

To cite this article: Jean Paul SAAMOYA LIBO and Isetcha Tawiti (2026). EXPERIENCES AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE FEW LGB PEOPLE IN KISANGANI, International Journal of Applied Science and Engineering Review (IJASER) 7 (4): 135-152 Article No. 295 Sub Id 431

EXPERIENCES AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE FEW LGB PEOPLE IN KISANGANI

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52267/IJASER.2026.7411>

ABSTRACT

Intimate relationships, family ties, social recognition and union plans are important to well-being, but they remain poorly documented among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This study analyzes the relationships, partner preferences, aspirations for union, family relationships and awareness trajectories of some LGB people in Kisangani. To do this, a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive and analytical survey was carried out among 70 participants recruited by non-probability purposive sampling with the support of the NGO Progrès Santé Sans Prix. A questionnaire pre-tested with 10 people excluded from the final sample was self-administered. Data were analyzed in SPSS 27 by frequencies, percentages, chi-square, and Monte Carlo probabilities. The results show that ninety percent of participants reported being in a conjugal relationship, and common-law unions were the most common form (55.7%). The general desire to marry one day was expressed by 67.1%, while only 11.5% declared a civil or religious marriage. The specific aspiration to a common-law union was affirmed by 35.7%, rejected by 12.9% and not provided by 51.4%. It was not significantly associated with age, sex, sexual orientation or level of education. Family relationships were marked by both rejection and estrangement, with each of these categories cited by 32.8% of participants. Most reported an awareness dating back more than three years; Current feelings were often positive, but fear persisted in 25.4% of respondents. The results show the existence of emotional ties and plans for union.

KEYWORDS: Intimate relationships; common-law union; family; sexual orientation; trajectory;

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context of the study

Intimate relationships, a sense of belonging, family recognition and life projects are among the fundamental dimensions of the human experience. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people also build bonds, forms of commitment, support networks, and marital aspirations. However, these experiences sometimes

unfold in contexts where heterosexuality, marriage between a man and a woman and parenthood in accordance with dominant social norms are presented as the only legitimate trajectories.

The literature shows that LGB people's relationships are not defined solely by stigma. Peplau and Fingerhut (2007) point out that lesbian and gay couples engage processes common to other intimate relationships, including attachment, satisfaction, power negotiation, support, and conflict management. Kurdek (2004) observed that cohabiting gay and lesbian couples were comparable to heterosexual couples on several dimensions of functioning. The most marked differences are often related to the social and institutional environment rather than to the intrinsic quality of the relationship.

The lack of legal recognition, the need to protect the couple's confidentiality, the fear of disclosure and the lack of support from relatives can nevertheless produce specific constraints. LeBlanc et al. (2015) proposed the notion of minority couple stress to account for pressures that target the relationship itself such as invisibility, invalidation, lack of support, the obligation to permanently negotiate disclosure, and unequal access to symbolic or institutional resources. Cao et al. (2017) show that the quality of the couple can be influenced by these contexts, without sexual minorities forming a homogeneous group.

Also, it should be noted that the family of origin occupies an ambivalent place. It can provide some security, affection, necessary material resources and recognition. But it can also become a space of suspicion, control, rejection or estrangement. Ryan et al. (2009) associated family rejection with negative health consequences in LGB young adults, while Ryan et al. (2010) showed the protective role of family acceptance. Katz-Wise et al. (2016) insist on the evolutionary nature of family reactions, with some families moving from incomprehension to a form of support.

Friendship and community networks can make up for insufficient family support. They provide spaces for recognition, learning and protection. Zimmerman et al. (2015) showed that social and community support can build resilience to experiences of stigma. Rostosky and Riggle (2017) also point out that people belonging to sexual minorities develop relational resources, strategies of resistance and forms of meaning that should not be obscured by an approach that focuses solely on vulnerability.

The trajectories of sexual awareness and identification are diverse. The first attraction, self-recognition, the adoption of an identity category, the first relationship and disclosure to others do not necessarily occur at the same time or in the same order. Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000), Floyd and Stein (2002), and Rosario et al. (2006) described multiple trajectories, influenced by gender, relationships, available resources, and context.

In several African countries, the relational lives of LGB people are built under the effect of religious, cultural and political norms, the risk of violence and limited institutional recognition. Currier (2012) has shown that identity categories and collective strategies are shaped by organizational contexts. Müller et al. (2021) documented different forms of violence in nine African countries, while Saalim et al. (2023) described manifestations of stigma in Ghana ranging from gossip and humiliation to exclusion and permanent anticipation of judgment.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, scientific data on the conjugal, family and identity life of LGB people are scarce. UNDP (2022) reports low consideration of sexual and gender minorities in policies and barriers to their social participation. Michael et al. (2024) observed in Kinshasa often negative attitudes towards homosexuality, even though the people concerned could express a positive perception of themselves.

In Kisangani, there is little information on the types of relationships, partner preference, desire for marriage or common-law union, dependents, family experience, and changes in feelings related to awareness. This lack of information limits the understanding of the psychosocial needs and forms of organization of the intimate life of these people in the city. The rationale for this study is therefore the need to describe these dimensions and to examine whether the aspiration to a common-law union varies according to certain sociodemographic characteristics.

1.2. Status of the matter

Studies on same-sex couples first sought to verify whether they differed fundamentally from heterosexual couples. Kurdek (2004) has shown that there are many similarities in relational functioning. Peplau and Fingerhut (2007), in a synthesis of close relationships, insisted on the ordinary mechanisms of intimacy: attraction, commitment, satisfaction, communication, power and rupture. This literature has contributed to shifting the gaze from a supposed deficiency of the couple to the social conditions in which they evolve. More recent research examines stress that targets the relationship. LeBlanc et al. (2015) distinguish between individual pressures and those concerning the couple: lack of recognition, inability to be visible, social invalidation and lack of support. Cao et al. (2017) showed that the relational trajectories of sexual minorities are heterogeneous and depend on personal, dyadic and contextual factors. Reczek (2020) points out that LGBTQ families and couples are a diverse field, crossed by gender, class, race, age and institutions.

The family issue is particularly documented among adolescents and young adults. Ryan et al. (2009) linked family rejection to health risks, while Ryan et al. (2010) associated acceptance with higher self-esteem, more support, and better overall health. Katz-Wise et al. (2016) show that the reactions of relatives

can change over time. This work suggests that trust, cordiality, mistrust, suspicion, estrangement and rejection should be evaluated separately, instead of simply opposing a favourable family and a hostile family.

Identity trajectories were also the subject of longitudinal analyses. Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) have highlighted differences in trajectories according to gender. Floyd and Stein (2002) described several configurations of identity milestones among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Rosario et al. (2006) showed that coherence and change can coexist during development. These studies invite us to interpret feelings at the time of awareness and current feelings as situated states, likely to evolve.

In African research, family, religion, discretion and community networks appear to be determining factors. Currier (2012) has shown that categories and mobilizations are linked to the political context. Müller et al. (2021) documented exposure to violence, and Saalim et al. (2023) showed that stigma can be structural, communal, interpersonal, and internalized. These constraints can encourage low-profile relationships, informal unions, and cautious responses to surveys.

Despite these advances, the data published in the Democratic Republic of the Congo remain insufficient, and those from Kisangani are almost non-existent. The available studies do not allow us to estimate the frequency of the different forms of union or to understand the local meaning of the category's marriage, cohabitation, friendship or common-law union. The present study therefore attempts to fill this scientific gap.

1.3. Problem

LGB people may want to build a long-lasting relationship, live as a couple, get married, form a family, or maintain a discreet relationship. However, the options actually available are determined by personal aspirations, economic resources, family expectations, social recognition and institutional constraints. A small proportion of marriages may reflect age, confidentiality, the impossibility of formalizing certain unions or a different conception of commitment.

The relational categories used in a survey can also have different meanings. A common-law union can represent a stable cohabitation, an unofficial relationship, a couple project or a protection strategy. Friendship can refer to a non-marital bond, but it can also serve as a more socially secure label. The high non-response observed on certain aspirations therefore requires a cautious analysis and calls for additional qualitative research.

The problem of this study is twofold: first, there are very few studies on the relational life of LGB people

in Kisangani, and the available information must be interpreted in a context where the public expression of relationships and projects can expose them to judgment. Relational forms and aspirations should be identified, their socio-demographic variations should be examined, and family relationships and subjective trajectories of awareness should be described.

1.4. Research questions

By considering these two problems, the present research attempts to answer the following general question: what are the experiences and aspirations of some LGB people in the city of Kisangani?

In particular, this study answers the following questions:

1. What are the forms of relationship, partner preferences and projects of LGB people in Kisangani?
2. Does the aspiration of these people vary according to their characteristics (age, biological sex, sexual orientation or level of education)?
3. How do these people describe their family relationships, their awareness of sexual orientation, and their past and current feelings?

1.5. Objectives of the study

The general objective is to analyze the experiences and aspirations of some LGB people in the city of Kisangani.

From this general objective, the following specific objectives are derived:

1. Describe the forms of relationship, partner preferences and projects of LGB people in Kisangani;
2. To examine variations in aspiration by characteristics of LGB people in Kisangani (age, biological sex, sexual orientation or level of education);
3. To analyze the family relationships, sexual orientation awareness, and past and current feelings of LGB people in Kisangani.

1.6. Research hypotheses

Based on the fact that LGB people in Kisangani live in a context where recognition and family support are relatively limited, we assume that, in general, the LGB people surveyed develop diversified relational forms and union projects.

We can answer specific questions in the following way:

1. Common-law unions are the most frequently reported form of relationships, while the desire for a future union is more widespread than the formalization of the union in the civil registry;
2. The aspiration to a common-law union would vary according to age, biological sex, sexual orientation and level of education;
3. Family relationships are divided between support and rejection, and current feelings related to

orientation are generally more positive than those reported at the time of awareness.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach presents the framework of this research, the study design, the population, the sampling, the instrument, the variables, the analyses and the ethical considerations.

2.1. Scope of the study

The study was carried out in the city of Kisangani, the capital of the province of Tshopo in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Access to the participants was facilitated by the NGO Progrès Santé Sans Prix (PSSP), an organization involved in health promotion and the fight against HIV. This structure has served as a point of contact with a population whose social visibility is reduced.

2.2. Type and period of the study

This is a quantitative cross-sectional study with a descriptive and analytical aim. It describes relationships, aspirations, and feelings at the time of the survey and examines some associations, without tracking individual changes or establishing causality. The methodological document indicates a field duration of about one month.

2.3. Study population

The target population is all people living in Kisangani who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. This population did not have a known number or an exhaustive list, so it is infinite.

2.4. Sampling, sample size and participation criteria

Non-probability purposive sampling was used. This strategy makes it possible to reach people with the desired characteristics when a sampling frame does not exist, but it exposes to selection bias and limits generalization (Angers, 2009; Quivy et al., 2022). The final sample includes 70 participants recruited with the support of PSWs.

Eligible candidates identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, living in the study area, who had received information about the research and had agreed to participate.

2.5. Data collection technique and instrument

The collection was based on a questionnaire survey. The instrument included 17 questions on socio-demographic characteristics, variables related to relationship type, partner preference, type of marriage, desire for union, common-law aspiration, dependents, family relationships, duration of awareness, initial and current feelings, and subjective accounts of the identity journey.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 10 people excluded from the final sample. After explanation and consent, it was self-administered. This mode reduces direct intervention by the investigator and promotes confidentiality.

2.5.1. Study Variables

For this study, in addition to sociodemographic variables, four other groups of variables were selected.

- The type of relationship corresponded to the category reported by the participant: marriage, cohabitation, friendship, common-law union, engagement or lack of specification.
- The general desire for union indicated the intention to unite one day, while the specific aspiration for common-law union was a separate variable classified as yes, no or no information.
- Family relationships included responses relating to trust, suspicion, mistrust, rejection or estrangement, cordial and very cordial relationships.
- The identity trajectory was apprehended by the age of awareness, the initial and current feelings and the subjective explanations reported by the participants. These explanations are treated as personal narratives and not as scientific causes of sexual orientation.
- The sociodemographic variables examined in the association analyses were age, biological sex, sexual orientation, and education.

2.6. Data processing and analysis

The responses were coded in Microsoft Excel and parsed in SPSS version 27. Categorical variables were described by frequencies and percentages. For multiple-response questions, the results are presented in terms of number of citations and percentage of participants or respondents. The association between common-law aspiration and age, biological sex, sexual orientation, and education level was examined by Pearson's chi-square. Monte Carlo probabilities were retained because of small numbers in some cells. The V for Cramér was used to assess the size of the association. The materiality threshold has been set at 0.05.

III. RESULTS

The results are organized into five axes: sociodemographic characteristics, relational forms and preferences, formalization and aspirations for union, family relationships and dependents, and then trajectories of awareness and feelings.

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

As for sociodemographic characteristics, four of them were retained in this study, namely the age, biological sex, sexual orientation and level of education of the subjects.

Table 3.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (N = 70)

Feature	Modality	n	%
Age	17 to 26 years old	36	51,4
	27 to 35 years old	23	32,9
	36 to 43 years old	11	15,7
Biological sex	Male	56	80,0
	Female	14	20,0
Sexual orientation	Gay	25	35,7
	Lesbian	13	18,6
	Bisexuals	32	45,7
Level of education	Secondary	32	45,7
	Academic	38	54,3

It can be seen from this table that the majority of subjects are under 36 years of age (84.3%). Biological males account for 80.0%. Bisexual participants are the most numerous (45.7%), followed by gay (35.7%) and lesbian (18.6%) people. University-level participants accounted for 54.3%.

3.2. Relationship forms and partner preferences

Regarding the forms of relationships and partner preferences, the sample of this study is distributed as follows:

Table 3.2. Declared form of relationship

Relationship Type	n	%
Common-law union	39	55,7
Wedding	8	11,4
Concubinage	8	11,4
Friendship	8	11,4

Relationship Type	n	%
Engagement	3	4,3
Not specified	4	5,7
Total	70	100,0

A reading of this table shows that common-law unions are the dominant form of relationship, reported by 55.7% of the sample. Marriage, cohabitation and friendship each account for 11.4%, while betrothal accounts for 4.3%. The high proportion of conjugal relationships shows that the participants do not live on the margins of any emotional life, but the categories may have different social meanings.

Table 3.3. Declared partner preferences

Preferred partner	f	%
Bisexual partner	26	38,8
Male	22	32,8
Female	17	25,4
No information	4	6,0

Regarding preference, it emerges that the preference for a bisexual partner is the most cited, ahead of the preference for a man (32.8%) and for a woman (25.4%).

3.3. Formalization of the union

In order to find out whether the respondents aspire to make their union official, we obtained the following results:

Table 3.4. Formalization of the marriage and the wish to join

Position	Indicator	n	%
Declaration of Marriage	Declared civil/legal marriage	2	2,9
	Declared religious marriage	6	8,6
	No type of marriage declared	62	88,6
Desire to unite	Wish to unite one day	47	67,1
	Doesn't want to get married one day	8	11,4

Position	Indicator	n	%
	Neutral/unspecified position	15	21,4

Speaking of formalization, it is declared by eight subjects who mention a civil or religious marriage. On the other hand, 67.1% want to get married one day. This may be due to age, or to constraints, discretion or conceptions of the union that do not necessarily involve official recognition.

Table 3.5. Envisaged partner for a future union

Proposed partner	n	%
A woman	26	37,1
A man	12	17,1
A bisexual person	10	14,3
No information	22	31,4
Total	70	100,0

Regarding the intended partner, a woman is the most frequent response (37.1%), followed by a man (17.1%) and a bisexual person (14.3%). Almost a third did not provide any information.

Table 3.6. Aspiration specific to common-law union

Answer	n	%
Yes	25	35,7
Not	9	12,9
No answer	36	51,4
Total	70	100,0

The information contained in this table shows that the specific aspiration to a common-law union is affirmed by 35.7% and rejected by 12.9%. More than half of the participants did not express an opinion on this.

Table 3.7. Associations between sociodemographic characteristics and common-law aspiration

Variable	χ^2	bill	p Monte Carlo	V of Cramér
Age	7,09	4	0,136	0,225
Biological sex	3,53	2	0,213	0,225
Sexual orientation	7,34	4	0,117	0,229
Level of education	1,43	2	0,557	0,143

The results of the chi-square test indicate that common-law aspiration is not statistically associated with any of the four characteristics studied. Association sizes are moderate for age, gender, and orientation. It follows that the hypothesis of sociodemographic variation is therefore not confirmed for the sample of this study.

3.4. Dependants and family relationships

Table 3.8. Dependants

Answers	n	%
Has at least one dependant	37	52,9
Has no dependents	27	38,6
Not specified	6	8,6
2 to 3 people	22	31,4
More than 4 people	10	14,3

Content results in this table show that more than half of the subjects (52.9%) report having at least one dependent. More than one-third (38.6%) reported having no dependents, 31.4% of subjects reported having between two and three dependents. And 10 topics mentioned more than 4 people.

Table 3.9. Relationships with family members

Relationship Type	n	%
Relations cordiales	22	32,8
Rejection/Removal	22	32,8
Trust	14	20,9
Mistrust	8	11,9
Suspicious	5	7,5
Very cordial relations	2	3,0
No information	2	3,0

Relationships with the family appear in a dispersed way. Cordial relations and rejection or estrangement are cited in identical proportions (32.8%). Trust is mentioned by 20.9%, followed by mistrust (11.9%) and suspicions concern a smaller part (less than 10%). The answers suggest that the same participant may have different relationships depending on the relatives.

3.5. Trajectories of Awareness and Feelings

Regarding the trajectory of awareness, the results are presented in the following lines.

Table 3.10. Awareness of sexual orientation has been growing for a long time

Duration	n	%
1 to 3 years	19	27,9
4 to 9 years old	23	33,8
10 years or more	20	29,4
Not specified	6	8,8
Total	68	100,0

It can be seen from this table that the most frequent category corresponds to an awareness dating back 4 to 9 years (33.8%). Nearly three out of ten respondents place this awareness at ten years or more, while 27.9% became aware between one and three years ago.

Table 3.11. *Feelings at the time of awareness*

Sentiment	n	%
Difficulty in explaining	42	60,0
Joy	23	32,8
Fun / Pride	10	14,3
Comfortable	8	11,4
Disgust	8	11,4
Very comfortable	2	2,9
Pride	1	1,4
Not specified	3	4,3

Compared to the feeling felt at the time of care, difficulty in explaining the experience is the most reported feeling at the time of awareness (60%). Positive emotions, including joy (32.8%), pleasure and pride (11.4%), are also present. Disgust was cited by 11.4% of the responses.

Table 3.12. *Current feelings related to sexual orientation*

Sentiment	n	%
Very comfortable	36	53,7
Normal/Joy	30	44,8
No particular feeling	22	32,8
Fear	17	25,4
Not very cheerful	10	14,9
Pride	5	7,5
Comfortable	2	3,0
Fun / Pride	2	3,0
Disgust / surprise	1	1,5

The current feelings are much more positive. Feeling very comfortable (53.7%) and considering the situation as normal or happy (44.8%) were the most frequently mentioned responses by respondents.

However, fear is also cited by 25.4% and feeling unhappy by 14.9%. Other feelings are cited in small proportions (less than 10%).

Table 3.13. Subjective narratives concerning the identity journey

Reported account	n	%
"Born this way" and progressive awareness	37	53,6
Initiation	17	24,6
Imitation	13	18,8
Lack of financial resources	3	4,3
Curiosity / Feeling	3	4,3
Lack of friends	1	1,4
Having been approached by a girl	1	1,4
Difficulty responding	1	1,4
No information	6	8,7

It emerges from this table that the story of an orientation experienced as always present and gradually understood is mentioned by more than half of the subjects interviewed (53.6%). Other participants mentioned initiation (24.6%) or imitation (18.8%).

IV. DISCUSSION

In this subsection, we consolidate the results obtained with those of other researchers in order to make them more intelligible. This discussion successively takes up relational forms, aspirations for union, family relationships and identity trajectories, confronting the results with previous research and the limits of the study.

After analysis, we found that nine out of ten participants say they are in a conjugal relationship, and common-law unions are the most common form. This result shows that the LGB people surveyed build bonds of attachment and commitment, in line with the work of Peplau and Fingerhut (2007) and Kurdek (2004), who insist on the similarities between the mechanisms of sexual minority couples and those of other couples. The predominance of common-law unions may represent a choice, a stage of life, a designation of cohabitation or an adaptation given the limited recognition of this type of union in the country.

The preference for a bisexual person is the most cited, but men and women also occupy an important place. These results reflect the composition of the sample, where bisexual participants are most numerous. They also remind us that orientation, identity, attraction and the choice of a partner should not be reduced to a mechanical correspondence.

The general desire to marry one day is expressed by 67.1%, while only 11.5% declare a civil or religious marriage. This discrepancy is in line with the idea that conjugal aspirations can be strong while the possibilities of formalization are limited. LeBlanc et al. (2015) show that lack of recognition and social invalidation can produce stress aimed directly at the couple. Reczek (2020) points out that LGBTQ families and couples negotiate their projects in unequal legal, social and economic frameworks.

The partner considered for a future union is most often a woman, followed by a man or a bisexual person, but nearly a third do not respond. This distribution prohibits the assumption that all plans for a union concern a same-sex relationship. It reflects projects of social conformity, personal desires, the bisexuality of many participants or the sensitivity of the issue.

The specific aspiration to a common-law union is not associated with age, biological sex, sexual orientation or level of education. The hypothesis of socio-demographic variation is therefore not confirmed. However, the absence of meaning should not be confused with demonstrated equality. Silence can be significant in a context of risk of disclosure.

More than half of the subjects report having dependents. This observation qualifies the representations that isolate LGB people from family life. They can take on responsibilities towards parents, children or friends and participate in solidarity exchanges. Research on LGBTQ families invites us to consider these real networks rather than defining the family solely on the basis of filiation or marriage (Reczek, 2020). Family relations are strongly contrasted, cordiality and rejection or estrangement are cited in identical proportions. This polarization is consistent with the work of Ryan et al. (2009, 2010) and Katz-Wise et al. (2016), who show that support and rejection can vary between members of the same family and evolve over time.

Awareness dates back more than three years for the majority of respondents. The initial feelings are marked by difficulty in explaining the experience, but also by joy, ease, pleasure, pride and, in some, disgust. The work of Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000), Floyd and Stein (2002) and Rosario et al. (2006) shows that the identification trajectories are multiple and that the milestones can occur in different orders. The results of this study are part of this diversity.

Current feelings appear more frequently positive, with a significant proportion of participants declaring themselves very comfortable or considering their orientation to be normal or joyful. This possible evolution seems to show processes of adaptation and acceptance. Rostosky and Riggle (2017) remind us that sexual minorities also develop forms of resilience, meaning and pride. Nevertheless, a quarter of respondents still mention fear, which may be related to the anticipation of judgment, violence or the risk of disclosure.

The narrative of "born this way" and progressive awareness dominates, but other responses evoke initiation, imitation or economic difficulties. These categories may reflect available linguistic resources, socially circulate explanations, or attempt to make sense of experience retrospectively.

The study has several limitations. Interest-based sampling and recruitment through an organization reduce representativeness. People living their orientation in an entirely hidden way may be absent. The data are declarative, multiple-response questions complicate the denominators, and some categories are ambiguous. Non-response is very high for the aspiration to a common-law union and marriage.

CONCLUSION

The sample studied is characterized by a high presence of conjugal relationships and the predominance of common-law unions. The general desire for union is frequent, but the formalization of marriage is rare. Partner preferences and plans are diverse, in a sample that includes a significant proportion of bisexual people. The specific aspiration to a common-law union does not vary significantly according to the sociodemographic characteristics studied, but the high non-response requires caution.

Family relations appear to be divided between cordiality, trust, mistrust and rejection. The trajectories of awareness are heterogeneous and the current feelings often seem more positive than the initial feelings, without the complete disappearance of the fear. These results show the interest of interventions that respect confidentiality, relational support and family dialogue, as well as the need for mixed or longitudinal research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To set up confidential spaces for relational and psychological support accessible to LGB people;
- Develop, on a voluntary and secure basis, interventions with families focused on the prevention of rejection, violence and expulsion;
- To deepen the quality of the local meaning of the term's marriage, concubinage, common-law union, friendship and conjugal relationship;

- Conduct mixed or longitudinal studies to observe changes in self-acceptance, family support, and union plans;
- Reformulate questions about the origin of guidance to clearly distinguish between awareness, identity, attraction, behaviours, relationships and disclosure;
- Check before publication the collection dates, authorisations, the reference of the ethical opinion and the consent procedure for underage participants.

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