

Summary and conclusions

Acceptance of homosexuality by ethnic and religious groups in the Netherlands

Compared with other countries, attitudes to homosexuality in the Netherlands are generally positive (Kuyper et al. 2013). Acceptance of homosexuality by the Dutch has increased sharply since the middle of the 20th century (Keuzenkamp et al. 2006). However, even in the Netherlands, tolerance cannot be taken for granted. In particular, open displays of homosexuality still meet with a great deal of disapproval. Religious (especially orthodox) groups and migrants, in particular, less readily accept homosexuality. Against this background, the Emancipation department at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science asked the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP to carry out an exploratory study of the acceptance of homosexuality within ethnic and religious groups in the Netherlands. The purpose of this study is to use existing data to gain an impression of the level of acceptance of homosexuality and developments in that acceptance in as many different ethnic and religious groups as possible.

How was acceptance of homosexuality measured?

Attitudes towards homosexuality are complex, not just in their form, but also in their gradation and content (Kuyper & Bakker 2006). These attitudes are often broken down into four dimensions in the Netherlands (Keuzenkamp et al. 2006). The first is 'general acceptance': the acceptance of sexuality in general. The second dimension is concerned with equal rights and (anti)discrimination. The third dimension comprises reactions to public displays of homosexuality: how do people react when homosexuality is openly visible? The fourth dimension is concerned with how people react to homosexuality close to them, for example within their family or in the neighbourhood. This study looks at all these dimensions, but is mainly descriptive in nature. An in-depth discussion of all identified differences and developments between and within groups goes beyond the scope of this report.

Acceptance of homosexuality in religious circles

Church life in the Netherlands is dominated in quantitative terms by two communities: the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). The PCN is in turn an amalgamation of virtually all members of the former Dutch Reformed Church, the Orthodox Reformed Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Apart from the PCN and the Roman Catholic Church, a number of small Christian churches and movements are also active in the Netherlands, including within the orthodox reformed and evangelical groups. Migration has also led to an increase in the number of followers of non-Christian faiths over recent decades. Islam is the biggest religion within this group.

High level of acceptance among non-religious groups

Religious groups were compared with each other as well as with people who say they are not religious (non-believers). Since the end of the last century, non-believers have formed the biggest group in the Netherlands. The level of acceptance of homosexuality is high in this group; the majority say it would not be a problem if their child had a steady partner of the same sex, and also endorse equal rights to adoption or marriage for gays and lesbians. Non-believers have most difficulty with public displays of homosexuality, especially where this concerns gay men kissing.

Roman Catholics

Dutch Roman Catholics are predominantly positive in their attitudes to homosexuality. A (large) majority endorse notions such as equal rights for gays and accept homosexuality within their own family. Catholics are markedly more accepting of homosexuality than Protestants, and especially Protestants outside the PCN. The attitudes of Catholics towards homosexuality are the most tolerant of all religious groups studied here.

More diversity in acceptance of homosexuality among Protestants

The wide diversity of views within the Protestant community means there is no such thing as 'the' Protestant attitude to homosexuality. Generally speaking, the views of orthodox reformed groups outside the PCN and members of the evangelical movement are substantially more negative than members of the PCN, whose views are often closer to those of Catholics than to the smaller (orthodox) Protestant groups. Nonetheless, homosexuality still meets with resistance even within the PCN. There appears to be little evidence of 'hard' intolerance, but a small proportion state explicitly that homosexuality is wrong, for example, or say they would have difficulty if their child had a gay teacher or was gay themselves. At the same time, however, the acceptance of homosexuality goes a step too far for many members of the PCN. For example, fewer than half think it is acceptable for their child to have a partner of the same sex or that gay couples should have the same rights as straight couples to adopt children.

Low acceptance among 'other' orthodox Protestants and evangelical groups

The 'other' orthodox Protestants and members of the evangelical groups have markedly more negative attitudes towards homosexuality, with major objections especially as regards equal rights for lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGBs) or reactions to homosexuality in public and in their immediate setting. A majority say they think homosexuality is wrong; a minority endorse the notion of equal rights to marriage or adoption and a quarter could accept their child being gay. Open displays of homosexuality attract particular disapproval; almost four-fifths think the idea of sex between two gay men is repugnant, while more than two-thirds are repelled by the idea of two men kissing in public.

Homosexuality also problematic among Muslims

Approval of homosexuality is low among Muslims, a majority of whom explicitly reject homosexuality. Orthodox Protestants and Muslims are often mentioned in the same breath as groups in the Netherlands where acceptance of homosexuality is low. And the attitudes of Muslims are indeed comparable in some areas with those of the smaller, conservative Protestant groups. Roughly the same proportion think that homosexuality is wrong, for example, or that LGBs should not be allowed to live their lives as they wish. When it comes to equal rights to marry or homosexuality within their own family, however, acceptance among Muslims is lower. Three-quarters say they would consider it a problem if their child had a steady partner of the same sex. Within the Muslim community, acceptance of homosexuality is slightly greater among Alawites than among Sunni or Shi'ite Muslims.

The degree of religiosity – principally measured by attendance of religious gatherings and endorsement of religious views – is closely associated with the degree of acceptance of homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, it emerges time and again that the more religious someone is, the more negative their attitude is towards homosexuality. In the smaller Protestant groups, in particular, acceptance is low among those who go to church. The differences in the Muslim community based on frequency of mosque attendance are relatively small.

Attendance at religious gatherings has a greater influence on acceptance of homosexuality in general terms than on acceptance of homosexuality in a person's immediate setting or in public. The closer homosexuality comes, the less religiosity plays a role. Differences between religious groups are then more pronounced than differences within those groups.

Decline in hard rejection since the 1960s

In the early 1960s, a substantial proportion of the Dutch population were squarely negative in their attitudes towards homosexuality. The 1960s brought great changes to those attitudes. The extreme negative utterances about LGBs, for example that they should be eliminated from society, have received virtually no support since the 1980s. This increased tolerance and acceptance has not only occurred outside the church; this study shows that this development has also taken place among believers, including those who frequently attend religious gatherings.

The increase in acceptance among religious groups took place at a time of a mass exodus from the church. It is highly likely that most liberals have left the church in recent decades. This means not only that the number of non-believers with a positive attitude to homosexuality has increased in the recent period, but also that the 'remaining' believers have become more positive in their attitudes to homosexuality.

Increased acceptance among 'mainstream' religious groups too

The sharp increase in general acceptance over the last two decades of the twentieth century does not appear to have been sustained among all religious groups in the present century. Although tolerance of homosexuality has increased among (church-affiliated)

members of PCN and Roman Catholics, it is largely unknown how the acceptance of equal rights has developed recently within the more conservative (Protestant) groups. There is also little certainty regarding developments in the acceptance of homosexuality within non-Christian religions, simply because the data for this are not available.

Little difference between age groups within conservative groups

Generally speaking, young Roman Catholics and non-believers are more positive towards homosexuality than their older peers. There is little or no evidence of this among Protestants and Muslims; in fact there are even indications that young members of the evangelical movement and the 'other' orthodox Protestants (outside the PCN) have more negative perceptions about homosexuality than older members of these religious groups. Younger Muslims are slightly more positive when it comes to general acceptance, but when asked about their attitude to gay marriage or homosexuality within their own family, age makes no difference.

If we look at the attitudes of school students, the negative views of students with an Islamic background are particularly striking. More than a third do not like being taught by a gay or lesbian teacher, and over two-thirds think it is disgusting if two boys kiss. The reactions of schoolchildren from other religious backgrounds are much less negative.

Ethnic groups

The (limited) acceptance of homosexuality within certain ethnic groups has become a widely discussed social theme particularly since the beginning of this century. This study confirms that the biggest differences are found between Dutch natives and migrants from non-Western countries. If we look at the four largest non-Western migrant groups in the Netherlands, a clear distinction emerges between the views of people of Surinamese and Antillean origin on the one hand and those with a Turkish and Moroccan background on the other.

Limited acceptance among migrants of Turkish and Moroccan origin

Migrants of Moroccan, and especially Turkish origin are generally not positive in their attitudes towards homosexuality. Half of those of Turkish and Moroccan origin say explicitly that homosexuality is (always) wrong; a majority reject the idea of gay marriage and three-quarters would consider it a problem if their child were homosexual. Among Dutch natives, one in ten think that homosexuality is (almost) always wrong, four-fifths think LGBs should be allowed to marry each other and a sixth would have difficulties if their child had a partner of the same sex. The Islamic background of the Turkish and Moroccan groups is an important factor. The differences between people of Turkish and Moroccan origin are generally not great, though the views of the Turkish group are more negative on certain points.

Antillean and Surinamese migrants

A large majority of people of Surinamese and Antillean origin say that LGBs should be allowed to live their lives as they wish and support gay marriage. Roughly one in three say they would have difficulty if their child was homosexual.

A substantial proportion of Surinamese migrants are Hindus. They are also predominantly positive in their attitudes to homosexuality, though two-fifths would consider it a problem if their child had a partner of the same sex. Homosexuality meets with greater resistance in certain smaller faith communities within Surinamese or Antillean circles. For example, approval levels are low among Jehovah's Witnesses, the evangelical brotherhood or members of the Pentecostal church. Members of religious circles would also have difficulties with having a homosexual child. Nonetheless, the majority of people of Surinamese and Antillean origin do take a positive attitude towards homosexuality.

Refugee and Chinese groups

Little is known about the views of other non-Western groups in the Netherlands on homosexuality. General acceptance appears to be high especially among those of Iranian origin, who are relatively secular and well educated. People of Iraqi, Afghan and Somali origin, all groups with an Islamic background, also believe more often than their Turkish and Moroccan counterparts that LGBs should be able to live their lives as they wish. Roughly two-thirds of those of Chinese origin also endorse this view.

Views of Western migrants generally positive

Overall, there is not much difference between the views of Western migrants as a whole and Dutch natives. That said, there is no such thing as 'the' Western migrant: there are wide differences between them. The attitudes of students from the 'rich' Western countries towards public displays of homosexuality are even more positive than those of Dutch natives.

There has been a major influx of migrants from Eastern Europe since the start of this century, especially from Poland. More than three-quarters of Dutch migrants of Polish origin think that LGBs should be able to live their lives as they wish – a fairly high proportion compared with non-Western migrant groups. One caveat here is that the figures date from 2009, since when the Polish population in the Netherlands has changed considerably. People in Poland itself are less tolerant of homosexuality, and it is uncertain to what extent the negative opinions held by these new labour migrants are endorsed and 'carried' to the Netherlands – though the signs based on research among recent migrants from Eastern Europe do not appear to suggest that this is common (Gijsberts & Lubbers 2013). What is true is that a relatively small proportion of school students from Western countries that are not 'rich' would accept an LGB person as a friend. In fact, after Turkish and Moroccan students, this group show the lowest acceptance of gay friends.

Developments

There is a lack of good (quantitative) information needed to describe developments within the various ethnic communities in the Netherlands. It is however possible to look at differences between generations. In general, members of the second generation are more positive towards homosexuality than the first generation. However, the closer homosexuality comes to their personal sphere, the more broadly views – positive or negative – within ethnic groups are shared. For example, second-generation Moroc-

can and Turkish migrants hold the same views on having a homosexual child as the first generation: three-quarters of them say explicitly that this would be a problem.

Acceptance of homosexuality at school

Ethnic differences in acceptance of homosexuality start young. We see this in studies of school students, for example; Turkish and Moroccan students, in particular, have negative views on homosexuality. Reactions to homosexuality in public are predominantly negative, and a high proportion would not allow a gay person into their circle of friends. More than a third also say they would have difficulty with a gay teacher. At secondary school, the attitudes of the 'other' non-Western migrants are relatively positive, and close to those of Dutch natives and 'rich' Western migrants.

Analysis of differences in acceptance of homosexuality

This study sought to ascertain what lies behind differences in acceptance of homosexuality. Differences in acceptance between believers and non-believers can be only partially explained by the background characteristics included in the study. Although believers are on average older, less well educated, more often live in less urbanised environments and are more often of non-Western origin – all unfavourable factors for acceptance of homosexuality – wide differences remain in acceptance of homosexuality between believers and non-believers after taking these factors into account.

The relationship between religion and attitudes to homosexuality is a powerful one. The influence of other factors such as education level, age or gender is much smaller. Both denomination and degree of religiosity – and especially endorsement of religious attitudes – influence acceptance of homosexuality.

Ethnic origin is also closely associated with acceptance of homosexuality. This relationship operates largely via religion and parental education level. Migrants are more religious on average than natives and have generally grown up in a less well-educated setting; this partially explains their more negative attitudes to homosexuality.

Members of the second generation are more positive in their views on average than the first generation, but these differences can be ascribed entirely to the education level of their parents. Growing up in a Dutch context thus does not appear to have had a positive impact on the acceptance of homosexuality by members of the second generation.

Among those of Surinamese and Antillean origin, a longer period of residence in the Netherlands does lead to more positive attitudes towards homosexuality. By contrast, among those of Turkish and Moroccan origin two normally important drivers of socio-cultural change among migrants – length of stay and generation – do not have an impact in terms of a growing acceptance of homosexuality.

Evaluation and outlook

This study also looks forward, by considering how future research can be designed to provide a better insight into the acceptance of homosexuality by ethnic and religious groups. The main gaps in knowledge are described briefly below.

It is impossible to establish accurately for any of the migrant groups or non-Christian religious groups what their attitudes are to the compound measure that is used in policy

to monitor acceptance of homosexuality. Little is also known about how adult migrants view public displays of sexuality.

There has been a major influx of (labour) migrants from Eastern Europe in recent years, especially from Poland. The information on this Polish group is sketchy and somewhat dated.

A more general point is the need for new statistical material. This would make it possible to view developments within ethnic groups, something that cannot be done adequately using the existing quantitative data.

The least information is currently available on (recent) developments within those groups that have most difficulty with homosexuality, namely the smaller orthodox Christian groups and Muslims. To the extent that a picture can be formed, it is not positive; and there are no indications that acceptance of homosexuality is increasing within these groups.

The study also sought to determine how best to monitor acceptance of homosexuality in the future. At the request of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, SCP has developed a summarising measure for this purpose. This measure is reliable and takes into account the different theoretical dimensions of social acceptance. However, it comprises eleven items and may weigh (too) heavily in the questionnaire in many surveys. In this study we show that a 'narrower' measurement instrument based on four of these items is also valid and reliable. Naturally, fewer items means some loss of information, but if it is not practicable to study all eleven items, the proposed measure offers a good alternative.

Acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands has increased across the board, but groups remain which still harbour predominantly negative perceptions. Initiatives to encourage discussion and increase acceptance of homosexuality in these groups would therefore appear to be warranted. To gain an insight into the actual impact of initiatives of this kind, it is very important to monitor the situation closely.

Note

- 1 The following are regarded here as 'rich' Western countries: Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. All other origin groups that are included among Western migrants according to the definition used by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) therefore fall into the category 'other Western countries'. These include migrants from Eastern Europe, for example.