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The Building Blocks of Resistance against Same-Sex Marriage on Aruba

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| Item Type | Book chapter |
| Authors | Boucher, Veere |
| Citation | Boucher, V. (2024). The Building Blocks of Resistance against Same-Sex Marriage on Aruba. In Mijts, E. Ballantyne, J. & Rodriguez, C. (2024). UAUCU Student Research Exchange – Collected Papers 2024. University of Aruba. 113-124. |
| Publisher | University of Aruba/University College Utrecht |
| Journal | UAUCU Student Research Exchange – Collected Papers 2024 |
| Download date | 2026-03-09 17:59:57 |
| Link to Item | https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14473/1687 |



Veere Boucher, Utrecht University

I have spent this time meeting people I would never have otherwise.

I find that I have trouble writing a summary of my time here on Aruba. My experience has been, well, mixed. A couple weeks ago, a bright-eyed US student, fresh off the plane, asked me if I was having ‘sooo much fun?’ on Aruba. Unfortunately, my reply was ‘No, I actually thoroughly dislike this place.’ I had real reasons for this answer. For the 2.5 months that I have been here, I have been constantly overheating; my great friend the sun has turned to an enemy. All of the things I do for fun and relaxation ‘back home’ have been made into stressful events here; any run has to be finished before 7:30 without breakfast, and I have been chased and threatened by dogs on about 1/3 of my runs. Idem dito for biking- I bravely set out to conquer this island on a little mountain bike, but this has proven to be both supremely difficult as well as unsafe – I have, almost unsurprisingly, been hit by a car during my time here. And again, the dogs chasing me into traffic and forcing me to divert my routes were decidedly not a bonus. Walking

– one of my favourite activities – suffers from the same problems. Finally, I have found that being on an island this size, and having any movements made this difficult, I have felt trapped here in a way I have not felt anywhere else. That night, with the American student, I really did feel very negatively about the place where I had landed – I must apologise to any Aruban reading this, but I did.

While writing this, of course I have to make space for some reconsideration. I have spent this time meeting people I would never have otherwise, as well as meeting a culture I would never have otherwise. You might hear me speak negatively about road safety, but never about Arubans – they have been absolutely delightful and have set an example I have decided to follow, especially when it comes to hospitality and generosity. I have seen a country characterised by a wildly different landscape from the ones I know, populated by birds and lizards more colourful

than I have ever encountered. I've had the privilege to dive amongst live reefs with fish in the strangest of shapes. I've had a couple of new foods. Of course, I have also learned in-depth about wondrous things like islandness, smallness, SDG's, Wicked Problems, circular opportunities and science-policy interfaces. I am grateful to our teacher, Eric Mijts, for guiding us through it all with so much interest, dedication and enthusiasm. In the end, I have learned a thing or two about myself as well; I have seen strength I hadn't expected and discovered new weaknesses, and I now know that I am to be very grateful for a temperate climate indeed. Thank you, Aruba, for having me. (But I will only ever return for those that inhabit you (and the wonderful avocados).)

The Building Blocks of Resistance against Same-Sex Marriage on Aruba

Veere Boucher

Introduction

Today, a woman cannot get married to a woman on Aruba. This year, something is going to change about that. Supposedly against the will of the government – possibly against the will of a substantial part of the Aruban population. What exactly is going on? Though over the years, some initiative has been shown from politicians, it was local humanitarian organisations which have taken the crucial step of following the legal rather than democratic route to legalisation of same-sex marriage, with success. However, local religious organisations, citizens and politicians are very vocally opposed.

The purpose of this paper will be to investigate what the *building blocks* of this resistance are - what are the elements that explain the reluctance from Arubans towards same-sex marriage (S-SM)? Defining these 'blocks' should visualise the wall blocking marriage equality - one that might still be worth toppling once S-SM has been implemented, as opinions and behaviours do not change overnight. Having analysed individual elements might help in tackling them, for example through education and awareness campaigns, as well as more specific interventions.

This paper will consist of 4 sections; one where I explain what the history of the debate surrounding S-SM is; a literature review in which I will theorise on what these

building blocks might consist of; a short methods section, and finally my (preliminary) results.

Aruba – State of the Art

In this section I will summarise the history and current status of same-sex marriage and the perception of it and LGBT persons on Aruba. I am drawing on online news articles as well as some interviews and personal conversations I have had to reconstruct this history.

The discussion around same-sex marriage started when the Netherlands legalised this as the very first country in the world in 2001. The question of whether the other countries within the kingdom should follow suit immediately arose. In 2005, the problems that this legislative 'split' would cause presented itself when a Dutch same sex married couple requested the right to be considered married on Aruba, as they were running into problems. This case was closed in 2007 by the Joint Court of Justice. (Parool, 2007) Both the political and social climate proved to be hostile to the development, as illustrated by then-Minister of Justice Rudy Croes, who called this ruling a 'black day for Aruba' (Mirjam, 2005)

5 years later, there had been little change in this attitude, then-Prime Minister Mike Eman claiming that Aruba was not ready for a change on this front. (Caribisch Netwerk,

2013) Just a few years later, member of parliament Desiree Croes (AVP) entered an amendment for a registered partnership into the civil code of Aruba. (Caribisch Netwerk, 2015) This was followed by a period of extreme controversy within society as well as politics; Croes had to be protected by the police and experienced major workplace difficulties. In 2016, parliament agreed to enter the amendment into the civil code that was to replace the one from 2001. However, so much contention remained that the code – along with all other changes made to it – did not enter into practice until 2021, 5 years later. (Spier, 2019; Henriquez, 2021)

In 2019, Fundacion Orguyo was founded with the express purpose to get same-sex marriage legalised via the legal route, as the political route had failed or stalled. The foundation charged its government with violating anti-discrimination laws. LGBT individuals are protected in the Aruban constitution, yet they cannot marry. With this argument, Orguyo won their case in September 2021. The government went into appeal over this decision at the Joint Court of Justice, and lost again. Within a week, the Aruban government decided to go into appeal for a second time, now with the High Court of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in the hope of retaining some political autonomy over this decision. (Nu.cw, 2022; Gaykrant, 2023)

This is an ongoing trial, and the concluding decision is expected on the 31st of May. The government's arguments aim to prove that it is not a judge's place to 'force' such a change on to society. It is argued that this society is not ready, mainly because it is very religious. It is the role of the politicians, as the chosen representatives of their citizens, to make this decision. Additionally, the European Court has said in an earlier ruling that the lack of a marriage option for same-sex couples is not necessarily considered discriminatory. Despite these arguments, it is expected that the High Court will stick to previous courts' conclusions and that thus, same-sex marriage will be legalised in 2024. (Drayer, 2022; Rijcken, 2024)

Politics on Aruba remain divided, while Accion21 and RAIZ have bonded together to push an unwilling parliament into deliberations about the legalisation of same-sex marriage. This debate is supposed to happen come May 8th, though many suspect it will end up being postponed. This might mean that the government could theoretically legalise S-SM before the court does, but this is not expected. (Aruba.nu, 2024)

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review will be to examine what factors come forward in the literature as characteristics of societies and individuals that can predict or explain homonegativity. [*An aversion to homosexuality as a social practice or way of life*' (Jäckle, 2015)] These factors will then be related to Aruba based on what can be found in news articles, what has come forward in personal conversations, and in statistics collected by the Aruban government. The factors discussed are what we will consider potential building blocks of the resistance against same-sex marriage.

Individual characteristics

There has been a great number of studies into what characteristics and values of people are related to homonegativity. The first and most reliable characteristic of a person with a homonegative attitude tends to be their religiosity, measured by their frequency of church attendance and the importance they attach to religion in their lives. (Van den Akker, 2013; Gibert, 2024; Stulhofer, 2009; Withworth, 2023)

Other correlations that are frequently found: Those that earn less, are less educated, are men, are older, live outside the city, are married, hold conservative, authoritarian, and traditional values, have a lower trust in their environment and promote collectivism are more likely to express a homonegative attitude. (Jäckle, 2015; Leach, 2022)

Religion

Religion has consistently come forward as the single greatest predictor of homonegativity in both older and most recent research. Those that attribute greater significance to God in their lives, those that attend church more often, and those that describe themselves as religious tend to be more homonegative. These figures are further moderated by the general level of religiosity in a country; religious citizens of a heavily religious country tend to be less tolerant than the same churchgoers in a less religious environment. (Adamczyk, 2009; Jäckle, 2015; Reese, 2013)

Thus, it is likely that the opinions expressed by religious leaders as well as the religiosity of Aruba can be a factor in the resistance against S-SM. According to Aruba.com, over 75% of the population of Aruba identifies as Roman Catholic. There is little doubt about what the opinions expressed by church leaders encompass when it comes to this subject. In 2016, pastor Spilza of the Dakota church quite ominously warned his congregation that allowing same-sex marriage on Aruba would ‘challenge God’, in line with other homonegative trends in the Church over the years. (Caribisch Netwerk, 2016) In 2023, close to the hearing of the High Court about the same-sex marriage case, Christian groups on the island got together in marches in protest. Religious leaders handed over a petition with 18.000 signatures to the government, to show that the majority of the population did not want to ‘open up marriage’. Pastor Norman Brown claimed at the time that marriage was between a man and a woman by God’s design, and that the government should not ‘normalise’ other forms of marriage. (Stamper, 2023) Again, in March 2024, the churches of both Curacao and Aruba banded together to send a letter to the government not to obey the decisions of the High Court. Crucially, the organisations claimed to be speaking on behalf of the (majority of) the populations. (Antillaans Dagblad, 2024) The church as an organisation and church leaders as individuals on the islands are clearly and vocally opposed to S-SM, all the while claiming that

their opinion reflects that of the population, positioning themselves as opinion leaders.

Masculinity

Some recent studies have found support for the idea that beliefs about gender have a great influence on homonegativity. In fact, in a 2008 study by Brown, adherence to traditional gender role beliefs was the single biggest predictor of this. Men tend to define themselves and their masculinity via a rejection of femininity. Gay men are usually seen as less masculine, and as such in violation of gender roles; this violation tends to then be punished by peers. (Meaney, 2010; Slaatten, 2014) Reese (2014) shows that male participants’ social identity, in this case being their masculinity, is perceived to be threatened by gay men, triggering a negative reaction. This, along with the other research, shows that homonegativity may partially stem from a patriarchal male culture.

For the Aruban case, it may be fruitful to look into machismo culture, considering the geographic location of Aruba and its immigrant population. I adapt the definition of machismo given by Pena-Talamantes (2013) as being the conceptualisation of men and masculinity as dominant (over women and each other), aggressive, unemotional, and heterosexual. This version of masculinity is commonly associated with Latin, South-American cultures. Understandably, this expectation is harder for gay men to live up to; it is incompatible with the lived reality of gay men. There might be more pressure for macho heterosexual men to reject femininity and by association, gay men. Hirai (2014) indeed found that higher levels of machismo beliefs were associated with higher levels of prejudice against gays and lesbians.

Nationalism

Sremac and Ganzevoort (2015) describe the intertwined nature of sexuality, religion and nationalism and how this developed in several countries in EEU. For this thesis, I

will use their definition of sexual nationalism as being “Every perspective that links nationalism with a certain view of sexuality. [...] where] the role of the state is invoked to regulate sexuality through restrictive politics (pro- or antigay discursive regimes) in the process of justifying national self-determination.” The definition of religious nationalism is more complicated; I will use a synthesis between Sremac’s work and that of Mark Juergensmeyer (1996), where (ideological) religious nationalism is understood as a movement that attempts to religionize politics; where compatibility with religious goals becomes a criterion for an acceptable political platform, and that regulates views on and practices of that religion.

Going by aforementioned definitions, religious and sexual nationalism could be a factor in determining some of the homonegativity on Aruba. The reason most often cited by politicians in general and in the court cases for the lack of political will to legalise S-SM has been the idea that Aruba ‘is a Catholic country’ - note the difference with ‘a country with a high population of Catholics’. (Gaykrant, 2023; Hendriksen, 2020) This is also illustrated by Marco Berlis and Hendrik Tevreden of the Aruban government explaining their decision to fight the court’s initial judgement: „*Aruba is in overgrote meerderheid een Christelijk land. Het is autonoom en wil zijn eigen route bepalen*” [Aruba is by large majority a Christian country. It is autonomous and wants to determine its own direction.] The court has gone so far as to remind the lawyers of these countries in several instances that there ought to be a separation of the church and the state, signifying their belief that this is not fully the case at the moment. (Gaykrant, 2023) Also interesting to note is that the argument used in the most recent court case is that legalising S-SM infringes upon the religious rights of Arubans - meaning not only that the right to be opposed to S-SM on religious grounds is considered to be more important than the right to marriage equality, but also that religion is assumed to be inherently opposed to marriage equality. (Nu.cw, 2023) Finally, there is an explicit push

from religious leaders on the island to influence politicians directly as well as indirectly, for example by rallying their constituents to put pressure on politicians to prevent same-sex marriage laws from coming into effect. (Caribisch Netwerk, 2016; NoticiaCla, 2024) In all of these cases, the contours of sexual and religious nationalism are present; the desire to have the state have a say in the expression of their citizen’s sexuality, as well as the clearly apparent wish and intention - from both sides - to allow religion and the church have a say in the governance of Aruba. It is also clear what the impact of this variant of nationalism is, as those in power lose sight of the separation of church and state.

Post-coloniality

One factor that has come forward especially from news articles is the sense that same-sex marriage is a Western and especially *Dutch phenomenon*. From conversations on the island, it has become clear that there is a certain resistance against any form of Dutch influence. Though this has not been mentioned in personal conversations, I think the relationship with Aruba’s coloniser is worth looking into in relation to my case study.

This reaction has been called *decolonial homophobia* by Day (2023); the idea that decolonisation and LGBT+ affirmation are contradictory because LGBT+ rights are a global Northern phenomenon that is imperialistically imposed on the global South. I argue that a similar sentiment is seen in discussions around gay rights on Aruba as well. A mild example is the frequent reminder that Aruba is autonomous in the decisions surrounding S-SM - even though the push for marriage equality appears to clearly have been started by islanders themselves. (De la Fuente, 2009) I expect that this decolonial homophobia will be another one of Aruba’s building blocks of the resistance.

Economy

Although it is less obvious, economic conditions are important predictors of homonegativity. As mentioned

before, those that earn less and have enjoyed a lower education, tend to be more prejudiced. It is also clear that attitudes in less wealthy countries tend to skew towards intolerance of out-groups. It follows that within-country variations in wealth also matter. This is also the conclusion of Andersen (2008), who revealed that high income inequality was actually related to homonegativity regardless of social class. The mechanism would be that this inequality undermines social trust, which then produces social intolerance. However, it was clear that in countries with higher economic inequality, the higher earners were still the most 'tolerant' group. Aruba, though it has a relatively high GDP, Aruba has a very high level of economic inequality. (Worldeconomics; CBS, 2019; GlobalData, 2022) Taking this into account, it is likely that, following the literature, Arubans' lower income and high inequality may play a role in their resistance towards minority rights.

Methods

The review of the literature has brought specific questions to be answered in the rest of my research, such as:

- Does religion on the island affect voting choices and opinions of citizens and politicians with regards to same-sex marriage and/or LGBT individuals? In what way and to what extent? [Nationalism & Religion]
- To what extent can machismo/ traditional conceptualisations be said to be influential in homonegative sentiment on the island and/or in the discussion surrounding same-sex marriage? [Masculinity]
- To what extent do Arubans feel that same-sex marriage is forced upon them by the Netherlands? And do they feel negatively about this? [Post-coloniality]

I will be conducting interviews with key stakeholders like NGO's and churches, as well as interviewing LGBT citizens for their experiences living on the island. This should further refine my research. Then I will set foot on what has been called the 'Aruban marketplace'; Facebook.

I will analyse discussions that are relevant to the topic to see whether sentiment in the population follows the directions I have predicted based on my interviews and literature review and to answer my questions. I will be getting the help of an Aruban student to lift the language barrier.

Preliminary Results

This section of my paper will cover the data I have gathered so far from interviews with key players in the same-sex marriage discussion on Aruba, namely the church, political party representatives, and those organisations and individuals taking initiative. This is combined with interviews with LGBT Arubans in multiple age groups. It must be mentioned that these were primarily with Arubans who were positive about same-sex marriage, were not (very) religious, and/or were LGBT themselves.

I will start with a characterisation of the climate on the island. Then I will discuss how my findings relate to the potential building blocks I established in the literature review.

The Arubans I have spoken to have painted, fairly unanimously, a picture of an island that is very conservative or even 'backwards', with a tight and judgmental religious community. LGBT people do not feel welcome on the island or within the culture; they feel that they are not considered a 'real Aruban' or even a real man or woman. The environment feels hostile, at home, at school and within the church. People face bullying at school and the workplace and have, anecdotally, even been disinherited by or lost contact with family. Organisations and individuals report being threatened online and even facing violence in practice. The younger generation reports less problems than older generations have (had) with their peers. Still, many LGBT Arubans choose to study, work and live abroad for these reasons.

For my discussion on building blocks, I want to start with a factor I did not consider when going into this research but that has prominently come forward in discussions; ethnicity. Aruba is a diverse island, with a very high rate of immigration; almost 40% of Arubans are 'foreign-born'. (CBS, 2023). This results in quite a high percentage of recent South American immigrants. Multiple interviewees have indicated that the culture among these immigrants differs from that of 'Arubans'. Though it is difficult in practise to define 'Arubans' precisely because of these immigration and emigration rates, I will go by the comments of the interviewees. How the Latino population supposedly differs from the Arubans will be indicated per section I discuss.

The 'block' that has come forward the most in previous research as well as in conversations is religion. All interviewees considered religion to be the most important factor. As stated before, the churches are explicitly opposed to same-sex marriage, repeatedly taking action against progress on this front. They are not entirely united in this; the Catholic churches, which have the largest number of followers on the island, are markedly less radical in their approach and thinking than the other Christian churches. These other churches are largely Evangelical, and have a different ethnic make-up, being frequented by the Latin population. Actions like the signature collection tend to be initiated by these minority churches, with Catholics only joining in the very latest stages. Respondents say that these 'Christian' churches, as well as their Latin American constituents, are clearly more homonegative. Meanwhile, the Catholic church indicates to not be so vehemently against the concept of same-sex marriage per se; merely wishing it to not be called 'marriage'. This more relaxed attitude is confirmed by other interviewees, though they all agree that the Catholic church, too, has majorly contributed to homonegativity on the island throughout their lives.

Another complicating factor mentioned is church attendance. Though it is true that the large majority of Arubans subscribe

to a religion, over the past 20 years, church attendance has dropped dramatically, along with a decline in the importance of the church in daily life. Respondents agree that younger generations give a much lower significance to the church. This calls into question the validity of the argument that the high proportion of religious people on the island should legitimate resistance against same-sex marriage; it seems that it is an ethnic as well as a generational minority that is the most, or in the words of some, 'actually' religious.

The next block is the presence of a machismo culture on the island. People in all age groups disagreed on the prevalence of this type of gender role. Though some named it as a factor even without me mentioning gender roles, someone else thought perhaps only 15% of men proscribe to the macho ideals. Generally, people will say that highly masculine and strictly heterosexual gender norms are dominant on the island for men, which goes hand-in-hand with not only strong homonegativity but also with misogyny and high levels of domestic violence. They have indicated a shift towards more lenience on following these gender roles in the last decade, providing some breathing space to LGBT residents. Though at the same time, some feel that they cannot be gay and be seen as a 'real' man or woman. More gender-nonconforming LGBT individuals report having more trouble in their daily lives with homonegativity, mostly through being immediately recognised as being gay. No difference between Arubans and recent Latin immigrants was reported.

To investigate the presence of some form of religious nationalism, I asked interviewees about linkages between the church and the state, with regards to same-sex marriage legislation as well as for past decisions. The church indicated to have been invited to judge the proceedings surrounding the bill and to give advice, and that many individual politicians had come to them as well. However, this was not a common occurrence with other government decisions, making this hard to judge. On the one hand, this

shows that politicians do view same-sex marriage to be a religious issue, and this also indicates direct influence from the church on decision-making. On the other, it implies that religious leaders do not normally hold this much sway over Aruban politics. Interviewees believed that the church had great direct influence over politics, either through the politicians being religious themselves and listening to church leaders, or through the fear of losing religious voters. Politicians themselves also indicated that maintenance of voter base was an important reason not to get into the subject. In any case, it seems that a majority of politicians believes religion has a place in politics.

Interestingly, no-one suggested any ill feeling towards a supposed Western influence on the same-sex marriage process, or believed that Arubans viewed homosexuality as something Western, and thus negative. Many actually expressed varying levels of disappointment in the relative lack of interference on this front by the Netherlands; though this would not be appreciated by many Arubans, it is believed that it would have helped the cause. The Netherlands is seen as not protective enough of the citizens within its kingdom. This might be because of the sample of people I have talked to, the majority of which was LGBT and highly educated – in the Netherlands.

Finally, it was also clear through my conversations that people who earned less and were less highly educated – such as students taking MAVO rather than HAVO, or those that had stayed on Aruba instead of attending university in the Netherlands/ the USA – were perceived as clearly being more homonegative and ‘backwards’ by those I spoke to. This group overlaps largely with recent Latin immigrants but also contains many Arubans.

Concluding remarks

So far, it is not possible to draw any hard conclusions; though those interviewed are broadly in agreement, I have

not found one single point everyone agreed on, even like-minded people often completely contradicting one another. This speaks to how much of a personal and emotional dimension this touches upon, as one’s personal position in society largely determines how they see it. In any case, it is clear that though there are certain blocks in the way of the acceptance of same-sex marriage, everyone – even those ‘against’ – agreed that Aruban society was moving in that direction regardless. Many are confident the majority of Arubans welcome this change. A hopeful note to end on.

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