

## ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALS IN GUYANA (2013)

### SYNOPSIS

Generally this survey demonstrates that Guyanese are largely either tolerant or accepting of homosexuals, with the quantity of persons that could genuinely be described as “*homophobic*” amounting to approximately 25% of the population. Conversely this means that 58% of Guyanese are either “*tolerant*” or “*accepting*” of homosexuals, while 17% were undecided. It is also immediately noticeable that homophobia or alternatively tolerance of homosexuals correlates directly with age, sex, race and to a lesser extent religion, place of origin and education. As such, women, younger persons and Guyanese who were not born in Guyana tended to be more comfortable with homosexuals, while active-Evangelical Christians, Afro Guyanese and those who have been “*less-well*” educated tended to be more homophobic.

Notwithstanding the largely positive stance of the vast majority of Guyanese toward homosexuals, it is also clear that fundamental misunderstandings exist among Guyanese regarding several basis facts about homosexuality and it is entirely possible that these misunderstandings could impact negatively on attitudes. Guyanese generally think that homosexuality is largely a male phenomenon and moreover that it is a “*choice*”. These are two misunderstandings that carry substantial baggage. There is also a heavy religious overtone regarding the “*proper*” location of sexual orientation and sexual expression, along with the presumption that the religious teaching should continue to influence the State’s agenda and treatment of homosexuals.

With regard to discrimination (as manifested in violence) the survey demonstrates clearly that Guyanese do dislike the idea of violence against minorities and discrimination in all its manifestations. Moreover, Guyanese largely consider discrimination against homosexuals to be “*wrong*”. At the same time; however Guyanese do not seem to think that homosexuals are currently being discriminated against, or that the state needs to provide special protection for them. Interestingly, there is strong support for the provision of special protections for Persons Living with AIDS (PLWA) and while some of these persons might be homosexual, there is no strong desire on the part of the population for specific protections for homosexuals against discrimination.

The general Guyanese reaction to the legislative environment that relates to homosexuals is to say the least, conflicting. A slender majority of Guyanese support the retention of the “*buggery law*”; however further investigation reveals that many of these persons are both unfamiliar with the specific provisions of this law and when advised of the specifics believe it to be “*illogical*” in some instances. Notwithstanding there is a clear resistance on the part of the population to “*let go*” of these laws which a majority of persons believe are a clear expression of Guyana’s moral and religious standards. In this regard, it is interesting to note the populations’ ability to separate religion and state as it relates to the propriety of “*Common Law*” marriage, while the state is presumed to have an obligation to project religious principles as it relates to homosexual acts.

Although there is no profound appetite for legislative change at this time, Guyanese believe that a clear demonstration that these laws are impacting negatively on the physical or psychological well-being of young people or adults would provide good grounds for change. There is also support for change if it can be proven that the laws contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. It should be made clear; however that in neither instance has the survey demonstrated that Guyanese are convinced that either of these “*perils*” have manifested themselves locally on account of the existence of buggery laws.

The actually stated legislative preferences of Guyanese at this time are noteworthy since these speak to the activities that Guyanese wish to prevent. In this regard it is clear that Guyanese desire most to prevent “*public sex*” of any sort, but are especially concerned about relations between two or three men. Although there is a stated preference for the retention of the buggery law, there is little interest in having the state prevent private sex between adults (of any sex) if that were possible. This peculiarity suggests that Guyanese are perhaps really concerned about public manifestations of sexual orientation, as distinct from private manifestations and appear to believe that the changing of the laws would help to encourage these public manifestations.

The juxtaposition of Guyanese support for decriminalisation (of homosexual acts) with their opinion on other major social issues does lend support to the suggestion that Guyanese are less committed to the retention of these laws than they are to issues like corporal punishment which also have a religious justification. This distance is significant, as is the finding in the survey that the position of a political party is not likely to affect its chances at the polls.