

**LATVIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL MINORITIES:  
DIMENSIONS AND 'TEMPERATURE'**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **WHY WAS THIS STUDY NECESSARY?**

Since summer 2005, an active debate has been taking place in Latvia on various issues related to homosexual people – gays and lesbians – and their role in society. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people) have claimed that society's attitude towards them is unfair and that homosexual people in Latvia face multiple risks of discrimination, social exclusion, and possibly violence.

Taboo for many decades, homosexuality has now become a topic of frequently heated public debate. The results and consequences of the debate, which will likely be fuelled by more research data on this controversial issue, are yet to be determined. To a large degree, the consequences will depend on society's attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Ignorance about these attitudes, mistaken conjectures, inadequate data or malicious interpretations of such data may aggravate intolerance, conflict and discrimination. At the same time, understanding and acknowledging the realities of public opinion on this issue is a necessary precondition and a first step towards more tolerance and democratic dialogue. Taking this into consideration, the aim of the survey study on the attitudes toward sexual minorities in Latvia undertaken by the NGO dialogi.lv was to shed light on both the problems with regard to sexual minorities that exist in the public view and the resources for addressing them.

To effectively promote tolerance, the various dimensions and contexts of intolerance and prejudice must be understood. At the moment, there is a lack of reliable and complete research data on Latvian society's attitudes towards sexual minorities and their ways of life. The all-around data sets in existence regarding tolerance, which also include one or two items on sexual tolerance, are insufficient for making any substantial conclusions on the issue. By systematically splitting the main research question into a set of related sub-questions and allotting enough questionnaire space for them to be further explored, the present study examines various related attitudes and helps to assess which specific contexts and what kinds of tolerance promotion work are relevant and necessary.

Academic research is based on established scientific methods for data collection, standard analytical procedures and well-known principles of academic objectivity. Yet no social inquiry is conducted in a vacuum. Underlying the researcher's work are moral assumptions regarding what constitutes a "good society." Those who conducted and supported this project are clear about the assumptions underlying this study; they believe that intolerance toward any group of people, including sexual minorities, is morally unacceptable and harmful to society in general; that prejudice against any person or group of people hinders each and every one of us from living a fulfilling and satisfying life; that recognizing and respecting each individual's freedom and right to be different makes society more free, secure and prosperous.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author and the NGO dialogi.lv would like to thank Ludmila Apsite, Katrina Schwartz and Laris Grava for their assistance and advice. Special thanks to Ieva Strode and SKDS for essential support in the research process and assistance in preparing this report. Thanks to Liesma Ose (dialogi.lv) and Līva Biseniece (Soros Foundation – Latvia) for their valuable comments and suggestions.

## WHAT EXACTLY WAS STUDIED?

This study is the first quantitative study undertaken in Latvia aimed at providing a more or less comprehensive picture of **Latvians**<sup>1</sup> **attitudes towards sexual minorities**. The research has been primarily designed to satisfy the need for information. Therefore, it was important to explore public attitudes towards homosexuality as a social and politically relevant phenomenon. A deeper analysis of the causes of and relationships between these attitudes from a psychological point of view, although possible to some degree on the basis of the resulting data set, was not a research priority.<sup>2</sup>

Sexual orientation affects various dimensions of social life. An individual's views regarding sexual orientation are complex and consist of attitudes, contexts, causes and intensities which vary. Although the present survey study does offer a single overall measure of attitude towards homosexuals, its uses are rather specific and limited. In fact, the research serves to achieve exactly the opposite, i.e., to explicate the complexity of public opinion on the issue. It is, therefore, particularly important to analytically distinguish two pairs of concepts.

First, *tolerance* should be distinguished from *prejudice*. The former refers to an individual's willingness to refrain from condemning or attacking people or phenomena that one finds objectionable, perplexing etc. The latter is a groundless negative judgment about people or phenomena. To illustrate the point, the results of the present study show that, although intolerance towards homosexuals is closely correlated with prejudice against them, a majority of survey respondents refrain from condemning gays and lesbians as people and are prepared to accept their presence in society although they express prejudiced opinions regarding this group.

Second, attitudes towards people should be distinguished from attitudes towards their way of life. Even when specific ways of life and social behaviours are judged to be undesirable or wrong, these evaluations do not necessarily reflect a complete moral assessment. For example, the majority of respondents in this survey study note that they do not judge a person as 'good' or 'bad' because of his or her sexual orientation or way of life.

The survey questionnaire was designed to answer the following research questions:

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Latvians" here and elsewhere in the text is used as a truncation for the more correct "inhabitants of Latvia" and refers to all permanent residents of the country irrespective of their native language, ethnic origin and citizenship status.

<sup>2</sup> For the same practical reason, the well-known methods for measuring attitudes towards homosexuality were consulted but not implemented with the exception of borrowing questions occasionally. The reference work used was C. M. Davis, W. L. Yarber, R. Bauserman, G. Schreer, & S. L. Davis (Eds.), *Sexuality-Related Measures: A Compendium* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- How tolerant is society towards homosexuals and homosexual ways of life?
- What are the main assumptions and prejudices regarding homosexuality and homosexuals?
- How strong is public support for various political demands and propositions put forward by LGBT and by their opponents?
- What other social values and beliefs correlate with attitudes towards homosexuality?
- How do attitudes differ among various social groups?

The project was conducted during spring and summer of 2006 and is based on a representative survey of the Latvian population with a sample of 1060 respondents. The data was collected by the Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS.

The present study does not and is not intended to provide definitive answers to the questions it touches upon. In many cases it only points to areas where more research is necessary. Some of the data can only be interpreted as part of a more long-term study that will, hopefully, be conducted in the future.

A word of caution is advised regarding any literal interpretation of the results presented in this report. No matter how conscientious the researcher or scrupulous the procedures, the resulting statistical data are never 100% accurate. For various reasons that cannot be detailed here, the percentages in this report are intended to be 'guiding.' In this survey, percentage differences of less than 3% are, as a rule, insignificant for statistical reasons. In addition, the psychological aspects of the survey method should also be considered, e.g., some respondents tend to give a positive answer mechanically due to a lapse of attention or the belief that a positive answer is likely to be the "right" answer. Such factors should be considered when interpreting the survey results.

### **WHICH SEXUAL MINORITIES WERE THE SUBJECT OF THE STUDY?**

The term *sexual minority* is applicable to a number of different groups. Both internationally and in Latvia, homosexuals, i.e., gays and lesbians, work in interest advocacy together with bisexual and transsexual people. Together these groups are known as LGBT. In the public debate, however, the diversity of sexual orientations is usually simplified; only homosexuality tends to be discussed, while bisexuality and transsexuality are either ignored or perceived to be a form of homosexuality. Therefore, bisexual and transsexual people are also likely to face similar, if not greater intolerance and prejudice. Taking this into account as well as the practical limitations of the study, the survey and the subsequent analysis have been limited to dealing with attitudes towards homosexuals.

### **WHAT CONSTITUTES PREJUDICE AGAINST HOMOSEXUALS?**

Various views about homosexuality and homosexuals exist. These are frequently factually wrong and groundless opinions that are contradicted by scientific knowledge. Such attitudes and opinions are regarded as prejudices in this study. For example, the idea that a gay man is usually recognizable by effeminate behaviour constitutes prejudice as it contradicts the available knowledge on homosexuality. At the same time, dislike for and reluctance to engage with homosexuals does not constitute prejudice and is, instead, a subjective valuation that may not necessarily be related to a person's knowledge about homosexuality or homosexuals.

One of the most widespread beliefs, regarded as prejudice in this study, is that homosexuality is an illness. For more than thirty years now, the explicit position of the majority of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals and their organizations has been that ‘homosexuality is not a physical disease, mental illness or emotional problem’ and that ‘it does not require treatment and is not changeable’.<sup>3</sup> Homosexuality has, in addition, been excluded from the Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders by the World Health Organization.<sup>4</sup>

## **MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS**

1. A significant proportion of Latvians condemns the “homosexual way of life” but express a tolerant attitude towards homosexual people as individuals. In particular, 37% condemn the homosexual way of life but “have nothing against” homosexuals. One in four condemns both and the “homosexual way of life” and homosexuals. Just as many believe the opposite, i.e., that neither the homosexual way of life nor homosexuals deserves condemnation.
2. Prejudice related to homosexuality and homosexuals is widespread in Latvian society. One of the most common prejudices is the idea that homosexuality is an illness. Half of the survey respondents (51%) support the idea that “homosexuals should be offered medical treatment for homosexuality.” Just as many (53%) agree that “if a person has homosexual inclinations, he or she should do everything possible to overcome them.”
3. One in three Latvians believes that society’s attitude towards gay people is “unfair.” Just as many are prepared to articulate a tolerant position through political action by signing a petition calling for “tolerance toward gays and lesbians.”
4. At the same time, about one in four Latvians is prepared to participate in a demonstration against homosexuality. 14% of the respondents support “isolating homosexuals from society” and 20% support making homosexuality a criminal offence.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apa.org/topics/orientation.html#mentallillness>. Accessed 2006.07.13.

<sup>4</sup> See The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders. Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/bluebook.pdf>. Accessed 2006.07.13.

5. A small but significant share of the population condones violence against gay people.
6. The majority of Latvians (53%) opposes discrimination against gays and lesbians in the workplace. At the same time, a sizable share of the population (45%) support professional bans for gays and lesbians in such places as schools and the military. The popularity of such attitudes reflects a significant risk of discrimination against homosexuals in the workplace.
7. Young people express a significantly more tolerant attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. There is no significant difference between the attitudes of males and females and among different ethnic groups. Tolerance towards homosexuality and homosexuals is not related to religious beliefs or membership in any of the major Christian denominations in Latvia.
8. Two out of three of Latvians (67%) believe that “by drawing public attention, homosexuals only turn society against them.” This can be interpreted both as the rejection of political activity by homosexuals to make society aware of their situation and as the lack of support for or distrust in the democratic principles of minority protection and open dialogue.
9. A majority of people is against allowing same-sex marriages and registered partnerships, while one in three expresses a neutral attitude on the issue.
10. Personal beliefs and life experience are the most frequently reported factors influencing Latvians’ attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals. Mass media are the most important external influence, while the impact of religion, church, parents and school in forming such attitudes is much weaker. Very few report that the opinion of politicians is significant factor.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To Policymakers**

1. Introduce anti-discrimination guidelines and legislation in social and employment policy.
2. Introduce anti-discrimination measures in social integration policy documents specifically protecting homosexuals.
3. Introduce in the ethical codes of conduct of public institutions, clauses prohibiting hate speech and stressing the use of respectful language in support of diversity including that of sexual minorities.
4. Within education policy:
  - a) Incorporate at the primary and secondary school levels educational content reflecting the diversity of human sexuality in the curriculum for social sciences and/or health education
  - b) Introduce at the higher education level a course on human diversity in all educational institutions within the A unit (general education courses) which includes sexual diversity on par with ethnic, religious and social diversity.
  - c) Introduce at the bachelor degree level in social work a special course on social work with sexual minorities. The pioneering work of Social Work and Social Education College, *Attitiba*, provides an example of such practice.
  - d) Introduce the principle of sexual diversity into continuous education programmes for teachers and school administrators within the framework of intercultural education

### **To Educational Institutions**

1. Increase the variety of backgrounds from which teachers are recruited, making an effort to include homosexuals. (The pioneering work of Social Work and Social Education College, *Attitiba*, provides an example of such practice.
2. Introduce intercultural education in schools as an interdisciplinary subject.

### **To Mass Media**

1. Exercise care in separating facts from opinions when dealing with the subject of homosexuality.
2. Prevent publication of material containing hate speech against homosexuals.
3. Present balanced coverage of opposite views in publications regarding homosexuals and homosexual ways of life.
4. Promote media coverage of life stories of gays and lesbians.

### **To NGOs**

1. Carry out systematic information work on the issue of homosexuality and homosexual people's lives in order to provide unprejudiced information about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people as members of society.

2. Form NGO coalitions against discrimination and for diversity in order to raise self-awareness and self-esteem among minority groups in Latvia.
3. Use multimedia and art as tools in information campaigns about homosexuality and homosexual people's lives.

### **To All Individuals**

1. Treat every person with whom you live and work with respect and dignity irrespective of his or her sexual orientation.
2. Be tolerant, understanding and supportive if your child tells you that he or she is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.
3. Avoid the use of derogatory or offensive labelling of homosexuals in conversations and statements.

## **SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **HOW TOLERANT IS SOCIETY TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALS AND THE HOMOSEXUAL WAY OF LIFE?**

#### **Attitudes towards homosexuals expressed as a degree on a thermometer scale**

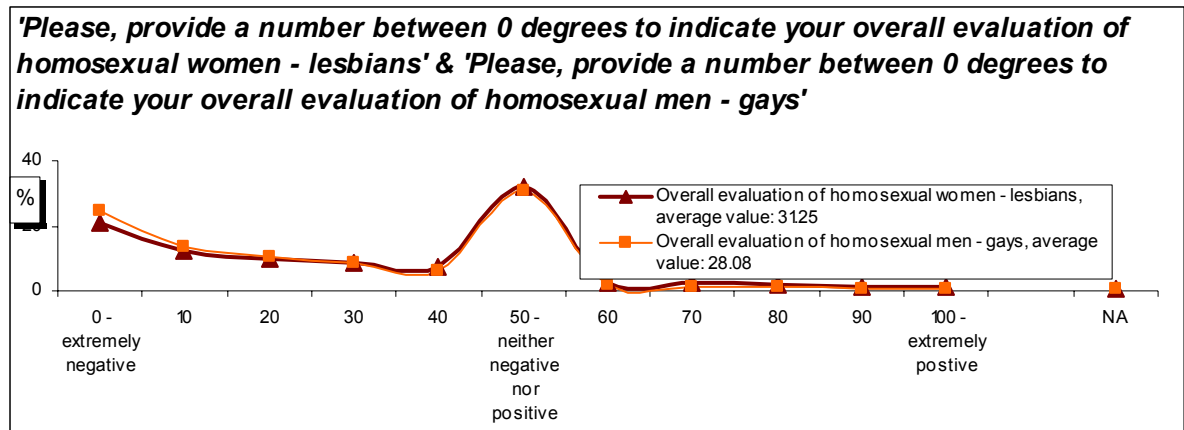
Peoples' positive or negative valuations of persons, groups or social phenomena may be based on diverse factors such as knowledge, emotions, previous experiences, etc. Each individual attaches different weights to these factors. Measuring each and every one of these factors and weights and consolidating them into one analysis would be a difficult, if not impossible, task. However, a simple overall indicator of attitudes often proves very useful. Therefore, this study uses an *evaluation thermometer*, an indicator that allows the respondents to express an overall valuation of a subject without limiting the factors that may influence such a valuation. Although the indicator does not reveal the causes which lie behind the respondent's valuation, it does facilitate the study of how valuations change over time, vary from group to group and differ with regard to a series of subjects.<sup>5</sup>

The respondents were asked to assign a value between 0-100 as on a thermometer scale where 0 reflected an *extremely negative* valuation and 100 reflected an *extremely positive* valuation. As shown in the chart below, the average valuation (determined by averaging extremely negative, neutral and positive valuations) of homosexuals is relatively negative. Respondents assigned a slightly higher average value for homosexual women (31.25) than for homosexual men (28.08).

Between one in four and one in five respondents valued homosexuals extremely negatively (21% for lesbians and 25% for gays), one in three provided a neutral valuation (32% for lesbians and 30% for gays) and 9% valued lesbians positively, while 6% valued gays positively. Considering the broad scope of the indicator, the neutral valuation ('neither negative nor positive') may be regarded as an expression of a tolerant attitude.

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<sup>5</sup> See Haddock, G., & Zanna, M. P. (1998). Valuation thermometer for assessing attitudes toward gay men. In C. M. Davis, W. L. Yarber, R. Bauserman, G. Schreer, & S. L. Davis (Eds.), *Sexuality-Related Measures: A Compendium* (2nd edition) (pp. 381-382). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



The majority of respondents expressed a negative attitude towards gays and lesbians. At the same time, attitudes towards sexual minorities in Latvian society are very heterogeneous. While almost one in four Latvians has an extremely negative opinion about gays and lesbians, approximately one in three has a neutral attitude which may be interpreted as tolerant. As mentioned above, the valuation thermometer is an overall indicator that does not distinguish the various factors behind the valuations. The survey data presented in the following section reveal the complexity of attitudes towards sexual minorities particularly with regard to assessments of homosexual persons versus the homosexual way of life.

### The majority condemns the homosexual way of life but not homosexual people

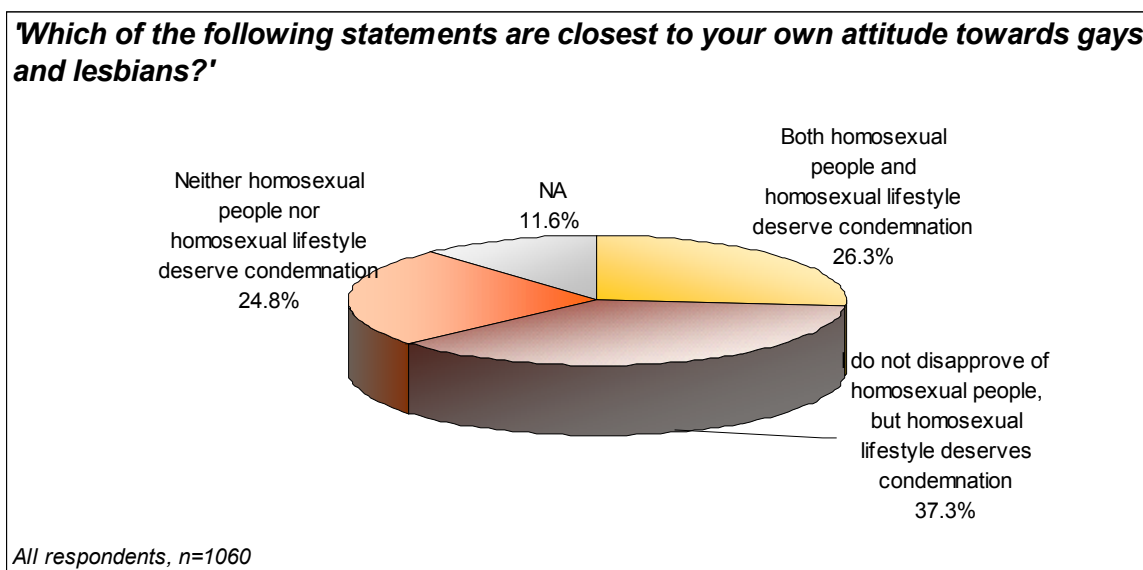
The respondents were asked to choose one of the three statements below which most closely reflect how they feel about homosexuality and homosexual people:

1. Both homosexual people and the homosexual way of life<sup>6</sup> deserve condemnation.
2. I do not disapprove of homosexual people, but the homosexual way of life deserves condemnation.
3. Neither homosexual people nor the homosexual way of life deserves condemnation.

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<sup>6</sup> Doubts have been expressed as to the appropriateness of the term "homosexual way of life." However imperfect, it was used as the best possible operational concept; it refers to any social way of life that involves a same-sex relationship instead of a heterosexual relationship.

About one in four respondents (26%) condemn both homosexual people and the homosexual way of life. About as many (25%) have no objections against homosexual people or the homosexual way of life. The largest share of respondents (37%) condemn the homosexual way of life but have no objections against homosexual people.



The largest share (36%) of respondents who condemn both homosexual people and the homosexual way of life are 55 years of age and above while this view is least frequent among the respondents aged 25-34 (17%) and 15-24 (20%).

More than a third (35%) of all respondents aged 15-24 years believe that neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life deserves condemnation, while this view is shared by 18% of respondents 55 years of age and above.

Respondents with higher education tend to indicate a more tolerant attitude toward homosexuality and homosexuals. In this group, only 19% believe that 'both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life deserve condemnation,' while 30% condemn neither of these.

Among respondents with only elementary education, 34% condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life, while 20% condemn neither. Among the respondents with secondary education or vocational training, 26% condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life, while 25% condemn neither.

The view that the homosexual way of life but not homosexual people deserves condemnation is shared by 33% of respondents with elementary education, 37% with secondary education or vocational training and 40% with higher education.

Attitudes tend to differ depending on the location in which respondents live. The most tolerant attitudes are expressed by respondents living in Riga where 24% condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life and, 35% condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexual people, while 30% condemn neither. The least tolerant attitudes are expressed by respondents living in small towns (32%, 41% and 19% respectively). A middle ground is comprised of respondents from larger towns (26%, 43%, 21% respectively) and those from the countryside (25%, 34%, 26% respectively)

Significantly more tolerant attitudes are expressed by those respondents who have gays or lesbians among close relatives or friends. In this group, only 11% believe that both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life deserve condemnation, while 43% believe the opposite and condemn neither.

However, the share of respondents in this group who condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexuals is identical to that among all respondents (39%).

Answers to these and other related questions reveal no significant difference of opinion between men and women or among different ethnic and linguistic groups.

In order to learn how the assessment of individuals as “good” or “bad” is influenced by their sexual orientation, the survey included the following statement: **‘Homosexual orientation does not make someone a worse person.’**

Almost half of the respondents agreed with this statement. More than one in four respondents disagreed. One in four abstained from answering.

**Two diverging opinions co-exist in Latvia regarding homosexuality. A majority of Latvians condemn the homosexual way of life, i.e., a way of life based on a same-sex relationship while expressing tolerance towards homosexuals as persons. More often than not, people avoid deeming a person ‘worse’ because of his or her sexual orientation. Tolerance towards homosexuality and homosexuals has a strong correlation to age with those aged 15-24 tending to express the most tolerant views.**

## **Attitudes towards homosexuals in daily life**

The respondents were split into roughly equal groups with regard to views about social contact with homosexuals. 36% agree that they **‘have no problem being in the company of homosexuals,’** while 38% disagree with this statement. More than a quarter of the respondents refrained from answering. Executives, managers, professionals, public servants, those with higher incomes, those aged 35-44 years and inhabitants of Riga more often than others report no problems being in the company of homosexuals (41-49%). Views regarding contact with gays and lesbians correlate with attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. Among those who condemn neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life, 60% indicate that they have no problem being in the company of homosexuals. This figure decreases among those who condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexuals (36%) and those who condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life (14%).

The absolute majority of respondents report that they would be distressed by the demonstration of intimacy by a same-sex couple. 78% indicate that they would be **‘disgusted at the sight of two men kissing,’** while 66% would react similarly at the sight of two women kissing. Interestingly, however, 54% of the respondents admit that they **‘dislike seeing public expressions of intimacy between two people such as hugging and kissing’** in a question *not* related to same-sex couples which may offer some perspective to the results.

12% of respondents indicate that **there is a homosexual person among their close relatives or friends.** The possibility that some respondents may not have answered this sensitive question truthfully should be noted. Among those respondents who count a gay or lesbian person among their close family or friends, more than half (59%) report that they have no

problem being in the company of homosexuals. However, even in this group 31% do have a problem with such social contact.

**Generally, the visibility of homosexuals in Latvian society is low. Social contact with homosexuals is viewed as problematic for a significant share of respondents albeit not the majority. The absolute majority would be offended by expressions of intimacy in public by same-sex couples.**

## **Homosexuality as a political issue**

The survey questionnaire included a number of statements measuring the subjective importance of issues related to homosexuality and homosexuals to the respondents as well as the respondents' readiness to engage in public and political activities on these issues.

Almost one in three respondents (32%) agree that **'society's treatment of homosexuals is unfair'** although 40% disagree with that. Just as many respondents (31%) **'would be willing to sign a public appeal for tolerance towards gays and lesbians,'** while almost half of the respondents (48%) would not agree to do so.

Both respondents who support gays and lesbians and their opponents are inclined towards political action. Almost every fourth respondent **'would be willing to participate in a demonstration or a picket against homosexuality'** although the majority of respondents (60%) reject such action.

In an attempt to accurately measure respondents' willingness to engage in violence against homosexuals, an indirect, 'soft' question was chosen over a more direct, explicit question. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **'I am disgusted by calls for violence against gays and lesbians.'** 29% of the respondents disagreed with this statement. A significant share of these answers may be explained by the fact that the respondents had not been directly solicited with such calls for violence. However, disagreement with the statement above is much more common among respondents who have a clearly negative attitude towards gays and lesbians and condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life. Among respondents in this group, 45% disagree with the statement versus 23- 24% among other respondents. The responses do reflect an acceptance of anti-gay violence by some segments of society related to their unfavourable view of homosexuals.

**One-third of Latvians indicate their willingness to engage in political activities as a manifestation of their tolerant attitudes towards homosexuals. Conversely, one-fourth are ready to oppose homosexuality by means of political action. A significant share of the population finds anti-gay violence acceptable.**

## **Should homosexuals attract public attention?**

Two in three respondents (67%) believe that by **'drawing public attention, gays and lesbians only turn society against them.'** This response allows several interpretations including the rejection of political activity by homosexuals to make society aware of their situation and the belief that such activity is ineffective or counterproductive.

**A clear majority of the Latvian population does not believe that homosexuals should gather more support by making society aware of their existence and interests. This raises the question: to what degree do Latvians support the basic principles of democracy. These principles allow for resolving disagreements through open public dialogue and respect for**

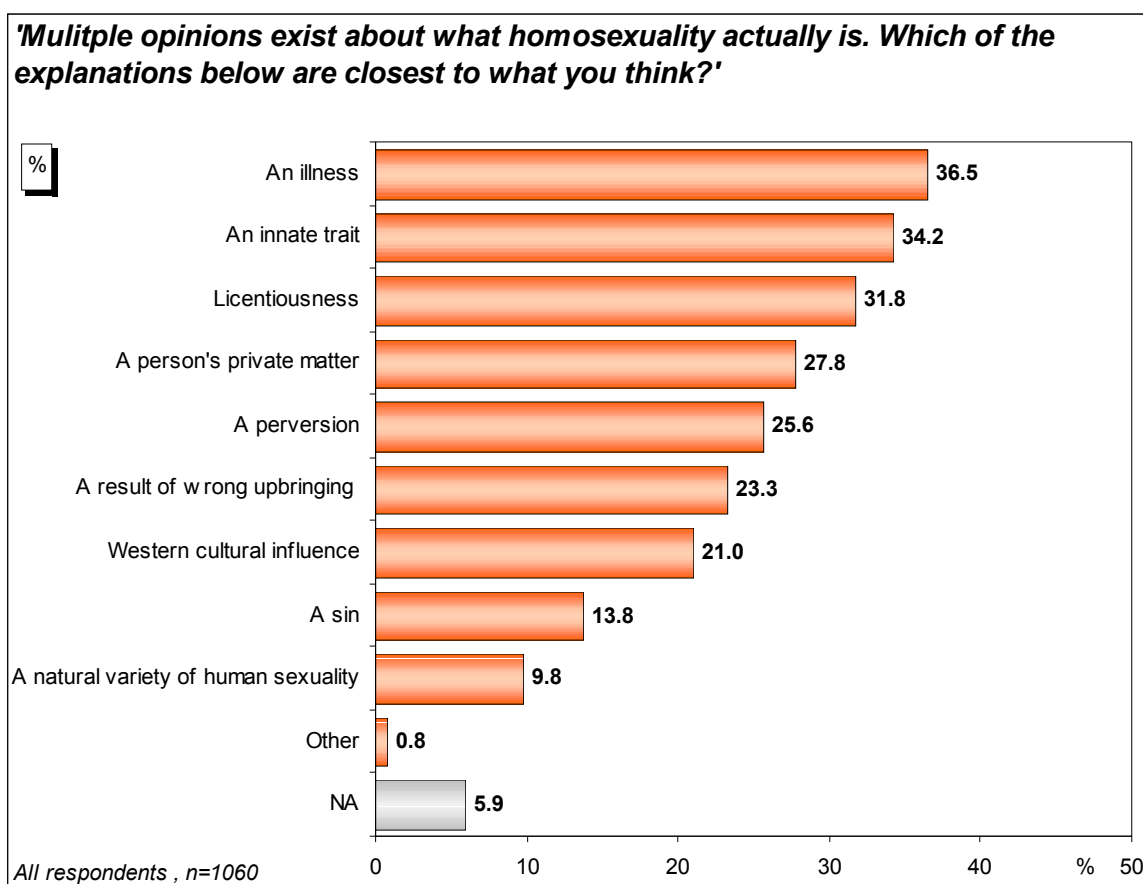
the right of minorities to be heard and represented at the political level. Importantly, the survey also registers considerable support (37%) for dissolving parliament and replacing it with a strong leader. This suggests that aversion to homosexuals' public and political activities may be based on both negative attitudes towards homosexuals and on the weakness of democratic principles in and the authoritarian tendencies of Latvian political culture.

## WHAT DOES SOCIETY THINK ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALS?

### What is homosexuality?

The explanation for homosexuality provided most frequently by respondents is that it is an **illness**. More than one in three respondents (37%) agree with this explanation. 32% regard homosexuality as **licentiousness**, 26% consider it **perversion**, 23% believe it to be a **result of wrong upbringing** and 21% consider it to be a **western cultural influence**. Only 14% of the respondents describe homosexuality as a **sin**.

34% of respondents regard homosexuality as an **innate trait**, 28% consider it a **person's private matter** and 10% agree to the explanation of homosexuality as a **natural variety of human sexuality**.



\*The total sum of answers exceeds 100% as the respondents were allowed to choose up to three answers.

Among those respondents who condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life, the most frequent explanations for homosexuality are licentiousness (56%), perversion (49%) and illness (44%).

Among those respondents who condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexuals, homosexuality is most often described as illness (41%), licentiousness (35%) and innate trait (34%).

Those respondents who condemn neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life most frequently describe homosexuality as a person's private matter (52%) and an innate trait (49%) while 23% believe it is an illness.

The respondents who have a gay or a lesbian person among close relatives or friends are more inclined than others to describe homosexuality as a natural variety of human sexuality (19%). However, the most common explanations for homosexuality in this respondent group are that it is an innate trait (44%), an illness (39%) and a person's private matter (38%).

The majority of respondents (53%) agree with the following statement: **'if a person has homosexual inclinations, he or she should do everything possible to overcome them.'** About as many respondents (51%) support the idea that **'homosexuals should be offered medical treatment for homosexuality.'** Regarding the question of what parents should do **'if in a family a child turns out to be gay'** (described in detail in the chapter below), the dominant recommendation given by respondents is to take the child to therapy or consult a doctor or a psychologist.

**The most common explanation for homosexuality in Latvian society is that it is an illness. A substantial share of the population, however, regards homosexuality in neutral terms, i.e., as a private matter or an innate trait. Only small segments of the population consider homosexuality a sin or, conversely, as a natural variety of human sexuality.**

## **What do people think about homosexuals?**

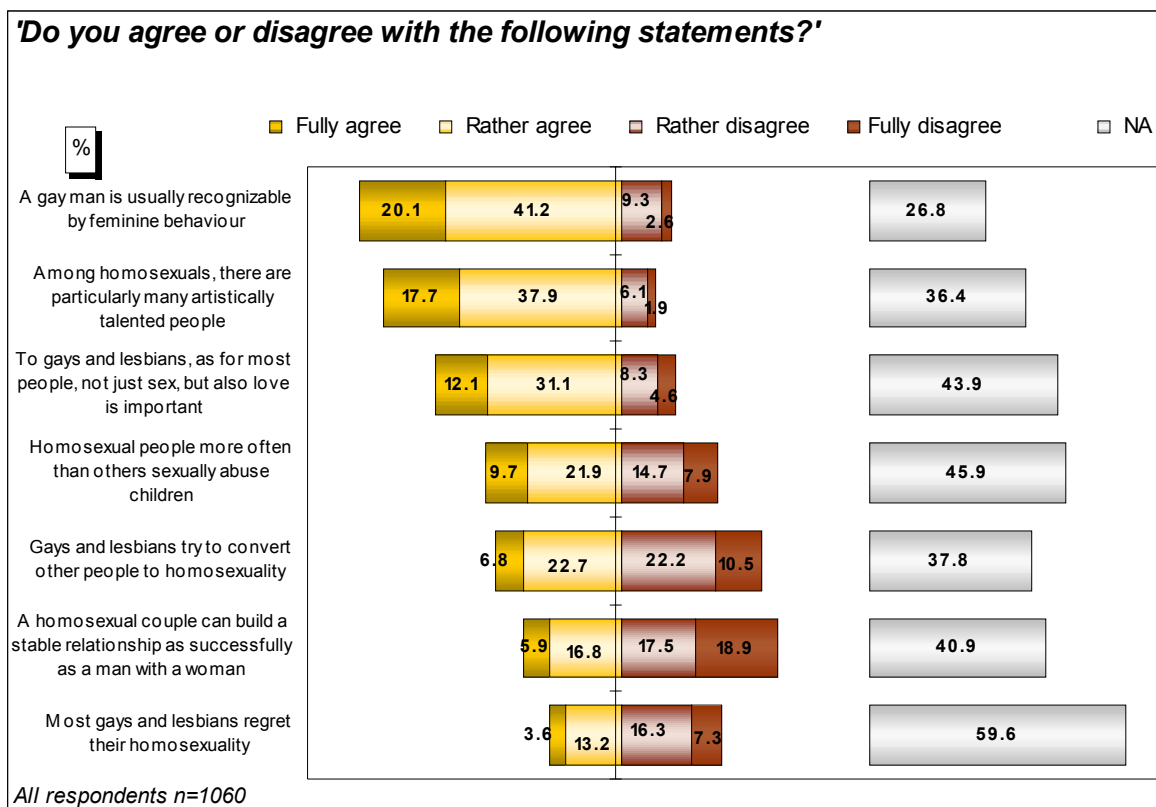
The respondents were asked to react to a number of stereotypical statements sometimes used to describe homosexual persons:

- Among homosexuals, there are particularly many artistically talented people.
- A homosexual couple can build a stable relationship as successfully as a man and a woman.
- Love and not just sex is important to gays and lesbians as it is for most people
- Most gays and lesbians regret their homosexuality.

The questionnaire also included some negative stereotypes about homosexuals:

- Homosexual people more often than others sexually abuse children.
- A gay man is usually recognizable by effeminate behaviour.
- Gays and lesbians try to convert other people to homosexuality.

The graph below shows the respondents' reactions to these statements.



Assessing the emotional characteristics of homosexuals, 43% of the respondents agree that **'Love and not just sex is important to gays and lesbians as it is for most people,'** while 13% disagree. Yet far fewer respondents (23%) believe that **'a homosexual couple can build a stable relationship as successfully as a man and a woman,'** while more than one in three respondents (36%) disagree with the statement.

Only 17% of respondents believe that **'most gays and lesbians regret their homosexuality,'** while one in four respondents (24%) disagree with such a proposition.

The majority of respondents (56%) agree that **'among homosexuals, there are particularly many artistically talented people,'** while only 8% disagree.

Confronted with negative stereotypes about homosexuals, almost one in three respondents (32%) agree that **'homosexual people more often than others sexually abuse children,'** while only one in four respondents (23%) disagree. 30% of respondents agree that **'gays and lesbians try to convert other people to homosexuality,'** while the proportion of those who reject this assumption is slightly higher (33%).

The majority of respondents (61%) believe that **'a gay man is usually recognizable by effeminate behaviour,'** a statement with which only 12% disagree.

It is noteworthy that a large number of respondents abstain from either agreeing or disagreeing with the above statements. This may indicate that a large share of the population has little or no knowledge about homosexuals and their way of life.

**About one in three Latvians holds strongly negative prejudices regarding homosexuals including the view that they are more inclined to molest children and the belief that homosexuals are unable to form stable relationships. The majority of Latvians support the stereotype of an artistically talented homosexual person. A large segment of the**

population may have only a vague and imprecise idea about homosexuals and their way of life.

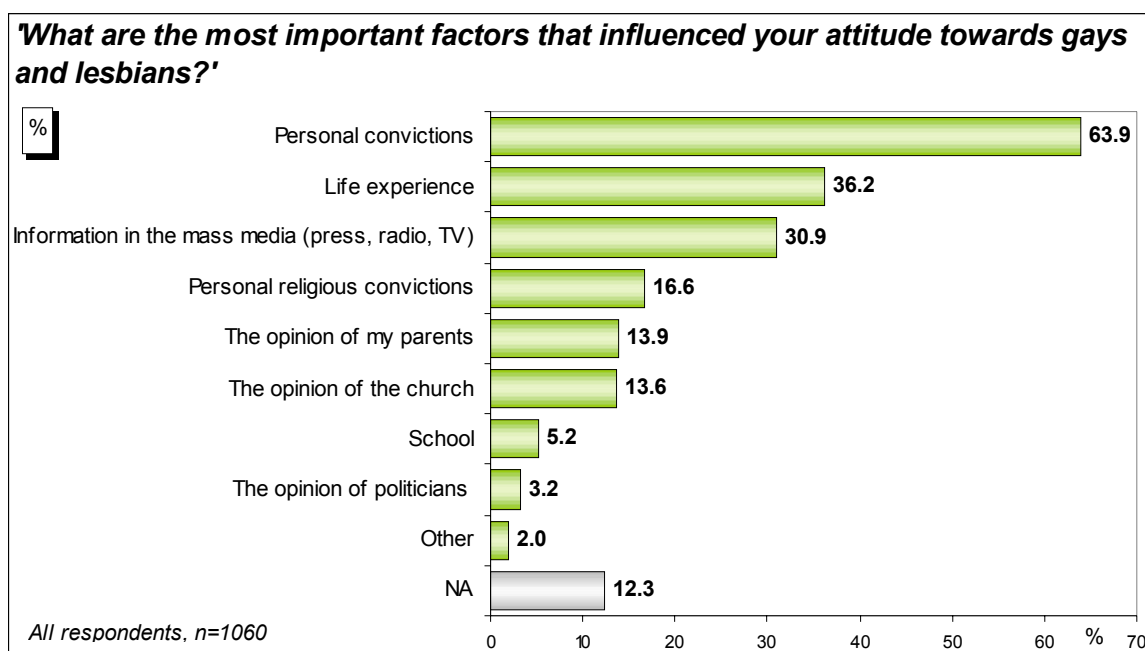
## What factors influence beliefs about homosexuals?

When asked about what has influenced their attitudes towards homosexuals, respondents most often cite **personal convictions** (64%). More than one in three (36%) respondents refer to **life experience** and almost every third respondent (31%) admit to the influence of **information from the mass media (press, radio, TV)** on their attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

Only a small share of respondents to this question cite the **opinion of the church** (14%) or their **personal religious convictions** (17%).

Respondents acknowledge the influence of **parents** (14%) and **school** (5%) infrequently although for respondents aged 15-24 the influence of **parents** (26%) and **school** (15%) is greater.

The influence of **politicians** on respondents' attitudes towards homosexuals is practically insignificant (3%).



\* The total sum of answers exceeds 100% as the respondents were allowed to choose up to three answers.

Comparing the *three groups* of respondents, i.e., those who condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life (Group 1), those who condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexuals (Group 2) and those who condemn neither (Group 3), reveals that more negative attitudes towards homosexuals correlate with greater influence of personal convictions, the opinion of the church and personal religious convictions on respondents' views. Group 1 cites these views as influential 11-12% more than Group 2. The information received from the mass media is somewhat (7-8%) more important for Group 2 than for the other groups. For Group 3, life experience is relatively more important (41%). For those respondents who have a close friend or relative who is homosexual, life experience is also relatively more important (47%).

**The majority of Latvians rely on their personal convictions to form opinions about homosexuals. Yet personal convictions, while they may be perceived as internal phenomena, are often the result of external influences. Among these external factors, mass**

media have the strongest impact, while religion, church, parents and school seem to be much weaker influences. The opinions of politicians seem to be inconsequential at least outside the mass media context.

## A homosexual child in the family. What to do?

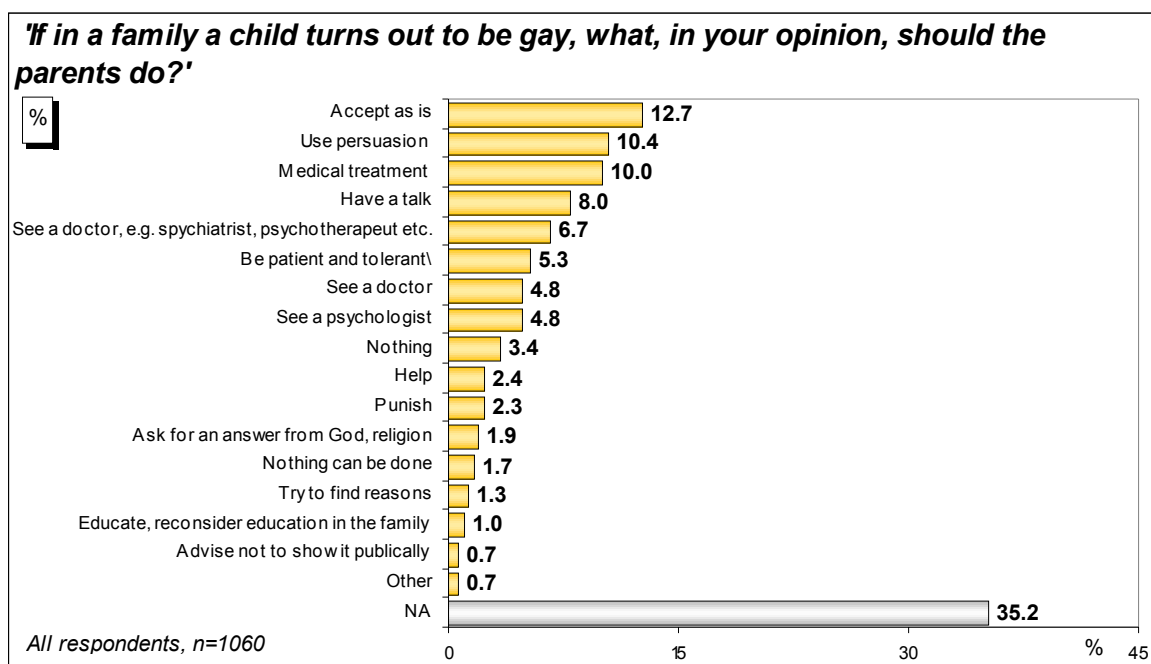
A theoretical question was asked about a situation which would be relevant for families: What should parents do **‘if in a family a child turns out to be gay?’** More than one in three respondents abstained from answering the question.

About one in four respondents suggested some form of treatment as the solution. 16% recommended **‘seeing a psychologist, psychiatrist or another medical professional,’** while 10% suggested direct **medical treatment.**

10% preferred to **‘use persuasion’** and 8% **‘to have a talk’** with the child, 13% believed that the child should be **‘accepted as is,’** and 5% preferred **‘to show patience and understanding.’**

Only 2% recommended **repressive measures** such as condemnation, banishment from home, etc.

There is no significant difference between age groups in the answers to this question.

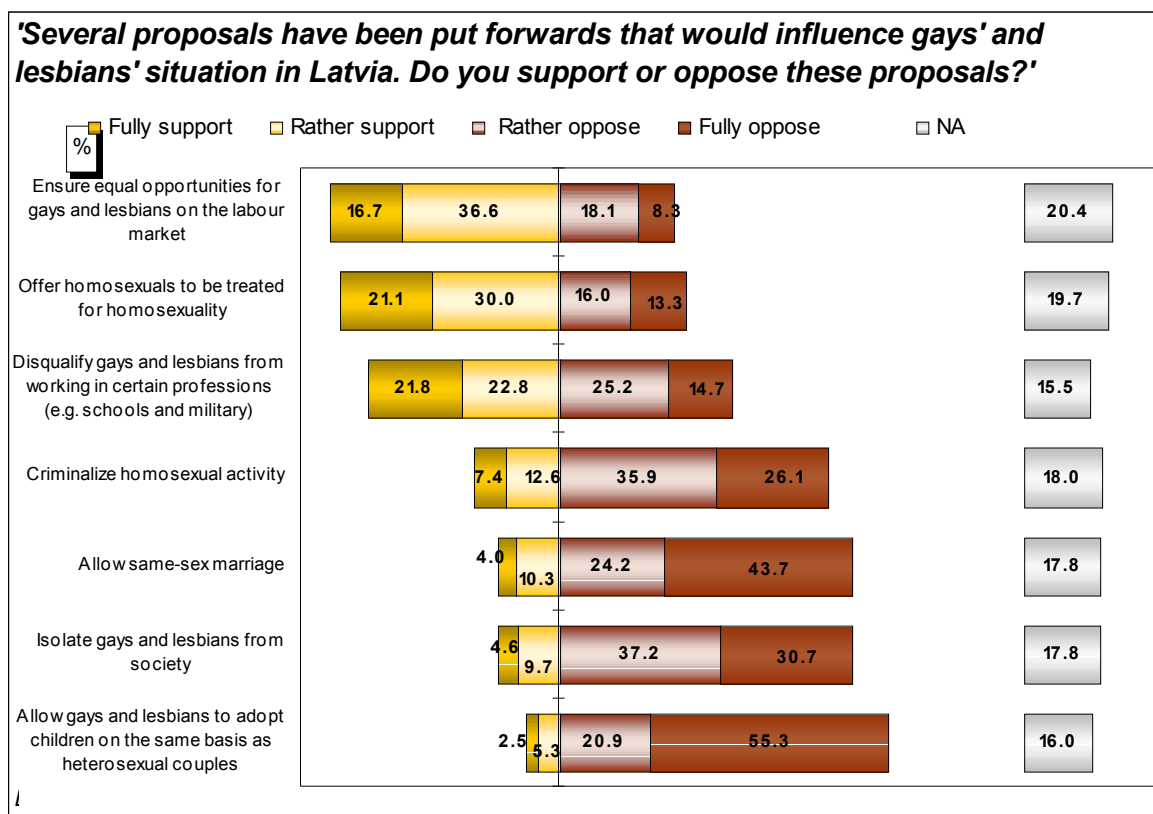


\* The total sum of answers exceeds 100% as the respondents were allowed to choose up to three answers.

**Faced with the prospect of a homosexual child in the family, more than one in four Latvians is likely to seek medical or psychological treatment believing homosexuality to be a treatable illness or problem. Only a small segment of the population is prepared to accept the child’s sexual orientation. Very few respondents explicitly approve of repressive measures against a homosexual child. However, the large number of the respondents who abstained from answering suggests that repressive action may possibly be more common in practice than the survey data suggest.**

## HOW STRONG IS PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR VARIOUS POLITICAL MEASURES AFFECTING HOMOSEXUALS?

The respondents were asked to consider a number of political proposals related to the situation of gay and lesbian people in Latvia. Some proposals, such as non-discrimination in the workplace, same-sex marriages or partnerships and child adoption rights are advocated by the LGBT organizations. Other proposals, if adopted, would limit the rights and freedoms of homosexuals. These include ‘isolation of homosexuals from society,’ criminalizing homosexual activity and disqualification of homosexuals from certain professions. The questionnaire also included a proposal ‘to offer homosexuals treatment for homosexuality.’



### Neither punishment nor isolation but treatment

14% of respondents support ‘**isolating gays and lesbians from society**’ and 20% support ‘**criminalizing homosexual activity**.’ About two thirds of the respondents, however, reject these ideas (68% and 62% respectively).

Half of the respondents (51%) agree that gays and lesbians should be offered ‘**treatment for homosexuality**,’ while 29% disagree.

**Overtly repressive political measures against homosexuals are supported by a relatively small minority of Latvians. Yet, the particularly intolerant nature of these measures may influence the psychological climate within society. Equally alarming is the readiness of half of the population to medicalize homosexuality and treat homosexuals as sick people.**

## **No recognition for the homosexual family**

Two survey questions evaluated the respondents' opinions on formally recognized same-sex unions. Only 14% of the respondents support allowing **same-sex marriage**, while 68% are against it.

However, in a similar question on the **introduction of a formal partnership status for same-sex couples** in Latvia, which also allowed the option of a *neutral* answer, the results are somewhat different. The majority of respondents (54%) still expresses a negative attitude towards the proposal but less so than in the previous question. While only 6% appraise the idea of same-sex partnerships positively, one in three respondents (33%) expresses a neutral (neither positive nor negative) opinion.

For young people aged 15-24, the proportion of those expressing a combined positive (11%) or a neutral (37%) opinion regarding the introduction of same-sex partnership status is equal to the proportion opposing it (47%).

The opinion of respondents is uniform on the issue of **child adoption** by homosexual couples. It is supported by 8% and rejected by 76%.

**The majority of Latvians oppose formal recognition of same-sex couples. At the same time, a considerable minority of the population are neutral on the issue possibly suggesting that they see no need for allowing same-sex partnerships but do not object to them either.**

## **A majority supports equal opportunities for homosexuals in the workplace**

Respondents' opinions are much more divided on the issue of equal opportunities for gays and lesbians in the workplace. 45% of respondents support **disqualifying homosexuals from working in certain professions** such as schools and the military. The percentage of respondents who disapprove of such measures is only slightly smaller.

Regarding a measure to **ensure equal opportunities for gays and lesbians in the workplace**, slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) favour such a measure, while one in four (26%) opposes it.

**Opinions on the issue of equal opportunities for homosexuals in the workplace are divided. Nevertheless, support for non-discrimination appears to be the stronger trend. At the same time, a large minority support discriminatory employment limitations for homosexuals. The popularity of such attitudes could, in practice, result in a significant risk of discrimination against homosexuals in the workplace.**

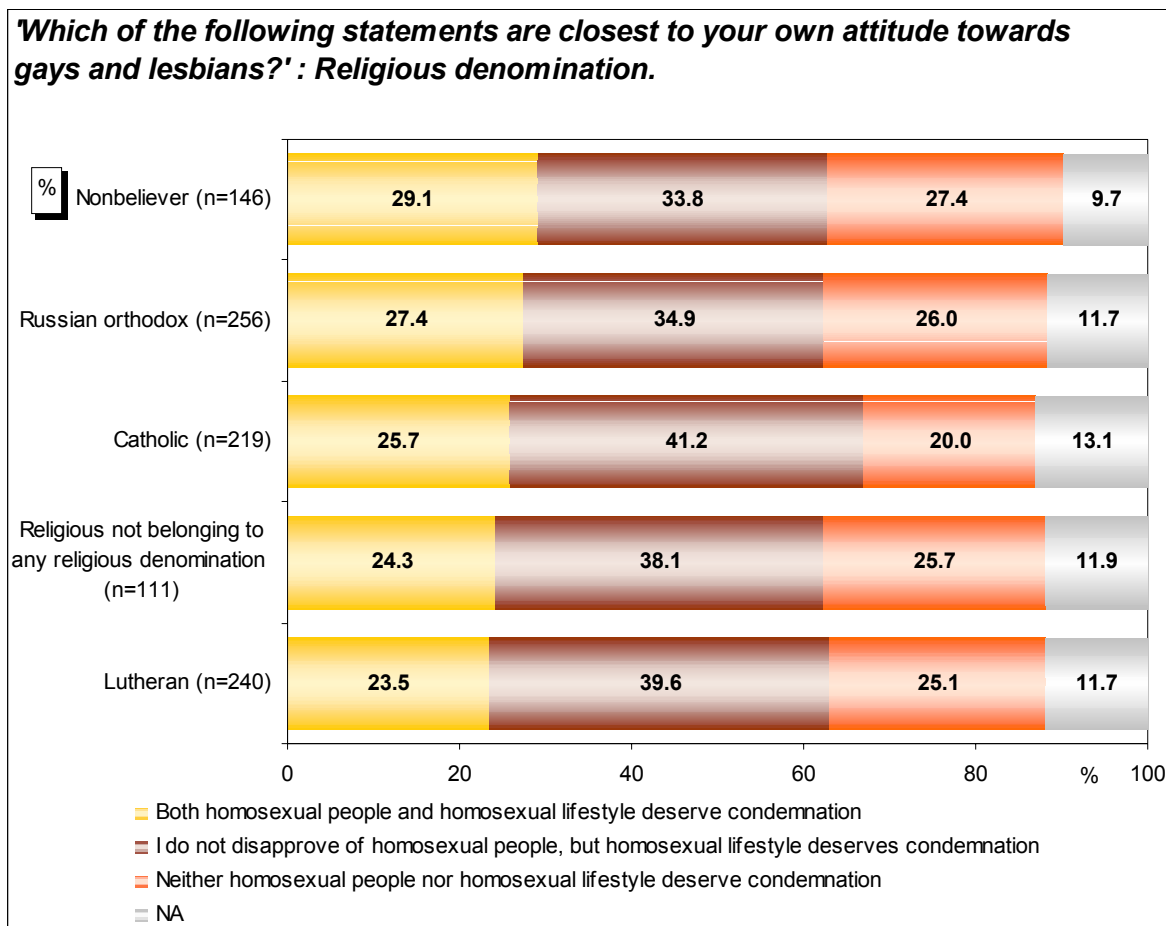
## **WHAT OTHER VALUES AND BELIEFS CORRELATE WITH ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY?**

### **Are religious people less tolerant of homosexuals?**

Questions regarding the position of religious denominations frequently arise in the debate about homosexuality in Latvia. That homosexuality contradicts religious values, particularly Christian religious values, is a commonly held assumption. It might be logical to conclude, therefore, that people with strong religious identities tend to hold more negative views about homosexuals and homosexuality than non-religious people. In the survey, however, no

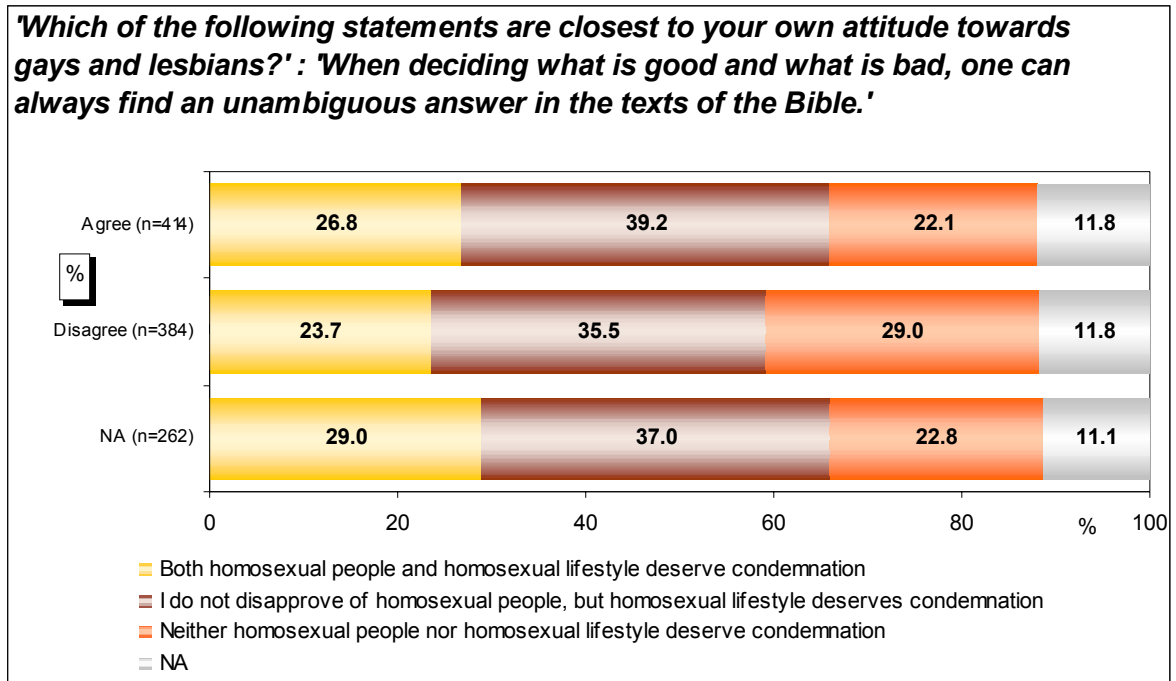
significant and consistent relationship between religious identity and tolerance towards sexual minorities was observed.

In the survey, the view that both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life are to be condemned is shared by 27% of Russian Orthodox respondents, 29% of nonbelievers, 26% of Catholics, 24% of non-confessional believers and 24% of Lutherans.<sup>7</sup> However, 27% of nonbelievers, 26% of Russian Orthodox respondents, 26% of non-confessional believers, 25% of Lutherans and 20% of Catholics condemn neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life.

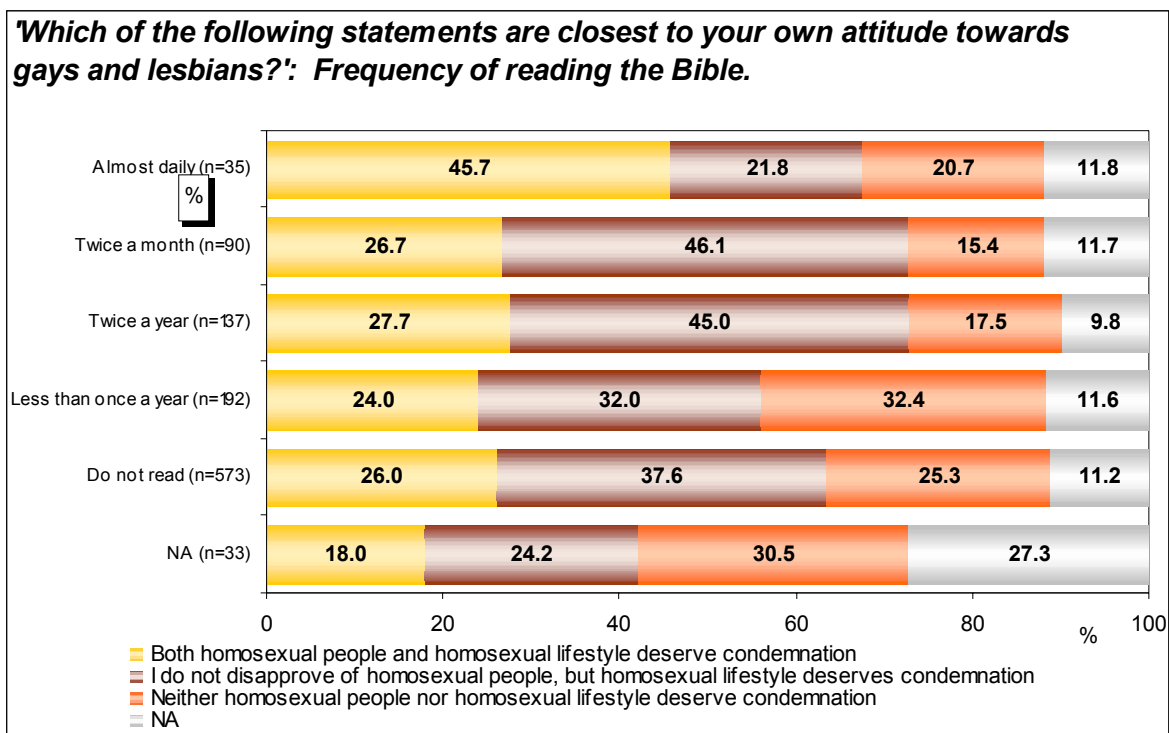


<sup>7</sup> Only the major Christian denominations in Latvia are analyzed here. The number of other religions and Christian denominations represented by survey respondents is too large for the purposes of statistical analysis.

In order to determine the influence of literal interpretations of the Bible, respondents were asked to evaluate the following statement: **‘When deciding what is “good” and what is “bad,” one can always find an unambiguous answer in the texts of the Bible.’** As the graph below demonstrates, those who rely on the Bible for clear answers to moral questions do not differ significantly in their responses from other respondents with regard to attitudes towards homosexuals.



There is also no clear correlation between **how frequently respondents read the Bible** and their attitudes towards homosexuals with the exception of those respondents who read the Bible every day. 46% of respondents in this group condemn homosexuals and the homosexual way of life. Yet even in this group, the share of those who condemn neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life is similar to the other groups. However, the very small share of respondents in this group does not allow for any statistically significant conclusions.



These results correspond with the previously noted conclusion that the opinion of the church and personal religious convictions are factors which influence the views of only a small number of respondents with regard to attitudes towards homosexuals.

**There is no significant and consistent correlation between tolerant attitudes towards homosexuals and membership in any of the major Christian denominations in Latvia; religious identity; the frequency in which religious texts are consulted; or literal interpretation of the Bible.**

### Social and political views that impact attitudes towards homosexuals

The present study was also intended to test the relationship between attitudes towards homosexuals and other social and political values and beliefs. Although rather limited in scope, the survey data did reveal a correlation.

Four areas were chosen to test the correlation with attitudes towards homosexuals:

1. Belief in the moral decline of society
2. Attitude towards a woman's role in the family
3. Attitude towards a democratic form of government
4. Religious identity (examined in the previous chapter)

Attitudes among the following three groups of respondents were compared: those who condemn both homosexuals and the homosexual way of life (Group 1), those who condemn the homosexual way of life but not homosexuals (Group 2) and those who condemn neither homosexuals nor the homosexual way of life (Group 3). The following correlations were identified:

Between attitude towards homosexuals and 'belief in the moral decline of society.' The belief in the moral decline of society is reported by 58% of all respondents while their share is 71% in Group 1, 60% in Group 2 and 45% in Group 3. In another survey question, 63% of all

respondents agree that **‘the increasing number of gays and lesbians points to the moral decline of our society.’** This view is shared by 89% of respondents in Group 1, 72% in Group 2 and 29% in Group 3.

Between attitude towards homosexuals and **belief that ‘it is only fair that women more than men sacrifice their professional career for the sake of children.’** This view is shared by 51% of all respondents, 56% in Group 1, 52% in Group 2 and 47% in Group 3.

Between attitude towards sexual minorities and **support for dissolving parliament and replacing it with a ‘strong leader who would decide things quickly.’** This view is shared by 37% of all respondents, 43% in Group 1, 39% in Group 2 and 32% in Group 3.

**Although these correlations are statistically significant, they may be due to social factors such as age and income and, therefore, are considered relatively weak.**

## **CONCLUSION: FROM INTOLERANCE AND PREJUDICE TOWARDS DIALOGUE**

The results of the study presented in the report demonstrate that prejudice and intolerant attitudes towards homosexuals are widespread in Latvian society. Pervasive homophobic attitudes in Latvia put homosexuals in this country at risk of discrimination, social exclusion, and possibly violence. The study concludes that prejudice and intolerance towards homosexuals constitute a problem not only for homosexuals but for society in general.

At the same time, despite widespread prejudice against homosexuality, homosexuals and their way of life, the majority of Latvians are, to varying degrees, tolerant towards gays and lesbians as individuals. This reflects a significant degree of tolerance at the social or daily level. Further aggravating the prejudice, negative attitudes and open intolerance which homosexuals face is a political culture which supports to a limited extent only the basic principles of liberal democracy including the idea that debates and disagreements regarding diversity should be addressed through mutual recognition and open dialogue. This characteristic of Latvian political culture stymies whatever capacity for tolerance exists in society and impedes it from reaching the level of political and public discourse. This conclusion is not dissimilar to the conclusions of another survey study by dialogi.lv on ethnic tolerance.<sup>8</sup>

There are those who fear, somewhat justifiably, that by detailing the force and pervasiveness of intolerant and prejudiced attitudes, a public opinion study may inspire those political forces and movements which use such attitudes for populist purposes. It should be remembered, however, that populism invokes both the real and the imagined ‘voice of the people,’ and the present study demonstrates that no united voice exists. It shows, in fact, that dissimilar and contrary opinions and attitudes towards homosexuality exist in Latvian society. It also suggests that on many issues a dialogue in society is not impossible.

At the same time, those who wish to reduce the power of intolerance and prejudice over Latvian society will achieve little until the source and nature of this power is recognized and understood. This study emerged from the belief that a look into the mirror of public opinion may ultimately help society better understand its own evils and stir it towards eradicating them. The results presented here, however sobering, hold out such hope. They should be interpreted not as a final judgement but as a call to action.

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<sup>8</sup> See «Uzskati par starpetniskajām attiecībām Latvijā» (<http://dialogi.lv/article.php?id=1880>) and «Etnisko attieksmju termometrs» — interpretācija (<http://dialogi.lv/article.php?id=1881>) (both in Latvian).