

Legal recognition of LGB-parent families and science. An interview with Mar González

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Abstract *Mar González is a psychologist and one of the pioneers in studies on LGB-parent families in Spain. Her research work from the 2000s onwards played an essential role in the parliamentary debate in the country, which culminated in the approval of same-sex marriage in 2005. Spain, a Catholic-majority country that had left the Franco dictatorship three decades earlier, was the third country in the world, after Belgium and Netherlands, to recognize the right of gay and lesbian people to unite. Her studies address unconventional families, family diversity, child and family development, and their relationship with education and health. Our conversation addressed LBG parenthood, the establishment of filiation rights for this social group, studies on these family configurations, and leading LGB parenthood health implications.*

Key words *LGB parenthood, family diversity, LGB-parent families*

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Rosana – Could you tell us about your education and academic career?

Mar González – I have a degree in Psychology from the University of Seville and a Ph.D. in Psychology. I started as a researcher and a research fellow at the university, working on parent-child interactions and the construction of cognitive and linguistic development from a sociocultural framework, and how these developments are constructed. However, just after these studies, I became interested in family diversity. I started working with some family types that do not correspond to the conventional pattern, such as single-mother families after a divorce. From then on, I became interested in other family structures.

Rosana – When did you start these studies?

Mar González – It was in the late 1990s, especially 1997/1998, with studies on post-divorce families and single mothers. In 2002, we had the first study on lesbian mothers or gay fathers families, which we started in 2000¹.

Rosana – What motivated you to study LGB-parent family configurations?

Mar González – An intense debate about LGB-parent families opened in Spain in the late 90s of the 20th century. It was rooted in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, which legislated for the possibility of fostering families for married people and couples living together without any distinction – they could be different-sex or same-sex couples. Same-sex marriage had not yet been approved in Spain then, and there was no legislation in this regard. It was a conservative government, and there was much revolt. A fantastic review by Charlotte Patterson² was published in 1992 in *Child Development*, a central journal in developmental psychology. I read it and knew what happened to children growing up in this type of family because she reviewed everything published up to 1992. At the time of the social debate about LGB-parent Families, I taught a doctoral course on family diversity – a doctoral course in which I talked about family diversity, including lesbian-mother or gay-father families. Even more, I included LGB-parent families as a family diversity type in my exam to become an associate professor at the university in 1995.

Rosana – When does this topic become an academic concern, and in what area of knowledge does it begin?

Mar González – When our study was being conducted in Andalusia, I found out about an ongoing study in Anthropology in Barcelona, also on same-sex couple families. Another study was underway in the Department of Sociology in Barcelona. So, practically, these studies from the three groups are becoming known together. Ours is the first developmental psychology study conducted to answer social issues because there was a debate around the possibility of legislating. However, there was a strong social debate against it, with opposing positions saying that children could be affected by living with two mothers or two fathers and not having a father or mother figure or could be affected by living in a hostile, threatening, bullying environment at school. So, we aimed to respond to these social issues, clarify society's doubts, and do it through science documented by data. We knew data from other countries. When we intervened in some debates in the media, we commented on the studies in other countries. Back then, it was mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom, with research work by Susan Golombok's³ team (Psychologist, Professor of Family Research, and Director of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom), Charlotte Patterson's team (Psychologist, spearheads research work on LGB parenting, University of Virginia, United States of America), and other researchers in the United States. We also had other studies in the Netherlands and Belgium and some in Canada. So, there was already plenty of scientific evidence. However, in Spain, people said – yes, but those are other countries. Spain has Latin and Mediterranean people. Our culture is different. This part of childhood has much more weight, and these families and children will grow up poorly in this environment. Thus, we decided to answer these questions through research.

Rosana – In your early studies, what issues concerned you? On what topics exactly were these families being investigated?

Mar González – We wanted to know what their parents were like. If they were healthy, mentally, emotionally, and behaviorally fit people. Why was that? Because there were a lot of social issues, stigma, and prejudice surrounding LGB people. So, we wanted to know what their educational styles and their support network were like. Since

there was prejudice, we wanted to know whether they were isolated people who lived in 'ghettos,' relating only to other gay people, and how they organized their children's daily lives, as there was also this concern. Some people said that these children had an abnormal life, that they did not go to the parks and spent all day locked up in places and environments. So, the questions regarding the fathers and mothers were about the organization of daily life and educational and developmental practices. Concerning children, it was about their self-esteem, how their emotional and behavioral adjustment was, and how their gender relationships were because people also said that they would not have a well-defined gender identity due to the lack of two role models at home. People enquired about social acceptance, whether they had friends, and if they were well accepted at school and in relationships. Those were the fundamental questions.

Rosana – How was marriage regulated for these groups in Spain? How did these field studies and, let us say, your contribution, relate to this discussion?

Mar González – Our data were published in 2002, and there is much social unrest about the results. A part of society, the most conservative part, is not willing to accept that these children are growing up well, which is basically what the research says. They are growing up without mental health problems, have no self-esteem issues, and are being well looked after. They lead orderly lives very similar to those of their peers. They do not differ from their peers in practically any of the measures we took, except that they are more flexible on gender issues. Not that they have more knowledge than their peers, but they understand, for example, that both men and women can use a baby bottle. They are more flexible in considering what is masculine and what is feminine. They tend to consider that the job can be performed by men and women, even if they know that it has traditionally been assigned to the female or male genders. So, this data has been very shocking for some people, which opens up a debate and allows us to present it to the media. We divulged the results in 2002, and the law was enacted three years later, in 2005. It took three years of going to different provinces and showing the results nationwide at the invitation of the provinces. There was a lot of media coverage and debate. Finally, the government changed in 2004. The Partido Popular, a conservative party, left the national government, and the Spanish Socialist Party en-

tered again with President Rodríguez Zapatero. A bill was presented to Congress in 2004, just a few months before the change of government. There was a parliamentary debate, and the Senate stalled the process and asked experts to participate. They invited me as an expert or professional, and on the very day of my intervention, before my speech, a psychiatrist presented himself, a professor of psychiatry at the Complutense University of Madrid, who, in a presentation with no scientific basis makes claimed that gays are the offspring of abusers and they become abusers; they are the children of violent people or alcoholics, so much so that a revolt was triggered in the Senate Justice Committee. I then presented my data; of course, it was a striking contrast. This contrast between an ideology with no scientific basis and science-based data makes the parliamentary debate more interesting. Then, when the bill passed – the Equal Marriage Law – through Congress in 2005, it was approved by the majority. We believe that we contributed to this through science because we gave a scientific basis to extend civil rights to the LGBTI+ population in Spain. Only one sentence was changed in the Civil Code, but it had an immense effect, as it established the right to marriage between men and women and would have the same effect if it were between same-sex people. This last sentence was the only one changed in the Civil Code. However, it affected all the secondary laws since it was included in the Code. In other words, it affected adoption and everything the Code establishes regarding principles of civil rights and discussion in all areas.

Rosana – What benefits can we say this legal recognition has brought to LGB-parent families?

Mar González – It allowed legalizing their existing affective bonds. In other words, the family does not start to exist at the root of the law. As we had studied, they were pre-existing. They had a void of legal recognition, which explained, for example, that a real mother and father who had no legal bond with their children because they had not been able to legalize the bond could not accompany their children to an emergency room or could not be attended to by their children's school tutor because they had no legal bond with them. Moreover, this had already happened to these families. Not being legally bound restricted their rights to a large extent because they did not have the right to be looked after and cared for by their non-legal father, their real father. These

children were being deprived of several rights, and so were their parents, because they could not legally exercise paternity and maternity. So, this law legalized reality. It gave legitimacy to what was already a social reality and contributed – and this is very interesting from my viewpoint – to advancing the acceptance of the LGBTI+ population in our society. As you know, Spain had a dictatorship until 1975. Until the democratic constitution of 1978, same-sex relationships were criminally persecuted in Spain. In less than thirty years, from 1975 to 2005, we shifted the gay population and the LGBTI+ population from the Penal Code to the Civil Code. This is a revolution for any society and has led to the accelerated acceptance of LGBTI+ rights. As a result, Spain, along with Sweden and Denmark, is the country with the most significant acceptance of LGBTI+ rights in the world, a country with a Catholic tradition and where same-sex relationships were in the Penal Code until very recently. This early legalization – it was the third country in the world to do so – gave legitimacy, security, and peace of mind to families and an unequivocal educational message to society, which is that these families should enjoy the same rights as heterosexual people.

Rosana – You have studied how this legal recognition has led to changes in LGB-parent families. Could you share your thoughts with us about that?

Mar González – We performed an investigation when the government changed⁴. We had had two terms in office with the Socialist government, and in 2011, the People's Party came to power again, which had appealed against the marriage law as unconstitutional and threatened to revoke it. The Constitutional Court had denied their support. So, the families felt nervous and anxious. Thus, we decided to study their experience before marriage was approved, after it had been approved, and when we met, this moment of legal uncertainty about their future. It was beautiful to see how marriage had given them security, legitimacy, and a feeling of first-class citizenship in our society, which is very important. It had also given them social acceptance and openness. In other words, after marriage was approved, of all the families we interviewed, at least one awaiting international adoption, had married where this bond was pending. However, they said that, with the approval of marriage, they had shown themselves much more openly to their surroundings, extended family, friends, and acquaintances, es-

pecially at work. For example, more than 60% began openly accepting themselves as LGBTI+ people (previously 30% of those interviewed) and be LGBTI+ people with everyone. A stronghold of five to ten percent did not talk about it in a very patriarchal environment that persecuted same-sex relationships a lot. However, the vast majority talked about it openly and, of course, in the family. Friends started discussing it openly, which was a noticeable change.

Rosana – How can homophobia affect these families?

Mar González – Well, plenty of studies show the effect of belonging to a stigmatized minority and living in a prejudiced society. So, in the sociocultural environment closest to your family, friends, and neighbors and in the more distant groups, which do not accept same-sex relationships, which is homophobic, which persecutes them, as is now happening institutionally in Italy with the coming to power of a homophobic party, this clearly causes changes in the mental health of these minorities. Belonging to a minority but living in an environment that accepts them, that includes it, that allows it to live out its sexual diversity facilitates, let us say, serves as a counterbalance as a protective factor for these families who have to face homophobia at some point. Not a homophobic sociocultural environment. Institutionalized homophobia, growing homophobia under the law, which discriminates against those near and far, is harmful for these families, both parents and children. The other day, we interviewed a mature ten-year-old girl who told me she had grown up in a school where everyone knew her. Her parents had chosen a very open public school with an ideology open to diversity. Her classmates knew about her situation, having two parents and having been born through surrogacy. She was finishing school and would attend an institute that received young people from different educational centers. Many of them would not know her, and she was afraid of having to face homophobia and the rejection of families like hers. That was at the age of ten. That dream had already been taken away from her two years before she reached secondary school.

Rosana – Do you believe studying this topic in academia can be seen as a political action?

Mar González – It certainly is. It certainly has an obvious political value, and we felt part of that political struggle in the debate around the law in Spain. We believe it was about science, which was

our role. The communities played a demanding and activist role. The media played an essential role in disseminating different positions and types of research on the subject, as did academia and universities. However, in our opinion, it is also a political role that places us as a social reference since we are giving scientific answers to social prejudice.

Rosana – What kind of needs do these families bring to health? What specific features could be highlighted?

Mar González – This strikes me as a fascinating point. Most health professionals have not been trained in family diversity in their primary or ongoing education. Therefore, the first thing they bring with them is an unknown reality, of which they have many doubts and are unaware in many respects. It is a reality that is not without its prejudice in society in general, and we know that many professionals may be imbued with it, too, because it is growing in our society. So, prejudice is found among the professionals who work with these families in health, education, social work, and psychology. Therefore, as a public health authority, we have a duty to advance training in family diversity and LGBTI+ families and what happens there in the development of children and young people. Secondly, we must remove doubts because we do not know any developmental problems considering the data and international pediatrics, psychiatry, psychology, social work, and psychoanalysis societies. These are very clear positions from professional societies. The scientific evidence says that children who grow up in these families have the same possibilities of harmonious and healthy development as those in heterosexual families and that their parents can provide them with the same conditions to foster development, and this was affirmed by the American Academy of Pediatrics back in 2002. In other words, there have been unequivocal pronouncements from all the relevant professional societies for many years now, and this needs to be translated into training for professionals, adapting protocols in this field, and, from our viewpoint, changing from the deficit pathology model, which has consequences for these families, to a model of challenges, these families face 80% of the challenges common to other families and other distinct issues, which they must resolve differently and is translated into specific strengths and difficulties that I believe should be known. I will start with the difficulties. One is facing homophobia. These family

members face homophobia, and health and other specialty professionals do not always understand them. Therefore, health professionals must strengthen, monitor, and legitimize them. As we know, coping with homophobia has clear consequences, such as increased anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, and increased stress. So, there are clear repercussions on the health of parents and children, who may also have to address homophobia. In this sense, our data and many other countries clearly indicate that these people's well-being increases, and their stress and anxiety problems decrease when marriage is legitimized and legalized, and these families are granted official legality and legitimacy. Therefore, legalization and legitimization would be a good political idea because it promotes the well-being of this public. Let us say that the difficulties in legislating for these families undoubtedly lie in the sociocultural framework. This framework that follows up, legalizes, and legitimizes their becoming is similar to what other families face. They are the usual problems associated with having a child and day-to-day life-related issues. However, what strengths can be considered? These families have matured and reflected much on their parenting decisions because you do not get to build this project with people of the same sex without that. They have made a very mature and thoughtful decision and, therefore, are clearly committed to parenting. In other words, as in the case of any adoptive family, they are committed to parenting. Something similar happens with these families. So, this is a strength of these families. Another important fact that studies in Spain show is that there is a greater shared responsibility in the distribution of tasks and an equal division. Some sociological studies in several European and American countries and meta-analyses show that they are more egalitarian in the distribution of domestic responsibilities and childcare than heterosexual families. They also educate their sons and daughters in an environment of equality. Their children are more flexible on gender issues. This more equal division of tasks is significantly linked to greater life satisfaction. In other words, we find egalitarianism in both lesbian and heterosexual families, but in percentage terms, we find much more egalitarianism in lesbian families in day-to-day life, in the distribution of tasks and childcare, and this is linked to the family's well-being. Another element that is a strength, and one that seems very relevant in these families, is that they educate their children with greater freedom to define their sexual orientation. We

know this from the parents, who told us a beautiful story. We spoke to a father of a five-year-old daughter and asked him how he affectionately raised his daughter. He said that the message was short, but when she is playing with Barbies, for example, which was fashionable, and with Ken, I sometimes tell her – “Barbies can be girlfriends, and they can get married because if they like each other and if they want to, they can be girlfriends”. Sometimes, when playing with the Barbies, Ken, and other friends, she would say to her friends – “Barbies can be girlfriends too”, because that is what the adult children we studied say when we analyze their sexual orientation. This fact was one of the great concerns of our society, whether they would also be gay like their fathers and mothers, and they saw this as a concern. What we found is that 88% of them are people with relationships with young people of another sex; 10% define themselves as gay or lesbian like their fathers and mothers, and 2% define themselves as bisexual. In other words, it is a very similar percentage to what we found in the general population. The children believe that they can live their sexuality freely and that they will be accepted for the way they define themselves. In fact, at the age of 14, one of the daughters, who perceived herself as heterosexual, believed she was in love with her teacher and spoke to her mothers because she could be a lesbian. The mothers said that it could be so, but it could also be that she looks at her and the teacher may look like someone she liked because of how she was. I do not know a single non-heterosexual person who has heterosexual parents and consulted them when they first had doubts. They consult a friend or a sister but not their parents. In this sense, they educate their children in greater freedom to decide their sexual orientation, and it is important to consider that.

Rosana – You coordinated the APEGO project promoting parenting skills in the Andalusian public health system. Could you tell us a bit about this project? When did the initiative come about, and how important is it for the Spanish public health system to get involved in working with LGB-parent families?

Mar González – I was part of the group that coordinated it⁵. It was coordinated by Prof. Jesús Palácio González, who works much on childhood in Brazil. We were a team of people working with families for some time. We had already implemented an intervention program with education professionals, with fathers and mothers, now understood as positive parenting. It is the

most widely used term. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, we conducted a project on health with the Andalusian government. However, this program was old, obsolete, and did not consider diversity. A necessary adjustment was made, demanded by the Regional Health Council of Andalusia – it was a project at the level of the Andalusian government. We were asked to do something straightforward: make a project, materials for pediatricians and pediatric wards, on attachment and attachment disorders. We thought it was essential to do this. However, we told them that we would like to do something broader, focused on positive parenting and how to support development in all areas in the best possible way, not only in attachment and bonding but also linguistically, socially, and emotionally. In short, we wanted to land on other personality areas. So, I worked on part of a stage, focusing on diversity, from 2 to 12 years old, which resulted in professional and family guides to follow up the development of all stages, from birth to adolescence (16 years). It should also be translated into training for professionals in courses or working groups. However, the government changed, and this was no longer a priority. We could not do more and would have liked to have done much more because it was a demand from the professionals themselves.

Rosana – Despite the progress and legal recognition of same-sex parent families in several countries around the world, we are currently seeing growing resistance to these family structures and, in some cases, the repeal of laws, especially by extreme right-wing political groups. How do you understand these processes?

Mar González – It is a process fueled by an ultra-conservative, ultra-right ideology, which is seriously damaging the rights and affecting the health and well-being of these families. I have to put it this way. We have done specific research related to this topic, but there is much research done around the safety of regulatory debates in Australia and the United States. All the research around family experience, when there is a considerable debate around, and they are the focus, which allows people to doubt and deny their rights and capacity as parents, discuss whether their families are legitimate, we witness problems with well-being and health in families and children. Fueled by this social debate, bullying can arise from peers who are finding these arguments on the networks and in parliaments. We met a politician who made homophobic statements. The political legitimization of this homophobic

discourse is undoubtedly a very clear risk factor for the well-being and health of LGBTI+ communities and, in particular, families and their children, who are the most vulnerable party at the moment, and we must safeguard them. We need a clear position from international organizations and governments in defense of children and human rights. We must have an unequivocal statement on this.

Rosana – How did researching this topic affect you and your team?

Mar González – Until now, I have lived as a heterosexual person. I am married, have children, and have never faced homophobia. It existed, and I saw it daily; I took a stand against it when I saw people making homophobic jokes and statements around me. However, we had a strong counter-campaign from the more conservative media from the first survey. A campaign went so far as to make my university come out in my defense because of their statements, doubting the scientific rigor, the research's validity, and our track record. An ultra-conservative association linked to the ultra-conservative line of the Catholic Church ran a nationwide campaign asking that studies of this kind should never be funded again, and that the data should never be published, encouraging people to write to the President of the Government of the Regional Council of Andalusia, asking him not to fund the research and never to publish our data again. The Government Presidency called me, told me this was happening, and reassured me that they would disregard these requests, but they were receiving these

demonstrations. We also received phone threats, messages on buses, flyers outside the congresses where we would present our data, and letters. There was even a poster put up on my door at the university referring to a popular term for being a lesbian. I did not take the poster down; after a while, I took it into the classroom. All this made me even more aware of the pernicious effect of homophobia on LGBTI+ people, and I became part of a group. Even though I like men, I rejoice in these people's joys, but I suffer with their sorrows and the group's distress. So, I became part of the group and the families who feel they are part of it. I collaborate with them whenever necessary. It was a way of confronting homophobia. Let us say that it is the price of doing science and should not be like that. It was tough at the time, and there was also a change of government in Madrid. What we were doing was first conducted in Andalusia and Madrid. With the changes in Madrid (of the public defender), they wanted to prevent the data from being published by the very institution that funded them. It was very shameful. The university that supports us must continue to be free and without political determination, and the scientific society also supports us, and this gives us a freedom that we cannot lose: the responsibility to continue keeping this freedom of professorship and science, which society needs. In Spain, scientists are highly valued by society and one of the most recognized and valued professions. This credit is vital in order not to give in to these pressures.

Rosana – Thank you!

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