



# Pride and prejudice:

## Public attitudes toward homosexuality

South Africa is characterised by the co-existence of progressive legislation upholding the rights of lesbians and gay men, and discrimination and violent hate crimes perpetrated against them. By analysing attitudes to homosexual behaviour over the last five years, derived from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), **Benjamin Roberts** and **Vasu Reddy** provide evidence on the changing direction and intensity of sexual prejudice in the country.

Criminalisation and legal sanctions typified life for homosexuals under apartheid. Post-apartheid, in contrast, brought constitutional reform and facilitated the protection of rights, enabling homosexuals to develop their identities. Identity is shaped by complex social forces, and the law may be viewed as one facet of a more complex set of social relations which influences identity formation.

As such, the equality clause in the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights (1996) is the first to expressly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Progressive decriminalisation through law reform since the mid 1990s enabled lesbians and gay men to claim their citizenship as equal South Africans. Far-reaching judgements in respect of medical aid parity, sodomy, custody of children, adoption, insurance, immigration and inheritance have benefited lesbians and gays. A decade later, the signing of the Civil Union Act in November 2006 brought legal recognition of gay

marriages, positioning the country as the first to do so in Africa and the fifth to do so internationally.

The recognition of 'sexual orientation' as a form of identity is characterised by increased visibility about homosexuality in the public domain. This has included the growth of gay and lesbian political activism and organisations, the emergence of regular social events such as pride marches and film festivals, and significant coverage in print and electronic media on homosexuality. Policy changes and the active engagement of lesbian and gay civil society organisations have likewise reinforced public discussion, debate and dissent on homosexuality.

Yet, for all these gains, gay and lesbian identities continue to be characterised as 'un-African'. The assertion of 'un-Africanness' conceals a moral and cultural view that African societies are somehow unique and therefore immune to what is perceived to be

a Western and European import. The systematic accusations by several African leaders over the years have fuelled these perceptions and South Africans are likewise divided in their tolerance of same-sex issues. As the incidences of hate crimes against black lesbians and gay-bashing attest, the victory of constitutional equality clearly has not guaranteed the end to social discrimination.

### Recent national trends

While there is a steady stream of qualitative research on homosexuality in the country, developed during the first decade-and-a-half of democracy, limited quantitative evidence exists on whether this progressive, liberal turn brought about notable attitudinal change among the South African public regarding tolerance of homosexuality.

Since 2003, SASAS included a question on same-sex relations among a broader set of items on sexual permissiveness. This measure of sexual prejudice focuses on attitudes to homosexual behaviour, and is phrased as follows: 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?' Responses are captured on a four-point scale ranging from 'not wrong at all' to 'always wrong', providing a glimpse of recent dynamics in public sentiment towards one aspect of homosexuality, using a series of nationally representative samples.

How deeply entrenched is homophobic sentiment in South Africa, and have there been signs of change over the past five years? Negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men are widespread. Overall, more than 80% of the population aged 16 years and above expressed the view that sex between two men or two women could be considered 'always wrong' in each of the five survey years (Figure 1). At the national level, there appear only to have been minor changes over the period.



Figure 1: Tolerance towards same-sex relations, 2003-2007 (%)  
 Note: The question is phrased as follows: 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?'  
 Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2007

A comparative perspective can be gained by examining responses from more than 40 countries to the same question included in the 1998 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) module on religion. South Africa is ranked alongside countries such as Chile and the Philippines, where intolerance towards gays and lesbians is more than five times higher than in the Netherlands (the

most tolerant of the societies included), almost double that of Great Britain, and about a third higher than the United States.

### Attributes of intolerance

**Gender:** Although a number of international studies have shown that men tend to exhibit significantly more negative attitudes than women towards homosexuality, an examination of gender differences in the South African data suggest that, in total, there is not a pronounced divergence. As with the national trend, the percentage that believes homosexual relations to always be wrong over the five-year interval varies within a small band within the 80-85% range.

**Age:** There is an age effect in attitudes towards homosexuality, with older South Africans moderately more intolerant than younger adults (Figure 2).

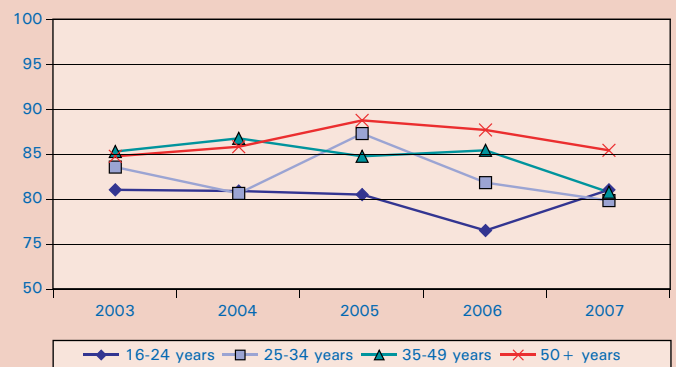


Figure 2: Attitudes towards homosexuality by age group, 2003-2007 (%)  
 Note: The lines represent the percentage of each subgroup that answered 'always wrong' to the question: 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?'  
 Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2007

In the four years between 2003 and 2006, 16 to 24 year olds were significantly less likely to voice their disapproval than middle-aged and older groups. While there are both upward and downward swings within age groups over this interval, there are indications that attitudes began softening after 2005, especially among those older than 24 years. For 16 to 24 year olds, the level of disapproval has remained at a relatively constant level, except for a short-lived improvement in 2006. Between 2006 and 2007, there appears to have been a convergence in attitude among the three groups younger than 50 years, to the extent that they no longer differ significantly.

The observed difference between those younger than 50 years and older South Africans nonetheless remains statistically significant. Whether the recent changes are related to the passing of the 2006 Civil Unions Act and the political and media attention devoted to this development, is open to speculation.

It is important not to overstate the scope of the age differentials, especially since in most instances more than 80% of the various age groups over all five years held negative views. Even in the year where the gap between 16 to 24 year olds and those older than 50 years was the greatest, namely 2006, the percentage point difference was 11% and the percentage of the younger group declaring homosexual behaviour as 'always wrong' was 77%.

**Education:** Prejudiced views on same-sex relations appear closely related to education, with more highly educated people being more tolerant (Figure 3). Those who matriculated or possess a tertiary qualification demonstrate more liberal views, especially compared to citizens that either have no formal schooling or only a primary level education. This is a constant trend across the five years. However, even among tertiary educated adults, 76% on average over the period consider homosexuality to be always wrong, with the lowest reported figure for this group being 72% in 2003. Noteworthy are the signs of improvement since 2005 among those with either a grade 8 to 11 education or having matriculated. This development will need to be monitored to determine whether the trend persists.

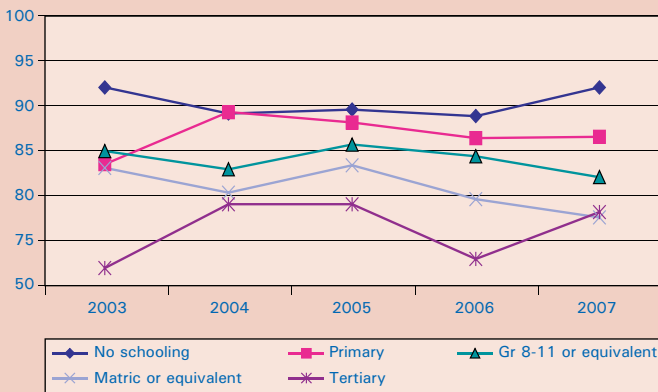


Figure 3: Attitudes towards homosexuality by educational attainment, 2003-2007 (%)

Note: The lines represent the percentage of each subgroup that answered 'always wrong' to the question: 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?' Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2007

**Religious variables:** International research has found that religious denomination and frequency of attendance at religious services have statistically significant relationships with sexual prejudice. More disapproving attitudes to homosexuals and their behaviour are likely to be found among the strongly religious and those belonging to a 'conservative' denomination. The South African data produces ambiguous evidence. Respondents belonging to denominations such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and Islam appear to have marginally more entrenched negative views, while practising Anglicans and Hindus emerge as more positive. Yet, virtually none of the differences between denominations are statistically significant, which may reflect the narrow range within which the attitudes to homosexuality vary.

**Population group:** There exists a small racial gradient of difference in tolerance of homosexual behaviour. Black South Africans have tended to report higher levels of disapproval than white and coloured South Africans in most of the five survey rounds. These differences are statistically significant, though on average the percentage differences have not exceeded 10 percent. Attitudes towards homosexuality among Indian respondents have fluctuated considerably over the period, making it difficult to make any general assertions about this population group.

**Geographic divides:** Attitudes also differ according to geographic location. Most negative attitudes are found in rural areas – among those living on commercial farms and in communal areas – while less negative attitudes are observed in formal urban areas (Figure 4). This pattern is consistent over the five-year window, though there has been a closing of the attitudinal gap between informal settlements and formal urban areas since 2005. Disaggregating the formal urban areas in metropolitan areas

and non-metropolitan areas, we find that residents of larger urban centres have significantly less negative attitudes than those in the communal rural areas. International literature suggests that one of the underlying explanations as to rural-urban variation is likely to be proximity of an individual to gay and lesbian communities. However, given the still high level of intolerance in urban areas combined with the relative proximity to gay and lesbian communities, one would expect the potential for hate crimes in such localities to be comparably high too.

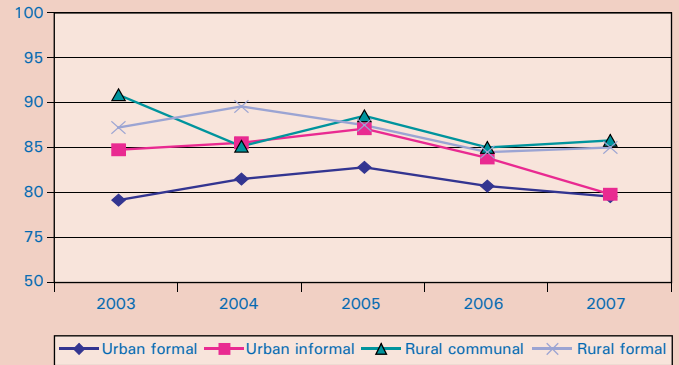


Figure 4: Attitudes towards homosexuality by location, 2003-2007 (%) Note: The lines represent the percentage of each subgroup that answered 'always wrong' to the question: 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?' Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2007

## Pushing boundaries

Despite guaranteed constitutional freedoms, the results suggest that South African society is still largely prejudiced rather than accepting of same-sex relations. Ironically the negative attitudes confirm that despite policy shifts and legal reform within a Bill of Rights culture, cultural prejudice remains strong. This also indicates that while a rights-based model governs citizenship claims in the country, attitudinal changes do not necessarily correlate with rights.

Additionally, the results suggest that the negative attitude and reluctance to 'accept' homosexuality could also be linked to levels of education and awareness of people, rural-urban divide, age, culture, and religion. Tolerance and positive attitudes may have something to do with the recognition of difference, equality and dignity which are values that arise out of a slow process of negotiation.

Understandably apartheid had a strong psychological basis to indoctrination, and perhaps acceptance of 'homosexuality' has less to do with a legal framework, and more to do with consciousness-raising and openness to differences in South African society.

Finally, it would seem that rights do not necessarily result in justice. This tension seems to exist if we consider, for example, recent hate crimes of lesbians in Cape Town, Ladysmith and Soweto. Perhaps the empirical data suggests that much work remains at the level of public education around diversity (which will include understanding same-sex issues). This task may not be the responsibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered organisations, but rather the responsibility of all South Africans, perhaps to be included in life orientation curricula within schooling.

*Benjamin Roberts is a Research Specialist in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development (CYFSD) research programme and Professor Vasu Reddy is a Chief Research Specialist in the Gender and Development Unit.*