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Gender Roles in LGBT Families in Ukraine: Idealization and Reproduction of Heteronormativity

Among the variety of forms of cohabitation only heterosexual monogamous relationships are recognized in Ukrainian state politics, thus constructing the norm and marginalizing the rest of the forms of relationships, including same-sex families. So, LGBT families in Ukraine are invisible, especially on the level of state statistics and research. A limited number of studies conducted by LGBT organizations estimate that there are some 100,000-200,000 same-sex couples in Ukraine.[1] Such estimates say more about the very existence of LGBT families in the country instead of their exact number.

Same-sex families are characterized by a number of features compared to heterosexual families. First of all, as could be confirmed by public opinion polls,[2] there is rather high level of homophobia in Ukrainian society that has increased over last ten years. Secondly, the gender roles played by lesbians, gays, and transgender people are not that strict compared to heterosexual couples when it comes to the division of household duties or duties in the public sphere, and are less based on power and inequality. As indicated by an American sociologist Michael Kimmel in his work "The Gendered Society," gay and lesbian couples are "less likely to fall into the patterns of inequality" that define heterosexual marriages. By bringing together two people of the same gender, gender inequality is neutralized and gender difference eliminated."[3] That means that LGBT families have a bigger potential than heterosexual families to create relations based on equality.

This article is part of report "LGBT Families in Ukraine: Legislative Regulations and Social Practice" published by NGO "Insight" in cooperation with the Heinrich Boell Foundation Warsaw Office, Kyiv 2011. The empirical data in my research consist of in-depth interviews carried out in July-September 2011 with seven LGBT families from different regions of Ukraine (central, northern and southern). The interviewees included three gay couples, three lesbian couples and one transsexual couple. Five of these couples are raising children born with the use of a donor, artificial insemination or from previous heterosexual marriages. The couples have been in their relationships and have lived

together from 3 to 15 years. Each partner was interviewed separately (around 45 minutes – 1 hour) on the peculiarities of gender (family) roles in private relationships, on attitudes towards family institution and its parts (marriage and parenthood). Patriarchal and egalitarian aspects of gender roles and their essential component were characterized.

Interpretation of Family

On the question of identity of their own long-term relationships, respondents of this study almost unanimously determined them as family. Almost all indicated that common space (shared accommodation) is important to family life, it could be identified with certainty of life choices and stable relationship. Questions from parents and friends regarding to the fact of cohabitation always raises questions of coming-out. Queer families are often forced to explain their cohabitation with the help of economic reason ("it is cheaper to share an apartment"), while marking their family relations as friendly. For some respondents, having children and caring for them is crucial for family relationships; this is so called "formula" of family happiness. Of course, gay men who want to have children, face bigger problems than women because they cannot give birth themselves, and to have a baby using a surrogate mother or by adoption in Ukraine is rather difficult and sometimes impossible. However, some respondents who do not have children, are quite critical to child-centred ideal for family relationships, as it excludes a number of couples from public family discourse.

An important aspect of family relationships shared by a majority of respondents is family traditions, holidays and anniversaries. The absence of structuring traditional and external support mechanisms (such as registered marriage, fear of loss of status, public opinion) on the one hand, makes LGBT families vulnerable, but on the other hand, permits greater flexibility and freedom in the search for mechanisms to maintain relationships and family preservation (for example, they independently construct and reconstruct the history of their relationship). Some couples wear wedding rings. Deprived of the right to a formal wedding rituals and features of the official recognition of relationships, same-sex couples use wedding rings as a symbol of securing a new status of their relationship, recognition at the interpersonal and social level:

"At the 5-year anniversary, we bought the ring. So we wanted. (...) Co-workers, when I returned after the holidays with a ring, made their conclusions and decided that this was engagement" (Polina).

One respondent, 42-year-old Ostap told about the wedding ceremony in the Orthodox Church as an important personal practice and ritual declaration

of mutual obligations and commitment to partner. The respondents' attitudes towards the (lack of) possibility to enter into marriage as a sign of the family differ: some of them are for and would like to do this (seeing marriage as an indicator of stability, seriousness of intentions and plans for the future); others have quite a sceptical attitude, although in general they talk a lot about the necessity to protect LGBT rights in state institutions.

Gender Roles in LGBT Families

In analysis of gender roles in LGBT families, I use the established classification of the so-called two ideal types: traditional and egalitarian. Traditional gender roles are dual opposition, based on a functionalist approach: the man (the father) takes on the role of "breadwinner" who earns tangible income for the family, while the woman (the mother) assumes the role of "housewife" and "keeper of the hearth." Egalitarian roles, instead, are based on the same and, if possible, an equal distribution of responsibilities. No emphasis is placed on "natural" roles, assuming household duties can be performed equally.

Katerina Nedbalkova, in her research of lesbian families in the Czech Republic, wrote that the institution of family and relationship intimacy is deeply gendered, based on gender roles, and therefore is heteronormative. Same-sex families are also inscribed into heteronormative society and are characterized by gender division.[4]

Answering questions about the distribution of domestic responsibilities, most respondents emphasized egalitarianism within their families. Same-sex families are often contrasted this to traditional division of gender roles in heterosexual unions, and based their comparisons on their own previous experience or marriage, or on the experiences of their families and friends.

The question of "head of family" by the majority of respondents is perceived quite critical, even sceptical. However, for some families the notion of "head of family" was important. Mostly older and "more experienced" partners were named in such a way.

During the interviews it became clear that direct questions about the distribution of housework in the family is ineffective because they brought on quite expected answers such as "we do everything together" and "we have full parity." Further explanations of everyday practices and additional clarification from interviewee about specific types of household responsibilities appeared to be more fruitful. Despite statements on the egalitarian family roles, the division of labour in household depends primarily on the involvement of partners to the labour market. This distribution, when the partner who does

not work full time or works part time is also engaged in household, many couples perceived as fair and "natural."

Moreover, respondents were not always able to explain why sometimes it is only one person in a couple who tends to always have the time to do housework. For example, one female explained her greater share in household labour precisely with having a lot of time, also calling her non-office (distant) work as "staying at home."

The question of the so-called traditionally "male" household work, of who does it and how, sometimes arose in interviews with lesbian couples. The respondents used heteronormative concepts of gender roles division, according to which there is a traditional "male" role in the household:

"I usually ask my father to help if there is anything complicated. He comes and helps us, since male hands, obviously, are quite important. But if there is anything we can do on our own, it is usually my girlfriend, who is not very tall but quite slender, who likes to do something with a hammer and nails" (Viktoria).

On the contrary, in male couples no one talked about any "female" work that the partners were not able to do on their own and for which they would constantly need to invite a woman (mother, grandmother, sisters) from outside the couple.

Mechanisms of Idealisation and Normalisation in LGBT Families

During the in-depth interviews with LGBT couples it seems that queer-families are constantly forced to demonstrate that they are perfect. The respondents used to mention their problems rarely. Typical example can be the answer given in this study by Valentyna (45 years old): "I think our family is ideal?! No other options." Such idealization is a form of legitimizing your relationship in a society where the mere existence of same-sex couples is often ignored or marginalized. Since not all LGBT families have good relations with their parents or other relatives, very often they need to prove in all possible ways that everything is perfect in their own family.

Another mechanism of legitimization of the phenomenon of LGBT families by respondents was "normalizing" their own relationships by using heteronormative language and traditional categories such as "normal" or "right."

Media plays an important role in constructing "normality" discourse on queer-families in Ukraine. Non-existence of LGBT relations in Ukrainian media could influence respondents' perception of their own families and relationships. For instance, one of the respondents who has been living in a lesbian

relationship for a long time sees it as strange for homosexual couples to have the possibility of going through an official marriage procedure:

"I can hardly imagine it. Well, maybe a civil ceremony, a normal wedding, I could imagine that. (…) But still, it's somehow strange. It's so pompous, such celebration (…). A suit and a dress seem more logical than two dresses" (Kateryna).

Sometimes, respondents who consider that "the society is not ready" to learn about their family, use a strategy of silence, avoiding questions about "uncomfortable issues" or hiding the visual symbols which manifest their queer identity. Thus, they do not go to corporate parties with their partner, they avoid talking about their personal life: "So as not to take part in private conversations. It's better to avoid them" (Georgiy). The common space of living can be even more "filtered" when parents come to visit:

"We hide all the photos, take off all lesbian stickers or magnets; we still haven't put them back after last time my dad visited. We delete unnecessary tabs from Mozilla, so that an unwanted issue does not crop up" (Svetlana).

Therefore, there can be very different mechanisms of normalizing one's experiences that go beyond the social norm. No wonder that parents of LGBT couples, even if they accept the life choices of their children, may want them to normalize this state, for example by performing one of the fundamental functions (in the heteronormative sense of family) such as having a child. Such mechanisms as idealization and normalization of own family relations or adopting the heterosexual symbols of marriage and family, all show that LGBT families do not always propose a division of duties which is alternative to the traditional one, or are able to critically evaluate and deconstruct the dominant concepts of the only possible forms of social life, entrenched in main state institutions.

It would be naive to believe that LGBT families are free from general societal framework of heteronormativity and gender norms. Gender is an inevitable part of our lives, a system that structures society; it is present in every situation of our interaction. LGBT families are forced to obey the demand of silence, control their expression. Queer families exist in a state that does not recognize them – in a Ukrainian society that marginalizes them as all other form of non-heteronormative sexuality. Society forces queer families to follow standards of "ideal," "normal" family and demands non-visibility in public discourse. In this situation mentioned above, mechanisms are helpful for respondents to construct their own place in the heteronormative society.

References

1. See Maymulakhin A., Kasyanchuk A., Leshchinskiy M. Odnopoloye partnyorstvo v Ukraine (Same-sex partnership in Ukraine), Donetsk, 2009, p. 25.

2. Ukrainian homosexuals and the society: mutual infiltration. Overview of the situation: society, state, politicians, media, legal context, gay community, "Our World" LGBT Centre, Kyiv, 2007; Love-based discrimination. Report on the rights of gays and lesbians in Ukraine, Kyiv, 2005; Human rights in Ukraine, the level of xenophobia, attitudes towards migrants and refugees, attitudes towards manifestation of extremism. Report of the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, 2010.

3. Kimmel M.S. The Gendered Society, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 144.

4. Nedbalkova K. Rendering Gender in Lesbian Families: A Czech Case / R. Kulpa and J. Mizieli ska (Eds.), De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives, London: Ashgate, 2011, p. 133.