

Greater public acceptance of gay sex and marriage: Survey

Tham Yuen-C

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People in Singapore are now more liberal in their views on gay rights, even as society remains largely conservative.

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on perceptions and attitudes towards social and moral issues found there is greater acceptance of gay sex, gay marriage and adoption by gay couples compared with five years ago when the same survey was done.

Overall, slightly more than 20 per cent of people polled between last August and January this year said sexual relations between adults of the same sex were not wrong at all or not wrong most of the time, a rise from about 10 per cent in 2013.

Around 27 per cent felt the same way about gay marriage (15 per cent in 2013) and 30 per cent did so about gay couples adopting a child (24 per cent in 2013).

The findings, released by IPS yesterday, are part of a wider survey on race, language and religion, and come at a time of greater scrutiny of the conservative-liberal divide on moral, social and political issues.

More than 4,000 Singapore residents were asked to indicate how they feel on a range of issues, by choosing whether it is "not wrong at all", "not wrong most of the time", "only wrong sometimes", "almost always wrong" or "always wrong". A similar number of people were polled in 2013.

The large-scale, nationally representative survey was weighted by race and age according to the proportions in Singapore's population.

In general, people have become less conservative on moral issues in Singapore, with fewer opposing not just gay rights, but also premarital sex and cohabitation, said IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan, the authors of the paper on the survey.

The changes were most stark on homosexual rights, mirroring international trends in countries like the United States, where there is less resistance in this area amid greater advocacy by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) groups.

The survey shows the shift in attitudes on the issue was most pronounced among the young.

People also became more liberal over time, especially the younger generation.

The authors said that if the trends continued, there could be greater acceptance of gay rights in Singapore in future.

Asked about the implications this will have on Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men, Mr Lim said: "The Government has maintained that any changes to the law must take into account where the majority of public opinion stands on the issue.

"Our results, while they point to a growing acceptance of gay sex as well as other matters surrounding gay rights, still show that most Singaporeans remain opposed to these issues. We

cannot say for certain when the scales will be tipped in favour of gay rights but, if present trends continue, it may not be very long before that takes place."

The survey also found that Christians and Muslims were more conservative on gay rights than those from other religions.

Similarly, those who are married, more financially frugal and who see governments as leaders of societal change were also more conservative, whereas those who support free speech and were more accommodating of people of different backgrounds were more liberal.

Commenting on the link between religion and conservatism, the authors wrote: "If not managed well, this can be divisive, with different religious groups uniting over moral positions, forming blocs and together opposing those of other religions who may differ on these moral positions."

The link between attitudes on socio-political matters and gay rights also has the potential to worsen existing tensions between pro-and anti-LGBTQ camps, they added.

Despite the greater acceptance of gay rights, society continues to be largely conservative, the researchers said, citing the findings that show people still frowned on gambling and infidelity as much as they did before.

The survey had asked people about political, fiscal and social matters, and on these issues many were neutral.

Of the remainder, more tended to agree with the position emphasised by the Government in general - a stance the researchers identified as more conservative.

On freedom of speech, for example, around four in 10 agreed people should be careful when speaking about sensitive topics, compared with three in 10 who agreed people should be allowed to speak freely on any topic.

Delving deeper into the results, researchers found that those who were conservative on moral issues were more likely to also be conservative on socio-political issues.