



Young Women's Health Project

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Teenage Pregnancy LGBT Research- Laura Critchley

For this piece of research, I have used oral histories to see if there is a connection between becoming pregnant as a teenager/young woman and young women's sexual orientation.

Evidence suggests some young women may become pregnant as a response to their sexual orientation. 77.3% of self-identified lesbians reported sex with one or more male in their lifetimes (Diamant AL., 1999) and lesbian and bisexual young women are twice as likely to report having ever been pregnant than their heterosexual peers (12% compared to 5-6% for lesbian/bisexual women and heterosexual/questioning women respectively) (Saewyc EM., 1999).

I interviewed five young women for this piece of research (case studies follow) and recorded their responses. I also spoke to a number of other young people; these young people were of all sexual orientations, gender identities and ethnicities. I asked these people a number of questions to gain their opinions on whether they feel that teenage pregnancy is in anyway linked to sexual orientation.

The young women interviewed ranged from 21 to 25 years old and became pregnant between the ages of 14 and 20. One of the young women that provided their story for this research was not actually the biological mother of her son, but provided the story of her partner who died last year. All names used for the case studies are made up; all participants have been kept anonymous at their request.

Case Study One – Jane

Name: Jane

Age: 21

Age when got pregnant: 14

Sexual Orientation: Lesbian

Ethnicity: White British

Children: None

Jane received a lot of homophobic bullying while at school, particularly in PE as a result of her being good at sports and it was assumed that she was looking at other young women getting changed. Accepted by friends, although she feels this was particularly because “they were part of the “alternative” group where everyone was a goth or an emo or a bit geeky or different in some way.”

Jane generally felt like her sexual orientation had been dismissed. “I came out as bisexual at first and people dismissed it as a phase or as being OK because I still liked boys. When I came out as lesbian it was again dismissed because I still had a boyfriend.”

Jane did not make the decision to become pregnant as a young woman. She does not know who the father of her child was. She was subjected to abuse throughout her childhood and says that she was being raped by that same abuser on a regular basis. She also reports having been correctively raped by a young Asian man from her school who “said he was going to turn her (me) straight.” Although the decision to become pregnant was taken away from her, but she did want children, partly as an excuse to get out of the situation she was in through getting her own flat and benefits. She hadn’t considered that the baby would most likely have been taken away from her.

Jane had a miscarriage late into the pregnancy as a result of being hit in the stomach by her abuser who wanted to hide the pregnancy in case people discovered what he was doing. Jane was also taking drugs, drinking and smoking heavily.

Jane feels the pregnancy could have been related to her sexual orientation as she was subjected to a corrective rape.

Case Study Two – Maria and Sophie

Maria is a young lesbian mother, Sophie is the biological mother who died last year. Maria is telling Sophie’s story.

Name: Maria

Age: 21

Age when got pregnant: Sophie got pregnant first at 14, then at 18.

Ethnicity: White British

Children: One boy, age 5.

“Sophie never came out at school but people used to think she was (lesbian) and she got treated badly. I used to look after her she was in the year below me. She got bullied a lot. When the school told Sophie’s mum and dad she might be a lesbian they were really angry with her and told her if she didn’t get a boyfriend they were going to kick her out. They were a really religious family and they hated I was her best friend they thought I was going

to make her gay but you can't change who someone is and she was already a lesbian but she didn't tell anyone.

Sophie always wanted to be a mum she felt lonely and didn't have many friends and didn't get on with her family she wanted someone to love and who would love her. We couldn't easily be together because she was too scared to come out till she moved in with me. She got pregnant the first time at 14. She kinda wanted the baby but she mostly did it to prove to her mum and dad she wasn't lesbian. They made her get rid of it and she was depressed for ages and started taking drugs. I didn't like her sleeping with boys because she was my girlfriend but she wanted to be normal and didn't want to get kicked out.

I got my own flat when I was 19 and she moved in with me but she was already pregnant with our little boy she didn't know who the dad was though she slept with lots of boys so her mum and dad wouldn't get pissed with her they used to hit her whenever the school said anything about her being gay. We got engaged and I adopted our boy and everything was OK for a while but she got depressed again cause of her parents and she started using drugs again. She died from a drug overdose last year so I look after our boy now."

Maria believes that Sophie's pregnancies were related to her sexual orientation: "She did it because her mum and dad didn't want her to be gay."

Case Study Three – Lizzie

Name: Lizzie

Age: 25

Age when got pregnant: 18

Sexual Orientation: Lesbian

Ethnicity: White British

Children: One boy, age 6

Lizzie first tried to come out at 14, but they just dismissed the concept and as a result, Lizzie chose to bury it until later in life. She came out when she was 21 and her mum basically ignored it and hoped it would go away; when she realised it wasn't going away she tried to change everything in Lizzie's life until they stopped speaking altogether.

The situation at Lizzie's workplace is different: "At work, the young people take it quite well, they have a laugh and a joke because they don't completely understand most things

but generally they are open minded. The older colleagues are the worst as anytime I wear feminine clothes they ask if “I’m turning back” etc.

Lizzie feels like her sexual orientation was dismissed. “I think most lesbians/bisexuals will agree. People assume that if a girl says that she’s gay that it is just a phase however if a boy says he’s gay it is taken more seriously.”

Lizzie says that her pregnancy was an accident. She was on the Pill, but other precautions weren’t used and this led to the birth of her “beautiful boy.”

Lizzie doesn’t feel like her pregnancy was influenced by her sexual orientation at all. “I was in a serious relationship with a male and it was the “norm” thing to do. I was very open to him about my feelings towards women but at that time in my life I didn’t even think that I would meet another lesbian. I lived in a small town where everyone I knew was straight therefore I was going to live my life like anyone else and bury any feelings that I had had but after a while I met another lesbian and although all we ever was were friends, it created a rift in my marriage that made him turn into a bad husband and I left.”

Case Study Four – Sandra

Name: Sandra

Age: 21

Age when got pregnant: 20

Sexual Orientation: Bisexual

Ethnicity: White British

Children: One boy, age 1 month

Sandra has not come out to that many people and as a result has never really experienced any homophobia or biphobia. To those she has come out to, she feels like her sexual orientation has been accepted, she feels this is mostly because her sister is a lesbian.

Sandra became pregnant as a result of an accident. She did not intentionally become pregnant.

Sandra does not feel that her pregnancy has anything to do with her sexual orientation.

Case Study Five – Kayleigh

Name: Kayleigh

Age: 24

Age when got pregnant: 16
Sexual Orientation: Lesbian
Ethnicity: White British
Children: One boy, age 6 years

“It is hard at first for people to accept you (as a lesbian) especially with you having a child. They look at you differently and talk about you behind your back and some children say nasty things to my little boy that hurt me very much. I have been refused a job because of my sexuality.

It was dismissed at first especially by mum, she didn't speak to me for 4 months and that hurt. I have been accepted by everyone at work and family home environment and all of my other friends and family have all accepted me.

I was young (when I got pregnant), very young at sixteen but I wanted the chance to prove to my mum and dad I was strong enough and old enough to manage on my own. Which I was, I lived on my own in my own house and I managed fine with the help of my family.”

Kayleigh does not feel that her pregnancy was linked to her sexual orientation. “No, not at all, I had my baby because I wanted something to love and cherish and even though I am in a relationship now with a woman I would never have opted out of having a baby. He is my world, my universe and I am very proud of him and he's lucky to have two mummies.”

Summary

- 2 out of 5 of the young women felt like their pregnancy was linked to their sexual orientation.
- 1 of these young women became pregnant to hide her sexual orientation.
- 1 of these young women was a victim of corrective rape (rape where the intent is to change the sexual orientation of the victim).
- 2 out of 5 young women became pregnant accidentally.
- 2 of the young women wanted children.

I also gathered opinions from other young people on this subject:

- Five young people felt that it is common for young lesbian and bisexual women to become pregnant at a young age. Two felt that it is more common for young heterosexual women to become pregnant at a young age. Two others felt that

young lesbian and bisexual women are just as likely to become pregnant as heterosexual young women and one didn't know.

- There were a number of reasons for these opinions, here are some: "I think this is because we're made to feel ashamed of our sexuality and we're trying to hide it." "Denial." "To have a boyfriend and fit into the norm." "Straight women are more attracted to men, and therefore more likely to have sex at a younger age with a member of the opposite gender, but then out of that list I would say bisexual, and that's mainly out of social bias." "I'm not sure – they are having sex with men less often so their chances of getting pregnant are less."
- The emotions the group felt were behind this are: wanting kids, confusion, denial, guilt, unaccepting of sexuality, not knowing who they are, scared, possibly pressured, loneliness, the same as anyone else.
- When asked why they think young lesbian or bisexual women get pregnant as teenagers and whether they feel this is linked to their sexual orientation the responses were: "To prove you're not gay", "socially isolated", "rape and corrective rape", "In denial, turning straight", "Because you want kids", "Could be linked", and "I can't think of a reply, my gut instinct tells me that it isn't, not directly, there may be other parts like social pressure from their orientation that affects this but I don't directly think that it affects their chance of getting pregnant early."
- When asked if they have any other feelings on this subject, the responses were: "Some people get pregnant because they want kids", "Some lesbians get raped, and that's why they get pregnant", "Because they've been abused" and "Linked to social pressure."

This research has shown that there is a link between sexual orientation and becoming pregnant as a teenager or as a young woman. This may be as a result of rape or abuse or in an attempt to hide their sexual orientation. We know that lesbian and bisexual women do become pregnant and are twice as likely to do so as heterosexual women (12% compared to 6%); it is likely that some of these women become pregnant because of reasons linked to their sexual orientation. Though, it is important to remember that some young lesbian and bisexual women may become pregnant through their own choices.

"Caution must also be paid, so that we do not negate the fact that some young lesbians positively choose to become parents and take on the role of the mother." (Carr, S. 2010)

What is clear is that more needs to be done to raise awareness of these issues, so that there is not a presumption amongst health care professionals that pregnancy and teenage pregnancy is not an issue for lesbian and bisexual young women. This research suggests that Lesbian and Bisexual women need different messages and support to make informed choices about their reproductive rights.