

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: Netherlands

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last years, investments have been increased to create an inclusive and safe academic environment at Dutch Universities, for instance, through the development of social safety policies, the installation of diversity officers, and the provision of funds for marginalised groups. The discourse in the Netherlands is, however, not so much on gender-based violence (GBV) – a term that is predominantly associated with domestic violence. The main concepts used in documents, media and public discourses are 'harassment in academia' and 'social safety'. Although often special attention is given to the gendered nature of macroaggressions, harassment and misconduct, most debates are about harassment experienced by female and male students and staff. Harassment experienced by non-binary or trans people has hardly been part of the discussion. This attention to (sexual) harassment at universities and research institutions has been instigated by two studies on harassment in academia (Naezer et al. 2019; FNV/VAWO 2019), and several cases of sexual misconduct by university staff reported in the media. Since that time, the issue is high on the agenda of university boards. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the VSNU (sector organization of universities) and some informal bodies have been active in developing policies and strategies around this subject (see below).



2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

In the Netherlands, no explicit laws exist that address GBV in HEIs and RPOs. There are general laws (Article 7:658 of the Civil Code (Burgerlijk Wetboek) which state that "employers have the duty to create a safe working environment for their employees". In the specific Working Conditions Act (Arbeidsomstandighedenwet/ Arbowet), it says that the employer has to take care of the safety and health of the employees in all labour-related aspects. The employer needs to have policies in place that create good working conditions, amongst others, prevent sexual intimidation, aggression and violence. Furthermore, the employer has to take measures for prevention and support for victims. Furthermore, there are general laws against gender discrimination in the workplace.

One possible reason for the lack of laws on a national level on GBV in Higher Education is that universities in the Netherlands have a great deal of autonomy and make their own policies. Since the 1980s, universities have been expected to operate more in accordance to a free market system (Maassen & van Vught, 1989). Government management has been restricted to more global and macro issues and has focused on developing a framework within which universities could operate more autonomously (Enders et al. 2013). This approach, known as 'managing from a distance' entails increased institutional autonomy and responsibility in exchange for more accountability in terms of quality control, output productivity and effectiveness. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science organizes and facilitates the academic system and universities

are responsible for setting their own strategic research lines for the longer term. Government and the universities draw up contracts which stipulate what is expected from the universities and enter into agreements on performance, conditions and accountability. In return, the universities carry out their tasks and receive funding.

Although there are no laws, that doesn't mean that the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science hasn't been pushing universities to make action plans for diversity, inclusion and social safety. Since 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has launched an action plan for greater diversity and inclusion in higher education and research (<https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2020/09/01/national-action-plan-for-greater-diversity-and-inclusion-in-higher-education-and-research>). The action plan focuses on an inclusive, diverse and safe learning and working environment in which everyone has the opportunity to flourish ensures the highest possible quality of education and research.

Part of the action plan is dedicated to 'social safety'. Therefore, the Ministry has asked the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences to install a committee that will advise the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science on how to deal with harassment in the university sector. Questions that are answered are: what are the consequences of harassment on scientific integrity, how can structures and cultures that facilitate harassment be mitigated? The advice will consist of concrete recommendations that aim to produce a safer working environment. The advice is expected at the end of 2021.

Besides the Ministry, another body has been active in agenda setting, awareness-raising and assisting universities in making policies on harassment in academia. The VNSU (Sector Organization of Dutch Universities) is an organization that represents all Dutch universities. After the publication of the two studies on harassment in academia (Naezer et al. 2019; FVV/VAWO 2019), they have published a statement against harassment in academia on their website. The statement makes clear that all kinds of 'unwanted behaviour' are disapproved. They state that universities should learn from each other and share best practices, especially related to confidential counselors. In order to learn from each other (the individual universities), the VNSU has collected measures taken by individual universities in one document and uploaded it to their website. In addition to this, they have organized a discussion evening about the topic and suggest measures taken by universities to prevent harassment.

The Dutch Network of Women Professors, who also commissioned the study of Naezer et al., contacted the 'acteursgenootschap' who developed a theatre play from scenarios originally performed as #MeTooAcademia. The play is fictitious but is based on interviews published in Science Guide¹ as well as confidential interviews conducted in the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). The Learning Curve is a 40-minute theatre play about sexual intimidation and abuse of power in the university context. It's both humorous and bleak and is written to be followed by a discussion led by a moderator. Different academic stakeholders and the audience can discuss what you can do if you find yourself, your colleagues or members of your team in such situations.

Although these actions have been taken and 'social safety' is indicated to be a high priority of university boards, some (in)formal bodies have emphasized that victims of harassment in academia are still not supported and even silenced. The LNVH (network of professors) who initiated a study on harassment (see Naezer et al. 2019) indicates that they still receive a high number of emails from women academics reporting on a case of harassment. A student initiative

¹ <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2017/12/he-is-a-professor-and-you-are-just-an-associate/>



at the University of Utrecht has launched a Twitter account where they report on their worries and their actions. The Twitter account was initiated by the self-appointed task force, which was called "Action group undesirable behavior² (Actiegroep wangedrag)", a group of students and alumni with an affinity to this topic from the University of Utrecht.

3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

The #MeToo movement has been widely discussed in Dutch news(papers) following Metoo cases in sectors as theatre and television, classical music, and sports. This led to several discussions about the precarious situation of people in the world of media, arts and sports who have no permanent contract and strongly depend on a casting director, director or coach who is able to make or break their career. Several initiatives – such as 'Mores' in the world of theatre - were launched to protect victims. Also, the Metoo movement opened up the discussion in several sectors in the Netherlands about "what kind of behavior can and cannot be tolerated". Interviews were published in which people reported that the #metoo movement had opened their eyes: "it became legitimate to question behavior that was previously considered 'part of the deal' or 'normal'. On the other hand, people were worried about a growing intolerance towards "harmless" behavior and jokes (NOS, 2020).

In May 2019, the first big case of sexual harassment in academia was reported in a Dutch newspaper. A professor at the University of Amsterdam had been sexually harassing and intimidating women colleagues and students for more than 15 years. Colleagues and supervisors had been aware of some affairs the professor had with students, but nobody reported on their colleague. Approximately at the same time, two studies on harassment in academia were published (Naezer et al. 2019; FNV/VAWO 2019) who showed that this case in Amsterdam was not a single incident. These studies and the case of Amsterdam was taken up by television shows and national newspapers. In 2020, two other cases of sexual harassment in academia were reported, and the number of students and staff reporting cases of harassment at the National Network of Female Professors (who commissioned the Naezer report) has been rising ever since.

Lately, the discussions on (sexual) harassment in academia have focused on the lack of action and protection of the victims of harassment in Dutch academia. A student initiative at the University of Utrecht has launched a Twitter account where they report on their actions. The Twitter account was initiated by the self-appointed task force called 'action group undesirable behavior', a group of students and alumni with an affinity to this topic from the University of Utrecht.

National newspapers reported on the Istanbul convention when it was ratified in the Netherlands, but it didn't spur any resistance or disbelief. The dominant public opinion is that violence against women, such as stalking, domestic and partner violence and (online) sexual violence is reprehensible. In addition, Dutch people are convinced that they are progressive, especially in terms of women's and lgbtqi+ rights (see also Wekker 2016). Therefore, hardly anybody would object to the Istanbul convention, also not the main religious institutions. The native Dutch public opinion would also connect GBV more easily with ethnic and religious minority groups and practices such as honor killing. This shows how blind native Dutch are for the prevalence of

² <https://twitter.com/actiewangedrag>



GBV in the native white population (Atria, 2014). More recently, the media mainly reported on Turkey and Poland wanting to undermine the convention.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

There are no studies that report on the national public opinion about GBV, also not specifically in universities and research institutions.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

More generally, there has been quite some attention paid in media about the rise of GBV in home situations during times of COVID (FNV 2020).

In universities, most attention has gone to the effects of the COVID-19 measures on women's situations in terms of work productivity and stress. This discussion was mainly geared towards the possibilities of growing gender inequality in the careers of men and women academics. Several international studies showed that women academics were disadvantaged in their career progression due to unequal division of care responsibilities (King & Frederikson, 2021). However, a Dutch COVID Gender (In)equality Survey Netherlands (COGIS-NL) reported that the coronavirus has created more work pressure and less free time and has had no structural influence on gender roles between men and women.

6. CONCLUSION

Since 2019, the topic of (sexual) harassment has received a lot of attention due to two studies on harassment and several cases of (sexual) harassment in national media. Since then, there is a greater awareness of the prevalence and seriousness of this issue at the sector and university level. Universities have been sharing their policies to create a safer and inclusive workplace via their sector organization (VSNU) and installed confidential counselors within their universities. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has been slower in their response as they wanted to connect their advice to the National Diversity and Inclusion Action plan that has been launched end of 2020. We will have to wait till the end of 2021 before the advice on social safety will be ready, and hopefully, the Ministry will put some pressure on the universities to take over these recommendations.

Note: I think there is some attention to sexual-based violence during the traineeship of medical students, but cannot find it online. The same for the military. I have heard that they have some attention for it, but they do not display this on the internet.

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