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The view of millennial men in the Netherlands on gender equality and the achievement thereof.

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Master in, International Studies M.Sc.

Supervisor:

PhD., Thais França, Invited Assistant Professor,

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of History

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This thesis is attributed to my personal goal to understand how we can build a society where gender equality is the norm instead of a goal that needs to be achieved. I firmly believe that the harmful impacts of the patriarchy should be from the past. I am dedicated to understanding what hidden gaps can be filled in the here and now, to directly contribute to a future society free from harmful gender stereotyping, gender discrimination, and damaging power dynamics between genders.

Throughout the efforts I put into this thesis, I reckon that I became a true feminist, fighting for gender equality. I could not have started this fight without my supportive parents, Nico- and Diana Kamphuis, my sister, Sabina Kamphuis, and my close friends: Joke, Jamie, Nadia, Rowan, and Nadine. They have seen me grow into the feminist that I am today. Likewise, I want to truly thank my Lisbon environment, Mirna, Sophia, Patricia, Edoardo, Sina, Friederike, Anna-Maria, and Dani. Because of them, I could get through the ups and downs of this thesis.

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RESUMO

Esta tese tem por objectivo uma melhor compreensão da visão dos homens da geração "millenium" nos Países Baixos sobre a igualdade de género e a sua concretização. A igualdade de género tende a ser reconhecida como uma batalha pela qual só as mulheres são responsáveis. Contudo, é necessária toda a sociedade para enfrentar esta questão de desenvolvimento global: as questões relativas à igualdade de género têm impacto sobre todos. Todavia, elas não são defendidas por todos. Dez homens da geração "millenium" dos Países Baixos, divididos em três Focus Groups de Discussão (FGDs), partilharam as suas posições. Na análise dos resultados do estudo, foi utilizada a teoria da "masculinidade hegemónica", respeitante ao domínio dos homens sobre as mulheres dentro da sociedade. Além disso, foi tida em conta a percepção de homens da geração "millenium". A análise do estudo revelou quatro categorias, cobrindo as opiniões dos participantes. Primeiro, os participantes reconhecem o conceito alargado de igualdade geral; segundo, acreditam na necessidade de igualdade de tratamento entre homens e mulheres; terceiro, acreditam que a realização da igualdade de género é algo positivo. Finalmente, acreditam que existem diferenças biológicas entre homens e mulheres, argumentando que, portanto, é impossível alcançar a plena igualdade de género. As categorias sugerem oportunidades, mas também desafios para incluir mais homens na obtenção da igualdade de género. As oportunidades revelam que os homens acreditam que a realização da igualdade de género é positiva. Os desafios revelam que existem opiniões bastante tradicionais envolvendo estereótipos de género, prejudiciais para a concretização da igualdade de género.

Palavras-chave: igualdade de género, homens, 'masculinidade hegemónica', milénios, Países Baixos

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to create a better understanding of the view of millennial men in the Netherlands on gender equality and the achievement thereof. Gender equality tends to be recognized as a battle only women are responsible to fight for. However, we need the whole of society to tackle this global development issue: the issues around gender equality impact all. Nevertheless, they are not defended by all. Ten millennials within the Netherlands, divided over three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), have shared their opinions and views. Within the analysis, the theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which covers the dominance of men over women within society, was used in analyzing the results of the study. Additionally, the perception of millennials was taken into account. The study's results and analysis revealed four categories, covering the participants' opinions. First, the participants recognize the broader concept of general equality, second, they believe in the need for equal treatment between men and women, third, they believe that the achievement of gender equality is something positive, and finally, they believe that there are biological differences between men and women, yet they argue that therefore reaching full gender equality is impossible. The categories portray opportunities but also challenges to include more men in the achievement of gender equality. The opportunities reveal that men do believe that the achievement of gender equality is positive. The challenges cover that there are rather traditional views involving gender stereotyping which is harmful for the achievement of gender equality.

Keywords: Gender equality, men, ‘hegemonic masculinity’, millennials, the Netherlands

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women
EIGE	European Institute of Gender Equality
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GGG	Global Gender Gap
GII	Gender Inequality Index
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WEF	World Economic Forum

INTRODUCTION

It was 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft laid the foundation for what we understand today as women's rights, in her *'Vindication of the Rights of Woman'*, she exemplified feminism and kickstarted a fight that persists until this day; a demand for equal opportunities and rights for both men¹ and women² (Dilli et al., 2019). The quest that, among many other women, Wollstonecraft embodied gained vital importance over time. Gender inequalities cause burdens in achieving overall economic, social, health, and educational development and negatively impact the quality of democracies and human rights (Dilli et al., 2019; UNDP, 2020a; WEF, 2020, 2021). Nevertheless, what would *gender equality*³ mean in terms of overall development? The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines gender equality as follows: *'Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, thereby recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men.'* (EIGE, 2022). The definition that EIGE (2022) uses recognizes that men and women are different and that both women and men deserve to have their needs heard equally, regardless that these needs might differ, which in theory sounds logical. Nonetheless, these differences often fuel what we understand today as *gender inequality*, due to the misuse of power dynamics by men and harmful ways of gender stereotyping⁴ by society (MenEngage, 2014). The impacts of gender inequality on overall development include political disempowerment, exposure to (sexual) violence, unequal responsibilities in family settings and the chances of getting a job and educational opportunities (Perez, 2019). It is, therefore, vital to understand how these harmful dynamics interplay and, unfortunately, impact the whole of society, not only women but also men. However, the focus and responsibility in understanding gender equality issues mainly remain on women, as gender equality is widely recognized as a women's issue (T. King & Elliott, 2021). Yet, men's involvement is frequently left out within gender equality achievement policies and practices (Ruxton & van der Gaag, 2013), confirming the narrative that only women suffer from gender equality issues and are, therefore, thus left responsible for

¹ With men or man within this thesis is referred to the social accepted ideas of the gender: man/men, not to be mistaken with referring to male or males, which represents the reproductive organ of a person (Aultman, 2014).

² With women or woman is referred to the social accepted ideas of the gender: woman/women, not to be mistaken with referring to female or females, which represents the reproductive organ of a person (Aultman, 2014).

³ Throughout this thesis the debate on gender equality, is specifically focused on the role of men, as opposed to women. Nevertheless, this is not to not acknowledge other genders, though it is chosen to specifically for this thesis dive into the role of men within the gender equality debate. Yet this is by all means is not to say that the perspective of other genders should be excluded in gender equality discourses, yet this falls out of the scope of this thesis.

⁴ *'The essence of gender stereotypes of straight women and men is that they conform to traditional gender roles'* (Kachel et al., 2016).

fighting for it. While understanding the underexposed view of men on gender equality might contribute to diverse opportunities to achieve gender equality instead of the just old 'empowering women' narrative, especially after the damage of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the perfect timing to acknowledge and adopt new opportunities (T. King & Elliott, 2021).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, a critical literature review is presented, in which the fundamental topics on gender equality and men's involvement are discussed. The first section introduces the topic of gender equality and the need for gender equality in our society, and the second section dives into the issues revolving around the contribution of men and gender equality and puts an emphasis on masculinities. Afterward, attention is drawn to the Netherlands and millennials in the light of achieving gender equality.

1.1 GENDER EQUALITY AS A DEVELOPMENT PROBLEM

Gender equality is a battle mainly defended by women, carried by women, and suffered through women, and the current aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies this issue perfectly. Both the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the United Nations (UN) recognized that the influence of COVID-19 was undeniably negative for achieving gender equality. The UN pointed out in the light of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: *Gender Equality*, that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, gender asymmetries became more apparent than ever before. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, women have been less likely to be hired for leadership positions (UN, 2021), and there has been an increase in unpaid labor for women, causing burdens in (re)integrating economically (UN, 2021a; WEF, 2021). Nevertheless, both men and women suffered from unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 3.9% of the employed men lost their jobs, though women were suffering to a greater extent, with 5% of the employed women who lost their jobs (World Economic Forum, 2021). Moreover, (domestic) violence against women has increased. Yet, this thesis is written during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is, therefore, hard to comprehend the exact volume and precise impact of the violence that occurred throughout the pandemic (UN, 2021b). While women thus suffered seriously throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ironically enough, women were considered *the frontline* workers and were primarily responsible for the healthcare roles, which were undeniably necessary throughout the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet, women were often not praised for their significant efforts (UN, 2021). In summary, gender equality issues intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and progress stagnated (UN, 2021a).

The measurement of the progress towards gender equality, has given essential insides into the dynamics of gender equality in nations and globally. In 2006, the WEF started to measure gender parity per country, known as the Global Gender Gap (GGG), referring to the statistical measure of equality in the female-to-male ratio. Within this approach, the WEF qualifies gender equality per country and globally (WEF, 2021). The development of the GGG

helps to understand in which areas of gender equality in countries are not fully established yet, according to their measures. The GGG uses four measurement scales: education, health, politics, and economics, and countries can score between zero and one. According to the GGG, full equality between women and men would mean scoring *one* (WEF, 2021). The most recent report of the GGG index shows that globally on average, a 32.3% gap needs to be closed, which like expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic increase in comparison to the years before (WEF, 2021). Since 2007, the UN publishes the Human Development Report annually, in which a similar measurement as the WEF are applied; the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (UNDP, 2020). The GII assesses gender equality in countries based on three categories: health, empowerment, and the labor market (UNDP, 2020a). The GII helps to create a better understanding of the position of countries in achieving gender equality. According to the latest GGI measurement (2019), Switzerland ranks the highest, followed by Denmark and Sweden (UNDP, 2020b). Another tool for gender equality measurements established by the UN are the 17 UN SDGs, established in 2016, from which SDG 5: *Gender equality*, is entirely dedicated to ending gender inequalities (UN, 2021a). Within SDG 5, the UN provides hands-on targets and indicators that link to actions to reach gender equality (UN, 2021a). The targets and indicators help countries in assessing their gender equality practices. The UN additionally makes statements about gender equality *globally*. For example, they have pointed out in the latest SDG report of 2022 that more than one out of four women faced intimate partner violence at least once throughout their life (UN, 2022)⁵.

In most of the existing frameworks for achieving gender equality, the main focus is improving women's economic, social and health situations and their rights and opportunities. Little attention is given to 'empowering' men to change their behaviors and holding them equally responsible for achieving gender equality as women (T. King & Elliott, 2021; Maceira, 2017; Ratele, 2014). Therefore, the battle for gender-equal societies thus appears to be primarily a women's issue; however, gender equality has intersectional benefits for all (EIGE, 2012; Ruspini, 2019; Spar, 2020; UN, 2008). Nevertheless, understanding these benefits for all and stressing the position of men in achieving gender equality is a fairly complex field.

⁵ Throughout the thesis, the measurement tools for gender equality like the GGG index from the WEF, the GII from the UN, and SDG 5 from the UN, are still used as important indicators. These bigger organizations namely have the power and resources to gather a large amount of research on gender equality, and thus help to understand to complexity of the issue of gender equality, nevertheless, this does not mean that I personal have a critical view on how they approach the topics at all times, and have approached gender equality measures.

1.2 MEN IN A WORLD OF GENDER EQUALITY

Throughout the quest to achieve gender equality, men have been appointed as one of the main barriers. As Connell (2003) described, men, are ‘the gatekeepers’ in achieving gender equality. Men hold gatekeeping positions in our society, which is possible due to the patriarchy, which is the social system characterized by the domination of men over women and the favoring of masculinity over femininity (Smirnova, 2018). Men often find themselves in positions to be able to decide for women on women’s rights, futures, and careers, which is happening due to for example, unequal men-women representation in politics and an overrepresentation of men in top decision-making positions in companies (WEF, 2021). Moreover, once these men are in these positions of power, due to the patriarchy, they will more likely, draw towards, engage with, and hire people (often thus men) who have similar values due to the similarity biases (Hagen & Voorthuizen, 2022), which makes it challenging to break through the cycle of the patriarchy (Fine, 2017). According to Connell (2003), this issue implicates that men can control most of the resources and essential, influential roles required to support gender equality. To be able to achieve gender equality, it is inevitable to change the current power dynamics (Connell, 2003). However, this is rather challenging, as the patriarchy has been a social system that was prominent throughout almost all of history (Mcbride & Mazur, 2008). Thus, for hundreds of years, men were put directly in a position of privilege: receiving power. The achievement of gender equality would mean that men would need to indirectly give away some of this power, which is incredibly challenging yet necessary, as the achievement of the gender equality agenda requests the full an active involvement of men (UN, 2008).

It has been agreed for several decades that men should be engaged in achieving gender equality (Ratele, 2014: UN, 2008). Research on how men could be actively involved is not as broadly covered as research on women’s involvement in gender equality, and there is little evidence available on how men could help directly contribute to gender equality (Huis & Leek, 2020)(MenEngage, 2014). Additionally, it can be fairly challenging to find the right approach to engage men effectively. A review containing 65 studies about programs that engage men to decrease sexual violence toward women found that only 29% of these programs, was according to the authors, ‘effective’ in terms of changing the attitudes and behavior of men (Huis and Leek, 2020 as cited in Ricardo et al. 2011). Nevertheless, a few initiatives try to gain a greater understanding of the viewpoint of men on a structural basis. For example, The International Men and Gender Equality Survey, a research initiative established in 2006, conducted research with roughly 30.000 men, on gender equality and men (Promundo, 2022). The initiative has

highlighted the positive impact of men’s involvement in promoting gender equality for the population as a whole and for men themselves.

While the benefits of the achievement of gender equality for women appear to be more prominent- women would be able to increase their participation in politics, have a wider variety of joining the labor force, have more educational opportunities, improved healthcare specifically focused on women’s needs, and an increase of legal protection (UN, 2022) – the benefits for men are less visible. For example, the most current report on the SDGs, in the section on SDG 5: Gender Equality, focuses entirely on the suffering of women, and research that backs this up, which is completely necessary⁶, yet, does not at all consider the position or suffering of men within the debate of gender equality (UN, 2022). Discussing the involvement of men in gender equality appears to be a rather sensitive debate. In the public eye, men are often seen as the ‘bad guys’ who embody burdens in gender equality, and they are the reason that women ‘suffer’ rather than a group of people who can benefit from gender-equal societies (Huis and Leek, 2020). Moreover, critics say that the more attention is drawn to men in the gender equality quest, the more attention is drawn *away* from women, who are visibly impacted mainly by issues of gender equality (Huis & Leek, 2020; MenEngage, 2014). Nevertheless, as mentioned before, it is *crucial* to understand that men are currently holding on to gatekeeping positions, and neglecting their possible role in change would be neglecting possibilities of change.

1.3 GENDER EQUALITY FOR WOMEN AND MEN

Gender equality means an improvement for the overall population for multiple reasons (Maceira, 2017). In broader terms, men and women will always be in some type of relationship with each other and advancing gender equality will directly improve this dynamic (EIGE, 2012; Levtoev et al., 2014; MenEngage, 2014). The improved dynamic can be manifested in multiple ways, benefitting men as individuals and their families and the women present in their environments as well as society as a whole.

One of the key issues within gender equality is to be found in the family setting. Women often carry the responsibility of caring for children and the household (Perez, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2021). However, once men are more involved with caring for their children,

⁶ It is important to understand here, that, data on the suffrage of women in themes of politics, education, work force, and (sexual) violence is utmost necessary to achieve gender equality, a missing key factor recognized is how men are partially responsible for the data presented in the report (UN, 2022), yet, not included in policies or practices to achieve gender equality.

their children's mental health in the family setting and their partner' will increase (Croft et al., 2021). In Rwanda, a program was implemented to involve men more in caregiving and promote a shared responsibility for care. After the program's implementation, a study was conducted and found that the control group (men who joined the program) was 40% less likely to use violence against their partners (Alemann et al., 2019). More interestingly, another study among men in Mexico and Brazil found that men who already have more gender-equitable attitudes, like dividing household tasks equally, are more probable to be fulfilled with their relationship (Levtov et al., 2014). In addition, more equitable behavior of men will increase their *general* own mental health too (Croft et al., 2021; T. King & Elliott, 2021; Ratele, 2014; Ruxton & van der Gaag, 2013). One of the reasons these benefits occur is that the behavior of men connected to gender equality often challenges masculinity behavior, which tends to suppress the idea that men can be vulnerable (Flood et al., 2021). More so, benefits can even reach as far as reduced alcohol consumption for men (T. King & Elliott, 2021; Roberts, 2012). Roberts (2012) conducted a study in which she measured the relationship between gender equality and alcohol consumption in the US, and found that lower levels of alcohol consumption suggest higher gender equality. Roberts (2012) suggests that once men drink less alcohol, there is more 'time' available to attribute to care activities within a household. Moreover, gender equality has the power to potentially benefit men as individuals, as well as benefitting society as a whole. According to Maceira (2017), improvements in gender equality would lead to additionally 10.5 million jobs, by 2050 if women get equal opportunities in education and job positions. This would lead to an increase of the GDP in the EU from 6.1 to 9.6%, and thus helps to reduce overall poverty (Maiers, 2017).

Besides the economic benefits, more gender equality will contribute to a more equalized political representation, which is important as it is thought to make democracies stronger (Stem op een vrouw, 2022a). Women and men's equal participation in political decisions directly contribute to promoting more inclusive solutions to political issues (Stem op een vrouw, 2022a; UNDP, 2018). Likewise, it contributes to trusting democracies better due to a better reflection of what society looks like (Stem op een vrouw, 2022a; UNDP, 2018). There have been efforts to facilitate an equal man-woman division in political institutions worldwide, and there are many campaigns reaching citizens to motivate them to vote for women. Like in the Netherlands, in 2018, a campaign started called: 'Stem op een vrouw' (Vote for a woman), which is returning every election (regional, provincial or national), aiming for more representation and women in the political institutions in the Netherlands (Stem op een vrouw, 2022a).

Besides economic and political benefits, another major benefit would be the increased

global health (Ravindran et al., 2021; WHO, 2021). Gender equality issues for women related to health, vary from an underrepresentation of women health leaders in the top health CEO's, to women using medication, medical treatments, and practices built for a man's biological system, and consequently having different side effects than men do with the same treatments (Perez, 2019; WHO, 2021), to health-related issues of women labeled as 'unknown' or 'exaggerating' to an increase in health-related issue due the experience of more sexual violence and dealing with the consequences of STDs', unwanted pregnancies, and harm to their bodies (Perez, 2019). In addition, there is a major imbalance in health care work, globally 90% of the nurses are women (World Health Organization, 2021). More gender equality would result, in a greater representation for both men and women in healthcare, as in the top positions women would be able to defend the needs of women in health care related issues, and more nurses who are men would enhance equal representation and boost diversity in workplaces (World Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, an increase in nurses who are men, would help to have patients who are men feel more at ease, once needed treatment, if treatment was performed by a man, moreover, representation in healthcare reaches as far as even receiving greater healthcare, nevertheless the gender stereotypes tend to withhold men from entering nursing positions (World Health Organization, 2021).

1.4 MEN AS FEMINISTS

There are many stereotypical images about men as feminists: one of the most prominent images that revolve around feminists who are men, that men specifically hold, is that feminism is something that disputes masculinity (Anderson, 2009). However: "can men even be feminists?" (Mcbride & Mazur, 2008).

The involvement of men on the topic of gender equality is a complex matter. According to Peterson (2004), feminists are, at its core, exposing the masculinity bias's "*extent and impacts*". Peterson (2004) explains that feminists often try to expose the dynamics of the gender hierarchy and lay out the oppression of women. Most people who consider themselves as feminists are women and often expose the impacts men have on women (Anderson, 2009). For Delmar (2018), feminism, at its core, tried to change the position of women in society throughout history. The current ideas around feminism show inclusiveness and, most importantly, strive for equality for all genders, with every background (UN Women, 2021). From this narrative, men should thus be involved in the quest to achieve gender equality and men thus *should be able* to be feminists. However, it is not that simple. First, men, like women, have to deal with society's expectations; these social constructs and forms of gender

stereotyping specifically for men oppose gender equality (Huis & Leek, 2020; Levtov et al., 2014). These social constructs possibly make it harder for men to join the gender equality movement. The social constructs for men directly connect to the ideas of masculinity, leading to question: *what does it mean to be a man?* (Croft et al., 2021; Huis and Leek, 2020; Ruxton and van der Gaag, 2013). Masculinity differs among societies, nevertheless, an overarching idea of masculinity is that men are supposed to have *power* (Ruxton and van der Gaag, 2013). Other ideas within masculinity are that men must be *'tough'*, *'compete'* and *'take risks'*, relating to showing dominant behavior (Ruxton and van der Gaag, 2013). As opposed to women, men's emotional openness is therefore limited to the outside world (Croft et al., 2021). The outcome of masculinity in society is known as the patriarchy, a social system that promotes and values masculine behavior, which includes harmful norms for women, like the dominant behavior resulting in violent behavior towards women in the forms of controlling women and beating them (Alemann et al., 2019). In the upcoming chapter, this will be elaborated on in greater detail. Second, there is some backlash within society once men get involved in the battle to achieve gender equality. As previously referred to, one of the foremost critics is that women are the group who are significantly disadvantaged by the patriarchal system. A focus on men removes the resources available for women, and more focus on men might implicate less focus on women (Huis & Leek, 2020). The focus on men and their vulnerabilities within the gender equality discourse could draw attention away from women and possibly be at the expense of women's empowerment (Huis and Leek, 2020). Moreover, something which is very critical here, is the involvement of men going *'wrong'* when discussing gender equality issues. A complex example of this is the right to abortion. As of 2022, there are 25 countries in which abortion is completely prohibited, and in 37 countries, abortion is only allowed if it saves the mother's life (WHO, 2022). As the right to abortion is a *'right'* defined by the law, politics are inevitably used to define the specifics of that law. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, most political institutions do not have equal men-women representation (World Economic Forum, 2021a). However, these political institutions form the policies about abortion, in which the majority of the people who decide are men. Many of the demonstrations about women's rights, therefore, appoint the fact that they (women) should be able to be the *'boss'* about their own bodies leading women to be angry that men get to decide over their bodies (Khalil et al., 2022; The Guardian, 2021). The involvement of the men, once a woman chooses to abort, is seen as the invasion of women's rights (Nagy & Rigo, 2021). Nevertheless, this shows how men get wrongly involved, once deciding on issues like these, the abortion questions, is namely not only

a political matter but also a health matter, from which in both areas, at decision making levels women are significantly underrepresented (Staats, 2021; WHO, 2021).

Another issue around men's involvement in feminist movements is that research has shown that men might be afraid to engage with gender equality issues as it would impact them negatively. As mentioned, men believe it challenges their masculinity (Anderson, 2009), and this fear has some particular implications. Ratele (2014) observed from his research on men's views on gender equality in India and the Republic of Congo that men felt like they would 'lose out' once women gained power. Nevertheless, this is not true for all men, but it is one of the considerations for men to be involved in the gender equality discourse (Ratele, 2014). A possible explanation for this fear could lead us to the patriarchal system (R. W. Connell, 2003). Connell (2003) argues that, to some extent, it is true that once there is a greater sense of gender equality, men *do* have to give up some power, as they are often in gatekeeping positions, like top management positions. The fear from men about their decreasing power has even resulted in an online anti-feminist movement that has emerged in the last decade, referred to as the 'Manosphere' (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022; Ging, 2019). The movement consists of men who believe that they are victims of the uprising of feminist movements in society and want to liberate men from the issues they face due to feminism, men who engage with this movement are referred to as incels (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022; Ging, 2019). The movement is paired with hate against mostly Western women and a negative attitude toward gay men (Ging, 2019). Moreso, the movement is seen as a form of hypermasculinity, joined by men who support the far right, and have racist and women unfriendly behavior online and offline (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). The movement has some dangerous characteristics, as the online movement can be followed by anyone and enforces a less safe space for women, which is the opposite of what feminists are trying to achieve, but the online movement contributes to spreading hate on feminist movements, and there have been men who joined the online movement, and have proved to be violent with women offline (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). The online movement, thus shows, how severely some men are intimidated, and are afraid of 'losing out' when feminism becomes more dominant in society.

1.5 THE NETHERLANDS AND GENDER EQUALITY

There are major differences between countries in pursuing gender equality in their policies and prioritization. According to the WEF, as of 2021, out of the 156 countries assessed, most countries in the Middle-East and North African (MENA) region score relatively lower in closing the gender gap than those in Western Europe (World Economic Forum 2021). One of

the reasons for this is due to law legislation. Women who are situated in the MENA region have less political and economic freedom, moreover, they are suffering from conflicts, which displace women, and put them in vulnerable positions (Danon & Collins, 2021), whereas women in the countries in Western Europe, do have more political and economic freedom, and conflicts do not play a role in a day to day life for women there (World Economic Forum, 2021). Yet, this does not mean that gender equality in Western Europe is not a development problem. Within the Western European context, the Netherlands is a fascinating case. Internationally, the Netherlands is seen as a progressive country (WEF, 2021). The Netherlands has legalized weed, prostitution, euthanasia, and gay marriage and has a democratic political system, considered among the top 15 strongest democracies in the world (Economist Intelligent, 2021). Likewise, the Dutch see themselves as a progressive and tolerant nation (Bloomfield, 2016; Mudde, 2021). However, concerning gender equality, in comparison to other countries, who portray similar ideologies like Finland or Norway, the Netherlands scores relatively low in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021). Moreover, from several Dutch gender equality networks, there are severe critics of how the Netherlands operates within the gender equality discourses and the achievement thereof (Dutch CEDAW-Network, 2016; EIGE, 2019; Staats, 2021).

The first laws in the Netherlands addressing gender equality go back to 1975, when the Equal Pay Act was adopted (Dutch Parliament, 1975). The act granted equal civil rights to both women and men and had to assure that an employee should get paid for the work done, regardless if it was a woman or a man performing the job (Netherlands: Equal Pay Act adopted, 1975). Despite that, the Netherlands has been unable in the last 45 years to ensure that women and men get paid equally. In December 2020, a new bill was proposed in the parliament to tackle this issue (Dutch Parliament, 2020). The bill covers that companies consisting of a minimum of 50 employees should provide proof that their men and women employees receive the same salary for job positions with the same value (Kamerstuk: 35 157, 2020). On one side, this bill shows the willingness of the Netherlands to achieve gender equality. On the other hand, it portrays that the Netherlands has taken 45 years to recognize that its previous law was not enough to ensure equal pay. Legal protection is understandably a great start. Nevertheless, it does not assure that discrimination is not happening anymore. For instance, last year, a report stated that currently, from all the stock exchange companies in the Netherlands, more CEOs are called Peter than women who are the CEOs of these companies (NOS, 2022b). Staats (2021) argues that here the neglectful and ignorant attitude of the Dutch government and society regarding gender equality becomes painfully visible. Furthermore, the Netherlands' efforts to

comply with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW), the treaty is recognized as ‘the international bill of rights for women’ and the ‘base’ for achieving gender equality (UNDP, 2018), never has been a priority. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women even pointed out to the Netherlands that they did not have policies in place to achieve the CEDAW (EIGE, 2016). Likewise, in the latest report regarding the implementation of the CEDAW law in the Netherlands, it was stated that the Netherlands does not have any concrete benchmarks ‘*to promote gender equality and end discrimination against women*’ (Dutch CEDAW-Network, 2016). As well as the lack of a gender impact assessment tool (Dutch CEDAW-Network, 2016).

Another critical aspect in seeing if a country is progressive in achieving gender equality is access to paternity leave (WEF, 2020; WHO, 2021). By ensuring that the men (in most cases) get about the same amount of paid parental leave as the mother, more gender equality is assured within care-work and in labor market opportunities (Perez, 2019; Staats, 2021). In the Netherlands, recently, a change occurred for parental leave. From the second of August 2022, all parents are allowed to take nine weeks of paid parental leave (Rijksoverheid, 2022). However, before this regulation, parental leave in the Netherlands was organized differently. The partner (often a man) had five days of paid paternal leave in comparison to the mother, who delivered the child which is 16 to 20 weeks (Randstad, 2021), which (in)directly had and has consequences on the dynamics of parental responsibilities (Staats, 2021). With the new regulation, however, it is not to say that these dynamics directly change. Nevertheless, it is a good step towards enforcing a more gender-equal dynamic between parents and for organizations. I recognize that the new regulations possibly help to enforce less discrimination in hiring a man or a woman.

Another phenomenon in the Netherlands makes gender equality within economic ‘work’ and care ‘work’ remarkable. In the Netherlands, 73,4% of the women work part-time (CBS and SCP, 2020). Within the EU, no other country has equally or close as many women only working part-time; after the Netherlands, for example, Austria is the runner-up with just 47,8% of the women working part-time (CBS & SCP, 2020). Part-time jobs bring in several issues, people who work part-time work fewer hours and are thus slower in building up expertise and experience, which leads to slower progress towards, for example, top positions; moreover, part-time jobs are often paid very poorly (Webber & Williams, 2008). Women in the Netherlands thus mostly work part-time women and thus indirectly carry a more considerable part of the responsibility of care work, enhancing women’s financial dependency of on men (Staats, 2021). In 2020 about 36% of the women in the Netherlands were not economically independent in

comparison to 19% of the men (CBS & SCP, 2020). Besides inequalities in the workforce, there is also considerable inequalities in politics in the Netherlands. At the moment, there are 58 women in the Dutch parliament out of the 150 seats available (comes down to 38.6%), from which two parties in the parliament do not have any women (PDC, 2022). As for the city councils, the most recent elections took place in March 2022 and reached a historical moment, more women than ever before were elected (Stem op een vrouw, 2022b). However, even though this is good news, and there is some improvement in women's representation, on average similar to the parliament, only 37% of the people in the city councils are women (Stem op een vrouw, 2022b). Moreover, the Netherlands has no gender quota⁷ for having a minimum number of women in parliament, and the EIGE (2019), has even stated that the urgency on gender equality issues within politics in the Netherlands is missing. In 2021, a youth politician (a man) in the Netherlands even stated that politics are a place only destined for strong people and that, biologically seen, men are stronger than women, therefore, men would be more fitted to work in politics than women (Quekel, 2021). For achieving gender equality and focusing on women's issues, it is very important that there is at least an equal representation in politics, as men are less likely to vote in favor of gender equality policies and women's issues (Perez, 2019).

The lacking priority of the Dutch government in promoting gender equality becomes apparent as well when a closer look is taken at the international recognized 'measurement tools' for gender equality like the earlier mentioned, GGG Index (World Economic Forum, 2021), the GII (UNDP, 2020a), and SDG 5: Gender Equality (UN, 2021b). When the GGG Index was created in 2006, the Netherlands ranked in place twelve out of 115 countries, and in 2021 the rank decreased significantly to place 31 out of 156 countries (World Economic Forum, 2021). One of the reasons is that within this rating, one of the indicators is, if a woman was ever head of state, and in the Netherlands, this has never been the case (World Economic Forum, 2021). Like in the GGG index rating, within the ratings of the GII, the Netherlands decreased its position (UNDP, 2020a). In the UN Human Development Report of 2010, when the GGI was first introduced, the Netherlands was praised; they at the time were, according to their indicators *the number one*, in being gender equal (UNDP, 2010). However, according to the GGI, the most current ranking of the Netherlands was lowered to place four (UNDP, 2020b). One of the reasons their place was worsened is that within these ten years, is the number of seats in the parliament occupied by women, with time went down by 5.3% (UNDP, 2010; UNDP 2020b).

⁷ "Gender quotas require that women (or men) make up a minimum share of a group, list, or institution." (Hughes et al., 2017).

Next, it is interesting to look at SDG Netherlands' achievement. *SDG Nederland*, a Dutch NGO overseeing the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands, brings out a yearly report assessing all SDGs in the Netherlands (SDG Nederland, 2020). As of SDG 5, it appears that the Netherlands scored below the average, based on all other OECD countries, in ensuring effective economic participation for women. For every 580 euros a woman earns in the Netherlands, a man earns 1000 euros (SDG Nederland, 2020). Moreover, the report addressed that violence against women is a major concern, as policies against violence appear not to be gender-sensitive enough (SDG Nederland, 2020). A vivid example of this insensitivity became salient in January 2022, when a sexual abuse scandal in the Netherlands was unveiled. This issue has been painfully put on the public and political agenda (NOS, 2022a). It became apparent that several men who worked for the Dutch tv show: *The Voice of Holland*, had been guilty of sexually insulting participants of the show, and social media has been putting out the alarming concern that it is men who should change their behavior and not women (Enden, 2022). A #MeToo discussion in the Netherlands sparked for a couple of weeks in January and February 2022 (Enden, 2022). Moreover, it became clear that in the Netherlands, the rules and restrictions once someone sexually abuses someone else are not finetuned and do not safeguard the victim at all times (Enden, 2022).

The SDG report concluded that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the Netherlands regarding gender equality and that the effectiveness of policies is lacking (SDG Nederland, 2020). The willingness of the Netherlands to put policies in place is appreciated as well as their rather progressive outlook. Therefore, we can say that the Netherlands has an excellent opportunity to improve its implementation of gender equality. However, to do so, the Dutch government will need to prioritize the issues on the gender equality agenda. More so, when one looks at the downward trend of the GGI, SDG 5 and the GGG, in the Netherlands, it could be considered *a warning* for the Dutch politicians, as their progressive character for gender equality is slowly fading.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 IMPACT OF MASCULINITIES

As mentioned previously, the ideas around what ‘masculinity’ is ought to be keep the patriarchy alive (Smirnova, 2018) and block the achievement of gender equality (MenEngage, 2014). Therefore, men's involvement in gender equality often focuses on changing the ideas around masculinity and the ‘masculinity’ behavior, which would lead to challenging the patriarchy (Levtov et al., 2014; MenEngage, 2014). As the expectations that lay within ideas of masculinity are considered to be damaging for both women (dealing with the impacts of for example, aggressive behavior) and for men (having to live up to certain expectations), yet ideas around masculinity and this behavior is validated in our society (Smirnova, 2018). It is therefore important to understand the depths and the dynamics and to understand the complete picture of masculinities, before taking into consideration the involvement of men in gender equality.

2.1.1 DEFINING MASCULINITIES

Connell (2005) has studied masculinities and men's involvement in gender equality deeply. She argues that defining masculinity is somewhat abstract and is ultimately based on gender relations (relationships women and men have) and that there is a range of different standards masculinities can go by. Even though Connell (2005) points out that it is hard to define masculinity, she argues that it depends on who ultimately sets out the benchmarks on ‘*what is ought to be a man*’. Nevertheless, she recognizes that many men do not live up to the expectations of ‘*what is ought to be a man*’; therefore, she does not give one clear-cut definition. She does suggest certain behavior traits such as aggressivity, dominance, high interest in sex, and lack of parental behavior. She explains that the origin of masculinity derives from the debates about sex differences, which were the expectations coming along with being a male or female (gender stereotyping), in the late 19th century debates. At the time, women were excluded from the opportunity to access university, originating from the idea that a woman's brain would be incapable of understanding complicated science compared to the brain of a man, who would be able to handle this type of science (R. W. Connell, 2005b).

‘Mass culture’ refers to masculinity in the sense of what it means to be a ‘real man’; yet, as understood, this is open to interpretation (Connell, 2005a). Connell (2005a) is not the only scholar who recognized that it is hard to define masculinity in one clear-cut definition. Messerschmidt (2019) states likewise that masculinity should be used as a fluid concept. The scholar backs up the argument by explaining that the form masculinity takes on can depend on the social structure (like family, religion, economy etc). Similarly, Jewkes and Morrell (2018)

share the idea of fluid masculinity. One example of this masculinity is the difference between masculinity between the global South and North (R. Connell, 2014; Jewkes & Morrell, 2018; Messerschmidt, 2019), which has to do directly with a colonial background, economic situation per country, as well as the presence of education and how academic research focused on gender and masculinity. More explicitly, Jewkes and Morrell (2018) point out the danger of assuming that one type of masculinity. Organizations that are pursuing to achieve gender equality and in addition, try to unpack masculinity might tackle specific attributes of this masculinity nevertheless, as understood, there is not one clear-cut definition, and this could result in using wrong methods to achieve gender equality (Jewkes and Morell, 2018).

The ideas around masculinity and femininity are argued to be at the core of gender stereotyping (Kachel et al., 2016), with masculinity linking to a man and femininity linking to a woman. Thus, even though the ideas around masculinity might depend on the environment, it does set out a specific benchmark that men and women (in)directly have to be obliged to, as it is an established norm. Gender stereotyping originates from the ancestral past, where the division of labor was based on biological sex differences, meaning that women were responsible for childbearing and men were responsible for protection (Croft et al., 2021). Until today, these responsibilities are still considered the norm, and this usually means that, among other things, women carry the responsibility of caregiving and any labor force job related to that, and for men, this means that they have to be able to ‘provide’ as the breadwinner (T. King & Elliott, 2021). Nevertheless, these gender roles nowadays slowly become a more fluid definition as the expectations of a man or woman have changed over time (Kachel et al., 2016). Yet, gender stereotyping still sets a norm, which burdens among other things the achievement of gender equality (MenEngage, 2014).

2.1.2 ‘HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY’ AND THE PATRIARCHY

Within gender studies, scholars have been referring to ‘hegemonic masculinity’, in the gender equality discourses (R. W. Connell, 2005b; N. King et al., 2021; Kupers, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). The term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ refers simply to when masculinity takes up a dominant form in society. Defined by Connell (2005) as ‘*the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*’, which is sustained by the patriarchy, and thus explains how men easily can take up the dominant (social) roles in society and, thus, therefore, overrule women, in various settings (family, work, privately).

Other scholars have followed Connell’s (2005) definition of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and explored this further and in multiple contexts. Smirnova (2018) explains that ‘hegemonic

masculinity' is based on a relationship construct representing a hierarchy in which mainly white men hold the privilege of power against other groups, such as women and gay men. At its core, it is a direct acceptance of forms of masculinity in society and a direct rejection of femininity in society (Schwiter et al., 2021). Likewise, Jewkes and Morrell (2018) explain that one of the core elements of 'hegemonic masculinity' is heterosexuality, '*not gay*' and '*not feminine*'. Kupers (2005) confirms this idea and incorporates that characteristics of 'hegemonic masculinity' involve '*ruthless competition, the inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency*'. Moreover, Kupers (2005) describes that even though not all men can live up to this norm, men worry once they descend from expressing 'masculinity' they will not be considered 'man enough' for society's parameters. More novel research from 2021 shows how men indeed feel as they have to live up to certain expectations. King et al., (2021) researched men in the United States (US), and one of the participants explained that for men, it is all about '*sexual prowess*' '*performance*', and '*picking up women*'. In the same study, one man mentioned similar characteristics, like '*virile*' '*strong*', and even '*young*', as elements of 'hegemonic masculinity'.

The expectations that are set for 'hegemonic masculinity', can only exist if other groups in society validate this behavior (Smirnova, 2018). Nevertheless, even though not every man fits the norm, it is argued that men who show behavior that can be linked to masculinity do benefit from 'hegemonic masculinity' as they *do not* actively challenge it (Schwiter et al., 2021). Many of these ideas that Jewkes and Morrell 2018, Kupers (2005), Smirnova (2019), and Schwiter et al. (2021) pose are based on ideas from Connell's (2005) work. As Connell (2005) states, there is a masculinity 'norm' that exists many men cannot live up to.

The term, 'hegemonic masculinity' allows for a deeper understanding of the dominant role of men in society, and indeed many scholars have used this term to explain the impacts men have in society. However, the concept has been criticized as well. Demetriou (2001c), offers some critique of the term and explains that using the term 'hegemonic masculinity' it implies that there is somehow a coherent 'bloc' of masculinity. In contrast, he states that there are different types of masculinities that are subordinated to each other and thus towards other men. His critique does link to the ideas, as mentioned before, that masculinity is fluid, and not every man will be able to live up to the standard ideas of masculinity (Connell, 2005), and realistically not every man can be part of the 'bloc' of masculinity. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that even though men mostly hold the dominant power over women, there are also subordinate forms of power between men (Demetriou, 2001c). Thus masculinities, there are

different types of masculinity behaviors awarded. Thus, looking at the impact of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, it is crucial to understand the type of behavior that negatively impacts gender equality.

Similarly, the social system that connects to the ‘hegemonic masculinity’, *the patriarchy*, does not benefit men at all times. The patriarchy benefits men over women, but it does not mean that all men benefit, as mainly marginalized men suffer from the impacts of the patriarchy (Smirnova, 2018). According to Smirnova (2018), men and women who do not fit into heteronormative ideals, the patriarchy pursuits often become victims of all types of violence (physical, sexual, and psychological). One quick look at the data on violence exposes this. Sardinha et al., (2022) combined over 300 studies on violence against women, which accounts for a total of two million responses from women, including data spread over 161 countries, and globally 27% of the women aged between 15-49 years old have experienced physical, or sexual violence or a combination from their intimate partners. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sardinha et a., (2022) expect this type of violence to worsen. Moreover, McGraw et al., (2021), even referred in their study that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, improving health was often targeted towards men’s unhealthy behavior, stating that the dangers of not talking about mental health, which is ought to believe not ‘manly’. Thus showing how the patriarchal system is built on the layers of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ yet, does not always safeguard men in each setting.

The impact of the patriarchy and ‘hegemonic masculinity’ thus goes further than only the violence. Harmful ideas about masculinity become salient in work, family, political, and health environments. Ideas of masculinity go hand in hand with the patriarchy⁸, and for men to deviate from that, acknowledge that the system primarily benefits them (mostly), and enact on that, and in theory, step away from power is a complex challenge (R. W. Connell, 2005a; Smirnova, 2018).

2.2.1 MILLENNIALS

‘Millennials’ are the generation who were born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s (Bitterman & Hess, 2021). Nevertheless, it is debated on which year exactly the generation ‘ends’, and when the next generation, generation Z, exactly starts (Boone, 2016). The millennial generation is characterized by ideas of lifestyle flexibility and was the first

⁸ However, what is crucial to understand, is that much of the behavior linked to masculinity, like aggression, dominance, sexual violence, and the idea that men *must* be able to provide, all directly oppose the achievement of gender equality.

generation to connect through digitalization in a normative way due to the many technological innovations at the time (Bitterman & Hess, 2021; Boone, 2016). Moreover, it is the first generation to let loose of the stigmatization of same-sex relationships (Bitterman & Hess, 2021; Ruspini, 2019). Maiers (2017) even stated that millennials have been ‘shaped’ through globalization, as they are considered the first generation to benefit from the opportunities and the global view globalization brought (Maiers, 2017; Ruspini, 2019). Globalization brought new (international)work opportunities, networks, an international outlook on issues and allowed people to learn from each other and adopt novel ways to work more effectively (Maiers, 2017). Within this ‘global view’, dynamics in society started to shift too, for example in comparison to the previous generations, they value a greater ‘work-life balance’ meaning they are less work-centric as the generations before and for example have higher requirements for days off than the generation before (Boone, 2016).

2.2.2 GENDER EQUALITY VIEW OF MILLENNIALS

In light of gender equality, the millennial generation has some noticeably curious characteristics. It is thought that millennials have a more progressive view on gender equality than previous generations (Baralt et al., 2020). First, millennials tend to attach a greater value to diversity in people at their workplaces (Maiers, 2017) and are more likely to appreciate a more gender-equal workforce than previous generations (Boone, 2016). Second, the millennials were among the first generations in which gender roles within families started to fade, and *both* mothers and fathers started having careers (Ruspini, 2019). Third, millennials are the most educated generation compared to previous generations (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Maiers, 2017; Ruspini, 2019). Interestingly, the increase in education access for women has contributed to it being the most educated generation thus far (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Additionally, due to the increase in job uncertainty, millennials invested more time in education to create ‘certainty’, as higher education would likely implicate better-paid jobs (Baralt et al., 2020). Moreover, millennial men and women are likely to get a degree in higher levels of education (Bialik and Fry, 2019).

All of the factors mentioned above and developments for millennials cannot be seen in isolation from the social changes happening throughout the years. Firstly, feminism was rising while millennials were growing up, and consequently, attention worldwide for gender equality was expanding (Huis and Leek, 2020). For example, the Beijing Conference was held in 1995, which is considered as one of the major central stepping stones in achieving gender equality, putting out issues women struggled with specifically on the international agenda (Huis & Leek,

2020; UN Women, 1995). More so, different international policies and recommendations promoting gender equality, like the earlier mentioned CEDAW, were freshly adopted (in 1979) (UN General Assembly, 1979). In its turn, globalization ensured that gender equality became widespread and even created more job opportunities for women, even if they were precarious ones, due to the outsourcing of multinational companies contributing to women's financial independence (Kaur, 2018). Moreover, more accessible access to higher education means that millennials are more likely to be educated about gendered issues. Therefore, it is often assumed that this group in society is likely to engage in more ethical issues like achieving gender equality (Baralt et al., 2020; Lejla Becar, 2017).

As millennials were the first generation to embody and learn about gender equality, it might feel that 'gender equality' is a given, instead as something that 'necessarily' has to be fought for since the situation for women (part of the millennial generation) has already improved in comparison to the generation before. Boone (2016) conducted research with lawyers, reflecting on generational differences. One of the women participants from Generation X⁹, said that in her time, there was more of an urge to 'fight' for women's rights like maternity leave, which according to her, still has to be fought, and that for millennial women it might feel that somehow gender equality is standardized and that they feel less this urge to 'fight'. Baralt et al. (2020) similarly explained that around the early 1990s, the importance of gender equality issues stagnated for millennials. The biggest 'roadblocks', had disappeared, and the tolerance among millennials for non-traditional family settings was greater than in any generation than ever before (Ruspini, 2019). Women could work and vote, and it appeared as if gender equality might have been 'achieved' already (Ruspini, 2019). Nevertheless, gender equality goes beyond women's ability to vote or work. It involves equal opportunities and women being taken seriously in spheres, that still breathe the power disbalance from the patriarchy, for example, in policy-making, the labor market, and health-related issues (Hagen & Voorthuizen, 2022).

Baralt. et al. (2020) conducted a study among millennials in the US that points out that millennials hold on to the 'agency belief' which is a thought that some millennials hold, which is the belief to have complete control over their lives and futures but blocks them from seeing structural solutions (Baralt. et al, 2020). Baralt. et al. (2020) explain that millennials tend to view issues around gender equality as issues women are responsible for themselves to resolve. An example would be that women are responsible for getting a top position in a company, which does not have anything to do with a patriarchal system that might be against them. The

⁹ The generation born between 1965 and 1980 (Boone, 2016).

'agency belief' thus makes it hard to properly achieve gender equality if not all of society acknowledges it as a structural problem embedded in society rather than someone's responsibility. Furthermore, there appears to be a gender inequality paradox among millennials. Ruspini (2019) points out that millennials idealize stay-at-home mothers, even though, at the same time, women do feel that their opportunities have been broadened. A possible explanation for this is that millennials tend to romanticize the idea of a 'breadwinner' (a man) and a 'homemaker' (a woman), they tend to accept that norms are changing, yet like to hold on to an image of tradition, and traditional gender norms remain strong, as these examples have been dominant in their environments while growing up (Van Bavel, 2017 as cited in Ruspini, 2019). Ruspini (2019) explains that millennials struggle with challenging the stereotypes, specifically, men are afraid to do so, as they are afraid of being stigmatized, as stereotypical gender roles still surround them, and deviating from a normative gender role, might put them in a vulnerable position.

2.2.3 MILLENNIAL MEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

By 2025, millennials are estimated to comprise 75% of the global workforce (Maiers, 2017). It is therefore essential to acknowledge, in terms of achieving gender equality, what the role of millennials is, as they will be the main responsible actors in organizational structures in both achieving gender equality and assuring policies of gender equality are complied with. As understood from the literature above, many burdens within achieving gender equality can be appointed to ideas of masculinity; therefore, it is essential to acknowledge and identify the viewpoint of millennial men. Only a few scholars have specifically dived deep into the view of millennial men regarding gender equality. Ruspini's (2019) work is essential to understanding this topic. Ruspini (2019) researched the view of men on sexism and gender equality. The study found that 48% of millennials strongly agreed with the following statement: "*Men and boys are increasingly excluded from measures to improve gender equality*" (Evans, et al. 2018, as cited in Ruspini, 2019). This could be because, as mentioned previously, many of the gender equality initiatives are focused on women's empowerment. There is little focus and space for a man to occupy this role as a changemaker in gender equality (MenEngage, 2014). Though, Ruspini (2019) argues that millennial men are open-minded enough to challenge their societal norms and gender stereotypes and stresses the importance of millennial men doing so to be more supportive and engaged with gender equality. Nevertheless, even though there is a willingness to change, a call to action to actively challenge these stereotypes is a difficult step to pursue. Another study by the American council of Contemporary Families, portrayed another

difficulty, in which was shown that millennial men have expressed setbacks in gender equitable behavior and portrayed that they feel more inclined towards more conservative and thus directly more traditional man-woman dynamics (Fate-Dixon, 2017). For example, in 2014, 45% of the millennial men in the study believed that it is better for women to stay at home and for men to be the ‘achiever’ (Fate-Dixon, 2017). The data confirms the ideals very much around gender stereotyping. However, stereotypes can be challenged if we follow the narrative from Cordelia Fine (2010). In her book, she explains that the way women and men act often has to do with the expectations of society, and once the concept of gender is primed, both men and women tend to live up to the standards of stereotypes of what it is to be a man or what it is to be a woman. Fine (2010) points out one specific study held in the Netherlands, conducted with at the time undergraduate bachelor students who fall into the millennial generation nowadays. For the study, students received the assignment to write about a day in a life of a student named ‘Paul’. Half of the students had to write in the ‘I’ perspective, and the other half had to write in the third person perspective, which was the ‘He’ (named Paul) perspective. Women students who had to write from the ‘Paul perspective’ scored in an emotional sensitivity test as ‘low’ as actual men, nevertheless the women who had to write from the ‘I’ perspective (hence still writing about a day in the life of Paul), scored significantly higher on the emotional sensitivity test (Marx and Stapel, 2006, as cited in Fine, 2010). Fine (2010), concludes that, therefore, the interplay between the mind and societal expectations affects our capacity in behavior, like, thus, for example, showing empathy. Once one’s expectations are shifted, our behavior can shift too, and there is a big opportunity to achieve gender equality, yet there is still little written on how the leading workforce of the future views the pressing issue of gender equality.

2.3 MILLENNIALS AND ‘HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY’

Looking at the particularities of millennial men in how they approach gender equality might offer new insights into the debate on ‘hegemonic masculinity’.

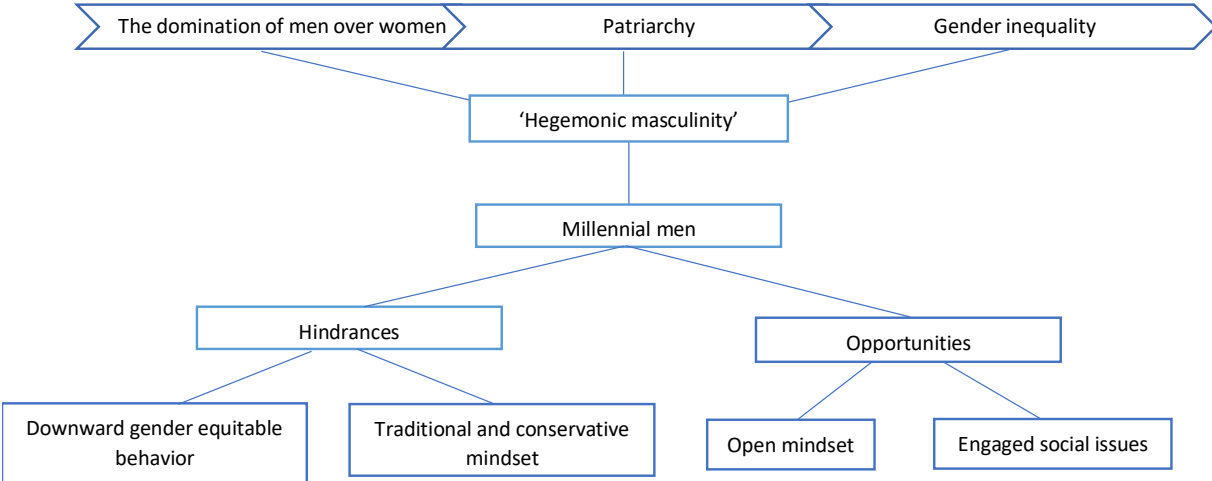
When looking deeper into millennial men's behavior, norms, and values, we can recognize some features linked to what is believed to be ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Millennial men tend to idealize traditional/conservative ideals around men-women relations (Fate-Dixon, 2017; Ruspini, 2019) that can enforce gender stereotyping, thus hindering the achievement of gender equality. Millennial men seem even to be afraid to challenge gender stereotypes due to stigmatization (Ruspini, 2019). Moreover, millennial men have decreased their gender-equitable behavior (Fate-Dixon, 2017). In addition, some millennials tend to hold on to agency beliefs that everyone is in complete control of themselves over their lives and choices. Thus,

they lose sight of how external influences possibly play a role, specifically in social inequalities (Baralt et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, there is a counter part of the behavior, norms, and values of millennial men that might be relevant for achieving gender equality. For starters, millennial men grew up in the globalization era and tend to have a ‘global mindset’ (Maiers, 2017). Secondly, they are likely to have a more open mindset and understanding of social issues like gender inequality (Baralt et al., 2020). These factors show the potential to change current harmful gender equality practices. However, little is known about millennial men in the context of gender equality specifically. This thesis attempts to create this broader understanding by using the theory of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and taking the narrative from millennial men in the Netherlands.

Against this background, Figure 1 bellow illustrates how millennial men stand between the reproduction of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and future opportunities for fostering gender equality.

Figure 1. ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ and millennial men connections.



3. METHODOLOGY

Below a detailed description of the method of the research on the view of Millennial men in the Netherlands can be found.

3.1 PROBLEM DEFINITION

Within the achievement of gender equality, much of the focus has been on women and women's empowerment in education (WHO, 2021), economics (Kaur, 2018), health (Ravindran et al., 2021), and politics (Verge, 2014). In an attempt to achieve gender equality, organizations like the WEF and the UN vouch for having more women in politics, eradication of violence against women, better health practices for women, and acknowledging the amount of household work done mainly by women and many other practices in which gender equality becomes visible (UN, 2021b; WEF, 2020). By doing so, these organizations have tried to challenge the patriarchy and break through harmful traditional norms and values.

Women have been the front fighters for achieving gender equality, and rightfully so, as the patriarchy mostly negatively influences women (Alemann et al., 2019; Perez, 2019; Smirnova, 2018). However, it should be acknowledged that the patriarchy does not benefit every man equally (Smirnova, 2018), and men *do* suffer from the expectations set within the patriarchy (MenEngage, 2014). Moreover, there is a limited effort on men's engagement within the gender equality discourses (Huis & Leek, 2020; MenEngage, 2014), yet it is believed we need everyone to achieve gender equality (UN, 2008). As understood, the patriarchy is sustained through the 'hegemonic masculinity', the dominance of men over women in society (R. W. Connell, 2005b). Which results in the acceptance of masculinity in society, and the rejection of femininity (Schwiter et al., 2021). This results in harmful gender stereotypes, and specifically for men can lead to behaviors such as aggressivity, sexual prowess, and pressure to provide for a family (Smirnova, 2018), and, not showing emotions (Kupers, 2005). Nevertheless, a focus on transforming these behaviors seems to be lacking in many gender equality policies and practices, which can be seen as one obstacle faced in achieving gender equality (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). In addition, little is known about the view of men in the achievement of gender equality as in comparison to women, which makes it also a complex challenge how to involve men properly (MenEngage, 2014).

For women, much has changed in the past five decades, as international awareness raised the idea that women and men are equal and women should be given the same opportunities as men (Staats, 2021). However, men have not been involved in the gender equality discourse in the same paste as women. Moreover, men are less affected by gender

inequality than women are daily (Staats, 2021). Millennials will make up the largest workforce by 2025 (Maiers, 2017). Hence, they will bear the responsibility for changing society norms and values, including in regard to gender equality.

The involvement of this new generation is even more important if we consider that countries have recently developed a downward trend in achieving gender equality, among them the Netherlands (SDG Nederland, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). Once, the Netherlands used to be one of the most gender-equal countries in the world (UNDP, 2010). However, it appears that as soon as they received this honorable position, their efforts to stay number one have been lacking (EIGE, 2019), and they lost their honorable title of being number one (World Economic Forum, 2021). More importantly, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, progress made in previous years toward gender equality has faded globally, and the quest to achieve gender equality has become more complex (Barker et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). Finding novel opportunities and achieving gender equality might be more necessary than ever to catch up on the losses throughout the last years, especially during the pandemic years.

3.2 RESEARCH AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aimed to examine the view of Dutch millennial men on gender equality, which concluded with the following research objectives:

1. Analyze the view millennial men in the Netherlands have on gender equality.
2. Examine millennial men's perceptions about the need to achieve gender equality in the Netherlands.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

To follow these objectives, the main research question below was formulated:

How do millennial men in the Netherlands perceive gender equality and their role in achieving gender equality?

Additionally, three sub-questions were created to make the research more comprehensive and serve as guidance throughout the research.

1. How do millennial men in the Netherlands view gender equality in the Netherlands?
2. How do millennial men in the Netherlands perceive their engagement towards gender equality?

3. What are their stereotypes or pre-determined beliefs about the achievement of gender equality in the Netherlands?

3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

To meet the aims of this study, a qualitative method was chosen, specifically using focus group discussions (FGDs). The questions that guided the discussion can be found in table 1 below. FGDs, are typically used to gain a greater in-depth understanding of social issues (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). This method, allowed participants to talk and approach the topic openly and freely. In contrast, a quantitative study would have cut down the more profound understanding of the topic, as it would be forced to use pre-determined topics. Nonetheless, as explained before, little research is done on millennial men on gender equality, therefore, a qualitative approach allows to delve deeper into the topic. Moreso, as men hold on to stereotypes and ideas about masculinity, which are very much connected to issues of gender equality (Huis & Leek, 2020; Levtoov et al., 2014), getting a first impression on the sample group feeling about gender equality could offer new food for thought on the matter. The FGDs offered a relatively safe and open space for the participants to discuss with other men millennials' peers their views towards gender equality.

Table 1.

Focus Group Discussion questions and which research sub-questions are connected to them.

QUESTIONS FGD	
1	What is gender equality according to you?
2	What do you think about gender equality?
3	What do you think about the quest to achieve gender equality?
4	To what extent is there gender (in)equality in the Netherlands?
5	Do you think there are any problems with the achievement of gender equality?
6	What does gender equality mean for a man?
7	What does gender equality mean for a woman?
8	Do you contribute to gender equality?

As Nyumba et al. (2018) suggested, three rounds of FGDs were held, the first two FGDs were conducted with four participants, and the third FGD was conducted with two participants, as two people who had confirmed their presence dropped out last moment. A total of ten participants joined the study. All were born between 1982 and 1996, to ensure to reflect the millennial generation (Bitterman & Hess, 2021). In Table 2, a demographic overview of all the

participants can be found.

FGD 1 and FGD 3 were conducted in Dutch, and FGD 2 was held in English¹⁰, therefore the quotes from FGD 1 and FGD 3 were directly translated from Dutch to English, with the help of [Deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com) and Grammarly, to ensure the most coherent translation possible. All FGDs were held online, either through Zoom or Google Meet, each with a duration of 60 to 70 minutes. O.Nyumba et al., (2018) suggest already pre COVID-19 time that online FGDs are a legitimate possibility to conduct FGDs, as in comparison to holding physical FGDs, as it boost dynamism and modernity, it was therefore a logical choice to conduct the FGDs all online as the method of this study was created midst-COVID-19 time. Moreover, Turney and Pocknee's (2005) research indeed states that an online FGD meets all the requirements needed within an FGD setting, for example, that the data is qualitative and that the participants are unfamiliar with each other. All participants signed the informed consent (based on the principles from ISCTE) in which the main objectives of the study were outlined (See Appendix 1), and participants were made aware that the information gathered throughout the FGDs was held confidential, and all information was processed in anonymity.

Table 2.

Demographic overview participants FGD 1, 2, 3.

	In relationship	Migration background	Higher educated ¹¹	Lower educated ¹²	Working	Student	Heterosexual
FGD 1	4	0	4	0	4	0	4
FGD 2	4	4	4	0	2	2	4
FGD 3	2	1	1	1	1	1	2
Total	<i>10</i>	5	9	1	7	3	10

3.4 ANALYSIS

For the analysis of this research, it was crucial to get an in-depth understanding of the participants' answers. As mentioned before, eight questions served as guidance for the FGDs and aimed to answer the main research questions initiated for this research. Nevertheless, the questions led to a variety of insights. The FGD were analyzed through a coding method, which allowed finding reoccurring themes between all the three FGDs. Afterward, for each FGD, the

¹⁰ This was due to the fact FGD 2 contained participants with a migration background, and not all of them spoke Dutch.

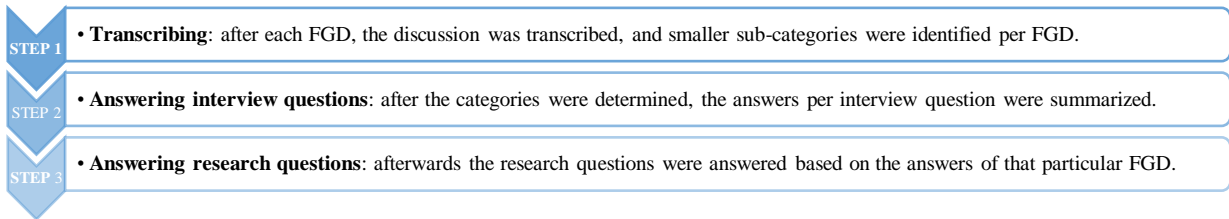
¹¹ Higher educated in the Netherlands means at least one obtained bachelor degree with potentially having an additional degree like a Masters or an additional PhD.

¹² Lower educated in the Netherlands means having a pre-vocational secondary education.

answers to the interview questions and the answers to the research questions were summarized. Figure 2 illustrates the steps undertaken on the analysis of this research.

Figure 2.

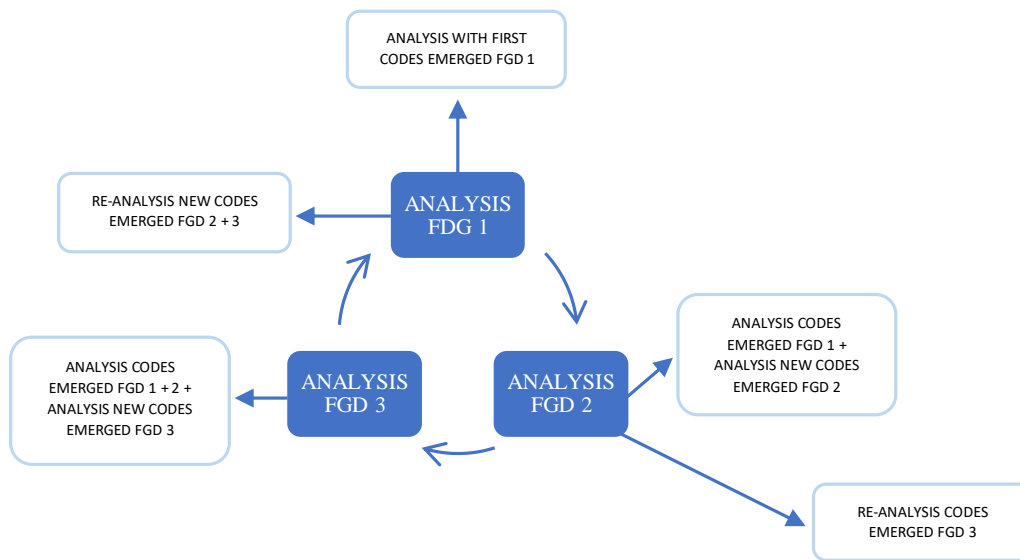
Steps analysis per FGD.



All three FGDs have been recorded and afterward transcribed in Word to be able to analyze the answers thoroughly. After the initial coding, an emerging list of themes was identified. A separate coding list was made, and each code got a description attached to it and an area indicating how often that code occurred in that FGD to indicate how strongly this code was represented within that FGD. The codes that became visible in the first FGD were taken as a base for the FGDs that followed afterward. For the second and third FGD, the coding list was used as a base, and each code was counted on how often it occurred in the FGD. Nevertheless, as it appeared, some codes, which were very prominent in FGD 1, were not at all or barely occurring in FGD 2 and FGD 3. Therefore, some codes were eliminated for the results. However, as the coding for FGD 2 started, some themes occurred that were noticed previously. Thus, new codes emerged, and with the new codes, FGD 1 was re-analyzed, and the same process occurred for FGD 3. In Figure 3, a visual representation can be found on how this research's initial coding went. As Terry et al., (2006) explains, the outcomes that can be read below are, therefore thus, well defensible, as there was a rigorous and systematic engagement with the data obtained. Once all final categories were established and re-analyzing the data, all the codes found were grouped into broader themes. In total, 58 codes were identified, eventually leading to 12 overarching themes, from which some were more significant than others, specifically for this research which can be found in the Results section.

Figure 3.

Initial coding method.



4. RESULTS

Bellow, the four most prominent themes from the coding process and the most relevant themes in meeting this research's aims can be found described in great detail. The four themes identified are general equality, perception of gender equality, the achievement of gender equality, and biological differences.

4.1 GENERAL EQUALITY

The FGD questions all strongly focused on the concept of gender equality. Even more so, all the questions had the term 'gender equality' in them (See Table 1). Throughout all the FGDs, however, *gender equality* appeared to be inextricably linked to *general equality*, and the participants believed that gender inequality is not the only 'inequality' within our society.

The statement from participant D from FGD 1, who is 26 years old (working), explains this thoroughly. He states:

'I was also thinking about diversity in general, racial and cultural differences I am even doing research on people with disabilities, they are also involved, in management in the company, and diversity, in general, you can draw it towards that, the same opportunities for everyone, also that this should be valued, that you are a company one, with different nationalities, and that gender is evenly distributed, I can imagine, if you work together 50/50 men and women, that that triggers something different, than only men, or only women, and it does have a certain value ...'

This quote illustrates participants' awareness of multiple inequalities in our society. The fact that this discussion came up is not surprising, though still remarkable. None of the questions steered into other inequalities. Inequality issues are often intersectional¹³, embracing gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and many other forms of inequality (Hyde, 2014; N. King et al., 2021). Hyde (2014) even argues that gender issues should never be understood independently and always within context, for example, referring to ethnicity or other social identities. Schwiter et al., (2021) state that within the context of the patriarchy, it is not only about ideas of masculinity but also the intersectional aspect. They exemplify this by referring to nurses (a job performed mainly by women), who are black and man, are not as often mistaken as actual doctors as compared to their white colleagues. Which shows how people can suffer from intersectional inequalities in one context. The fact that the discussion arose on multiple

¹³ 'An approach that simultaneously considers multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage, such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation' (Hyde, 2014).

inequalities throughout the FGDs, thus shows a certain level of awareness of the participants on social issues. Confirming the statement of Baralt et al., (2020) on that millennials tend to be more engaged with, and thus aware of social issues.

Participants shared a mutual feeling that they treat everyone the same. Interestingly, this does not confirm the idea that millennials hold on to the ‘agency beliefs’ described earlier in the literature review (Baralt et al., 2020). By highlighting that there are more types of inequalities, participants clearly reckon that there are issues within society that are not the individual's responsibility. Another theme that occurred here along the same lines of being respectful of one another was regarding racial inequality.

Participant C from FGD 2 , he is 30 years old (working), and has a migrant background, stated this thoroughly:

‘Matching with race equality, what I think about is, what for me as a black person, what I would like to have in the society, and then I try to put myself in the position of society, that may be in the same situation, and then I think, I would like to have the same chances, independently of who I am, or who I was born to, because I did not have a choice when I was born, I did not choose to become who I was, before being born, the only thing that I am asking for is, to give me the same opportunities, as anyone else, and I think that is, mostly what I like to see as gender equality, or as equality in general’

Looking at his own experience, participant C reinforces the idea that inequalities are embracing other dimensions than just gender. This again confirms the ideas from Hyde (2014) talking about how inequality is intersectional. The participants’ background furnishes him with a broader perception and understanding of how inequality issues work. The millennial generation is racially and ethnically diverse, Baralt et al., (2020), therefore, argue that there is an increased awareness of intersectional inequalities, which is confirmed by the statement by participant C. Complementary to the awareness of social issues, millennials tend to have higher education levels (Maiers, 2017), like participant C, which helps them to understand better the complexity of other societal issues (Baralt et al., 2020). Finally, within the topic of general equality, the shared idea of being respectful to one another and treating everyone equally, disregarding someone’s background (race, gender, ethnicity etc) became apparent. Participant D, from FGD 1, is 27 years old (working), stated about his behavior towards women:

‘... also I have much respect for them, I just try to treat them equally, as I would want to be treated myself’

'Respect' appeared to be the core theme around the discussions of equality. The idea of treating others with respect also comes up once taking a closer look at the viewpoint of men. Jewkes (2005) points out in her paper on masculinity and men in prison that men have these ideas around 'earning respect', and that 'respect' is an essential matter to them. Jewkes (2005) also discusses that the 'hegemonic masculinity' front remains vital in prison, and that respect belongs to this front. A more recent study from Walters and Valenzuela (2019), showed similar results, they interviewed twenty Latino-identifying men on the concept of masculinity. One of the core themes was respect; likewise, as the participants of *this study* expressed, the men expressed that for them, it is really important to treat others with 'respect'. Some participants from Walters and Valenzuela's (2019) study even stated that masculinity is *all* about 'respect'. It is thus not surprising that the element of how the men interact through 'respect' came up among the participants.

4.2 PERCEPTION OF GENDER EQUALITY

As mentioned above, the participants see *gender* equality and *general* equality as something that is associated with each other. Specifically, regarding gender equality, they identified different dimensions that cover the topic of gender equality to them. The most common thought among the participants was that women and men should be treated the same. For instance, participant B from FGD 2, a 32 year old (studying), states:

''Woman and a man do the same things, they should be treated equally in all aspects of their life, either at home or at work, I think that is the main aspect, that is the main aspect for the quest, is equal treatment''

Indeed, overall, participants claim that they treat women well, meaning: no different from how they treat others in their surroundings. In addition, participants approached the topic of gender equality with a common feeling of why they would treat women differently? The impression arose that it is rather natural for the participants to treat women equally. From the feminist¹⁴ point of view, one of the most extensive quests in the gender equality debates is equal treatment between men and women (Peterson, 2004). The fact that the participants believe they do not actively discriminate against women can be seen as positive. Yet, the common problem

¹⁴ Within feminism, at its core it is exploring the dominance of men over women, and the preference in society of the power of men over that of women, yet it has to be clarified, that there are a lot of different approaches within feminism, and not every feminist would advocate for the same issues (Delmar, 2018; Peterson, 2004).

is, that men often intrinsically believe that they treat women ‘right’ and ‘equal’. However, in practice, they continue to reproduce sexist behaviors. A vivid example of this is that once a man sexually harasses a woman, a man is much *less* likely to perceive this as sexual harassment (Bongiorno et al., 2020). Thus, although the impression is that participants feel like they treat women equally compared to men, a deeper analysis disclosed its oversimplification and contradictions. This will be touched upon further in the categories *the achievement of gender equality* and *biological differences*.

Most participants’ consideration regarding their equal treatment between men and women was exemplified based on their experiences with the women in their direct environment. For example, participant A from FGD 1, 27 years old (working), pointed out how they take on roles in their households.

‘‘For example, with me and my girlfriend, I like cooking she likes washing better, but not because she is a woman, that she has to cook, on a micro level, I treat women like I treat a mate’’

The fact that the participants pointed out dynamics within their household setting in a frequent manner is rather positive, as it shows that they are not ashamed of performing so-called women’s tasks in their private lives. Furthermore, it also shows an understanding of how issues of gender equality possibly occur and in which settings equal treatment can be present. The literature shows how men and women dealing with household-related tasks enormously impact gender equality (Perez, 2019; Staats, 2021). From a traditional perspective, it usually is, as mentioned before the women’s responsibility to take care of household tasks, and the men are expelled from this responsibility, which causes a variety of men-women inequalities, like less time for women to develop professionally as compared to men (Staats, 2021). Moreover, these traditional ideas about the responsibilities of what a man or a woman is ought to do relate to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ where women are seen as ‘caregivers’ and men have the power over the role of women (Smirnova, 2018). Nevertheless, the participants seemed to acknowledge that there are roles to divide in the household and that it is not solely a woman’s responsibility, and additionally acknowledged how these dynamics impact gender equality, thus shows that they do not directly identify all the attributes of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’.

More so, another valuable insight the participants related gender equality to concerns the financial aspect of gender equality. Many participants approached the topic of equal pay

and appeared to feel that this should be enforced vigorously. Many of the participants across all the FGDs confirmed this idea:

Participant A, 27 years old (working) from FGD 1:

‘‘If woman and men are doing the same job then the pay should be equal’’

Participant B, 40 years old (working), from FGD 3:

‘‘If my girlfriend makes more money, we will have more money later, I just see it as a positive thing, gender equality in the workplace’’

Participant A, 29 years old (working), from FGD 2:

‘‘if the men stop working as much, then it is a bad strategic decision, as you are losing money, the woman will go back in the workforce at the same level where she was... if you bought a new house, and you have kids, you have more expenses, it is almost, impossible, for the men to stop working as much as he was, and let the woman go back in the normal life as it was ... money represents a problem in that sense, you cannot, move away from your expenses, the man needs to continue to work as hard, that is the income that you have, and if the man stops working that much, to take care of the household you are going to miss money somehow’’

Besides the fact that the participants stood behind the concept of equal pay, they also mentioned that they feel that it is becoming more challenging for them to sustain a household alone and therefore that equal pay would be something to be enforced. It is interesting, though, as, from the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ perspective, the concept of men being the ‘breadwinner’ (Connell, 2003) in the household does not seem to be as representative for this group of participants. Even though the Netherlands is actually considered as one of the countries which represents the breadwinner model (Sainsbury, 2008), and as mentioned previously, most women in the Netherlands work part-time, and thus more often dependent on the income of the men, indirectly confirming the ‘breadwinner’ model (Staats, 2021). Although the participants expressed the financial pressure they experience and therefore support the equal-pay movement, it does support and validates the fact that millennials are considered to challenge norms (Ruspini, 2019). The participants thus emphasized that equal pay should be an undisputable right for women. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the participants have an open mindset concerning all topics within gender equality. Specifically, in FGD 3, much of the discourse about gender equality had to do with the concerns about the rise of more gender identities outside of considering one a woman or a man. In FGD 2, this topic did not occur. However, in

FGD 1, a discussion arose on gender-neutral toilets and the disagreement about this rather novel development.

Participant B, 40 years old (working), from FGD 3, expressed the following:

"With more and more forms of gender naming, and making distinctions, it misses the mark, because everyone can or want to feel very special, and want to look just different from someone else.. aren't we all just human, isn't that what it's all about, one is man, another woman, another half man, that doesn't matter that much.. we are all just people, I think that splitting up into different types has the opposite effect, I notice that I get irritated by that sometimes"

And participant B, 27 years old (working), from FGD 1 said the following:

"I find those gender neutral bathrooms, for example, terrible"

The negative expressions towards the increase of multiple genders is something rather interesting. For the scope of this thesis, the questions were focused on gender equality, in light of the inequalities between men and women. For example, two questions that were asked to the participants were: 'what does gender equality mean for a man?' and 'what does gender equality mean for a woman?'. No question included any other gender. Although not all participants spoke out on the topic of other genders (outside traditional gender man/woman) the topic emerged spontaneously. Interestingly enough, it thus meant that some participants, when talking about gender equality, they do relate to other genders, which are often left out of the debate about gender equality (WEF, 2021). Thus, participants are aware of the complexity of gender issues. It is unfortunate, however, that they have a more conservative view on the matter. The negative attitude that was expressed by some participants is in line with Worthen (2021) statements that cisgender men¹⁵ may reject non-binary people as they have a greater investment in the commitment towards the traditional man/woman social system. All the participants of this study identified as heterosexual, and as understood from the literature, the ideas of 'hegemonic masculinity' are built on traditional gender norms, with a clear idea of the power dynamics between these genders and the behaviors these genders should have (Schwiter et al., 2021). Although millennials are deemed to be more opened mind towards many topics, including equality between men and women, and that they are aware of the discussion of other

¹⁵ Men who were assigned the sex 'male' at birth, and identify with the socially accepted gender 'men' connected to this.

genders' rights, it seems that in this latter regard some participants *did* conform to the 'hegemonic masculinity' norms.

4.3 ACHIEVEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY

The achievement of gender equality was another major topic throughout all the discussions. Participants strongly believed that the quest to achieve gender equality is something positive, and in all FGDs, the dialogue arose that they *do* support the quest to achieve gender equality.

Participant A, 26 years old (studying) from FGD 3, said the following:

'I think that is a very nice aim, and think that is a good thing to achieve in society, and you actually want everyone to feel comfortable, I do see value in that, so to speak''

They also agreed that achieving gender equality would mean something positive for both men and women.

In the same tone, participant D, 26 years old (studying) from FGD 2, stated:

'That men, are not forced, are not forced to change their current position or behavior, and I feel it could be liberating for them, so they don't feel the pressure of, of having these jobs, they feel the opportunity, of new jobs, because gender equality would also mean they can take jobs, which they could not take before, as there maybe was a society that did not expect that''

Another participant B, 27 years old (working), from FGD 1, explained his view in this context, particularly about women:

'For a woman, that they feel, that they are treated equally, I think it is very important, for women, that there is general consensus that men are treated better, and I think that for women, that they feel they are treated equally''

The fact that all participants generally feel like they are vouching for the concept of achieving gender equality is something positive, as it indicates that there is a possibility to involve more men in this process. As understood from the literature, there are also various benefits for both men in gender equality. As participant D from FGD 2 pointed out, men may apply for jobs that they usually do not apply for as it potentially does not fit the role of a man in society. An example would be men who are working as nurses. As mentioned before, the WHO pointed out in their report on gender equality and leadership in the global health setting

that 90% of the nurses are women (WHO, 2021). More gender representation in health care would lead to contributing to breaking through gender stereotypes related to caring roles being performed only by women (WHO, 2021). It is thus interesting that participant D from FGD 2 pointed this out, as Ruspini (2019), explained, that millennial men would be afraid to challenge their gender stereotypes. This thus appears to be true, yet the participant explained perfectly well how it would benefit men to break through gender stereotypes.

The benefits of equal representation have been on the agenda for decades (Dilli et al., 2019). As mentioned in the literature before, representation makes democracies stronger and assures better coverage of women's issues within politics (Stem op een vrouw, 2022a; UNDP, 2018). However, the political representation of women thus remains a battle until this day. Nevertheless, as much as the participants were able to recognize that thus the achievement of gender equality is something positive, they firmly *disagreed* with the fifty-fifty quotas.

Participant A, 27 years old (working), from FGD 1 said the following about this:

“and I think it's a pity, that we always say anti-discrimination, I think discrimination is judging someone on his or her appearance, and now we are going to select on appearance, and I think that's a bit bullshit”

It appeared that the participants feel that the fifty-fifty quota would somehow foster discrimination. Throughout the discussions on this topic, it appeared that the men were distressed that the gender quotas, would negatively impact them. Participants appeared annoyed, and it came up that they feel that people who fall out of the traditional norms nowadays have better chances of getting a job. This shows how participants cannot grasp how invisible structural gender inequalities operate to hinder women's advancement in society. Within this discussion, they did try to highlight that they feel everyone should get the same chances, but they feel that with the gender quotas, the opposite is happening. It, therefore, appears that some participants do tend to struggle with the structural inequalities that are present in our society. These beliefs fall in line with the ‘agency belief’, as explained before, that millennials tend to have, which demonstrated that some millennials struggle with seeing structural inequality issues (Baralt et al., 2020). It is not surprising that the participants feel some rejection towards the quota. O'Brien and Rickne (2020) talked about how men tend to have an adverse reaction to the increase of women in, for example, political institutions, as the increase of women would take away the power from men. Even though the participants strongly

disagreed with the fifty-fifty gender quotas, they supported other measures. The first one is parental leave.

Participant B, 27 years old (working) from FGD 1, said the following:

‘‘So I have my own company, so we are going to hire people now, and the point is, that you hire a pregnant woman, so for example, I would, I am a small business, if you hire a person like that, a pregnant woman ... that means for me as a small company, that I have to pay that woman, and then she is on leave, but then you have to hire someone else, you have double the cost, for a work, as a small company it is not possible ... for those small companies, it just does not work, I will go bankrupt then’’

Parental leave is like political representation, one of the more prominent debates regarding gender equality in the Netherlands (Staats, 2021). In the context of the Netherlands, it has to be acknowledged that parental leave has, until recently (August, 2022) made a big step towards a more gender-equal approach (Rijksoverheid, 2022). It is, therefore, also noticeable that participants from the study expressed their disagreement with how the Netherlands used to organize/organizes parental leave. All the participants from the study identified as heterosexual and were all in a relationship. Therefore, it might be that this topic is something they are more aware of, as they feel that the parental leave situation might impact them in the future. Unequal parental leave issues can impact both genders negatively. For example, men cannot spend time with their newborn(s) as they would like due to work duties, and for women, it is challenging, as they miss out on possible job opportunities due to recovery of birth or caring responsibilities (Staats, 2021). The participants expressed that they found it alarming that the distinction in the Netherlands for parental leave is so significant and that it is way more difficult for women to re-enter previous jobs, as men tend to have shorter parental leave, which affects their careers less. Here, the frustration about the unequal system on parental leave opposes ideas around ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which namely fuel that women are caregivers and men are providers (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). We can argue here that it appears that not all participants do indeed justify and endorse the ideas the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ bloc tries to sustain. And as we already know from the statements from Connell (2005b), not every man can live up to the expectations represented in the ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Moreover, what might also interplay here is that currently, the millennials fall into the generation that are most likely to become parents in the present time. According to the most current statistics, the age of a man who becomes a father is 32.8 years old (Statista Research Department, 2022). Therefore, topics related to family arrangements are very popular among them.

Another topic that some participants pointed out that does not directly sustain the ideas of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ concerns the existence of sexist jokes or comments that men tend to make.

Participant C, 30 years old (working), from FGD 2, states the following:

‘Misogynistic jokes, and comments, and you hear them and you are like why are you saying this, don’t you realize this is actually hurting someone’s, since they are really accepted in society’

In the same FGD, participant D, 26 years old (working) shared a similar opinion:

‘I only see this as a student ... sexism, is happening, if you are in pubs, if you are someone else, it is not all men so negatively, but still, if you if you call a woman a girlie for example, and a man just a man, these minor differences’

In particular, the participants expressed resentment towards other men who make sexist or misogynist¹⁶ jokes. Participants recognized this type of behavior as something harmful. Bemiller and Schneider (2010) point out in their study that these types of jokes often nurture the power dynamics between men and women, and men who make these types of jokes do so to show they have power over women. Moreover, they explained that these jokes are, at times, steering into violence toward women, which puts women physically at risk (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). The fact that the participants thus expressed their fierce disagreement with these jokes is considered positive for the achievement of gender equality. The power dynamics that come to interplay when men make jokes about women, something which resonates with the ideas about the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). Again here, the participants appear to adhere to expectations within the ‘hegemonic masculinity’. In addition, the occurrence of this topic in the FGDs is I believe, one of the most direct contributions the participants expressed toward achieving gender equality. It shows how the participants believe in interacting with women and that this type of behavior they expressly disapprove.

¹⁶ ‘... misogyny, a term that indicates extreme views against women. Misogyny is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and social structures of power that create everyday instances of sexism’ (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022)

4.4 BIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Throughout the conversations, almost all participants (except one), endorsed that men and women are different. This was often referred to as ‘biological differences’. The topic of the differences often arose when they tried to explain their views on what gender equality is according to them. Yet, the reoccurrence of this topic was very strong from the beginning and the end of the conversations. The most pressing statement the participants seemed to hold related to the biological differences was the importance of stressing this is *the reason* that men and women will never be equal in every area of life as there are simply ‘differences’ between men and women.

Participant A, from FGD 2, 29 years old (working), , said the following about this:

“Men will be, generally speaking stronger than women, women will be generally speaking more compassionate than men ... it will never ever happen, total 100% gender equality”

And participant A, 27 years old (working), from FGD 1 said this:

“The biological differences become apparent, then you see right ... fewer women in finance, and that’s on average then, that they choose different roles”

What is striking here, and very contradicting as opposed to the previous categories, is that the participants do state they firmly believe in gender equality and that it is something positive to achieve. Yet, they also appear to believe it is never going to happen because, according to them, women and men are naturally/biologically different. Much of this has to do with the concept of gender stereotyping, as mentioned earlier in the literature. As Croft et al. (2021) explained, gender stereotyping originates from our ancestral past and strongly connects to ideas of masculinity and femininity. The vast majority of the participants thus tended to still have rather traditional and conservative ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman and which behavior links to that. Fate-Dixon (2017) mentioned in her study that millennial men tend to value traditional settings, which also became apparent in *this study*. More interesting is that, besides the fact that participants highlighted the existence of biological differences between men and women, they additionally believed that they do not see this as an issue, that according to them women are more inclined to do one job or another, as they believe it is just ‘nature’. Yet as explained already previously, what people are ought to do depends heavily on their environments’ expectations Hyde (2014).

For example, participant C, 27 years old (working) from FGD 1, exemplifies this with the following statement:

"But there are just certain, biological things I think, that our neurochemistry, to approach certain situations, so be it, I do this because I almost feel, that I have to apologize"

Most participants thus feel it is in a man's or a woman's nature to do one kind job or another. Some participants took this approach a step further and believed that the differences between men and women should be highlighted and enhanced in society.

Participants A, 40 years (working), from FGD 3, for example, mentioned:

"There is a difference between men and women, and we should applaud that, and it is important"

The idea that the 'differences' between men and women should be enforced rather than equalized might be due to the fact that the participants feel that once we are steering away from the traditional settings, men will have less power. The fear of having less power is not something new or surprising. A core element of masculinity is holding on to power (Ruxton & van der Gaag, 2013). The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', is built on the dominance often translated into power dynamics of men over women (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). Connell (2005b) and Ratele (2014) stated before as well that more men struggle with the fear of losing out once engaging in gender equality. I believe that by highlighting the biological differences, participants are able to hold on to a form of power they indirectly already gained due to the patriarchy. Yet two participants appeared to disagree with the arguments that 'biological differences' are the reason gender equality will never be fully achieved.

Participant D, 26 years old (student), from FGD 2 said the following:

"Yes of course there are some physical differences, however, I think those physical differences ... are not relevant anymore, I don't see the need for these physical differences that is relevant for any job, maybe for sports people, if you do swimming, there is definitely a difference in physique, or other professions it does not matter anymore, it is something from the past"

In the same FGD, participant C, 30 years old (working) said this:

"Disney movies, there are having a shift now, they become more inclusive, and gender equal, back in the day it was always the prince saving the princess in a way, and now the

princess is the one who is dealing with the bad guys. And now the prince is side guy who is actually helping''

Herewith, both participants confirmed that the way we interact with one another has to do with the expectations set and that the relevance of the biological differences might not be as prevailing as thought. They stated the narrative that the focus on what a man or a woman should do is something from the past. Moreover, this narrative shows that if we change what we expect from a man or a woman, our behavior can change, and we change the norm, as the participant C exemplified with the Disney movies example. This confirms the earlier specified argument from Fine (2010), dealing with men's and women's expectations. Moreover, it additionally shows that there is this flexibility and awareness that millennials tend to have (Maiers, 2017). However, it also clarifies that this mindset, unfortunately enough for the achievement of gender equality, does not sustain for everyone.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim for this study, was to understand the view of millennial men in the Netherlands on gender equality and their role in the achievement thereof. In order to do so, FGDs were carried out, followed by a critical analysis of the collected data. From my analysis, I can argue that the sample group who represented millennial men in the Netherlands appear willing to strive for gender equality. Even though it has been challenging to find participants for this study, the fact that some accepted joining shows how there *is* potential to include more men in achieving gender equality. From the FGDs, it became evident that, in line with the participants views, they believe that gender equality should be achieved. This is where the biggest opportunity can be found to reach gender equality in a faster paste. Yet, I do believe that there are still some fundamental traditional beliefs that the participants expressed that must be addressed and deconstructed, as these beliefs are harmful to gender equality and facilitate the patriarchal system. Nevertheless, I do not assume that the participants necessarily believe that these traditional beliefs are directly related to the disturbance of the achievement of gender equality. In contrast even, in fact, the participants of the study appeared to show a great willingness to learn about gender equality, and be involved in gender equality. Thus, I believe it is, therefore, possible to deconstruct these traditional beliefs.

Through the FGDs, four main themes emerged, that were undeniably portraying the opinions and views of the sample group representing millennial men in the Netherlands. The first theme was *general equality*, which is the participants' belief that *general* equality is inseparably connected to *gender* equality. A mutual feeling throughout all the discussions emerged that it is ultimately about treating everyone with respect, no matter someone's background or gender. The participants thus portrayed the broader understanding of inequality as a complex phenomenon marked by different inequalities, yet, still, this is a difficult point. People, who are in privileged positions, in this case, men, as being part of a patriarchal system, would always prioritize masculinity over femininity : the 'hegemonic masculinity' factor (Smirnova, 2018). The participants recognize inequalities, yet as they are not part of a marginalized group, themselves, it might be hard, to understand to which lengths the impacts of inequalities might go, and in this case, can thus possibly overlook the specific challenges that women face (Schwiter et al., 2021). This why it particularly remains important to include women in the challenge yet, let men understand the depths of gender equality (MenEngage, 2014).

The second theme, was the *perception of gender equality* which covered a variety of

topics. Firstly, the participants feel like men and women should be treated equally. Participants moreover expressed how they related gender equality to tasks within a household and equal pay, which captures the idea of men and women being treated equally. Both themes showed an open mindset and awareness on the topic of gender equality, which is also argued to be likely found in the ideas millennials hold onto (Baralt et al., 2020). Yet, one factor that came up which contradicts the open-minded mindset which was the discussion on the rejection of the rise of multiple gender identities. It appeared that some of the participants strongly disagreed with this, showing how some conservative views are still present in this sample group of millennial men in the Netherlands.

The third theme to be discussed was the *achievement of gender equality*. All participants recognized that gender equality is something that should be achieved. The fact that the participants consider the achievement of gender equality as something positive shows the potential for a more gender-inclusive approach to achieving gender equality. Some participants stated that it is good for society to achieve gender equality, for both men and women individually. The participants even reckoned some concerns they see that burden the achievement of gender equality: the parental leave system in the Netherlands, and the occurrence of sexist and misogynistic jokes and comments. The fact that the participants acknowledged these burdens shows how the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ bloc, which represents the domination of men over women in all spheres, thus does directly account for every participant in this study. Thus, I see that, like Connell (2005) said, not every man identifies with the ideas that the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ embodies. Yet, still, on the other side, the participants heavily criticized one of the main ways to achieve gender equality, which is the fifty-fifty quota (Hughes et al., 2017). It is contradictory, as the participants stated multiple times how they support the achievement of gender equality, yet disregard the fifty-fifty quota completely. I argue that it is also one of the ways that the participants potentially feel directly that power is taken away from them, something which is sustained through the power dynamics between men and women within ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Even though I see opportunities here, I also see that it might be difficult for the participants to adjust toward a more gender equality society, as Connell (2005b) said, they might struggle with giving away their power.

The last theme was discussed in the FGD was biological differences. Over all participants believe that these differences between men and women cannot be minimized, therefore it would be impossible to achieve gender equality in every field. This traditional perception reinforces participants to align with some of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ ideas. Moreover, the focus on the biological differences, which according to some participants,

manifests itself in certain career choices of men and women, shows that the participants engage with ideas of gender stereotyping. The fact that the participants pointed this out is not that surprising, as it is believed that millennial men especially tend to value traditional roles (Fate-Dixon, 2017). The fact that this topic that strongly reoccurred, I believe is the most, contradicting debate throughout the whole study, as the participants do strongly believe gender equality should be achieved, however they also believe that women and men are not capable of doing the same things within society. I consider it to be one of the biggest bottlenecks in including more men in the achievement of gender equality.

With a critical eye on their views and the above-mentioned categories, it should be understood that within the discourse of gender equality, men always find themselves in a privileged position as opposed to women (Flood et al., 2021). To highlight once more, an example of why this is important is the view of the sample group of millennial men in the Netherlands on biological differences and their belief that men and women are simply different. Besides that, physically, they are indeed different, men and women can equip themselves for any role as they are expected to, as researched by Hyde (2014) and Fine (2010). Another example is the level of disagreement participants expressed with the fifty-fifty quota approach, which is understandable, as this quota, in the first blink, it harms them, as it means directly fewer opportunities, thus less power (O'Brien & Rickne, 2020). Even though this thesis strongly tried to embody the importance of the involvement of men, and the four main categories as argued above, serve in understanding the view of millennial men in the Netherlands better on gender equality, yet do also indicate some burdens which should *not* be ignored. Including men in the achievement of gender equality goes further than understanding their opinions on the matter. Burdens and misconceptions should get attention to be able to involve men properly.

One concern about focusing on men in the promotion of gender equality is that it could take away opportunities from women to be the protagonist in this matter (Huis & Leek, 2020). Nevertheless, I believe this might not be as dreadful as it appears in the first blink. As it was described, many issues within gender equality *involve* men. Thus, increasing men's role in achieving gender equality I ought to believe is positive. As men become more aware of their privileges and of the problems of gender inequality, they are able I reckon to challenge the 'hegemonic masculinity' norms. Ruspini's (2019) conclusion about millennial men being open-minded enough to challenge their societal norms was, to a certain extent, confirmed by this dissertation. Participants of the study did acknowledge that achieving gender equality is

something positive. Yet, they also showed some less open-minded attitudes regarding biological differences and the fifty-fifty quota.

Against this background presented above, I argue that *not all men* conform drawing from the sample group of the study, with the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ norms and stereotypes, and not all traits and expectations that every man has represents the ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Therefore, I argue that creating more opportunities to engage men in gender equality promotion would enhance the achievement of gender equality. Moreover, I see that the participants of this study, the millennial generation, show great opportunities to be flexible and open-minded to learning. Yet some statements I came across in this study also make me aware that we truly need to educate the whole society better on the impact of a more gender-equal society would mean for all genders.

On a very critical and final note. As a feminist, I acknowledge that I cannot fully comprehend and identify all the negative impacts of the patriarchy in our society. Therefore, I also see that it is even more challenging for people in privileged positions, like millennial men in the Netherlands in this case.

Throughout the study, there were some limitations to be recognized. The difficulty in recruiting participants allowed only to conduct three FGDs. The ideal situation would have been to be able to conduct around three to five FGD’s, to ensure a stronger analysis. Additionally, a profile comparison would have been a great addition to the study as well, as it would have served a more in-depth understanding of the participants.

As in regard to future studies, I believe that the view of men should be investigated more deeply on the importance for them on the topic of biological differences, as this appeared to be the biggest bottleneck in the belief that it *is* possible to reach full gender equality one day. Moreover, I believe that more research should be conducted on what motives can convince men more easily to be actively involved in achieving gender equality.

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APPENDIX 1 INFORMED CONSENT



INFORMED CONSENT 2.0

STUDY – VIEW OF MEN ON GENDER EQUALITY

This study is part of a research project taking place at **Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa**. The study aims to *create a better understanding of the view of millennial men in the Netherlands on gender equality and the achievement thereof*.

The study is conducted by **Paulina Riky Aleksandra Kamphuis** (paulinaa@hotmail.nl) who you may contact to clear up any doubts or share comments.

Your participation in the study, which is highly valued as it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field of science, consists of *answering 8-10 questions, regarding the participants position on gender equality, the achievement thereof and the role of the participant in doing so, in a group format with three to four other men*.

Participation in the study is strictly **voluntary**: you may choose freely whether to participate or not to participate. If you have decided to participate, you may stop your participation at any time, without having to provide any justification. In addition to being voluntary, your participation is also **anonymous** and **confidential**. The obtained data are merely intended for statistical processing and none of the answers will be analysed or reported individually. At no point of the study will you be asked to identify yourself.

I declare that I have understood the aims of what was proposed to me, as explained by the investigator, that I was given the opportunity to ask any questions about this study and received a clarifying reply to all such questions, and **accepted** participating in the study.

_____ (place), ____/____/____ (date)

Name: _____

Signature: _____



APPENDIX 2 SOCIAL MEDIA

WANTED

BESTE MANNEN OPGELET!

Ik ben opzoek naar mannen, en niet zomaar mannen... mannen die mij hun ongezoute mening kunnen geven over wat zij vinden van **gendergelijkheid!**

Voor mijn master onderzoek probeer ik namelijk te onderzoeken:

1. Hoe mannen tegenover **gendergelijkheid** staan, en het **behalen** daarvan
2. Hoe mannen tegenover **hun rol** staan in het behalen van gendergelijkheid

Het gaat om een **online video gesprek** van ongeveer **1 a 2 uur**, bestaande uit **10 vragen**, met een groepje van **4-5** andere mannen!

Ik ben daarvoor opzoek naar mannen met een van de volgende achtergronden:

geboren tussen **1980 - 1996**

+

met een van de volgende achtergronden:

1. Hoger opgeleid
2. Lager opgeleid
3. Migratie achtergrond
4. Homoseksueel zijn

Stuur mij een DM op Instgram: @paulinax
of stuur mij een appje via +31 6 36147877

Ga jij mij helpen om meer inzicht te krijgen? Ik hoor graag van je :)