



Sexual diversity in the Netherlands

Ninety-five per cent of the Dutch think that men and women should be able to choose when, how, and with whom they have sex, as long as their chosen partner is over the age of 16 and gives consent.

General acceptance of lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB) in the Netherlands is high, although this wasn't always the case.

Pre-1950: a sin, a disease and a disorder

Before the Second World War, homosexuality was by no means accepted in the Netherlands. It was seen as a sin, a disease and a preventable disorder. Even a suspicion of homosexuality could cost a person their job and social position.

Homosexual contact was not illegal in the Netherlands in the 20th century. However, from 1911 until 1971, the age of consent for homosexuals was stricter than for heterosexuals. Homosexual activity with a person under the age of 21 was an illegal act.

Post-1950: homosexuality accepted as a form of love

In the 20th century, many homosexual men and some women publicly stood up for their right to live. The major breakthrough for acceptance of homosexuality came at the end of the 1950s, when both Catholic and Protestant experts working in pastoral and psychological care stated that homosexuals were simply ordinary people looking for love. And this viewpoint caught on.

Acceptance of homosexuality also grew as a result of changing attitudes towards sexuality in general in the 1950s and 1960s. To an increasing degree, sex was being separated from reproduction and marriage.

Post-1960: increasing emancipation of homosexuals and bisexuals

From the 1960s onwards, laws that discriminated against homosexuals were increasingly amended. Since 1994, discrimination against someone based on their sexual preference has been explicitly prohibited.



However, the year 2001 was a particularly symbolic year for tolerance of homosexuality in the Netherlands. In that year, the Mayor of Amsterdam conducted the first ever civil marriage ceremony between gays and lesbians in the world!

Present day

Today, the Netherlands fights for the rights of sexual minorities at both the national and international level. However, tolerance, acceptance and respect for LGB people in the Netherlands is still not universal.

This document takes a closer look at the situation of LGB people and Dutch domestic policies on:

- legal equality
- social acceptance in general
- discrimination and safety at school, in the workplace and in the street
- health and well-being

You can also read more about the meaning of homosexuality and bisexuality in the Netherlands, international LGBT policy in the Netherlands and the relevant NGOs.

Want to know even more about LGB history in the Netherlands? You can consult the digital library of [IHLIA](#), the centre for LGBT heritage in the Netherlands.

Legal acceptance of LGB people

In the Netherlands, LGB people's rights are firmly entrenched in the law. The current government, in conjunction with LGB organisations, has worked hard to remove the remaining inequalities against LGB people from Dutch law. What does the law currently say about gay marriage, parenthood and general discrimination against LGB people?

General discrimination laws

Discrimination based on someone's sexual preference is illegal in the Netherlands. However, in the [General Equal Treatment Act](#) (*Algemene Wet op Gelijke Behandeling*) the text was ambiguous. As a result, a number of specific schools claimed there were legal grounds to fire homosexuals or to not employ them. After years of lobbying, the text was amended to prevent any more confusion.



Marriage laws

Since 2001, same-sex civil marriage has been legal in the Netherlands. Dutch civil servants are not always obliged to conduct gay marriages: they can decline to do so based on personal beliefs (religious or otherwise). However, civil servants appointed since the summer of 2014 are no longer allowed to decline such services.

Parenthood laws

Lesbian couples who wish to have children often do so via a sperm donor. In the Netherlands, the woman who gives birth to the child is automatically granted legal authority over the child. If the couple is married, then the partner of the biological mother (male or female) is automatically recognised by law as the second parent. If the couple is not married, then the partner (male or female) must go to the city hall to be recognised as a parent and request parental authority.

For gay men, having children is more problematic. They often have to undergo a long and expensive adoption procedure. Some couples find a surrogate mother. Obtaining parental authority for the partner of the biological father is a more difficult process.

Co-parenthood laws

More and more homosexual couples in the Netherlands are raising children together with the known donor or surrogate. Sometimes, a gay couple and a lesbian couple will have and co-raise children together. There are still very few legal provisions regarding this type of co-parenthood. In the Netherlands, a child can only have two parents. The [LGBT organisation COC](#) is investigating the possibilities for changes in this area.

Blood donation laws

Gay and bisexual men are currently not permitted to give blood. This is because men who have or have had sex with other men have too great a risk of being HIV positive. The current government wishes to remove this restriction as it believes there are other ways to guarantee the safety of the donated blood.

Source: <http://www.government.nl/issues/gay-rights/equal-rights-for-gays-and-transgenders>



Social acceptance of LGBs

Ninety per cent of Dutch people think that homosexuals and bisexuals (m/f) should be free to choose how they live their lives. The vast majority (78%) support the legalisation of marriage for gays and lesbians.

Although general acceptance of homosexuality continues to rise, it is still not universally accepted.

The sexuality of one's own child

A significant proportion (35%) of Dutch people would have difficulty with their son or daughter being homosexual. However, few Dutch people (7%) would have a problem with their child's teacher being gay or lesbian.

Kissing in the street

A quite substantial proportion of the Dutch have a problem with gay people (m/f) being openly affectionate in public. Gay people walking hand-in-hand, hugging or kissing in public is frowned upon by many.

Acceptance differs across the age groups

Research shows that women, highly educated people, secular groups and people who vote for social or liberal political parties are generally more positive about homosexuality. Young males, people from immigrant backgrounds, lesser-educated people and strict religious groups tend to have a relatively negative view of homosexuality and bisexuality. The government plans to appoint 'ambassadors' to promote LGBT emancipation within these groups.

Obstacles to coming out

In the Netherlands, gays and lesbians are becoming aware of and open about their sexual preference at a younger and younger age. Only 2% of homosexuals are secretive about their sexual preference. However, 40% have difficulty telling others about their homosexual feelings.



LGB people with a bicultural or religious background are more likely to keep their sexual preference hidden. The Dutch government has therefore set up a national coming-out day to help young LGB people.

Government supports visibility

The government is also supporting other initiatives to increase the visibility of LGB people in the public eye. For example, there are many festivals in the Netherlands in which the major cities are turned pink and rainbow flags are displayed. The major political parties also attend these events to demonstrate their tolerance.

Rainbow zebra crossings are now a permanent fixture in cities such as Utrecht and Maastricht. It is also expected that LGB-friendly traffic lights – already in place in Vienna – will soon spread to areas of the Netherlands.

Read more about acceptance in these publications of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research (SCP):

[Acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the Netherlands](#) (SCP, 2013)

[Towards Tolerance: Exploring changes and explaining differences in attitudes towards homosexuality in Europe](#) (SCP, 2013)

Sources

[Wel trouwen, niet zoenen](#) (Dutch publication, 'Get married, but don't kiss each other', SCP, 2015)

[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', Summary in English, SCP, 2012)

Safety and discrimination

Everyone in the Netherlands has the right to be who he or she wants to be. However, this doesn't always work out in practice.

Many LGB people are discriminated against and a small proportion do not feel safe. This is mainly limited to verbal aggression: abuse, name calling and taunting of homosexuals. However, sometimes it goes further than this.



Some examples:

- Nearly 40% of gay men feel unsafe. This figure is just 28.3% among straight men.
- Just one out of ten young people think that LGBs can be open about their sexual preferences at school.
- On the other hand, the vast majority of gays and lesbians are happy with the level of LGB acceptance in their workplace.

Government policy

The safety of LGB people is a key focus in the government's current LGB policy. Tougher punishments, preventive measures and better registration can help to reduce LGB-related violence and discrimination. It also helps to increase social acceptance of LGB people.

You can also consult the [graphic data explorer](#) and the [investigation report](#) by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights into discrimination, harassment and violence experienced by LGBT people.

Sources

[Perceived discrimination in the Netherlands](#) (SCP, 2014)

[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', Summary in English, SCP, 2012)

Violence and discrimination in public

In the Netherlands, LGB people feel most discriminated against in public: in the street, on public transport, when socialising and in their own neighbourhood. A quarter of LGB people suffer verbal abuse, bullying and harassment based on their sexual preference.

Types of abuse and discrimination

Many homosexuals (men and women) experience verbal or physical abuse due to their sexual preference. For bisexuals, the percentage is lower. Gay men are most likely (29%) to be insulted, ridiculed or shouted at in public. Physical abuse or threats are uncommon,



although 3% of gay men have experienced this. Furthermore, gay men also have a relatively higher risk of suffering sexual abuse from strangers.

Registration of anti-gay violence

In the Netherlands, the police register incidents of anti-gay violence (violence relating to the victim's sexual preference). Violence related to sexual preference is registered less often than racial violence. Whether this means it is less prevalent is not known, as LGB people are less likely to file a report. The [LGB organisation COC](#) strongly encourages the LGB community to always report discrimination and violence to the police or to a nearby [anti-discrimination centre](#).

Perpetrators

The registered reports show that the perpetrators tend to be groups of young males hanging around on the streets. It also shows that religion is not a motivating factor. Anti-gay violence is predominantly a way for youths to prove their masculinity to each other.

In one's own neighbourhood

In 2010, there was uproar in the Netherlands when a homosexual couple was harassed into leaving their home in Utrecht. This was not an isolated incident. Gay people in the Netherlands feel far less safe in their own neighbourhood than straight people. The government supports organisations and initiatives that strive for LGB-friendly neighbourhoods.

To learn more about how safe homosexual people feel, see a number of results from the [Safety Monitor](#) by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), 2013.

Sources

[Perceived discrimination in the Netherlands](#) (SCP, 2014)

[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', Summary in English, SCP, 2012)



Violence and discrimination at school

The situation of LGB youngsters at school is a spearhead of Dutch LGB equality policy. There is particular room for improvement regarding the safety of LGB people at the secondary-school level.

LGB people suffer a greater degree of violence at school than heterosexuals. Furthermore, over half of openly gay young people suffer bullying, which often results in psychological problems.

Anti-LGB climate

In the Netherlands, there is an anti-gay climate in schools. Many young people are scared to be open about their homosexual feelings for their classmates. And with good reason: 'gay' and 'fag' are just two of the most frequently used insults used on the playground to question young boys' masculinity. Social acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality is much more prevalent among adults than youths.

More education = greater tolerance

The government wants more attention to be paid to LGB people at school. Since 2012, awareness of sexual diversity has been a fixed part of sex education in primary and secondary schools. Organisations such as [Rutgers](#) can support teachers with regard to this issue.

Social initiative

Within the [Rainbow project](#), LGB organisations and schools across Europe work together to combat homophobia at school. In addition, the [COC](#) also organises information days about homosexuality and bisexuality and often on gender diversity, as well. Another initiative is the Gay-Straight-Alliances: at two-thirds of secondary schools, LGBT and heterosexual pupils alike join hands to promote LGBT-friendly schools.

Sources



[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', Summary in English, SCP, 2012)

[Sociale onveiligheid van LHB schoolpersoneel en LHB-leerlingen](#) (Dutch publication, 'Lack of social safety of LGB employees and pupils at school', ITS, Radboud University Nijmegen, 2012)

[Jongeren en seksuele oriëntatie](#) ('Young people and sexual orientation', summary in English, SCP, 2015)

Discrimination in the workplace and on the job market

Most gays and lesbians (97%) say that their workplace is LGB-friendly. Eighty per cent of homosexuals (men and women) are open with their colleagues about their sexuality.

Treatment during job interviews

A [European study](#) shows that around 18% of lesbians and 9% of homosexuals feel they are discriminated against during job interviews. The decision not to hire someone is more frequently motivated by the candidate's age, origin and gender than their sexual preference.

Treatment in the workplace

Around 10% of homosexuals have received negative comments in the workplace with regard to their sexuality. Jokes about homosexuals are also regularly made. However, this doesn't negatively affect how homosexuals experience their workplace: gay and lesbian employees are just as happy or unhappy with their workplace as heterosexual employees.

Positive diversity climate helps

Anti-discrimination legislation, government LGB policy and initiatives such as [Workplace pride](#) have successfully helped to make workplaces more LGB-friendly. Also, lesbians and gays more frequently choose to work for organisations that value diversity, such as the management and education sectors.



Bisexual employees less happy

Bisexual employees are significantly less happy at work than homosexual and heterosexual employees. They are also treated negatively more often than their colleagues. However, this has little to do with their sexual preference. After all, the majority of bisexuals are not open about their feelings in the workplace, mainly because they don't consider it to be relevant information. The relatively poor health of bisexual employees may well be the cause of their negative workplace experiences.

Sources

[Seksuele oriëntatie en werk](#) ('Sexual orientation and work', Summary in English, SCP, 2013)

[Perceived discrimination in the Netherlands](#) (SCP, 2014)

[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', Summary in English, SCP, 2012)

Health and well-being of LGB people

On average, the mental and sexual health of LGB people in the Netherlands is worse than that of heterosexuals. The main reason for this is discrimination and disapproval from those around them.

As a result, homosexuals, bisexuals and lesbians have more difficulty accepting who they are.

High rate of suicide among young LGBs

Many young LGB people suffer from depression. They have often taken the disapproval of those around them to heart and don't accept their own sexual preferences. Examples of consequences:

- Young homosexual and bisexual people give a score of 6 out of 10 for how happy they are with their lives. This figure is just under 8 out of 10 for young heterosexual people.
- Young LGB people are nearly five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.



Difference in mental health between LGBs

There are few differences between the mental health of gays and lesbians in the Netherlands. The mental health of bisexuals is worse than that of homosexuals. A large number of bisexuals use drugs and suffer from psychological problems.

Bisexuals feel less accepted by those around them than homosexuals. Around 50% of bisexuals – particularly men – hide their sexuality from others.

Sexual health and sexual violence

Gay and bisexual men have a relatively greater risk of falling victim to sexual violence: 20% of gay and bisexual men compared to 6% of straight men. Bisexuals are the most vulnerable group among women: 52% have experienced sexual violence.

Sexual health: STDs and HIV

Gay and bisexual men have an increased risk of STDs and HIV, despite their more frequent use of condoms. Bisexual and lesbian women have a much lower risk. [Rutgers](#) and [SOA AIDS](#) are the main organisations in the Netherlands with regard to prevention of STDs.

Read more about [health risks for women who have sex with women](#).

Sources

[Een wereld van verschil](#) ('A world of difference', summary in English, Rutgers, 2014)

[Wel trouwen, niet zoenen](#) (Dutch publication, 'Get married, but don't kiss each other', SCP, 2015)

Dutch foreign policy & LGBT equality

Internationally, the Netherlands strives to ensure the reproductive health and rights of all men and women. To do this, the Dutch government works hard to promote equal rights for LGBT people abroad.



LGBT

Who someone is attracted to (sexual preference) or which gender someone identifies him/herself as (gender identity) are two different things. However, gay and transgender rights are often grouped together (LGBT). This is also the case in the Netherlands.

For the Dutch government LGBT equality goes hand in hand with gender equality. Both objectives are integrated into a single national and international emancipation policy.

How is this done?

A large proportion of Dutch LGBT lobbying is conducted via transnational institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union. In addition, the Netherlands provides funding to foreign organisations that fight for LGBT rights.

The Netherlands is always one of the first countries to come into action when EU member states discriminate against LGBT people. LGBT people originating from countries with strict anti-gay laws can successfully apply for asylum in the Netherlands.

Sources

<http://www.government.nl/issues/gay-rights/lgbt-rights-worldwide>

[Gender and LGBT equality policy 2013-2016\(1 MB\)](#) (Dutch Ministry of Education, culture and Science, 2013)

Want to learn more?

Below is a summary of the main Dutch LGB organisations currently operating. You are welcome to contact them for more information.

LGBT special-interest organisation

[COC Nederland](#)

The COC operates 20 regional and local offices, often with their own programme of social events. For more information, see the regional links at the bottom of the COC Home page ('In jouw regio')



LGBT people from multicultural backgrounds

[Respect2love](#): community for young LGBT people from a bicultural background.

[Stichting Secret Garden](#): foundation of and for LGBT people with an ethnic-cultural background.

[Veilige Haven Amsterdam](#): foundation for LGBTs from a multicultural background.

LGBT & Christianity

[Landelijk coördinatiepunt groepen kerk en homoseksualiteit](#): umbrella organisation of the Christian LGBT movement.

Specifically for lesbians

[Stichting ondersteboven](#): a foundation to support visibility of LBT women in the Netherlands.

Specifically for bisexuals

[Landelijk netwerk bisexualiteit](#): National Bisexuality Network, a special-interest organisation for bisexual men and women.

LGBT associations for students/young people

[UvAPride](#): platform for LGBT students and employees of the University of Amsterdam

[ASV Gay](#): Amsterdam LGBT student association.

[Outsite/Delftse Werkgroep Homoseksualiteit](#): for LGBT people under the age of 28 in Delft.

[Ganymedes LGBT Student Association Groningen](#)

[DITO](#): LGBT organisation for young people in Nijmegen.

[Erasmus Pride](#): LGBT network at Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

[Leiden University Pride](#): platform for LGBT students and Leiden University staff



[Anteros](#): Utrecht LGBT student association.

[Shout Wageningen](#): LGBT association in Wageningen.

Workplace

[Workplace pride](#): the international platform for LGBT inclusion at work, based in Amsterdam.

Information centres

[IHLIA, the centre for LGBT heritage](#)

[Savannah Bay](#): bookshop for women and LGBT people in Utrecht

[Vrolijk](#): LGBT bookshop in Amsterdam

International

[ILGA](#): the international lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex association.

Terminology

Sexual diversity in the Netherlands relates to differences in sexual preference. In the Netherlands, homosexuality, heterosexuality or bisexuality is an aspect of a person's identity.

Somebody is heterosexual if they are attracted to people of the opposite sex. Somebody is homosexual if they are attracted to people of the same sex. Somebody is bisexual if they are attracted to people of both sexes.

Behaviour or identity

Nowadays, homosexuality is predominantly seen as a clearly defined sexual identity in the Netherlands. A minority of people see homosexuality as being more of an activity rather than an identity, and don't recognise terms such as gay, bi, or lesbian. Scientific studies into homosexuality and bisexuality usually investigate all aspects: sexual behaviour, sexual attraction and self-identification.



Bisexuality

In the 1960s, bisexuality was mainly seen as behaviour that disrupted the two defined sexual identities: heterosexuality and homosexuality. Since the 1980s, bisexuality has been accepted as a clearly defined identity in itself. The criterion is that the person is attracted to more than one sex.

It is a misconception to think that bisexuals are equally attracted to both sexes at all times. There are bisexuals who are predominantly attracted to people of the same sex or the opposite sex, or people who are equally attracted to both. The percentage of bisexuals in the Netherlands is larger than the group of homosexuals. Based on sexual activity, attraction and identity, 6% of men and 16% of women are bisexual. Three per cent of men and 1.4% of women are homosexual.

Lesbians

Homosexuality is a term that applies to both men and women. Although homosexuals can be women, the LGB community prefers the term lesbians. This is because many people associate the term 'homosexual' with men, which often results in homosexual women being forgotten.

Queer

Nowadays, the gay community often use the word 'queer' to refer to people who do not identify with the three defined sexual identities. The word 'queer' is also used as an umbrella term for the whole LGBTI community, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

LGB(TQIA)

Lesbians, gays and bisexuals are often grouped into the acronym LGB. However, this acronym could do with an update, adding letters such as T for transgender, I for intersex, Q for queer or questioning, and A for asexual or ally. For more information about the letters T and I, see the terminology page in the gender diversity section.

Sources

[Landelijk Netwerk Bisexualiteit](#) (National Bisexuality Network, site in Dutch)



HOLLAND ALUMNI
Network

nuffic
meet the world

[Niet te ver uit de kast](#) ('Don't come too far out of the closet', The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), 2012, Summary in English)