

# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

## Combatting digital forms of violence against women

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### Comments paper – The Netherlands



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# Online Gender-Based Violence in The Netherlands: policies and best practices

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## Abstract

The Dutch government has voiced ambitions to effectively counter online forms of gender-based violence (OGBV), but a coherent, integrative and gender-sensitive approach has yet to be put to practice. This paper comments on the current Dutch societal and political context regarding OGBV. In addition, it describes relevant interventions from The Netherlands and opportunities and challenges regarding best practices from Finland and Iceland. Implications for Dutch policies include an integration of help services, additional efforts in promoting gender-sensitivity among professionals and reviewing the funding structure, which is based on short-term projects while sustainable funding is needed. The narrow labour market and the ambiguous position of current political leaders pose challenges to intensifying the Dutch approach to OGBV.

## 1. Current situation in The Netherlands

I first summarise descriptive data regarding OBGV in The Netherlands. Integrated data on reported cases are not available, as monitoring services are fragmented: victims can, amongst others, report cases to the police, to regional anti-discrimination units or to the official website [Meld.Online Discriminatie](#). The latter received 483 reports of online discrimination and/or harassment in 2023. These numbers severely underrepresent the actual prevalence of OGBV, as few victims know where and how to report their case.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Online harassment and sexual violence

Among all age and gender groups in The Netherlands, young women have the highest risk of experiencing online sexual harassment. In 2024, 22% of 16- to 18-year-old females and 21% of 18- to 24-year-old females experienced online sexual harassment in the past year, compared to 7 to 8% among male peers.<sup>2</sup> These percentages have decreased over the past years, both for 16- to 18-year-old females (35% in 2022) and

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<sup>1</sup> Gorissen, M., el Akehal, J., Weerman, F. & van de Weijer, S. (2020) [Het fenomeen online seksueel geweld. Een literatuuronderzoek naar de kennis over omgang, aard en aanpak](#). Amsterdam: NSCR.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Netherlands (2024) [Prevalentiemonitor Huiselijk Geweld en Seksueel Grensoverschrijdend gedrag 2024](#). The Hague: Statistics Netherlands.

18- to 24-year-old females (28% in 2022).<sup>3</sup> Homosexual men and bi+ women were targeted by online harassment relatively often as well. 20% of victims report negative consequences of the online harassment, such as mental or sexual problems. People of different genders were equally likely to experience such consequences.

## 1.2 Online hate speech

Online hate speech prevalence in The Netherlands has only been studied in subgroups. According to a study by Atria, 47% of female politicians report having been victim of online aggression or violence in the past year, compared to 36% of males.<sup>4</sup> Females were more frequently attacked as a representative of a specific group (e.g., gender) than males. 35% of female politicians (males: 27%) indicated the online aggression influenced their social media usage, and 53% (males: 42%) said that even only the risk of experiencing online aggression did so. 11% of female politicians (males: 8%) considered leaving politics as a result of online aggression or violence. Similarly, more than half of female journalists reports having experienced intimidation in the last year, mostly in the form of online verbal aggression.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Policy/legal context

### 2.1 Relevant national policies

- The ***Emancipatienota 2022-2025*** describes the overarching Dutch policy line regarding gender.<sup>6</sup> In the document, the former cabinet emphasized the need to adopt a gender-sensitive (instead of gender-neutral) approach. The directorate for emancipation, part of the Ministry of Education, provides subsidies to eight five-year alliances of civil society organisations that bring the overarching policy line into practice. Among these alliances, the [Act4Respect](#) alliance is committed to the prevention of (offline and online) gender-based violence.
- The government also issued a separate **national action programme** against gender-based violence.<sup>7</sup> The programme covers several Ministries and incorporates new legislation, facilitating stakeholders, and stimulating a societal discussion and norm shift.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Netherlands (2024) [Prevalentiemonitor Huiselijk Geweld en Seksueel Grensoverschrijdend gedrag 2022](#). The Hague: Statistics Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> Steijaert, M. J., Thijs, P., Bruijn, S. & Klein Kranenburg, L. (2024) [“Ga aardappelen schillen of zoiets”: Onderzoek naar de omvang, aard en gevolgen van online agressie en geweld tegen vrouwelijke politici in Nederland](#). Amsterdam: Atria.

<sup>5</sup> Bruijn, S., & Bouwmeester, J. (2022) [Vrouwelijke journalisten en veiligheid](#). Amsterdam: I&O Research.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2022, November 18th) [Emancipatie: een opdracht voor ons allen. Emancipatienota 2022-2025](#). The Hague.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science & Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (2023, January 13th). [Elkaars wensen en grenzen herkennen, erkennen en respecteren: Nationaal Actieprogramma Aanpak seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag en seksueel geweld](#). The Hague.

- Ensuing broad publicity about sexual transgressions in a popular Dutch television show, an [independent government commissioner on sexual harassment and violence](#) was appointed. She offers unsolicited advice and promotes a societal discourse and cultural shift towards sexual violence.
- In July 2024, the updated sexual offence law came into effect. The new law shifts the definition of sexual offence from coercion to lack of consent. One is in violation of the law, when one engages in sexual action towards another while there are signals that this other person does not consent. In addition, sexchatting (sending sexual messages to minors) and sexual intimidation (approaching another with intimidating sexual messages, online or offline) were added to the list of criminal sexual offences.
- With regard to OGBV, the ministries of internal affairs, education, social affairs, health and justice together strive to intensify the approach to online hate speech and discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Their plans have yet to be published.

## 2.2 Current political debate

An evaluation study on implementation of the Istanbul Convention has applauded earlier national programmes for their broad and integral approach. However, the study also criticizes the Dutch approach for being too gender-neutral. Dutch policies in the past decades have tended to treat sexual violence and harassment as unrelated to gender. Also (and as a result) gender-specific data on prevalence is often lacking. A gender-neutral approach might unintentionally underestimate prevalence of gender-based violence and limit our understanding of gender-related causes of violence.<sup>9</sup>

Following the results of this study, the cabinet issued an investigation of its approach towards OGBV. The report, published in 2023, signalled severe fragmentation of policies, a knowledge deficit among professionals regarding online developments, undercapacity among stakeholders, insufficient integration with offline measures and overall underperformance in protection, prevention and prosecution measures.<sup>10</sup>

Past December, the current Schoof cabinet reacted to the study.<sup>11</sup> The government aims to coordinate segregated policies by a taskforce formed by five Ministries, led by the ministry of health. Concerning protection and prevention, the government points to existing policies (such as the national action programme) that aim at strengthening digital literacy skills. Concerning prosecution, the government points to

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Justice and Security (2023, February 22nd) [Kamerbrief aanpak online discriminatie, racisme en hate speech](#). Kamerstuk 30950, nr. 334.

<sup>9</sup> Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) (2020) [GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Netherlands](#). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>10</sup> Korf, W., Harthoorn, H. & Witvliet, M. (2023) [Digitale dimensie van geweld tegen vrouwen: Opvolging Algemene Aanbeveling nr. 1 GREVIO](#). Amsterdam: Regioplan.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (2024, December 19th) [Beleidsreactie op het rapport 'Digitale dimensie van geweld tegen vrouwen. Opvolging Algemene Aanbeveling Nr. 1 GREVIO'](#). Kamerstuk 28345, nr. 281.

the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the updated sexual offence law. The government has expended structural funds (€20 million) to organisations involved in execution of these laws to strengthen workforce capacity and bridge existing knowledge gaps.

Whereas the Schoof cabinet formally subscribes to the policy line set out by its predecessor, its actual position remains to be seen. Notably, the ministry of justice issued a significant cut in funding of Offlimits, a helpline organisation for victims of online sexual abuse. Only after amendments by a coalition of centre-left opposition parties, the cut was expunged. Another noteworthy debate revolved around the “*Week van de Lentekriebels*” [“Spring Fever Week”], an education programme on love, friendship and sex for primary schools developed by Rutgers Centre on Sexuality and municipal health services. In both 2023 and 2024, several right-wing parties spread false claims about the programme’s contents and incited a hate campaign that led to threats and intimidations towards teachers and Rutgers’ employees. Among the assailants were Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party (PVV) and the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB), which are both members of the current Schoof cabinet. Their critique fits within the international neoconservative, anti-feminist movement in the (radical) right, which thus is currently represented in the Dutch government.

### 3. Good practice examples

In this paragraph I describe several good practices that might be of interest to the seminar audience. The list is to no extent exhaustive.

- The toolkit “[\*Eerste Hulp na Online Seksueel Grensoverschrijdend Gedrag\*](#)” [“First Aid after Online Sexual Harassment”] offers a cohesive guideline for professionals to help victims of OGBV. Strengths of the toolkit include its focus on monitoring long-term psychological consequences and actively involving youths’ social surrounding (parents and schools).
- [Helpwanted.nl](#) is a free, anonymous online helpline for OGBV victims. An evaluation study found that only 14% of victims was acquainted with the website.<sup>12</sup> Notably, however, another recent study found that Snapchat advertisements potentially strengthen youth’s acquaintance with the website, especially when self-blame (a well-known barrier to help seeking) was mentioned in the ad.<sup>13</sup>
- Platform KIS offers a [toolkit](#) for professionals on talking (with youths or parents) about shame sexting. The toolkit explicitly addresses cultural sensitivity in talking to youths or parents of Turkish, Moroccan or Hindu descent. These youths experience higher risk of shame sexting and stronger negative consequences.

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<sup>12</sup> Pijlman, V. (2024) [Het zoeken van hulp na online seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag en/of misbruik](#). Amsterdam: NSCR.

<sup>13</sup> Pijlman, V., & Burgmeijer, A. (2024) [Using A/B testing to Study Engagement with Snapchat Advertisements Promoting Help-Seeking After Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse Victimization](#). Computers in Human Behavior, 158.

- The platform for resilient governance, part of the ministry of internal affairs, issued a [collective norm](#) against aggression and intimidation, which explicitly condemns all forms of offline and online aggression. The platform calls for political parties and government officials to subscribe to the norm and act as an ally in combatting aggression. This way, people in the immediate surrounding of victims of OGBV are called upon to intervene and speak out.
- [Make a Move](#) and [Girls' Talk](#) are evidence-based interventions developed by Rutgers to improve sexual resilience and healthy sexual behaviour among adolescents. Each contains an online module, [Seks Online](#), which is also available as stand-alone module. This module is currently being updated, improved and made more lhbt+-inclusive.

## 4. Transferability aspects (FI & IS)

In this paragraph, I briefly describe challenges and opportunities drawn from the Finnish and Icelandic discussion papers.

Both the Finnish and Icelandic approaches benefit from cohesiveness. Dutch policies have been criticised for their fragmentation, which can be perceived as a challenge. However, the examples also offer opportunities for integrating Dutch OGBV policies. For example, all helpline services in Iceland are brought together on the 112-website, which is a well-known and well-respected source of information. Efforts should be made to integrate Dutch helplines under one single well-respected platform as well.

A challenge to sustainability of measures is that Dutch policies are currently mainly executed within the context of short-term subsidies, such as the 5-year alliances. Sustaining collaborations after subsidies run aground has proved to be challenging, but is a highly relevant condition for effective implementation of anti-OGBV policies. The same goes for integration of policies with offline efforts.

Another challenge in implementing the best practices concerns the labour market shortage. The Dutch police, most notably, suffers from high capacity deficits. This would create considerable problems in adopting elements from the Icelandic action plan, which highly relies on police capacity. One specific strength from the Icelandic example is the thorough training of police officers. However, intensifying police training might further exacerbate workforce shortages.

Finally, the Dutch gender-neutral tradition still strongly resounds among policymakers and professionals. It takes time to pervade them of the need for more gender-sensitive measures. The critical stance towards gender issues by some current members of the cabinet does not make this process any easier.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Thanks to the 2023 investigation of current OGBV policies, the challenges in the Dutch approach towards OGBV are clear. The Finnish and Icelandic examples

provide some guidelines how to tackle these problems. Dutch measures would be more effective and sustainable if helpline information is brought together on a well-trusted and well-known platform, if funding is granted for extended periods, if a more explicit integration is made with existing offline measures, and if executors are encouraged to adopt a gender-sensitive approach. The severe labour market shortage poses a challenge to effectively intensify the Dutch approach to OGBV.