



University of Ljubljana
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CAMPAIGNING for EQUALITY

The Frames of
Homophobia in Slovenia

HANDBOOK

Campaigning for Equality: The Frames of Homophobia in Slovenia

Handbook

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1. Introduction

This handbook was developed as part of the DARE project (Dare to Care about Equality), whose goals included an analysis of the discourses directed against the equal rights of the LGBT community in Slovenia, the examination of discrimination based on sexual orientation and the preparation of suitable strategies to fight homophobia, mainly through the processes of education and awareness-raising.

The handbook is part of the project outcomes. It comprises three parts.

The first part presents the findings of the research study in which we analysed online comments to examine what the chief reasons are for the rejection of the equality for gays and lesbians and what the background is to homophobia in Slovenia. Using the method of critical frame analysis, we analysed 1397 online comments posted below the articles on the MMC RTVSLO news portal, covering the issue of homosexuality.

The analysis reveals the question of same-sex families to be the “breaking point”: a large share of the commenters, namely, states that they have nothing against gays and lesbians – as long as they are not allowed to raise children. Therefore, the second part of the handbook appraises systematically the sociological and psychological research into children growing up in same-sex families and addresses the most frequent fears/prejudices connected with this.

The results of our analysis were addressed with a TV awareness-raising campaign as part of the DARE project. The messages were tested with the method of focus groups. Since such analyses may incur exorbitant costs and are therefore mostly unavailable to NGOs, we conducted experimental versions of focus groups with the help of sociology students. The recommendations and instructions on how to use the method to test NGO awareness-raising campaigns are presented in the third part of the handbook.

2. Homophobia

Today, the classical understanding of homophobia as a physical fear of lesbians and gays is no longer applicable. Yet the concept itself, whose author was the American clinical psychologist George Weinberg, was formulated in that very context: Weinberg compared homophobia with claustrophobia, agoraphobia and other similar phobic feelings of revulsion he came across in his practice. Some of his critics have pointed out that not only did Weinberg construct the word homophobia awkwardly from the Greek word *phobos* (phobia) and the Latin prefix *homo* (same), but that he also understood it “wrongly” as primarily a physical fear of homosexuality. Although this is true, it is also true that in the Introduction to his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, in which he introduced the term homophobia, Weinberg did clarify that it simultaneously denoted an illness, an attitude, a pathology and a world view (Weinberg, 1972). Due to the term’s ambiguousness some authors propose other – if related – concepts, for instance, heterosexism or heteronormativity (cf. Kuhar et al., 2011), but the term “homophobia” has gained wide recognition and today it represents widely varied systemic and especially individual manifestations of (political and social) exclusion of individuals because of their homosexuality. It denotes negative attitudes and feelings towards homosexuality on which the legal, economic and symbolic discrimination against lesbians and gays is based.

There are different explanations of why homophobia occurs. Groneberg (2011) cites three types of explanation: inertia explanations, structural explanations and socio-psychological explanations. The first perceive homophobia as an element of culture and history; passed down through time it is a reflection of religious and wider social attitudes towards lesbians and gays in the past. Structural explanations go further, discovering and examining the aspects of stigmatisation in the past that made the rejection of homosexuality possible in the first place. They usually focus on the construction of male subjectivity, since this construct seems to encompass the majority of homophobic roots.

The latter – the social construction of masculinity – is closely related to those socio-psychological explanations which maintain that homophobia is not merely about transferring past attitudes towards homosexuality to the present; rather, in new forms homophobia is being established today, too. Here, homophobia is understood as a modern phenomenon which is being maintained either through patriarchal culture (the relations between men and women and their gender roles) and the violence directed at the groups which are socially marginalised

and often constructed as scapegoats, or through political disenfranchisement. In this way homophobia is closely related to nationalism. Mole (2016) asserts that the links between homophobia and nationalism are key to understanding LGBT people in Eastern Europe in the post-socialist period. This period has seen nationalist movements strengthen, and economic and political uncertainty has significantly increased. Looking for some certainty that individuals need in everyday life, people rely on the idea of ethnic identity as the element binding a certain group while also demarcating those who are outside the group – the Other. Furthermore, the notion of the nation as a blood-related group can only live through the naturalisation of the patriarchal family as the family that reproduces the nation and where both men and women have their distinctive roles. The production and reproduction of the norms and ideologies that define appropriate sexual behaviour are part and parcel of this process. Sexual categories, as emphasised by Weeks (2003), do not exist in a vacuum; they are always defined through cultural and historical imaginaries: they are defined by various institutions such as churches, families, schools, medicine, legislation, etc. In other words: part of the nationalist project in the post-socialist period that has tended towards an unambiguous answer to the question of who we are “as a nation” has included a clear definition of sexual morals and norms based on heteronormative ideology. Mole (2016) explains that this process cannot be ascribed to any particular (political) subject, as nationalism has relied on viewing homosexuality as something that self-evidently (i.e., following common sense) threatens the nation. Thus “a taken-for-granted ‘truth’” is established, “and it is this ‘truth’ that nationalist politicians are able to manipulate to further their own particular ends” (Mole, 2016: 110).

As we will see in the empirical part of this analysis, the self-evidence of homosexuality as a threat – without the need for explanation – was an important argumentative frame in the debates surrounding the Family Code. However, it is also true that nowadays traditional prejudice based on biological explanations is complemented with purported cultural differences, differences in lifestyles and values.

The American psychologist Gregory Herek (1984, 1986, 1987, 1991, 2004) was among the first to study homophobia through socio-psychological aspects in more detail. In essence his analysis is functional, since he explains homophobia through a basic (psychological) function that expressing homophobia has or satisfies in individuals or groups. He distinguishes three basic functions: experiential, defensive and symbolic functions.

The experiential function, as the name suggests, is the only one with any basis in individuals' actual experiences with homosexual people. It is the function that makes sense of past experiences with gays and lesbians and directs future behaviour: positive experiences generate positive behaviour and vice versa. Research (Barth and Parry, 2009; Herek, 2007; Herek and Capitano, 1996; Lemm, 2006) demonstrates that people who know a gay or a lesbian personally are less likely on average to express negative attitudes towards lesbians and gays. The positive correlation is further strengthened with the frequency and intensity of the contacts. Herek (1991) also stresses that the experiential function can explain only a small segment of homophobia. According to him, the majority of homophobic behaviour originates in prejudices and stereotypes, that is, in the absence of actual experience with the persons towards whom homophobic attitudes are established.

The defensive function describes an increase in uneasiness and anxiety that gays and lesbians can trigger in an individual. Anxiety is often related to the individual's conflicts about their own sexual or gender status. Put differently, the expression of homophobia serves as a defence against one's own undesired characteristics that the individual projects onto the group of lesbians and gays. Thus, the individual conducts "the symbolic purification" of unacceptable aspects of themselves. The suppression of feelings will eventually destroy (homoerotic) desire, and the latter will transform into hatred (i.e., internalised homophobia). The individual does not see that what they hate is, in actual fact, their own homoerotic feelings.

According to Herek, the symbolic function can explain the largest share of homophobia. Expressing homophobia, the individual strengthens their self-image and the environment extends them support and approval. In the context of homophobia the individual's self-image is strengthened either through homophobic expressions and attitudes, which are supported by the family, friends or society in general, or through expressing (homophobic) values, which are in the centre of the individual's understanding of themselves. Herek gives an individual's religion as an example: if the individual's religion puts the belief that homosexuality is unacceptable centre stage, the expression of homophobic attitudes actually strengthens the individual's belonging to the religious community and its moral values. Research (Rowatt et al., 2009; Whitley, 2009) also shows that religion is the variable that is most closely related to homophobic attitudes. A pan-European public opinion poll showed that among the various religious groups the members of Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities

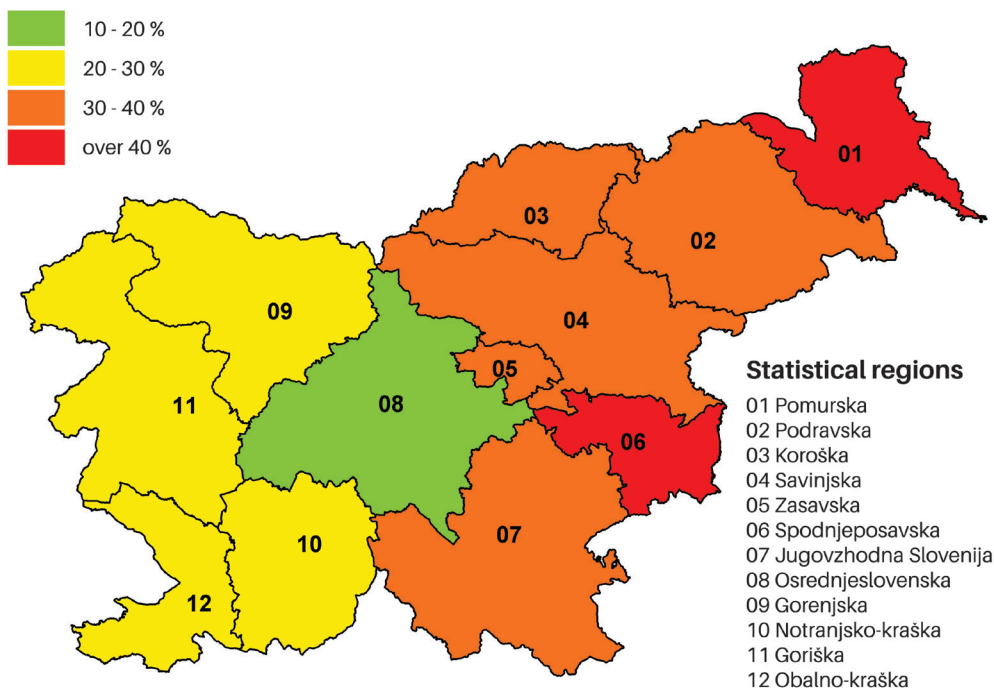
expressed the most negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Takács and Szalma, 2011). In addition, a Dutch study (Jaspers, Lubbers and de Graaf, 2007) showed that in the Netherlands, where the social distance towards lesbians and gays is small, the significance of religion in homonegativity strengthened and the significance of education weakens: the level of education did not play a significant role in one's level of homonegativity. In general, however, negative attitudes towards homosexuality weaken as educational levels increase (Herek, 2007; Hooghe and Meeusen, 2013). Research also demonstrates that men are more homophobic than women, especially towards gays and transgender people (Herek, 2007; Jaspers, Lubbers and de Graaf, 2007; Kite and Whitley, 1996; Takács and Szalma, 2011), and negative attitudes also increase with age (Herek, 2007; Hooghe and Meeusen, 2013; Takács and Szalma, 2011).

In addition to demographic factors, cultural and political factors also play an important role. Greater acceptance of homosexuality correlates with greater satisfaction with democracy and one's own life (Takács and Szalma, 2011). Research also indicates that the people who think that homosexuality is a choice are more likely to condemn it and less likely to support the rights of lesbians and gays compared to those who think that gays and lesbians were born like that (Herek and Capitanio, 1996; Wood and Bartkowski, 2004). An Irish study (Higgins et al., 2016) demonstrated that the acceptance of homosexuality may decrease when it comes to the homosexuality of one's own child. In this case homophobia relates to the supposedly rational parents' fears of their child being discriminated against, marginalised and becoming a victim of unequal treatment. Therefore, they accept homosexuality as long as they are not faced with it very directly.

Studies indicate that homonegativity decreases with the increase in the cultural capital (Slootmaeckers and Lievens, 2014), while it is positively linked to political conservatism and modern sexism (Morrison and Morrison, 2003) as well as to racism, patriotism and nationalism (Morrison, Kenny and Harrington, 2005). The most homophobic views in Europe are expressed by the supporters of the extreme right (Takács and Szalma, 2011).

The Slovenian Public Opinion Survey measures social distance towards homosexuals with the question about who the respondents would not wish to have as their neighbours. The most recent data available, for 2016, shows that the share is 28%, which is a good half less than it was in the 1990s. By regions, the

biggest social distance exists in the Posavska region (58%) and the smallest in the Osrednjeslovenska region (15.5%).



*Picture 1: I would not wish to have a homosexual as a neighbour.
Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Survey, 2016.*

Herek (1991) asserts that to fight homophobia effectively we should understand what (psychological) function it has in an individual. In other words: we should identify the (psychological) award that the individual gets when they express homophobic views. This was the starting point of our research study: we were interested in how online commenters view the issue of homosexuality and what explanation frames they use for their argumentation. We believe that such a critical analysis of the frames will also provide us with the awareness of the functions that homophobia has in different groups of individuals. Only that will enable us to answer the question about how to approach homophobia, since the different functions that homophobia has require different approaches.

3. Research study

As part of the DARE¹ project we examined what the crucial reasons were for the rejection of the equality for gays and lesbians and what the backgrounds to homophobia in Slovenia were in order to use the findings in the future to address these problems in a well-informed manner via public campaigns. One of the activities consisted of a research into the discourse on homosexuality, gays and lesbians in online comments. Therefore, between April 2016 and July 2016, we analysed 1397 online comments posted on the main Slovenian news portal MMC RTVSLO, using the method of critical frame analysis. For each of the comments we identified what the author defines to be the problem (diagnosis) and what solution (prognosis) they offer or recommend. After that we combined the diagnoses and prognoses into frames, which we then analysed. We confronted the arguments and discourse of the opponents and supporters of the equal rights of gays and lesbians.

The analysis covers the entire year 2015, which in terms of politics was strongly characterised by the referendum campaign concerning the Act Amending the Marriage and Family Relations Act, which had brought total legal equality to the field of heterosexual and homosexual partnerships and families. The amendment was rejected in the popular referendum on 20 December 2015. Not unexpectedly, during the period most public debates on homosexuality, gays and lesbians referred to the referendum. Nevertheless, the MMC RTVSLO also published a couple of other articles that were LGBT-related. Our analysis took account of all articles – those that related to the referendum and those that addressed other LGBT topics.

3. 1. Critical frame analysis

Critical frame analysis is a discursive approach to researching norms, beliefs and perceptions embedded in texts. The method assumes that it is possible to identify, among others, diagnoses, prognoses and frames in the texts. The diagnosis answers the question about who or what the text presents as a problem. The prognosis answers the question about who or what the text presents as a solution. A text may include more than one diagnosis and/or prognosis or none at all. The frame synthesises diagnoses and prognoses; it groups them, so to speak, into meaningful categories that reveal the key ideas and ideologies expressed by

¹ The DARE project (Dare to Care about Equality) was financed by the European Commission as part of the JUST/2014/RDIS/AG/DISC/8220 contract. The project leader was the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, and the partners were the Faculty of Arts, and Legebitra.

the diagnoses and prognoses. According to Verloo (2005: 20), a frame is “an organising principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed.” Our analysis discusses the dimensions of frame diagnosis and prognosis separately.

Our analysis followed the following steps:

1. Each text (i.e., each comment) was ascribed diagnoses (the problems that the comment emphasises) and/or prognoses (the solutions that the comment emphasises). The number of diagnoses and prognoses was limited at maximum three.
2. Then, based on the identified diagnoses and/or prognoses, each text was assigned the main diagnosis and the main prognosis. Our focus was on the diagnoses and prognoses that related to homophobia.
3. Next, each comment was given two frames, one on the basis of the main diagnosis and one on the basis of the main prognosis.
4. The frames were arranged according to whether they were used by the supporters or opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians, and they were analysed.

The coding procedure will be demonstrated on two examples; one was posted by an opponent and one by a supporter of equal rights. All the comments are published in their original form, including grammar and other mistakes. However, in the English translation they have been substantially, but not completely, corrected for the sake of clarity.

Comment 1



What about the violence of homosexuals towards normal people? With person 1 and person 2 parents, the deletion of mother and father? Are they nuts? Let them make their own laws and marriage, why are they meddling with the existing relationships? How dare they!

Diagnosis 1: Gays and lesbians are abnormal.

Diagnosis 2: Violence of gays and lesbians towards heterosexuals.

Diagnosis 3: The deletion of motherhood and fatherhood.

The main diagnosis: Gays and lesbians – violent and abnormal.

The diagnosis frame: Homosexuality and transgender issues (this frame includes the diagnoses that treat homosexuality or transgender identity – the

articles dealing with the latter were very few – as unnatural, abnormal, immoral, etc.).

Prognosis 1: Separate (legislative) treatment of homosexual and heterosexual partnerships.

Prognosis 2: /

Prognosis 3: /

The main prognosis: Separate (legislative) treatment of homosexual and heterosexual partnerships.

The prognosis frame: Discrimination against gays and lesbians (this frame includes the prognoses that recommend as the solution a discriminatory, i.e., different, treatment of gays and lesbians).

Comment 2



As expected, no real answers, no real reasons, no arguments whatsoever. In the name of all of us who have suffered a number of years because we were afraid what others would say about us being gay/lesbian, I call on you to vote IN FAVOUR at the referendum, so that your children won't be afraid or ashamed as I'd been before I realised that I was born this way and that I'm normal just as I am!

Diagnosis 1: Opponents have no arguments.

Diagnosis 2: Suffering and fear experienced by gays and lesbians.

Diagnosis 3: Treatment of homosexual children as abnormal.

The main diagnosis: Unfamiliarity with the issue of sexual orientation – gays and lesbians are normal.

The diagnosis frame: The de-stigmatisation of homosexuality (this frame includes the diagnoses that problematise the stigmatisation of homosexuality, presenting it as natural, normal, etc.).

Prognosis 1: Accepting gays and lesbian as normal.

Prognosis 2: Voting in favour of equality at the referendum.

Prognosis 3: /

The main prognosis: Voting against the discrimination against gays and lesbians at the referendum.

The prognosis frame: Political actions in favour of equal rights (this frame includes the prognoses that call for voting in favour of equality at the referendum, for the prosecution of hate speech, for the referendum to be paid for by those who initiated it, etc.).

3. 2. Empirical material

First we used a search engine to collect all the articles thematising homosexuality, transgender issues, homophobia, gays, lesbians, the Act amending the Marriage and Family Relations Act, etc. that were published on the MMC RTVSLO in 2015. There were 130 articles and 35,000 accompanying comments. Given the research group's capacities, the data quantity was too large, so we decided to make a selection. The articles were divided into ten groups, following the sequence of events and the subject-matter according to which the article was published in a specific section of the portal. Afterwards, we took a third of the articles with the most comments from each category, thus acquiring 38 articles.

We coded the first 50 useful comments below each article, as test coding showed that this number reaches the point of saturation. The comments that follow the number include comments that digress from the main topic of the article. We coded only the comments which attempted to present arguments for their views or which included something more than merely stating the fact that they supported or opposed the Act.

The final number of the coded comments included in this analysis is 1397. As for diagnoses, we identified 1263 frames and 386 frames on the side of prognoses, which we combined into larger, meaningful units. The difference between the figures is expected, as the texts generally address problems without offering solutions. The supporters were a little more active when commenting, and we identified 921 supporters' frames (693 at the level of diagnoses and 228 at the level of prognoses) and 728 opponents' frames (570 at the level of diagnoses and 158 at the level of prognoses).

3. 3. The discourse characteristics of online comments

Before we present the findings, some clarification concerning the discourse we analysed is due. Most of all it is important to highlight that online comments do not reflect public opinion in general. The forum users have to register and they usually use a nickname, so there is always the possibility that they use made-up details and that the same person posts comments under different nicknames. Furthermore, the comments are edited, which means that the most obvious instances of hate speech are deleted or that hate speech is customised to suit editorial policies.

Commenters' decision to take part in a debate is influenced by various, often specific motives. Two user categories have developed on the Internet whose primary purpose is to provoke: *trolls* purposefully post untrue and misleading information in order to elicit angry reactions and in doing so they often attempt to be witty, whereas *flamers* post offensive and hostile comments in order to incite hatred and passions (Miller and Slater, 2000). Moreover, online comments and participation in other forms of online communication have become part of political strategies, which means that some commenters are motivated or even paid to participate by political parties and other organisations which want to influence public opinion through such comments. A number of commenters participate regularly, below different articles and with more comments (some in our database have over 50 comments). Although the portal does not have the function of direct conversation among commenters, debates among them are frequent and often heated.

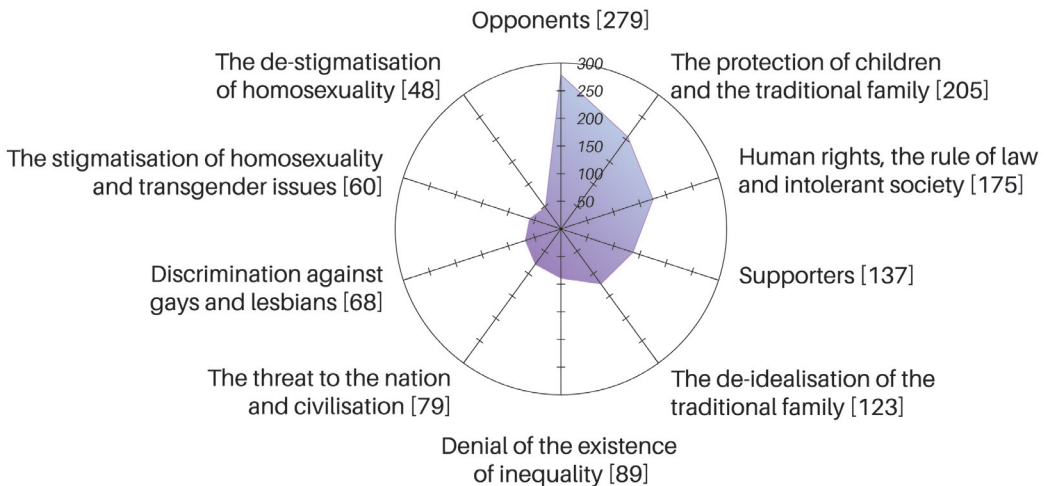
Although the users' gender cannot be determined exactly, grammatical gender reveals that the users are mainly men, which shows, among others, that the Internet reproduces and reaffirms the differences from non-virtual environments. On the Internet, too, politics remains very much a male domain. It is also important to add that the comments and debates are highly politicised, defined as they are by the article topics and current political affairs. They frequently stray into the dichotomy of the Home Guard vs the Partisans.

Online comments are, then, very much about strategic communication that individuals and (political) organisations employ to influence public opinion and political decision-makers. This discourse often reproduces, complements and supports the arguments provided by political parties and other political stakeholders, but it is created in the anonymity of the Internet, which allows and calls for more activities on the edge of what is acceptable communication.

3.4. Research findings

As for diagnosis, we identified 10 different frames (Picture 2): 5 with the opponents and 5 with the supporters of the equal rights of gays and lesbians (Table 1). *Opponents* (279 occurrences) is the strongest frame, valuing and criticising the actions of the opponents of the Act amending the Marriage and Family Relations Act (individuals, civil initiatives, political parties, the Church, etc.). The frame of *Supporters* (137) also belongs to the large ones, valuing and

criticising the actions of the supporters of the Act. It is a very polarised debate with two participating sides attacking each other. Given the fact we are analysing discourse in online comments, this is to be expected. We can observe that in such attacks the supporters of the equal rights of gays and lesbians were much more active than the opponents, which raises the question about whether their campaign contained too many negative messages and whether it was based mainly on opposing the opponents. Our analysis cannot confirm this, since the opponents perceive gays, lesbians and transgender people as their opponents, too, attacking them within some other frames, for instance, *The stigmatisation of homosexuality and transgender issues* (60) and *The protection of children and the traditional family* (205); these are of particular interest, because they express directly the attitudes of the commenters towards homosexuality, and gays and lesbians. The most frequent arguments of the opponents are found in the frame *The protection of children and the traditional family*, while the supporters most often provide arguments for their views in the frame *Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society* (175).



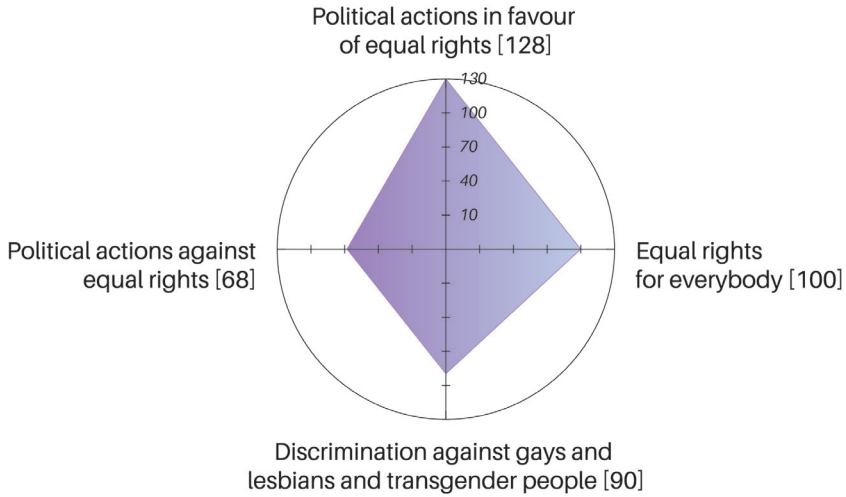
Picture 2: All the frames on the side of diagnosis. The figures in the brackets indicate the number of the occurrences of each frame in the database.

DIAGNOSIS - Frames given in pairs

OPPONENTS	SUPPORTERS
The protection of children and the traditional family [205]	The de-idealisation of the traditional family [123]
Supporters [137]	Opponents [279]
Denial of the existence of inequality [89]	Discrimination against gays and lesbians [68]
The threat to the nation and civilisation [79]	Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society [175]
The stigmatisation of homosexuality and transgender issues [60]	The de-stigmatisation of homosexuality [48]

Table 1: The frames on the side of diagnosis arranged according to whether they are used by the supporters or opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians and according to the principle of argument and counterargument.

As for prognosis, we identified 4 frames (Picture 3), which – like diagnoses – are analysed in pairs (Table 2). We see that supporters really attempted to motivate potential voters to take direct action, especially to vote in the referendum, and called for a more tolerant society, since the most frequent frames are *Political actions in favour of equal rights* (128) *Equal rights for everybody* (100). The opponents offered solutions in the frames *Discrimination against gays and lesbians and transgender people* (90) *Political actions against equal rights* (68).



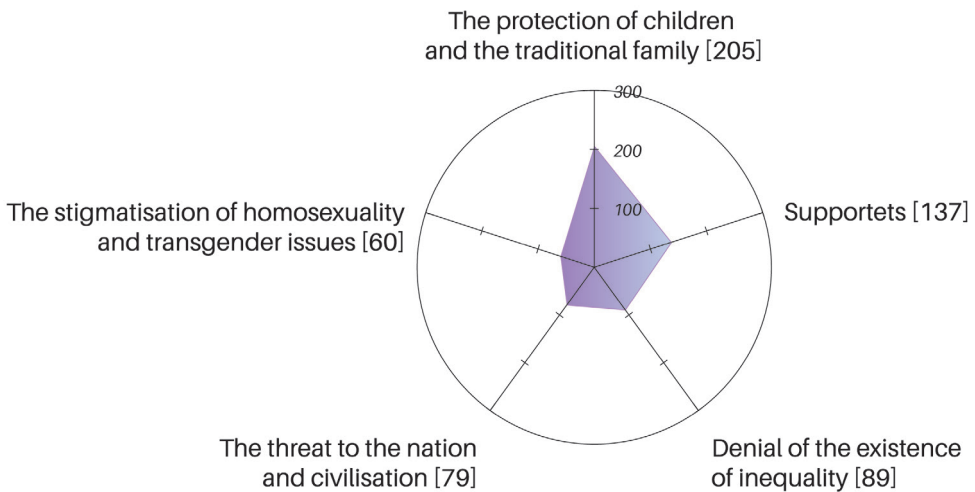
Picture 3: All the frames on the side of prognosis.

PROGNOSIS - Frames given in pairs	
OPPONENTS	SUPPORTERS
Discrimination against gays and lesbians and transgender people [90]	Equal rights for everybody [100]
Political actions against equal rights [68]	Political actions in favour of equal rights [128]

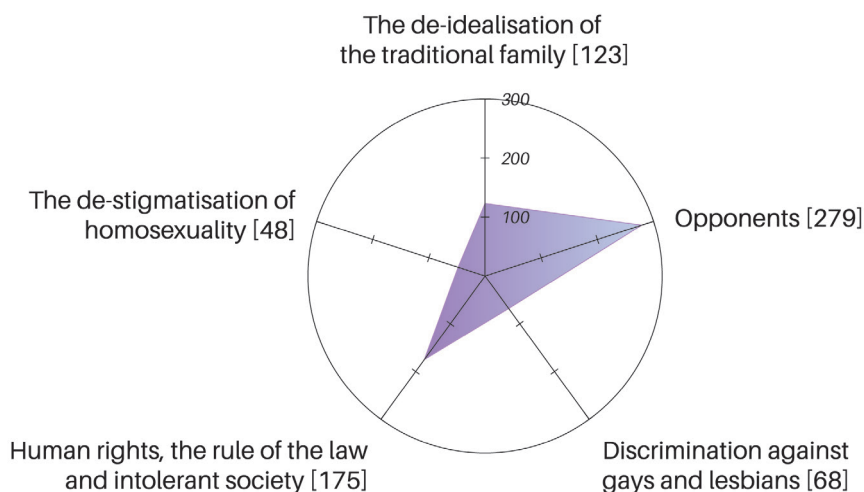
Table 2: The frames on the side of prognosis arranged according to whether they are used by the supporters or opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians and according to the principle of argument and counterargument.

3.4.1. Diagnosis

On the side of diagnosis we identified 5 pairs of frames, each consisting of one opponents' frame and one supporters' frame. The opponents' strongest frame at the level of diagnosis is *The protection of children and the traditional family* (208), in which the commenters problematise same-sex families as inappropriate for children's development (picture 4). The supporters respond to their arguments with the frame *The de-idealisation of the traditional family* (116), in which they stress that the so-called traditional family in itself is no guarantee for children's ideal development (picture 5). Consequently, we treat the two frames as a complementary pair.



Picture 4: *The frames on the side of diagnosis used by the opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians.*



Picture 5: The frames on the side of diagnosis used by the supporters of the equal rights of gays and lesbians.

The protection of children and the traditional family vs The de-idealisation of the traditional family

The strongest frame used by the opponents is *The protection of children and the traditional family*. The significance of this frame is in sync with the main message of the campaign of the coalition *Children Are at Stake*, which invested most of its efforts (very much like the commenters) in the problematisation of the adoption of children by same-sex couples. The supporters responded to the arguments with the frame *The de-idealisation of the traditional family*.

The protection of children and the traditional family

The starting argument of the frame *The protection of children and the traditional family* suggests that children's well-being is only guaranteed by heterosexual two-parent families, while families of same-sex partners are treated as a threat not only to children but also to the traditional family and the existence of society.

This frame primarily problematises the possibility of gay and lesbian adoption, with a number of commenters claiming that is the only objection they have to the Act amending the Marriage and Family Relations Act. It was the main argument of the *Children Are at Stake* coalition, too. But we can recall that the Family Code, which did not allow for adoption by same-sex couples (except

when the child is the biological child of one of the partners), was nevertheless rejected in a referendum in 2012, with the same coalition of political parties and initiatives campaigning against it. The beliefs of the opponents of equal rights seem to have deeper and other roots than the concern for children's well-being.

The comments treat same-sex couples and families as unnatural and abnormal, emphasising that they are not capable of procreation or of ensuring upbringing with the (natural) female and male roles. In general, they are seen as an environment which is “not best possible” for the child.



The state must ensure children best possible environment in which to grow up, and this is only the Family with a Father-man and a Mother-woman, where each realises his or her gender-specific role, i.e., unique educational principle and fulfils the supreme mission-natural given, they are called for! This dirty attempt at the disqualification / devaluation of the Family allows same-sex communities to adopt, but they with their undoubted limitations, compared to the full-blooded Family, will NEVER be able to compete for the role! [Sklonjen]

In a similar way adoption by same-sex partners is diagnosed as unnatural, sick, a threat to children. There are arguments about experimenting and manipulating with children and the commodification of children (for gays and lesbians children are supposed to be a status symbol; opening the door for surrogacy; trading with *our* children), as well as the legalistic argument that adoption is not a human right and the appeal to “the right of children to mum and dad”. A lot of fears concern the consequences this might bring for the family and society. Same-sex couples are not seen as suitable for bringing up children, because they are selfish, irresponsible, delinquent and they have problematic lifestyles.

The opponents also believe that if we asked children, they would oppose being adopted by same-sex partners and that the children growing up in same-sex families will be mistreated. Additionally, teaching about homosexuality at school and the introduction of “gender theory” in syllabuses is problematised, too.

” *My friend, who’s gay, said this: “although im gay i cant imagine living without my father, who i respect and love boundlessly. so as a gay i’ll vote against, because i cant imagine a child living without a mother and a father” well, that’s why i’ll vote AGAINST to protect the well-being of all future generations of gays! [ajvar]*

” *how to explain to kids at preschool or first years of primary school when school mates tease them “how come you’ve got two dads or two mums” so they don’t feel rejected (they wont understand it or are we to start teaching the form of sexuality in early years), when its not clear to them what the others are asking.
otherwise marriage between homosexuals-if they want [RYAN]*

The commenters oppose the redefinition of family and assert that the legal change means the degradation of family, fatherhood and motherhood as well as the deletion of gender and the concepts of husband and wife.

” *Of course I am in favour of marriage. Between anybody. But not in such an awkward way that abolishes “mother” and “father”. To be replaced with “parent 1” and “parent 2”. I simply have the right to remain FATHER. If this is our path to equality, let us then give the right to Muslims, Mormons ... and others whose religions and lifestyles allow polygamy. And let’s use parent 1, parent 2, parent 3, parent 4 ... up to parent 30 or more. [nevem]*

The discriminatory and hateful discourse that we are analysing differentiates between “us” and “others” and endeavours to highlight the differences and create a split between the groups. “Others” are essentially different (regarding their lifestyles, values, sexuality, aspirations, etc.) and thus incompatible with “us”. They are presented as a threat, which is used as an excuse for discrimination. The analysed comments also include the argument that the legislation of equal rights for gays and lesbians jeopardises the possibility of heterosexual couples of adopting children from Russia.

The frame *The protection of children and the traditional family* reveals the discourse of the opponents to be emotional rather than based on rational arguments, which is seen in the constant references to children, the expression of fears and the underlining of threats. The opponents understand the equal rights of gays and lesbians as a threat to the key identity categories of each individual:

family, fatherhood, motherhood, female sex and male sex. To understand why people feel threatened by the legal change which will in no way interfere with their own lives, we can employ the concept of “habitual security”. Behnke and Meuser (2012, 141–143) use Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus to establish that individuals’ actions depend on their (gender) specific habitus and personal identities. This means that, for instance, living in accordance with the male habitus provides men with their fundamental or “habitual security”. Therefore, in their everyday lives they accept gender roles as naturally given and act in line with traditional (heterosexual) masculinity. In a society where masculinity and femininity are changing and where traditional masculinity and femininity are problematised, men and women have to question their roles and identities more, and this can lead to crises and less “habitual security”. In this process some take on alternative masculinity and femininity models, beyond traditional male and female roles and they have no difficulties with “habitual security”. It means that a normative change in the area of the equal rights of gays and lesbians may undermine individuals’ habitual security, as it changes the habitus and influences the social frames of acceptable femininity, masculinity and sexuality.

From the aspect of Herek’s (1991) functional analysis this suggests the strengthening of the individual’s heteronormative value system, which is importantly defined by (patriarchal) relationships between the two genders and the construction of the innocent child as a potential victim. These seem to be the crucial aspects, the crucial values, that are perceived to be jeopardised and have to be addressed when countering homophobia.

The de-idealisation of the traditional family

On the other side, the supporters of equality see the essentialist arguments about the superiority and naturalness of the traditional family as problematic. Consequently, they deconstruct the arguments in the *The protection of children and the traditional family* frame, de-idealising the two-parent heterosexual family. In this frame (just like in other frames) the supporters respond to the opponents’ diagnoses (such as the right of grandparents to guardianship of their orphaned grandchildren, surrogacy, adoption legislation, etc.), trying to reject them with rational arguments. Their main argument maintains that love is more important to the child’s upbringing than the family form and that the legal amendment only follows the social reality (different family forms already exist).



If the referendum initiators really cared for all children, they would let go of the referendum or at least strive IN FAVOUR OF the legislation to be implemented.

The opponents do not realise that already now there are same-sex couples having and raising children in Slovenia! This will be the situation after 20 Dec., too!! The referendum cannot change the fact and that's something that the opponents can't accept!

Children in those families are at stake – that's why we must vote IN FAVOUR! Children's equality is at stake. [twenty7]

The supporters try to de-idealise the traditional family by, among other things, problematising widespread alcoholism, violence, fights over the custody of children, materialism, etc. Some of them problematise baptism and upbringing in religious families and inquire about what would happen if these questions were put to the referendum; also, they draw attention to the composition of the Holy Family. The supporters also quote sources that advocate the equal rights of gays and lesbians. They emphasise that children in our society are treated like inheritance.



And please stop misleading about this act giving the RIGHT to adoption by same-sex couples. NOBODY has the right to adoption and nobody will have it according to the new law. A couple only has the right to stand in the queue. Then they have to go through many tests, interviews, etc., so that the Centre for Social Work can decide if the couple is suitable for adoption. The fear that unsuitable pairs will be able to adopt children is completely unfounded. Couples with their own children who do not look after them, who neglect them, where there's alcoholism are much more problematic. There are quite a lot of families like that, and very rarely people stand up for the kids. [Allende]

The supporters address the various fears expressed by the opponents (e.g. that gays and lesbians will take children away from heterosexuals, that children will be adopted in inadequate environments, that the change will affect their lives, that fatherhood, motherhood and the traditional family will be erased, etc.) and typically reject them as irrational.

The very first analysed frame shows that the agenda is primarily defined by the opponents of equal rights, whereas the supporters mainly respond to the former's arguments. On the one hand, this is expected, since the referendum on the Act

amending the Marriage and Family Relations Act had been initiated by the opponents, who thereby framed the debate. On the other hand, it is relevant to ask whether the supporters did enough before the referendum debates, when the space to set the agenda was still more open.

The stigmatisation of homosexuality and transgender issues vs The de-stigmatisation of homosexuality

In the previous section the opponents' and the supporters' discourses mostly related to the family and children, now we are moving on to a pair of frames that relates to homosexuality and transgender issues.

The stigmatisation of homosexuality and transgender issues

In this frame the opponents problematise homosexuality, gays, lesbians, transgender identity and transgender people. Homosexuality is characteristically labelled as an illness as well as abnormal, unnatural, perverse and an adolescent passing phase. This frame reveals homosexuality to be strongly medicalised. Homosexuality is also related to "abnormal" femininity and masculinity, problematic values, sexualities and lifestyles.



It's just adolescent whims.

Ellen will see the light and find the right guy.

This babe of hers look pretty abnormal.

And as a couple they're not really normal: Ellen is short and Samantha could play centre for the Slovenian team at EuroBasket. [Mortdecai]



Rather than going for some psychological treatment, they show off and parade in the media. It's a topsy-turvy world. [sloEU00]

In addition, gays, lesbians and transgender people are stigmatised as exploiting the victim status to gain material benefits or to reach political goals. It is claimed that invoking homophobic abuse is fake.

Similar adjectives as those used for homosexuality (and gays and lesbians) are used for same-sex partnerships, which are also problematised in the above-discussed frame *The protection of children and the traditional family*. In the cases of both homosexuality and same-sex partnerships the main argument is abnormality and inability to procreate, with the frame *The stigmatisation of homosexuality*

and transgender issues emphasising same-sex partnerships solely to problematise homosexual identity (and not e.g. the harm to children's upbringing).

” On TV I can often hear people-experts commenting “what is this, natural law?” Natural law is clearly specified and it is clear to animals and plants, without brain. Each body is anatomically created so as to serve its purpose and the human body has sexual organs that serve a very specific purpose, both its size and usability ... so homo(sexuality) isn't in line with the Natural Law, because it isn't designed-created for reproduction. [zemljemerec]

The stigmatisation of transgender issues is very similar to homosexuality, but it only occurs in a few frames and even then only in the comments below the articles which address transgender issues. All the articles included in our selection are reports from abroad, usually about celebrities.

” Nowadays this can be a good joke. Say you need a job, and you come for the interview dressed as a woman and you tell them that if they don't take you on, you'll have them in all the media saying they're discriminatory. [friks]

The de-stigmatisation of homosexuality

The mirroring responses by the supporters to the problematisation of homosexuality and transgender identity are collected in the *The de-stigmatisation of homosexuality* frame. The supporters reject the opponents' diagnoses, asserting that homosexuality is natural, normal as well as created by God.

” Since when do you support natural laws? Isn't everything God's will? Isn't God the creator of all things? If it is so, and you believers claim it to be so, then homosexuals were created by God and they are God's will. The Church should fight for them with all the means necessary, rather than being against. [cairns]

The commenters try to explain what sexual orientation is and how it develops, they argue that homosexuality does not equal paedophilia and that it is not a mental illness. Some problems arise here because there is no single scientific explanation of how sexual orientation develops, which leaves room for speculation. One of the most frequent counterarguments states that gays and lesbians are born to heterosexual parents and that they have always existed. The supporters

also maintain that gays and lesbians do not threaten Slovenia and that they are not to blame for the falling birth rate. Bisexuality and transgender identity are only rarely mentioned. The supporters also try to de-stigmatise gay and lesbian lifestyles and they strongly reject the sexualisation of gays and lesbians.

” *Mrs Jeraj [an MP opposing equality], with all due respect. Just as the fact that a man hits a woman does not mean that all men do it, it's not true that all homosexuals have sex with just about anybody who has 5 minutes to spare. I can't believe whatever got into you. If you are in favour, my boyfriend and I will be happy to invite you for a coffee, and we can say something more about the topic.*
The blind delusions and stereotypes which may be true of a small percentage do no mean the average.
Because I want to marry my boyfriend, I will vote in favour!
IN FAVOUR! [Respect2015]

Denial of the existence of inequality vs Discrimination against gays and lesbians

The third most important frame used by the opponents is *Denial of the existence of inequality* (89), where they question whether gays and lesbians are discriminated against at all. On the other side the supporters problematise the discrimination against gays and lesbians in society (68).

Denial of the existence of inequality

The *Denial of the existence of inequality* frame collects the diagnoses of the opponents that problematise the statement that gays and lesbians are discriminated against. The starting argument states that everybody, including gays and lesbians, has the right to get married and have children under the same conditions. Therefore, gays and lesbians are already equal and, if anything, they are asking for more rights than others. The opponents claim that the Marriage and Family Relations Act does not cover human rights and they cite decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights.

” *Slovenian people will never tolerate homosexuals having access to children. This year homosexuals will get such a NO in the referendum they will remember it for the next 70 years. And every time they start forcing their agenda they will be less popular.*

The ECHR has decided that each country can regulate it individually. Homosexuals should be happy they are not oppressed, so they're completely equal, but they must leave children alone. [Wągra]

Often another argument appears: if we make homo- and heterosexual partnerships legally equal, we should also do the same for other types of relationships, for instance polygamy. Here, same-sex partnerships are framed together with paedophilia, incest and bestiality. Moreover, the topic of the equal rights of gays and lesbians is labelled as trivial, which is also the case with transphobia.

Discrimination against gays and lesbians

The supporters of equal rights list the discrimination against gays and lesbians in various areas. Most frequently they emphasise legal discrimination against children from same-sex families and against gays and lesbians with reference to marriage and adoption. They also problematise the ridiculing of children and the problems faced by homosexual adolescents as well as the restrictions on personal freedom and autonomy. Besides, they assert that adoption is a human right, not a privilege.



Usually I never comment news. But since this is beyond rationality, I must say something. As a Slovenian citizen and taxpayer I demand equal rights. Throughout my working life I've been paying taxes and insurances used for things I'll never need, for children, education, preschools, Catholic preschools, Catholic schools, etc.

I've never complained about paying for things I actually don't care about. But those who use these services a lot keep refusing me the right to visit my partner in hospital if I don't get registered before, and let me not go on ... I will agree with those who refuse my right to the fundamental rights that all citizens have and I don't; but then I demand appropriate tax relief. I think it's fair that if people can get married in the castle and I can only do it in an office, they should pay for the upkeep of the castle, too. And schools and preschools as well. And artificial insemination, which is oh so natural. [Rufus]

The threat to the nation and civilisation vs Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society

The frames *The threat to the nation and civilisation* and *Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society* indicate different understanding of the state and society

by the supporters and the opponents. The opponents advocate the nativist vision of social organisation, which provides particular social groups with a privileged status while discriminating against others. Nativist democracy does not take account of the constitutional protection of minorities and the top maxim is the will of the people; therefore, they strongly support referendums. On the other hand, the supporters believe that the protection and equality of minorities are crucial to the functioning of democracy and they refer to human rights and liberties. They reject referendums, claiming that the majority must not decide on a minority's rights.

The threat to the nation and civilisation

In the opponents' diagnosis the equal rights of gays and lesbians are against common sense and they also jeopardise society, the nation and civilisation (the same is supposedly true of gays and lesbians). The legal changes are seen as indications of social decadence (in Europe) and tendencies (or conspiracy) to annihilate the family, that is, "the natural pillar of civilisation". In this nationalistic and nativist discourse the opponents call attention to the demographic crisis (same-sex partnerships are not capable of procreation) and the negative attitude of the state towards Slovenian families and children (gays and lesbians are not part of the nation, they are "the internal other").



The change in the legal definition of marriage as a union between a husband and a wife into a union of two persons is a singular madness. (...) Only a union between a husband and a wife enables new life. Let two men or two women try as they may night and day (read: have sex), there will be no child and society will collapse. [Boroč]

Furthermore, the opponents bring in the threat of migration and Muslim migrants, trying to present as contradictory the left-wingers' support for more open migration policies and, simultaneously, for the equal rights of gays and lesbians. Immigration is thought to jeopardise gay and lesbian rights. Puar (2007) describes this phenomenon as homonationalism. It is the opposite of the so-called political homophobia, which is currently typical of, say, Russia. Political homophobia means a systemic use of homophobia at the level of state policies to reach political goals. Quite the opposite, homonationalism denotes the situations when gays and lesbians are (temporarily) accepted as part of the national body, as part of "us" in order to justify discrimination against others –

usually Muslims. The latter are unacceptable, because (supposedly) they do not respect or will not respect the human rights of gays and lesbians and are therefore not welcome in our country.

The opponents take the will of the people as the highest form of democracy, which makes the prohibition of the referendum on the equal rights of gays and lesbians a threat not only to democracy but to the people themselves.

Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society

On the other hand, the supporters, when diagnosing Slovenian society, problematise the state of human rights and the rule of law in Slovenia. They describe Slovenian society as homophobic, reactionary, conservative, medieval, uncivilised and as a society of fear. The frame *Human rights, the rule of law and intolerant society* is the most important frame on the opponents' diagnosis side.

” *Angela says: “I hope a lot of people turn out to vote, because we won't be deciding on the rights of a minority ...”*
For a change, I agree with you ... it's not only about homosexuals, it's about the rights and freedom of all of us ... people do not realise enough that when we take away other people's rights, we also narrow our own field of freedom ... it's about wanting to live in a free, democratic, open and inclusive society, or are we to let the priest's vestment rule our lives! For me the answer is clear: IN FAVOUR! [Jeffrey]

Regarding gay and lesbian rights and homophobia, the supporters situate Slovenia in the Balkans, among less developed countries, in the uncivilised world, which can be understood as a response to the opponents' nationalism as they reproduce these very parts of the world as inferior if compared to, say, Western Europe.

” *We'd do anything to escape being the Balkans, but time and again our actions prove we belong there. [Dr. LeQuack]*

” *IN FAVOUR*
The Netherlands, Iceland, England, Belgium, France, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Norway ...
AGAINST
S. Arabia, Nigeria, Russia, Serbia, Afghanistan ... [Ti-ne]

Attitudes towards gays and lesbians are problematised in relation to other racisms, for instance attitudes towards migrants and Muslims. Some draw attention to fascist tendencies in society. They also question the functioning of the rule of law and some state institutions. They deem the referendum unconstitutional, because it is about deciding on the human rights of a minority.

Most of the criticism targets the Constitutional Court, which allowed the referendum. The court's decision is seen as shameful and the judges as politically biased, working against human rights in the country. As some see the referendum as unconstitutional, they call for a boycott. They problematise the waste of money for the referendum and the exploitation of the issue for political purposes. The supporters describe the referendum and the accompanying campaign as a threat to the secular state and they highlight the actions of the Church during the referendum campaign.



I expect the Constitutional Court will do its duty and prevent religious sects from holding a referendum that could threaten citizens' equality. [Komisar]

Supporters of equal rights vs Opponents of equal rights

The supporters and the opponents attack each other in the frames *Supporters of equal rights* and *Opponents of equal rights*. For the supporters the frame *Supporters of equal rights* is the strongest (279 : 137).

Supporters of equal rights

This frame collects the diagnoses that see the problem in the supporters of equal rights: left-wing parties, the Government, the Prime Minister, the gay lobby, the media, artists. They are accused of a misuse of power, of not respecting the will of the people, neglecting the nation, betraying voters, they are accused of heterophobia, Christianophobia, neoliberalism, perversity and immorality. Attempts to guarantee equal rights are framed as dictated by the elites and homosexual propaganda, spread by the intolerant gay lobby via the media, culture and the arts.

Two political parties, the Modern Centre Party (SMC) and the United Left (ZL), are particularly emphasised. The party-political framing of the requirements for equal opportunities serve as group reinforcement and recruitment. In addition, the issue supposedly only concerns the elites, not the people.

” *Such experimentation with society and the family attempted by our elites is shameful!*
AGAINST AGAINST [ajfon 6]

Opponents of equal rights

This frame collects the diagnoses that see the problem in the opponents of equal rights. Among them: the Church, right-wing parties, certain civil initiatives and commenters with opposite views. They are labelled as uninformed, foolish, ignorant, intolerant, clerofascist and their arguments as untrustworthy.

” *In half a century these people who will vote against same-sex marriage will be seen as we today see those who supported racial segregation. We'll be wondering how foolish and ignorant they were; so homophobes watch out what you tell your grandchildren about your youth when they point their fingers at fascists like these, and rightly so [antiklinac]*

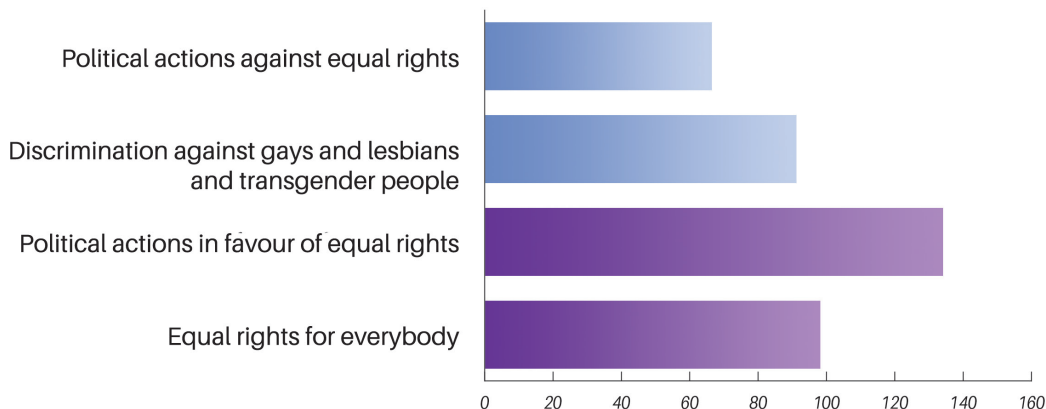
” *Unfortunately (or fortunately), I'll never understand those who are against ... Indeed, to trample on someone simply because of their sexual orientation. No-one can tell me this is anything but primitiveness and narrow-mindedness. Definitely IN FAVOUR OF the proposal. [kar_nekdo]*

The supporters problematise the opponents' exploitation of children for political purposes and working against children's interests, spreading lies and falsehoods. The supporters especially emphasise the Church, particularly its double standards (discrimination against women, spreading hatred, abuse of the faith, sexual abuse, etc.). During the campaign the Church remained very much in the background, most of the work was done by the initiatives related to it; the opponents of equality also very rarely referred to the Church or its morality, but the supporters mention it and its dogmas much more frequently.

” *Ha ha, just have a look at these "civil initiatives" and you'll see they all have the same address: Tržaška cesta 85, at the Vič Catholic parish. Which means that the campaigns are led from a single address and the destiny of us all is decided there. Don't let yourself be misled by the Church's interests; vote IN FAVOUR. [iufhdfewd]*

3. 4. 2. Prognosis

On the side of prognosis (solution) we identified two pairs of complementary frames, where we can see that the supporters offer more solutions than the opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians.



Picture 6: All the frames on the side of prognosis used by the opponents of gay and lesbian equality (blue shades) and the supporters of gay and lesbian equality (purple shades).

Discrimination against gays and lesbians and transgender people vs Equal rights for everybody

On the prognosis side the main opponents' frame is expectedly the discrimination against gays, lesbians and to a smaller extent transgender people, while the supporters advocate the equality for gays, lesbians and other minorities.

Discrimination against gays and lesbians and transgender people

The main solution put forward by the opponents is a separate legal treatment of gays and lesbians with a smaller set of rights (mostly they oppose adoption). They also argue that parents should have the right to decide what kind of family their child would be adopted into in case of their death, with grandparents given precedence. Rarely they suggest discrimination in other areas, too, for instance excluding gays and lesbians from social life so as to retain societal unity. Rather than equal rights, the opponents advocate a heteronormative vision of society (heterosexual partnerships, recognition of gender differences, natural laws). This discourse regards heterosexuality as a value.

” *I'd give them all the rights that single unmarried people have and nothing else. Marriage should only be possible between a man and a woman. The law that allows homosexuals to get married should be abolished immediately. The same for lesbians. [caven]*

The proposals used to justify discrimination include respect for natural laws, common sense and conservative values. Some opponents recommend ignoring or medically treating homosexuality and in particular transgender people. They advocate a ban on teaching about homosexuality, gender equality and equal rights at school and preschool and they oppose public debates about the topics in general.

” *There are surely attempts to explain these stupidities at school, which have nothing to do with normality. I'm very much against it. Forcing it on children by a small group with huge media support – should be condemned. People in primary schools will reject it. It's just as unacceptable to do it in preschools. I'll go to the referendum and vote against the act. [lovec]*

Equal rights for everybody

The supporters advocate equal rights for everyone, which is best illustrated by the frequently used slogan “live and let live”. They also refer to the humanistic values of tolerance, equality and (personal) freedom. They argue for a loving and safe environment for all children, regardless of the family form. They appeal for sensibility, love and the Christian principle of not doing to others what you do not want them to do to you. They also predict that regardless of the referendum result time will bring positive changes. The supporters also support early education about homosexuality and tolerance both at school and at home.

” *I don't know why some people find it such good fun to post a cliché, a stereotype, something that's not their opinion at all as it's clear they haven't been thinking about it for even a second. Good for you that you don't have such problems, but there are people who do, and these problems are not something you could just brush aside and make fun of. Live and let live! [Ples]*
I don't need a TV debate to know how to vote. If my son, still in diapers, is gay, I want a society in which he will be able to live as equally to others as possible. After all, they say children are at stake. [webman]

Political actions against equal rights vs Political actions in favour of equal rights

The last frame pair to be discussed includes different recommendations of political actions in favour of equal rights and against them. The majority refers to actions concerning the referendum and the minority to other forms of political actions, such as pressure on political parties and the Church.

Political actions against equal rights

The opponents propose a variety of solutions to preserve gay and lesbian inequality. They strongly support the referendum and respect for the will of the people, an open confrontation of opinions, but they also propose fight against the state, the political left and a new election to build up political pressure. If they are defeated in the referendum, they suggest, their children should be transferred from public to private schools.

Political actions in favour of equal rights

The strongest frame on the side of prognosis used by the supporters concerns the protection of democracy and human rights – *Political actions in favour of equal rights*. As for the referendum a range of solutions is proposed: ban, boycott, voting in favour. Some believe that the Parliament should have the last say, some that it should be experts. There are calls for the supporters to try to convince their family members who are against not to vote. To protect human rights and the rule of law the supporters also propose imposing stricter and more consistent sanctions against hate speech.



Any freedom (including freedom of speech) ends where another person's freedom begins. And if people are incapable of self-reflection and recognition of their own hate speech, society will simply have to censor it.

Imagine that these people with jobs would say these things about black people? That a florist from America wouldn't want to sell flowers to a black couple for their wedding.

That a teacher would tell their students that black people can't get married, because that would reflect badly on other married people and that they can't adopt children because white parents are proved to be the most suitable.

That women would be made to keep quiet and that they couldn't enjoy all the

rights because they are inferior.

That an employee “merely expressed their view” on how women couldn’t vote because God said so and because it’s “the natural order”? [Gautama]

The supporters add other forms of resistance (to homophobia), such as fighting the Church and ridiculing the opponents. Other recommendations and initiatives appear also, and among the most frequent ones is asking for the referendum to be paid for by the initiators themselves.

Like the opponents, the supporters also suggest that parents could state in advance in what kind of family they do would not want their children to live if they were adopted in case of their death. While the opponents problematise same-sex families, the supporters problematise religious families.

3.5. Conclusions

The study of the debate frames concerning same-sex marriage, families and homosexuality on the MMC RTVSLO website shows that the opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians use all the five identified frames at the level of diagnosis in a more balanced manner. With the supporters two frames dominate, which is illustrated in Pictures 4 and 5. The net in Picture 5 is rounder, which indicates a more frequent use of all the five identified diagnoses by the opponents. The supporters used mostly two types of communication: referring to human rights and “attacking” the opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians. To put it differently: in the online comments the supporters’ communication was “flatter” (i.e., one-directional), while the opponents’ communication was more varied, making use of different subjects; however, referring to the protection of the traditional family does stand out.

Refusing gays and lesbians their rights and online homophobia are based on the following notion of homosexuality: it is unnatural, abnormal, an illness, incompatible with the (natural) female and male roles, perverse, a thing of adolescence, selfish, delinquent, irresponsible, related to problematic lifestyles and values. These are essentialist arguments, based on stereotypes and prejudice. The same is said of gays and lesbians, same-sex couples, same-sex families, adoption by same-sex families and transgender people. All this makes gays and lesbians unsuitable to bring up children and this is a threat to children.

Furthermore, as Mole (2016) establishes, homophobia is founded on populist, nationalistic and nativist ideologies, which originate in the assumption of the biological reproduction of the nation – something that gays and lesbians are supposed to be unable to contribute to and are thus seen as an inferior part of society or as a threat to its existence.

The debate about the equal rights of gays and lesbians has to be examined in the context of party-political struggles, too, where belonging to a political option contributes to either accepting or rejecting equality. Moreover, the equal rights of gays and lesbians are constructed as an elitist interest, which may link opposition to equality to anti-elitism.

The rejection of human rights is crucially dependent on the deep-rooted cultural notions of the family, fatherhood, motherhood, femininity, masculinity, but especially on the belief that the child's well-being is only guaranteed in heterosexual two-parent families, while no other family is as adequate an environment. These, then, are the answers to the question about how to address homophobia in Slovenia: the value system that we have described and that is basically founded on the essentialist understanding of sexuality and the relationship between the two sexes (the binary system) and that, subsequently, results in naturalised images of the nation makes up – generally speaking – the frames which allow homophobia to flourish. The proponents of the values and norms believe them to be endangered – endangered by LGBT people and their striving for human rights. The supposed central target of the threat is “innocent children”. Children remain the key “weapon” in the hands of the opponents of the equal rights of gays and lesbians – after all, the main slogan of their campaign was “Children are at stake”. Accordingly, adoption by same-sex couples is a major bone of contention in the comments we analysed. Because of the belief that same-sex families are not a safe environment for children's upbringing and education and because this area remains legally unregulated even after the implementation of the Civil Partnership Act (2016), we will now proceed with the presentation of the key findings of psychological and sociological research studies of children living in same-sex families.

4. Same-sex families and the myths of partnerships and family life

The number of sociological research studies of same-sex families has been increasing in recent years. This is a direct consequence of the fact that the families are becoming ever more visible and that there is an increasing number of countries which legally recognise and protect them and, finally, also because there are – statistically – more of them. But this does not mean that the studies are without a couple-of-decade-long history. The first studies were done already back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They mainly focused on the (reorganised) families that were created after the split-up of the heterosexual couple and the involvement of one of the parents in a same-sex partnership. In addition, there are some longitudinal studies, among which the one by Susan Golombok and her research group (1983, 2000, 2015) is especially important, since it has been conducted since 1983. In Slovenia the first study of same-sex families was done in 2009 by Ana M. Sobočan (2009) and in 2012 by Darja Zaviršek and Ana M. Sobočan (2012).

Methodologically the research studies vary in terms of sample sizes and methodologies. The majority of them apply qualitative methodology (semi-structured interviews with the parents, sometimes with the children, too), which enables an in-depth approach to the dynamics of family life in same-sex families. The co-author of the largest meta-analysis conducted in the area, sociologist Judith Stacey (2010), states that there have been enough quality studies in the last thirty years to allow for some conclusions regarding the life of children in these families and the functioning of same-sex families in the wider social environment.

Below we will present the findings of sociological (and sometimes also psychological) research studies of same-sex families through individual aspects of the studies. For easier understanding the terms “same-sex family” and “heterosexual family” will be used, as they are well established in public discourse, problematic as they are since the family as an institution does not have a sexual orientation. These terms merely refer to the sexual orientation of the parents in the family.

4. 1. The influence of growing up in same-sex families on the individual's gender identity

An American study including children aged between 4 and 9 years born or adopted by single lesbian mothers showed that the children demonstrated no problems regarding their gender identities. The author of the study J. C. Patterson (2006) compared children in single-parent families where the mother was lesbian with the sample of children of the same age growing up in single-parent families where the mother was heterosexual. The study showed that the children from lesbian families had contacts with a wider variety of adults of both genders, both inside and outside the family and did not grow up in single-gender environments. The author stressed that these children had similar self-concepts and preferences about playing with peers of the same sex as children living with heterosexual mothers. Moreover, a standardised assessment of social competences and behavioural difficulties revealed no differences between the two groups of children.

Key finding: children in same-sex families have no problems with their gender identities.

A longitudinal research study including adult children of lesbian mothers and a control group of single-parent families with heterosexual mothers was carried out by Susan Golombok and her collaborators in 1983 and 1997. In 1983 the research included 37 children from single-parent or two-parent lesbian families and 38 children who lived in single-parent families with heterosexual mothers; in 1997 the study included 25 sons and daughters of lesbian mothers and 21 sons and daughters of heterosexual mothers who had already participated in the 1983 study.

The 1983 study showed that in reference to sexual preferences, stigmatisation, gender role behaviour, behavioural adjustment and gender identity there were no differences between the two groups of children aged 5 to 17 years living in same-sex families and the comparative group of children who lived in single-parent families with heterosexual mothers. (Both groups included 27 mothers who had previously lived with a man.) The research study conducted fourteen years later (the children were thus 14 years older) showed no differences between the two compared groups.

4. 2. Children from same-sex families and gender roles

Research indicates that growing up in same-sex families more frequently “liberates” girls and boys from traditional gender scenarios. Moreover, the parents, especially lesbian mothers, are less burdened with the expectations that their children should conform to typical gender roles. However, this tendency is also seen more frequently in modern heterosexual families. In other words: gays and lesbians are more critical of patriarchal culture, since social homophobia itself originates in such culture, but the trend (moving away from patriarchal culture) occurs with increasing frequency in heterosexual families, too (e.g. fathers participating in caring activities). Not unimportantly, contemporary state policies contribute to the development (e.g. paternity leave).

Key finding: children in same-sex families are exposed to the traditional gender divisions to a lesser degree. Lesbian families, in particular, are more critical of traditional gender roles (passive women, active men).

An early research study of the gender roles of children in same-sex families was done in 1986 in the USA (Green et al., 1986). In line with later studies it discovered a bigger gender nonconformity, especially in lesbian families, where mothers were critical of patriarchal division into male and female gender roles and associated activities. While the girls from heterosexual families participating in the study demonstrated more interest in so-called traditional female activities, the girls from lesbian families demonstrated more interest in activities that are socially identified as both male and female.

The longitudinal research studies by the psychologist Susan Golombok showed that the children who grew up without a father were not deprived with regard to the development of gender roles in either lesbian or heterosexual single-parent families. Golombok found that a biological/blood relationship is not prerequisite to a strong relationship between parents and children or to children’s well-being. Furthermore, the father’s presence is not a decisive factor in the child’s development of a female or male gender identity. This does not mean that fathers are not as effective parents as mothers or that their presence is unimportant (quite the contrary, the more they participate as active parents the better outcomes there are for the children). Fathers can, just like mothers, have a positive impact on the child’s development. What is important is the role of the additional parent, not their gender. In other words: children in two-parent same-sex families are not deprived of the absence of one gender, because the children

live in gender-mixed environments (in the nuclear and extended families), and they also have the second (additional) parent, who plays an important role. Susan Golombok also concluded that the children growing up in families with equal parents whose gender roles did not follow the traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity were more satisfied. On the other hand, Golombok surprisingly found a high degree of emotional satisfaction in children who had lived all along with financially well-off single mothers or fathers and who had wide social support and did not have to go through separation and poverty. Negative effects of single-parent families have more to do with poverty (when it is linked to social deprivation and exclusion) than with only one parent looking after children.

Modern personal and developmental psychology asserts that people learn throughout their lives and actively look for role models, for example, for the traits that are important to self-image, to value development or to typical gender behaviour roles. Children and adolescents rarely take their own mothers or fathers as role models. It follows that to develop adequate gender roles children need role models of both genders in the living environments, but the role models do not need to be their own mothers or fathers.

This was also demonstrated by a German study conducted on a sample of 1059 parents (mainly lesbian mothers) from same-sex families (Rupp et al., 2009). The study showed that same-sex parents find it very important for their children to have a reference person of the opposite gender. They want to provide them with enough male and female role models. The children from same-sex families who were born in previous heterosexual relationships or who know their sperm donor have more frequent and more regular contacts with their biological parent who lives outside the family than the children who live in separated heterosexual families. Lesbian mothers and gay fathers also keep in more intensive contact. Only very rarely are there conflicts between the parents who live separately, and children face no allegiance issues or loyalty conflicts.

4. 3. Children from same-sex families and sexual orientation

The meta-analysis done in 2005 by Meezan and Rauch (2005) showed that children growing up in same-sex families are no more uncertain about their sexual orientation (and, consequently, identity) when they reach adolescence than children from heterosexual families. Furthermore, the studies analysed by the researchers did not show children from same-sex families being homosexual any more frequently.

Key finding: the sexual orientation of children from same-sex families is not more frequently homosexual. But if the individual is homosexual, parents in same-sex families are more understanding and accepting of the child's homosexuality.

The research study by J. C. Patterson (1992) reached the same conclusions. It found that the occurrence of homosexuality in gay and lesbian families equals the one in the general population.

The meta-study conducted on 21 research studies of same-sex families by the American researchers Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz (2001) established the same. The researchers did emphasise, however, that in same-sex families the issue of different sexual orientations is more evident. It means that heterosexuality is not perceived as the only possible sexual orientation; the fact itself that the child is growing up in a same-sex family indicates that sexual orientations are a topic the parents discuss with their children. Having looked at the studies, Biblarz and Stacey concluded that children in same-sex families more frequently report having thought about the possibility of entering a same-sex partnership. The fact that there are heterosexuals and homosexuals is clear to them – they live with the fact in their everyday lives – whereas children in heterosexual families may be completely deprived of the information about homosexuality. Nevertheless, the researchers highlighted that the studies reveal no statistically significant differences in sexual identity. That is to say, no more gays and lesbians grow up in same-sex families than in heterosexual families.

4. 4. Children from same-sex families, behavioural disorders and psychological well-being

From the aspect of developmental psychology, the studies identify no risky or disadvantageous factors threatening children or their development in these families. Children's emotional development

Key finding: parents' sexual orientation has no impact at all on children's behavioural disorders and their psychological well-being.

requires, for instance, an adult to ensure security and a feeling of acceptance; and cognitive development requires a lot of stimuli from the environment, etc. Research shows that homosexual parents can successfully provide all this. Both the *American Psychiatric Association* and the *American Psychological Association* published reports confirming, based on a wide-ranging analysis of research, that empirical data and findings do not justify the general prejudices and stereotypes concerning life in same-sex families. Therefore, they do not discourage adoption into same-sex families (Sobočan, 2009). The *Slovenian Psychologists' Association* also published a statement saying that scientific findings show that children in same-sex families do not differ in any crucial aspect from the development of children of heterosexual parents. The association also stated: "More than the structure of the family (the number of family members, parents' gender, sexual orientation) the child's psychological and social adjustment is influenced by the processes in the family – the quality of parenting, attitudes of the parents towards the child and their mutual commitment, other relationships in the family and relationships with the environment."

A comprehensive German study of same-sex families demonstrated that children and adolescents who grow up in same-sex families do not show any signs of increased "vulnerability", such as susceptibility to depression or psychosomatic problems (Rupp et al., 2009). Quite the contrary: some children from same-sex families are more confident and independent than children from heterosexual families. The study also showed that children from same-sex families face challenges of growing up (e.g. body changes, establishing first intimate relationships, adolescent developmental tasks, etc.) as well as children from other family forms.

In her extensive study the psychologist Susan Golombok found out that the most stressful and risky position for children is the one in which they change family forms. In other words: the riskiest circumstances for children are those in

which the following factors combine: exposure to a spiteful atmosphere between the parents, the parents' divorce when it also means a loss of social support and a drop in living standards, adjustment to the newly reorganised family. Usually, it is a temporary situation that gradually calms. But her studies show that the children who have lived since the beginning with the parents with whom they are not biologically related exhibit no more psychological problems than their peers from traditional families.

A meta-analysis of research studies of same-sex families from 2008 (Crowl et al., 2008) which included 19 studies conducted between 1979 and 2005 showed that children in same-sex families are statistically significantly more connected to their parents than children from heterosexual families. At the same time, the studies found no statistically significant differences between the two groups of children with reference to the children's cognitive development, psychological adjustment or sexual preferences. The same results were provided by a meta-analysis from 2002 (Anderssen et al., 2002) which included 23 empirical research studies with 615 children from same-sex families and 387 children from control groups (i.e. heterosexual families).

A research study from 1998 that included 80 families – 55 two-parent lesbian families and a control group of 25 two-parent heterosexual families – examined children's social competences (Chan et al., 1998). All the children in the study were five years old and artificially inseminated so that each child in the study, both from hetero- and homosexual families, had one social and one biological parent. The authors of the study established that children from both family types demonstrated similar, relatively high social competences as well as a low level of behavioural disorders.

The same findings are available in the studies that looked into the well-being of older children and adolescents growing up in same-sex families. When selecting its sample, J. C. Patterson's study (1992) relied on the data of *The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health*² and complemented them with interviews with over 12,000 adolescents at school and with their parents at home. The sample was drawn from asking the parents who were not married but who lived in a relationship about the gender of the person they were in the relationship with. This method identified 44 12- to 18-year-olds who lived with same-sex

² See the official Add Health webpage: <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>.

parents. They compared the data with a comparable group of adolescents who lived with heterosexual parents that were either married or in cohabitation. The only statistically significant difference between the two groups of adolescents was that the adolescents living with same-sex parents had a stronger sense of being connected to their school friends than the adolescents living with heterosexual parents. The two groups of adolescents showed no differences in relation to drug use, delinquency or exposure to bullying. There were likewise no differences in the variables pointing to children's psychological well-being (e.g. self-image and anxiety), in school achievement (e.g. average grades) and problems related to school, or in the variables pointing to family relationships (e.g. adults' care for children). The author concluded her interpretation stating that children and adolescents growing up with same-sex parents develop successfully.

4. 5. Children from same-sex families and homophobia

A meta-analysis of 23 empirical research studies of same-sex families conducted between 1978 and 2000 and comparing children from same-sex families with a control group of children from heterosexual families

Key finding: children from same-sex families may be exposed to homophobic violence due to the family form they grow up in.

showed a difference in the stigmatisation of the children (Anderssen et al., 2002). Nine studies (8 of children whose mothers were lesbians and 1 of children whose fathers were gays) demonstrated that children from these families are not stigmatised generally, but they are more likely to be exposed to homophobic violence. The studies also showed that the children typically fear they would be stigmatised due to their parents' sexual orientation, but at the same time the studies report almost no such incidents at all. In other words: homophobia definitely is a problem that same-sex families and children in these families face.

The leading American researcher in the field, Judith Stacey (2001), believes that homophobia is not a problem of same-sex families, but rather of society as a whole. In her study she finds same-sex families to be perfectly safe for children if only parents show sensitivity to the potential troubles children may have due to the homophobia in the outside world and if they are willing to discuss the problems. But since the studies show no differences in the anxiety and self-confidence of children from same-sex families, it means that the children are psychologically very strong, having been prepared for homophobic society by their parents.

In her longitudinal study Susan Golombok asserted that children from same-sex families are just as popular with their peers as children from heterosexual families all the time until adolescence. During adolescence the picture slightly alters. In this period, too, they are generally not harassed more frequently, but a difference does occur. Other children are more likely to be teased because of their social status or physical characteristics, but children from same-sex families are more frequently discriminated because of the sexual orientation of their parents. This is certainly stressful, but any long-term consequences depend on how the adolescent's experiences are responded to by the parents. The parents' sensitivity to the child's emotions and their readiness to engage openly are usually enough for the child to understand and process the experiences. For children from lesbian and gay families outcomes can be negative if their parents are insensitive to the problems that they have because of the prejudices of the outside world.

As said above, the studies of adolescents and adults who grew up in same-sex families do not show these individuals to have more or deeper psychological problems than their peers who grew up in heterosexual families: they do not experience anxiety more frequently, they are not more depressed and they do not seek professional help more often. A crucial role in all of that is played by school. The children whose (pre)school educators had spoken about different families had fewer problems and did not feel inferior or deprived for not living in the dominant family type. Their peers were also more sensitive to the differences and more capable of accepting them without negative judgement.

The first Slovenian qualitative study of same-sex families (8 lesbian mothers and 2 gay fathers) also touched upon the issue of social homophobia (Sobočan, 2009). The participants in the study mentioned strong relationship and love between the partners as the means with which they fight prejudice and stereotypes. All the participants believed that love for children and the partners' commitment are the source where same-sex families and children from same-sex families can find strength to fight any adverse situation. In general, the respondents did not report negative experiences. They all reported disclosing their family lives to the public in one way or another, starting with gynaecologists and other hospital staff during pregnancy and birth, and later doctors, preschool teachers and teachers, etc. At no time did they encounter obstacles where the staff would not allow a partner's presence at birth or where preschool teachers would not accept the fact that the child is brought to and taken from the preschool by two people of the same gender.

Similar conclusions were reached by an Italian qualitative research study conducted at the University of Milan on the sample of 23 lesbian mothers from 16 same-sex families from northern and central Italy (Danna, 2009). The children in the families were between 9 months and 18 years old. The study showed that the supposed discrimination children in same-sex families are thought to experience was often a myth. Although the families do face legal discrimination, as their position is not legally settled, everyday experiences do not reflect the black scenarios that same-sex families are attributed to. The respondents reported that, as a rule, people in their environments, teachers in schools, doctors and others expressed no prejudice against them. Even if they had prejudices, they did not talk about them. It is interesting that this was also the experience of a mother whose child attended Church preschool. The nuns completely accepted their same-sex family. These families seem to be an agent of social change; when they come out, people are always interested in the “special” family, and their reactions are generally good. Or, as one of the respondents in the Slovenian study of same-sex families said (Sobočan, 2009: 79):

“Yes, when people see such a family in real life, we’ve never had a single negative reaction, only positive reactions. And I think all people need is to see as many concrete examples as possible, and based on these concrete examples they’ll see it’s not something they stereotypically thought, but rather something that really nicely fits some of their own conceptions of the world.”

4.6. Conclusion

The American researchers Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz conducted two meta-analyses of studies of same-sex families, one in 2001 and the other in 2010. Their analyses are accepted as the most rigorous meta-analyses in the field. In 2001 they analysed 21 research studies and in 2010 they analysed 81 studies. For the studies to be included in the meta-analyses they had to pass a rigorous methodological test (the authors accepted only high-quality studies), and their analyses attempted to answer two questions: are parents’ genders and sexual orientations important?

They concluded that the studies some people cite to support their claim that a child needs a mother and a father did not examine the influence of parents’ gender on upbringing; rather, they compared two-parent families with single-parent families or two-parent families with reorganised families and suchlike.

None of the studies used by some to prove that a child needs a father and a mother rather than two fathers or two mothers compared nuclear heterosexual families with same-sex families. Stacey and Biblarz, on the other hand, examined just such studies – the studies that compared planned lesbian families (i.e., the families that did not begin as a form of a reorganised family) with heterosexual families. Furthermore, they analysed the studies that compared single-parent families with a father to single-parent families with a mother. The comparisons reveal minimal differences.

The first set of comparisons (hetero/homo families) revealed small differences between heterosexual and same-sex families. For instance, lesbian families are, generally speaking, more equal in terms of housework division. But the family form does not have a substantial impact on the child's development. The studies that compared single-parent families showed small differences pointing out that mothers were typically better in supervising children, in investing more time in them and so on.

Stacey and Biblarz's meta-analysis of 81 studies concludes that gender is a "trivial", inconsequential factor with no influence on parenting: "At this point no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for child well-being" (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010: 17). In general, the researchers state, two parents (regardless of their genders) who perform their roles well are better than one parent, but this does not mean that one parent cannot give the child everything the child needs to develop and grow up. It indicates that neither the gender nor number of parents is decisive; it is the quality of fulfilling the parental role that matters. Biblarz and Stacey conclude that "ideal parenting comes in many different genres and genders" (ibid.).

The MMC RTVSLO online comments we analysed exhibit a number of statements about the "nature" of the family, the roles of fathers and mothers as well as the rights of children. Below we will highlight some of the myths.

Each child has a natural right to a mother and a father, and same-sex families are unnatural

Legislation regulates social relationships among people. The legislation that regulates same-sex partnerships and adoption does not take away fathers and mothers from children, as human conception requires a male sex cell and a female

sex cell. Consequently, each child has a father and a mother, but they may not be able or do not want to look after the child or one of them may be unknown or may die, so there must be legislation to guarantee that in such instances children with social parents have the same rights as children growing up with biological parents.

Children live in different family forms and the task of the state is to protect everybody equally and in the same way. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, there are a little over 25% single-parent families with children; 50% of all marriages end in divorce and the majority of the partners enter new relationships, where they live with their own and the new partner's children; in Slovenia more than 100 children live in same-sex families and more than 1000 children live in foster families. It is important for legislation to treat equally all children from all family forms without giving preference to any one of them.

The argument of nature has been applied throughout history whenever the advocates of exclusion and discrimination wanted to keep a specific group of people in an unequal position. So only a hundred years ago the opponents of women's equality claimed that women were an inferior form of human evolution and thus closer to children and savages than to adult civilised men. The wish for women to have the same education and, accordingly, the same goals as men was seen as "a dangerous delusion".

Interracial marriage was outlawed in the USA until 1967, as it was claimed to be against nature. Correspondingly, in 1959 a county circuit court judge in the state of Virginia sentenced the black Mildred Loving and her white husband Richard Perry Loving to a year in prison. Later, in 1965, when asked to vacate the conviction, he said: "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."

Each child needs a father and a mother (who are caring and loving)

A child needs a caring and loving (biological or social) parent looking after them. Gender itself is no guarantee of a quality caring relationship or the love that

the child needs. Scientific studies in developmental psychology demonstrate that children need loving parents, regardless of their genders or biological links. Moreover, sociological and psychological studies show that the family form is not paramount; what occurs in the family is more important, not who the family members or what their genders are. The family structure (number of family members, their genders, parents' sexual orientation, etc.) does not influence the processes of the child's psychological and social adjustment. What really matters is the quality of parenting, parents' relationship with the child and their mutual commitment as well as other relationships in the family and with the wider environment. In other words: establishing a healthy environment for the child to grow up in does not depend on a gender combination but on the concrete caring activities of the people who look after the child. Therefore, it is really important for social parenting (together with biological parenting) to be equally socially and legally recognised, because it is in the child's best interest.

Children from same-sex families will be discriminated against and mistreated

We should all strive for a society that is tolerant and non-discriminatory. Children from same-sex families are here – it is our duty to protect them. Those who draw attention to children from same-sex families being discriminated against do seem to recognise the problem, but then they proceed by simply overlooking the children rather than solving the problem at its source. Children can be discriminated against on different grounds, but that does not mean these children should be overlooked. Rather, we should deal with the reasons for the discrimination.

A good example of the role legislation can play in combating stigmatisation in Slovenia is so-called “bastards” (children born to parents who are not married to each other), who used to be excluded from society; but when the law made their position equal to legitimate children, society's attitudes towards the children changed, too. Today these children are no longer stigmatised in Slovenian society, thanks also to legislative equality.

Research shows that children from same-sex families are potentially exposed to homophobic violence, but they are also well-equipped to deal with such incidents, because their parents prepare them for the potentially homophobic environment where they live.

The central function of marriage is starting a family, which is why same-sex couples should not be allowed to get married

Marriage has a number of functions, which have been changing with time. For some people in Europe marriage is a precondition to having a family (i.e., it is important to them that their children are born in wedlock), but it is not a norm everybody accepts. Statistics reveal a wide range of practices. In some European countries (Estonia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, France, Sweden, Belgium) the majority of children are born outside marriage, which suggests that the institutions of marriage and family are not necessarily interrelated. Additionally, there is no country in Europe to have marriage as a prerequisite to the birth of a child and starting a family. If it were the case, people who are over fifty years old could no longer be allowed to get married.

The claim that the central function of marriage is starting a family, which is why same-sex couples should supposedly not be allowed to get married, is based on the false assumption that gays and lesbians cannot have children. It is a fact that gays and lesbians have children – either from previous relationships, or through adoption, artificial insemination, surrogacy, etc. The state should ensure favourable conditions for people to have children, but it should never require them to do so. The decision to have children must be free.

Those who stubbornly insist on the one and only right and acceptable family actually shoot themselves in the foot. The family has survived as a central value of the majority of people precisely because it has been changing throughout history and adapting to different lifestyles. The variety of family forms thus strengthens the institution of the family and maintains it as a pivotal value, not the opposite; the family is not “in crisis” because of the variety of families, it is only the notion of the one and only right family form that is “in crisis”. It is therefore essential that legislation treats all family forms equally.

5. Focus groups as a method of testing awareness-raising campaign messages

The last part of this publication presents a methodological attempt at testing the messages of awareness-raising campaigns that we prepared as part of the DARE project based on the analysis presented in the first part of this report. This part of the project was done in collaboration with ILGA Europe and the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. We only focus on the testing method, not on the subject-matter of the messages we prepared. Our goal was to assess how the methods that professional opinion poll agencies use – and that are financially unaffordable for the majority of the non-governmental sector – could be adapted in order to be employed by NGOs. We concentrate on the method of focus groups.

Focus groups are a form of group interviews, a method that became part of qualitative research in the 1930s. It established itself in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly in the social science research studies of social minorities, environmental issues, education, etc., as well as in the market research where companies test new products and, based on focus group participants' responses, design marketing strategies.

As a method, focus groups are a relatively efficient way of collecting large amount of information in a short period of time. We study the views, experiences, interpretations, thoughts of people about a topic/product under discussion. Interaction among focus group participants is key, as it leads to important new information we could not acquire during classical interviews.

As a rule it is necessary to conduct enough focus groups to reach the saturation point. It means that the information we are getting starts repeating with new focus groups and that our research is gaining no more new information.

Using the analysis of MMC RTVSLO online comments, Legebitra prepared three test videos addressing everyday situations in which LGBT people may find themselves. The videos were made as TV awareness-raising ads with more messages. Using focus groups, the material was analysed by a research agency, which also put forward recommendations about how best – according to the current attitudes towards LGBT people in Slovenia – to prepare an information campaign and appropriately modify the videos.

Such message testing is a usual constituent part of all professional media campaigns and commercials, but it is largely unaffordable for the non-governmental sector due to its high costs. As part of the DARE project and in collaboration with ILGA Europe and the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, we therefore carried out an experimental analysis of how to use qualitative methodology (focus groups) to test NGO messages, while avoiding the high costs. We were interested in whether our experimental focus groups reached similar/comparable conclusions to the analysis done by the professional research agency. The findings of the two analyses show that both approaches yielded similar data, although the cheaper version of focus groups provided us with lower quality information. The latter, nevertheless, still suffices for basic testing and subsequent adaptation of textual, audio and visual awareness-raising campaign messages.

The focus groups conducted by the agency were replicated with the help of three sociology students who became familiar with the method during their studies but who had never used it in practice. Below we describe the individual steps we followed when conducting the focus groups, and draw attention to some of the difficulties we encountered.

5. 1. Focus group participants

Focus group samples are collected according to research goals. We wanted to test the videos (three short films, each about a minute long) using a group of people who were neither vociferous opponents of LGBT rights nor ardent supporters of the LGBT community. Thus we wanted to see what the responses to the awareness-raising campaign were by those we could position in the “middle” of the debate. To decide on suitable participants the research agency conducted a phone survey on a representative sample to measure social distance towards the LGBT community and, based on that, it identified suitable participants to be included in the focus groups.

The telephone survey comprised questions that asked the respondents to state which groups of people they would not want to have as neighbours, which groups of people should not be allowed to adopt children and suchlike. The focus group sample was drawn from those who did not situate lesbians and gays among the most/least desired neighbours, the most/least suitable adopters, etc.

When replicating the study, our first problem also turned out to be the biggest drawback of the repeated study: the students were only able to attract the participants through their acquaintances rather than using a representative sample, for which we had neither technical nor financial resources. In research, sampling is the central and most critical point, and it is also financially the most challenging. The replicated study avoided this by choosing participants from our acquaintances, but from different environments. All the participants filled in a questionnaire that measured social distance, but we only excluded those who gave the most extreme answers (in the positive or negative sense), whereas the agency used only those who situated lesbians and gays in the middle. We were also careful about the participants' gender and education structure as well as their place of residence, but this posed a grave problem for our study. The students namely organised the focus groups in their local environments, which meant that individual focus groups were uniform in terms of the participants' place of residence. Since our focus groups were organised in three different places in Slovenia outside urban centres, we nevertheless ended up with a relatively varied sample, but we cannot describe it as random or comparable to the one drawn by the agency. If the students had invited people from different parts of the country to their focus groups, it would have presented further logistic difficulties and incurred extra travelling expenses.

Gender composition of the focus groups was a smaller problem. The agency conducted three focus groups – one female, one male, one mixed. The dynamics in the different groups (and thereby the responses to the videos) were different. In our replication we also wanted the same gender composition, but we were not entirely successful. We could not have a male-only group, so we conducted two mixed groups and one female group.

Although an important part of information started to be repeated in the third group, we cannot maintain that we had reached the saturation point. However, financial and time limits made it impossible for us to conduct more focus groups. Despite the limits, the messages and responses we received from the three focus groups were relatively uniform and as such important information when redesigning the awareness-raising campaign.

Each focus group typically has between 4 and 10 participants. The experience from our focus groups suggests that the best and most manageable had 5 or 6 participants. We invited two more participants to each focus group because

almost always one or two of the participants called off their participation shortly before the beginning.

What to pay attention to when selecting a sample?

- The sample should be selected according to your research goals.
- Be careful about the participants' demographics and other characteristics – generally you should strive for as great variety of focus group participants as possible.
- Be careful about gender – consider whether you should have gender-mixed or gender-uniform focus groups.
- Be careful about the place of residence – if, due to financial restrictions, you are unable to conduct your focus group with participants from different places, organise them in different places if it accords with your research goals.
- Observe the point of saturation – when new focus groups bring no extra information, you can stop.

5.2. Conducting focus groups

Focus groups are usually conducted by sitting the participants around an elongated table. At one side sits the chair of the focus groups and at the other side sits their assistant. The participants sit at the left and right sides of the table, so that each of them can see the chair.

As opposed to the agency, which has its own place to conduct focus groups, the students had to solve the problem of finding a free space, close enough for all the participants but at the same time neutral enough. Conducting the focus groups at the home of one of the participants would, namely, put them in a completely different position from the others. The students conducted their focus groups at a local theatre, in a local NGO meeting room, and at a local school. However, the organisers had to depend on the goodwill of the owners and their availability, which additionally complicated the scheduling of the focus groups. It would therefore seem sensible to plan adequate financial means to hire suitable places.

The agency conducted their focus groups without an assistant, since the chair was skilful enough to control the situation by herself. The experiences from the students' focus groups demonstrate the opposite – the assistant's participation was crucial. They could really help the chair, who did not have much experience

with focus groups, as the assistant looked after technical things (e.g. playing the videos, providing refreshments, audio recording the group, etc.), asked additional questions the chair may have forgotten, etc. It is, however, essential for the focus group dynamics that the assistant's interventions do not prevail over the chair of the focus group. The assistant speaks when the chair asks them to do so (e.g. "Have I forgotten something that needs to be asked?") or only exceptionally, when an intervention is required, with an additional question or with some help to the chair.

The focus group is begun by asking the participants to sign an informed consent, indicating that they agree with the focus group being conducted, with the purpose of the focus group, with the audio recording, that they are guaranteed anonymity, etc. If necessary, the participants complete a short anonymous questionnaire which provides us with their demographic details (gender, age, education, place of residence, etc.), which we can apply when analysing the empirical materials. The chair also asks all the participants to write their (assumed) names on a piece of paper and put them in front of them. This way the chair will be able to call all the participants by their names and enable easier communication among the participants.

At the beginning of the focus group all the participants, including the chair and the assistant, introduce themselves. Different icebreakers can be used. We asked our participants to choose among the pictures on the table (different photos of nature, objects, people, etc.) the one that best represents them. Each person was then asked to introduce themselves and say why they had picked the picture.

Then the focus group is conducted, organised so as to follow the research study goals. The questions to be asked the participants have to be prepared accordingly. It is important for the questions not to be formulated as yes/no questions, since the participants have to be encouraged to think about and debate the issues. It is also important for the participants – especially those whose responses are short and unclear – to be asked additional questions to clarify their views (e.g. "Why do you think so? Can you elaborate on that a little more?"). If the participants are unclear, the chair may summarise what they think the participants are trying to say and then ask if they have been understood right (e.g. "So, your view is ... Do I understand you correctly?"). Such extra questions stimulate additional debate.

When asking questions, listening to the answers is crucial. If we were only to ask the questions we had prepared in advance without listening to what the participants were saying, we could miss that a question we were going to ask had already been answered. It is equally important to ask the same question again or to reformulate it if the participants do not actually answer it (i.e., they may start answering it, but they digress and do not really answer the original question at all).

It is vital that the chair allows equal time for all the participants. At the very beginning the group has to agree with the main rule of only one person speaking at a time. If there is a problem, the chair politely asks the person disregarding the rule to wait for their turn. It is particularly important to be careful about the dominant members of the group, who are always the first to express their views and give their answers. Although we generally leave freedom to the participants to answer when they wish to, we may – if there is a “dominant person” in the group – ask a question and call upon a person to answer it (i.e., not the dominant person). If somebody talks too much, they can be politely stopped by thanking them for their opinion and saying we are also interested in others’ views and then choosing somebody from the other side of the table.

The chair has to create an atmosphere that is relaxed, and where everybody feels safe to express their views. It is good if the chair repeats and emphasises that there are no right or wrong answers, and that we are only interested in the participants’ views. The students who conducted the focus groups reported that their position as students enabled them to create a more relaxed atmosphere, as the participants understood them as equals and were not reserved when answering the questions.

We have already mentioned that planning a neutral space where the focus group will be conducted is important, but it has financial consequences. (Conducting focus groups in a place owned by the organisation that is testing its awareness-raising campaign is unsuitable, because it can affect the respondents’ responses.) Moreover, a small financial reward is also an important factor in deciding to participate. The agency paid its participants 20 euros, but the students’ focus groups were not paid, and the students reported having a lot of problems finding the people who would be willing to offer up two hours of their time. It seems that a financial incentive might have been beneficial.

As for our research, we enquired into how the participants reacted to the videos shown to them (the videos were played in different sequences in different focus groups), what they saw in them, what they liked about them, what bothered them, and whether they recognised/read in them what the authors of the videos had tried to pass on. Each video was played twice. During the first viewing the participants were asked to write down (in silence, without talking to others) their first associations/impressions they had got when watching the videos, and then we discussed the associations and impressions with them. We asked questions such as:

- What was your first impression? What was your first thought when you had seen the advert?
- What particularly sticks in your mind? What attracted your attention the most?
- What did you like? Why?
- What didn't you like? Why?
- How did you feel when watching the advert? What emotions did it arouse in you?
- What did the advert want to say?
- What was the advert's slogan? What could the advert's slogan be?

Then we watched the video again, and we asked further questions, for example:

- What did you miss when watching the video the first time? What hadn't you noticed that you saw now?
- What are the key messages that the advert tries to pass on?
- What values does it try to pass on?
- How clear are the messages? What is not clear? What don't you understand?
- How suitable do you find the messages?
- What would you change? How/in what way?
- How did you find the music in the video?
- What about the actors?

After the end of the focus group the chair and the assistant discussed the impressions of the focus group. This part was audio recorded, too, since the first reflection may turn out to be an important source of information when analysing the material later on. Finally, we analysed the recorded materials according to individual topics / research questions and produced recommendations about what in the videos needed to be improved/modified.

What to pay attention to when conducting a focus group?

- Preliminary focus group preparation includes: (1) hiring a place, (2) preparing refreshments, (3) preparing an audio recorder to record the focus group, (4) preparing pens and paper, (5) preparing the introductory icebreaker, (6) preparing all the technical equipment needed, (7) preparing an informed consent to inform the participants about the subject-matter and procedure of the research study, (8) preparing a short questionnaire to collect demographic data.
- It is important for the focus group chair to be well informed about the topic and to be capable of asking and listening.
- We recommend an assistant, who can help and support the focus group chair – especially if they are beginners.
- The chair should ask clear questions and avoid any verbal or non-verbal reaction to the answers, even when they disagree with the opinions expressed by the participants.
- It is important to ask additional questions and encourage the participants to express their views even if their views are in the minority and the majority disagrees (i.e., a safe space should be established).
- The chair must have a relaxed relationship with the participants.
- Conducting a focus group requires some financial means (hiring a place, refreshments, possibly a small remuneration for the participants).

5.3. Conclusion

The focus groups conducted and analysed by the students reported similar findings to the focus groups conducted by the professional agency. Although there were some differences, the basic and crucial emphases were the same, and the recommendations that the students prepared based on their research were comparable to the ones provided by the agency.

The costs related to conducting the focus groups involved the students' work, the refreshments and the technical equipment needed for the focus groups. It is also important to budget for the hire of a place and potentially for the financial reward for the participants.

The focus groups conducted by the sociology students were, in some aspects, not as high quality as the ones conducted by the professional agency (sampling problems, the chairs' (in)experience, problems with place, etc.), but the main findings and recommendations drawn up by the students were similar to and sometimes the same as the ones prepared by the agency. In other words: the data we acquired are not as good quality, but the entire study was significantly cheaper and despite the lower quality of the data it is informative enough for us to be able to adequately modify the awareness-raising campaign.

The experience was really positive for the students who – with the help of a supervisor – have learnt a lot from the research. We worked with three students; each participated in two focus groups, once as the chair and once as the assistant. After each focus group they discussed it with their supervisor and they modified the next focus group accordingly. Our experimental focus groups thus brought satisfaction to both sides: the non-governmental organisation, which received important information to prepare its awareness-raising campaign, and the students, who – in addition to being adequately paid – gained invaluable experience in practical research they had previously not had.

6. References

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