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Gay, bisexual, and non-binary: When young people question heterosexuality

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Sexual minorities are more visible and more socially recognized in France today. Categorizations relating to sexuality (pansexuality, asexuality, etc.) and gender (trans, non-binary) have emerged. Based on the new *Envie* survey (see Box 1), the authors analyse the place of sexual minorities among young people, as well as sexual and intimacy trajectories.

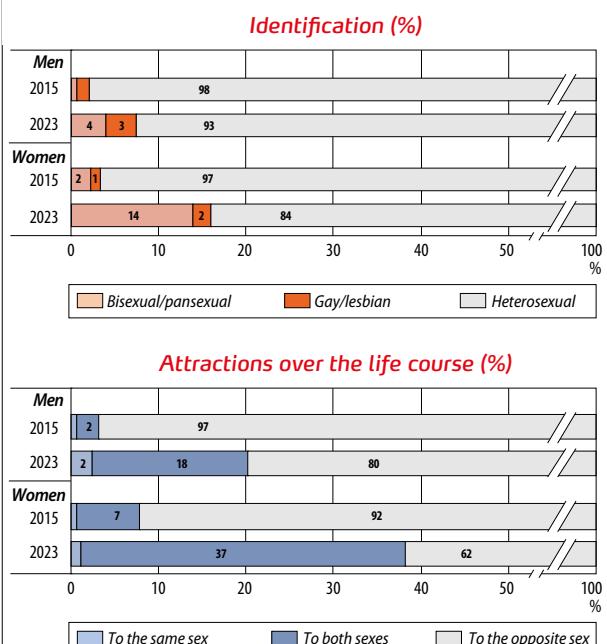
People belonging to sexual minorities are more visible and more socially recognized; they are also increasing in number, particularly among young people. Nineteen per cent (19%) of women and 8% of men aged 18–29 do not identify as heterosexual [1]. This increase has been accompanied by a diversification of identifications, with pansexuality (being attracted to people independent of their sex) and asexuality (not being attracted to other people), even if they may cover older realities, having become new ways of defining oneself. What is the scale of this increase? What does this diversity of identifications mean? What distinguishes young people identifying as sexual minorities from other young people?

Young women identifying less as heterosexual

Same-sex sexuality and bisexuality can be defined in several ways. Being attracted to, having or having had sex with people of the same sex, and identifying as gay or bisexual are the criteria most used in statistical surveys. While strong links exist between these three ways of defining sexuality, they do not intersect entirely (for example, people may have sex with people of the same sex without identifying as gay or bisexual). Identification is an interesting indicator in that it reflects the importance given to sexuality in the construction of self and the way we present ourselves to others. Between 2015 and 2023, the proportion of women aged 20–29 saying that they were not heterosexual quintupled and that of men in the same age group quadrupled (Figure 1).

This increase above all concerned young people [2]. The share of people identifying as bisexual or pansexual has increased the most. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of

Figure 1. Trends in sexual identification and attraction among young people, 2015–2023



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Notes: We excluded 18- and 19-year-olds from the sample of the *Envie* survey so that we could compare on an identical-age basis, the *Virage* survey having concerned people solely from the age of 20. Unlike the *Envie* survey, the *Virage* survey did not explicitly propose the wording 'pansexual', instead offering respondents the possibility to report pansexuality via an open question.

Coverage: Men and women aged 20–29 having reported attractions and identifying as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, or pansexual; weighted data.

Sources: *Virage*, INED, 2015; *Envie*, INED, 2023.

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people aged 20–29 identifying as bisexual or pansexual increased by a factor of slightly over 6. These individuals now account for 4% of men and nearly 14% of women (Figure 1). It is among the latter in particular that heterosexual identification has declined. The difference between bisexuality and pansexuality is the subject of much debate, but they can be distinguished according to the place of gender in the choice of sexual and romantic partners. Bisexual people are attracted to people of both genders, while pansexual people desire people regardless of their gender. A deep-seated transformation has occurred in this respect in recent years, with new identifications not making the gender binary a nodal aspect of one's sexual life, as is the case among most individuals.

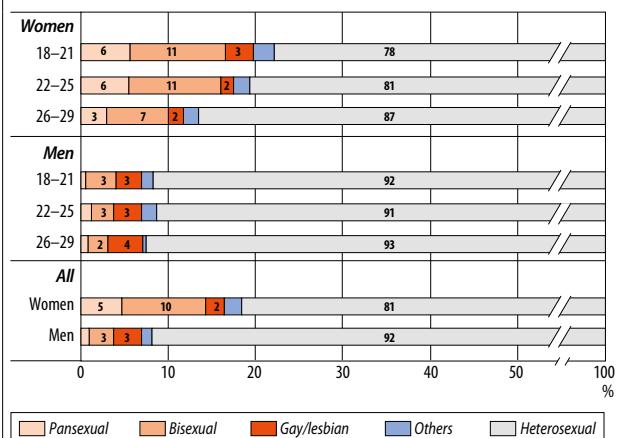
The number of bisexual and pansexual individuals has also increased in other European countries and in North America [3]. This trend no doubt results to some extent from greater acceptance and the improved reporting of these populations in statistical surveys. Interestingly, the increase above all concerns bisexuality and pansexuality. The broadening of sexual possibilities initiated with the recognition of same-sex sexuality is continuing today with the increase in identifications not polarized on a single sex.

The share of individuals attracted to people of both sexes has risen considerably (18% of men and 37.2% of women in 2023), while the percentage of individuals attracted exclusively to one sex has remained relatively stable (1.1% and 2.4%, respectively). This is a deep-seated trend that does not simply concern people identifying as gay, bisexual, or pansexual. The idea that desire is directed towards one sex exclusively is less and less the norm, particularly among women. This broadening can be attributed in part to the numerous restrictions experienced by women in heterosexual relationships, concerning not just the risk of violence but the uneven distribution of housework [4] and gender inequalities in private life [5]. It is also inseparable from the fact that women tend to be more accepting of same-sex relationships than men. The increase in non-heterosexual identifications and attractions results not simply from more assertive desires but from a shift in sensibilities and perceptions regarding relationships between men and women, largely among the latter.

Younger sexual minorities with distinct lifestyles

Looking beyond identification, what distinguishes sexual minorities from young heterosexuals? Age differences are slight among men but more emphatic among women (Figure 2). Far fewer young women identify as heterosexual: 78% of women aged 18–21 compared with 87% of women aged 26–29. This can be seen as a generational issue, as these women belong to cohorts having been teenagers during the rise of the #MeToo movement in France (starting in 2018), which, as well as condemning sexual violence, also challenged the heterosexual norm. Age could also be a factor, since we do not know yet if young individuals will identify differently as they age.

Figure 2. The sexual identification of women and men according to age (%)



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Interpretation: 78% of women aged 18–21 identify as heterosexual.

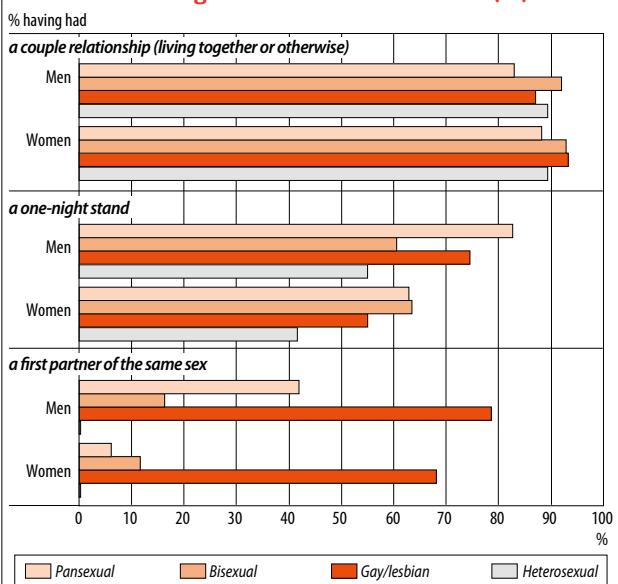
Note: Individuals having responded 'Don't know' or having refused to respond were not considered (1.4% of women, 0.8% of men).

Coverage: Women and men aged 18–29; weighted data.

Source: Envie survey, INED, 2023.

The specific nature of the intimate experiences of sexual minorities can also be seen in their sexual and emotional arrangements (Figure 3). This specificity relates to their younger age but also reflects lifestyle differences. While most young people, independently of their sexual identification, have been in a couple, the experiences of sexual minorities are characterized more by having had 'one-night stands'. Among women, this is particularly true for bisexual and pansexual individuals.

Figure 3. Conjugal and sexual experiences according to sexual identification (%)



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* Among people saying that they have had sex.

Coverage: Men and women aged 18–29 identifying as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, or pansexual; weighted data.

Source: Envie survey, INED, 2023.

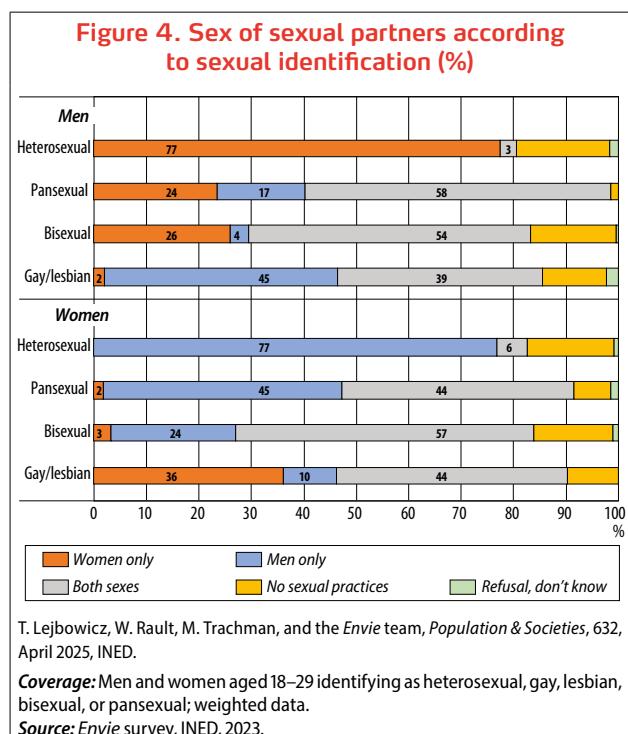
Among men, these experiences are more common for gay and pansexual individuals. But these non-couple relationships are not exclusive to sexual minorities; they constitute a moment of 'sexual youth' made up of numerous experiences common to a large proportion of young people [1].

Bisexuality and pansexuality focused more on the opposite sex

While deviation from the heterosexual norm is common among sexual minorities, differences exist among the latter, particularly regarding their sexual partners. Among lesbian women and gay men, individuals having exclusively had same-sex partners (36% of lesbian women, 45% of gay men) can be distinguished from those having had partners of both sexes (44% of lesbian women, 39% of gay men; Figure 4). The high percentage of life courses focused solely on same-sex partners is unprecedented. When same-sex sexuality (and female same-sex sexuality in particular) was less visible, it was rare for individuals to have only had partners of the same sex. This decrease in heterosexual experiences in the life courses of gay and lesbian individuals is also illustrated in the sex of the partners with whom they first had sex (Figure 3).

Pansexual women differ from bisexual women in having had partners of both sexes less often (44% vs. 57%) and different-sex partners more often (45% vs. 24%). Very few said they had only had female partners. Similarly, most bisexual and pansexual women had their first sexual experience with a man.

The experiences of bisexual and pansexual men are less contrasted and of a different nature than those of women, with more pansexual than bisexual men saying that they had



sex exclusively with same-sex partners (17% vs. 3%). As among bisexual and pansexual women, most bisexual and pansexual men say their first sexual experience was with a different-sex partner, though a large proportion of pansexual men (a very small group) say that they have had a male partner.

The sexuality of non-binary people

Minority sexual identifications are more common among certain groups of young people. This is particularly true for non-binary individuals identifying neither as men or women and accounting for 1.7% of 18- to 29-year-olds in France. This group is to be distinguished from cisgender individuals, whose gender identification corresponds to their sex at birth, and trans women and men, whose gender identification is distinct from their sex at birth.⁽¹⁾ Statistical data remain scarce for non-binary people [6], but they show that the individuals concerned are particularly young, with 51% of non-binary people aged 18–29 being under 21.

There is a clear overlap between identification as non-binary and as a sexual minority (Table 1). While non-binary individuals distance themselves from heterosexuality (14.7% identifying as such), they also hold same-sex sexuality at arm's length (12.6%). The most common identifications among this population are bisexuality (21.5%) and, above all, pansexuality

Table 1. Sexual characteristics according to gender identification (%)

	Non-binary people	Cisgender women	Cisgender men
Identification			
Heterosexual	14.7	81.8	92.4
Gay/lesbian	12.6	2.2	3.0
Bisexual	21.5	9.5	2.7
Pansexual	38.5	4.6	0.8
Asexual and other	12.7	2.0	1.1
Total	100	100	100
Sexual attractions over life course			
No attraction	15.6	3.5	1.5
To one sex (exclusively or largely)	34.9	85.2	96.3
Equal for both sexes	49.5	11.3	2.2
Total	100	100	100
Sexual practices over life course			
No sexual practices	30.0	16.0	17.7
Practices with one sex	32.1	70.0	75.9
Practices with both sexes	37.9	14.0	6.5
Total	100	100	100
Sample	118	4,644	5,225
Note: Cisgender individuals are those whose gender identification corresponds to sex at birth.			
Coverage: Non-binary and cisgender people, aged 18–29; weighted data; no-answers excluded.			
Source: Envie survey, INED, 2023.			

(1) The number of trans individuals in the Envie survey is extremely low (0.5%), which limits statistical analysis. Non-binary people are included in the group of women or men according to their current gender, except where the analysis concerns cisgender individuals.

(38.5%). This reflects a refusal of sexual binarism and also of gender as a decisive frame of reference in the choice of partners. Half of non-binary individuals (49.5%) report the same attraction for both sexes, and this is reflected in sexual practices, with over 1 in 3 non-binary people having had partners of both sexes.

Numerous non-binary people (12.7%) also identify as asexual (see Box 2). In addition, 15.6% say that do not feel a sexual attraction and 30% that they have never had sex. While this aspect can be explained in part by their youth, attractions and identifications also reflect a distancing from the central place given to sexuality in relationships.

Many contrasting trends are afoot in gender and sexuality among young people. While the heterosexual norm is predominant among young people, many of them are calling it into question in their ways of identifying and their sexual desires and practices. This questioning concerns not just sexuality but gender, as a binary category or a dominant frame of reference in sexual and partnership choices. The issue is not

Box 1. The Envie survey

The Envie survey (*Enquête sur la vie affective des jeunes adultes*, INED, 2023) on the emotional life of young adults was administered by telephone in 2023 with a representative sample of 10,021 individuals aged 18–29 and living in mainland France.* The sample was built via the random generation of cellphone numbers. The survey contributes to our understanding of sexual attractions, practices, and identifications without limiting the latter to same-sex sexuality and bisexuality. Regarding gender identification, the questionnaire gathers information on sex at birth (male or female) and the way the respondents identify ('as a man', 'as a woman', 'other'). Where the respondent chose the latter wording, several possibilities were possible, and the interviewers were able to enter those not included in the list. The wordings were notably discussed with the members of two trans organizations, Acceptess-T and FLIRT.

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simply to extend the realm of sexual possibilities to include other forms of relationships and other partners, but to challenge heteronormativity.

Box 2. Young asexual individuals

One identification having emerged in recent years is asexuality, or not being sexually attracted to others. In the Envie survey, a little over 1% of women and a little under 1% of men identify as asexual. An alternative approach to asexuality is based on the attractions reported by respondents: 3.5% of women, 1.5% of men, and 15.6% of non-binary people say that they are not sexually attracted to others (Table 1).

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Abstract

The number of people identifying as sexual minorities is increasing, particularly among young people. The Envie survey, representative of young adults aged 18–29 in France, demonstrates the considerable diversity of identifications and sexual desires and practices of young people. While most people continue to identify as heterosexual, an increasing number of young women identify as bisexual and pansexual and say that they are attracted to both sexes. This diversity is particularly visible among young non-binary people, who account for slightly over 2% of 18- to 29-year-olds.

Keywords

young person, sex, gender, sexuality, heterosexuality, same-sex sexuality, gay, lesbian, bisexuality, non-binary, trans, attraction, France