



# YOUTH REPORT UPDATE



# YOUTH REPORT UPDATE

Every five years the Dutch government and NGO's report on the status of the Rights of the Child in the Netherlands. Parallel to this the Dutch National Youth Council (DNYC) and the Coalition for Children's Rights also produce the Youth-report on the Rights of the Child. DNYC and the Coalition for Children's Rights believe that the views, experiences and recommendations of children and young people should always be taken into account when talking about and considering subjects that have an impact on their lives.

Right now we are mid-way between the last report in 2012 and the next scheduled to be made in 2017. Therefore we believe an update is appropriate, to bring to your attention and understanding a selection of trends and subjects that are relevant for and having an impact on the lives of young people and children right now.

Multiple in-depth interviews with children and young people from varying backgrounds lie at the foundation of this update. It's their views, combined with the information from the youth-report and input from several youth-organizations and organizations that often work with youth, that will supply you with an additional and up to date insight in what their lives and situations are like in the Netherlands right now.

In this report we've chosen to inform you about four major trends/topics through the eyes of the children who directly face these trends.

Firstly we delve into the lives of youths and children who are part of the LHBTIQ-community (Lesbian, Homosexual,

Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual and Queer). This group hasn't before been reviewed by the youth-report 2012 and through this update, we strive to offer you a peek into the challenges and things young LHBTIQ-youths generally face.

Secondly we focus on a special group within the general LHBTIQ-populace; the young transgenders. These boys and girls, having been born in bodies that never have felt as their own, are part of a relatively small group of people that even today still are quite unknown to a large part of the Dutch populace.

Thirdly we'll delve into the continuing though renewed battle against child-abuse. The Dutch government, NGO's and society more than ever strive to include young people and children, through taking their idea's, experiences and passion, on board in this process. More and more there's being spoken with these children, instead of about them.

And lastly we'll take a closer look at the 'Kinderpardon' (childs-pardon) which the Dutch government tries to use to make sure that less refugee- and illegal-immigrant-children with extremely close ties to Holland are being repatriated. This policy has received a lot of criticism from both people who still find the policy too strict und unfair for too many children, as well as from people who find this leniency towards refugee- and illegal-immigrant-families unfavorable.

We'll end this update with a few recommendations based on the stories of the young interviewees that we've spoken.





## HOMOSEXUALITY AND BISEXUALITY

The Dutch pride themselves on their long-held and long-cherished tolerance for the gay-community in the Netherlands. We often refer to this community as 'LHBTIQ' (Lesbian, Homosexual, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual and Queer) but in this chapter we'll delve into the experiences of the LHB-youth.

All of the young interviewees pointed out they still consider the Netherlands to be 'a good place to be gay'. They generally feel equally valued by their friends and don't experience structural discrimination by institutions and government. Yet they still feel as if there are some problems and challenges remaining with being gay and being a young homosexual specifically.

### **The big grey area between wanting to be publicly emancipated and to be 'normalized'**

"In the way we are often 'emancipated', through great parties on party-boats during the Gay Pride or through 'Pink-festivals', we as a gay-community are still set aside within broader society", says a young lesbian interviewee. "More than anything I want to be 'normal'. I feel normal, but because of the extravaganza and/or indeed politically-correct-tiptoeing around gay people, we're still not viewed and approached as such."

All our interviewees feel that gays are no longer viewed as 'second-class-citizens' by the majority of society. Now all they want is for being gay to be as normal as being straight. "I feel we are both accepted and embraced by the Dutch", says a 18-year old homosexual. "But the continued way in which gays are treated as an overly vulnerable minority, stands in the way of true integration in Dutch society".

The young interviewees tell that the responsibility of changing this rests primarily with the government and gay-community. "The government should strive to really create an open environment in which gays are given the same treatment as straight people; to give them the same tasks, opportunities, restrictions, praise and functions as role-models. This would make sure that in the public eye there would be no distinction between being gay or being straight." Also they call for the events and organizations that try to make the gay-community more well known in the Netherlands, to do so "with an balance between entertaining and open extravaganza, as well as making sure that the 'normality' of a gay-person isn't overlooked or overshadowed".

### **Views on lesbians and female bisexuals vs views on homosexuals and male bisexuals**

"I feel that when we do try to focus on some remaining strange attitudes and stereotypes towards the LHB-community, that it has to do in which there's a difference on how male and female members of this community are viewed", tells a young lesbian interviewee. "Where lesbians and female bisexuals are often idolized by straight (young) males, for they find girls who like girls tantalizing, young homosexuals and male bisexuals are often seen as a threat." The strange thing is that straight boys and girls are the most likely to feel threatened or at unease when confronted with a gay-person of the same sex, according to the young interviewees. "A girl will feel that a lesbian might automatically want to be with her, like a boy might feel that a homosexual will immediately want to be with him. Strange how the subtle realization that no-one likes everyone of their preferred sex, here less frequently seems to sink in."

The interviewees feel that the more apparent discomfort is often centered on the young gays than on young lesbians. “Where lesbian or bisexual women are often found even more-than-normal exciting by boys, they boys also seem to tip the balance to a more-than-normal disquiet when coming into contact with homosexual youth.” In all interviews it is stressed that this observation only rings true for a relatively minor, and ever shrinking, amount of youth, for they feel that the acceptance of (young) gays is ever increasing. But still this is something to take into account when viewing the situation of the LHB-community. “I feel that here we really need to look at the way the subject of ‘lesbians, homosexuals and both sexes of bisexuals’ are being covered in schools and the public debate”, tells another young interviewee. “Are the girls idolized in popular media and are the boys often portrayed stereotypical? I wouldn’t be able to give a definite answer, but this is a question everyone needs to ask themselves if we are to keep improving and normalizing the situation for the LHB-community.”



## TRANSGENDER

Transgenders do take and always have taken a special place within the LHBTIQ-community. Being a relatively small group within Dutch society, they are vulnerable to both misunderstandings as well as to less well-arranged procedures and bureaucracy. Being a young transgender also includes the challenge to develop yourself and live in a social environment with other people with little to no knowledge about what it is that you go through, feel and what it means to be transgender. Youngsters belonging to a vulnerable group at a vulnerable age, involves a big responsibility for the Dutch government and society to care for these children and young people.

### Public acceptance

As transgenders are a relatively small group within Dutch society, they are still often quite under-lit in the public eye and in public knowledge. “People know of LHBTIQ, but normally almost solely associate this with ‘being gay’.” What it actually means to be transgender, to be born with a body that doesn’t correspond with who you truly are, is something that neither in the public debate nor in the school-system gets much attention.” In the experience of the young transgenders we’ve spoken, this results in a lot of different and often ‘not-corresponding-with-reality’-assumptions about transgenders. “This is something that could quite easily be tackled by making sure that there is more information available for everyone to create more awareness about ‘what it means to be transgender’.”

### Medical support

“We are blessed with all the possibilities that have been granted to us in recent years”, tells a 19-year old interviewee who’s halfway through her transformation. “From affordable ways to physically transform, to less substantial bureaucratic burdens that come with changing your gender.” Still we notice that administrative burdens are gradually being reduced. For example recently a new guideline has come into effect which makes it easier to change your gender in your passport. In the past this had to be ratified through a court-ruling, though now it can be arranged just through filling in a form”.

Transgenders still form a relatively small segment of the LHBTIQ-community and even more-so within the Dutch society as a whole. This makes that the procedures they have to follow and possibilities that are granted to them, are still relatively time- and energy-consuming, rare and specific. Where some things are increasingly well arranged for transgenders, there are also still some difficult situations that young transgenders experience. “We notice that we face a few problems. Firstly almost all procedures for almost all of the Dutch transgenders can solely be done by the VU (Free University of Amsterdam), which gives them a monopoly on the transgender-market. This results in certain harsh and unforgiving criteria and procedures that transgenders have to face.



Though not lawfully wrong, these still wouldn't be able to exist if there would be some competition from and/or fair collaboration with other medical institutes in the Netherlands."

## VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Physical and psychological violence against children is a phenomenon that is equally as terrible as it is ageless. Claiming over an hundred-thousand child-victims at an annual basis, that being the 'known' number, the battle against child-abuse is as important as ever. In the past year big steps have been made in the Netherlands to make sure that in the ongoing discussion about how to combat child-abuse, there's less talking 'about' children and more talking 'with' children; to take their experiences, views and insights into account and to enable children and young people to actively participate or even spearhead this battle against violence against children.

### Youth Taskforce, Childs-rights-ombudsperson and intergenerational cooperation

This trend resulted in the formation of the Youth-Taskforce on Violence against Children. This is a taskforce consisting of all manner of youths and children that have experience with violence against children through profession, study, relation to victims or having experienced this abuse themselves. This taskforce gives voice to all the formerly unheard children that directly or indirectly have come into contact with this violence and is a regular (spokes-) partner to NGO's, institutions and the government and decision-makers. Everywhere these young people go, they advocate the bottom-up-approach and try to make sure that combating child-abuse remains a top priority in all levels of Dutch society, among many other things. Also they try to actively open and keep open a public debate about child-abuse, as to make sure that the taboo on this subject is removed.

"I most enjoy working with the children, youth and teachers", tells one of the young interviewees whom is also a part of the Youth Taskforce. "When working with them, you are the closest to 'where it happens' and where the biggest impact on a personal level can be

achieved. I feel that I can easier change and improve things for others when working at this level." According to her this doesn't necessarily mean that little to nothing happens on the government-level. "I'm really grateful for the opportunities the relevant decision-makers have given us to talk and express concerns. The problem is just that there are so many layers of people and governance between the decision-maker and reality that change trickles down ever so slowly and that information going up the chain always knows a level of distortion and slowdown. And when talking about a topic like violence against children, we need to try to fight or circumvent this slow and sluggish process."

One of the key-focus-points of both the Youth-Taskforce, as of many of the involved NGO's and institutions is to make sure that both the detection of violence against children, as well as supporting the young victims, is granted a central place in the Dutch school-system. Through informing young classmates of the signs of abuse and enabling and supporting teachers in helping young victims, the care for victims and battle against (continued) violence against children can be brought closer to the children and be made more readily available.

"For me two things, among many others of course, have been really important and helpful", tells another 18-year-old interviewee with personal experience on the subject. "Knowing I could find help with my friends and school if need would ever be, without being viewed as a 'poor, vulnerable and defenseless child' and learning to talk about it and using that to inspire and touch others." He finds that talking with the children, about both the problems and their wished support, is one of the most important things. "I got to talk about my experiences when I was ready to do so, neither before nor later. This has helped me to remain in control of my own life and use my experiences and developments how I see fit. Children are strong, no matter what they've been through. We need to recognize this and allow that to inspire others and be the foundation for the getting a young child through the difficult process of working through their experiences."



## YOUNG REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The Netherlands are host to refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world. Each year hundreds to thousands of new refugees enter the Netherlands in search for safety, stability and to be somewhere else than where they came from. The Dutch government only gives a relatively small portion of these families and people a residence permit, only when they meet all the criteria. For many young refugees and asylum seekers, this means that they won't get leave to stay and have to go back to their place of origin after the procedure has come to a negative conclusion. Often the media tell the stories of young children, having lived most of their lives in the Netherlands (sometimes up to and over ten years) and then having to leave the country alongside their families. Although this policy is supported by a large portion of the Dutch population, there have also been a lot of cries for a more humane and less strict policy towards these children and their families.

### Concerning cases and public attention

Both the public media (the state-sponsored television channels) and the private media (the commercial networks) have given extensive coverage to stories of young refugees and asylum seekers who are to repatriate but have lived in the Netherlands for a long period of time. This in almost all cases also sparked a correspondingly vigorous public debate. In some cases this public attention and debate even changed the situation for these young people, as the story of Mauro clearly showed. He had to go back to Angola after reaching the age of eighteen, but because of public outrage and the attention in national and international media, he was eventually granted a visa to continue following his education in the Netherlands with the option to stay even longer. This has also sparked hope in other young refugees awaiting a residence permit or repatriation. "I have never known any other country than the Netherlands and now I risk being sent to Egypt", tells one of our young interviewees whose family fled prosecution because of their Christian background. "And even though the decision-makers haven't been willing to give me and my family permission to stay in the Netherlands, I've got the media-attention to thank for all the support we are getting from both the municipality and

other national organizations, as well as from hundreds of people that care for us and our story. I'm ever grateful to all of them, whatever the outcome might be"

In response to the wishes of the people, politicians and organizations that found the policies too strict, state secretary Teeven has created the 'Child-pardon', an arrangement in which the Dutch government can grant residence permits to refugee children and their families when they don't meet (all) the criteria, but when they have been in the Netherlands for an extended amount of time.

### Child-pardon

The Child-pardon is a concession of the government towards children and families that have been in the Netherlands for such a long time, that they have integrated in and become part of Dutch society. This Child-pardon has led to an additional 675 residence permits being granted to asylum seeking families with young children, who were initially denied this permit. "Despite this pardon, there still are a lot of refugee children, just like me, who have lived and prospered in the Netherlands for almost their entire lives, but still have to leave the country", tells a 16-year old interviewee himself facing repatriation. "I have never known any other surrounding, culture and costumes than here in The Hague. But because of a hiccup in our application procedure for a residence permit, I'm facing having to live in a country I have never known and can't properly speak and read the language of."

The secretary responsible for the application and management of the Child-pardon, state secretary Teeven, has received an discretionary mandate so he can also grant pardon to children who still, despite their dire situation, do not meet the criteria. "But still you don't know what your future might bring, whether you'll be granted a permit or just have to prepare on having to leave the country", tells the young refugee. "My parents came to the Netherlands for safety and security, but nowadays I find myself wishing for nothing other than exactly that; wishing that I could count on being allowed to grow up in happiness, safety and the knowledge that I won't suddenly have to leave my life-long home and friends behind."



# CONCLUSION

In this update unto the Youth Report, we've given young people from different backgrounds the chance to share their full stories, their insights and their experiences. It is up to all of us to take their advice and lessons to heart.

## Homosexuality and Bisexuality

*"More than anything I want to be 'normal'. I feel normal, but because of the extravaganza and/or indeed politically-correct-tiptoeing around gay people, we're still not viewed and approached as such."*

The young interviewees call upon both the Dutch government and the gay-community itself to take the 'LHBTIQ-agenda to the next level', to strive towards making sure that gays are viewed as being no different than straight people. In their general view the LHBTIQ-emancipation should lead to being viewed as normal by all other members of society.

*"I feel that here we really need to look at the way the subject of 'lesbians, homosexuals and both sexes of bisexuals' are being covered in schools and the public debate"*

The interviewees find that some of the last strange attitudes and remaining stereotypes lie in the different ways that male gays and bisexuals versus female gays and bisexuals are perceived. They feel that through additional coverage of the LHB-community in schools and the public debate, these problems could be solved.

## Transgender

*"What it actually means to be transgender, to be born with a body that doesn't correspond with who you truly are, is something that neither in the public debate nor in the school-system gets much attention."*

Because of the little amount of available information on being transgender and what that means for someone's life, the young transgenders we've interviewed feel that they have to fight a lot of preconceptions and ignorance on their situation. In their view this problem could fairly easily be tackled by making sure that schools spend more attention to informing young people and children about transgenders.

## Violence against children

*"I'm really grateful for the opportunities that the relevant decision-makers have given us to talk and express concerns."*

All the interviewees on the topic of violence against children have pointed out that they cherish the opportunities of increased collaboration and participation with the relevant stakeholders and decision makers in fighting violence against children. This increase is something that they both appreciate, as well as hope to see even further implemented and broadened in the future.

*"The problem is just that there's so many layers of people and governance between the decision-maker and reality that change trickles down ever so slowly and that information going up the chain always knows a level of distortion and slowdown."*

The young people and children we've spoken stress the importance of decision-makers keeping in touch with 'reality on the ground level'. They perceive the aforementioned collaboration and chances for (youth-) participation as a strong means in keeping this touch with reality. They also point out that this collaboration with young people also needs to be done with other stakeholders, like the teachers.

## Young refugees and asylum seekers

*"I've got the media-attention to thank for all the support we are getting from both the municipality and other national organizations, as well as from hundreds of people that care for us and our story. I'm ever grateful to all of them, whatever the outcome might be"*

The young refugees point out that the effectiveness of contacting and using the media is a blessing on the one hand, but they want to stress that humanitarian and less strict considerations should also always be made when the public eye hasn't been involved.

