RESEARCHING EVERYDAY LIFE OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS

The case of gays and lesbians in Slovenia

Selected results

Basic preliminary analysis

[Text is not proof read. For internal use only.]

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Introduction

«Everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia» is a two-year research project, financed by the Ministry of labour, family and social affairs and Ministry of education, science and sport (2002-2004). The basic starting point was the idea that gays and lesbians are socially stigmatised group in Slovenia, facing social exclusion, which is partly result of a high rate of homophobia¹, but also of an absence of systematic policy, which would legally protect gays and lesbians and prevent their social exclusion and stigmatisation. The absence of concrete policy is also strongly connected with the fact that there is a lack of sociological research in the field.

The attempt of the project is to outline the current situation, to research social position, family and social contexts, in which gays and lesbians in Slovenia live, and above all to identify the problems they face because of their sexual orientation. The project combines sociological empirical research with the elements of policy analysis. For these reasons, the project is divided into two empirical parts - quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (focus groups and in-depth interviews). The final aim of the project is to prepare concrete proposals for policy concerning social and legal position of gays and lesbians in Slovenia.

Quantitative part was conducted in the period from April to July 2003 by ‘face to face’ interviews (questionnaires with 88 closed and open ended questions) with 443 respondents (the population of Slovenia is 2 million). Sampling was carried out by the so called ‘snow-ball’ method, which is relevant for researching small social groups, where we need a high level of personal trust. The starting sample of 45 respondents was created through personal acquaintance, ads and gay and lesbian web sites. 25 interviewers carried out the interviewing. Some among them were also gays and lesbians themselves, which enabled better access to respondents.

¹ Surveys of Slovene public opinion assessed the attitude towards homosexuals using the scale of social distance (e.g. “whom wouldn’t you like to have as a neighbor?”). The percentage of those having negative attitudes towards homosexuals averages, with greater or smaller deviations, around 60%, with the positive trend indicating an increase in tolerance being obvious towards the end of the 1990s. According to the Slovenian public opinion poll, conducted in 2002, 51% would not want to live next door to a homosexual.
One of the biggest problems one has to face when researching hidden social minorities - like gays and lesbians - is the question of basic characteristics of the target population. It is literally impossible to form a representative pattern, since we don’t know how many gays and lesbians are there and what their demographic characteristics are.

Generally we can talk about two methodological approaches: the increasing and decreasing method. Some researchers tried to identify gays and lesbians when surveying the general population. The question they usually ask is: “Did you have any same sex experiences in the past year?” or “Did you have any same sex experiences during your life time?”. The decreasing approached (from the general population to the target group) proved to be problematic. First of all it identifies a small number of gays and lesbians in the population, since people usually don’t want to talk about their intimate life, unless the research is focused and respondents have at least basic interest to participate.²

Secondly, these questions reduce homosexuality only to sexual experiences, which is a very limited view over the issue. Homosexuality is not only about sex. What about those people who identify themselves as gays or lesbians, but have never had any same sex experience? And vice versa - does one same sex experience already makes you gay or lesbian?

We decided to use the increasing methodology instead. It is based on link tracing. The idea behind this methodology is that there are some links between the initial pattern - in our case between those 45 gays and lesbians who volunteered to participate in our survey - and other gays and lesbians in the population. Link tracing methodology helps you to identify social networks. At the same time the problem of identification is surpassed by self-identification; only those who identify themselves to be part of the target population participate in the research. In our case only those who identified as gays and lesbians were included in the sample.

Every respondent was asked at the end of the interview (after finishing the questionnaire) whether he or she knows of any other gays and lesbians who he or she could ask to participate in the survey. We didn’t collect telephone numbers. The respondents had to make the initial contact themselves and ask the person, if he or she is willing to participate in the survey. If they agreed, their telephone number was delivered to us or the new respondents contacted us themselves. It proved to be a good strategy, since you can trust more someone you know. At the same time they, who have already participated in the questionnaire, could share their (positive) experiences about the survey with their gay and lesbian acquaintances and friends. Trust is the key element when researching hidden minorities.

The problem with the increasing methodology is that it tends to overemphasise social networks. Those who are isolated or part of a very small and closed social networks, are usually left out. It is also a problem, if only one (big) and easily accessed social network is identified and activated. In Slovenia that is the case with the so called Ljubljana’s gay and lesbian scene. Experiences of the people from “the scene” are probably not experiences of other gays and lesbians. We tried to initiate more parallel chains of social networks and there are some sings upon which we can conclude that we succeeded in doing that. For example, 12% of gays and lesbians from the sample never attend GLBT places in Slovenia, 13% is not familiar with the work of GLBT activists (activists belong to the Ljubljana’s scene), 11% does not know any of Slovenian GLBT media or Internet site and 48% does not live in Ljubljana or its outskirts.

The geographical distribution of the sample shows that we managed to include gays and lesbians from all over Slovenia. We traced the residence of the respondents by the first number of the post code. This enabled us to keep the information on the exact residence of the respondent as anonymous as possible, whereas we still could trace the region of the respondent’s residence.
Demography

According to various researches from different European countries the general demographic characteristics of a certain population are equally distributed among the population of gays and lesbians as well, with few exceptions. These surveys usually identify higher proportion of gay men. According to these surveys majority of gays and lesbians are living in urban centres, since urbanity seems to provide – at least to a certain extent – safer place for homosexual way of life. Unlike general population, gays and lesbians are of course less likely to be married. Our pattern reflects the same distribution of demographic factors.

We surveyed 443 respondents, 66% of them were male, 34% female. The youngest respondent was born in 1986 (17 years old), the oldest one in 1943 (60 years old). 85% of the respondents were aged between 20 and 40.

62% of them currently live in urban centres (Ljubljana or Maribor).

Majority, 95% were never married.
The education level of the sample is higher than the education level of the Slovenian population. 55% of them finished secondary school, 20% hold BA degree and 4% MA or PhD.

30% of the respondents declared themselves religious (51% of them are Roman Catholics). 47% stated that they are not religious, while 21% didn’t want to answer the question.

90% of the sample is of Slovene nationality, 2% of the respondents are Croatians, another 2% Serbs. There are other nationalities represented in the sample, but with very small percentages. Among them are Bosnians, Macedonians, Albanians, Montenegrins, Hungarians, Germans, Austrians and various combinations of nationalities.

Discussion about homosexuality in family and school

Facing stigma related to homosexual identity is connected with social reaction to homosexuality and also with the internalised homophobia, which is a consequence of socialisation in heteronormative environment. Lack of information that de-stigmatise homosexuality, reproduce stigma and negative perception of same-sex orientation. Gays and lesbians are thus constantly faced with the information about unacceptability of their sexual orientation. The survey revealed that 76% of respondents never or very rarely discussed homosexuality with their parents during the growing up. However we trace a slight trend of increasing the frequency of discussion about homosexuality among younger population of gays and lesbians.

Picture 3 - Have your parents discussed homosexuality with you (during your schooling and growing up?)
Among the impulses for discussing homosexuality with parents mass media reports and gay movies on television are most frequently mentioned. Rumours of one's alleged homosexuality and coming out are also among the most common initiators of the conversation on homosexuality in the family.

The situation is school is slightly better. 45% of respondents claimed that they have discussed homosexuality in school (during the school hours), but only slightly.

Discussion about homosexuality in school is usually carried out in a neutral way, according to 64% of respondents. However, 18% respondents reported that homosexuality was discussed in negative way, and 17% said that it was discussed in a positive way. The main reason for discussing homosexuality was curriculum.

Taking into account the absence of discussion about homosexuality in the family and also in school, we can conclude that young people do live in an information blockade, which reproduce stigmatisation of homosexuality. In addition the role of mass media is important here, since it plays the main educational role in relation to homosexuality. Of course, media does not necessarily de-stigmatise same-sex orientation.
Coming out

Coming out is one of the crucial moments in the process of redefining one’s sexual identity and forming homosexual identity. Gays and lesbians in Slovenia first come out at the end of the late adolescents years, on average at 19 and a half. It is not surprising that majority of gays and lesbians first came out to their close friends, whom they can trust. 43% first came out to their female friend, 34% to their male friend.

![Bar chart showing whom first came out to.](image)

Picture 5 - Whom you first came out to?

Coming out to parents seems to be emotionally extremely demanding experience. Family life rests on gender based expectations, which are endangered or ruined by the very fact of coming out. Majority came out to their parents a year or two years after their first coming out, when they were 20 or 21 of age.

Coming out is usually not something that happens unprepared. It is rather well considered and the person one come out to is usually carefully chosen and thought of as trustful. Even in situations where gays and lesbians are faced with direct question whether they are homosexual or not, they can control it. One can easily say “no”, if he or she feels that the person who is asking the question is not trustworthy. This is usually true for the first coming outs, when gays and lesbians are still very vulnerable to negative reactions to their coming out.

However, the survey showed that the first reactions are usually positive. This reactions are mostly positive, because people gays and lesbians come out to are carefully chosen.
The social milieu of close friends proved to be the safest social environment for one to come out. 91% of people surveyed have already come out to their close friends. Mothers, sisters and brothers are the second group of people gays and lesbians usually come out to. Fathers, on the other hand, are far behind, followed only after schoolmates and co-workers. While 67% came out to their mothers, only 46% came out to their fathers. It seems that mothers know much more than fathers do.

There are various reasons for the fear of coming out to father. The results show that Slovenian society is still patriarchal to a certain degree. The phenomena of the so-called ‘distant fathers’ probably contribute to it; if real communication channels are not established between fathers and their children, it is hard to discuss such intimate questions as homosexuality. At the same time respondent (stereotypically?) expect that their mothers will be more sensitive to the question, while father’s reaction might be devastating and absolutely non-supportive. It is interesting to note that mother often prevent their homosexual child to talk about it with his or her father, claiming that this information would “kill” her husband. 35% of respondents claimed that their mothers, after finding out about their homosexuality, never discussed the issue with their fathers. Mothers remain in the very same closet from which their child came out from.
When comparing the reactions of mother and father to their child’s coming out, the fear of coming out to father proves to be unfounded. Their reactions statistically do not differ: in 40% of cases the first reaction is negative. In the long run, the negative reactions are changed and majority of parents accept their homosexual child, although talking about it in the family is usually avoided.
However, these are experiences of those who have come out to both, their mother and father. The conclusions might be problematic, since those who come out to their mothers only, might have a very good reason why not to come out to their fathers as well.

Coming out can cause the end of a personal relationship. People stop talking to gays and lesbians or they try to avoid them because of their homosexuality, which they were not aware of before. 18% of people surveyed reported having that kind of an experience. Interestingly enough, friends, who seem to be the most open to one’s homosexuality, are also those who are most likely to end the relationship. 56% of those who stopped communicating because of one’s coming out were friends. They are followed by acquaintances (13%), schoolmates (8%), mothers (5%), relatives (5%), ex-partners (4%) and fathers (3%).

![Picture 9 - Person stopped talking to me because I came out](image)

Women more often report such experiences, but the difference is not statistically significant.

![Picture 10 - Person stopped talking to me because I came out (by gender)](image)
Intimate relationships

The survey included 59% respondents who had partner at the time of interviewing. Gender and age differences are not statistically significant. Majority of respondents live in a monogamous relationship of two partners (90%), 1.5% live in a partnership of three partners, while 8% of respondents live in an ‘open’ relationship of two partners.

Respondents were in average 20.6 years old when they entered their first same-sex relationship. Women have their first same-sex partner usually earlier than men, however these differences are not statistically significant. We assume that gays and lesbians enter their first same-sex partnership significantly later than heterosexuals due to several reasons. Social pressure to conform to heterosexuality may force individuals to first find a partner of the opposite sex, and there is also a high rate of homophobia, creating a fear of stigmatisation and discrimination among gays and lesbians. The process of forming homosexual identity may be longer because gays and lesbians are faced with the process of redefining compulsive and expected heterosexual identity. In addition, the social places where gays and lesbians could meet potential partners are very limited in Slovenia. There are significant age differences among age groups. While young people meet their first partner usually in their early 20s, older gays and lesbians met their first partner in average when they were 27.
Respondents have met their current partner most frequently in the milieu of their close friends (28%), or in GLBT clubs and discotheques (26%), while 21% of respondents met their partner through the Internet. Generally speaking, informal networks of close friends represent an important social environment where gays and lesbians can meet their potential partners. This is not surprising since these social places enable discretion, intimacy, while exposure to stigmatisation is smaller. For these reasons, the Internet is also quite popular 'meeting place', especially for those who do not have relevant network of friends or for those who have not come out yet.
Registration of partnership is currently a hot political issue in Slovenia since Slovenian Parliament is about to adopt the Law on same-sex partnership. According to our survey, 61% of respondents would register their partnership. 21% respondents are undecided which could be explained with the high proportion of young people in the sample. Today, young people no matter of their sexual orientation usually postpone their decisions about marriage, children etc. to later time in their life course.

The survey revealed sex differences regarding the registration. Lesbians expressed their willingness to register same-sex partnership in a greater extent than gays. There is also a smaller proportion of women who would not register their partnership or are undecided about it.

Respondents who have partner are more likely to register their partnership (66%) than those who are single (55%). 24% of singles are not prepared to register their partnership in comparison with 24% of respondents with partner.
The survey included also a series of value statements regarding registration of partnership. The results revealed four groups of statements:

1. ‘Pragmatic reasons’: expose the importance of social security, the right to the state sponsored housing and the similar. There is a high level of agreement with such statements. Gays and lesbians would register their partnership primarily for these reasons.
2. ‘Ideological-romantic statements’: related to ideologisation of marriage characteristic for heterosexual partnerships in the past. Respondents in average do not agree with such statements, proving that gays and lesbians do not want to marry for ideological but pragmatic reasons.
3. Statements related to ‘close social environment’ (family, friends) in which gays and lesbians live: respondents were asked whether they believe that their relationship with the close social network would improve with registration of their partnership. Respondents in average do not believe that registration would improve such relationships.
4. Statements related to ‘society as a whole’: respondents in average do not believe that same sex marriages will change negative society’s attitudes towards gays and lesbians. This is a sort of scepticism to influence greater social changes, which can be connected with personal experiences of homophobia. Namely, more than half of the respondents were victims of some sort of violence due to their sexual orientation at least once.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Mediana</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My relationship with partner would become more stable</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The state could control gays and lesbians easier if they marry</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My relationship would have greater social value</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society in general would start to accept homosexuals</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could apply for a non-profit or social apartment</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage means conforming to a heterosexual way of life</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with people that surround me would improve</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage would ensure me better social protection</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents would better accept my sexual orientation</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage is a sign of love</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Picture 16 - Statements on registered partnership
(on a scale from 1 (I don’t agree) to 5 (I agree))
Respondents were also asked if they want to have a child. 42% said they would like to have a child. Young respondents are more willing to have a child than older. There are no significant differences between gays and lesbians regarding the wish to have a child. Also, there is no statistical difference between singles or those respondents who have partner. Gays and lesbians most often mentioned that they would adopt a child.

![Pie chart showing the percentage of respondents who would like to have a child](Picture 17 - Would you like to have a child?)

**Violence**

The extent of violent acts towards gays and lesbians is one of the problems previous few surveys of gays and lesbians in Slovenia pointed out. 53% of people in our sample reported being victim of a violent act due to their sexual orientation. 91% of them experienced verbal violence, 24% psychical violence and 6% sexual violence.

![Pie chart showing the percentage of respondents who experienced violence](Picture 18 - Victims of violence)
Most frequently perpetrators of violence acts were strangers (61%) on the streets, in the bars or other public spaces. It means that public space is still very much heterosexualized; signs of homosexuality are therefore often removed by violent acts and homosexuals themselves, if spotted, are gay bashed. Any kind of public expression of your sexual identity - like holding hand or kissing your partner in the street - might result in a violent reaction. In 26% of cases parents or other close relatives were perpetrators of violence, while in 23% of cases these violent acts were committed by friends or acquaintances.

Respondends did not report very often acts of discrimination at their work place. 94% of them stated that they have never been discriminated at their work place due to their sexual orientation.
It is important to note that majority of people surveyed did not come out at their workplace. 49% of them didn’t come out or came out to only a few of their work colleagues. This partly explains high percentage of non-discrimination experiences. It is also a sign that one does not feel comfortable to be open about his or her sexual orientation at work place, since they either fear losing the job or being laughed at. 4% of respondents suspect they have lost their job or they were not promoted because they came out.

Basic findings

- **ABSENCE OF DISCUSSION ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY**
  - 53% of respondents said that their parents never discussed homosexuality with them.
  - 34% of people surveyed claimed that they never discussed homosexuality in primary or high school.

- **COMING OUT**
  - On average gays and lesbians first come out at 19 and a half. In 74% of cases the first reaction of the person gay or lesbian come out to, is positive and supportive.
  - Majority, 77% of respondents first came out to their close friend.
  - 18% of people surveyed claimed that they have experiencied the ending of a personal relationship due to their coming out. In 56% of cases the person, who stopped talking to gay or lesbian because of their sexual orientation, was his or her friend.
  - Respondents fear most to come out to their father. 54% of people in the sample have not come out to their father yet.
  - The first reaction of mothers and fathers to their child’s coming out does not differ. In 40% of cases the first reaction is negative.
  - In the long run the first negative reactions by parents do not effect negatively to the relationship with their homosexual child.
• INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

→ On average gays and lesbians enter their first same-sex relationship when they are 20 and a half.

→ 28% of people surveyed met their partner in a social milieu of close friends, 26% in GLBT club or discotheque, 21% on the Internet.

→ As it is the case with disclosure of one’s sexual orientation, the fear of disclosing one’s same-sex partnership to his or her father is the biggest. 60% of respondents have not disclosed their partnership to their fathers, while 40% have not disclosed it to their mothers. In 93% of cases close friends know of their same-sex relationship.

→ The distribution of family work is more equal in same-sex partnership as it is in heterosexual ones. Kinship work is an exception; each partner takes care of their own kinship. In kinship networks they are not recognized as partners.

→ 42% of people surveyed would like to have a child. Majority of them would adopt a child.

→ 61% of respondents would register their partnership. More women than men would register.

→ Gays and lesbians would register their partnership for pragmatic reasons (social security, gaining rights which are already accorded to heterosexual partnerships). They would not marry because of romantic ideas about love and marriage.

• VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

→ 53% of gays and lesbians surveyed have been a victim of a violent act due to their sexual orientation. 91% of them experienced verbal violence, 24% physical and 6% sexual violence.

→ Most frequently, in 61% of cases, perpetrators of violent acts are strangers (on the streets, in the bar or other public spaces).

→ Lesbians are more often exposed to a hidden violence at home (parents, kinship).
→ 49% of the respondents did not come out to their work colleagues or only to a few of them. 94% of the respondents believe that they were not discriminated against at work place due to their sexual orientation.

→ 4% of people surveyed suspect that they lost their job due to their coming out at work place.

• **MEDIA AND GLBT SUBCULTURE**

→ Gays and lesbians got most information about homosexuality from the Internet and specialized gay and lesbian media.

→ 11% of people surveyed do not know of any Slovenian GLBT media or Internet page. ‘Legebitrina oznanila’ is the most recognized Slovenian GLBT magazine.

→ Ljubljana’s gay and lesbian film festival got the highest score among events in GLBT subculture.

→ Internet site ‘SIQRD’, Internet site ‘Legebitra’, ‘Lesbo’ and ‘Legebitrina oznanila’ got the highest scores among GLBT media in Slovenia.

→ 66% of people surveyed have never attended the Gay and lesbians pride parade in Ljubljana.