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Preventing Sexual Harassment

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Prevention of sexual harassment in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Sexual harassment, including sexual violence, is a serious problem in the Netherlands. Rutgers, the Netherlands expertise centre on sexuality, is advocating for years for more attention to prevention of sexual harassment. This took some effort; prevention is apparently felt to be less urgent than care for victims, despite its key importance. Thanks to a number of remarkable events early in 2022, the attention to sexual harassment has gained momentum. This paper will give an overview of the situation in the Netherlands, and how this momentum will eventually lead to a national action plan on preventing sexual harassment.

The term sexual harassment, or sexually transgressive behaviour, as an umbrella term for any sexual behaviour that crosses another person's boundaries, ranging from unwanted sexual touching to forcible rape, will be used in the paper. This includes behaviour in public spaces, in the workplace, at school, within relationships, etc.

1. Prevalence in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, two large studies on sexual health are conducted every four or five years: one among the adult population (*Sexual health in the Netherlands*¹) and one among young people between 12 and 25 years of age (*Sex under age 25*²). In these studies, some questions are included about experiences with sexual harassment. Both studies were last conducted in 2017; results of the following are expected in 2023. In these studies, particular forms of sexual harassment are questioned, including sexual touching, kissing, manual, anal, oral and genital sex against one's will. Sexual violence is understood as manual, anal, oral or genital sex against the will. Sexual harassment means sexual violence or unwanted sexual touching or kissing against the will, thus being a broader concept. The study among adults found that more than half of the women and almost a fifth of the men have experienced sexual harassment at some point in their lives; 22% of women and 6% of men have experienced sexual violence. Among young people under 25, 44% of

¹ H. de Graaf & C. Wijsen (Eds.), *Seksuele gezondheid in Nederland 2017* (pp. 88-98). Delft: Eburon

² Graaf, H. de, Borne, M. van den, Nikkelen, S., Twisk, D., & Meijer, S. (2017). *Seks onder je 25e*. *Seksuele gezondheid van jongeren in Nederland anno 2017*. Utrecht/Amsterdam: Rutgers/SOA AIDS Nederland.

girls and 17% of boys have had experiences with sexual harassment; 14% of girls and 3% of boys have ever experienced sexual violence.

Among adult female victims, almost all perpetrators were men; among male victims a third of the perpetrators were female. Women were mostly victimised by their (ex)partners, men mostly by friends or acquaintances. Around a quarter of the perpetrators were unknown to the victim.

In 2020, a large-scale study was carried out looking into the annual prevalence of sexual harassment. These figures showed that apart from young women, LGB people are also a risk group, especially bisexual women.³ This study will be repeated every two years, the results of the next one are expected next year. In this way, an increase or decrease in prevalence can be revealed.

2. Organisations

In the Netherlands, various organisations are engaged to some degree in tackling sexual harassment:

- Rutgers is the Netherlands expertise centre on sexuality and works on improving sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Netherlands and parts of Africa and Asia. Prevention of sexual harassment is one of the focal points of the centre's work.
- Atria is the knowledge institute for emancipation and women's history. Atria conducts scientific and policy-oriented research in the field of gender equality and diversity, including violence against women, and encourages the social and political debate on these subjects.
- Movisie is the national knowledge institute for a coherent approach to social issues. Movisie supports and advises civil society organisations, governments, socially involved companies and citizens' initiatives, both locally and nationally. Domestic and sexual violence is one of the core themes of their work.
- Emancipator works to change society's norms for men and masculinity, in order to achieve gender equality. Men and boys are needed as actors of change to prevent gender-based violence. Emancipator collects and discloses knowledge, connects professionals and strives for a common vision on men's emancipation.
- In the Centres for Sexual Violence (CSG), a team of doctors, nurses, police, psychologists, social workers and sexologists work together to provide specialist care to victims of sexual assault and rape 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Centres offer national coverage.

³ Akkermans, M., Gielen, W., Kloosterman, R., Moons, E., Reep, C. & Wingen, M. (2020). Prevalentiemonitor Huiselijk Geweld en Seksueel Geweld 2020. Den Haag: CBS/WODC

- On a local and regional level, municipal health services (GGD'en) work on prevention, identifying and assessment of sexual violence.
- Several bureaus that advice organisations and companies regarding policies on prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Research is being conducted at several universities.

Most of these organisations are subsidised in whole or in part by the government. They have their own focus when addressing sexual harassment. Rutgers is at the forefront when it comes to prevention. From their different perspectives, these organisations also collaborate and coordinate efforts if necessary and appropriate. For example, over the last five years, Rutgers and Atria formed the alliance Act4Respect, subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and worked together on the prevention of gender-based violence. In this alliance, the focus was on campaigns, capacity building of professionals working with young people and interventions for youngsters who are at risk of becoming either victims or perpetrators of sexual harassment. This alliance will be continued in the next 5 years.

In addition to these organisations, there are quite a few smaller groups with a specific goal or representing the interests of a specific group. Most of the organisations and groups mentioned here meet twice a year in the Partnership Sexual Violence, coordinated by Movisie and Rutgers. Goal of the Partnership is to exchange information, advise each other and to give solicited and unsolicited advice to policy makers, such as the government.

In addition to the regular work of these organisations, the government has subsidised several projects and programmes in the past.

The activities of these organisations are not enough to conclusively prevent sexual violence. More efforts are needed in this direction.

3. Improving the approach

3.1 What is needed?

Sexual harassment is a complex problem with individual, social, cultural and structural causes. Prevention therefore requires an approach with multiple strategies. Prevention works best when a number of conditions are met.⁴ First, it must be comprehensive. That is, a prevention programme must address both knowledge, attitudes and skills and take place in multiple settings, i.e., not only at school, but also at home, in the media and, for example, at the sports club. Prevention is appropriately timed, preferably before young people enter into sexual relationships. In addition, it is

⁴ See for example: Nation, M., Crusto, C., Wandersman, A., Kumpfer, K. L., Seybolt, D., Morrissey-Kane, E., et al. (2003). What works in prevention: principles of effective prevention programs. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 449.

important to teach children and young people from an early age the norms about equality and respect. This means that prevention should start as early as elementary school and continue through high school and beyond. Interventions must also have a sufficient scope. Just one lesson is not enough. A complex topic like sexual harassment requires multiple lessons that are repeated. A positive approach, in which young people support each other, has also been shown to work.⁵ Strategies in which young people, for example, are used as active bystanders are promising. Involving parents is important as well. Professionals involved in prevention need to be well-trained, and prevention activities must be theoretically based and culturally sensitive. It is important that prevention takes place at multiple levels, i.e., focused on the individual, professionals and organisations, culture and society as a whole. In this way, measures reinforce each other.⁶ This means that measures are needed in education, in training for professionals, in the workplace and the sports club, in the public domain and the media, and in policy. In recent years, it has also been increasingly recognised that involving boys and men is essential, not only because they are the perpetrators in the vast majority of cases, but also because sexual violence is a structural social phenomenon, not a problem of women alone.⁷

3.2 The approach in the Netherlands

Prevention of sexual harassment must begin at an early age. Education is the best place to start. In the Netherlands, sexuality education is mandatory in primary and secondary schools. However, schools are free to choose how they will implement sexuality education. In practice, this means that attention is often paid only to the biological aspects of sexuality, and that topics such as consent, pleasure, gender, diversity, responsibility and boundaries are left out. A survey among students showed that they rated sex education an average grade of 5.8 (out of 10), and that they wanted to learn more about sexual pleasure, boundaries and diversity.⁸

Adequate prevention of sexual harassment requires capable professionals in the field of education, care, social work and justice. Organisations such as Rutgers, Atria and Movisie are working on offering tools and training to professionals who work in this field. Due to work pressure, prioritisation or lack of perceived urgency, these tools are not sufficiently implemented. Moreover, it is also important to structurally include

⁵ UNESCO (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education. An evidence-informed approach*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

⁶ In the literature referred to as the socio-ecological model, see U. Bronfenbrenner (1994). Ecological Models of Human Development. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3(2), 1643-1647.

S. DeGue, L.A. Valle, M.K. Holt, G.M. Massetti, J.L. Matjasko, & A. Teten Tharp, (2014). A systematic review of primary prevention strategies for sexual violence perpetration. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 19, 346–362.

⁷ WHO (2007). *Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: Evidence from programme interventions*, Geneva: WHO 2007.

⁸ M. Cense, S. de Grauw, & M. Vermeulen (2019). 'Gewoon het taboe eraf halen.' *Wat leerlingen willen van seksuele vorming* ['Just taking the taboo off.' What students want from sexuality education]. Utrecht: Rutgers.

sexual health and prevention of sexual harassment in the curricula of vocational training for these professionals.

Young people who are at risk to become a victim or a perpetrator of sexual harassment need extra interventions, such as specific prevention programmes. There are quite a few of these interventions available, but implementation is an issue here as well.

Campaigns are necessary to bring about changes in the public. In recent years, Rutgers, Act4Respect, the Ministry of Health and the Centres for Sexual Violence have run campaigns. Campaigns however need to be repeated to be effective.

The development, collection and exchange of knowledge on the prevention of sexual harassment needs continued attention. Activities must be monitored and evaluated. New developments, insights and target groups must be identified. Information about this should be shared with all parties involved. More research is needed to examine interventions for effectiveness. By learning from what works and what does not, we can continuously improve the prevention of sexual violence.

3.3 Prioritisation and coordination

According to Rutgers and several other organisations, the approach in the Netherlands to address sexual harassment, and especially prevention, is not sufficient enough and too incident driven. A more systematic and coordinated approach is necessary. To reach that goal, prioritisation is needed. The approach is mainly focused on identifying, assessment and care to victims. This is, of course, of the utmost importance. Victims must be helped as quickly as possible. The violence they suffer must stop, they must be able to work on restoring their physical and mental health, and re-victimisation must be prevented. However, prevention is also crucial to ensure that there are as few new victims as possible. Without prevention, the approach to sexual violence is a textbook case of what we call in the Netherlands: mopping with the tap open.

In addition, addressing sexual harassment requires the involvement of many different sectors and professionals. Different ministries also have a role in this. Central coordination of the activities of all these different parties is necessary, otherwise the approach to sexual violence will become fragmented. This was the case in the Netherlands for a long time. It is therefore important that one minister and one ministry become responsible for coordinating the approach. And finally, the budget for prevention and care should be proportionate to the scale of the problem.

4. Recent developments

4.1 #TotHier (#UpToHere)

In 2020, Rutgers launched the #TotHier campaign. This campaign was aimed at getting the prevention of sexual violence into the coalition agreement of the new government; the elections were in March 2021. In addition, the goal was to broaden and make visible the social support for prevention. This strengthened the political

lobby but was also important when the policy would be implemented. The message was that it is necessary for the government to work on structural prevention of sexual violence by means of a national action plan. We advocated for:

- Systematic sex education in schools, with attention to respectful treatment, consent, gender equality, gender norms, diversity, self-determination and responsibility. It should start at primary school. Because this does not happen automatically, the core objectives need to be adjusted.
- Capacity building of professionals in vocational training.
- Awareness-raising campaigns with a positive message that are repeated periodically.
- Promoting and supporting the policies of organisations, institutions and local, regional and national governments, as well as sports clubs, the hospitality industry and student associations.
- Implementation of interventions for groups at risk, and development of interventions for groups at risk that are not yet sufficiently addressed, such as migrant groups and asylum seeker status holders.
- Developing and gathering knowledge by conducting research.

This approach should be realised by one coordinating ministry and with a sufficient budget.

To achieve this goal, several activities have been undertaken. We wrote a plea, containing information about sexual harassment and what is needed to prevent it. This plea was widely shared, for example with ministry officials and politicians. We started a petition to increase public support. The petition was supported by a large number of civil society organisations and well-known influencers and was presented to members of parliament. Via the media, we drew a lot of attention to the prevention of sexual harassment (with the hashtag TotHier). This led, among other things, to round table discussions with members of parliament. The youth organisations of the political parties drafted a manifesto asking for an approach to sexual violence. All in all, #TotHier has put the subject high on the public and political agenda.

4.2 The Voice of Holland

In January 2022, the YouTube Channel BOOS broadcasted a programme about sexual abuse in The Voice of Holland. BOOS has a large number of mainly younger viewers. In the programme, a number of powerful people, including a director and jury members, were accused of far-reaching sexually transgressive behaviour towards young The Voice participants. John de Mol, the owner of Talpa and creator of The Voice, also had a say. He condemned this behaviour but wondered why the women had not come forward. Moreover, he did not see what position of power these men had. The BOOS-broadcast was watched more than 10 million times and was the talk of the day in the media for weeks. Discussions focused on the prevalence, the seriousness of sexual harassment, victim blaming and the need for cultural change.

The day after the broadcast, the Prime Minister said, "How do we prevent unwanted sexual behaviour? That is the core." More and more cases came to light. Recently, the programme received an important Dutch media award, the Silver Nipkowschijf, and the Televizier Impact Award.

5. The government commissioner

5.1 The appointment

Shortly after the broadcast, the government announced a National Action Plan aimed at long-term commitment and sustainable change to address sexual harassment. This plan entails a coordinated and integral approach, under the responsibility of two ministries: Education, Culture and Science (OCW), and Social Affairs and Employment (SZW). The goal of the action plan is to help shape, accelerate and make sustainable a fundamental cultural change needed to end sexually transgressive behaviour and violence. To support and strengthen these efforts, Mariette Hamer has been appointed as Government Commissioner for Sexual Transgression and Sexual Violence. Government Commissioners are more often appointed in the Netherlands. It is an official who is assigned by the government with a special task. A Government Commissioner has an independent position and mandate in the realisation of this task. This allows the Commissioner to function as a driving force to speed up the necessary changes.

The work of the Government Commissioner for Sexual Transgression and Sexual Violence is described as follows:

- The Commissioner advises the Cabinet, both on request and on her own initiative, regarding the development and implementation of the National Action Plan.
- The Commissioner is a recognisable and accessible figurehead of the culture change that is needed, initiating social debate and dialogue and stimulating initiatives in this area.
- The Commissioner has an important signalling function and ensures that reports of undesirable developments are passed on.
- In the performance of these duties, the Commissioner works closely with the ministries, co-governments, supervisory bodies, social partners, relevant public authorities, expertise centres and government agencies.
- The Commissioner is in constant contact with relevant stakeholders in the field and can rely on a solid network among experts by experience, victims and professionals at organisations that are active in this field on a daily basis.⁹

⁹ Letter of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to Parliament, d.d. 8th of February 2022

Mariette Hamer is appointed for three years and started her work in April 2022. She is supported by a compact office that will fall under the Ministry of OCW. As the Government Commissioner she will report to the Ministers of OCW and SZW.

Previously, Mariette Hamer has been chair of the Social and Economic Council (SER) since September 2014. Prior to her appointment to the SER, she was a member of the Lower House of Parliament for the Labour Party. She won the Joke Smit Prize¹⁰ in 2019 and, as SER president, stood at the cradle of the advisory report Diversity at the Top, in order to achieve greater cultural and gender diversity at the top of companies.

5.2 Outline of the national action plan

At the end of June 2022, the two ministries made public the substantive outlines of the National Action Plan; the National Action Plan itself will be released end of 2022. These substantive outlines include the following:¹¹

- Establishing social norms and a shared view on how we want to deal with each other in society and what is needed to do so, with attention to gender stereotyping and power inequality. To better equip society with knowledge about healthy relationships, consent, desires, boundaries and sexual resilience, including specific attention for new generations, their parents and/or guardians and the professionals working with them. The importance of sex education is emphasised: "It is important to educate children at an early age and to discuss relationships and sexuality with them at home and at school. For a healthy sexual development and entering into equal relationships, it is important that young people learn how to indicate their wishes and boundaries and how to ask for consent. This contributes to respectful dealings with gender diversity and gender. The National Action Plan will be in any case:
 - Ensuring updated core objectives for sexuality education. In this way, students can learn to recognise, name and consciously guard their own boundaries;
 - Looking at what is needed to stimulate and facilitate the use of effective, evidence-based teaching methods and learning packages within a continuous learning line;
 - Addressing online violence.
- Setting sharp formal standards in laws and regulations, on what is accessible behaviour and what is not, and on mandating effective approaches.
- Support organisations, municipalities and clubs to put their processes in order. The goal is that in three years' time, every organisation or company will know what

¹⁰ The Joke Smit Prize is a biennial Dutch government award for a person, group or body that makes a fundamental contribution to improving the position of women.

¹¹ Letter of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to Parliament, d.d. 27th of June 2022

is expected to counteract sexual transgression and sexual violence and how to act when it occurs and will also put this into practice.

- Activating bystanders by removing the reluctance to take action and bringing them into the shared understanding of what is acceptable behaviour. The aim is to inform the general public about what bystanders can do and what the norms are. Especially in situations that may seem mundane, but which everyone feels are actually out of line.
- Improve accessibility and findability of hotlines and emergency services for victims and perpetrators.
- Improving the use of and referral to adequate and effective help. Attention is hereby paid to municipalities (regional approach) and to the availability of sufficient appropriate assistance. The government wants to pay attention to gender within the systemic approach of sexual violence and wants to invest in capacity building, so that professionals can identify gender as a cause of violence and know which interventions should be used to remove the cause.¹²

In a letter to parliament, Mariette Hamer responded positively to the ambitions of the Cabinet against sexual transgression and sexual violence.¹³ She is pleased that in the outlines of the National Action plan, a cultural change is central. She says: "Only by changing the culture we will be able to prevent and reduce transgressive behaviour now and in the future." In the coming months, she wants to continue the discussions she is already having with experts and organisations. Hamer: "The conversation about how we want to deal with each other must be held everywhere: at the kitchen table, at work and in the media. I hope that this conversation will generate new, shared norms and values about what is or is not possible. We need to find a respectful and positive way of dealing with each other's boundaries. This includes addressing each other when we see undesirable behaviour. Looking away is no longer an option."

Mariette Hamer also sees an important role for sexual and relational education in education and other forms of prevention, including in culture and the media. To gain more insight into the fundamental causes of sexually transgressive behaviour, Hamer wants to encourage research into risk factors and into the underlying power mechanisms and motives.

These recent developments are promising in that the focus is on prevention and a structural approach to producing a cultural change in society with regard to respectful behaviour and gender norms. However, concerns remain about funding and securing unless funding for long-term programmes is provided in the National Action Plan.

¹² Letter of the Ministry of OCW to the Chair of Parliament, d.d. 27th of June 2022

¹³ From the press release, d.d. 27th of June 2022