Gender diversity in the Netherlands

Most people identify with the gender based on their sex at birth: male or female. However, around 2% of the Dutch population has difficulty identifying with their assigned sex.

By means of its national and international LGBT policy, the Dutch government also wishes to protect the equal rights of the T in this group: transgender people.

From the third sex and transsexuality...

At the start of the 20th century, it was common in the Netherlands to view homosexuals as ‘the third sex’. Homosexuals were seen as a separate sex between male and female. In addition, sexual and romantic feelings for the opposite sex were grouped together with feelings of dissatisfaction with your biological sex.

After the Second World War, homosexuality became a sexual preference, while the men who felt like women and the women who felt like men were named transsexuals.

...to gender diversity

However, there were not only people who felt trapped in the wrong body. There were also large numbers of people who didn’t see themselves as either men or women, or who saw themselves as both. These people do not seek gender reassignment with help of hormones and surgery.

Since the 1990s, the umbrella term transgender has been used to refer to people whose gender identity and/or behaviour do not fully match their assigned sex.

Read more about transgender (in)equality

In recent years, great strides have been made in the Netherlands with regard to transgender emancipation. Transgender people are now more visible than ever before in public. Many organisations now lobby for the interests and rights of transgender people, and the Dutch government also pays attention to their situation.
This document takes a closer look at the situation of transgender people and Dutch domestic policies on:

- legal equality
- social acceptance
- safety and discrimination in school, at work and within institutions
- health and well-being

You can also read more about the differences between the terms transgender, transvestite and transsexual and the organisations involved with the issue of gender diversity.

**Sources**

*A World of Difference*, (Rutgers, 2015)

Transgender Network Netherlands

### Legal equality of transgender people

The Netherlands is renowned for fighting to gain equal rights for sexual minorities. However, for a long time, only limited attention was devoted to the T in LGBT. Nowadays, this has changed and equality for transgender people is a vital objective for emancipation policy in the Netherlands. And for these purposes, Dutch law must be changed.

#### Legal gender recognition

When a baby is born in the Netherlands, its sex is registered. This is a problem for transgender people who aren’t comfortable with the labels ‘male’ or ‘female’ in their identity cards and driving licence.

Since 1985, it has been possible to change your registered sex in the Netherlands. At first, this was only possible after undergoing gender reassignment surgery and sterilisation. These prerequisites were removed in 2014. It is now easier for transgender people to change their registered sex. However, they must still choose either male or female.

In due course, the Dutch parliament will vote on whether to abolish compulsory sex registration.
Read more about the situation in the Netherlands before 2014:


Protection against discrimination

In the Netherlands, transgender people are protected against discrimination by the constitution and the General Equal Treatment Act (Algemene Wet op Gelijke Behandeling). Unlike sexual preference and gender, gender identity and gender expression are not explicitly stated as grounds for discrimination.

Special-interest organisations such as Transgender Network Netherlands (TNN) are disappointed that this remains the case. Together with COC Nederland, the TNN is striving for an explicit ban on discriminating against transgender people.

European transgender policy

The international fight for transgender people’s rights has a major impact on the Netherlands. Recently, the Council of Europe called upon member states to fight against all forms of discrimination against transgender people.

For example, every member state should enable a third gender option in addition to male and female. An explicit ban on discrimination based on gender identity should also be introduced.

In addition, medical and psychological care for transgender people should be fully covered by insurance. On the latter issue, the Netherlands is not (yet) compliant, as health insurances don’t cover all of the costs involved in sexual reassignment.

Read more about the European Council’s resolution on transgender people.

Social acceptance of transgender people

The visibility of transgender people in the Netherlands has been growing in recent years. For example, more documentaries about gender diversity have been broadcast on TV and LGB organisations now also stand up for the rights of transgender people. General social acceptance of transgender people is high.
High level of acceptance, but not limitless

Ninety-three per cent of the Dutch would remain friends with somebody who decided to undergo sexual reassignment. But however high the levels of acceptance may be, it still has its limits. For example, 37% of the Dutch population think that transgender people should pay the costs of the operation themselves. And one in five Dutch people have a problem with people who are not clearly a man or a woman.

Differences between sections of the population

In general, highly educated people, secular groups, women and people who vote for social or liberal political parties are more positive about transgender people. Young males, people from immigrant backgrounds, lesser-educated people and strict religious groups tend to have a relatively negative view of transgender people.

Obstacles encountered

Most transgender people experience discomfort with their birth gender before the age of ten. However, for many of them, it is a huge step to actually express their desired gender identity. Around 30% keep their feelings hidden, usually out of fear or shame.

Read more about acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the Netherlands. (SCP, 2013)

Sources

Wel trouwen, niet zoenen ('Get married, but don’t kiss each other’, in Dutch only, SCP, 2015)

Worden wie je bent ('Becoming who you are’ Summary in English, SCP 2012)

Safety of transgender people

In the Netherlands, transgender people are entitled to a life free of discrimination just like everybody else. In practice however, things don’t always work out this way. Many transgender people experience discrimination at work, in the street or at sports clubs. A proportion of them even feel unsafe.

The Dutch government want to get a clearer picture of discrimination against transgender people. To make this possible, it is important that transgender people more frequently report incidents of discrimination and violence.
Just 16% of transgender people who fall victim to threats, physical violence and sexual harassment report this to an anti-discrimination centre or to the police.

You can also consult the graphic explorer and the investigation report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights into discrimination, intimidation and violence experienced by LGBT people.

Source: Worden wie je bent (‘Becoming who you are’, Summary in English, SCP 2012)

Health and well-being

Compared to the general population, the mental and sexual health of transgender people is poor. However, the majority of transgender people say they are happy with their life.

Some facts:

- Half of all transgender people suffer from mental health issues. This figure is just 14% in the general population.
- 70% of transgender people have thought about committing suicide.
- Two out of three transgender people feel lonely. This figure is just 30% in the general population of the Netherlands.
- Many transgender people have an inactive sex life.
- In general, the well-being of transgender people increases following gender reassignment surgery.

Care relating to gender reassignment

Of all transgender people, 12% undergo gender reassignment surgery. Some hospitals in the Netherlands have a ‘gender team’: a team of care providers that study transgender people and give them guidance with regard to gender reassignment.

However, a major problem is that these teams have long waiting lists. In addition, not all medical costs are covered by health insurance. It is also too frequently the case that long-term psychosocial care is unavailable.

The patient organisation Transvisie helps transgender people with any individual questions they may have regarding gender identity. Transgender people can also go to Transvisie Zorg to see professionals in psychological or psychosocial care.
Sources

Worden wie je bent (‘Becoming who you are’, Summary in English, SCP 2012)

Een wereld van verschil (‘A world of difference’, Summary in English, Rutgers, 2014)

Want to learn more?

The following is a summary of the main organisations in the Netherlands that are working towards emancipation and care for transgender people. You are welcome to contact them for more information.

Special-interest organisations in the Netherlands

Transgender Network Netherlands (TNN)

COC Nederland: the special-interest organisation for LGBT people.

International special-interest organisations

Transgender Europe (TGEU)

Care provision and patients

Transvisie Patients’ Organisation (site in Dutch)

Transvisie Psychological and Psychosocial Care (site in Dutch)

Knowledge and Care Centre for Gender Dysphoria (site in Dutch)

The gender team at Groningen University Medical Centre (site in Dutch)

World Professional Association of Transgender Health

You can find an overview of general organisations involved in LGBT issues in our document about sexual diversity.
Terminology

What are the differences between the terms transsexual, transgender, transvestite, queer and intersex? And how do we refer to someone who is happy with their birth label of ‘male’ or ‘female’?

Transsexual

Transsexuals are people who wish to transform their bodies to match their gender identity. Transsexuality is a clinical term that is increasingly falling into disuse. Part of the reason for this is the use of the word ‘sexuality’.

Transvestite/cross-dresser

Transvestites and cross-dressers are often happy with their assigned sex, but they like to dress and behave like the opposite sex.

Genderqueers

Genderqueers feel uncomfortable with both gender labels (‘male’ and ‘female’). They feel both male and female, or neither, or somewhere in between. Gender fluid, genderambivalent or transgenderists are other terms used for this group.

Transgender

Transgender is an umbrella term for all people who don’t fully identify with or behave according to their assigned sex. This can be either because their behaviour and clothing doesn’t match their sex (gender expression), or because they identify with a different gender. The term transgender includes transsexuals, genderqueers and transvestites.

Transman

A transman identifies himself as male, but was assigned female at birth.

Transwoman
A transwoman identifies herself as female, but was assigned male at birth.

Cisgender

Cisgender people are people who feel comfortable with their assigned sex. Their gender identity matches their biological sex. Or to put it another way: cisgenders are people who are not transgender.

Intersex

People with intersex conditions are people whose biological sex is ambiguous. These people have nonvisible and sometimes visible characteristics of both sexes. In the past, these people were referred to as hermaphrodites.

Read more: Living with intersex (SCP, 2014)

Source: Transgender Network Netherlands