

## Worldwide momentum to combat violence against women and girls

Institutions and individuals must work together, not only at national level, but also in Europe and around the world. This is essential to end violence in dependent relationships and empowering victims by increasing their resistance.

These words spoke the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, Jet Bussemaker, at the International Conference on Violence against the Girl Child, in The Hague.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In a Western country like the Netherlands, you might think there is little difference in the status of men and women. Today, more and more women are pursuing higher education, participating in employment and achieving economic independence. And over the years of course, women have gained greater sexual freedom. But still there are notable differences. One is the topic of this conference – violence against girls and women.

I would like to examine this issue from the perspective of violence in dependent relationships and my responsibility for tackling this problem.

In my approach I focus explicitly on the dependent position of victims. Both men and women form relationships in which they are dependent on each other. Violence occurs within relationships more often than we think. Although this type of violence mainly affects women, men are sometimes victims too. Violence in dependent relationships is much broader than domestic violence alone. It also includes honour-related violence, human trafficking and female genital mutilation. All these forms of violence are potentially life threatening.

Here are some statistics:

Forty per cent of the Dutch population has encountered or been involved with domestic violence in some form or other. In The Hague area alone approximately 250 cases of suspected honour-related violence were investigated in 2006.

In the Netherlands there are 16,000 girls and 34,000 women from countries where the practice of female genital mutilation is widespread. The number of reported cases of human trafficking rose from 402 in 2004 to 579 in 2006. These numbers are reason enough to place this issue high on the political agenda. Because behind every statistic is a harrowing personal story.

Today I would like to discuss the history and development of violence in dependent relationships in the Netherlands over the past several decades. Then I will outline my goals and the measures I have taken to reduce violence in dependent relationships. I will explain how building up women's resistance is an important theme running through this policy. I will also go into some detail on combating female genital mutilation in the Netherlands, in Europe and worldwide. This will be the main topic of tomorrow's workshops.

Let me begin with a brief history of violence in dependent relationships.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s freed people from the idea that the only legitimate expression of sexuality was a heterosexual, monogamous relationship aimed at producing and raising children. The availability of the pill and other forms of contraception propelled women's liberation. Sexual freedom has had a dramatic influence on family planning and challenged assumptions about the monogamous and heterosexual nature of relationships. It has also encouraged

social acceptance of other sexual inclinations, such as homosexuality and bisexuality.

The sexual revolution had its downsides, too. Some took the idea of 'free sex' and the hippy motto 'If it feels good, do it!' to heart, which led to an increase in both the number and incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. Violence, too, became more visible. Personal relationships were found to have a political dimension. And the family, it turned out, could be a source of violence rather than a safe haven in a cruel world. Sadly, that is still the case today.

The first women's shelter was opened in Amsterdam in 1974. (The Dutch name for shelters – 'Blijf van mijn lijf-huis' – literally means 'keep your hands off my body'.) The women's movement brought sexual and domestic violence against women out into the open, so that it was no longer seen as a private matter, but rather a political and social issue.

Over recent decades, the diversity and complexity of violence in dependent relationships has also increased. We are seeing new vulnerable groups of people who are dependent in one way or another and fall victim to violence as a result. For example, ethnic minority girls and women, people with mild mental disabilities, young males, women with multiple problems, severely traumatised victims, young gay men and children who witness violence.

Then there are the victims of 'lover boys', young pimps who recruit new girls by feigning romantic interest in them and fostering an emotional and financial dependence that ultimately leads to prostitution. And we are also seeing new forms of violence from non-Dutch cultures, such as female genital mutilation and honour-related violence.

We need to take a concrete approach in order to curb these serious forms of violence.

I have set three goals aimed at providing effective care and assistance for victims.

First, victims must have immediate access to a secure shelter. We need to protect those who are most at risk. This can be a matter of life and death.

Second, I want victims, offenders and children – regardless of the type of violence involved – to receive early, rapid and effective assistance that enables them to carry on with their lives, free of violence. Resistance is the key factor here.

Third, I want professionals in the field to be able to identify the risk of violence in dependent relationships at an early stage and know what to do to prevent it.

Our approach to violence in dependent relationships involves a series of steps that are only effective if they are carried out as a complete programme.

The steps are education and prevention – early detection – assistance – care and shelter – prosecution – recovery and aftercare. They cannot be viewed as individual components. They are all essential to preventing violence in dependent relationships from escalating, stopping it as quickly as possible and preventing its recurrence.

I am implementing a number of concrete measures to meet these three goals.

First, we need to systematically increase the number of shelter places over the next few years. Guaranteeing protection includes providing shelter for men in serious danger, not only women. This is new. We know that men can be victims of domestic violence. But sometimes they are also threatened with violence for refusing to protect 'the family's honour'.

I work closely with the Minister of Justice, Ernst Hirsch Ballin, and the Minister for Youth and Families, André Rouvoet, on the issue of violence in dependent relationships. This collaboration has resulted in a reporting code that is mandatory.

The code gives professionals guidance on recognising and reporting violence and helping victims get assistance. Reporting is now the rule rather than the exception.

The third and final measure that I have implemented to help victims of domestic violence is the temporary domestic exclusion order, which came into force at the beginning of this year. Under the new rules, the offender – rather than the victim and children – is required to leave the home. At the same time, the entire family – including the offender – participates in a support programme aimed at helping them get back on the right track.

Helping victims increase their resistance is a major theme in our approach to violence in dependent relationships. Resistance is of vital importance to the victims of teenage pimps, domestic violence, sexual intimidation, female genital mutilation and honour violence. Because by building up their resistance, victims regain both self-respect and control over their lives. It is important for them to reclaim their independence – their autonomy – by learning to stand up for themselves.

Victims of abuse need more than just a roof over their heads. Work and a social network are also essential. Ultimately they must be able to live an independent life, free of violence. And the assistance they receive is geared towards achieving this goal.

As I said a few moments ago, domestic violence is not the only kind of violence that occurs in dependent relationships. Other forms include honour crimes and female genital mutilation. A few decades ago these were rare or entirely unknown in the Netherlands. But since the arrival of immigrants from countries where honour crimes and female genital mutilation take place, we're now seeing them in the Netherlands and many other European countries.

Every year at least fifty girls living in the Netherlands are subjected to genital mutilation. This number is based on research estimates, and may be higher. I think the number is already alarmingly high. Not a single girl in this country, in Europe or anywhere else in the world, should be subjected to this practice.

The measures I just listed – increasing professional expertise and the reporting code for domestic violence and child abuse – can also help prevent female genital mutilation. But we also need to take a more specific approach. At-risk groups and people whose occupations bring them into contact with girls of immigrant origin must be adequately informed and have a comprehensive understanding of female genital mutilation.

In the Netherlands, we have achieved positive results by involving key people in communities where female genital mutilation occurs. These are people who speak the language and understand the culture. They are able to talk to families and

girls about female genital mutilation and make sure they are well informed. They make it possible to raise this sensitive topic within at-risk groups.

I would also like to adopt a method currently used in France. There, parents of children from states of concern voluntarily sign a 'medical certificate' pledging not to have their daughter circumcised during a visit to their country of origin.

When I was in Paris on a working visit I learned how effective this method has proved to be. The document helps the parents resist community and family pressure in their country of origin. And at the same time, agencies here can reduce the risks by informing parents that female genital mutilation is a punishable offence. In addition, the pledge allows doctors to examine girls on their return if they have reason to suspect that parents have violated their obligation.

In short, the Netherlands employs a range of instruments to prevent female genital mutilation. But our efforts do not stop at our borders.

It is also important to work with other European countries to combat this practice. That is why I intend to organise a European meeting where member states can exchange best practices. In France, for example, the authorities have investigated, prosecuted and sentenced numerous offenders.

Norway pursues an active policy to prevent female genital mutilation in various African countries, and in the UK the police offer rewards for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of anyone carrying out female genital mutilation. And other countries may benefit from the results of our experiments in six pilot regions. No one country has all the answers.

States of concern also have an important part to play. The barrage of media attention devoted to female genital mutilation suggests that the tide is turning and the movement against serious forms of violence against women and girls is gaining momentum.

I witnessed this at the Zero Tolerance Conference in Utrecht where local communities and young people from Ethiopia and Burkina Faso played an important role. Elder brothers and sisters are stepping up to protect their younger sisters and future daughters from female genital mutilation. They openly discuss the subject, provide information and raise the issue with their local communities. Education is the key.

But there are other ways to combat this abusive practice. What has been going on in Senegal is a good example. The Senegalese have found that collective protest and denouncement of female genital mutilation are highly effective ways of ending the practice. Perhaps at-risk groups in the Netherlands could follow the Senegalese example and distance themselves from the practice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cooperation is an essential element of our approach to ending violence in dependent relationships and empowering victims by increasing their resistance. Institutions and individuals must work together, not only at national level, but also in Europe and around the world. Ending these forms of violence and increasing women's resistance will bring us closer to achieving gender equality.

I very much hope that this conference will advance that goal and I wish you all inspiration and success.

Thank you.