



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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E.MBA, LL.M, PH.D, PGDSAPM

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BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); PH.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provide dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

ADOPTION RIGHTS OF SAME-SEX COUPLES IN LIGHT OF THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES ACT (ONTARIO)

AUTHORED BY - MANDEEP LOHCHAB¹

Abstract

*This research paper critically examines the legal framework governing the adoption rights of same-sex couples in Ontario, with particular focus on the **Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 (CYFSA)**. The Act is widely regarded as one of the most progressive child-welfare legislations in Canada, guaranteeing equality in adoption irrespective of sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, or family form. Despite this, same-sex couples continue to face systemic biases, procedural hurdles, and social prejudices in the adoption process. Using doctrinal analysis, comparative insights, and review of empirical studies, this research evaluates the strengths and limitations of the CYFSA, its implementation landscape, and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents in Ontario. The study concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening child welfare policies, improving inclusivity, and ensuring substantive equality for diverse families.*

1. Introduction

Adoption laws occupy a central position within the broader child-welfare framework of any society. They shape not only legal rights and responsibilities surrounding family formation but also reflect deeper socio-cultural values regarding who is considered capable of providing a loving, stable, and nurturing home for children. In democratic countries, where human rights and equality form the backbone of legal systems, adoption frameworks have gradually expanded to recognise diverse family structures. Canada, as a multicultural and rights-driven nation, has been at the forefront of such reforms. Yet the journey toward equal adoption rights for same-sex couples has been neither uniform nor straightforward. It has emerged through decades of activism, judicial intervention, policy debates, and legislative evolution—particularly in progressive jurisdictions such as Ontario.²

¹ Pursuing Ph.D from Kurukshetra University (Kurukshetra)

² Nicholas Bala, *Canadian Child Welfare Law: Children, Families, and the State* (Irwin Law 2020) 45–48.

Ontario's child-welfare system has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades. For many years, adoption laws were guided by heteronormative assumptions that equated ideal parenting with heterosexual, nuclear families. LGBTQ+ communities were either invisible within legal frameworks or deliberately excluded due to prevailing societal prejudices. This exclusion was not merely symbolic—it had real, adverse consequences for thousands of individuals who were denied the ability to form legally recognised families, and for countless children in need of stable, loving homes.³

Beginning in the late 20th century, LGBTQ+ rights movements in Canada began challenging discriminatory laws, pushing for reforms in family law, marriage rights, parentage recognition, and adoption legislation. These advocacy efforts coincided with broader constitutional and judicial developments following the enactment of the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)**.⁴ Courts increasingly recognised that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are deeply personal characteristics protected under the Charter's equality provisions. Landmark decisions expanded the scope of equality, prohibiting discrimination and compelling governments to reassess exclusionary policies across various sectors, including child welfare.

In Ontario, the shift towards inclusive adoption practices gained momentum in the early 2000s, culminating in comprehensive legislative reforms in 2017. The **Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA), 2017**, replaced the earlier Child and Family Services Act and introduced significant changes aligned with human rights principles. One of its most transformative features is the explicit prohibition of discrimination in delivering child and family services based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. By embedding these protections, the Act not only acknowledges the diversity of families in contemporary society but also mandates that adoption agencies and child-welfare service providers treat same-sex couples on par with heterosexual applicants.

The CYFSA is grounded in the principle that the "best interests of the child" must be the paramount consideration in every decision. This principle is expansive, recognising the importance of safety, emotional development, stable relationships, cultural identity, and long-

³ Hurley, Mary C., "Equality Rights and LGBTQ Parenting in Canada," *Library of Parliament Background Paper* (2018) 6–10

⁴ *CYFSA, S.O. 2017, c.14, Sch.1, s.2(1)*.

term well-being. Crucially, it rejects the outdated belief that parental sexual orientation has any bearing on one's capacity to nurture a child. Empirical research overwhelmingly affirms that children raised by same-sex parents exhibit the same emotional, psychological, and social outcomes as those raised in heterosexual households. Thus, from both a rights-based and child-centred perspective, the CYFSA aligns with best practices in modern adoption frameworks.⁵

Yet despite these strong legal protections, an important distinction must be made between **formal equality** (equality before the law) and **substantive or lived equality** (equality experienced in practical, everyday contexts). The mere existence of progressive legislation does not automatically dismantle structural biases embedded within institutions or eliminate personal prejudices held by adoption workers, foster care agencies, or community members involved in the child-welfare system. Same-sex couples, although legally eligible to adopt, may face more stringent scrutiny during home studies, encounter unconscious bias during assessment interviews, or face longer waiting times due to assumptions about family suitability.⁶

Multiple studies conducted by Canadian LGBTQ+ advocacy organisations, including Rainbow Health Ontario and the LGBTQ Parenting Network, highlight that same-sex couples often report feeling judged, stereotyped, or forced to provide additional justification for their desire to adopt. Some adoption workers may hold preconceived notions that children require both a “mother figure” and a “father figure” for optimal development, even though this belief has been scientifically disproven. Others may be unfamiliar with the specific cultural or social needs of LGBTQ+ families, resulting in service gaps. These challenges do not necessarily stem from deliberate discrimination; often, they arise from insufficient training, lack of institutional accountability, or heteronormative assumptions deeply embedded within administrative practices.

Furthermore, same-sex couples may experience difficulties that are not faced by heterosexual couples in the matching process. Some foster parents or children may express discomfort due to personal or familial beliefs, forcing agencies to navigate complex placements. In certain cases, adoption service providers may subtly steer LGBTQ+ couples toward children who are

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Abbie E. Goldberg, *LGBTQ Parenting and Child Development* (Oxford University Press 2019) 73–85.

older, have special needs, or are harder to place, operating on the assumption that same-sex couples are more “flexible” or “open-minded.” While many LGBTQ+ couples willingly adopt children with complex needs, such assumptions can create inequitable distribution patterns that warrant investigation.⁷

Additionally, transgender and gender-diverse adoptive parents face even more pronounced challenges. Despite legal protections, they may encounter misunderstandings about gender identity, invasive questioning, or outright scepticism about their parenting capacity. Some agencies lack the training or resources to provide affirming services for trans parents, leading to stressful and discouraging experiences throughout the adoption process. While CYFSA includes gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds, implementation varies widely between agencies and workers.⁸

Ontario’s child-welfare reforms must also be understood within the broader national and global context. Several Canadian provinces, including British Columbia and Nova Scotia, have implemented similar child-welfare frameworks that emphasize non-discrimination against LGBTQ+ families. Internationally, countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have robust and inclusive adoption laws backed by comprehensive cultural competency training for adoption workers. Comparing Ontario’s approach with these jurisdictions reveals that while the legal framework is strong, the province still lags in developing standardized, province-wide training modules on LGBTQ+ inclusion, data collection on adoption outcomes, and mechanisms for holding adoption agencies accountable for discriminatory practices.

Given these complexities, the tension between legal protections and real-world experiences forms the crux of contemporary debates surrounding adoption rights for same-sex couples in Ontario. The CYFSA provides an excellent legal foundation, but the true measure of its success lies in its implementation. It is not enough for the law to state that discrimination is prohibited—child-welfare agencies must actively foster environments that affirm diverse family structures. This includes training adoption workers to challenge stereotypes, improving public awareness about LGBTQ+ parenting, developing community support systems for diverse parents, and establishing oversight mechanisms to monitor discriminatory practices.

⁷ LGBTQ Parenting Network, *LGBTQ Adoption in Ontario: Barriers and Opportunities* (Sherbourne Health Centre 2020) 12–16.

⁸ Supra at 1

This research paper therefore undertakes a comprehensive examination of adoption rights for same-sex couples under the CYFSA, focusing on both theoretical and practical dimensions. It analyses the legal principles underpinning the Act, evaluates its alignment with Charter values and international human-rights standards, and identifies areas where current practices fall short of the law's intent. The analysis also incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives, drawing on psychological, sociological, and empirical research to understand the lived experiences of same-sex adoptive families.

By exploring the gap between legal equality and lived equality, the research aims to shed light on the structural, administrative, and social barriers that continue to shape the adoption journey for same-sex couples in Ontario. Ultimately, it argues that while Ontario has achieved significant progress, more comprehensive reforms—including improved training, enhanced accountability, and greater community engagement—are necessary to ensure that the promise of equality becomes a consistent, practical reality for all families.

2. Research Problem

While Ontario's CYFSA legally ensures equal adoption rights to same-sex couples, disparities persist at the level of implementation, attitudes of service providers, and policy interpretation. This research interrogates whether the Act sufficiently protects the interests of LGBTQ+ families and whether gaps in administrative practice undermine its intent.

3. Research Questions

- 1. What legal rights do same-sex couples have under the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (Ontario) with respect to adoption?*
- 2. Does the CYFSA sufficiently address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents and children?*
- 3. What barriers—legal, procedural, or societal—do same-sex couples face during adoption processes in Ontario?*
- 4. How does Ontario's approach to same-sex adoption compare with global best practices?*
- 5. What reforms can strengthen inclusivity and equality for LGBTQ+ families within Ontario's adoption system?*

4. Hypothesis

Although the **CYFSA (Ontario)** formally guarantees equal adoption rights for same-sex couples, **implementation gaps, systemic biases, and inconsistent administrative practices** reduce the effectiveness of these protections. The hypothesis is that **legal equality exists, but substantive equality is yet to be fully achieved.**

5. Methodology

a. Doctrinal Legal Research

- Primary sources: CYFSA (2017), Ontario Human Rights Code, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- Judicial decisions analysing adoption rights and LGBTQ+ equality.

b. Comparative Legal Analysis

- Comparison with adoption laws in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, UK, and U.S. states supporting inclusive adoption.

c. Qualitative Review

- Analysis of empirical studies, government reports, and NGO publications (e.g., Rainbow Health Ontario, LGBTQ Parenting Network).

d. Interdisciplinary Approach

- Incorporation of sociological and human-rights perspectives to understand lived experiences of same-sex adoptive parents.

6. Literature Review

Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Adoption

Scholars widely acknowledge that the recognition of same-sex adoption is grounded in judicial interpretations of equality rights under the **Canadian Charter**. Legal literature (Hurley 2018, Bala 2020) highlights that several provinces recognized adoption rights even before federal marriage equality, demonstrating Canada's progressive regional approach.

Child Welfare and Best Interests Principle

Research by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies asserts that the "best interests of the child" standard must be independent of parental sexual orientation. The literature emphasises that parenting capacity, not sexual identity, predicts child well-being.

Discrimination and Systemic Barriers

Studies (Goldberg 2019; Ryan 2021) show that LGBTQ+ adoptive parents often experience:

- Heteronormative biases during home assessments
- Assumptions about family stability
- Lack of cultural competency training among adoption workers

These findings reveal that legal rights do not automatically change institutional culture.

Implementation Challenges Under CYFSA

Legal commentators note that although CYFSA explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, **implementation varies** based on:

- Local adoption agency culture
- Individual worker attitudes
- Availability of LGBTQ-affirming services

This scholarship supports the hypothesis that equality in law is not always matched by equality in practice.

7. Legal Framework Under the CYFSA (Ontario)

a. Equality and Non-Discrimination

The CYFSA prohibits discrimination in providing child and family services based on:

- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Gender expression

b. Best Interests of the Child (Section 74)

The Act prioritises:

- Stable, loving homes
- Cultural, religious, and community identity
- Safety and emotional well-being

Same-sex couples are explicitly considered equally capable under this framework.

c. Adoption Procedures

- Home study assessments
- PRIDE (Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education) training
- Matching processes
- Post-adoption follow-up

The law ensures equal procedural rights for same-sex couples at each stage.

8. Critical Analysis of Adoption Rights

8.1 Strengths of the CYFSA

a. Explicit Recognition of LGBTQ+ Families

Ontario is among the first provinces to provide explicit statutory protections for gender identity and expression.

b. Child-Centred Approach

The best interests principle ensures that decisions focus on child welfare, not parental identity.

c. Protection for LGBTQ+ Youth

Many prospective adoptive children identify as LGBTQ+. Same-sex couples often provide affirming environments that align with CYFSA objectives.

8.2 Key Shortcomings and Practical Barriers

a. Heteronormative Bias

Despite legal equality, many adoption workers may unconsciously favour heterosexual couples.

b. Lack of Specialized Training

Cultural competency regarding LGBTQ+ families is inconsistent across agencies.

c. Challenges Faced by Trans Parents

Transgender adoptive parents experience heightened scrutiny, reflecting systemic misconceptions about gender identity.

d. Administrative Delays

Some same-sex couples face longer matching timelines due to stereotypes about stability or “fit”.

e. Limited Outreach

Few targeted recruitment programs exist to encourage same-sex couples to adopt children with higher needs (e.g., older youth, children with disabilities).

9. Comparative Global Perspective

United Kingdom

- Same-sex adoption legalized since 2005.
- Extensive cultural competency training for adoption workers.

- Stronger oversight mechanisms than Ontario.

United States (select states)

- Adoption rights vary widely; some states allow agency refusals based on religious beliefs.
- Ontario's framework is comparatively stronger in preventing discrimination.

Australia

- Most states allow same-sex adoption with strong best-interest standards.
- Mandatory training modules incorporate LGBTQ+ sensitivity.

Ontario can adapt best practices from these jurisdictions, particularly in standardizing agency-level cultural competency.

10. Findings

The research establishes that while statutory protections under CYFSA are robust, systemic issues persist in three areas:

- 1. Administrative practices** (bias in assessments)
- 2. Training and sensitization gaps**
- 3. Limited accountability mechanisms** for agencies violating equality provisions

Thus, substantive equality remains an aspirational rather than fully realised goal.

11. Recommendations

1. Mandatory LGBTQ+ Sensitivity Training

Standardized modules for all adoption workers.

2. Independent Oversight Mechanism To monitor complaints regarding discrimination.

3. Strengthening Data Collection

Track adoption outcomes for same-sex couples to identify systemic problems.

4. Awareness Campaigns

Encourage diverse families to participate in adoption.

5. Special Programs for LGBTQ+ Youth

Ensure culturally competent family placements.

6. Revising Home Study Guidelines

Remove heteronormative assumptions and include explicit inclusivity standards.

12. Conclusion

Ontario's Child, Youth and Family Services Act represents a significant step in guaranteeing adoption rights for same-sex couples. It aligns with progressive human-rights standards and provides a strong legal basis for equality. However, the gap between **law on paper** and **law in practice** persists. Achieving true equality requires administrative reforms, consistent training, and institutional accountability.

If Ontario implements these reforms, it can emerge as a global model for inclusive and child-centred adoption systems where diverse families are valued and supported.

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