Family formation among sexual minorities: a cross-country perspective on desires and outcomes

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Introduction

Within the scientific research community, there is a rapidly expanding awareness of sexual orientation as an important demographic characteristic shaping people's experiences, relationships, and opportunities throughout their lives (National Academies of Sciences & Medicine, 2022; Ophir et al., 2023; Rouvroye et al., 2025). Sexual orientation informs people's beliefs about what they can and cannot desire in life, their attitudes towards existing opportunities and their intentions to work toward specific outcomes. Sexual orientations can therefore be understood as having a stratifying influence on people's socialization, agency and opportunities (akin to SES as shown by: Billari et al., 2019). A life-course domain in which sexual orientation clearly has a diversifying influence is family formation (Reczek, 2020), which in this paper is defined as the process of having children[1].For sexual minorities, the road to parenthood is often complex. They must navigate restrictive institutional frameworks, discriminatory legal systems, and social stigma about whether they should become parents at all (Chapman et al., 2012; Gates, 2015; Hayman et al., 2015), while also facing lengthy and costly procedures to do so (Goldberg, 2006; Van der Vleuten et al., 2024). These structural and normative barriers shape not only people's ability to have children but also their desires around family formation.

Existing research on family formation among sexual minorities has largely focused on same-sex couples and shows that they generally report lower fertility desires than different-sex couples (e.g. Boertien et al., 2024; Hank & Wetzel, 2018). Much less attention has been paid to variation across sexual orientations, even though exposure to structural barriers and normative pressures differs substantially by group, being most restrictive for gay men (e.g., limited biological pathways, higher costs, and stronger stigma) and typically less restrictive for other groups (e.g., bisexual individuals in different-sex relationships). This gap in the literature persists largely because large-scale, representative surveys have rarely included direct measures of sexual orientation. Consequently, we know little about family formation desires among single sexual-minority individuals or those in different-sex relationships. We address this gap by using one of the largest nationally representative datasets – the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS-II) - including direct measures of sexual orientation, allowing us to compare both ideal and actual family sizes across sexual orientation groups.

Most existing studies are also limited to single-country analyses (Reczek, 2020). Yet, legal rights, access to parenthood, and societal attitudes towards sexual minorities vary substantially across countries (Evertsson et al., 2020; Kazyak et al., 2018; Malmquist & Spånberg Ekholm, 2020). These contextual differences shape not only sexual minorities' ability to have children (Evertsson et al., 2025), but also their family ideals and expectations. We are the first to examine how ideal family size as well as the gap between ideal and actual family size among sexual minorities vary across national

[1] We choose not to use the word 'fertility' for sexual minorities, as it typically refers to biological reproduction, which does not encompass the diverse pathways to parenthood in this population (e.g. adoption or surrogacy).

contexts. In sum, we answer the following research questions:

1) How do sexual-minority people and heterosexual people envision their ideal family formation?

2) How does the desired family size of sexual-minority people and heterosexual people compare to the number of children they actually have?

3) To what degree does family formation among sexual-minority people vary across countries?

Data & Methods

This study is based on data from the second round of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS-II) (Gauthier et al., 2025). Each country used probability sampling methods to obtain national representative samples. GGS-II added a new module in the ongoing second wave to measure the sexual orientation of the respondent (Rouvroye et al., 2025). The question was "In the context of relationships, the question of sexual orientation arises. Would you say that you are…" The options included "Heterosexual (that is, attracted to the other gender)", "Lesbian or gay (that is, attracted to the same gender as you"), "Bisexual or pansexual (attracted to more than one gender)", and "Another orientation". Based on the respondents' gender, we further separated heterosexual men, heterosexual women, gay, lesbian, bisexual men, and bisexual women.

We measure ideal family formation using 'personal ideal family size' in the preliminary analysis. The respondent was asked, "For you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?" The respondent answered the number of children from 0 to 10.

In the preliminary analysis, we used the current available data from Wave 2 in Norway (2024) and Estonia (2025), both countries included the questions on sexual orientation in the survey[2]. We observed 3,841 respondents in Norway and 5,456 respondents in Estonia who have valid information on sexual orientation. Next, we calculated the average ideal number of children by sexual orientation and country. We restricted the sample to respondents under age 50. After excluding missing values, the sample included 2,044 respondents from Norway and 2,598 respondents from Estonia. We also calculated the total number of children of respondents had at the time of the interview to show the gap between ideal family size and the actual number of children.

Preliminary results

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of respondents by sexual orientation. In Norway, 5.8% of respondents identified as sexual minorities, compared to 3.8% in Estonia. Specifically, 1.8% of respondents in Norway and 0.8% of respondents in Estonia identified as gay or lesbian. The proportion

[2] The questions on sexual orientation were not included in GGS-II wave 2 in Moldova

of bisexual respondents was higher than that of gay or lesbian respondents in both countries, accounting for 3.5% in Norway and 2.5% in Estonia.

Next, we calculated the average number of personal ideal family size and the actual children among respondents under age 50. We separated the sample by sexual orientation and gender. Figure 1 shows the result in Norway, and Figure 2 presents the result in Estonia. In Figure 1, in Norway, the average personal ideal family sizes were more than 2 children for all groups, regardless of sexual orientation. Differences between sexual orientations were relatively small. The largest ideal family size was observed for lesbians with a value of 2.62, and the lowest was observed for bisexual men with a value of 2.11. However, compared to heterosexual men and women, the gap between personal ideal family size and the actual number of children is larger for all sexual minority groups. The largest gap was observed for gay men. Among them, although the average ideal number of children was 2.43, the average number of actual children was only 0.13. The gap is still relatively large for bisexual people and smallest for lesbians.

In contrast, Figure 2 shows that the average personal ideal family size was lower for sexual minorities[3] than for heterosexual people in Estonia. The average ideal family sizes for heterosexual men and women were around 2.4. The lowest number was observed for bisexual women with a value of 1.83, followed by gay men with a value of 1.95. Similarly to Norway, we observed a larger gap between personal ideal family size and the actual number of children for sexual minorities than for heterosexuals. Gay respondents in Estonia did not have any children. For bisexuals, the average number of actual children was under 1, whereas their average ideal family sizes were around 2.

Discussion and next step

These preliminary results have provided us with the following insights. First, using representative data from GGS-II Wave 2 in Norway and Estonia, we observed a relatively large number of sexual minorities, particularly for bisexuals. Second, similar to heterosexuals, sexual minorities also expressed a two-child ideal, especially in Norway, which contrasts previous findings on sexual minorities' parenting desires. Third, the gap between personal ideal family size and actual number of children was larger for sexual minorities, particularly for gay men. Fourth, we found that sexual minorities in Estonia reported a lower ideal family size than those in Norway, and that the gap between actual and ideal family size between heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals was smaller in Norway than in Estonia. Given Norway's longer history of acceptance of same-sex relationships and parenthood, and its fewer structural barriers to family formation, these findings support our expectation that societal and legal contexts shape ideal family sizes as well as the extent to which these ideals can be realized.

[3] Note that the number of lesbians was too low for meaningful comparison.

There are several steps we intend to take to further this paper. First, we will use regression models to examine the association between sexual orientation and ideal family size, controlling for other covariates, such as education and age. Moreover, we will consider the important role of partnership, being in a same-sex or different-sex relationship, and children. Second, we will include more countries from GGS-II Wave 2. By June 2026, data should be available for Czechia and Germany. This will allow us to make future cross-national comparisons. Third, we plan to include other indicators to measure family ideal, including the general ideal family size and the intended family size (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). Fourth, depending on our findings from the previous steps, we may also compare the ideal family size between same-gender and different-gender couples, using data from GGS-II Wave 1. Although Wave 1 did not have information on sexual orientation, we can observe a relatively large sample size of same-sex relationships in many countries, such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, United Kingdom (Table 2).

Tables and Figures

Table 1. The number and percentage of respondents by sexual orientation and country

	Norway		Estonia	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Heterosexual	3,619	94.2	5,251	96.2
Lesbian or gay	69	1.8	41	0.8
Bisexual	135	3.5	134	2.5
Another orientation	18	0.5	27	0.5
Total	3,841	100.0	5,456	100.0

Figure 1. The Average Number of Personal Ideal and Actual Children among Respondents Aged 22–49 in Norway.

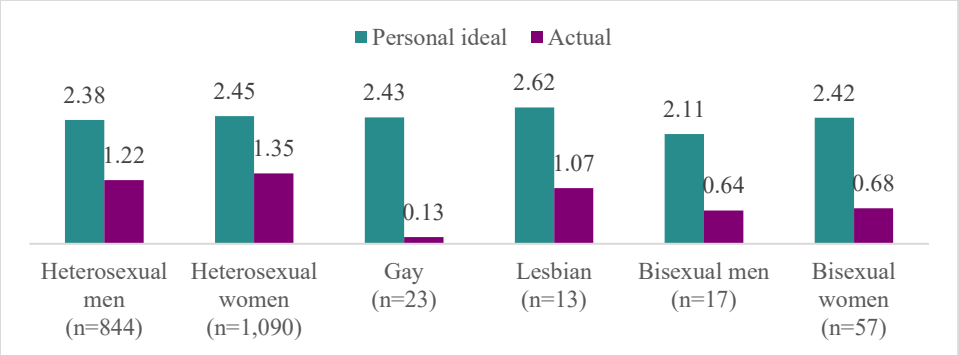

Figure 2. The Average Number of Personal Ideal and Actual Children among Respondents Aged 23–49 in Estonia.

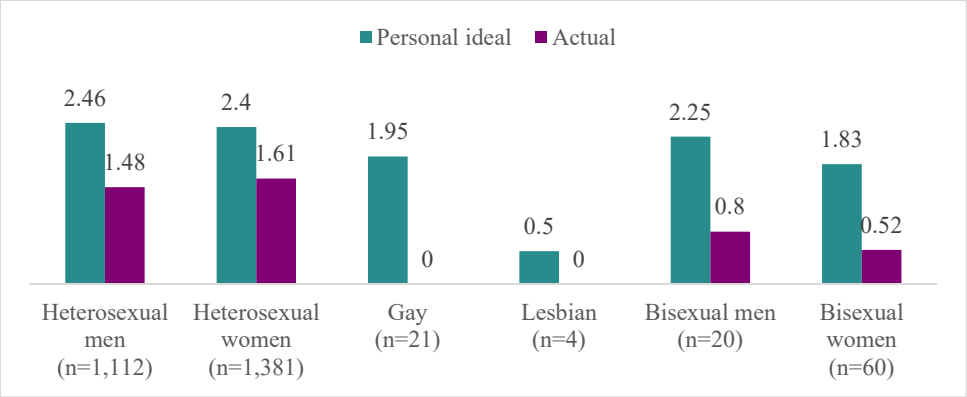

Table 2. The number and percentage of respondents who are in a same-gender relationship from GGS-II Wave 1.

Country of residence	Freq.	Percent
Germany	299	18.49
France	627	38.78
Netherlands	105	6.49
Norway	50	3.09
Austria	52	3.22
Estonia	33	2.04
Czech	35	2.16
Sweden	33	2.04
Croatia	17	1.05
Argentina	12	0.74
Denmark	80	4.95
Hong Kong	23	1.42
Finland	38	2.35
Uruguay	74	4.58
UK	139	8.60
Total	1617	100.00

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