

## **Lesbian and gay individuals' path into foster parenting in Norway – barriers and facilitators at the person and system levels**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Growing numbers of LGBTQ people are becoming foster parents in several western countries. The LGBTQ perspective on the child welfare system has received little attention in practice, research, and policy. Despite their increased rights, LGBTQ foster parents continue to face challenges related to fostering. Knowledge is needed on LGBTQ individual perceptions of the process of becoming foster parents, including barriers, and facilitating factors. This article reports on the experiences of 13 gay or lesbian foster parents in Norway. The study shows a lack of knowledge about the possibility of becoming foster parents due to lack of information directed at them as a minority group. Participants felt vulnerable and experienced “minority stress” before encountering the child welfare system, while mainly experienced the encounter with the staff as good and respectful. While several valued being treated “like everyone else” by the system, others questioned why LHBTQ-specific parenting issues was not raised and discussed. Apart from lack of information, the process towards foster parenting seemed mostly hampered by participants’ own assumptions that sexual identity would be a barrier, and to some extent biological parents’ refusal. The study suggests that foster care and child welfare services would benefit from information in recruitment of foster parents, aiming at being more inclusive. Furthermore, addressing gender and sexuality diversity related to foster care work and to highlight the strengths and challenges it may offer.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The parenting options for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ), and other diverse identities and expressions, individuals, and couples have grown considerably in recent years. In countries such as Norway [1], Australia, the UK, and the USA [2], growing numbers of LGBTQ people are becoming foster parents. Nevertheless, no data on the numbers of LGBTQ foster parents are available. The LGBTQ perspective in the child welfare system – how the system meets the needs of individuals with LGBTQ-identity, has received little attention in practice, research, or policy [3]. A small but growing number of empirical publications on specific practice and policy issues concerning LGBTQ foster parents indicate that although many agencies, both public and private, have positive views of the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ foster and adoptive parents continue to face challenges related to fostering [2, 4]. Given the increased acknowledgement that LGBTQ people can meet the ongoing demand for foster parents, knowledge is required on how they perceive the process of becoming foster parents, including the barriers and facilitating factors [2].

The Nordic countries are traditionally supportive of gay rights, and in 2009, Norway became the first to recognize same-sex marriage in law [5]. Although support for gay rights is increasing and people are more open to LGBTQ people, findings from three recent nationwide surveys representing the adult Norwegian population, conducted based on a time series design (2008, 2013, and 2017), indicate that people still are somewhat hesitant about gay and lesbian parenting rights and that concern for children's welfare was the strongest predictor of beliefs about equal parenting rights for same-sex and heterosexual couples [5]. A recent scoping review on LGBTQ [4] issues in child welfare systems indicates that the empirical peer-reviewed research on LGBTQ foster parents is limited, and most originates from only three countries (the USA, UK, and Australia), with the vast majority conducted in the USA. Despite changes in laws and norms concerning the rights of LGBTQ people around the world, acceptance of LGBTQ issues in society varies across (and within) countries and regions, and by economic development. Hence, research on LGBTQ foster parents in a wider range of countries and settings will address the gap in the existing literature.

Studies in recent years have focused on LGBTQ foster parents' experiences of foster care systems and interactions with social workers, including challenges, successes, and roles [6, 7], as well as issues specific to the process of adoption/fostering by LGBTQ individuals [8-11].

Across these studies, the findings indicate that lesbian and gay foster parents are vulnerable to experiencing different kinds of obstacles and experience several challenges and forms of discrimination as they encounter the child welfare system [8, 10, 12, 13]. Several informants expressed the view that they were “second best” to heterosexual families and that they felt dependent on the goodwill of individual social workers [14] for positive outcomes (i.e., children being placed with them) [7, 15]. In many studies, lesbian and gay foster parents report experiencing scrutiny of their parenting ability and that they feel they must excessively display their suitability, and this is particularly the case for aspiring gay male foster parents [6-8, 15, 16]. Goldberg et al. [10] refer to the concept of “minority stress” theory, developed by Meyer [17] in framing their study on LGBTQ individuals' experiences with delays and disruptions in the fostering and adoption process, and call for legislation preventing the discrimination of prospective LGBTQ parents. The concept of “minority stress” is used to describe the additional burden to which individuals from stigmatized groups are exposed owing to their minority position. Research shows strong relationships between minority stressors and psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals [18].

Lesbian and gay foster parents report that they are expected to demonstrate that they will offer “appropriate” gender role models to foster children [2]. Wood [6] found that although the informants in her study had not experienced explicit discrimination, they were asked by assessment workers about their perception of how they would provide appropriate gender role models. LGBTQ foster parents have at times been portrayed as inherently inappropriate role models for LGBTQ children in care. Riggs [7] reported that participants (lesbian and gay foster parents) felt they were perceived by child protection staff as inappropriate role models and were denied requests to have children placed with them. The research literature displays contradictory interpretations of policy. Some LGBTQ foster parents suggested that there should not be a specific focus on sexuality, whereas some advocated for foster carer systems to engage openly with such parents as lesbians or gay men [7]. Thus, there is a need for more knowledge about the reasons for aspiring and current LGBTQ foster parents' experiences of discrimination and their consequences.

As foster parents, LGBTQ individuals bring unique experiences and strengths that may be seen as assets in their role as foster parents [2, 7]. The positive aspects of LGBTQ foster parenting are also indicated in the research literature. Wood [6] highlights that for many

LGBTQ aspiring foster parents, their commitment to foster parenting is often a first option for building their family, which makes them a highly motivated resource. Compared with placement in heterosexual-headed households, lesbian and gay foster parents may bring a unique perspective on their parenting, creating a unique, and in some cases better environment for vulnerable children, by providing a “safe place” for them and by being more understanding/accepting [7]. Wood [9] suggests that lesbian and gay foster parents may be exceptionally attuned to the needs of birth parents and more willing than non-LGBTQ foster parents to work on developing positive relationships with the birth parents of the foster children. Given the barriers, challenges, and facilitating factors identified in the research summarized above, it is important for child welfare systems to increase their knowledge on what LGBTQ people make of such barriers and facilitators in a wider range of contexts (i.e., countries/settings) to provide valuable insights into how they may be addressed in welcoming them as prospective foster parents [2].

Our study is part of a larger research-project with an overall goal to investigate how the Norwegian child welfare system meets the needs of individuals with LGBTQ identity and whether the system succeeds in meeting their needs. This study aims to explore how lesbian and gay individuals perceive the process of becoming foster parents – that is, the challenges, barriers, and facilitating factors. We explore this process in two phases: (1) decisions to apply to become foster parents, and (2) encountering the child welfare system.

## **2 METHOD**

### **2.1 Sample**

There were 13 participants in the current study: seven women and six men. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via invitations in announcements on home pages and Facebook pages at one organization for foster parents and one for gender and sexuality diversity. We invited same-sex couples or single persons with an LGBTQ identity who are foster parents or who wanted to become foster parents. The announcements had links to our project’s homepage for more information. The participants contacted the project leader via email or telephone, and an appointment for the interview was made. All participants signed a consent form before the interview.

All participants defined themselves as lesbian or gay. All of them had been approved as foster parents, and all had completed compulsory training to become foster parents. One couple had not yet had children placed with them but had been notified of an imminent placement. The rest had one or two foster children, and varying lengths of experience as foster parents, up to nine years, and for a mean duration of 5.2 years. The participants lived in different parts of the country, some in cities and others in rural communities. The age range of the foster parents was from the late 20s up to 50 years, with most being around 40. They were foster parents to a total of 11 children, ranging in age from one to 19 years, with a mean age of ten. Among the foster parents were three nurses and two teachers, one kindergarten teacher, one after school assistant, one lawyer, one advisor, one child welfare worker, one hairdresser, and two service workers.

## **2.2 Data collection**

Eight semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with the thirteen foster parents. Five interviews included two parents. Three interviews were conducted with one parent. In two of these, the person interviewed spoke as if they were speaking for both themselves and their partner (for the most part referring to "we" in their reflections), and one was conducted with a single parent. Two researchers did the interviews, of which one interview was conducted jointly while the rest were conducted by a single researcher.

An interview guide was developed and used for all interviews, but the interviewer retained flexibility to adjust questions according to participants' responses. The interviews lasted between 33 and 74 minutes with a mean of 52 minutes and were conducted via Skype, telephone, or in person at the participant's workplace or the researcher's office. All interviews were recorded.

## **2.3 Data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts constitute our data. The data were analysed using a four-step analysis method of systematic text condensation [19] suitable for analysing the material transversely and condensing information from various individuals. First, two of the researchers read all the material to obtain an overall impression, focusing on the participants' experiences. Second, we identified and classified meaningful

text units relevant to the aim of the study. These units were coded and subsequently clustered to form descriptive themes, for example, “doubt about being accepted”. Furthermore, related descriptive themes were clustered together to form analytical themes, of which we ended up with two: “process towards own decision to apply” and “encountering the system”.

Validity in qualitative research is based on the “appropriateness” of the tools, processes, and data [20]. The validity of the data obtained in this study was safeguarded in several ways. To increase credibility and trustworthiness, the data analysis was performed separately by two researchers. Agreement on analytical themes was reached via discussions between the two researchers who performed the interviews and data analysis. The draft for article was read by one of the participants in the study who also participated in the project's reference group, representing persons with lived experience.

### **3 FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 First phase: deciding whether to apply to become foster parents**

##### **3.1.1 Lack of (LGBTQ) targeted information**

The informants' stories and comments indicate that the information about the foster care scheme is insufficient in terms of diversity, and did not clarify that queer people can become foster parents. Several of the foster parents in the study had very little knowledge and even misconceptions about the foster care scheme from the beginning when they started to plan how to become parents. Most informants had discussed several possible paths to parenthood, and several describe accidentally or coincidentally receiving information about the opportunity to become foster parents, prompting their decision to apply. For some this was a great surprise, as the following quote illustrates:

*The very first time we thought about it... it was probably when we got to know another female couple. She told us that we could become foster parents. Really, could we? (...)  
This [the information that foster parenting was possible for queer people] was not expressed openly. It was not something that I sort of felt was being marketed in any way! [laughing]*

Several informants called for more information from the child welfare system, directed towards them as a target group for fostering, as illustrated by the following quote about reaching out to more minorities.

*I feel that more examples are needed, for example in advertisements, to reach out to more minorities. There's a lack of... and actually, using them as examples and in advertising – using two men, for example.*

Several informants pointed out that more targeted information towards queer people could lead more people to the idea of becoming foster parents, and perhaps more motivated foster parents, which in turn could provide a greater opportunity to find suitable foster homes for children who need them.

*I just want to say that I think the marketing of being a foster parent to attract gay and lesbian couples – I think it's a little weak. (...) At the same time, most people want children. So, I think there are a lot of good forces there that can be set in motion.*

There are different considerations when targeting the information. For example, a single foster parent among the informants did not recognize himself in the child welfare system's use of the term "family" in their advertising of the foster care scheme. His wish was that instead of "family" it should be made clear that they are seeking people who can, as he terms it, "provide care". He describes reading through information from the child welfare system and reflecting on his identity:

*Am I a family? Can I be a family? (...) When I make a quick "search" on Facebook [on the foster care service's pages], it says: "seeking a family". I struggle to recognize myself as "a family", but I exert as much care, if not more than what a "family" does. (...) Instead of saying that we are looking for gays, lesbians, regardless of gender, say that "we are looking for care because children need care". In this way make it more recognizable to the heart, because that's why I became a foster parent.*



The concept of “family” used for announcements/recruitment purposes does not necessarily move everyone sufficiently to become foster parents. It is conceivable that both single people and same-sex couples who want to become foster parents may experience the concept of family as a threshold to applying.

Several couples, in different ways, pointed to the power of the general opinions in society to same-sex-couples and parenting how it affected their perception of what is possible for them. One male couple stated that even if people's opinions are developing in the right direction, it is plausible that some gay couples still consider that placing a child with gay parents could add further challenges for the child:

*(...) the argument that we [same-sex-couples] could not become foster parents because it would expose already vulnerable children to more strain – this seems to have “drowned”. I feel that this [attitude] is not there anymore. But I think it may have deterred some gay couples from applying to become foster parents because they know that some of those kids are in a tough situation as it is.*

In addition to the power of peoples’ attitudes in society at large, the above quote also indicates that feelings of doubt may be stronger for gay persons. A female participant representing a lesbian couple did not express feelings of doubts about becoming foster parents but had many thoughts about possible negative reactions both from (and for) the child and the society around them.

*"...but we certainly had many thoughts in relation to becoming foster parents like: would it be a problem for the kids that we were two ladies? If it did, it could possibly become a stigma in relation to both that "I am a foster child AND I have two moms". We have of course had a lot of thoughts about this. (...) but the reactions when we moved back [from a larger town] to a smaller place - we have not been met in other ways than completely normal."*

## **3.2 Second phase: encountering the child welfare system**

### **3.2.1 Feelings of “minority stress”**

Facing a system that is going to investigate whether you are suitable to become a foster parent may be a challenging experience for most. Many of the participants in our study described feeling vulnerable before meetings or situations where the foster care or child welfare services would assess them and their qualities as parents. Some expressed their vulnerability related to their sexual identity more strongly than others, such as the following male couple who also used the concept of “minority stress” to explain their feelings.

*...one is a little cautious, like: “Excuse me, excuse me, but I am actually allowed to do this, and I am entitled to”. I do not know how deep this feeling is, but I think that it may be like when you are someone who breaks the norms of sexuality, that you act very carefully and feel the “minority stress”. The fact is that you expect a negative reaction, and you are a little unsure of the attitudes of the professional party you are going to meet. But this was absolutely unfounded.*

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “minority stress” is used to describe the additional burden individuals may feel due to their minority position, and that research show a strong relationships between minority stressors and psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals [17]. In this example, the male couple describes how it feels when you consider that this may not be a straightforward case even if you have the same rights as everybody else, and because of this, that you feel that you must remind and convince others that you have the same rights. Furthermore, the stress one may feel is connected to other people’s attitudes – one is constantly aware that there may be reactions, whether open and visible or not.

The above couple’s experience with the system was that these thoughts and feelings were, as they said, “unfounded”. Another male couple reported similar experiences: strongly negative personal feelings of vulnerability and doubts before the first meetings with the child welfare system, but relief afterwards.

*You feel to some extent that you are automatically an “underdog” and must somehow show that you can provide care... that you have the capacity. And that it is kind of like, “excuse us for being two men, but we would like to do this”. So, I think I probably went into this phase very prepared that we would have to prove that we were interested and able. But I also felt [afterwards] that there was no need for that because we were met in a very good way, by both the foster care service and the child welfare service that we were in contact with.*

Seen in retrospect, both these male couples realized that there was no justification for their scepticism in connection with their sexual identity and need to prove their interest and ability. There were no negative histories from first meetings with the system related to being queer, except for one indicating that being a male couple represented a higher threshold to foster parenthood than being a female couple.

*We [a male couple] had made waffles and warmly welcomed them [two women from the foster care services] into our home. To make a long story short – they said on their way out; “...well, it would probably have been much easier if you had been two ladies”. And then I just felt...just get yourselves out of here! (...) I experienced this as abuse, quite simply. Both of us, are sensible and caring people (...) and we are used to working [professionally] with people and with care, and this is my whole life, and then to get this thrown straight into my face in my own home.*

The informant describes how upset they both became and that the experience ended in postponing their decision to apply to become foster parents. When he later informed a leader of the foster care service about what had been said in the home visit, the response from the office was that: “these are certainly not prevailing attitudes with us. We need same-sex couples – both men and women – and we need Christian families, Muslims and Hindus, we need everything because we have different children with different needs”.

### 3.2.2 Lack of questioning/thematizing gender

Most of the informants experienced professional treatment from the services, with openness and like “everyone else” – hence with very little focus on issues of gender or being a same-sex couple.

One exception was a female couple who reacted to what they perceived as a particularly thorough investigation with many questions about them as a same-sex couple; however, as they perceived it, this was more intended to uncover potential “baggage” before they were accepted as foster parents.

*In that home visit, there was one man and a woman – they were very inquisitive about what we thought of it [being a same-sex couple], and if we had experienced something painful about it – if there had been any difficulty with the fact that we were two women.. (...) if we had experienced difficulty related to how we managed to be safe, caring people, and if we were insecure about ourselves (...) I do not know, I did not feel that it was prejudice or that they didn't think it was okay, but more like if there was any “baggage” there and how we “carried our baggage”.*

Our results indicate that the topic of gender is more visible and openly discussed when foster care services seek to match parents and potential foster children. Biological parents have the right to speak on the case, and some of our informants experienced several rounds of matching because of parents' refusal.

Some of our informants reported that the services had informed them that it could take a longer time to find children who were a suitable match because biological parents' right to speak affects the decision. Some experienced several rounds, even when the foster care service believed they had found a suitable match, as described by the following male couple:

*There were several rounds before we ended up with the child we have today. The foster care service found kids that they thought could be a good match for us but we*

*were not accepted by the biological parents. Also, some biological parents said that “our child is not going to a same-sex couple”. The foster care service then said that they did not want to put us in this situation several times and would wait to introduce us to a new child until they knew that the biological parents would consent to placement with a same-sex couple. (...) So, the fact that we are a same-sex couple was never really a topic, except for the times we experienced refusals from biological parents. However, when that happened, we were well taken care of by the people we were in contact with from the foster care and child welfare service.*

Only one couple very clearly thematized/problematised the lack of focus on gender and discussions about what being a same-sex couple meant. This was also related to the matching of parents and children and specifically to what the children themselves wanted.

*We were a little surprised. For us – I really think that being a same-sex couple meant more to us than it did to the child welfare service. We asked what they thought about it, and we also asked what they thought the children would think about it. We specifically asked them [the foster care service] to ask the children if it was okay before the children could choose whether to come to us or not. And then we made it a condition/requirement that if the children went to us, they would have to want it themselves. They should not just be placed with us. So, we were more worried about being same-sex-couple than the child welfare service was.*

This couple felt more surprised than positive or negative about their not being thematized as a same-sex couple. They were assertive in the face of the foster care and child welfare services and wanted to discuss what this meant, what those in the service system thought, and what the children wanted.

#### **4 DISCUSSION**

This study describes the experiences of lesbian and gay people in Norway and what it was like for them to become foster parents. Following qualitative thematic analyses, the

informants' perceptions were found to centre around three key themes. Theme 1 is lack of (LHBTQ-directed) information. The results show a lack of knowledge about the possibility of becoming foster parents. Many had little knowledge about the foster care scheme, some had misconceptions, and some received information by coincidence that made them realize that this was a possible way to become parents. More information directed at LGBTQ-people were suggested as this may lower the threshold for potential foster parents (more information and inclusion would also avoid other problems that we found). Theme 2 is the informants' feelings of vulnerability and "minority stress" *before* encountering the system, whereas they actually experienced the encounter in good and respectful ways. Theme 3 is that several highlighted and valued being treated "like everyone else" in encounters with the system. However, surprise was also expressed that being queer was not raised and discussed more specifically in terms of possible issues this could raise in the process.

The research literature provides insight into the positive aspects that queer foster parents experience. For many, becoming a foster parent is the preferred choice when it comes to starting a family, making them a highly motivated resource [7]. Most of the foster parents in our study describe their decision-making process as relatively extensive, where different paths to parenthood had been considered. Lack of information about the possibility of becoming a foster home and not identifying with the "family construct" in communications from the foster home scheme indicates a potential for reaching more people. The announcements and course material typically illustrated with pictures of the traditional nuclear family with a mother and father that participants pointed out confirm what Wood [6] finds in her study in England and Wales. Our study indicates that such images may suggest that they should not take it for granted that foster parenting is within reach, particularly when combined with the feelings of vulnerability that some describe when encountering the system – ready to excuse themselves while at the same time claiming their rights.

As it turned out, the foster parents in our study mainly experienced the encounter with staff at child welfare service as good and respectful. The main impression is that our study does not show the same kind of challenges and discrimination described in much of the present research in other countries in relation to queer foster parents' encounters with child welfare or the foster care services, such as being treated as second best, dependent on goodwill from social workers, and expected to offer "appropriate" gender roles to foster children [2, 4]. It is

possible that this difference can be explained by the generally supportive attitudes in Nordic countries towards gay rights [5], and this may be reflected in the informants' meetings with the child welfare system. Further research is needed to explore such potential differences.

At the same time, several informants in our study describe the same feeling of being in a minority that must provide extra proof to be considered, as for example described in Riggs and colleagues' [7] study of 60 Australian lesbian and gay foster parents. In Riggs's study, however, this feeling is much more strongly linked to their reception by the system than that found in our material. The informants in Riggs's study are much more sceptical of authorities in the system; the study points to suspicions of homophobia and dependence on the goodwill of some social workers. Our study does not indicate this type of scepticism and suspicion towards the child welfare system; it is more about potential parents' own thoughts about whether they are good enough. This is in line with Riggs's study [7], which reported that prospective applicants' enthusiasm to become foster carers was somewhat dampened by their assumptions that their sexuality would be a barrier.

An important barrier that emerged for some of the informants was the biological parents of children selected by the foster family service – with long and exhausting processes ending in rejection because the parents would not accept lesbian or gay foster parents. The perceived or actual lack of acceptance by the child's birth family is also reported in previous studies [2]. Foster parents appreciate and need support to enable their children to have helpful contact with their birth families. However, research shows that some LGBTQ foster families are concerned about homophobia from their children's biological families [2]. This concurs with the findings of the longitudinal Norwegian population study [5] indicating that although there was a decline in negative beliefs about lesbian and gay parenting and marriage rights, and gradually less concern about children growing up with a same-sex couple, beliefs about equal parenting rights remained more negative than beliefs about equal marriage rights. Hence, inclusion and participation are important principles when it comes to the foster care scheme. The findings underline the importance of supporting prospective LGBTQ foster parents as well as the biological parents in the initial phase to increase the acceptance of potential placement in an LGBTQ foster home.

The research literature displays contradictory interpretations of policy in terms of addressing gender and sexual identity within this field. Some LGBTQ foster parents suggest that there should not be a specific focus on sexuality, whereas some advocate for foster carer systems to engage openly with lesbian and gay parents as lesbians and gay men [7]. This concurs with the findings of our study, which reveals diverse perspectives on whether gender or breaking with norms of gender and sexuality are thematized and that parents' views on this vary. Where the topic has not been addressed and discussed, some foster parents feel that it is good to be treated "like everyone else". Others, on the other hand, react with surprise that these issues are not addressed, and want openness and discussion to be prepared for both challenges and opportunities. When services choose to appear neutral on these questions this might be an attempt to "normalize" but also a way to suppress such issues.

The impression created by our study is that the issue of sexual identity is most clearly thematized in connection with the process of matching foster families and children. According to the law, the child's biological parents may express their view, if this is possible, to have a real opportunity to influence the choice of a foster family. Inclusion and participation are important principles in Norwegian administration, and under the foster home scheme, it is important to achieve good cooperation between the foster and biological families. For example, Riggs's study in Australia shows great variation and inconsistency over whether biological parents are consulted about a placement with queer foster parents [7]. In some cases where parents were consulted, their views were ignored. In other cases, biological parents were given a veto, while in still others they were not consulted at all. Here, new knowledge should be taken into consideration and used as a guideline, as research shows that lesbian and gay foster parents may bring a unique perspective on their parenting and in providing a "safe place" for vulnerable children [7,9,10]. Social workers, foster carers, and agencies must be aware of gender and sexuality and the roles they play in the lives of LGBTQ people without focusing on them excessively, but rather including them in a holistic approach.

#### **4.1. Limitations**

The study had a relatively small sample, and one potential limitation relates to the sampling strategy recruiting most of the participants via home pages and Facebook pages of relevant organisations (one for foster parents in general and one for gender and sexuality diversity). We were conscious of the potential selection bias that may have arisen from the recruitment



process. Although it was crucial to include participants who were happy to discuss their experiences, this strategy of recruiting could have resulted in a participant group representing a higher-than-average level of social functioning or presenting a particular narrative. However, several background factors were balancing the heterogeneity of the group with a good spread in terms of age, education and occupation, being from different parts of the country, from cities and rural communities, having long and short experience as a foster parent, being parents of one child or two children (including biological), and approximately equal numbers of men and women participating. The sample consists of couples, with the exception of one single man. For our purpose in this article, this enriches the material in terms of different experiences.

Despite these limitations, this study can make a useful contribution to the available evidence of gay and lesbian foster parents' experiences within a rather small area of research on specific practice and policy issues concerning LGBTQ foster parents.

## **4.2 Implications**

The informants' stories about how it was for them to become foster parents provides insights that may inform further research and ways to increase the number of foster parents, for whom there is great demand in Norway. Increased diversity in terms of qualities, skills, and strengths probably also provides greater opportunities for matching parents and children.

The study indicates that there is a need for more information about the opportunity of becoming foster parents for those who identify as LGBTQ, and that information should be more inclusive, for example through more inviting information and advertising, to reach out to minorities in society. Although the findings of the current study cannot be generalized to the target population, it seems likely that strategies aimed at improving attitudes and raising awareness among prospective LGBTQ foster parents would be beneficial. For example, in promoting gender and sexuality diversity, greater awareness may be required of the use of terms and images of what exemplifies a family. This could become a win-win situation in that it may attract highly motivated candidates for the foster family service and more people who are allowed to provide foster care. The service, for its part, would appear more adapted to society and the way people live their lives.

Furthermore, the study suggests that it is natural, useful, and expected to discuss openly gender and sexuality diversity related to foster care work and to thematize the strengths and challenges it may offer. Further research and service development should address these issues, not least because issues related to this will arise at some point, for example in the matching process and communication with biological parents. It is conceivable that caseworkers may choose to be neutral when faced with the LGBTQ topic, because they lack experience of such cases and/or lack knowledge based on research. Hence, more dissemination of knowledge targeting both social workers and aspiring LGBTQ foster parents is needed. While our study is exploratory and with a small sample, this field would benefit from further research with larger and more representative samples.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The child welfare service apparatus that manages the foster family scheme in Norway were mainly perceived as good, professional, and inclusive by 13 lesbian and gay foster parents participating in this study. The process of becoming foster parents seemed primarily hampered by lack of information and their own assumptions that sexual identity would be a barrier and to some extent by biological parents' refusals. The study suggests that foster care and the child welfare system may benefit in several ways from more directed information in recruitment, aiming at being as inclusive as possible. Furthermore, addressing gender and sexuality diversity more actively and purposefully related to foster care work and to highlight the strengths and challenges it may offer, particularly in the first phase of the process of becoming foster parents. We recommend focusing on the importance of future queer foster parents being given the opportunity to develop confidence in coping and self-confidence in developing the role of foster parent.

## **ETHICS STATEMENT**

The project was reported to NSD – the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Informed consent to participate in the survey was obtained in accordance with research ethics guidelines. NSD issues nationally valid judgements for studies within the Norwegian context.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. All research methods were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest concerning the research, implementation, and publication of this article.

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