

Perceived importance of childbearing and attitudes toward assisted reproductive technology among Chinese lesbians in Hong Kong: implications for psychological well-being

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Objective: To assess the perceived importance of childbearing and attitudes toward assisted reproductive technology (ART) among Chinese lesbians and the impact on their psychological well-being.

Design: Survey-based study using a 39-item questionnaire.

Setting: Not applicable.

Patient(s): A total of 438 Chinese lesbians between the ages of 18 and 35 years.

Intervention(s): None.

Main Outcome Measure(s): Perceived importance of childbearing; attitudes toward ART; and levels of anxiety and depression.

Result(s): Perceived importance of childbearing to Chinese lesbians was negatively associated with age ($r = -0.23$), relationship length ($r = -0.18$), and full-time employment ($F = 4.29$). Compared to heterosexual childless women, Chinese lesbians thought childbearing was significantly less important (3.30 vs. 6.00 on a 1–10 scale, $t = 14.6$). Most lesbian respondents (92%) supported legalizing same-sex couples' access to ART, although less than half (41%) wanted to use it themselves to have children. Among lesbians who thought childbearing was important to their parents or their partners, not wanting ART was associated with higher anxiety levels.

Conclusion(s): This is the first quantitative study of childbearing attitudes of lesbians in Asia. The data suggest that Chinese lesbians in the study who perceived childbearing as important to their parents or to their partners but did not want to seek ART reported higher anxiety levels. This study helps raise health care professionals' awareness of Chinese lesbians' attitudes toward childbearing as well as calls for a better delivery system of fertility and mental health services to address the psychological burden of Chinese lesbians in relation to reproductive issues. (Fertil Steril® 2016;106:1221–9. ©2016 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: Lesbian, childbearing, assisted reproductive technology, attitude, psychological well-being

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It is generally believed that parenthood plays a significant role in personal fulfillment (1, 2). Since the 1980s, more lesbian couples have

been pursuing parenthood by means of assisted reproductive technology (ART) in Western countries, such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium,

Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (3–8). Despite emerging literature on the medical and psychological demands of their experiences, less attention has been paid to the reproductive concerns of lesbians in Asia, where public opinions on homosexuality tend to be more negative.

Little is known about how the perceived importance of childbearing and attitudes toward ART affect the psychological well-being of lesbians,

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especially in places where they are aware of the existence of ART but are denied access to it. Bauermeister (9) found that among sexual minority men who lived in some states in the United States with discriminatory lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) policies (e.g., bans against same-sex marriage or joint same-sex adoptions), those who ascribed great importance to parenting aspirations reported greater psychological distress, particularly higher depressive symptoms.

As in many parts of Asia, homosexuality in Hong Kong, a semiautonomous Chinese city, remains stigmatized. Neither same-sex marriage nor civil partnership is legally recognized (10, 11), and ART is restricted to infertile heterosexual married couples. The omission of Chinese lesbian populations from academic discussions about ART may oversimplify the picture for lesbian parenthood and the social and cultural factors involved.

As part of a larger mixed-method study addressing the childbearing aspirations and perceived obstacles faced by Chinese lesbians, this article focuses on three main outcome measures: perceived importance of childbearing, attitudes toward ART (including support for its legalization in Hong Kong and personal desire for its usage), and levels of anxiety and depression. It attempts to answer two questions: [1] What is the perceived importance of childbearing among Chinese lesbians, and how does it compare to that among their heterosexual counterparts in Hong Kong? [2] Given that ART, and thus childbearing, is currently out of reach for lesbians in Hong Kong, do the perceived importance of childbearing and attitudes toward ART have any implications for their psychological well-being, namely depression and anxiety level?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the West, not only has donor insemination become commonly used among lesbian couples, newer forms of ART, such as ROPA (reception of oocytes from partner), allow both partners to participate in the creation of a child and to achieve shared biological motherhood (12, 13). Meanwhile, lesbians' transition to parenthood has become a focus of growing research interest (14–18). Compared with heterosexual couples who turn to ART, lesbian couples encounter special issues, such as whom to be the gestational mother; how to navigate parenthood within a heteronormative context; and how to negotiate with the known or unknown donor (14, 19, 20). Their paths to reproduction are more challenging and require careful planning (15, 21). This may explain why lesbians are less likely to become parents compared with their heterosexual counterparts, even in jurisdictions where there are few legal and social hurdles to non-heterosexual parenthood (22, 23). For example, the two most recent rounds of the National Survey of Family Growth in the United States found that fewer than 18% of lesbians were biological mothers compared with 67% of heterosexual women and 54% of bisexual women (22).

The use of ART impacts on both lesbian and heterosexual couples' psychological well-being. It may affect the psychological well-being, sexual satisfaction, and relationship quality among involuntarily childless couples as family-building using ART is considered a deviation from traditional family

formation (24–26). For lesbians in particular, anxiety is a significant index of psychological well-being in their transition to parenthood by means of ART (27, 28). Their anxiety is associated with contextual factors at the macro level, namely legal recognition of parental status and neighborhood climate and safety (28).

Meanwhile, the childbearing aspirations and concerns of Chinese lesbians are underexplored. In China, the Confucian emphasis on patrilineage, one of the cornerstones of traditional Chinese culture, means that parenthood is considered an essential life goal, whereas homosexuality poses a threat to the conventional family ideal. Most Chinese men and women are anxious about the social stigma associated with infertility (29, 30). Meanwhile, Hong Kong's fertility rate has seen a steep decline, largely due to increased educational and employment opportunities for women (29, 30). In the past three decades, the fertility rates among heterosexual females in the 20- to 24- and 25- to 29-year age groups have dropped by 76% and 58%, respectively. In line with the global trend of delayed childbearing (31), the median age of women at first childbirth in Hong Kong had risen steadily to 31.3 years in 2014, compared with 25.1 years in 1981 and 29.4 years in 2001 (32). Although a growing number of heterosexual couples decide to delay childbearing in Hong Kong, how do lesbians, who are deprived of reproductive rights, think about reproduction? More important, how would their belief concerning childbearing influence their psychological well-being?

While past research on fertility attitudes has predominantly focused on heterosexual couples (29, 33, 34), this study was designed to answer these questions about Chinese lesbians' attitudes toward childbearing. Given the persistent hostility to homosexuality and the unavailability of fertility treatment for lesbians in Chinese society, which values patrilineage, we hypothesized that [1] Chinese lesbians would perceive childbearing as less important compared with heterosexual women; [2] the perceived importance of childbearing would be negatively associated with psychological well-being; and [3] unwillingness to seek ART would be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample Recruitment

Respondents were recruited through local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations and a university in Hong Kong. E-mails were sent to five local LGBT organizations that then forwarded the details of the online survey to their members. The mail delivery system of the university was also used to reach all students, staff, and alumni from different faculties (27,933 students and 10,965 staff in the 2014/2015 academic year). The content of the e-mail provided a clear description of the research and a hyperlink to the online survey website where respondents completed an informed consent form and the questionnaire.

Hong Kong female permanent residents aged between 18 and 35 years, who identified themselves as lesbians and were able to read and speak Chinese, were eligible for the study. We did not include respondents who were not ethnically Chinese

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