

Summary

Increasingly normal; never the norm

Acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands

Gay Emancipation Monitor

The main objective of the Dutch government in its gay and lesbian policy is to improve public attitudes towards homosexuality. At the request of the government, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP periodically reports on (trends in) the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands.

This report describes what people in general and young people in particular think about homosexuality. Gay and bisexual men and boys and lesbian and bisexual women and girls were also surveyed in the study; how accepted do they feel? How often do they experience negative incidents, and what are they? Separate attention was devoted to lesbian parents and their children, and the study also investigated trends in attitudes to homosexuality in five minority groups: orthodox Protestants, and Dutch citizens with a Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Chinese background.

Attitudes of the Dutch public

The attitudes of the Dutch public to homosexuality are predominantly positive – not in all sections of the population and not on all fronts, but positive nonetheless. The summarising measure of acceptance of homosexuality developed by SCP at the request of the Dutch government shows that the percentage of the population who can be characterised as ‘anti-gay’ fell from 15% in 2006 to 9% in 2008. It is worth noting that ethnic minorities are not well represented in the survey used to compile this measure; however, given that they relatively often have difficulty with homosexuality, it is likely that the percentage with negative attitudes to homosexuality will in reality be somewhat higher. The studies based on the summarising measure are of fairly recent date, but research over a longer period that offers information on trends in public attitudes also shows that attitudes have become gradually more positive over time.

Compared with other European countries, public attitudes to homosexuality in the Netherlands are still the most liberal. The difference compared with Sweden and Denmark is small, but compared with countries in Southern, Central and above all Eastern Europe, the picture in the Netherlands is a decidedly positive one.

People have most difficulty with visible expressions of homosexuality. For example, 40% of the population find it objectionable if two men kiss in public, and 27% feel the same if two women kiss. People are much less troubled by a straight couple kissing in public, with 13% taking exception to this. What is considered normal and acceptable for straight people does not apply to the same degree for gays and lesbians. As an example, one in

three people in the Netherlands find it less problematic if a man and woman walk hand in hand than if two men do the same thing.

By contrast, the principle of equal rights for gays enjoys fairly broad support. However, if children are involved, support dwindles to a lower level than the support for same-sex marriage: more than 20% reject the idea of equal adoption rights, while just over 11% think that gay marriage should be banned.

Although it might be expected that people would have the most difficulty with homosexuality in their immediate circle, this is found not to be the case; a minority (13%) would for example consider it unacceptable if their son or daughter were to cohabit with someone of the same sex. The percentage of the population who would have a problem with this is thus substantially lower than the proportion who object to seeing gay men kissing, for example. On the other hand, the percentage is not negligible, and gay children can thus not simply assume that their parents will be open to their sexual preferences.

Attitudes of young straight people

In a survey of school pupils (aged 11-16 years), one in ten boys said they would be unable to have someone as a friend who was a gay or lesbian. Like adults, young people have difficulty with gays or lesbians kissing intimately in public. Almost half the young people interviewed find the idea of two boys kissing repugnant; this percentage drops when it comes for two girls kissing, but is still 29%. Three out of ten pupils think that gay and lesbian pupils are not able to be open about their sexual preferences at school.

Detailed interviews with straight young people explored in more depth how they feel about homosexuality and bisexuality and precisely where they have difficulties with it. Young people associate homosexuality mainly with feminine behaviour: gay men are effeminate in their behaviour and effeminate men are all gay. Straight boys in particular think that men should be 'manly', and prefer to distance themselves from gays. Straight boys consider it important to avoid being seen as homosexual themselves, and also fairly readily assume that a homosexual will make sexual advances to them.

Straight girls also regard homosexual men as effeminate, but for them this is not a negative characteristic – sometimes quite the reverse. Half of them have no fear of being seen as lesbians or 'dykes'; they are much more worried about being classed as 'sluts' or 'tarts'. Female homosexuality and bisexuality are in fact rarely a topic of conversation among young heterosexuals. They often do not know any lesbian girls or women, nor any bisexuals – and certainly no bisexual boys or men. The image that young people have of lesbians is that they are 'masculine' or 'sexy'. Boys, in particular, say they enjoy watching women kissing each other and often think that women do this in order to arouse men. The indigenous young people in the survey, in particular, revealed that being authentic, 'being yourself', is greatly valued. Someone who is able to be themselves deserves respect, but the problem is that they often tend to regard gay boys and bisexual girls, in particular, as 'fake'. Homosexual youngsters are thus in an impossible position: they are expected to be themselves as far as possible, but if they deviate from the gender norms they are rejected. At the same time, however, where heterosexual youngsters have built

up a good personal contact with a young gay person, they often feel that he or she has become more themselves.

Acceptance of homosexuality in the eyes of gays and bisexuals

In order to obtain a complete picture of how accepted homosexuality and bisexuality is in the Netherlands, it is important to look not only at the attitudes and opinions of the public at large, but also at the experiences of homosexuals, bisexuals and lesbians themselves. This was done using several studies. Part 2 of this report focuses in turn on the experiences of adult gay and bisexual men, lesbian and bisexual women and lesbian mothers (and their children). The third part of the report looks in detail at young gays and bisexuals.

Experiences of adult gays, lesbians and bisexuals

The experiences of men who have sex with other men were ascertained in 2009 using an online questionnaire as part of the annual Schorer Monitor survey, in which more than 4,500 men took part. In addition, in 2008 the Stichting OndersteBoven foundation conducted an online survey among more than 1,300 lesbian and bisexual women.

Coming out and acceptance

The majority of gay and bisexual men have come out (91%) and are open about their sexual preferences towards their parents and other relatives. Women are also often open about their sexual preferences with family members and colleagues. Among both men and women, bisexuals and those with a lower education level are more often still in the closet. The same applies for men who live in the countryside or in small towns, and for young women. According to most gay and bisexual men, their parents have accepted their sexual preferences. Yet one in ten of them report that their mothers find this difficult to deal with and almost one in eight say that their father is unable to fully accept their sexual preferences.

A proportion of gay and bisexual men and women themselves have problems in accepting their sexual preferences. Almost one in five men agree with the statement: 'If I could choose, I'd rather be straight', and almost a fifth also feel it is not easy to talk about their sexual preferences. Among women, one in 20 agree with the statement: 'If someone were to offer me the chance to be straight, I would take it'. Young people and bisexuals record a lower score on self-acceptance, as do men who do not live in cities and women who are not open towards their family and colleagues. For men, acceptance by their father also contributes to their self-acceptance.

Anti-gay experiences

A sizeable number of men and women have sometimes been confronted with negative reactions because of their sexual orientation. Young men and women, in particular, encounter anti-gay attitudes. One in ten men had been jeered or ridiculed one or more times at school or work because of their sexual preferences in the six months prior to

the survey, and around three in ten had had a similar experience with strangers. Among women, four in ten had been jeered in the six months prior to the survey and three in ten had been ridiculed. Both men and women report that they received the most negative reactions from strangers.

Things often go no further than negative verbal reactions, such as unpleasant, curious questions and gossip. Nonetheless, 1% of men reported that they had been assaulted by strangers in the six months prior to the survey, and 4% had been threatened on more than one occasion. A quarter of men moreover report that they feel less safe because of their sexual preferences than they did a few years ago. In 2009, 82 reports of physical violence were recorded by the police in Amsterdam alone, and most of these reports were made by men. The number of recorded incidents is likely to be no more than the tip of the iceberg.

Psychosocial problems

It is known from earlier research that gays, lesbians and bisexuals report more psychosocial problems than heterosexuals. One in eight men who participated in the Schorer Monitor survey reported that they had felt down or lonely often or very often one week before the survey, while a similar percentage of gay and bisexual women had felt lonely in the preceding month. It is not possible in these surveys to determine whether this percentage is higher than among heterosexuals, but comparison with other research suggests that these feelings may be more common among homosexual than heterosexual men. It has also been observed among gays, lesbians and bisexuals that it is mainly younger people, bisexuals and those who are not very open towards others about their sexual preferences who score relatively highly in terms of anxiety and depressive disorders. In addition, the study by the Stichting OndersteBoven foundation demonstrates that stigmatising and anti-gay comments by relatives, colleagues and acquaintances, as well as experiencing such incidents in at least three social contexts, have a negative impact on the psychosocial health of lesbian and bisexual women. Interestingly, negative reactions in the street or in nightlife situations were not found to have the same effect on their psychosocial health. It may be that women attach greater importance to relationships with family, friends and colleagues and that anti-gay sentiment in these spheres affects them more than when such sentiments are expressed by strangers.

Contemplating and attempting suicide also appear to be more common among gays and lesbians than among heterosexuals. One in 20 gay and bisexual men had occasionally thought about suicide in the week prior to the survey, and 3% had done so frequently. This problem was not covered in the survey by the Stichting OndersteBoven foundation, but earlier research has shown that lesbians also contemplate suicide more often than straight women and have more often made an attempt at taking their own lives.

Gay and lesbian parenthood

The bringing up of children by female or male couples is becoming more and more accepted in the Netherlands. Of the estimated 56,000 cohabiting female and male

couples, there are children in 20% of the female households and 3% of the male couples. Prejudices abound concerning the well-being of the children in these families, whereas to date little research has been carried out in the Netherlands to determine whether there are actually any differences between children who grow up with a mother and father and children who grow up with two mothers or two fathers.

Research carried out by the University of Amsterdam has shown that Dutch children aged 8-12 years who grow up in a family with two lesbian mothers do not differ in terms of their psychosocial functioning (overall self-esteem, social skills and depressive complaints) from children who grow up in a traditional father/mother family. It was also demonstrated that children aged between 4 and 12 years who grow up with two fathers do not differ from children who grow up with a father and mother in terms of their behaviour and skills in interacting with other children, emotional problems, hyperactivity or behavioural problems. The 'father families' which took part in this survey were in fact multiple-parent families, in which the raising of children was shared with their mothers.

The findings of these surveys suggest that growing up with two fathers or two mothers is in itself not a risk factor for children's psychosocial health. The survey did however find that a high proportion of children who grow up with same-sex parents encounter discriminating and stigmatising reactions from others. These negative experiences do then impact on their psychosocial well-being.

Experiences of young gays

Under the name SameFeelings, the first large-scale survey in the Netherlands was carried out among young gays, lesbians and bisexuals. The study used an online questionnaire to survey young men and women aged between 16 and 25 years who (also) feel attracted to members of their own sex. More than 1,600 young people took part in the survey. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 30 young people who had experienced a great deal of anti-gay sentiment.

Coming out

On average, the young people who took part in the survey became aware that they felt attracted to members of their own sex (sometimes as well as the opposite sex) at around the age of 13. Most boys reported that they feel attracted only to other boys, and three-quarters describe themselves as gay or homosexual. The picture among girls is slightly different: more than half feel attracted to both sexes to a greater or lesser degree. Just over half describe themselves as 'gay', a third as 'bisexual' and only 13% as 'lesbian'. The fact that a fifth of young men and women do not apply a clear label to their sexual preferences and that a third actually use more than one label shows that a proportion of young people appear to be somewhat reticent or ambiguous in describing their sexual identity. Some young people will still be searching for that identity, but it also became clear from the interviews that they would like to be seen as 'normal' (whereas a sexual label emphasises the fact that they are 'different') and do not want to be put in a pigeonhole.

Many young people who took part in the survey (91%) have come out about their sexuality. The average period between becoming aware of their non-heterosexual preferences and first coming out was just over three years. The majority of parents and friends (around 70%) are aware of their sexual orientation, whereas young people are more selective in how open they are in revealing their sexual preferences at school, work, to other relatives or to people with whom they engage in sport.

Perceived acceptance and negative reactions

A majority of young gays who are open about their sexual preferences encounter negative reactions; a minority feel they are not accepted. Two-thirds of the young gays who took part in this study have experienced negative reactions at some point, boys rather more often than girls. Verbal violence is the most common form of negativity. Most anti-gay reactions take place at school and in the neighbourhood. A quarter of boys who are in education feel that fellow-students do not accept their sexual orientation. Most young people in the survey do feel accepted by their parents and friends, though a quarter of them have at some time had anti-gay reactions from their parents and a third from their friends.

Not all young gays take a positive view of their own sexual preferences and of their lives in general. Almost a fifth of them would prefer to be heterosexual, and the same proportion feel uncomfortable about the idea of being open about the fact that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual. One worrying finding is that almost half have at some point had suicidal thoughts, 12% have actually attempted suicide and 13% often suffer from depression. Around half of young gays report that they have (at some time) needed support or help because of their sexual preferences, and 45% have received it. We found that young people who regularly receive negative reactions more often struggle with lower self-acceptance and depression and have more often made suicide attempts.

Groups in need of extra attention

Five groups of young gays warrant extra attention: young bisexuals, those who do not conform to gender type, young gays, religious and migrant youngsters. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to obtain a picture of the experiences of migrants; however, it seems reasonable to assume that, unlike the other four groups, they are extra vulnerable because homosexuality is often a sensitive topic in migrant communities and acceptance is anything but guaranteed.

Young bisexuals have a more difficult time than homosexuals in some respects. They feel their relatives, work and school environment are less gay-friendly than do the (predominantly) homosexual youngsters. They have less often faced negative reactions because of their sexual preferences, undoubtedly because they are less often open about their sexual preferences and have fewer experiences of relationships with members of their own sex, which means they are less visible. At the same time, young bisexuals have a poor self-image and display more suicidal behaviour than young homosexuals. Young gays who deviate from gender norms are also a vulnerable group. Boys who resemble girls and girls who resemble boys reported less acceptance in several settings

in response to the survey, as well as more anti-gay reactions and more depressive complaints.

Young gays in the survey who were still at secondary school are in a worse position as regards acceptance by fellow pupils, experiences of anti-gay reactions, gay-friendliness of the school environment and psychological well-being (depressive complaints and suicidal tendencies) than those who are in further education; almost a quarter of secondary school pupils regard the school climate as gay-unfriendly, compared with one in ten students in further education. Teenagers reported more anti-gay experiences than those in their twenties. Contact with other young gays can provide a good buffer as well as a source of support and information about dealing with non-acceptance and anti-gay reactions. The youngest group of respondents (16-18 years) have a greater need for contact with other young gays than young people aged 19-25 years. This is not surprising, given that they are more often still in the closet, encounter more anti-gay reactions and also more often describe their school climate as gay-unfriendly.

Young people who are religious are more often still in the closet than their non-religious counterparts and feel that homosexuality is less accepted by their parents. Young people who have been brought up in a religious setting have also more often attempted suicide.

Recommendations by young gays to the Minister for gay and lesbian emancipation

Gay youngsters were asked which activities would help to improve the position of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Several themes emerged. Providing information at school was mentioned frequently; it would also be a good thing if lots of gays were to talk about their sexual preferences in an open and 'matter-of-fact' way. The desired outcome is that young gays are seen as 'normal', not as 'special' or 'odd'. The media could also play a role here by presenting a more varied picture of gays. In addition, facilities and activities for young gays could be expanded or improved.

Trends among ethnic and religious minorities in the Netherlands

Part 4 of this report looks at the attitudes of orthodox Protestants and of Dutch citizens with a Surinamese, Moroccan, Turkish and Chinese background towards homosexuality, and at changes in those attitudes over the last 40 years. This was done on the basis of a literature review and discussions with key stakeholders. A number of positive trends were identified, especially in the Surinamese and Protestant communities, but all these groups continue to display a more negative basic attitude to homosexuality and equal treatment for gays and lesbians than the rest of the Dutch population.

What is the problem?

There are seven problems that the above groups continue to have with homosexuality: first, homosexuality is out of kilter with ideals about marriage and family formation; the same applies for ideas about masculinity and femininity: gay men are not real men and lesbians are not real women; a third objection is that gay men, in particular, display deviant sexual behaviour and place too much emphasis on it; homosexuality is also felt to be too much on public display, with both Protestants and Muslims moreover having

the feeling that they are being forced to accept homosexuality; a fifth objection is that homosexuality goes against religious principles; a sixth is that it is against nature, with virtually no distinction being made here between religious and biological nature; the seventh issue is that homosexuality is seen as a psychological disorder. The objections voiced vary across the different groups, and as one objection disappears, another takes its place. Sometimes the objections are directed against gay men, sometimes against gay men and lesbians, sometimes against particular homosexual practices such as anal sex. Most of the objections are traditional in nature and were commonly held by the Dutch public at large in the past. For this reason, many respondents believe that it is just a matter of time before homosexuality is accepted in these groups, just as it is among 'ordinary' Dutch citizens.

Trends over time

This study suggests that the race towards gay emancipation has not yet been run. Dutch citizens of Moroccan and Turkish background, for example, attach much more importance to family and religion today than they did in the 1960s and 70s, when the first generation of 'guest workers' settled in the Netherlands; this shift in values has a negative effect on acceptance of homosexuality. The most positive group in their attitudes towards gay sex are those of (Creole) Surinamese background, who have a philosophy of 'live and let live', though they too often object to gays or lesbians openly displaying their sexual orientation in public. Orthodox Protestants acknowledge that there are gay men and women within their own circles, too, and urge them to make known their sexual preferences; however, they have difficulty with homosexual relationships. The objections to homosexuality have cultural and religious roots which have not yet disappeared in the indigenous Dutch population, and even less so among the groups discussed here. It is worrying that 30 years of gay emancipation have not led to clearer results among new Dutch citizens. There appears to be no end in sight, at least in the short term, to the difficult situation faced by gays and lesbians from ethnic minority and orthodox Protestant circles, because they are caught between their own group and other Dutch citizens, between family and 'white' gays. The gay organisations in Orthodox circles are the only group that has achieved (albeit limited) success in making homosexuality something that can be seen and talked about. The resistance in this group, too, is stubborn, however, as evidenced by the rejection of homosexual teachers and pupils at orthodox Protestant schools. One specific problem is the almost total invisibility of lesbians in all groups, except among Dutch citizens of Surinamese origin.

Opportunities for change

In the 1960s there was a favourable climate for gay emancipation in the Netherlands, created among other things by powerful processes of individualisation, secularisation, democratisation and sexual liberalisation. Those processes are almost absent today in the groups discussed here. This only serves to make an effective gay and lesbian policy all the more important. A number of possibilities for doing this are formulated here. For a long time there has been pressure for more education about homosexual citizenship. This is a long way from having been achieved, and generally has too little input from

homosexuals themselves. It is important that gay initiatives in the groups discussed here receive more systematic support. That is desirable above all because gays and lesbians, especially those who are members of ethnic minorities, are confronted with a culture of silence and are willing at best to come only halfway out of the closet. This hampers their visibility in Dutch society and within their own group. Apart from gays and lesbians themselves, mothers, sisters and girlfriends of gays and lesbians also have a role to play, because they face comparable discrimination. Input from religious and political leaders and support workers – especially from the groups concerned – is highly desirable. Virtually all respondents emphasised that acceptance of homosexuality will take a long time and that targeted intervention is needed to give new impetus to gay and lesbian emancipation.

Summing up the situation

Acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands is growing gradually. According to a summarising measure of Dutch public attitudes to homosexuality, around one in ten Dutch citizens can be characterised as anti-gay; in 2006 the figure was 15%. People with a lower education level and members of ethnic and religious minorities, in particular, relatively often hold negative views about homosexuality, and visible displays of homosexuality in particular still arouse strong objections. Traditional views about masculinity and femininity often stand in the way of acceptance of homosexuality; for example, straight youngsters accept homosexuality chiefly as long as gay men behave in a masculine way and lesbians in a feminine way (though not too provocatively).

Where next?

The results of this study underline the importance of continuing the gay and lesbian emancipation policy. Several themes which (continue to) demand attention emerged from the study. Tackling violence against and intimidation of homosexuals remains as important as ever. This applies in general, on the streets and in neighbourhoods, but also particularly at schools: this was where young gays in the survey reported that they were confronted with the most anti-gay sentiment. However, schools also have a more general task in increasing the attention for and acceptance of sexual diversity.

When it comes to equal rights, there are still a number of pertinent issues that need to be addressed: the 'mere fact principle' (which allows faith schools to refuse to take on homosexual teachers), civil servants who refuse to marry gay couples and lesbian parenthood (the female partner of a lesbian woman with whom she has a child must adopt that child in order to become a legal parent).

It is also apparent that prevention of psychosocial problems in young homosexuals demands attention, both from professionals in preventive youth health care services (Youth and Family Centres) and from mental health care services.

Some groups demand extra attention. There is still little acceptance of homosexuality among orthodox Protestants and non-Western migrants and their descendants. Bisexuals appear to have a more difficult time than gays and lesbians, and teenagers more so than their older counterparts. Lesbians moreover face the problem that they

are largely invisible. This report did not cover older gays and lesbians, nor transgenders, but it is known from other sources that these groups, too, need to be included in the policy. Finally, the point is made in the report that it is important to change the negative perceptions about gay parenthood.

Greater acceptance of homosexuality is of course important in the first place for the target group themselves. However, since low acceptance of homosexuality also has a social cost, there is also a general interest here. Input from all stakeholders is therefore important, but for the time being support from the government remains indispensable.