25 Years of Same-Sex Unions in Sweden: Success Story or Stalled Progress?*

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Abstract

Given the historical and continuing prevalence of structural obstacles, interpersonal discrimination, and social norms opposing family formation among LGBTQ populations, it is important for researchers to understand the size and sociodemographic composition of individuals in same-sex unions. Using administrative data from Swedish population registers that now cover 25 years since same-sex registered partnerships were legalized, we assessed hypothesis about and document historical changes in the sociodemographic characteristics of Swedes aged 20-60 in same-sex unions, including a portrait of contemporary same-sex married Swedes in 2021. We focused on how structural, interpersonal, and normative changes over time were reflected in these changing sociodemographic characteristics. Our preliminary analyses found that some aspects were suggestive of a success story and others of stalled progress. The relatively low prevalence of and the continued linearly increasing demand for same-sex marriage over time suggest that much potential for growth in same-sex marriage remains today. The strong overrepresentation of same-sex married Swedes, especially men, in large cities implies continued subnational discriminatory contexts. Other findings suggest that gender inequalities in the availability of parenthood in same-sex couples is increasingly stratifying same-sex marriage by gender and parental status, and by socioeconomic status among male same-sex unions. For some, perhaps especially women in same-sex marriages living with children, the results point toward a partial success story emerging over time. For many others, the results are mixed and suggestive of persistent normative and discriminatory contexts that may continue to disadvantage same-sex couples.

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Sweden is considered one of the friendliest national contexts for LGBQ populations (also called sexual minorities and related to but distinct from transgender and nonbinary or gender identity minority populations) globally (Pachankis & Bränström, 2019). One important aspect of sexual minority rights is same-sex union formation. Same-sex registered partnerships were legalized in Sweden in 1995, with same-sex marriage legalized in 2009. With a wealth of data from Swedish population registers now available through 2001, we can *examine change over 25 years in the sociodemographic characteristics of Swedes in same-sex unions*. Two previous studies have investigated Swedish same-sex couples from a demographic perspective, focusing on the registered partnership era from 1995-2002 (Andersson et al., 2006) and the early same-sex marriage era through 2012 (Kolk & Andersson, 2020). In this study we provide new and updated knowledge on same-sex unions, focusing on *how changes over time in legal obstacles to union formation and parenting, interpersonal discrimination, and social norms are reflected in the changing sociodemographic characteristics of the population of Swedes in same-sex unions.*

Background

Sexual minorities face substantial stressors articulated in the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003). Understanding minority stressors requires a *multilevel* perspective on social contexts, including institutionalized, interpersonal, and internalized discrimination and stigma (Everett et al., 2021). *Societal* discriminatory policies and institutional practices limit sexual minorities' rights. Examples range from outright criminalization of same-sex sexual behaviors, to a lack of legal protections against discrimination, to disproportionate legal barriers to partnership rights, marriage, and adoption for same-sex couples. Even when people leave such environments, they have lasting negative health effects (van der Star et al., 2021). *Interpersonally*, sexual minorities face discrimination

and victimization (Ayhan et al., 2020). These experiences impact *individuals*, increasing stress, social isolation, and unhealthy behaviors (Bränström et al., 2016).

In Sweden, steady changes to policy environments (see below for details) have been improving the prospects of sexual minorities. Sweden scores the lowest on a scale of "structural stigma" against sexual minorities (Pachankis & Bränström, 2019). Yet room for improvement remains, for example regarding the parental rights of nonbiological parents in same-sex couples. And elevated discrimination, victimization, and health disparities are still prevalent (Bränström & Pachankis, 2018). Even so, evidence suggests that as societal-level climates improve for sexual minorities, so does their health, in part through reduced victimization and threats of violence (Everett et al., 2021; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2016).

Some research has identified protective factors that counterbalance sexual minority health risks. These *protections center around being in a same-sex union* (Hsieh & Liu, 2019), which characterizes a minority of LGBQ people. Research studying the interpersonal dynamics of same-sex couples suggests that they tend to experience strong practical and emotional support (Reczek & Umberson, 2012, 2016). The benefits of same-sex unions are less clear cut for bisexual people (Hsieh & Liu, 2019).

Bränström (2021) found that approximately 5% of respondents aged 16 and older self-identify as sexual minorities, representing hundreds of thousands of Swedes. Yet in official registers there was only a total of 12,158 Swedes in same-sex marriages in 2017. Thus, people in same-sex unions are a small subgroup of sexual minorities, yet they are the most visible in national population statistics. Formal same-sex partnerships in Sweden are thus not only rare but may be highly *selected*: the sociodemographic characteristics of people in same-sex unions may differ systematically from those of other sexual minorities in ways that have implications for well-being and socioeconomic attainment. For example, people in same-sex partnerships may have greater socioeconomic resources than other sexual minorities or be less likely to be foreign-born, which could partially explain relatively advantaged outcomes. Indeed, because of the lower prevalence of marriage

among Swedes regardless of spouse's sex (with 40% of Swedish women aged 18 and older and 41% of men currently married; https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/manniskorna-i-sverige/gifta-i-sverige/), married people are a relatively selected group in the population overall.

Timeline of Key Expansions to LGBQ Rights

1944: Same-sex sexual activity became legal in Sweden.

1979: Homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness.

1987: Unfair discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was banned.

1996: Same-sex registered partnerships were legalized.

2002: Sexual orientation became grounds for criminal hate speech.

2003: Adoption rights for same-sex parents were established, with expansions ongoing since then and full equality not yet reached today.

2005: Lesbian couples were granted access to in vitro fertilization (IVF) in the Swedish health care system.

2006: European Union poll found that 71% of Swedes supported gay marriage.

2009: Same-sex marriage was legalized.

2015: Eurobarometer poll found that 90% of Swedes supported gay marriage and 7% opposed.

Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis focuses on the size of the population of Swedes in same-sex unions over time. *Hypothesis 1* expects the rise in same-sex unions to taper off over time as unmet demand for marriage is realized and the number of same-sex marriages becomes equalized with the size of the LGBQ population. With rising acceptance of sexual minority status and same-sex marriage, we expect that the removal of legal barriers to unions and parenthood, reduced interpersonal discrimination, and improvements in social norms facilitate the formation of same-sex marriages among sexual minorities.

The next two hypotheses emphasize family formation in same-sex unions. *Hypothesis 2* expects female-female unions to become increasingly prevalent over time relative to male-male unions

because of gender differences in access to parenthood in the context of links between childrearing and marriage in Sweden. The timeline showed reductions in obstacles to childbearing for female-female couples. In contrast, male-male couples face increasingly rare international adoption over the same time period combined with continued objections to same-sex adoptive parents on the part of many sending countries, as well as the continued illegality of domestic altruistic surrogacy. Marriage in Sweden often occurs in the context of childrearing, making marriage disproportionately likely for female same-sex couples given gender differences in the availability of parenthood.

Another factor that can influence whether same-sex couples are parenting children is the existence of children from previous different-sex unions. *Hypothesis 3* expects that the prevalence of previous unions remained high among men in same-sex unions living with children because of a persistent lack of alternatives for parenting in male same-sex couples. For female same-sex unions, a similarly high initial prevalence is expected to decrease over time as sexual minority status became more accepted for young people and alternatives for parenting in female same-sex couples became legalized.

One hypothesis examines change over time in the selectivity of same-sex unions relative to different-sex unions in Sweden. *Hypothesis 4* expects growing similarity over time between women and men in same-sex marriages and their different-sex counterparts, as structural barriers, discrimination, and social norms moved in the direction of greater equality.

The last two hypotheses focus on how discriminatory national and subnational contexts may shape the changing sociodemographic composition of the same-sex married population. *Hypothesis 5* expects higher proportions of foreign-born people in same-sex relative to different-sex marriages,

with increases over time together with rising immigration levels as LGBQ individuals seek out Sweden as a relatively less discriminatory context to live in.

Hypothesis 6 expects higher proportions of women and men in same-sex marriages to be living in cities because of lower levels of discrimination and normative sanctions, decreasing over time as these pressures lessened.

Method

We assess these hypotheses using large-scale data from administrative registers covering the entire Swedish population. The primary register reports all union status changes in the population starting in 1968. Both registered partnerships, the union status accorded to same-sex couples from 1996-2008, and marriages, which cover all couples starting in 2009, are included in the register. This register allows information on spouses such as sex to be linked together, facilitating the identification of same-sex versus different-sex unions. Marriages that took place abroad and were not registered in Sweden often lack the spouse's Swedish person ID number, in which case the spouse's sex could not be identified and the union was omitted from analysis. The register also included union dissolutions through divorce or death, as well as the dates of all events. We included a measure of whether the focal individual had a previous marriage/registered partnership before the current one. Note that because of poor data quality especially in earlier periods and when couples do not share a biological child, we were unable to capture cohabiting couples in this analysis. Sweden's high cohabitation rates mean that married people are a sociodemographically selected group, which is important to keep in mind when interpreting this analysis.

We linked the union status changes register to other population registers to obtain several other variables. The focal person's age in years, sex, birth country (Sweden versus elsewhere), educational attainment (having attended at least 3 years of postsecondary education versus not), individual wages (earning the government-mandated base income—a low amount—versus not), and individual business and wage earnings (earning in the top quartile of the population versus not). A final important variable was whether the focal individual lived with at least one child aged 0-17.

Children with shared residential custody between two parents are still registered in just one household, making this a conservative measure of parental status.

We limited the analytic population to married individuals registered as Swedish residents in the year being analyzed. Those aged between 20-60 years old were included in analyses in order to capture Swedes of working age. We analyzed the sociodemographic characteristics of the married population in a given year. Our analysis focuses on the 25-year period from 1996-2001, measured at 5-year intervals (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021). A backlog of demand made 1995, the first year when same-sex unions could legally form, an outlier, but those who registered a partnership in 1995 and remained partnered in 1996 formed part of the 1996 population of people in same-sex marriages. The number of married Swedes included in our analyses varied by year and was 2,438,159 in 2021.

These results are preliminary and focus on descriptive analyses. Our future plans include strategies for adjusting for underlying age-based and other differences in the married population changing over time in ways that are a product of the 1968 start date of the union status changes register. We plan to conduct multivariate analyses, as well as replicating the analyses for a narrower age range such as 40-45.

Results

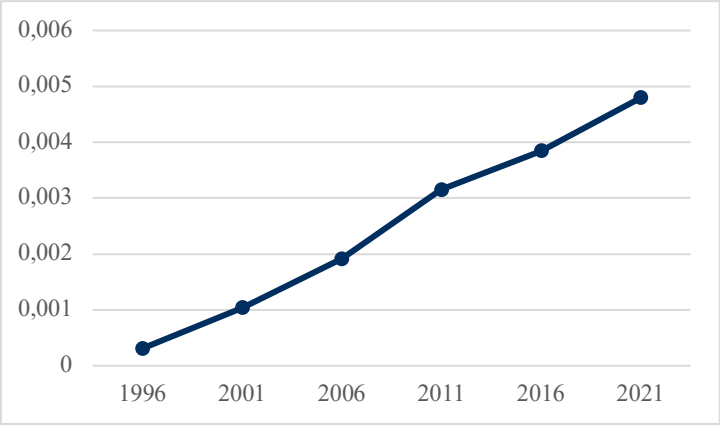
Approximately 12,000 Swedes aged 20-60 were living in same-sex unions in 2021 (Figure 1), a total that is 24 times higher compared to 25 years ago, when fewer than 500 people were in same-sex unions in 1996. As Figure 1 shows, the growth in same-sex unions as a proportion of all marriages has been linear and shows no signs of slowing.

During the same period when same-sex unions have become ever more prevalent, however, in 2021 they remained low relative to the population. People in same-sex unions constituted less than 0.5% of all married individuals. In comparison, our supplemental analyses of Sweden's National Public Health Survey (https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/public-health-reporting/), which adjusted for weights and complex survey design to

produce nationally representative results, found that 1.15% of the population self-identified as gay or lesbian, and another 2.63% self-identified as bisexual. Thus, the proportion of Swedes in same-sex relative to different-sex unions is still quite low relative to the proportion of adults who self-identify as LGB.

Taken together, these results do not find support for Hypothesis 1, which expected the rise in same-sex unions to taper off over time as unmet demand for marriage is realized and the number of same-sex marriages becomes equalized with the size of the LGBQ population. Instead, the findings suggest that there is still much progress to be made in the future along these lines.

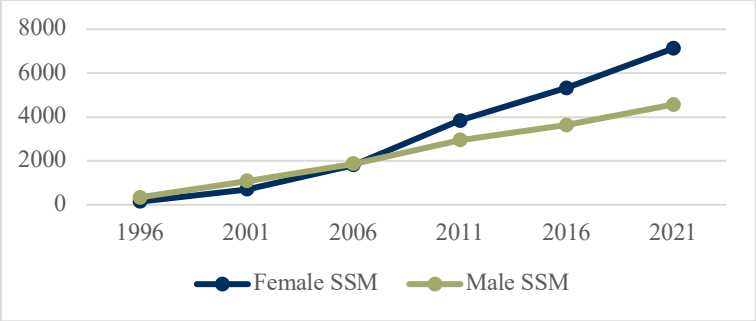
Figure 1. Same-sex married people as a proportion of all married individuals.



Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year.

Hypothesis 2 expected female-female unions to become increasingly prevalent over time relative to male-male unions because of gender differences in access to parenthood in the context of links between childrearing and marriage in Sweden. This hypothesis was supported by our results; see Figure 2. Women in female-female unions constituted less than 30% of all same-sex married individuals in 1996. By 2006 after some reductions in barriers to female-female couples' childbearing, there was gender parity. In 2021 after further reductions of barriers, people in female-female unions constituted 61% of all individuals in same-sex marriages.

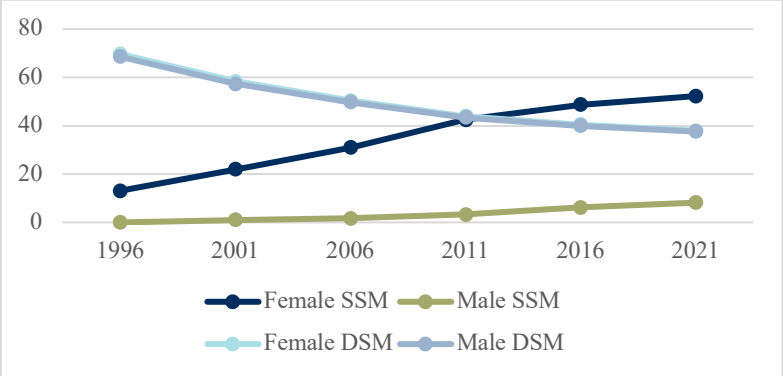
Figure 2. Number of same-sex married people by sex.



Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage.

Figure 3 further supports the notion that this change in gender balance in same-sex unions was related to childrearing. The proportion of men in same-sex marriages who lived with children aged 0-17 rose from zero men in 1996 to just 8% in 2021, but the vast majority of men in same-sex marriages still did not live with children. In contrast, since 2011 women in same-sex marriages have had a higher proportion living with children than women and men in different-sex marriages, rising to 52% in 2021. This has resulted in a very large gender disparity between same-sex couples in coresidence with children.

Figure 3. Percent of married people living with children by partner and own sex.

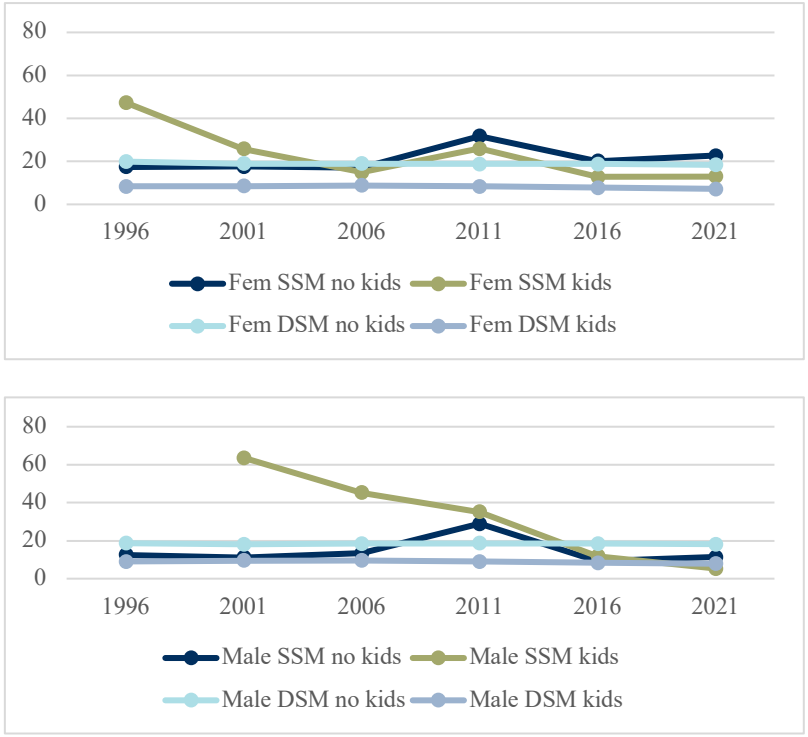


Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Figure 4 provides evidence on the role of previous unions in childrearing differentials. Hypothesis 3 expected that previous unions would be high among men in same-sex unions living with children, while that high proportion would decrease over time for women in same-sex marriages. The decrease over time for women is supported by the results, but starting in 2016

women in same-sex marriages living with children actually had lower proportions with a previous union relative to women living without children, whether married to someone of the same or different sex. Hypothesis 3 received partial support for men: Before 2016 men in same-sex marriages who lived with children disproportionately had previous unions, but this proportion decreased sharply over time and ultimately ended up with the lowest prevalence of previous unions among the four groups of men analyzed.

Figure 4. Percentage of married women (4a) and men (4b) with previous marriages by partner sex and parenthood status.

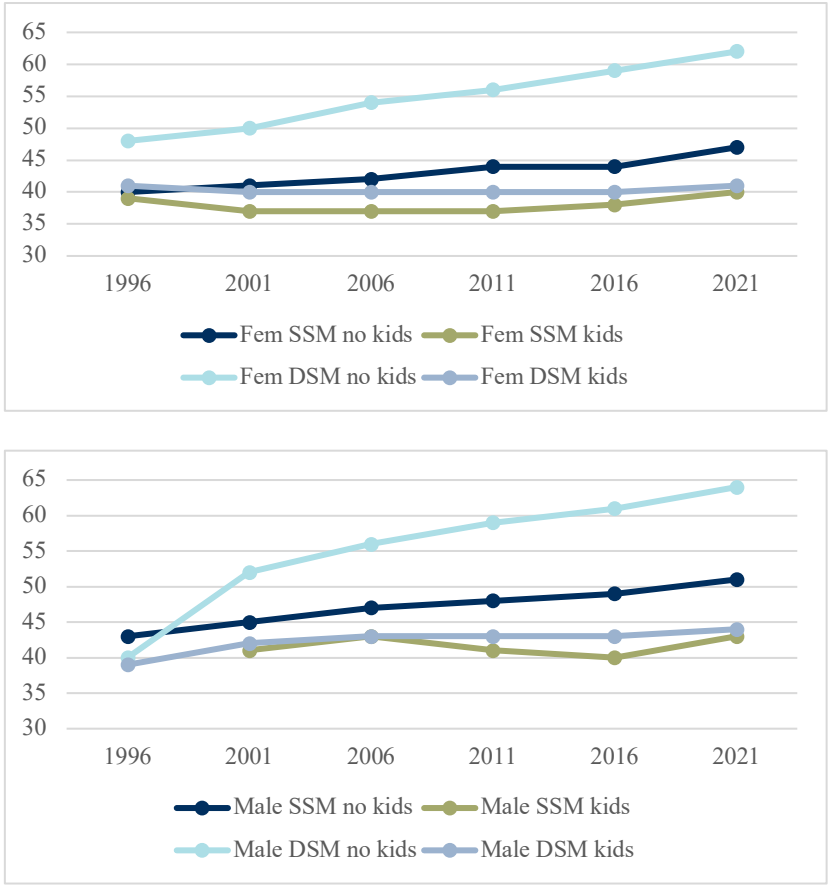


Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Hypothesis 4 expects growing similarity over time between women and men in same-sex marriages and their different-sex counterparts, as structural barriers, discrimination, and social norms moved in the direction of greater equality. Figure 5 partially supports the hypothesis: Age differences have not been large for either gender throughout the 25 years of same-sex union legality. The exception is women and men in different-sex marriages who do not live with children. Because the union status register is only available for unions formed from 1968 and onwards and

because many people in different-sex couples who do not live with children are older and have adult children, the age distribution of individuals in this category rose over time in part as a function of left-censoring in the data. By 2021, that censoring should no longer have played a role in the population aged 20-60 that we studied here. Age gaps within gender for people living with children were extremely small in 2021, regardless of the spouse's gender.

Figure 5. Age of married women (5a) and men (5b) by partner sex and parenthood status.

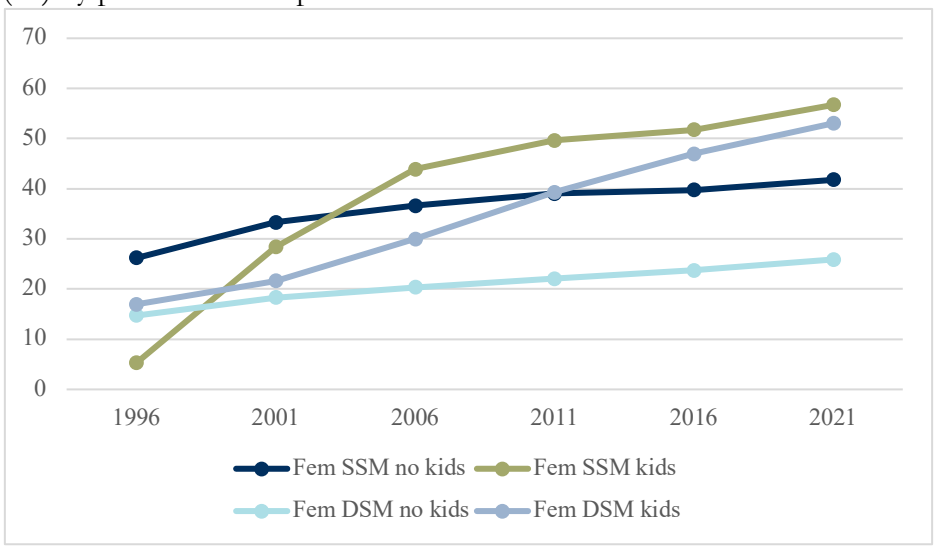


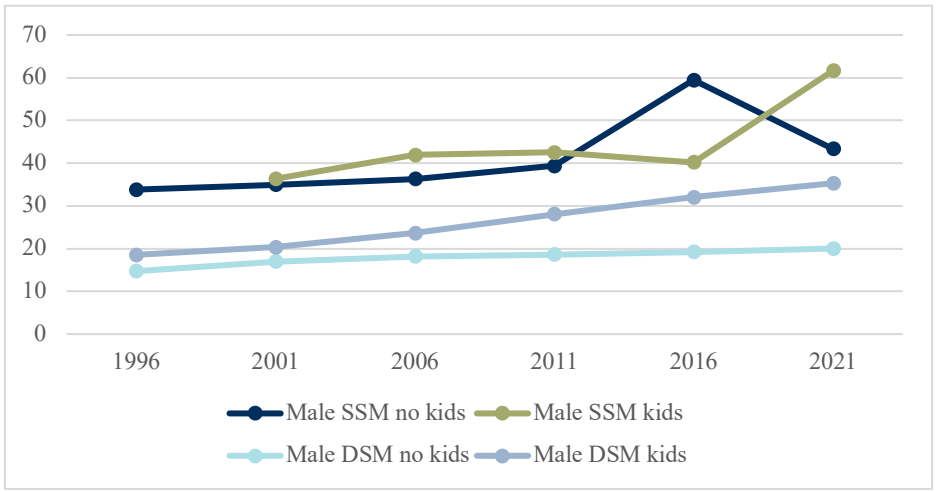
Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Analyzing postsecondary educational attainment, Figure 6 shows that since 2001 and for both women and men, those in same-sex marriages have retained an educational advantage over their counterparts of the same gender and parental status. In 2021 this disparity was 16 percentage points for women living without children, 23 percentage points for men living without children, and 27 percentage points for men living with children. The disparities remained similar or grew over time in these groups. Women living with children were an exception, with the same-sex and different-

sex married nearly converging over time in their prevalence of postsecondary attainment. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported only for women living with children.

Figure 6. Attainment of ≥3 years postsecondary education among married women (6a) and men (6b) by partner sex and parenthood status.



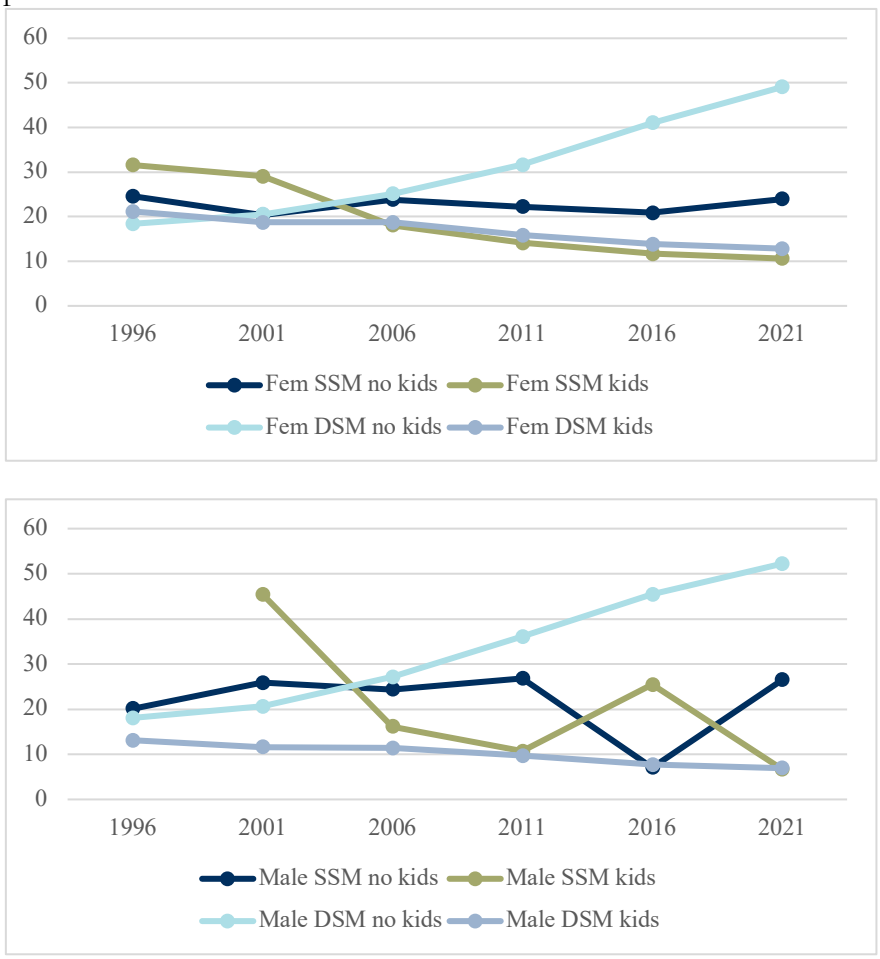


Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Turning to low levels of personal income, Figure 7 found support for the hypothesis only among women and men living with children. In these groups, the prevalence of low income (excepting 2001 for the very small number of men in same-sex marriages) remained low, and those in same-sex versus different-sex marriages moved toward convergence. In contrast, women and men living without children had higher and rising levels of low income, particularly those in

different-sex marriages. The age composition of this group may play a key role, which multivariate models will help disentangle.

Figure 7. Low personal income among married women (7a) and men (7b) by partner sex and parenthood status.

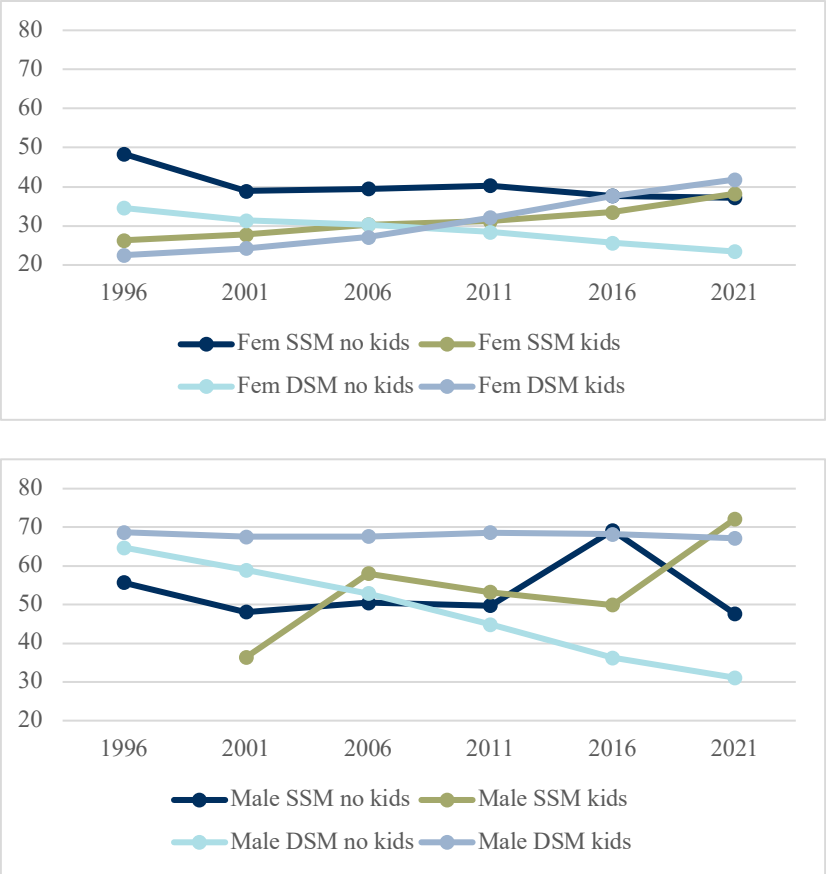


Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Further analyzing income, Figure 8 focuses on the top quintile of personal income in the population. As before, Hypothesis 4 is supported only for women and men living with children. The prevalence of high income among women and men in same-sex marriages living with children rose over time, by 2021 nearly converging with their counterparts in different-sex marriages at higher proportions than among those not living with children. Among those not living with children, women in same-sex marriages maintained an advantage over those in different-sex marriages throughout the period, whereas men in same-sex marriages gained an advantage in high

income only after 2006. These gaps grew over time and should be tested in multivariate models that adjust for age. Gender disparities in high earnings that favor men should be noted, as they existed within all categories studied here.

Figure 8. Personal income in top quartile among married women (8a) and men (8b) by partner sex and parenthood status.

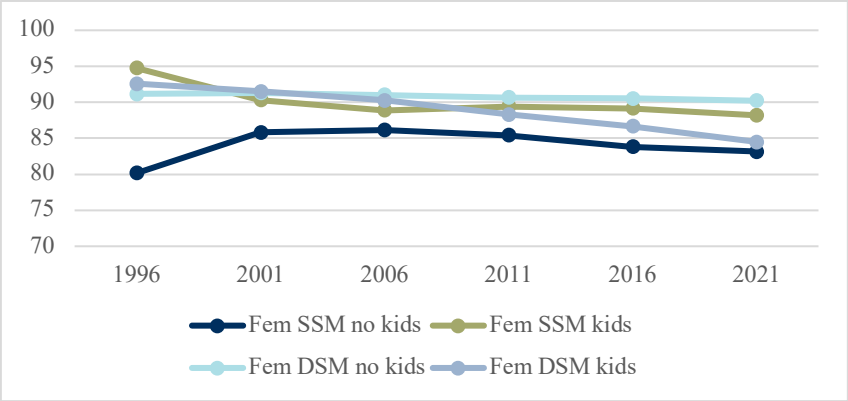


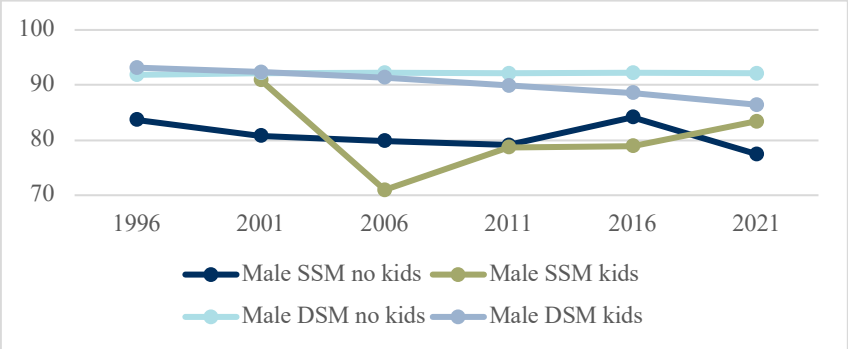
Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Hypothesis 5 expects higher proportions of foreign-born people in same-sex relative to different-sex marriages with increases over time together with rising immigration levels, as LGBQ individuals seek out Sweden as a relatively less discriminatory context to live in. This hypothesis was partially supported. Throughout the 25-year period, men in same-sex marriages, regardless of coresidence with children, were disproportionately born outside Sweden relative to those in different-sex marriages. The same was true for women in same-sex marriages living without

children. In contrast, women in same-sex marriages living with children were similar to all women in different-sex marriages throughout the period.

Figure 9. Percent Swedish-born among married women (9a) and men (9b) by partner sex and parenthood status.



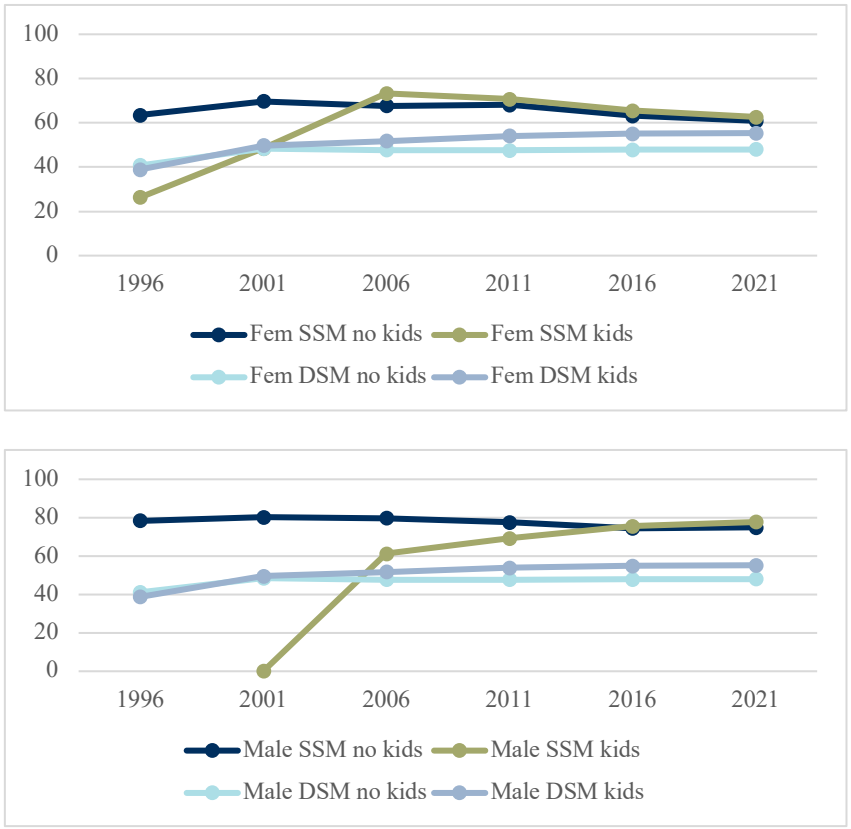


Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Finally, Figure 10 explores internal rather than international migration. Hypothesis 6 expected higher proportions of women and men in same-sex marriages to be living in cities because of lower levels of discrimination and normative sanctions, decreasing over time as these pressures lessened. The results support this hypothesis starting in 2006 for both women and men. Men in same-sex marriages were particularly overrepresented among those living in Sweden's three major metropolitan areas, at 75% or more in 2021 regardless of coresidence with children. Early results were different for both women and men in same-sex marriages living with children, moving swiftly toward convergence with their childless counterparts after 2006. Early on, women and men in same-sex marriages living with children were particularly underrepresented in urban areas. This

may be a result of the changing composition of this group, earlier on coresiding with children from previous unions and later resulting from childbearing within same-sex unions.

Figure 10. Percentage living in major metropolitan areas among married women (10a) and men (10b) by partner sex and parenthood status.



Data source: Swedish national registers.
Notes: Includes married Swedish residents aged 20-60 in each year. SSM=same-sex marriage, DSM=different-sex marriage.

Discussion

This study began by asking whether, after 25 years of legalized same-sex unions in Sweden, the demography of people in same-sex marriages is suggestive of a success story or stalled progress. Our findings from analyzing Swedish population registers from 1996 (the year after registered partnerships became legal) to 2021 provide a nuanced preliminary answer. Demand for same-sex marriage continues to grow, with no tapering of this growth on the horizon and with a remaining sizeable disparity between observed and expected numbers of LBGQ Swedes in same-sex marriages. This may suggest the presence of remaining structural, normative, and discriminatory

barriers that still affect same-sex marriage for Swedes. The results on internal migration, showing that relatively few people in same-sex marriages—most particularly men—lived outside of major metropolitan areas even in 2021, provide another clue that these factors are still solidly in play.

Analyses of trends in socioeconomic attainment show that for women in same-sex marriages living with children, and often for their male counterparts, similarities to those living with children and different-sex spouses are growing. In many cases, whether or not a married person lives with children is more strongly associated with education and personal income than is the sex of their spouse. Married people who are living with children are generally increasingly more socioeconomically advantaged than those who are not (except for a persistent educational advantage among both categories of men in same-sex marriages). However, multivariate analyses accounting for differences in the age distribution of childless people in different-sex marriages are needed to reassess these trends.

As the socioeconomic findings suggest, parenthood is becoming increasingly salient for understanding the composition of the same- and different-sex populations. But for those in same-sex marriages, unlike those with different-sex spouses, parenthood is increasingly unequal by gender. Just 8% of men in same-sex marriages lived with children in 2021, compared to a majority of women with same-sex spouses. For female-female couples, decreases in discriminatory policies have led to greater availability of IVF and acknowledgment of parental rights. Trends are going in the opposite direction for male-male couples, who cannot typically bear their own children. Falling international adoption rates throughout this period, paired with very high costs for international surrogacy and low levels of previous unions among men who marry men, have if anything increased barriers to childbearing in this population. This has led to rising inequalities within male-male unions, as evidenced by the relatively very high levels of educational attainment and personal income among the small group of men in same-sex marriages who live with children.

In conclusion, same-sex marriage appears to be becoming increasingly stratified by gender, parental status, and class. For some, perhaps especially women in same-sex marriages living with

children, the results point toward a partial success story emerging over time. For many others, the results are mixed and suggestive of persistent normative and discriminatory contexts that may continue to disadvantage same-sex couples. Our findings further suggest that same-sex marriage is still not considered as widespread an option as different-sex marriage is. Further changes in the composition and prevalence of Swedish same-sex marriage as a distinct phenomenon from different-sex marriage can be expected to continue in the future.

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