Gender equality in the Netherlands

Does being a woman or a man matter in the Netherlands?

Not so long ago, men and women’s roles in the Netherlands were firmly divided along traditional gender lines, with men at the head of the family. Up until 1956 there were no married women working in Dutch civil service positions. In fact, women automatically lost their job as soon as they took their marriage vows.

Liberal attitudes from 1960

In the years since 1960 the Dutch government has come to take an increasingly liberal position, essentially holding that the state must support the free choice of the individual. Men and women must be permitted to arrange their lives as they wish. And this should not be hampered by gender – that is, the cultural ideas and practices surrounding how a man or a woman ought to be and act.

From 1974 onwards, the Dutch government has actively sought to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women.

1994 Equal Treatment Act

Gender equality is now embedded in Dutch law. The Dutch constitution expressly forbids discrimination. The Netherlands has various laws to reinforce this. Most familiar is the 1994 General Equal Treatment Act (Algemene Wet op Gelijke Behandeling). Among other things, this act makes it illegal for employers to favour people on the basis of personal characteristics such as gender or sexual preference. However, these laws are not a precise reflection of society.

Compared to other EU countries, the Netherlands earns high marks for gender equality. Yet, even here, it does matter whether you are a man or a woman.

This document takes a closer look at these gender differences and Dutch domestic policies on:

- Education
- Labour, welfare and income
- Safety
- Health
- Media
You can also read more about the distinction between gender and sex, the Netherlands' international gender policy and the NGOs active in this area.

Source: Gender Equality Index

Education

What about boy/girl differences in academic performance and subject specialisations in the Netherlands?

In the Netherlands, schooling is compulsory for girls and boys from the age of four up until the age of sixteen. Dutch primary and secondary schools are mixed and the curriculum is the same for boys and girls.

Nonetheless, there are some differences between boys and girls where education is concerned.

Engineering for boys, nursing for girls

First of all, boys and girls differ in the subjects they choose. Boys tend to choose more technical and ‘hard’ (natural) sciences, whereas girls more often opt for specialisations in care and ‘soft’ (social) sciences.

The Dutch government is concerned about this sex segregation in education, as it means that technical fields are missing out on female talent and the care sector is missing out on male talent. The government believes that men and women should be able to choose for themselves on the basis of their own interests – and not on the basis of stereotypes.

It has therefore recently launched a new policy of encouraging not only girls to opt for technical subjects, but also boys to go into care professions. Slowly but surely, this seems to be taking effect.

Girls overtaking boys

The second difference is in the level of education attained by girls as compared to boys. Boys tend to do slightly better in primary school but are overtaken by girls in secondary school. Girls from non-Western ethnic backgrounds also perform well in secondary school, scoring on a par with Dutch boys.

By comparison, the level attained by boys from non-Western backgrounds is the lowest. Furthermore, boys are more likely than girls to leave school without a diploma. The Dutch
government wishes to address this by focusing on best practices. There are schools where girls and boys both flourish: what are these schools doing right?

Girls' academic edge continues in higher education. More girls than boys go on to university and, once there, they do better. The number of female PhD candidates is on a steady upward trend, with the balance between men and women PhDs now almost equal.

Yet, in spite of virtually equal levels of education, there are clear differences between men and women on the labour market.

Source: Emancipatiemonitor (SCP, 2014, summary is in English)

Labour, welfare and income

Many women in the Netherlands have paid jobs but they work few hours. Below we set out the figures, causes and effects.

Gender and labour market

Up until the 1960s, men's and women's roles were divided firmly down traditional lines in the Netherlands. Men and women were expected to marry. A woman looked after the house, her husband and her children. Men supported the family financially.

But from 1960, a wave of protest against the traditional division of roles began to gather speed. From that time, more and more women went to work outside the home – and went on working even after getting married and having children.

Watch our video on market participation

Differences remain

However, when it comes to labour, care and income in this country, it still matters whether you are a man or a woman. In spite of nearly equal education levels, there are clear gender-specific differences in the proportion of men and women doing paid and unpaid work.

Some examples:

- Twice as many women as men look after the household and children.
- The average father works five days a week; mothers average three.
- Less than 30% of senior level positions are held by women.
- 65% of those unable or unwilling to do paid work in the Netherlands are women.
The effect? For starters, that three million Dutch women are not financially independent.

Read more about labour market participation and working hours, the work-care division, the income gap and gender discrimination on the labour market.

Read more about feminism in the Netherlands in the late 1960s.

Source: Emancipatiemonitor (SCP 2014, summary is in English)

Safety

The Netherlands is a safe nation. Yet 45% of Dutch women experiences domestic violence at some point in their lives.

The Netherlands is a safe place to live, travel and work. This shows in the decreasing number of violent offences. Domestic policies to combat violence are often gender-neutral, but the types of violence experienced by each gender are clearly different.

Physical violence

Violence directed against men usually takes the form of threats and physical violence in public, mostly by other men. For a number of years now, the Dutch police have registered acts of violence with possible discriminatory motives such as homophobia and transphobia.

Domestic and sexual violence

Most violence directed against women in the Netherlands happens at home and is sexual in nature. And it is mostly done by someone they know. Every year, some 200,000 people, mainly women, experience serious forms of violence at home. The Dutch justice system prosecutes offenders. The government also seeks to put victims out of harm’s way by investing in shelters and empowerment.

Sex education as an instrument

Sex education is regarded as an important instrument in fighting sexual violence of every kind. Girls between the ages of fifteen and eighteen run the greatest risk of being victims of sexual intimidation and violations.
Dutch sex education therefore not only addresses the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. It also aims to strengthen young people's sexual independence on all fronts.

You can find more information about sex education as an instrument on the website of Rutgers, the international centre of expertise in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

Forced prostitution

Women’s position in the sex industry is a separate policy area in the Netherlands. The government takes active steps to stop the trafficking of women and forced prostitution. Recently it shut down numerous locations where prostitutes operated; though the effect of this measure is under much discussion.

Read Violence against women: European Union survey results in the Dutch context published by Atria.

Sources

NGO Review Report Beijing 20+: Women are Agents of Change (Atria, 2015)
Emancipatiemonitor (SCP 2014 summary is in English)

Health

The Dutch government is committed to gender-sensitive healthcare. What does this mean?

Gender-sensitive healthcare has been identified as a priority issue within current Dutch gender equality policy. The healthcare sector has to take account of differences between men and women to provide them with better care.

Low number of women die in childbirth

Traditionally, Dutch healthcare has concerned itself with differences between men and women mainly when it comes to problems relating to reproduction and sexuality. National standards of care surrounding childbirth are high, resulting in an extremely low incidence of maternal and infant mortality.
This is also because of the unrestricted sale of contraceptives and the legalisation of abortion (up to the 24th week of pregnancy) in the Netherlands. Around 13% of all maternal deaths worldwide are caused by risky abortions.

Men die younger, women more prone to illness

Gender-sensitive healthcare also means attending to differences outside the reproductive and sexual area, to all aspects of health that are different between men and women. As an example, women tend to live longer than men, but are less satisfied with their health. And women consult their GPs, go into hospital and report sick more often than men, and are also prone to different types of diseases.

Women more depressive and anxious

Psychological health is an area where the types of problems experienced by men and by women are especially different. Women more frequently suffer from mood, anxiety and eating disorders, whereas men are more prone to addictions and behavioural problems such as ADHD.

Medicines hardly tested on women

Gender-sensitive healthcare also requires investigating the effects of the same conditions and treatments among both men and women. In current medical science, too little consideration is given to gender, and medicines are often only tested on men. This is an issue, because studies have shown that women with cardiovascular diseases have other symptoms than men.

Doctors not immune to gender stereotypes

Finally, gender-sensitive healthcare is also about intervening in situations where there is too much of a focus on gender. Often, gender stereotypes unconsciously filter through in how doctors interact with patients. For example, doctors are more likely to diagnose a patient with a 'female ailment' like depression if that patient is in fact a woman.

Sources

 Emancipatiemonitor (SCP 2014), summary is in English)
Media

According to the Dutch government, the image of women in the media has an important influence on gender norms. The government is concerned that women are not visible enough in the media, but also that, when they are, they are subject to gender stereotyping.

Too few women in the spotlight

On the whole, it is men who produce Dutch television in the Netherlands and it is men who present Dutch talk shows. Just take a look at the 100 most powerful people in the Dutch media. Most of the experts invited onto serious Dutch talk shows are men.

But not only are there few women on Dutch TV – and almost none above a certain age – their role is often little more than being pretty and playful. Women are for packaging, men provide substance.

Watch our video on media stereotypes

Women as sex objects

Similarly, stereotypes about men and women are common currency in magazines, films, series, music and advertising. An issue of ongoing concern is the influence of the entrenched ideal of beauty and the sexualisation of women in the media, particularly on the body image and sexuality of young girls.

Counterweight

There are a number of Dutch initiatives that are trying to change the limited and stereotyped roles of women in the media. They include the platform and website Zij Spreekt (‘She Speaks’), which represents female experts, and the feminist magazine Opzij, one of the most widely read women’s magazines in the Netherlands.

Changing the role of women in the media is one of the priorities of the Dutch government’s gender equality policy.

Read more about women’s visibility in the news and other media around the world in: Who Makes the News?
Dutch international gender equality policy

The Netherlands has declared itself a champion of women’s rights and has ratified the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The Netherlands has also assumed a pioneering role in efforts for global gender equality. This is taking two forms. On the one hand, the Dutch government is integrating gender in all of its foreign policy, while on the other it is pursuing a comprehensive gender policy targeting specific topics.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is one key approach that the government is using in the fight for global gender equality. Every domestic and international government action is analysed to assess its implications for both men and women. For Dutch policymakers, gender equality is not just a goal in itself; it is also widely regarded as a means to solving societal problems – such as poverty.

Development cooperation

Dutch development cooperation offers a good example of how gender has been integrated into national policy. First of all, each individual project is measured and weighed up against how it will impact men and women.

Secondly, one of the four priorities of Dutch development cooperation explicitly consists of the advancement of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and men, irrespective of age, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Women in conflict situations
One of the topics for which the Netherlands has developed its own specific gender policy is the role of women in conflict and post-conflict regions, following up UN Security Council resolution 1325.

As an important international leader in the implementation of this resolution, the Netherlands has drawn up a national action plan designed to improve the safety of women in war situations and to expand women’s roles in peace and security initiatives.


Working together for global gender equality

Twenty years ago the Netherlands joined with other countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing to formulate a platform for action on gender equality all around the world. NGOs are working to sustain the Netherlands’ high ambitions and are closely monitoring the state of affairs here.

In turn, the Dutch government facilitates NGOs in supervising compliance with and advancing the rights of women and men.

You can read more about this in the NGO Review Report Beijing 20+: Women are Agents of Change.

Sources

Sixth periodic report of the Kingdom of the Netherlands concerning the implementation of the UN Women’s Convention


Want to learn more?

Which NGOs are involved in gender equality initiatives in the Netherlands, and what are their focus areas? Below is a selection of the leading organisations at this time, grouped by topic. You can contact these organisations for more information.

General: advocacy and knowledge

Dutch gender platform: Wo=Men
Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women’s History
Nederlandse Vrouwenraad: Dutch women’s council

Men’s empowerment
eMANcipator

Welfare, work and income
Women’s interests (Vrouwenbelangen)
Business and Professional Women (BPW) Europe

Education
GARCIA – Gendering the Academia and Research: Combating Career Instability and Assymetries.
The Dutch Network of Women Professors

Safety
Federatie Opvang: shelter for women

Gender-sensitive healthcare
Empowerment network for women: Women Inc.

Sexual and reproductive rights
Rutgers, For sexual and reproductive health and rights
Women on waves

Women and media
Zij spreekt: speakers agency furnishing female experts for conferences and media appearances;
Opzij: Dutch-language magazine on the position of women in the Netherlands;
Tijdschrift LOVER: Dutch-language online platform for feminist journalism.
Legal support for women

Clara Wichman legal action fund
Vereniging Vrouw en Recht: Women’s law association

Women’s history

Atria. Institute on Gender Equality and Women’s History

International

Women Peacemakers Program
Dutch gender platform: Wo=Men
Gender Concerns International
Mapping the world database by Atria (mapping Women’s Information centre’s)

Terminology

What is the distinction between sex and gender?

Sex

Sex refers to two biologically defined groups of people: men and women. Immediately following birth, the doctor or midwife determines a baby’s sex on the basis of its visible genital organs.

However, the two available categories – man and woman – do not work for everyone. Some people do not fit into either of these categories due to their own biology. Others feel the assigned sex to be psychologically wrong. You can read more about this in the section on gender diversity.

Gender

Gender refers to a society’s prevailing ideas and practices surrounding masculinity and femininity. These notions are shaped by political, cultural, economic, social and other factors and are subject to constant change. Symbols of femininity, like the colour pink, are known to be culturally determined: manufacturers introduced pink as a colour for girls in the 1940s – before that, pink was just as much a colour for boys.
Gender equality

Nowadays, the Dutch government and civil-society organisations are committed to gender equality. Gender equality means that men and women enjoy the same rights and opportunities. It does not mean that men and women ought to fulfil exactly the same roles (gender equity).

Further reading

One Hundred Words For Equality: A glossary of terms on equality between women and men (European Commission, 1998)

Source: Wo=men (site is mainly in Dutch)