

Summary

Opinions on sexual and gender diversity in the Netherlands and Europe

Lisette Kuyper

Original title:

Opvattingen over seksuele en genderdiversiteit in Nederland en Europa

978 90 377 0866 0

Summary and conclusions

SCP has been monitoring the status of LGB(TI) (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) emancipation since 2006. We do this by looking at the life situation of LGBTI persons (how is the group itself faring?) and by measuring public opinion (what do the Dutch think about sexual and gender diversity?). This report describes emancipation from that second perspective. Public opinion on homosexuality, bisexuality and gender diversity is not only important as an indication of the social climate, but is also directly related to the life situation of sexual and gender minorities. International research has shown that these opinions are related to homonegativity (Parrott et al. 2008) and to the well-being of LGB citizens (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2011; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2014). Public opinion thus has an impact on the well-being and life situation of LGB citizens themselves – though there do appear to be limits to this: while research shows that social settings which differ widely in terms of legislation and social climate also differ as regards the well-being of LGB persons (LGB persons living in negative settings report lower well-being), Felson and Adamczyk (2017) show that above a certain percentage of positive public opinion, an increase in that positive percentage is no longer associated with a better reported life situation and well-being of LGB citizens.

This report draws on national and international representative population studies to answer three questions: ‘What is the attitude of the Dutch and European population to homosexuality and bisexuality, and are there differences between countries and population groups?’; ‘What trends can be identified in the attitudes of the Dutch and European populations to homosexuality and bisexuality?’; and ‘What is the attitude of the Dutch population to transgender persons and gender diversity, and are there differences based on background characteristics?’. As regards the first two questions, the data show that the Dutch public generally have a positive or very positive attitude towards homosexuality and bisexuality: in 2017, 74% had a positive attitude, 6% a negative attitude and 20% a neutral attitude. Attitudes became increasingly positive between 2006/07 and 2016/17, and we also find a significant positive difference in attitudes to homosexuality and bisexuality between 2014/15 and 2016/17. These changes have occurred in relation to several themes (such as equal rights, visibility, acceptance in personal circle) as well as in different population groups (such as young and old or religious and non-religious individuals). School students also generally take a positive view of homosexuality, while primary school pupils have also been clearly more positive in their views over the years. Secondary school students held considerably more positive views on homosexuality in 2017 than in 2009, though the increase has recently levelled off. Compared with many other countries, the Dutch take a very positive stance on homosexuality.

However, two caveats need to be applied to this generally positive picture. First, attitudes are rather less positive on some specific aspects of homosexuality and bisexuality, especially regarding (visible) forms of intimacy between people of the same sex. This applies for both the adult population and for school students. A larger percentage of the Dutch popu-

lation also have doubts about equal rights to adoption. However, the fact that the Dutch public have a 'relatively negative' attitude to the above aspects compared with other topics does not signify disapproval on the part of the majority of the population. For example, compared with the 29% who consider two men kissing to be abhorrent, 42% do not; and compared with the 13% who do not support equal adoption rights, no fewer than 73% do support this. These percentages have moreover become increasingly positive over the last ten years.

The second caveat relates to the opinions of a number of sociodemographic groups in Dutch society. The way people feel about homosexuality and bisexuality is related to their sex, age, education, ethnicity, religion and political preference. Groups which hold substantially more negative views than the Dutch public in general include members of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKK), members of other religions and people with a non-Western migration background. It should be borne in mind here that, while these groups have more negative attitudes on average, even here the majority do not have a negative attitude. Moreover, the differences between the sociodemographic groups have narrowed sharply over the years. In other words, opinions on homosexuality and bisexuality in the Netherlands are moving closer together. This may be due in part to a ceiling effect: such a large majority of the population now hold positive views on homosexuality and bisexuality that a lack of variation in views means the correlation with predictors (such as sociodemographic characteristics) is disappearing.

As regards the third question, on views about gender diversity, the data show that the Dutch public again generally take a positive view. In 2016/17, 57% had a positive attitude, 34% a neutral attitude and 9% a negative attitude. The first tentative trends show that these views, too, are becoming more positive, but as we have only been measuring opinions on gender diversity since 2012/13 (a total of three measurements), we need to be cautious here. No recent international comparative figures are available.

The same caveats which apply to the opinions on homosexuality and bisexuality also apply here: people hold relatively negative views on certain aspects, and some groups in society have more negative attitudes. For example, opinions are divided on who should pay the costs of health care for transgender persons: 29% think that transgender persons themselves should pay these costs, while 35% disagree. Gender ambivalence also does not receive universal support: one in five respondents (20%) believe there is something wrong with people who do not feel like a man or a woman, and 14% would prefer not to associate with people who are not clearly male or female. On the other hand, more than half say they find nothing wrong with them (53%) and that they would be prepared to associate with people whose gender is ambivalent (62%). Those with negative attitudes are more often men, low-educated, religious, of non-Western origin and vote for the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Party For Freedom (PVV) or People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). Interestingly, the differences in opinions between groups are greater with regard to gender diversity than homosexuality and bisexuality. There is also no sign of a ceiling effect in opinions on gender diversity.

Quantitative, periodically repeated opinion surveys are a good and reliable means of monitoring public opinion on specific topics over time. Thanks to the addition of nineteen statements about homosexuality, bisexuality and gender diversity to the CUL/SUI study in 2006, we now have an impression both of the most recent situation and of the trends over time. At the same time, there are of course a number of limitations to this method of research. One limitation is that there is no way of identifying why people hold a particular opinion. For example, someone may disagree with the statement that ‘gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own lives as they wish’ because he or she has formed a negative attitude to homosexuality, or because he or she thinks that no one should be able to live their lives as they wish (for example because people should lead their lives in the way that God wishes). Similarly, someone may think that transgender persons should pay for their operations themselves because he or she takes a negative view of transgender persons, but also because he or she thinks there should be as little public money as possible spent on health care in general.

Another limitation is that a judgement always has to be made between the importance of comparability (and thus always asking the same questions in the same way) and new insights and societal trends. From the first perspective, it is desirable not to change any part of the statements or the scale construction used for the compound indicator. This is after all the only way of measuring developments and changes over time. By contrast, from the second perspective changes are actually a good thing. In 2018 the emancipation debate is focused (partly) on different issues and different groups than was the case in 2006. For example, to date the survey has contained no questions about intersex persons, nor have any specific questions about bisexual citizens been added to representative population studies. Public opinion on topical issues in the public debate, such as gender registration and gender-neutral toilets, is also an unknown. A choice will also have to be made between ‘comparability’ and ‘topicality’ in future editions of studies of opinions on LGBTI persons. Finally, the caveat is regularly applied that opinion research offers only socially desirable answers expressing what people say they think, and that the reality can be very different. This caveat touches on the issue of social desirability, and to mitigate this effect as far as possible, the SUI questionnaire is completed individually on paper. On the other hand, possible bias due to social desirability does nothing to alter the fact that people evidently found it easier to express homonegative views ten years ago than today, and that it is evidently considered socially desirable today to speak in positive terms about homosexuality and bisexuality; that also says something about changing views and the social climate in the Netherlands regarding sexual and gender diversity.

Concluding remarks

Leaving aside the caveats expressed regarding a few topics, groups and the research method, the current figures on opinions towards homosexuality, bisexuality and gender diversity show that the majority of the Dutch public have a positive attitude towards the majority of the topics, and that those attitudes have only grown more positive over recent years. From the perspective of attitudes and opinions, therefore, the emancipation of sex-

ual and gender minorities is moving in the right direction. However, as stated earlier, SCP looks at two sides of the story when considering the status of LGBTI emancipation, namely the life situation of LGBTI citizens themselves and public opinion on homosexuality, bisexuality and gender diversity. Although the opinions found in this study present a positive picture, we know from other research that progress in emancipation is weaker if we look at the life situation of the target group themselves. Recent SCP studies have shown that – notwithstanding the positive public opinion – LGBT citizens were at a disadvantage compared with heterosexual cisgender citizens (Kuyper 2015b; Kuyper 2016; Kuyper 2017). For example, transgender persons were more often living in poverty, LGB persons were more often victims of violence or bullying at work, and young LGB persons reported high levels of mental health problems. This underlines the importance of a broad view and nuanced pronouncements about the status of the emancipation of LGBTI citizens.