

OPENING SPEECH FOR THE CONFERENCE 'LEGAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND SEXUAL EQUALITY' 13 MAY, 2011.

*Andrée van Es**

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to open this conference today and I would like to thank the *Vrije Universiteit* for the invitation.

Forty years ago, I studied Law at Utrecht University. Since then and throughout my political and social career, I have been interested and involved in issues linked to the themes that will be discussed today. Refugees, the position of women, the position of homosexuals and discrimination against minorities. All of these subjects touch on moral considerations about equality, domestic and international solidarity and perceptions of foreigners or of people with a different sexual preference. Is a foreigner a threat or rather someone who we should be curious about? Is 'equality' based in culture or can we fall back on international treaties and agreements about women's and children's rights? Or on equal rights for minorities and sexual minorities.

These considerations are all relevant for the government when they have to make decisions. For example, decisions about emergency shelter for refugees, fighting discrimination or investing in the participation of minority groups in society. Decisions with regard to furthering the emancipation of women or protecting vulnerable members of society.

Today I would like to speak about the urban dynamic of Amsterdam and about the diversity of the city. The vitality that such diversity brings to the city, but also the complexities. Living together with so many people who are different to you can be complicated and requires effort from all sides. Diversity is one of Amsterdam's strengths. 183 different nationalities call Amsterdam their home and, for centuries, the city has attracted migrants and those looking for a step up in the world. Amsterdam has become an international brand that represents tolerance and equality. Amsterdam is a Gay Capital, the city in which the first same-sex marriage was conducted ten years ago.

Amsterdammers come and go and it's rare for a family to stay in the city for longer than three generations. And that's why it is strange to talk about 'integration' in a city like Amsterdam. To talk about who belongs here and who doesn't. I prefer to think in terms of 'citizenship' and furthering citizenship through education and labour market policy.

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Tolerance and equality cannot be taken for granted. They are values that constantly need to be worked on. In an ideal world, I would like to see gay couples walking hand in hand on the street and that women who choose to wear a head scarf are free to do so. That everyone can work and earn their own money. And that people don't lock themselves up in their own secure bastions.

The government cannot force matters when it comes to trying to secure such freedoms. It is up to *Amsterdammers* themselves to maintain and nurture this dynamic. Local government plays a variety of roles in this respect and I would like to use a few examples to illustrate this point. My examples relate to the importance of language in participation, fighting discrimination and the low level of participation in the labour market amongst Moroccan and Turkish women in the city.

Dutch migration policy has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. In her paper, Sarah van Walsum demonstrates how perceptions of the family, with the man as primary bread winner and the woman as moral guardian of the family, were reflected in migration legislation. In the past, a female from another country was not expected to find employment in the Netherlands. Encouraging this group to actively participate in society was not a target set by the government, and the same applied for asylum seekers. Municipalities were required to provide housing for people with a residence permit, be it temporary, permanent or otherwise. In the last 20 years, more than 10,000 people have been provided with a home in Amsterdam. However, people offered housing were not required to learn the local language. The requirement was also unnecessary for many people—they learned the language, found a job and found their own way. But this is not the case for everyone. Those who did not learn the language let themselves down, but also their children. Too many children in Amsterdam have grown up with a poor command of the Dutch language. These children were behind from the very start. It is up to the government to lay down the required standards.

The new citizenship laws and a changing social climate, two developments that are obviously linked, have resulted in the requirement of learning the language becoming the norm. I frequently meet men and women who are attending a language course. Initially they couldn't be bothered or weren't allowed to attend by their partner, but now they are extremely pleased that, thanks to the lessons, they are able to converse with their children's teacher. And even read letters they receive from the tax department. Now they can help their children with their homework and have a decent shot at getting a job. So, the guiding hand of the government does appear to be necessary to encourage people to take steps they otherwise would not have taken.

I mentioned same-sex marriage earlier in my speech and Ian Curry-Sumner will shortly tell us more about this. It is estimated that just over 1,000 same-sex couples get married in the Netherlands every year. In Amsterdam, nearly 7 percent of all marriages are between same-sex couples. In legal terms, the

inequality between gays and heterosexuals was effectively abolished when same-sex marriage was legalised. Yet this legal emancipation is certainly no guarantee that discrimination becomes less prevalent or stops completely. Twenty percent of *Amsterdammers* feel that they are discriminated against. The number of recorded incidents of discrimination, intimidation, threats and even violence against groups including homosexuals, Jews and Islamic *Amsterdammers* unfortunately remains notably high.

Dutchman Boris Dittrich recently conducted a report for the Human Rights Watch for GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) rights into the 10 countries where couples are legally permitted to marry no matter their gender. The report revealed that significant attention needs to be paid to tackling homophobia in the Netherlands. Both preventatively amongst children within the educational system, but also repressively by tackling violence. Combating discrimination is the primary target that the Amsterdam City Council has set itself. Discrimination leaves a lasting effect on people and reflects poorly on the city as a whole. This is something that I cannot stress enough.

What can local government do to fight discrimination? One condition is to repressively tackle violence. But people themselves have to overcome any prejudices they may have. The government can do little about disdainful gestures or abusive language on the street. But the government can play a facilitating role by bringing different groups into contact. Community organisations such as gay interest group COC, Argan, a centre for young Moroccans and women's organisations as well as key figures in the community, all play a role. Under the title 'Pink Citizenship', we work together with these groups to consider how we can tackle discrimination as a collective problem. A great example is that a few weeks ago, a group of young Moroccans went on a night out with homosexuals. This would have never have happened without the efforts of social organisations – they undeniably play a key role.

The City Council also takes concrete action. For example – there are still schools in Amsterdam that do not participate in the information programmes about homosexuality organised by COC. I will soon be visiting schools with my colleagues to discuss discrimination with pupils and teachers at schools in the city. Introducing and setting norms requires that the City of Amsterdam be constantly on the case, along with all *Amsterdammers* that want to tackle discrimination. To be in the public eye, condemn incidents of discrimination and enter into discussion with both offenders and victims.

The final topic I would like to talk to you about today is the position of Turkish and Moroccan women. I am concerned about the low level of participation in the labour market amongst Moroccan and Turkish-Dutch women in Amsterdam. A mere 15 percent of this group is economically independent compared to 46 percent of women in other groups.

There are a number of factors that go some way to explaining this low level of participation. Put simply, it is a question of being willing, being able and being

allowed. Some women have a notion of the position of women in the family and do not want to find in employment as a result of this. Many women are poorly educated or have a poor command of the Dutch language. Cultural barriers can come into play in the healthcare sector, consider for example whether or not washing men or women is permitted. And partners or other family members do not always support women who want to work.

Being willing, being able and being allowed. How can the local government influence these factors? I have already mentioned the importance of language and the barrier that some people have to first overcome. But there is more to this example and it is striking that it is specifically these two groups who remain behind. I am personally consulting with women's organisations due to my belief that they are an important factor in promoting economic independence. Women's organisations play a key role in, for example, bringing cultural barriers out into the open and making it possible to overcome them.

When thinking about the low level of labour participation, it is an obvious step to consider the staff shortages threatening the healthcare sector, for instance. I am not alone in seeing the opportunities that are present. However, I do take issue with the standard notion that we think we can solve staff shortages in the healthcare sector with women.

The role of companies cannot be underestimated; they can help by investing in training programmes for women and creating internships. And be open to, for instance, people completing an internship as part of a City of Amsterdam citizenship course in order to become acquainted with the labour market.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have reached the end of my contribution for today. I have introduced you to some of the dilemmas and considerations of the diverse nature of Amsterdam society that I am constantly faced with. Based on three subjects, I have tried to illustrate the various ways in which local government can play a role in matters of discrimination and emancipation. We cannot take tolerance and equality for granted and need to remain active to continuously fight for improvement. These are universal issues that are reflected in matters on a local level. And this is exactly what makes working in local government so fascinating and why I love working for Amsterdam.

Thank you.