently moved to London expressed her frustration of trying to satiate her sexual appetite by seeking women in gay clubs. G.W. was 'disappointed to find that married gays are considered out of the club'.[1029] She described herself as a 'gay married lady' who had discovered her 'true bisexual nature' and explained that her 'gay nature does have needs to be satisfied – through companionship with other gays and occasionally through intercourse with them'.[1030] She wanted casual sex with women, but stated that she had responsibilities to her husband and could not commit to an enduring, passionate, and emotional relationship with another woman. Although

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[1024] Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 33.

[1025] 'Credits,' *Sappho* 3:8 (1975) 3; 'Credits,' 3; *Sappho* 3:9 (1975) 3; 'Credits,' *Sappho* 3:10 (1975) 3.

[1026] Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood,' 576-577.

[1027] Hanscombe and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle.*

[1028] See also *Chapter Five: Activism*; Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood'; Gardiner, *From the Closet,* 33; Carole Woddis, 'Jackie Forster,' *The Independent* 3757 (31 October 1998) 43.

[1029] G.W. London, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:1 (April 1974) 9.

[1030] Ibid.

her husband was understanding and accepting of her extramarital affairs, she explained that many single women did not want to get involved with her because of her husband. She advocated that 'straight gays' should be less prejudiced against bisexuals.[1031] G.W. was adamant that she wanted a sexual fling with a woman, not an emotional connection.

Other wives argued they sought emotional as well as physical relationships with women but were trapped in their marriages. They tried to explain that their situations were complex – they often begged for tolerance and understanding – and that often it was their children that kept them from leaving their marriages as many feared being separated from their children in custody disputes. Several married lesbians explained that they did not have the best of both worlds; they were caught in the middle between their lovers and their families, a position that was very similar to married readers' letters in *Arena Three*. Married with two children in Bedfordshire, R.L. explained that she did not think 'that anyone can even begin to realise what a living hell situation being gay and married can be'.[1032] She explained that she was 'emotionally not living at all' and was 'trying to find the courage to make the break and make a fresh start'.[1033] Although she abhorred wives who frequented the gay scene to indulge in casual affairs, she defended married lesbians: 'In the compounds of our respectability we are paying the supreme sacrifice for our folly – the right to love as nature intended'.[1034] She suggested that although her marital status conferred respectability, she suffered mental anguish in not having the freedom to live openly as a lesbian: to divorce required great courage.

In the 1970s, single lesbians continued to criticise married lesbians, particularly those who had extramarital affairs with women with no intention of leaving their marriages. Single readers also expressed varying degrees of rejection of divorced

[1031] Ibid.
[1032] R.L. Beds, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:5 (1974) 10.
[1033] Ibid.
[1034] B.R. Milton Keynes, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 11.

lesbians. Colquhoun, a divorced lesbian and mother of two, explained how she felt mistrusted by the lesbians she addressed at a *Sappho* meeting:

> I sensed a distrust of me among lesbians who've never been married, never had children. They feel that I've suddenly flown down from absolutely nowhere. I think there's an element of distrust which I am very sad about. … Having suddenly dropped into the lesbian world, they're entitled to distrust me to some extent.[1035]

Ideas about infidelity, marriage, sex, and sexual identity influenced the discourse, as did the concept of the political lesbian. Some readers described married lesbians as promiscuous, non-monogamous, and highly sexual: tropes that many lesbians were trying to avoid. Others insisted married lesbians were bisexual, not lesbian. Discourse about married lesbians contributed to the ongoing debate regarding lesbian identity.[1036]

## Objections to Extramarital Affairs

Like *Arena Three* in the 1960s, *Sappho* readers expressed contradictory views that chastised wives for not prioritizing their families and also for not prioritizing their female lovers. Gorer determined in his 1971 study that more women than men disapproved of casual affairs by either spouse.[1037] Into the 1970s there was tension between wives satisfying their individual desires versus sacrificing to meet the needs of their families. Several readers expressed the view that unfaithful wives were selfish. Mothers were still expected to prioritise their children, and an extramarital affair meant a mother was derelict in her duty to care for her children. ''It is both horrifying and purgatory to think that any woman could choose a lover in preference to her children', explained one reader.[1038] Another reader accused unfaithful wives of regarding 'their

[1035] Jackie Forster, 'Remarkable Women – Maureen Colquhoun MP. Labour,' *Sappho* 6:3 (1978) 17. Also published as 'Maureen Colquhoun Talks to Jackie Forster about Being a Lesbian in Parliament,' *Gay News* 139 (March 23 – April 5, 1978) 22.

[1036] In 1975, Sappho surveyed fifty members with eight questions, including: 'Do you think you are a lesbian born or a lesbian made.? 'Sextionnaire,' *Sappho* 4:2 (1975) 16.

[1037] Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today*, 193.

[1038] Cheryl Tidmarsh, 'Over to You – the Sappho Survey Surveyed,' *Sappho* 5:9 (1977) 16.

lesbian lovers as “second-class citizens” both to their husbands and, possibly, to their children’.[1039]

In late 1973, a letter from a thirty-five-year-old, self-employed wife ignited the controversy about married lesbians seeking casual sex. C.H. of Surrey explained that she felt she could not go to clubs in London or Surrey because she was married and so she subscribed to *Sappho* to ‘meet other women for dinner once a month in some select restaurant or hotel’.[1040] Forster incited debate when she printed her vitriolic response alongside the letter, labelling C.H. a ‘promiscuous and inhuman specimen of straight society’ because she wanted to ‘have it off once a month with a lesbian for the fee of a dinner’.[1041] Forster’s objection to married lesbians seeking casual sex with women may have been an objection that such a practice upheld the perception that lesbians were hypersexual, promiscuous, and non-monogamous.[1042] This opposition conflicted with lesbian feminists in the early 1970s who associated monogamy with the patriarchal institution of marriage and promoted non-monogamy and sexual exploration.[1043] Forster may also have felt that wives were selfishly fulfilling their sexual needs without consideration of the feelings of single lesbians. Forster, who was in a committed lesbian relationship, may also have held the perspective that a lesbian identity included an emotional connection with women, as succinctly stated by a reader: ‘homosexuals who have chosen to lead their lives exclusively as such know that a relationship with their own is completely fulfilling in every sense, both sexually and emotionally’.[1044] To many women, a lesbian identity comprised more than sexual desire for women. Lesbians had intimate, emotional connections with women, not simply sexual encounters as sought by some wives.

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[1039] Phoenix, ‘Our Second Theme of Exploration is Bisexuality,’ *Sappho* 6:3 (1978) 19.

[1040] C.H (Surrey), ‘Heteraecetera,’ *Sappho* 2:9 (December 1973) 9.

[1041] Editor, ‘Heteraecetera,’ *Sappho* 2:9 (December 1973) 9.

[1042] Jennings notes that ‘the medical characterization of lesbians as hypersexual was reflected in broader cultural representations of lesbian sex practice in the post-war period.’ Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies,* 27.

[1043] See Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies,* 33-36; Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain,* 178-179.

[1044] Phoenix, ‘Our Second Theme of Exploration is Bisexuality,’ *Sappho* 6:3 (1978) 20.

## Bisexuality

In the 1970s, bisexuality became more visible in society, even fashionable, what with high profile celebrities such as David Bowie identifying as bisexual. However, the gay community often had difficulty with bisexuals.[1045] Persons considered to be not 100 percent gay were problematic for radical politics, which was built on a binary foundation of sexuality: heterosexuals versus homosexuals. According to Martha Robinson Rhodes, the '"synthesis" of a bisexual as part homosexual and part heterosexual, often expressed in percentages, led to bisexuals being excluded within the gay liberation movement for the part of them that was straight'.[1046] Gay liberation was not as inclusive as previously thought, Rhodes argues, for the GLF did not tolerate bisexuals and CHE's tolerance diminished during the 1970s.[1047] Women who had sex with both men and women were also problematic for feminist politics, especially beginning in the 1970s, when revolutionary feminists formulated the idea of political lesbianism.[1048] Gay husbands and lesbian wives were often considered bisexual. Colin Harrison, one of several persons who counselled homosexuals with heterosexual spouses, explained in 1976 that 'married gays' were bisexual and hence misunderstood and shunned by the gay community.[1049] Mothers in particular were targeted. Mothers at the "Women in CHE" National Conference in Nottingham in November 1974 reported hostility from gay women who assumed them to be bisexual and therefore insincere and not trustworthy.[1050] In a 1974 article for *Gay News*, Kit Fletcher, an occasional contributor, advocated working together against oppression by heterosexuals rather than persecuting bisexuals. Fletcher made the distinction between persons who desired both men and women and those who have

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[1045] Charlotte Wolff chastised the gay and lesbian community for ostracising bisexuals in 1977. Charlotte Wolff, *Bisexuality: A Study* (London: Quartet Books, 1977) 109.

[1046] Martha Robinson Rhodes, 'Bisexuality, Multiple-Gender-Attraction, and Gay Liberation Politics in the 1970s,' *Twentieth Century British History*, 31:1 (March 2021) 127.

[1047] Rhodes, 'Bisexuality,' 119.

[1048] The Leeds Revolutionary Feminists argued that all feminists should be "political lesbians" and choose women over men. Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (London: Onlywomen Press,1981).

[1049] Colin Harrison, 'It's All Right for Pop Stars…,' *Gay News* 104 (October 7-20, 1976) 16.

[1050] Women Threaten Breakaway,' *Gay News* 58 (November 7-20, 1974) 4.

not fully come out and use 'bisexual as a euphemism'.[1051] He made himself clear that 'by "bisexual" I don't mean those gays who get trapped in an unhappy marriage and continuing having sex with their husband and wife while seeking their real fulfilment in the occasional gay club or cottaging experience'.[1052] In 1978, a group of socialist feminists planning a conference in London to discuss bisexuality and the women's movement perceived the need to discuss the frequent rejection of bisexuals by lesbians and the isolation of bisexuals, 'particularly of women/mothers in heterosexual family situations'.[1053]

Unlike *Arena Three*, many *Sappho* readers assumed wives were bisexual. They reasoned that identity must agree with practice: wives who had sex with women and had sex with their husbands were bisexual, not lesbian. In 1974, Joan Young, a frequent contributor, explained that identity should agree with practice: 'Personally, I take the word lesbian to mean a woman who is exclusively homosexual, by inclination if not in actual fact. A woman who is homosexual but not exclusively, I would define as bisexual'.[1054] Thereby she branded all wives who desired women as bisexual.

Some wives accepted the bisexual label. They spoke of their 'lesbian associations' or 'Sapphic tendencies'.[1055] Several other wives were adamant they were lesbian because women were their only objects of desire, their commitment to their husbands aside. M.B. of Lincolnshire explained that she was lesbian even though she was married: 'Some of us stay married out of love and loyalty to an individual person, and try to work through the problems. It doesn't make us all bisexual'.[1056] I.N. of Hampshire, who had married after having a relationship with another woman, did not think that married lesbians qualified as bisexual and suggested that 'we are true

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[1051] Kit Fletcher, 'Comment. Bisexuality & the Gay World,' *Gay News* 59 (November 21-December 4, 1974) 11.

[1052] Ibid.

[1053] Bisexuality and the Women's Movement,' *WIRES* 45 (1978) 17; *WIRES* 47 (1978) 7.

[1054] Joan Young, 'Heterogenous Homosexuals' *Sappho* 3:5 (August 1974) 7.

[1055] Robin W., 'The Best of Both Worlds,' *Arena Three* 2:7 (1965, July) 7; B.R. Milton Keynes, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 10.

[1056] M.B. Lincs, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 9.

lesbians if our capability for emotional and sexual love is only for our own kind'.[1057] Angry at being labelled bisexual, J.H. from Cheshire explained that she lived with her husband because she neither had the right to separate her children from their father and nor could she live without her children.[1058] Having discovered her desire for women after marriage and two children, B.R. from Milton Keynes argued she was not bisexual because she did not desire men:

> Do I qualify as bisexual? I suppose I do considering that I live with my husband and children. But to be a true bisexual, as I've always understood it to mean, is that one is sexually attracted to both sexes. I can truthfully say that I am never remotely attracted to men. It's always women, emotionally and physically.[1059]

She also argued that because society pressured lesbians into marriage, they had to become bisexual to have sex with their husbands. She reasoned that she was both a "true lesbian" because she was physically-attracted to women and bisexual because she had sex with her husband. In the 1970s, to some women at least, categories of sexual identities overlapped.

## Into the 1990s

*Sappho* folded in 1981, having experienced financial difficulties similar to *Arena Three,* but women continued to express their intolerance towards married and divorced lesbian mothers in the 1990s via new platforms.[1060] Towards the end of the century, increasing numbers of lesbians were coming out at a young age, many likely without any experience of physical relationships with men. Nonetheless, some lesbians continued to marry men or remain married.

In *KMG*, published by KENRIC from 1992 to 1996, there was an ongoing discussion about married and divorced lesbian mothers that was very similar to the debates in *Arena Three* and *Sappho*. Single lesbians wrote about having been

[1057] I.N. Hants, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 3:9 (1975) 11.

[1058] J.H. Cheshire, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 9.

[1059] B.R. Milton Keynes, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 6:5 (1978) 10.

[1060] Georgina Turner, 'Producing a Lesbian Magazine at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century,' in Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s: The Postwar and Contemporary Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) 83-95.

discarded by wives with whom they had affairs while married lesbian mothers defended remaining married and explained that they felt ostracised by other KENRIC members. Val Brown, Chair of KENRIC, noted the dissension between single and married mothers in KMG:

> It seems to me that the tensions within KMG have indeed arisen from the arrival in Kenric of a number of articulate and capable "married mums" with young children. They have chosen, with pride, to remain within the nuclear family and are angered when meeting disinterest and distaste from others who have abandoned that stage of their lives – or who have never entered it at all.[1061]

Jackie explained that lesbians shunned her for having children from her marriage and questioned her sexual identity:

> [They] seemed to have this bigoted view that because you have children, and what's more committed the heinous crime of having relations with a man, you couldn't possibly be a lesbian. In their way of thinking, you had to be born gay. Would you believe it, the last place I expected to encounter intolerance was among other lesbians. I was really put off by that.[1062]

Mary, a fifty-year-old married member of KENRIC, explained that she was discontinuing her membership because of animosity from other members. She explained: 'I joined Kenric a few years ago because I wanted to make contact with other women who like women, but I have been made to feel as I were on trial, and had no business belonging to such an organization'.[1063] Single members were not empathetic and some were outright baffled 'why some women want to stay with their male partners while taking another woman as a lover.[1064] One single lesbian explained her feelings toward married lesbians:

> It feels to me that it is a rather hypocritical situation to live with husband, small children or even babies (Which proves sexual relationships between husband and wife are alive and well!!), and at the same time expect to meet and keep a secret woman lover who will have to remain in the shadows. The only reassuring thing is that among all my gay friends I don't know anyone who would tolerate being that "bit on the side". They would be terribly offended, rightly so too, and dismissive of those women who might expect

[1061] Val Brown, 'Soapbox,' *KMG* No. 32 (June 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1062] Jackie Miller, 'A Life Worth Waiting For,' *KMG No. 21* (June 1994) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1063] Mary Kernaghan, *KMG* No 38 (March 1996) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1064] Hilary Anderson, Soapbox,' *KMG* No. 32 (June 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

> this. I hope most of the women involved in KMG would also find this offensive.[1065]

Julie Burchell, the editor of *KMG,* also noted an ongoing debate about allowing bisexuals in KENRIC, specifically the mother's group.[1066] Bisexual married mothers advertised in the KENRIC and KMG newsletter in the 1980s and 1990s.[1067] After a particularly acerbic letter about 'happily married bi-sexuals', *KMG* received a deluge of letters on the topic.[1068] Burchell published a selection, stating that most letters supported married members, but that 'we know from reading the adverts in the personal columns that lesbians often say "no married/bisexual women"'.[1069]

Lesbians also expressed irritation that, while they were marginalised in society, married lesbians occupied a revered, respectable position in society as wives and mothers. Even divorced lesbians maintained privileges. Janet Bridget, one of two editors of the *International Lesbian Information Services (ILIS) Newsletter,* reasoned that divorced mothers, whom she called 'ex-het Lesbians', maintained residual benefits from marriage, whereas 'Lifelong Lesbians', who had never married or had children, suffered a lifetime of oppression.[1070] The second editor, Carol Akroyd, who had two sons from a former marriage and described herself not as a lesbian mother but as 'a mother who later became Lesbian', agreed from her own experience that she and other previously-married lesbian mothers were privileged over lesbians who had always lived openly as a lesbian.[1071] These arguments in the 1990s echoed the earlier debates in *Arena Three* and *Sappho.* Many single lesbians, from the 1960s through to the end of the century, expressed dislike and distrust of wives, divorcées, and mothers who claimed a lesbian identity.

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[1065] *KMG* No. 36 (December 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1066] Julie Burchell, *KMG* No. 32 (June 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1067] 'Contacts,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (January 1988) LMA/4720/06/01/014; 'Contacts,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (February 1991) LMA/4720/06/01/017.

[1068] Teresa Martin, 'TO ALL THOSE "HAPPILY MARRIED BI-SEXUALS" OUT THERE …...,' KMG No. 30 (April 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1069] Julie Burchell, *KMG* No. 32 (May 1995) LMA/4720/05/01/001.

[1070] Janet B Bridget, 'Letters', *ILIS Newsletter* 26 (April/May 1990) 4, TWL.

[1071] Carol Ackroyd, 'Letters,' *ILIS Newsletter* 26 (April/May 1990) 3, TWL.

## Conclusion

This examination of the discourse in the 1960s and 1970s of how the predominantly white, middle-class, female readership of *Arena Three* and *Sappho* othered wives who desired women adds to the understanding of the diversity of sexual practice and the formation of sexual identity. Wives' construction of their lesbian identity in the 1960s and 1970s illustrates that sexual behaviour and sexual identity were not sharply delineated. Many married readers proclaimed vociferously that they were lesbian despite having sex with their husbands. In opposition, single readers in the 1960s claimed wives were heterosexual and beginning in the 1970s they often claimed wives were bisexual. Each based their conception of a lesbian identity on their own experiences. Although some readers were sympathetic of married lesbians' situations, it was more often the women who were unsympathetic who wrote to lesbian magazines. "Dislike" is perhaps not an accurate description of single lesbians' feelings towards wives. Facing homophobia and ostracization every day of their lives, marginalised women expressed resentment and anger towards wives. Part of this resentment was that wives could choose to be mothers, something not seen as possible outside of marriage until the latter part of the 1970s. But it was their children who often kept lesbian wives trapped in their marriages, torn between love for their children and love for their girlfriends.

# Chapter Five: Activism for Lesbian Mothers

During her interview in 2023, solicitor Butler recalled a client who came to her for counsel about her divorce. The woman had fallen in love with a next-door neighbour in her village. Although this occurred in the 1980s, Butler doubted the woman had access to support networks for lesbian mothers:

> As far as support's concerned, it's tricky because a lot of them just weren't sort of part of any scene, if you like. I mean I had one client, I think there were about 10 houses in a row in a village in somewhere or the other and she got into a full relationship with the woman who lived next door. They met each other at the school playground. I mean, I think they weren't necessarily sort of plugged into some of the support networks. As time went on, I think you did get support groups growing up. I don't know where they got support from really.[1072]

As discussed previously in *Custody Disputes in Print Media,* from the mid-1970s, newspapers and the gay and feminist press promulgated the assumption that lesbian mothers leaving marriages had little or no chance of getting custody of their children if the divorce settlement was litigated. Incensed that lesbian mothers were not getting custody of their children in court, a handful of feminists soon acted. Firstly, activists sought to inform lesbian mothers about the legal process. They also sought to educate legal professionals, research lesbian parenting, and "change the law" to end discrimination against lesbian mothers by the judiciary.

Activism – collective actions that change short-term or long-term outcomes for a specific group of persons – takes many different forms. To locate activism in the past, historians have looked beyond visible, highly-publicised actions. Recently, they have also looked beyond groups that specifically identified as feminist or activist.[1073] Jennings and Katherine Hubbard argue that the creation of *Arena Three* was a form of activism. It helped alleviate women's difficulties in the 1960s by creating awareness

[1072] FAWTAR, Gill Butler.

[1073] See Caitríona Beaumont, 'Women's Organisations, Active Citizenship, and the Peace Movement: New Perspectives on Female Activism in Britain, 1918-1939,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 3:4 (2020) 697-721.

and a community of women who were otherwise isolated.[1074] In her examination of the lives of women who matured in the 1950s through the 1970s, Lynn Abrams explains that these women pursued autonomy through self-help initiatives and participation in organisations deemed non-feminist. She argues that these women's subtle pushback against their prescribed gender role quietly 'paved the way for a new model of the female life-course'.[1075] Academic research can also be considered political activism. According to Lise Butler, sociologist Michael Young's research on the working class influenced post-war public policy of the Labour Party.[1076] As there were no protests in the streets for married lesbians, this chapter examines, under the broad term "activism", a range of discreet activities undertaken to create awareness of the issues and support mothers' struggles to live with their children after divorce.

Activism for lesbian custody was folded into a growing broader campaign for the rights of lesbian and gay parents as the separation of parenthood from marriage began to widen in the 1970s. More women, both heterosexual and lesbian, were raising children outside of marriage. The percentage of live births outside of marriage steadily increased from 8.3 percent in 1970 to 38.9 percent in 1999.[1077] In the late 1970s, lesbians slowly began to choose to start families via AID, self-insemination (most of which was achieved in an anonymous context), and procreative sex with men.[1078] Samuel Vermote shows how 'lesbians permanently altered popular imaginations of assistive reproductive technologies by carving out a space for themselves as one of its target audiences'.[1079] Activism arose around lesbian

[1074] Katherine A Hubbard, 'Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid.' *Journal of Homosexuality* (2021) 565-586. Jennings, *Tomboys*, 134-172.

[1075] Lynn Abrams, *Feminist Lives: Women, Feelings, and the Self in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[1076] Lise Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science, and the British Left, 1945*-1970 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[1077] ONS, *Trends in Births and Deaths over the Last Century Births in England and Wales: Summary Tables* (15 July 2015) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/articles/trendsinbirthsanddeathsoverthelastcentury/2015-07-15> [Accessed 26 March 2025].

[1078] See Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 127-164.

[1079] Samuel Luis Vermote, *A Sterile Syringe, a Book, and a Towel to Lie On: The History of Lesbian Motherhood and Donor Insemination in England throughout the 1970s and 1980s*, Unpublished thesis, University College London (2024).

parenting, both for mothers who were married or leaving marriages, and lesbians who became or wanted to become mothers outside of relationships with men. As noted by Jennings, Wages Due Lesbians campaigned for lesbian mothers' rights in the 1970s.[1080] Part of the international campaign of Wages for Housework that resisted women's unpaid labour in families, Wages Due Lesbians insisted that women should be able to determine their sexuality and choose whether to have children.[1081] In 1978, lesbian mothers made front page news. Two journalists from the *London Evening News* posed as a lesbian couple and exposed a Harley Street doctor who was helping lesbians conceive children. Newspaper coverage of this scandal widely disseminated that lesbians were having families without men; Jennings explores the visible protests against the *Evening News* and the subsequent unrest described in the pages of *Sappho*.[1082] In protest, ALP staged a "sit-in" at the office of the newspaper. Allen argues that this caused a major rift in ALP:

> Half the members felt that using ALP's name as a key one for the action of the sit-in was a suitable political stance, both in advertising our existence and supporting those lesbians who were having artificial insemination. The other half wanted ALP to remain in the background focusing on research and maintaining a respectable front for future contacts with the courts and media. We parted company. The first group kept up the telephone link, the second group pursued research.[1083]

Subsequently, ALP extended its activism beyond lesbian mothers who were married and helped single lesbians access self-insemination.[1084] Artificial means of reproduction – including invitro-fertilization – were the subject of inquiry of the subsequent Warnock Report in 1978, which recommended that single heterosexual women or lesbians not be permitted to undergo artificial insemination because it was preferable for children to be raised by a mother and a father.[1085] In the wake of the implementation of Section 28, Jane Skeates and Dorian Jabri published a study on

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[1080] Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood,' 576.

[1081] Wyland, *Motherhood.*

[1082] Jennings, 'Lesbian Motherhood,' 583-586.

[1083] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 188.

[1084] '… Home ….' *Women's Report* 7:1 (Dec 1978-Jan 1979) 10-11.

[1085] Mary Warnock, *A Question of Life: The Warnock Report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

the experiences of fostering and adopting by thirteen gay men and women and in the following year concerned individuals formed the national Lesbian & Gay Foster & Adoptive Parents Network and organised the first conference for gay and lesbian carers.[1086]

Activism in the USA began earlier than in the UK. The Lesbian Mothers Union began in 1971 on the west coast and feminists subsequently initiated other groups across America, positioning activism for lesbian mothers within wider activism for homosexual rights and women's reproductive rights.[1087] Rivers, in his examination of custody battles by homosexual parents in America from 1967 to 1985, argues that two decades of activism by the homosexual community to 'fight the hegemonic notion that only heterosexual people were fit to be parents' influenced the courts and society to loosen their dogmatic insistence that the heterosexual nuclear family was the proper place to raise children.[1088] American activists for lesbian mothers were informed by the struggle for black civil rights and the antiwar movement.[1089] They also had financial backing to help mothers pay for expensive custody battles and escape from their matrimonial homes: they 'helped lesbian mothers go underground to avoid losing their children when they were in immediate physical danger'.[1090] Geographically, women could move from state to state where statutes differed. Part of wider activism for homosexuals and reproductive rights from the early 1970s, activism for lesbian mothers' custody battles in the USA was different from activism in Britain: the former benefitted from experience with other major activist efforts, was well-funded, and historians have focused on the topic.

Research into activism for lesbian mothers fighting for custody in Australia and the UK has been minimal. Jennings acknowledges early research and activism in

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[1086] Jane Skeates and Dorian Jabri (eds), *Fostering and Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men* (London: London Strategic Policy Unit, 1988); Stephen Hicks, 'Lesbian and Gay Foster Care and Adoption: A Brief UK History,' *Adoption & Fostering* 29:3 (2005). 42-56.

[1087] Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 213-214.

[1088] Rivers, '"In the Best Interests of the Child"'; Rivers, *Radical Relations*.

[1089] Rivers, Radical Relations, 82.

[1090] Ibid., 83.

Australia, noting that Robyn Plaister founded the Sydney Lesbian Mothers Group in 1976 to provide support for lesbian mothers and to be a 'focal point for political campaigning on child custody issues'.[1091] In Britain, Jennings attributes a positive shift in custody disputes to 'activist groups in building up a knowledge base of how to approach custody cases and identifying sympathetic and experienced lawyers' and to a broad shift in attitudes of lesbian motherhood and child development, assisted in part by scientific studies like those conducted by Susan Golombok.[1092]

This chapter is the first extensive analysis of the activism and support specifically for lesbian mothers who conceived their children within marriage and divorced from 1975 through the 1990s in England and Wales. It examines the archival records of ROW, the gay and feminist press, and interviews with key figures in the struggle. This chapter begins by introducing the two key activist organisations, which were run by a select few women. The first of two major sections examines how activism raised awareness of the issues, supported divorcing lesbian mothers to negotiate the legal system, and instigated psychiatric studies to investigate the psychosocial development of the children of lesbian mothers. The last part of the first section examines the failed attempts to "change the law" and end discrimination against lesbian mothers. The second and final major section interrogates the obstacles to activism: lack of funding and volunteering from the broader lesbian and feminist community and from lesbian mothers themselves.

Separate from my discussion of a shift in the outcomes of lesbian custody cases in Chapter Three, I agree with Jennings that access to sympathetic, knowledgeable solicitors in the latter half of the 1980s likely encouraged and enabled more mothers to fight for custody, both inside and outside of court. I also contend that psychological studies, undertaken by a handful of scientists in the UK and America,

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[1091] Jennings, 'Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody,' 507. See also Robyn Plaister, 'Lesbian Mothers and Custody Cases,' in Dorothy Davis, Geoff Caldwell, Margaret Bennett and David Boorer (eds), *Living Together: Family Patterns and Lifestyles*, (Canberra: Centre for Continuing Education, ANU, 1980) 149–154.

[1092] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies*, 126.

defeated one of the two main arguments used in court against lesbian mothers raising children. However, I argue that activism in the 1970s and 1980s for lesbian mothers fighting for custody with their husbands was limited to helping mothers work within the existing the legal system. Activism for lesbian custody was driven by a few women: married lesbian mothers were the minority of a marginalized community and their concerns, though tragic, were not taken up by wider feminist activism. As shown in Chapter Four, many feminists in the women's liberation movement and many lesbians disliked and distrusted married lesbians, lesbian mothers, and divorced lesbians. Mothers themselves, besides often having little extra time and money, were reluctant to get involved in political causes.

## Organisations for Divorcing Mothers

The first grassroots organisation to help lesbians fight for custody of their children upon divorce arose from a 1974 conference for the married subscribers of *Sappho*. Provoked by controversy surrounding a reader's letter, the editor agreed that a discussion would be beneficial and offered to initiate a *Sappho* meeting if married lesbians could not organise meetings themselves.[1093] Much later, the editor stated that the Gay Wives and Mothers Collective (GWMC) 'began as a reaction against the offhand attitude of single women'.[1094] Like *Arena Three* subscribers in the 1960s, wives in the 1970s did not organise themselves to meet; instead, *Sappho* arranged the Married Gay Symposium. Twenty-three women from the UK and one from Belgium attended. During six hours of discussion, six women volunteered to organise monthly meetings and answer mail. They named the 'self-help collective' Gay Wives and Mums Group (GWMG).[1095] To help women understand the potential issues they might face within the legal system during divorce, the group planned a second symposium with a

[1093] Jackie Forster, 'Heteraecetera,' *Sappho* 2:11 (February 1974) 8.
[1094] *Sappho* 4:4 (1975) 3.
[1095] Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 4; 'Lesbian Mothers,' *Gay News* (5-18 December 1974) 7.

female solicitor. *Sappho,* in turn, agreed to compile and maintain a list of sympathetic solicitors.[1096]

Renaming itself the Gay Wives and Mothers Collective (GWMC), the women agreed to meet the first Tuesday of each month to organise to help lesbian mothers fighting custody battles.[1097] The group was ambitious. It wanted to gather information about custody cases, 'instigate a scientific survey on children being brought up in a single sex environment' to disprove the accusations against lesbian mothers in court, and to educate judges, legal professionals, and welfare officers about lesbians.[1098] As promised, the GWMC arranged an information session with solicitor Joan Rubenstein in December 1974 to discuss the judicial treatment of lesbian mothers. The GWMC advertised in feminist and gay publications seeking to collect information from lesbians fighting custody battles to create and publish a pamphlet. Although the pamphlet on lesbian custody never materialised, GWMC member Bernice Humphreys exposed lesbian mothers' difficulties when she presented her paper titled *Gay Women, Marriage and Motherhood* at the International Gay Rights Congress in Edinburgh in December 1974.[1099] Over 150 people from seventeen countries had registered for the conference and Humphreys and Forster were scheduled to guide discussions on 'The Status of Gay Women'.[1100] Despite its ambitious beginning, the number of volunteers diminished to four and the GWMC folded less than two years after it began. It would take a new spark to provoke women to organise to help lesbian mothers fighting for custody.

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[1096] Jacqui, 'Gay Wives and Mums Group,' *Sappho* 3:2 (May 1974) 10; I found no evidence of a list of solicitors compiled by *Sappho*.

[1097] 'Diary of Events,' *Gay News* 239 (April 29, 1982 – May 12, 1982) 44; *Gay News* 262 (March 31, 1983 – April 13, 1983) 29.

[1098] 'Sapphoscene,' *Sappho* 4:5 (1975) 4.

[1099] "International Gay Rights Congress 1974,' *Sappho* 3:8 (1975) 8; 'Edinburgh: International Gay Rights Congress 1974,' *Camp Ink* 4:4-6 (1975) 18-19.

[1100] 'Sparkling Program for Congress,' *Gay News* 60 (5-18 December 1974) 4.

Coote's article in *The Guardian* in August 1975 provided the impetus needed to summon support, albeit from a small group of lesbians.[1101] Coote outspokenly accused judges of separating mothers and children due to the mothers' sexuality in the belief that this arrangement was in the best interests of the children. Coote also surmised that some mothers did not get custody because they were feminists. In response to this article, forty women gathered to discuss a course of action. Beginning as a 'small but very active' group of lesbians, ALP included the remaining volunteers from the GWMC. Although some were also mothers, only two were personally experiencing issues with custody.[1102] In 1977, an anonymous article, which was likely written by a staff member at WIRES, noted that 'the few women in ALP are isolated and struggling along with too much to do'.[1103] ALP was ambitious; it planned to monitor *all* custody cases and to promote expert research in the field to be used in future cases.[1104] The former goal was impossible, given the private nature of custody cases, and the latter goal required money. ALP actively participated in conferences into the 1980s, as described in the following section.[1105]

In 1982, the first formal, funded organisation began to support lesbian mothers seeking custody of their children. Groups of lesbian mothers from all over England had lobbied ROW to provide support for lesbians who had children within marriage.[1106] In response, ROW initiated the Lesbian Custody Group (LCG), supported by one full-time worker, volunteer lesbian mothers, and volunteer legal professionals.[1107] ROW started the LCG 'in order to campaign for the right of lesbian mothers to have custody

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[1101] Anna Coote, 'The Parent Divorced from the Child,' *The Guardian* (2 August 1975) 11.

[1102] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 186-187; Anna Coote, 'Lesbian Law', *The Guardian* (3 November 1975); 'Lesbians Fight for Custody' in *Gay News* 83 (November 20-December 3, 1975) 3; 'Disapproval and Hurt Pride: Action for Lesbian Parents Fights Custody Battles,' *Gay News* (11-24 March 1976) 10.

[1103] '6th Demand,' *WIRES* 34 (24 June 1977) 13.

[1104] 'Action for Lesbian Parents (ALP)' in *Sappho* 4:12 (1976) 6.

[1105] Women contacted ALP by care of *Sappho* until it stopped publishing in 1981. 'the spike,' *Sappho* 8:12 (981) 18; In 1986, an advice book on lesbian custody directed anyone wishing to connect with ALP to contact The Corner Bookshop in Leeds. ROW, *Lesbian Mother's Legal Handbook* (London: The Women's Press, 1986) 219.

[1106] There exists some evidence of small support groups for lesbian mothers across the country. See: The North West London Lesbian Custody Group, 'Lesbian Custody Victory, *Outwrite* 12 (March 1983) 3.

[1107] LCG was also called the Lesbian Custody Project (LCP). Radford, 'Rights of Women,' 57.

of their children'.[1108] One of its first efforts was to organise a conference on the legal treatment of lesbian mothers in Sheffield in January 1983.[1109] The organisers welcomed lesbians with children and any other women interested in lesbian custody to attend the conference and help organise both a national campaign and a support network for lesbian mothers fighting for custody. Its immediate objective was to advise lesbian mothers on legal matters through the ROW advice line and facilitate education and awareness through conferences and networking with local lesbian mother groups. Its second priority was to educate legal professionals on the challenges of lesbian custody cases and maintain a list of sympathetic solicitors. ROW's ultimate objective was to eliminate the discrimination against lesbian mothers at all institutional levels. Less than ten years from the inception of the LCG, following the introduction of the *Children Act 1989* and with increased numbers of lesbians beginning families outside of marriage, ROW widened its concern on lesbian parenting to focus on disputes between lesbian parents and between lesbian parents and sperm donors.[1110] ROW continues in 2025 – fifty years after it began – to provide free legal advice and information to women.

This chapter examines the activism of ALP and ROW, the two major organisations that persisted for several years to support and advocate for lesbian mothers. Other organisations, which lasted only a period of months, are examined later in this chapter in *Obstacles to Activism*. There exists some evidence of small support groups for lesbian mothers across the country in the 1980s, but they were likely only conduits for directing mothers to ALP and ROW.[1111]

[1108] 'The Lesbian Custody Project', *LSE/7EAW/E/12* Box 9.

[1109] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, 2.

[1110] Harne and ROW, *Valued Families.*

[1111] See: The North West London Lesbian Custody Group, 'Lesbian Custody Victory, *Outwrite* 12 (March 1983) 3.

# Activism

There were four avenues of activism regarding lesbian mothers in custody disputes. The first was to raise awareness of the issues. The second was to prepare women to fight for custody within the legal system. The third was activism to change how cases could be argued in court: to conduct research studies to prove that children of lesbian mothers were no different than children raised by single, heterosexual mothers. The fourth avenue was to "change the law" to end the discrimination against lesbian mothers by the legal system.

## Raising Awareness

Beginning in the mid-1970s and running throughout the 1990s, activists sought to raise awareness of lesbian custody. As described previously in *Newspapers and the Gay and Feminist Press*, feminist journalists wrote articles on lesbian custody cases and lesbian mothers. In the 1980s, ROW also worked diligently to raise awareness and promote a positive image of lesbian parents through consulting on and participating in television and radio programmes.[1112] This section examines ALP's and ROW's participation in conferences and the organisation of conferences specifically on lesbian custody.

In September 1975, Humphreys of ALP spoke about lesbian mothers and what it was like to be a member of a sexual minority at a workshop organised by the National Organisation for Mental Health.[1113] This was the first of many opportunities for ALP to disseminate information about lesbian custody cases. In March 1976, nearly forty women attended ALP's first symposium for lesbian mothers.[1114] Later that year, FRIEND – the befriending organisation of CHE – organised a two-day conference on the issues of married homosexuals in London where psychiatrist Len Curran led a session titled *Are We All Bisexual Really?*, barrister Sadie Robarts discussed the legal

[1112] Radford, 'Rights of Women,' 58.

[1113] *Sexual Minorities, a Workshop: Programme and Correspondence,* (6,7 September 1975) Archives of Sexuality and Gender, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DTBVHF888370559/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=635e461f&pg=11> [Accessed 19 May 2025].

[1114] 'Women Alone' in *Sappho* 4:12 (1976); 'Lesbian Mothers Unite,' *Spare Rib* 47 (June 1976) 18.

implications of divorce, and Humphreys led a session on lesbian mothers.[1115] At a conference in Nottingham in 1977 on the sixth demand of the women's liberation movement, Gay Sweatshop performed their play titled *Care and Control, Women Fight for Custody*, which portrayed three cases of women fighting for custody of their children. It illustrated 'society's sanctions against feminists' – implying that society punished lesbian mothers for leaving their marriages to live with women.[1116] Participants discussed the 'double bind' faced by lesbian mothers, in that even if they initially won custody of their children, their ex-husbands could apply for a change in custody until the children reached age sixteen.[1117] The discussion referred to the much-publicised custody case of Jean Whitfield, whose husband could not provide adequate accommodation for the seven children from his two marriages and the judges awarded her custody.[1118] In April 1979, fifty-six professionals attended a conference called *Homosexuality: Social Needs and Social Policies* at the University of Essex, where Allen from ALP and Nettie Pollard, a rights activist, conducted a workshop on child custody and legal problems.[1119] Titled *Lesbians and Child Custody/Legal and Civil Rights*, the workshop highlighted that in the instance of lesbian mothers, society had difficulty separating sexuality from gender roles:

> The overwhelming problem is the apparent threat which lesbians pose to the established family structure. Generally speaking, "mothers" are defined in terms of their place within the home and being a "good mother" is not considered compatible with lesbianism. Lesbian mothers therefore have the burden of proving in court that they are suitable mothers and in practice this often means that they have to establish credentials of a far higher standard than their heterosexual counterparts.[1120]

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[1115] 'Announcing Married and Gay.' Archives of Sexuality and Gender. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DAEIHU530085235/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=496df752&pg=67> [Accessed 05/25/2025].

[1116] 'Plays' in Wo*men's Report* 5:4 (May-June 1977) 15.

[1117] Jill Sutcliffe and Rosie Snowden, 'Midlands Women Organise,' *Peace News* (15 July 1977) 18.

[1118] *Whitfield v Whitfield* (CA, 4 November 1976) 14.

[1119] John Marshall, 'Needs of Gay People,' *Gay News* 165 (April 19-May 2 1979) 2.

[1120] 'Conference Report – Homosexuality: Social Needs and Social Policies, (University of Essex).' (6 April 1979) 7. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DDVILH606137184/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=009e7d93&pg=10> [Accessed 15/05/2025].

The report on the conference concluded that when the judiciary awarded custody to a father, it may also have imposed stringent conditions on the mother's access to her children.[1121] Also in 1979, Humphreys presented her paper *Lesbians and Child Custody* at the Socialist and Feminist Conference in London.[1122] Later that year, the Reading Gay Women's Group with the Reading University Gay Society organised an educational meeting about lesbian custody where Humphreys addressed the 'bad as ever' situation for lesbian mothers wanting to keep custody of their children, and stated that 'very few lesbian mothers won custody in English courts'.[1123] During the last half of the 1970s, ALP had well-publicised lesbian custody issues to organisations around England.

The impetus for the first two-day weekend conference about custody cases involving lesbian mothers and gay fathers began with one mother's rage and indignation of her husband being awarded custody of her daughters. In 1980, Julia Griffiths, who felt she had been unfairly treated in court, organised a conference for parents who had 'lost their children because of their homosexuality'.[1124] Griffiths and her partner, Gloria Carter, invited lesbian mothers and gay fathers to come to Bristol for two days to discuss their experiences with the legal system and treatment by legal and medical professionals. Griffiths extrapolated from her own experience in court to all lesbian mothers:

> The purpose of this conference is to bring all this secrecy out into the open so that everybody will be able to understand better the way the law works. It assumes that homosexuality automatically disqualifies you from being a caring, loving parent. So it takes your children away from you.[1125]

Speakers included Allen and Humphreys of ALP, Colquhoun from Gingerbread, which was an organisation for single-parent families, Forster of *Sappho*, Una Kroll, a

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[1121] Ibid.

[1122] Gay Left Collective (eds), *Homosexuality: Power & Politics* (London: Verso, 2018) 21.

[1123] '"Bad as Ever" for Lesbian Mothers,' *Gay News* 165 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 9; Abbie Enock, 'Help us to Keep Our Children, Say Lesbian Mothers,' *Evening Post* (Reading) (21 March 1979)

[1124] 'Custody – Crying Won't Help,' *Gay News* 187 (March 20-April 2, 1980) 9; See also Kevin Lee, 'What is Best for the Children…,' *Gay News* 186 (March 6-19 1980) 6-7 'Lesbian Mothers OK,' *Gay News* 191 (May 15-28, 1980) 1.

[1125] Kevin Lee, 'Come into the Open, Gay Parents Are Urged,' *Gay News* 192 (May 29-June 11, 1980) 5.

Deaconess of the Church of England, and researcher Golombok.[1126] This conference, like those that followed, offered a platform for women to share their stories and created awareness in the gay and lesbian communities. About thirty persons attended.[1127]

Throughout the 1980s, ROW facilitated education and awareness about lesbian custody disputes through conferences, television, and radio. ROW also networked with lesbian mother groups, including black lesbian mothers facing both homophobia and racism.[1128] It also developed a *Lesbian Custody Charter* and organised a national conference to discuss the charter. Approximately ninety lesbian mothers, their partners, and supporters gathered in London in 1988.[1129] The *Lesbian Custody Charter* illustrates that by the late-1980s, ROW was critical of the discrimination against lesbian mothers based on sexuality, race, disability, and socio-economic status. It was also cognizant of the problems facing lesbians wanting to adopt, foster, and co-parent. Developed during the time when Section 28 was being formulated in parliament, the tenth demand of the charter called for 'an end to the myth of the normal family', which implied that there were many workable family forms other than the nuclear family.[1130]

Other groups in the 1980s raised awareness of the difficulties facing lesbian mothers in custody proceedings. One example is the conference organised by the National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO) about lesbian and gay parenting. Over fifty men and women gathered at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1986. Lesbian custody cases were a main topic of discussion in several workshops, one which included a recommendation to confront the prevailing views on lesbian custody cases. The report summarised that social workers' inherent prejudices and

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[1126] 'Diary of Events,' *Gay News* (May 29-June 11, 1980) 37; Kevin Lee, 'Come into the Open, Gay Parents Are Urged,' *Gay News* 192 (May 29-June 11, 1980) 5.

[1127] 'Lesbian Mothers Draw up Battle Plans,' *Gay News* 193 (June 12-25 1980) 5.

[1128] 'The Lesbian Custody Project', *LSE/7EAW/E/12* Box 9.

[1129] National Conference for Lesbian Mother's Custody Charter (1988), FL/EPH/B/117, Bishopsgate.

[1130] 'The Lesbian Custody Charter', *LSE/7EAW/E/12* Box 9. See *Appendix B: The Lesbian Custody Charter*.

lack of knowledge led to improper service to lesbian and gay parents.[1131] A barrister experienced in lesbian custody cases, who led a workshop on 'The Legal Framework', was pessimistic about the chances of lesbian mothers winning in court. The conference report explained that attitudes in court, including those of welfare officers, were based on lesbian tropes of promiscuity, paedophilia, and immaturity. Children were seen to be at risk by their mothers' female partners and by society's disapproval of homosexuality. Judges sometimes distrusted expert witnesses such as psychologists and preferred the testimony of common-sense witnesses such as teachers, grandparents, and neighbours. Solicitors and barristers needed to prepare mothers for invasive questioning, hostile views from judges, and be prepared for supervision orders to be monitored by social workers.[1132] Another workshop on child development and sexual identity highlighted that social workers, foster parents, and day care workers needed training to challenge heterosexist assumptions. Participants recognised the lack of research into lesbian and gay parenting and that comparing homosexual parents to a "norm" went unchallenged.[1133]

Since Coote raised the alarm in 1975 that lesbian and feminist mothers failed to get custody of their children in court upon divorce, ALP and ROW continued to raise awareness through conferences. In addition, conferences enabled ALP and ROW to publicise the services they provided to lesbian mothers. Although awareness may have garnered some sympathy from members of lesbian and feminist communities, it did not necessarily impel them to volunteer time or money to support lesbian wives who were a minority in their communities.

## Support for Mothers Fighting for Custody

Advice and support benefitted lesbian wives facing divorce. Besides reading the few advice books available, mothers could have sought help from the various telephone help lines across the country that provided general information and support

[1131] *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Report of a Conference Held at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre* (11 October 1986) 1, LMA/4616/03/007.

[1132] Ibid.

[1133] Ibid.

for lesbians and gay men. These help lines, advertised in the gay and feminist press, could direct callers to organisations when appropriate. Beginning in 1977, women could call Lesbian Line – a national telephone support and referral service – and talk to lesbians who answered the phone during certain hours of the week.[1134] Pat, a married lesbian with two daughters, recalled contacting Lesbian Line after telling her husband about her sexuality: he threatened to throw her out of the house and she was terrified of not getting custody of her children. She explained that she thought that Lesbian Line would reject her because she was a mother. Apprehensively, she called Lesbian Line and talked to Angela:

> I found a tremendous amount of comfort from talking to her, although nobody could ever understand what I was feeling inside. But it was a terrific release to realise that I wasn't the only lesbian on this earth and probably more of a relief to know I wasn't the only lesbian mother. I wasn't sure whether I'd be accepted or not because I had kids.[1135]

Help lines referred callers to ALP before ROW began the LCG in 1982.[1136] ROW claimed in 1986 that Lesbian Line received several hundred calls each year from wives who felt unable to leave their marriages for fear of not getting custody of their children.[1137] Unfortunately, not every woman knew that support services existed. Selina, who fought a successful, four-year custody battle ending in 1979, reported that she and her female partner 'had no knowledge of lesbian support groups, gay switchboards, counselling or advice'.[1138]

ROW operated its own advice line for women around the country seeking advice about the law. It was the only source of free legal advice for women in England and Wales, which could include legal support throughout the process.[1139] The

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[1134] Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Revolution,* 50-5; *Lesbian Line, LSE/HCA/LGCM/7/33*. See also Helen Bishop, 'Dial a Dyke,' *Trouble and Strife* 2 (Winter 1992) 45-52.

[1135] SMLC, *Our Lives*, 25.

[1136] ALP was a volunteer-run, and I did not find any organisational documentation in the archives. I tried contacting Bernice Humphreys in 2023 through a secondary, but she did not reply to my email.

[1137] ROW*, Legal Handbook*, 141-142.

[1138] Hanscome and Forster, *Rocking the Cradle*, 83.

[1139] Although Gay Legal Advice (GLAD) provided free legal advice via a help line to anyone in the gay community, it was aimed, at least initially, at helping gay men. Kevin Lee 'Your Line of Defence,' *Gay*

alternative was to go to a Citizens Advice Bureau where 'you could queue up for a really, really long time, multiple times, and you could get non-specialist advice'.[1140] As an initial point of contact, the calls were often general discussions about legal processes, how to find a solicitor, and how to apply for legal aid in the main areas of immigration law and family law. Alldred, who worked at ROW in the early 1990s and reported on the statistics for the advice line, explained that it was very popular: 'We knew demand exceeded the service we could provide; we knew that women were waiting to get through on the phone line or women would have repeat calls before they would get through'.[1141] Employed staff answered the advice line sometimes during the day, but volunteers answered the phones in the evenings, during a window between seven and nine. Volunteers were all qualified female legal professionals, some quite senior feminist solicitors or barristers, such as Butler. Volunteers were the crucial first points of contact, as callers 'might have been talking about needing to leave a partner, or coming out to a partner'.[1142] Alldred recalled that some calls were incomplete: 'some of them might have to ring off suddenly' and might have been calling from a call box on the street.[1143] When a call was cut short the advisor would be frustrated and quite 'distressed because they were helpless to help' and worried about the situation of the caller.[1144] Lesbian mothers telephoned ROW to get advice on how to proceed if they wanted to end their marriages or relationships with men.

ROW responded to mothers' complaints that finding a sympathetic solicitor was a challenge. Several lesbian mothers explained that their solicitors had advised them not to fight for custody. Sharley recalled that when her marriage broke down in 1949, her solicitor had advised her not to divorce due to the unwanted publicity.[1145] Another mother who fought for custody in 1986 recommended a woman should

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*News* (January 22-February 4, 1981) 16-17; *Gay Legal Advice (GLAD): Manual*, (1978) *LSE/HCA 14/59.*

[1140] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

[1141] Ibid.

[1142] Ibid.

[1143] Ibid.

[1144] Ibid.

[1145] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 75-77.

choose a solicitor who would fight for her to keep her children and who was not homophobic: a solicitor who 'can say the word lesbian without feeling ill' (emphasis original).[1146] *Sappho* had agreed in 1974 to compile a list of legal professionals, as did the Lesbian Mothers' Movement in 1980, but I found no evidence that they followed through. The first evidence of mothers having access to a list of sympathetic solicitors is in 1986 at a conference when ROW suggested mothers contact ROW, ALP, or Lesbian Line.[1147] To build a database from which lesbian wives could select barristers and solicitors from across England and Wales who were both willing and capable of representing lesbian mothers, ROW delivered in-house workshops to educate young female legal professionals. The one-day workshops were aimed at solicitors and advice workers 'who wanted to know the best way of representing women who were fighting for custody of their children'.[1148] ROW ran two or three workshops per year, for groups of twenty to thirty legal professionals. ROW publicised the workshops in its newsletter, which was mailed to members, and direct to law firms.[1149] Women came from outside London, as 'the call went out to people all over the country'.[1150] Educating law professionals from around the country was crucial as mothers often came to London seeking representation after determining that their local lawyers were not prepared to handle lesbian custody cases.[1151] ROW also lectured law students, court welfare officers, probation officers, and social workers. It operated as a resource for legal professionals, answering enquiries from solicitors and barristers every week. Enabling mothers to find solicitors who were willing and able to fight for custody was a significant help for lesbian mothers beginning divorce proceedings.

To understand the experiences of lesbian mothers in custody disputes, ROW initiated a research study in 1982. The GLC Women's Committee funded ROW to

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[1146] *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Report of a Conference Held at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre* (11 October 1986) 13-15, LMA/4616/03/007.

[1147] ROW, *Legal Handbook*, 33.

[1148] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[1149] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

[1150] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

[1151] Ibid.

'research into the legal position of lesbian mothers with a view to changing the law and attitudes generally'.[1152] A group of solicitors, who volunteered at ROW and who had applied for the funding, oversaw the research conducted by Harne. Part of the intention was 'trying to reform the practice of lawyers so that they could win cases'.[1153] In total, Harne surveyed thirty-six lesbian mothers who had fought custody battles between 1974 and 1984. ROW published the survey in a booklet in 1984 and within an advice book in 1986 that included 'advice for lesbian mothers even before they begin thinking about what to do' and a critique of the law.[1154] Using information from the study, ROW claimed it was better able to advise lesbian mothers than it had done at previous workshops.[1155] ROW was the first non-volunteer organisation to research early custody battles by lesbian mothers and its findings added further evidence of the difficulties faced by lesbian mothers fighting for custody of their children.[1156]

ALP and ROW helped mothers prepare for their divorces, from how to find a solicitor to what to wear in court. This support helped numerous mothers fight and win custody both in negotiations outside of court and inside court, where they faced the argument that they would negatively influence their children's psychosexual development.

## Research to Dispel the Corruption Argument

Before the first published study of the children of lesbian mothers in 1981, speculative testimony by psychologists had influenced judges to award custody to fathers. Experts who testified on behalf of fathers claimed that children of lesbian

[1152] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook,* 2; Interview with Lynne Harne, 13 July 2023; For more information about ROW see Radford, 'Rights of Women,' 56-58 and Jill Radford, 'History of Women's Liberation Movements: A Reflective Personal History,' in Gabriele Griffin (ed), *Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism.* (Bristol, PA.: Taylor & Francis, 1994) 50-57.

[1153] Interview with Lynne Harne, 13 July 2023.

[1154] Interview with Lynne Harne, 13 July 2023; ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial;* ROW, *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook;* See *Advice Books on Lesbian Custody.*

[1155] On 21 January 1978, ROW organised a workshop in London on child custody for lesbian mothers, including a discussion of 'the sexist assumptions underlying custody decisions' and how to 'fight the law'. *Spare Rib* 66 (January 1978) 24.

[1156] Bernice Humphreys researched and authored an unpublished paper about lesbian custody disputes in the late 1970s, which is available in the archives, but I did not find any record of anything published in her name. See *LSE/7HEF/02/05.*

mothers would be confused about their gender, have psychological problems, and be bullied at school.[1157] Judges also related these unsubstantiated fears: a judge in the court of first instance in 1977 regarded that the 'spectacle' of the mother's relationship with a woman 'was likely or certainly liable to disturb and distort the children's sexual orientation at an important and impressionable age'.[1158] There was no scientific evidence to prove that lesbian mothers harmed their children, but neither was there any evidence to prove that they did not. In the absence of such evidence, legal counsel for fathers could conflate a mother's deviant sexual conduct with her ability to parent, which could influence judges to rule in favour of the fathers raising children with a female caregiver: a new wife, a relative, or a housekeeper.

The need for research to dispel the corruption argument became evident in 1976. Shirley, whose husband had custody of their son after a court battle, implored that someone should research the children of lesbian mothers:

> Desperately needed is a research project to prove that growing up in a lesbian household does not necessarily produce socially handicapped, disturbed, perverted or otherwise "out of step with society" adolescents and adults. The chances of success for future Lesbian couples seeking justice in the Courts would be greatly enhanced by such evidence. Will someone, somewhere come forward to undertake the project and will enough subjects be available to make it feasible? We cannot go on hiding any longer.[1159]

ALP's symposium in March 1976 also emphasised the need for such research. It began in earnest to organise its research project on children raised by lesbian mothers: a project that would eventually impact the experiences of lesbian mothers in court.[1160] ALP sought financial backing and fifty women to participate in a pilot scheme.[1161] ALP advertised for participation from mothers, lesbian or not, who had lived 'as a family unit' with at least one child under age sixteen and without an adult

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[1157] Interview with Susan Golombok (15 January 2024); Golombok is Professor Emerita of Family Research and the former Director of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge.

[1158] *Markovic v Markovic,* 6.

[1159] Shirley Kennington, 'Minus One,' *Sappho* 4:11 (1976) 11-12.

[1160] 'Women Alone,' *Sappho* 4:12 (1976); 'Lesbian Mothers Unite,' *Spare Rib* 47 (June 1976) 18.

[1161] 'Bits from the Sticks,' *Move* 16, (March 1976) 4; Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts' in *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976), 6.

male.[1162] ALP's initiative precipitated the first UK published study that provided empirical evidence that children raised by lesbian mothers were no more likely than children raised by single, heterosexual mothers to have emotional or behavioural problems, or be confused about their gender or sexual orientation.

Golombok, who had been searching for a topic for her Masters' dissertation in child development, responded to ALP's request for a researcher, launching her lifetime of research. By chance, Golombok read about ALP's study in *Spare Rib* and thought it unjust that mothers and children should be separated by the courts without any evidence that lesbians were unfit mothers.[1163] The study brought together two of her interests: the women's movement and child development. Golombok's Masters' research piqued the interest of Sir Michael Rutter, an eminent child psychiatrist and head of the Department of Child Psychiatry at the Institute of Child Psychiatry in London. Rutter had previously testified at custody hearings on behalf of lesbian mothers and knew that no one had yet undertaken the research Golombok proposed. She began in 1977 to interview families across England. Rutter helped to obtain a £2000 research grant from the Nuffield Foundation and guided her research methods.[1164] Later, he supervised her post-graduate research and together with Ann Spencer they published the first UK qualitative study in 1983, which reported no significant differences of psychological development or gender identity between 37 children of 27 lesbian mothers and 38 children of 27 single, heterosexual mothers, all school-age or above.[1165]

Subsequent independent studies corroborated the findings of Golombok's study.[1166] In 1981 and 1986, two separate groups of researchers in the USA published

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[1162] 'Clearinghouse,' *Women's Report* 5:2 (January-February 1977) 16-17; 'Love Knoweth No Laws,' *Gay News* (January 13-26, 1977) 33,

[1163] Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts,' *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976), 6.

[1164] Golombok, *We are Family,* 1; Interview with Susan Golombok, 15 January 2024.

[1165] Susan Golombok, Ann Spencer, and Michael Rutter, 'Children in Lesbian and Single Parent Households: Psychosexual and Psychiatric Appraisal,' *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 24:4 (October 1983) 552.

[1166] For more information about the researchers' impetus for their studies, see Marie-Amélie George, *Family Matters: Queer Households and the Half-century Struggle for Legal Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024) 81-88.

studies that confirmed that relationships in the family are the major determinant of children's risk for psychological problems and that the sexual orientation of the mother has no effect on the gender identity development or psychological happiness of her children.[1167] Psychiatrist Martha Kirkpatrick collaborated with child psychiatrist Ron Roy and psychologist Katherine Smith, a colleague at Robert Stoller's Gender Identity Clinic at UCLA, to compare ten boys and ten girls living with their lesbian mothers to ten boys and ten girls living with their single, heterosexual mothers. Although they found no differences in gender identity and indication of future sexual orientation, the researchers admitted that there were no well-established measures of these characteristics.[1168] Richard Green headed a team of researchers to compare thirty daughters and twenty-six sons of fifty lesbian mothers to twenty-eight daughters and twenty sons of forty single, heterosexual mothers. They concluded that there was no difference in the psychosocial and psychosexual development of children raised by lesbian mothers without adult males versus children raised by heterosexual mothers without adult males. Richard Green et al stated that in regard to custody disputes, 'the mother's sexual orientation per se should not enter this judicial calculus'.[1169] In their review of the psychological studies on the children of homosexual parents before 2000, Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz state: 'This body of research, almost uniformly, reports findings of no notable differences between children reared by heterosexual parents and those reared by lesbian and gay parents, and that it finds lesbigay parents to be as competent and effective as heterosexual parents'.[1170]

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[1167] Richard Green et al, 'Lesbian Mothers and Their Children: A Comparison with Solo Parent Heterosexual Mothers and Their Children,' *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15:2 (1986) 167-184; M Kirkpatrick, C Smith, and R Roy, 'Lesbian Mothers and Their Children: A Comparative Survey,' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 51:3 (1981) 545–551; Julie Mooney-Somers and Susan Golombok, 'Children of Lesbian Mothers: From the 1970s to the New Millennium,' *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 15:2 (May 2000) 121-126.

[1168] The study evaluated the sex of first-drawn figure, the history of play preferences and sexual interest, and behaviour exhibited in the playroom. Kirkpatrick et al, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 548, 551.

[1169] Green et al, 'Lesbian Mothers and Their Children,' 182-183.

[1170] Stacy and Biblarz argue this research assumes that children raised by married heterosexual couples are the benchmark of child development and that researchers frequently downplayed any differences including those that might be positive.; Judith Stacey and Timothy J Biblarz, '(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?,' *American Sociological Review*, 66:2 (April 2001) 159-183.

The three psychiatric studies and testimony from experts were used in some custody cases to dispute the corruption argument and influence the outcomes in favour of lesbian mothers. Butler submitted the UK study as evidence in some of her cases and other legal professionals consulted Golombok, who testified in an estimated five custody cases.[1171] Butler claimed that Golombok's testimony 'made a real difference' to her case in Ipswich: 'The father didn't have any psychiatric evidence because of course there wasn't any – there were no independent experts saying that children raised by lesbian mothers was a really bad idea'.[1172] Butler insisted that Golombok's research was crucial for changing judicial attitudes:

> Susan's study, given it was very small, really, was really important in changing attitudes. We would get her to come along to court and give evidence if necessary. But what we always made sure of was that the judges had sort of had briefings, if you like. Most of it was American research, so it was a bit difficult to rely on. But we did try and change judicial attitudes, and I think once the high court got it, it was a matter of time, then, that it would filter down.[1173]

However, barristers occasionally tried to discredit Golombok's research in court. She was once asked if she was a lesbian, implying that her research was biased.[1174] Counsel for lesbian mothers did not always introduce the research studies in court. In the courts of first instance for the four known appeal cases after the third study was published, mothers' counsel introduced the research in one case, was criticised for not introducing the research in a second, and it is unknown whether the studies were mentioned in the final two cases. In a 1990 Court of Appeal case, counsel for the mother raised the concern that expert evidence had not been presented to the judge in the court of first instance regarding the impact of the mother's lesbian relationship on the daughter, which would have been useful to refute the argument against lesbian parenting. The mother lost her appeal; her ex-husband maintained custody, care and control of their three sons and her daughter, who was not his progeny.[1175] In a separate case in 1991, Judge Callman summarised that Professor Russell-Davis, Emeritus

[1171] Interview with Susan Golombok, 15 January 2024.
[1172] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.
[1173] FAWTAR, Gil Butler, 11 October 2019.
[1174] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023; Golombok, *We are Family,* 22-23.
[1175] *Re "A" (A Minor)*

Professor of Mental Health at the University of Bristol, when testifying in the court of first instance, cited both the UK study and the 1986 American study in his testimony: 'fears of psychosexual development being distorted if a child is reared in a lesbian household, or that he will be subjected unduly to taunts and teasing or be ostracised, find no support in the systematic evidence'.[1176] In the subsequent appeal by the mother, she won care and control of her young son. ROW attributed the subsidence of prejudice against lesbian mothers in part to the research, although judges in County Court may have continued to demonstrate greater prejudice than the High Court or Court of Appeal.[1177] The research studies could dispel the corruption argument, but only if mothers' counsel introduced them as evidence.

Attitudes of the judiciary did not change significantly in the early 1990s, when Court of Appeal judges in three cases deemed a mother's lesbian relationship to be 'worrying', 'an unusual background in which to bring up a child', and difficult to explain to the children.[1178] Although the psychiatric studies contributed to positive outcomes for lesbian mothers in some custody cases, it is impossible to know the breadth of the impact due to the inherent secrecy of custody disputes. Nor is it possible to know how the psychiatric studies affected negotiations outside of court.

## Change the Law!

ALP was the first organisation to challenge the prejudice shown by judges in custody cases. In 1975, ALP initiated a sub-committee, chaired by Colquhoun, which included representatives from CHE, Gingerbread, the National Council for One-Parent Families, the National Union of Students Gay Rights Committee, *Sappho,* and *Spare Rib*.[1179] The first action of the committee was ambitious: to approach Lord Elwyn Jones, the Lord Chancellor, to convince him to open an investigation of court transcripts for evidence of judicial prejudice against lesbian mothers.[1180] The

[1176] *B v B (Minors)* [1991] 1 FLR 402 at 406.
[1177] Harne and ROW, *Valued Families,* 45.
[1178] *Re N (Minors)*; *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* [1991] 1 FLR 223; *Re "A" (A Minor)*.
[1179] 'Action for Lesbian Parents (ALP),' *Sappho* 4:12 (1976) 6.
[1180] Ibid.

committee advertised in *Spare Rib* for women – especially lawyers – to help prepare for the meeting.[1181] The few reports about this meeting indicate that although the Lord Chancellor had agreed to meet with the committee, the meeting was a disaster. Forster recalled that 'they went storming in to confront Elwyn-Jones, who was Labour Lord Chancellor, and said "Look, all these custody cases going on are based on prejudice, and not justice." He nearly had a fit'.[1182] Barrister Judith Walker's recollection was slightly less negative: 'He was extremely upset about our allegations against judges. Since then, things have improved a little'.[1183] Fifty years later, Humphreys recalled that the Lord Chancellor said that 'he could not interfere with the judgement of his judges'.[1184] The committee's confrontational approach to challenge prejudice against lesbian mothers in custody cases by judges was a failure. ALP reverted to less aggressive forms of activism.

A decade later, in 1984, ROW called to end discrimination against lesbian mothers in its *Lesbian Custody Charter*.[1185] ROW suggested examples of legal reform, such as creating a general anti-discrimination Act and amending the *Guardianship of Minors Act 1971* to disregard the mother's sexual orientation when making an order for custody or access.[1186] ROW implored all women to join its nation-wide Lesbian Custody Campaign to 'change the law to prevent courts from discriminating against women for being lesbians'.[1187] In June 1985, it arranged a one-day conference in London, which was open to all women, both lesbian and heterosexual. ROW explained that lesbian mothers had 'always lived with the threat of losing their children' and that in custody battles many lesbian mothers did not win custody because of the

[1181] 'Lesbians and the Lord,' *Spare Rib* 51 (October 1976), 23.

[1182] Neild and Pearson, *Women Like Us,* 94.

[1183] Polly Toynbee, 'What Makes Lesbians So Particularly Dangerous as Parents,' *The Guardian* (16 January 1978) 9.

[1184] Wilkinson,' Missing Pieces'.

[1185] 'Report on Legislation Conference in London 23-24 May 1987,' 6, PAMA/2/4/2, Bishopsgate.

[1186] ROW, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*, 43.

[1187] Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 'Lesbian Custody Campaign,' (1985), FL/EPH/B/118, Bishopsgate.

'prejudices, the legal profession, and the probation and social services'.[1188] A workshop on lesbian custody at the Legislation Conference in London in May 1987 also called for a change to the law. The report on the conference claimed that 'some but not all' lesbian mothers were winning the 'harrowing' battles for custody of their children.[1189] Noting that lesbianism was not illegal, the report claimed that judges still often regarded lesbian mothers as unfit to parent, which was the lone reason for denying lesbians custody of their children. The report on the workshop explained the brutal cross-examination of a lesbian mother in court:

> The lesbian mother finds herself on trial – her lifestyle, who she has sex with, her political views (particularly her attitude by men). In short her very existence comes under a microscope. Black lesbian mothers face the additional oppression of the law's racism.[1190]

The report explained that the corruption argument was most often used in court – without evidence – against putting children with their lesbian mothers. The report did not mention that the recently-published psychiatric studies could defeat the corruption argument against lesbian parenting. However, the report also noted that many were organising to expose and oppose legal discrimination, with reference to the *Lesbian Custody Charter*. The report called for changes to the law and to social attitudes: 'An anti-discrimination law including a clause about custody would go a long way to preventing discrimination, but we also need to create a climate within which a mother's sexuality is not seen as determining her mothering abilities'.[1191]

ROW helped women with their individual custody cases and educated legal professionals and social workers, but attempts at greater activism to change the law failed. One major hurdle was that it was impossible to know about *all* custody cases. As discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three, ROW admitted its ignorance of any statistics regarding lesbian custody cases and had no way of knowing about individual legal battles unless the mothers came forward to them for assistance. Butler claims it

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[1188] Ibid.

[1189] Report on Legislation Conference in London 23-24 May 1987, Bishopsgate PAMA/2/4/2, 6.

[1190] Ibid.

[1191] Ibid.

was difficult to campaign around the issue of lesbian custody. Solicitors fought to get the best deal for each client; they had to balance their client's interests against wider political activism. There was no statute barring lesbian mothers from raising their children for ROW to attempt to repeal, and instigating a statute specifically to bar discrimination against lesbian mothers in custody disputes was an ambitious undertaking.[1192] Thatcher's governments' intention and effect were to dismantle the welfare state and place caregiving responsibility back on the nuclear family. Section 28 was part of this agenda. The two interventions by Thatcher's governments to protect people of marginalized groups were required by European law.[1193] I found no evidence of country-wide campaigning for lesbian mothers to change or introduce new statutes or any mention of efforts to introduce protections in European law. In here 2023 interview, Butler recalled thinking at the time that efforts to change the law for lesbian mothers were a futile ambition. She stated: 'it could have been a mobilizing demand, but it was never going to work'.[1194] ROW did not "change the law" for lesbian mothers fighting for custody against their husbands, but did what it could to help mothers in their individual battles.

## Obstacles to Activism

Besides the two main organisations to help lesbian mothers in custody cases, ALP and ROW, there is evidence of the initiation of several groups, often announced with great fanfare in the gay press and later followed by a postscript about their demise. The greatest downfall of activism for lesbian mothers was the lack of support. Most conferences were attended by only tens of women, rarely a little more than a hundred, and never thousands. Low numbers meant few volunteers and few monetary

[1192] ROW researched and produced a sixty-page submission on custody and guardianship to the Law Commission on its working paper number 96 to contribute to the *Family Law Review of Child Law, Guardianship and Custody*, a review of common law and statutes regarding allocating the responsibility for raising a child to an individual. The Law Commission, *Family Law Review of Child Law, Guardianship and Custody* HC594 (25 July 1988) 109, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c11b5ed915d1c30daa606/0594.pdf> [Accessed 15 March 2024]; 'Rights of Women – (C 133), LSE/5ROW Box 1.

[1193] *Equal Pay (Amendment) Regulations 1983; Sex Discrimination Act 1986.* See Davies, Paul and Mark Freedland*, Labour Legislation and Public Policy: A Contemporary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 581-585.

[1194] Interview with Gil Butler, 5 April 2023.

donations. Financial difficulties were similar to that of both *Arena Three* and *Sappho*, which both folded after running out of money.[1195] ROW was funded by the GLC, but other groups scrambled for financial support from external bodies. Lack of funding and lack of volunteers killed several ambitious and energetic attempts to help lesbian mothers.

Despite the initial excitement for the first organisation that specifically focused on the needs of lesbian mothers – the GWMC – both the number of volunteers and financial support dwindled: the GWMC folded in 1975, less than two years after it had begun. One mother wrote anonymously to *Sappho* to relay her dismay at the dwindling support and interest in the GWMC:

> Gay Wives and Mothers has gone a long way since that first symposium of May last year. The euphoria has long departed, as have those women who promised support for lesbian-mother-action and demanded another symposium, and then regular meetings. Personal problems and solutions have thinned their ranks, and too, selfishness. Once the problems were resolved, they just disappeared. . . . One would not feel so bitter were it not for all the promises, were it not for all the times I was told that Gay Wives and Mothers must continue, it was so necessary: on which basis battles were fought at dead of night with volatile Sappho management, social activities arranged and monthly meetings organised. All for nothing, it now seems…[1196]

This observation suggests that Forster could have been more supportive of lesbian mothers, and that perhaps *Sappho* did not compile a list of sympathetic solicitors, as promised in 1974 to the GWMC. Run solely by volunteers, there was neither money nor enthusiasm to continue. The editors of *Sappho* noted that the decline of the GWMC illustrated 'the same pattern of self-defeat that has become so familiar in all liberation movements, and especially our own'.[1197] The four remaining volunteers tried ambitiously to organise a national campaign to disseminate information about discrimination against lesbian mothers in custody cases, to counsel mothers, and to

[1195] Turner, 'Producing a Lesbian,' 83.

[1196] 'Gay Wives and Mothers Collective—A Personal View by a Lesbian Mum,' *Sappho* 4:4 (1975) 5-6.

[1197] *Sappho* 4:4 (1975) 3.

collect mothers' experiences, but without adequate funding and volunteers, the GWMC was not viable.

The National Organisation of Lesbians (NOOL) is another example of a women's organisation that did not continue beyond establishment of its goals. In November 1977, fifty lesbians who had left CHE after years of frustration with the male majority ignoring their concerns, gathered in Nottingham for their first conference.[1198] The women debated using the word lesbian in the title of their new organisation. Some feared that the words lesbian and feminist would deter the very women they hoped would engage in the organisation. Others thought the word lesbian was proud and positive. Yet others thought lesbianism and feminism were indivisible.[1199] A compromise was to use the acronym NOOL. With seed money of £200 and the involvement of Colquhoun, they aimed to 'break down the isolation of women approaching lesbianism' and 'smash the negative image of lesbians'.[1200] They planned to organise both social groups and pressure groups on various issues including 'discrimination against lesbian mothers in custody cases, sex education, lesbians in the military, and aversion therapy.[1201] Less than a year later, Ruth Wallsgrove reported that NOOL was 'lying dormant' and attempted to explain the failure of lesbians to organise:

> A problem that faces N.O.O.L., as with so many groups, is *how* to communicate with each other. What links lesbians other than the gender of the people they love, and the problems they face in society as a result of this? If we don't explore our experiences, and question our place in society – that is, become political – what can we talk about with women who have such differences in interests? … Another problem is that there is no *one* issue that brings us together. Male homosexuality is still illegal for men under 21 – men still go to prison for having lovers under this age – and so gay men have an urgent reason for belonging to CHE, to work to change the law. (emphasis original)[1202]

[1198] Ruth Wallsgrove, 'A Guide to Lesbian Groups,' *Spare Rib* 74 (September 1978) 27.
[1199] Jackie Forster, 'National Organisation of Lesbians – First Conference,' *Sappho* 6:1 (1977) 7-8.
[1200] Helen Bishop, 'N.O.O.L.' *Gay Left* 5 (Winter 1977) 19.
[1201] Helen Bishop, 'N.O.O.L.' *Gay Left* 5 (Winter 1977) 19.
[1202] Ruth Wallsgrove, 'A Guide to Lesbian Groups,' *Spare Rib* 74 (September 1978) 27.

Wallsgrove's evaluation was astute in many ways. Lesbians gather to socialise – KENRIC has been a successful social organisation for sixty years – but mobilising around one issue can be problematic, especially a concern which was an issue for only a minority of the group. Only a small number of lesbians were actively concerned about custody, and their concern was often time-limited.

Resulting from the first weekend conference about lesbian custody in 1980, mentioned previously, organisers Griffiths and Carter formed a pressure group called the Lesbian Mothers' Movement (LMM) – initially called Lesbian Mothers OK – but it was crippled by lack of funding and did not survive its first year. For the initial conference, women who gathered in Bristol one day in March 1980 raised £60, the Gay Women's Group organised a benefit disco, and Bristol Men Against Sexism demonstrated in support. Colquhoun, then the Information Officer for Gingerbread, appealed to readers of *Gay News* to donate money.[1203] Funding LMM was an issue from its beginning. Griffiths and Carter were guests on Radio Bristol to discuss lesbian custody cases and request donations for LMM, to which both men and women called in with verbal support.[1204] *Gay News* reported that 'two other things are needed to get the campaign off the ground', namely 'money – and more money'.[1205] In September of 1980, CHE in Streatham donated £20.[1206] The goal of LMM was to coordinate a national network to recognise and combat judicial bias in custody cases involving lesbian mothers.[1207] The women of LMM were angry about how the legal profession had treated lesbian mothers; in addition to compiling a list of sympathetic and committed legal professionals, they wanted to compile a list of lawyers to avoid: 'lawyers who are uninterested, biased – or downright ignorant'.[1208] Griffiths' ongoing

[1203] Kevin Lee, 'Come into the Open, Gay Parents Are Urged,' *Gay News* 192 (May 29-June 11, 1980) 5; 'Custody – crying won't help,' *Gay News* (March 20-April 2, 1980) 9.

[1204] 'Mothers Plan for Action,' *Gay News* 194 (June 26-July 9 1980).

[1205] 'Lesbian Mothers Draw Up Battle Plans,' Gay News 193 (June 12-25 1980) 5.

[1206] 'Court Triumph for Lesbian Mother,' *Gay News* (September 18-October 1 1980) 6.

[1207] *Campaign for Homosexual Equality Annual Report 1980*, (London: Campaign for Homosexual Equality, 1980), 9.

[1208] 'Lesbian Mothers Draw up Battle Plans,' Gay News 193 (June 12-25 1980) 5.

battle against osteoarthritis, which forced her to quit her job, coupled with inconsistent financial support contributed to the death of LMM.[1209]

Funding was an ongoing issue in many volunteer organisations, including ALP. It repeatedly advertised in *Sappho* and *Gay News* for professional help, funds to help purchase transcripts of cases, and funding for an extensive survey of custody cases involving lesbians and gay men. At the time, transcripts of legal cases cost £300 to procure.[1210] In September 1976, the CHE Executive Committee agreed to support the objectives of ALP and provided £100, but ALP's appeal to the Albany Trust in December was unsuccessful. ALP had asked for financial assistance to help fund research, purchase court transcripts, and provide information not only to lesbian mothers, but also lawyers and social workers.[1211] In March 1977, Nikki Henriques, the Women's Organisations Liaison Officer of CHE, wrote to all CHE groups to request the donation of one collection to ALP, as approved by the Executive Committee. Henriques claimed that ALP was 'fast gaining strength' and desperately needed money.[1212] She explained that ALP existed to 'promote and defend the rights of ALL gay parents' and that the gay community often underrated the problems experienced by homosexual parents.[1213] The Albany Trust denied another appeal by ALP in April 1978 for a grant to fund the provision of information to homosexual parents and the media, research into custody disputes, and the production of a pamphlet aimed at

[1209] Ibid.

[1210] 'Disapproval and Hurt Pride,' *Gay News* (March 11-24, 1976) 10; 'Action for Lesbian Parents (ALP),' *Sappho* 4:12 (1976) 6; 'Maureen Backs Lesbian Parents,' *Gay News* (August 26-September 8 1976); Correspondence between Bernice Humphreys and Jan McHughes (December 1976), *Archives of Gender and Sexuality*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GMCORD219788942/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=4bc7ea63&pg=58> [Accessed 15/05/2025].

[1211] CHE and CHERT (CHE Research Trust), *Minutes of the 2022 Annual Conference (September 1976)*, Archives of Sexuality and Gender <https://www.chert.org.uk/pdfs/CHERT43-Conference2022Minutes.pdf> [Accessed 06 April 2024*]; Correspondence between Bernice Humphreys and Jan McHughes*; 'Executive Committee.' *CHE Bulletin*, 4:8 (September 1976) 8. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/apps/doc/DTDRJD483251389/AHSI?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=8c4fa715> [Accessed 9 June 2023].

[1212] Nikki Henriques, *Letter to all Convenors* (8 March 1977) *LSE/HCA/MURRAY/2/1.*

[1213] Ibid.

advising homosexual parents on custody proceedings in court.[1214] From sparse archival records it is unclear if, when, and from where ALP obtained financial support.

## Lack of Support for Lesbian Mothers

In 1975, controversy over whether custody disputes were a concern only for lesbians illustrates feminists' lack of support for lesbian mothers. A group of forty women met in London to discuss discrimination against mothers fighting for custody of their children following the publication of Cootes' article on lesbian custody cases. In addition to examples of lesbian mothers fighting for custody, Coote claimed a High Court judge did not award a heterosexual mother custody because he thought her feminist politics made her unfit to have custody of her children – that her children were 'at risk' if raised by her in a 'singularly unbalanced feminine environment'.[1215] A political split was evident at this first meeting; half the women felt custody issues only concerned lesbian mothers and the other half thought it was an issue for all feminists. Women in favour of campaigning for lesbian mothers started ALP. Allen thought the split was mainly due to the overall lack of support for lesbians in the feminist movement: 'But mainly, I am sure, it was because some lesbians were nervous to name the campaign as a lesbian one knowing there was so little support for us around'.[1216] In 1977, an article in *WIRES* noted that although the women's movement had 'some awareness of the hassles faced by lesbian women in custody cases and the far-reaching implications of the existence of lesbian parents', only a handful of women volunteered at ALP.[1217] Support for lesbian mothers from heterosexual feminists was limited.

Several lesbian mothers explained that they felt disliked by feminists. Harne kept silent about being a mother: 'being a mother was my own problem and politically un-right-on'.[1218] She felt she could not ask for support or raise as a political issue any

[1214] *Jacqui Smith to Bernice Humphreys,* April 1978. *LSE/HCA/ALBANY TRUST/14/81.*
[1215] Anna Coote, 'The Parent Divorced from the Child,' *The Guardian* (2 August 1975) 11.
[1216] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 186.
[1217] '6th Demand,' *WIRES* 34 (24 June 1977) 13.
[1218] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 189.

problems she had with childcare, schooling, or the father of her child: 'I felt I had no right to ask for support, because I had stupidly brought it on myself'.[1219] As discussed in Chapter Four, some lesbians expressed intense dislike of married and divorced lesbians. Harrison, who organised one of the earliest support groups for homosexuals in mixed marriages, attested that 'the gay world is not very sympathetic towards married gays' and that married gays may only be able to participate in gay society 'briefly and on the fringes'.[1220]

It may have been particularly difficult for single lesbians to identify with wives going through divorce. Elizabeth claimed that she and her partner Mary initially dismissed the women's movement because 'it seemed to be all about women who had children' and she and her partner were not very interested in the problems of educated, married mothers: the 'whole Betty Friedan thing'.[1221] Yet in a letter to *Sappho,* one lesbian mother noted it was imperative for women to identify with married lesbian mothers. She claimed that the play *Care and Control*, *Women Fight for Custody*, which was about three mothers who did not get custody of their children in court, had 'succeeded in opening the way for every woman – lesbian or not, a mother or not, to identify with the lesbian mother and to see this fight as her own – which is the first thing we need in order to win it.[1222] ROW also insisted that discrimination against lesbian mothers was relevant to all women: 'This anti-lesbianism is a blatant demonstration of male power and control over women and it is in the interests of all women to challenge such male control'.[1223] Separating lesbian mothers from their children, limiting mothers' access to their children, and monitoring children who remained in their mother's care, was considered by some to be a means of controlling women who dared live without men. Although lesbian custody issues could have been seen as an important concern for all women, anti-lesbian mother sentiment precluded

[1219] Ibid.

[1220] Colin Harrison, 'It's All Right for Pop Stars…', *Gay News* 104 (October 7-20, 1976) 16.

[1221] Interview with Elizabeth Wilson, *FAWTAR/8*, 05 November 2019.

[1222] Care and Control,' *Sappho* 5:9 (1977) 26.

[1223] Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 'Lesbian Custody Campaign,' (1985), *FL/EPH/B/118*, Bishopsgate.

widespread support for campaigns for lesbian mothers. For example, some lesbian wives faced ostracization from other women in shelters. Hennegan explained in 1977: 'I can think of gay women, physically attacked by their husbands, seeking asylum at women's refuges, only to discover that lesbians aren't really welcome'.[1224] In 1976, the editor of *Spare Rib* felt that lesbian mothers not getting custody of their children was significant to warrant a cover page story, but subsequently did not print any letters from readers on the subject, suggesting that none were received.[1225] Although there were small support groups for lesbian mothers across the UK, ALP and ROW were the only organisations that helped lesbian mothers fight for custody. As only a handful of volunteers supported ALP and ROW, and since other organisations experienced a swift demise, few women saw lesbian mothers' fights for custody as their concern.

By the late 1980s, the lesbian feminist movement had progressed to supporting the fight against the oppression of all lesbian mothers.[1226] A concern for a greater number of lesbians, in conjunction with gay men, was parental rights: the right to adopt, the right to foster, and the rights of both parents. A series of events brought the homosexual community together in protest: the AID scandal of 1978, the outrage against fostering and adopting by homosexuals from the 1980s into the 1990s, and the fight against Section 28's devaluation of homosexual families as "pretended families".[1227] Activism against Section 28, which threatened the entire homosexual community, united lesbians and gay men. Peter Tatchell felt that, as a blessing in disguise, Section 28 motivated, mobilised, and inspired the homosexual community to work together to achieve valuable changes.[1228] Unfortunately, married lesbian mothers never had collective support from either the homosexual or feminist communities.

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[1224] Alison Hennegan, 'Revelations, Recriminations, Rejection…,' *Gay News* 115 (March 24-April 6, 1977) 18.

[1225] Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts,' *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976), 6.

[1226] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 193.

[1227] See Davina Cooper and Didi Herman, 'Getting "the Family Right": Legislating Heterosexuality in Britain, 1986-91,' in Didi Herman and Carl Stychin (eds), *Legal inversions: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Law* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) 162-179.

[1228] Virginia Preston (ed), '*Section 28 and the Revival of Gay, Lesbian and Queer Politics in Britain,' ICBH Witness Seminar Programme* (24 November 1999) 44.

Their concerns were specific to themselves – a small subset of a marginalised group – during a time when feminist activists were concerned with fighting for what they perceived to be the concerns of the greater proportion of women.

## Lesbian Mothers' Lack of Participation

It was left mostly to lesbian mothers to fight against discrimination against themselves. In 1988, the year Section 28 was enacted, Allen noted that married lesbian mothers, who were occupied with raising their children, received little support and often antagonism from other women:

> As with all oppressions, the burden of responsibility in seeking change has rested on those most affected: lesbian mothers themselves. It has been a hard graft both organizing politically, and in our homes raising our children, against unremitting opposition and with little help from those we might have thought ourselves to be in alliance with.[1229]

If most supporters of activism for lesbian custody were lesbian mothers, which mothers were most likely to volunteer their time and energy? There were mothers who won custody, mothers who did not divorce, and mothers who were not awarded custody of their children.

Women who had custody of their children were unlikely to participate in any activism to help other lesbian mothers. Jennings notes that 'challenging the nuclear family model by presenting alternative family structures in positive terms could pose a considerable risk to a woman's ability to have access to or custody of her children'.[1230] Fearful that their ex-husbands could challenge them for custody until the children reached age sixteen, it was risky for lesbian mothers to be public about their sexuality; many were under surveillance by welfare authorities. For some mothers, fear of the repercussions of their employers knowing their sexuality would have curtailed their participation in lesbian or feminist campaigns. Participation required the freedom to travel widely, attend evening and weekend events, and live in collective housing – all freedoms denied to most lesbian mothers due to practical considerations of caring for

[1229] Allen and Harne, 'Lesbian Mothers,' 185.
[1230] Jennings, *Lesbian Intimacies,* 179.

their children.[1231] Julie Burchell, editor of the *KENRIC Mothers' Group Newsletter,* claimed that lesbian mothers' circumstances made their isolation different from other lesbian women. She explained that lesbian mothers often did not have the financial resources to hire a babysitter and travel to meetings or conferences: 'It is not at all easy for them to attend the KENRIC events, having to find a babysitter, etc and indeed, money may be so tight that some couldn't afford to go even if they wanted to'.[1232] One mother complained to ROW in 1988 about living in poverty while dependent on maintenance payments from her husband to support their children who were living with her.[1233] When mothers came out to their families they were often ostracised and therefore lacked familial support for their children. Although one mother had enjoyed custody of her daughter for eight years in the 1970s, she explained to *Gay News* that she feared her ex-husband reapplying for custody because he had learned of her trying to help other lesbian mothers. Although her ex-husband had remarried and had shown little interest in their daughter, when he learned of her activism, he thought their daughter was in 'moral danger'.[1234] Women who had won custody had nothing to personally gain from supporting other mothers' fight for custody, and their children to lose.

Mothers who remained married were also unlikely to support campaigns either through volunteering or donations. Many were secretive about their sexuality or did not have had the time, money, opportunity, or inclination to fight for mothers who chose to divorce. Married mothers had obligations to their children and husbands. Many lived across the country, in both rural and suburban areas, which made it difficult to gather routinely or attend occasional conferences. Mothers often lamented their isolation in small towns and villages.[1235] It was difficult and often detrimental to their own custody

[1231] Jennings, 'Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody,' 506.

[1232] 'Noticeboard,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (December 1992) 5 LMA/4720/06/01/018.

[1233] Mary Latham, 'Correspondence to ROW,' (2 September 1988) LSE/5ROW Box 9.

[1234] 'Lesbian Mothers Draw up Battle Plans,' *Gay News* 193 (June 12-25 1980) 5.

[1235] Women often stated their isolation when advertising for friendship in contact ads in the *KENRIC Newsletter*. 'Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (October 1978) LMA/4720/06/01; Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (October 1986) 7, LMA/4720/06/01/12*;* Contact Advertisements,' *KENRIC Newsletter* (November 1994) 13, LMA/4720/06/01/019.

situation for married lesbian mothers to support other women who had decided to divorce.

Women who did not have custody of their children were most likely to get involved in activism. They told their stories to the gay, feminist, and public press. During an interview for *Spare Rib*, Mary lamented the loss of her son John, and she and her female partner vowed to fight for other mothers: 'If we can fight to make things different for other people in the future we shall do so. And we certainly do not intend to be ostriches'.[1236] As explained previously, Griffiths organised a conference in 1980 because she was angry about her husband having custody of her daughters and was eager to share her story and to 'campaign to publicise the cruelty and injustice of court decisions against lesbian mothers'.[1237] Mothers also told their stories in mainstream journals, although sometimes anonymously.[1238] However, mothers who did not have custody were often concerned about maintaining access to their children and may have decided it was best not to inflame their ex-husbands' ire by being visible in the feminist or lesbian movements. Visits with their children may also have been monitored by the state. Working fulltime and perhaps spending weekends with their children precluded women putting time and energy into any form of political activism. After her divorce, Natalie finished her MA in psychology and established her own practice in east London, all while returning to the matrimonial home a couple times a week to visit her sons and cook dinner.[1239] Many mothers like Natalie simply did not have the time to dedicate to the plight of other lesbian mothers. As their children aged and custody became less of an issue for themselves, lesbian mothers may have been even less likely to fight for other lesbian mothers.

Mothers who lived with their children, whether through remaining married or getting care and control upon divorce, deployed their time and energy raising their

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[1236] Eleanor Stephens, 'Out of the Closet and Into the Courts,' *Spare Rib* 50 (1976) 7.

[1237] 'Custody – Crying Won't Help,' *Gay News* (March 20-April 2, 1980) 9; 'Lesbian Mothers OK,' *Gay News* 191 (May 15-28, 1980) 1.

[1238] Shirley Risdon, 'The Homosexual and the Courts: A Critique,' *Family Law* 7:2 (1977) 78-80; Anonymous, 'Conspiracy of Illness,' *Mental Health* (Summer 1968) 16-18.

[1239] Interview with Natalie Collins, 3 August 2023.

children. They also had great impetus to not be controversial for they often risked their ex-husbands reapplying for custody if it became known that they were lesbian, feminist, or activist. Similarly for the same reasons, mothers who did not have custody upon divorce risked losing access. Mothers who were most likely to fight for other mothers were those who had lost their children in custody disputes and had nothing more to lose.

## Into the 1990s

The 1990s witnessed a change of focus for activism for lesbian mothers, due in part to the *Children Act 1989* and to women starting families outside of marriage. Implemented in 1991, the Act had eliminated "custody": fundamentally changing the decisions made about the children of divorce.[1240] Both parents had parental responsibility, akin to joint custody, and only residence, where the child would live, needed to be decided. Between 1991 and 2000, I found only one Court of Appeal case between a lesbian mother and her husband.[1241] Disputes between lesbian couples and between lesbian parents and male sperm donors began to appear in court records in the 1990s.[1242] With more single women becoming parents through AID, self-insemination, and adoption, backlash extended to all women who chose to raise children without men. At ROW, the project on lesbian custody became the Lesbian Parenting and the Law Project, which concerned lesbian parents – both the women who gave birth and the women who parented – in disputes with each other and with fathers.[1243]

Concern for violence towards women escalated in the 1990s. ROW had previously noted that the family was the location of a high incidence of both sexual abuse of girls and violence again women, as recognised by the women's

[1240] Chapter Three provides a further examination of the *Children Act 1989.*
[1241] *Re N (Minors).*
[1242] Helen Carroll, 'Lesbians in Court Clashes Over Son,' *Daily Mail* 31196 (27 September 1996) 2.
[1243] Harne and ROW, *Valued Families.*

movement.[1244] The *Children Act 1989,* through providing fathers greater access to their children, facilitated fathers' access to their ex-wives. Women who had experienced violence from their husbands in the past were now at greater risk of further abuse. In the early 1990s, ROW initiated a working group on domestic violence to chart how women experienced abuse and fled from their male partners. Although the *Children Act 1989* had many positive consequences, Alldred, who worked on the Children Act Domestic Violence Working Group – a research group to support ROW lobbying for women fleeing domestic abuse – summarised 'that in relation to women who were trying to get out of relationships it was being used in the courts in a conservative way, in a way that said children need their fathers'.[1245] Alldred said that it was implied that when a woman divorced her husband she was depriving her children of their father. Alldred explained:

> There just wasn't a gendered analysis. There wasn't an analysis of why it would be difficult to disclose something or why it might be difficult to find help or why it might be difficult to leave an abusive situation. All of which felt like they were better understood within feminist organisations or within the women's sector.[1246]

Meanwhile, support was growing for fathers' involvement in their children's lives in organisations such as Families Need Fathers.

## Conclusion

Activism for lesbian mothers fighting custody cases started slowly in 1974 by a select few volunteer women in GWMC, then ALP in 1975, and gained traction in 1982 with the GLC-funded Lesbian Custody Project of ROW. Other initiatives began with grand ambitions but without funding and volunteer support they were soon defunct. The initiatives that made the biggest difference for women fighting for custody upon divorce were the research studies, which debunked the corruption argument, and the accessibility of legal professionals that were knowledgeable in fighting custody battles for lesbian mothers. A solicitor who was willing and capable of helping a lesbian

[1244] ROW, 'Families Need Fathers: National Access Conference' (12 November 1982) LSE/5ROW Box 6.

[1245] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

[1246] Interview with Pam Alldred, 3 May 2023.

mother through her divorce meant that she was more likely to obtain a satisfactory settlement, either in negotiations or in court. Sympathetic family law professionals counselled divorcing lesbian mothers, but into the 1990s and beyond they helped lesbian mothers with disputes over parental rights with either their lesbian partners or with sperm donors. From the late 1970s onward, as fewer lesbians got married and greater numbers sought instead to create families through AID, fostering, and adoption, custody battles with husbands were the concern of a shrinking minority. Although activism for married lesbian mothers held little attraction for the wider lesbian and feminist community and even for the mothers themselves, it paved the way for wider activism for parental rights for all gay fathers and lesbian mothers. Research into children's psychosexual development continued into the twentieth-first century, challenging the "normalcy" of the nuclear family. But it was the lesbian wives themselves, who challenged traditional gender roles by bravely leaving their marriages to raise their children alone or with other women, who were the most provocative. They were the first to illustrate to society that lesbians were mothers and that families headed by lesbians were not only possible, but that their children thrived.

# Conclusion

Interest in the narrative of lesbian custody cases persists fifty years after Coote penned her polemic article for *The Guardian*. During three years of doctoral research, journalists twice approached me to ask for my help, but I chose not to collaborate. The first hoped to gain access to my contact list of lesbian mothers and the second journalist summarized three decades of custody cases in a twenty-eight-minute audio for BBC Sounds. This 2024 exposé, like many of the numerous articles in newspapers and the gay and feminist press of the 1970s and 1980s, presents a partisan, provocative view of legal process through the lens of a select few lesbian mothers who were willing to tell their stories. The BBC website describes a scandal: 'From the 1970s through to even the early 1990s, a shocking pattern existed where the UK courts removed children from lesbian mums'.[1247] This thesis corrects this enduring rhetoric that implies that the state intervened in families' lives and removed children from their lesbian mothers. Custody cases between divorcing parents were not state-wide intervention in private lives of its citizens. When negotiations between parents failed, they went to court to have the judiciary decide which parent should live with the children. There was no statute barring lesbian mothers from raising their children but there was a statute tasking the judiciary to decide what was in the best interests of the children. Depending on individual circumstances, the judiciary sometimes gave custody to fathers and sometimes to lesbian mothers.

Some lesbian mothers suffered humiliating and offensive homophobia from their husbands, judges, and lawyers: mothers' emotional testimonials are disturbing. Wives who litigated custody, although they were the ones most likely to come forward with their stories, were the minority of lesbian mothers. Foregrounding their narratives has ignored the experiences of most lesbian mothers. There is a vast range of experiences, from amicable divorces where lesbian wives raised the children to the experience of Susan Liddell, whose husband stabbed her to death with a screwdriver

[1247] Wilkinson,' Missing Pieces'.

in 1975 a few days after she left him for another woman. The most common experience was lesbian mothers who negotiated an agreement with ex-husbands outside of court, either relinquishing care of their children or retaining some degree of parental responsibility. Articles about lesbian custody in the 1970s through the 1990s were written primarily by feminists and activists, who were motivated to publicise the negative experiences of lesbian mothers. Coote's 1975 article in *The Guardian* was significant because it prompted a few feminists to form the first major volunteer-led group to help lesbian mothers. This thesis, however, illustrates that newspapers and the gay and feminist press misrepresented judicial discourse and provided biased accounts. Articles and advice books, including two books that acknowledged that there was no means of knowing how many lesbian mothers litigated custody, promulgated generalizations that courts did not award custody to lesbian mothers in all or nearly all instances. Examination of court cases are opportunities for historians to uncover hidden narratives, particularly of lesbian mothers in custody disputes and criminal cases. Judgements, law reports, and legal scholarship are useful and reliable sources for historians, but basic knowledge of statutes and legal procedures is essential to find and understand court cases. Articles in the newspapers and the gay and feminist press can aid the search for court cases, but they are not reliable sources of judicial discourse or unbiased details of cases. For example, via an extensive search of legal databases, this thesis corrects the historiography to relocate the first known custody case won by a lesbian mother from 1985 to 1965 and evidences that lesbian mothers were sometimes awarded custody of their children in court.

This thesis is careful not to refer to lesbian mothers who "lost" custody, except when those were the words used by the media, for it implies mothers automatically had custody and it was theirs to lose. While some mothers had interim custody – status quo – while negotiating or litigating custody, interim custody was not a final decision and was only one aspect judges considered when deciding what was in the best interests of the children. However, divorced heterosexual parents usually continued heteronormative gender roles: mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners. When it became widely publicised that courts were unlikely to award care and control to lesbian mothers – many of whom were stay-at-home mums who had provided daily care for their children since birth – some feminists and lesbian mothers were alarmed. Ironically, the anger about courts not always assigning one hundred percent of the

daily care of children to lesbian mothers upon divorce opposed feminist ideas that women had options other than motherhood and that child-rearing should be shared between parents. There was a vast range of experiences for lesbian mothers. Not all mothers wanted to live with their children after divorce: some felt that children interfered with their new lifestyle while others, mostly for economic reasons, felt that it would be best for their children to live with their fathers. Some mothers felt guilty taking children away from their fathers while others felt guilt for leaving children with their fathers. Others had deep feelings of remorse for dividing their families decades after divorce. These feelings of guilt were tied in part to beliefs that children needed influence from both fathers and mothers. Such beliefs echoed those of Court of Appeal judges, who asserted that it was axiomatic that children were ideally raised by their fathers and mothers.

The nuclear family was not exclusively heterosexual. When marriage was nearly universal, many lesbians were wives. This thesis encourages scholars to reconsider those whom they have assumed to be heterosexual. Courtship looks different when you consider that some young women desired only women. They dated men to appear like everyone else and because agony aunts claimed they would one day meet the “right man”. Women who desired women read women’s weeklies, and many yielded to magazines’ prescription that motherhood within marriage was the epitome of every woman’s existence. Despite their desire for women, many accepted traditional gender roles and became housewives and mothers. Married lesbians exemplify women who married for pragmatic reasons. But marriage had its challenges. Perhaps not unlike many heterosexual wives, lesbians endured conjugal relations as a marital duty. When their husbands learned of their desire for women, wives were at risk of domestic abuse. Nonetheless, lesbian wives had great impetus to remain married: in addition to economic and social concerns, they feared being separated from their children. Therefore, employment and education of married mothers looks different when you consider that some lesbian wives planned to be self-sufficient to be able to leave loveless or abusive marriages. When lesbians separated from their husbands, they often did so because they sought emotional and physical intimacy, something which was lacking in their marriages. Thereby lesbians illustrate how love, rather than pragmatic concerns, became a greater impetus for women to engage in

long-term relationships. In greater numbers from the 1970s onwards, despite economic hardships and social disapproval, lesbians rejected their heteronormative lifestyle and divorced, often raising their children either as lone mothers or in partnerships with other women. Without much recognition, lesbians have been part of the nuclear family. This thesis illustrates that lesbian history is an integral part of women's history.

Similarly, this thesis encourages queer historians to examine queer lives before coming out narratives. Many women who identified as lesbian admitted previous sexual relations with men. Many spouses were homosexual, and lived for decades, perhaps nearly their entire lifetimes, passing as heterosexual. Many lesbian wives found means to balance relationships with women with their obligations to their families. Many used the title of Mrs, had sex with their husbands, and had no intention of leaving their marriages. In the 1960s and 1970s, many self-defined lesbians who had never married argued that wives were not lesbians. In rebuttal, wives explained that they were lesbians because they desired only women, not men, despite their heteronormative lifestyle. This latter definition prevailed. Considering that motherhood within marriage was a near universal mandate for women until the last quarter of the twentieth century, if a woman's only objects of sexual desire were women, then she should be included in lesbian history.

This thesis, through examination of a broad selection of primary sources, has uncovered the wide range of experiences of lesbian wives in the last half of the twentieth century. Criminalization of lesbianism similar to the *Labouchere Amendment* was not required to make lesbians conform to the patriarchal institution of marriage; societal and economic pressures were more than sufficient to compel women who desired women to wed. Social and economic changes that gave women autonomy – such as control of their bodies, equal pay, and access to education – gradually freed women from motherhood within marriage. Being a wife and mother was no longer women's only option. Nonetheless, many social pressures remained for lesbians: many lesbian wives did not divorce, and some young lesbians wed at the end of the twentieth century. Disseminating the vast experiences of married lesbian mothers, not just the few who litigated custody unsuccessfully, illustrates that married lesbians were a significant minority in nuclear families in the twentieth century.

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# Appendix A: Lesbian Custody Cases

Divorce cases before the *Divorce Reform Act 1969:*

| Case | Court | Date | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Gardner v Gardner* | Probate, Divorce & Admiralty Division | 10/03/1947 | [1947] I All ER 630 |
| *Gould v Gould* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 26/01/1977 | [1952] 2 All ER 854 |
| *Markovic v Markovic* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 12/07/1977 | [1954] I WLR 1051 |
| *Cummins v Vassallo* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 04/02/1981 | [1981] EWCA Civ J0204-4 vLex |

Divorce cases access, joint custody, or where the sister of the deceased mother was lesbian:

| Case | Court | Date | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Taylor v Taylor* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 24/06/1976 | [1976] EWCA Civ J0624-3 vLex |
| *Davis v Davis* | Court of Appeal | 27/10/1952 | [1977] EWCA Civ J0126-3 vLex |
| *Spicer v Spicer* | Probate, Divorce & Admiralty Division | 12/07/1977 | [1977] EWCA Civ J0712-2 vLex |

Divorce cases where mothers were known to be lesbian:

| Case | Court | Date | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Coffer v Coffer* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 30/07/1965 | [1965] EWCA Civ J0730-3 vLex |
| *Re B (TA) (An Infant)* | Court of Appeal | 28/07/1970 | [1970] 3 All ER 705 |
| *Whitfield v Whitfield* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 4/11/1976 | [1976] EWCA Civ J1104-1 vLex |
| *S v S (Custody of Children)* | Court of Appeal | 21/06/1978 | [1980] 1 FLR 143 |
| *Walker v Walker* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 17/06/1980 | [1980] EWCA Civ J0617-1 vLex |
| *Eveson v Eveson* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 27/11/1980 | [1980] EWCA Civ J1127-6 vLex |
| *Re P (A Minor) (Custody)* | Court of Appeal | 21/07/1982 | [1983] 4 FLR 401 |
| *Re D and D (a Minor)* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 16/02/1983 | [1983] EWCA Civ J0216-3 vLex |
| *Holder v Holder* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 12/12/1985 | [1985] EWCA Civ J1212-4 vLex |
| *B v B (Minors) (Custody, Care and Control)* | Judge Callman sat as a High Court Judge | 6/07/1990 | [1991] 1 FLR 402 |
| *C v C (A Minor) (Custody: Appeal)* | Court of Appeal | 24/08/1990 | [1991] 1 FLR 223 |
| *Re 'A' (A Minor)* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 26/07/1991 | [1991] EWCA Civ J0726-2 vLex |

Divorce cases after the *Children Act 1989:*

| Case | Court | Date | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Re N (Minors)* | Court of Appeal, Unreported | 02/09/1994 | [1994] EWCA CIV J0902-3 |

# Appendix B: The Lesbian Custody Charter

## Appendix B: The Lesbian Custody Charter

1. An end to discrimination against lesbian mothers

   Many lesbians are mothers and we all live with the threat of losing custody of our children solely on the grounds of our sexuality.

2. An end to the additional discrimination faced by lesbian mothers as a result of racial discrimination

   The racism of the legal system operates to discriminate against black and ethnic minority lesbian mothers. Also, some lesbian mothers are discriminated against by racist and sexist immigration and nationality laws and practices.

3. An end to the additional discrimination face by lesbian mothers who are working class

   Working class lesbian mothers face extra discrimination because of the anti-working class attitudes of judges and lawyers. Also many do not have the middle class privileges of education, language, connections and finances.

4. An end to the additional discrimination faced by lesbian mothers as a result of a disability

   At present, lesbian mothers are treated as though they are incompetent and unable to care for children because they have a disability.

5. An end to lesbian mothers' enforced separation from their children

   Courts frequently deny lesbian mothers custody and access rights and give custody to fathers [who] may have had little or no involvement in the children's upbringing. Judges have threatened to put children into local authority care rather than leave them with their lesbian mothers.

6. An end to the enforced separation of children from their lesbian mothers

   The stated desire of children to live with their lesbian mothers is often discounted.

7. No conditions on a lesbian mother's custody or access rights

   Lesbian mothers who are awarded custody or access often have very restrictive conditions imposed on them. For example, lesbian mothers have been told that they must not let their children see their lover. Often supervision orders are placed on lesbian mothers whereby the Social Services keep watch over a mother's behaviour and lifestyle

8. Lesbians should have the same rights as heterosexuals to foster and adopt

   Local authorities should welcome lesbians as adoptive or foster parents. They should make statements in support of lesbians caring for and having custody of

children. Young lesbians should have the option of requesting a placement with a lesbian mother.

9. Lesbian co-parents should not be denied custody or access rights on the grounds of their sexuality

   At the moment lesbians bringing up children with their lovers or involved in shared childcare are denied custody by the courts, for example, should the biological mother die. Lesbian lovers are co-parents are also discriminated against by the courts refusing them any contact with children they have been living with/caring for.

10. An end to the myth of the normal family

    It is time that the courts and social services recognised that there are many varied forms of family structures and that the nuclear family (mother, father and 2.3 children living together) is no longer the 'norm', nor is it necessarily 'in the best interests of the children'.