

Even in Gay Circles, the Women Want the Ring



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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Boston

LAST year, three months after the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to ban gay couples from marrying, a young woman named Bernadette Smith embarked on a reinvention. Ms. Smith abandoned her job running a community outreach program in Boston to become a wedding planner for gay couples, declaratively naming the new business she created It's About Time.

May 17 will be the anniversary of the landmark legalization of gay marriage and in the months since last spring, Ms. Smith has produced a wedding in a bowling alley with pizza and tiki lamps, a party at an oceanfront home documented by a watercolorist, and pagan nuptials officiated by Wiccans, where guests were shepherded from ceremony to reception in rented street cars. Only one consistent trend has emerged in her operation: most of her clients have been women. In the coming months she will oversee eight weddings, only one of them for a male couple.

Although women have served at the front lines of litigation efforts in the emotional debate over same-sex marriage, the issue's most vocal opinion leaders have been men, often leaving the impression that marriage is the preoccupying goal of one sex more than the other. Yet of the close to 5,400 couples who have married in Massachusetts since last May, a figure that represents nearly a third of all same-sex partner households in the state identified by the census, almost two-thirds of the couples have been women. Boston was one of the few cities and towns in the state where male marriages outnumbered female ones.

Sociologists and gay-marriage advocates explain the discrepancy largely in terms of the social and economic realities that shape conflicting attitudes about marriage. What the figures show, Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts said last week, "is that gay and lesbian differences aren't the most important ones in society, but the differences between men and women are."

On some level the statistics in Massachusetts bear out the culturally obvious: that men carry the greater weight of ambivalence on the subjects of marriage and family. On another level the numbers may reflect a wish among women to override the economic vulnerability of living independently. "Women are situated differently in the occupational labor force; there's more value to their marrying," said Christopher Carrington, an anthropologist who has studied gay and lesbian couples. Research conducted by Lee Badgett, an economist and director of the Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies, showed the average household income of lesbians in Massachusetts is 20 percent lower than it is for gay men.

DIANE DiCARLO and Jeanne Leszczynski, a Needham, Mass., couple who have been together for 12 years, have had marriage conversations involving finance. Ms. Leszczynski, a laboratory director at the University of Massachusetts, brings greater assets to the relationship than her partner.

For some time Ms. DiCarlo, a retired drapery maker who is 54, remained unconvinced that marriage should be pursued purely on romantic terms. "How could I make a vow and say I'm never going to get divorced when so many people get divorced?" she said.

Ms. DiCarlo's views began to change when her partner began to think about marriage as a means of long-term financial custodianship, rather than merely as an idealized vow of fidelity. "Things could happen, we could separate, people's needs systems change," Ms. DiCarlo explained. "But marriage means that a person is taken care of for life." The couple are currently arranging for a prenuptial agreement.

Gay marriage in Massachusetts remains secure until the end of the year, when the issue is to be taken up once again in the State Legislature and potentially put to a popular vote. A public opinion poll conducted by The Boston Globe in March found popular support for gay marriage in the state at 54 percent, an 18-point increase over the previous year. The number of gay marriages themselves have declined since the initial rush last spring; more than half of them occurred in the first six weeks of legalization.