

RESEARCH NOTE

Women's and Diversity Networks Within Dutch Political Parties: Increasingly Intersectional?

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Abstract

This research note maps the current landscape of women's and diversity networks within Dutch political parties and evaluates their role in promoting political equality. While women's organizations have existed in most major parties since the twentieth century, recent developments toward broader diversity and intersectional formats have not been systematically documented. Drawing on organizational contacts and internal documentation, we provide an up-to-date overview of formally active networks as of January 2026. We show that progressive and centrist parties tend to institutionalize multiple networks addressing gender, ethnicity, lhbtqi+ inclusion, youth, and disability, whereas populist and far-right parties largely lack such formal structures. Building on organizational research on diversity networks, we argue that these initiatives primarily operate at the individual and group levels – supporting career development, visibility, and community building – but often have difficulty transforming organizational power structures. Diversity networks are therefore necessary and valuable instruments for inclusion, yet insufficient on their own to dismantle systemic barriers within party organizations. Further research is needed to assess their long-term institutional impact.

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, many political parties have internal networks to foster the participation of underrepresented groups. This research note centres these networks and makes two contributions. First, it provides the first systematic update of the presence of women's and diversity networks within Dutch political parties more than ten years on, since 2013 (Mügge & Damstra, 2013).² Second, it shows that the contemporary landscape is characterised not only by a growth in single-axis diversity networks, but also by the emergence of broader structures that increasingly combine multiple dimensions of inequality. In other words: the overview shows that Dutch political parties are increasingly complementing traditional women's, youth, and ethnic minority networks that have existed for decades with broader diversity structures, suggesting an emerging intersectional interest in internal party organization.

Hence, the key argument of this research note is not simply that single-axis and multiple-axis diversity networks exist. Rather, compared to earlier mappings, the organisational logic of these networks appears to be changing. While earlier networks were predominantly organised around a single identity category, several contemporary party structures seek to combine multiple dimensions of inequality within one organisational framework.

The Dutch case may be particularly interesting for other contexts, given its wide range of political parties, from different ideological stances, covering a wide variety of identities in special networks (Vermeulen et al., 2020; for an overview of the party landscape, see for instance Otjes & De Jonge, 2023). Especially women's and youth sections within political parties exist across many democracies (see for instance Childs, 2008). At the same time, despite decades of such networks, full political equality for women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026), ethnic minorities (Runderkamp et al., 2025), young people (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2023), and many others has not yet been achieved in the Netherlands. Therefore, this research note also includes studies from outside politics on the use and effectiveness of diversity networks. These studies show that networks are necessary and useful on the individual and group level, but are not sufficient for equality on the organisational level to remove all barriers for the participation of historically underrepresented groups. Intersectionality might provide answers to this challenge.

Following Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality highlights how different dimensions of inequality, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class, intersect and mutually shape experiences of exclusion. An 'intersectional turn', as argued in this research note, is a shift from separate, single-axis networks toward structures

2 It was updated for only gender and ethnicity in 2024 (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2024).

that explicitly seek to represent multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage within one framework. The empirical mapping allows us to identify such a ‘turn’. However, with the data available we cannot further assess the use or limits of intersectional practices within these networks and their parties (e.g. for their internal decision-making, advocacy strategies, or membership dynamics). The research note provides insight into changing party organizational approaches to diversity and inclusion in politics.

Historical Development of Diversity Networks

Throughout this research note, I use the umbrella term “networks” to refer to a broad range of internal party structures, including committees and platforms aimed at supporting underrepresented groups. The tradition goes a long way back: almost all major Dutch political parties established women’s organizations over the course of the twentieth century (Van de Velde, 1992). ‘Gender en etniciteit in de Tweede Kamer: Streefcijfers en groepsvertegenwoordiging’ (Mügge & Damstra, 2013) gives an excellent overview of the networks.

However, the existence of these networks has also been volatile: already in the 1990s, some parties re-evaluated the role of separate women’s networks. The idea emerged that promoting women’s participation should be the responsibility of the entire party organisation, not just a women’s branch. Mügge and Damstra (2013) show that these networks are not necessarily forever. Therefore, an integral update, more than ten years on, is useful.

In parallel with women’s networks, political parties also established other diversity networks, aimed at encouraging participation from underrepresented groups (Ensel, 2003). Since the late 1980s and 1990s, when the political participation of Dutch citizens with a migration background became more politicised, parties began actively seeking ways to engage these groups (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2024). Various major parties set up internal networks or platforms to unite members with diverse ethnic backgrounds. Again, as Mügge and Damstra (2013) show, the stability of these networks varies considerably. Some networks have existed for decades and are formally institutionalised within party structures, and they are relatively stable. Meanwhile, several other diversity networks appeared more recently and have also been started and ended, amongst others special networks for women of colour in the Labour Party and the Christian Democrats (Mügge & Damstra, 2013, p.347).

What Do These Networks Do?

Research suggests that women’s networks may contribute to improving women’s position within parties and increasing their visibility during recruitment and

candidate selection processes. Such networks help break through the traditionally male-dominated “old boys’ networks” in politics. They do this by actively scouting and recruiting female talents, offering training and mentoring, and promoting women during candidate selection (Mügge & Damstra, 2013). Essentially, women’s networks functioned as internal lobbying and training apparatuses for the group they represent. This increases the visibility of women aspirants and improves their chances of landing electable spots. Within party structures historically dominated by male networks, such networks thus create a parallel circuit that supports and advances women party members, breaking through mostly homogeneous informal circuits from which candidates are often recruited (Bjarnegard, 2013).

Women’s organisations also played a central role in advancing gender equality within parties, particularly by advocating voluntary gender quotas. The PvdA was the first to implement such a target in 1977, gradually increasing it to 50 percent, and introduced mechanisms like the ‘zipper system’ to alternate men and women candidates on electoral lists (Mügge & Damstra, 2013, p.348–350).

In contrast, however, efforts to promote ethnic diversity rarely resulted in concrete structural measures, even though there have been many such networks. And some parties, like liberal parties such as VVD and D66, at first mostly rejected group-based representation besides gender. Ethnic minority representation was perhaps expected to occur “naturally”, without quotas or dedicated structures. While women’s organisations mostly succeeded in institutionalising gender diversity, ethnic minority networks generally struggled to achieve such structures. Importantly, the most explicit promotion of ethnic minority and minority women’s networks occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But by the 2010s, some of these networks had been dissolved—sometimes because of success, or because of new ways of thinking about internal lobbying for underrepresented identities (Mügge & Damstra, 2013).

The Case of the Netherlands

The Dutch case offers a particularly relevant context for studying internal party diversity networks because of the combination of a highly fragmented multiparty system, a long tradition of pillarised societal organisation, and ongoing debates about political representation and inclusion. Dutch political parties have historically played the main gatekeeping role in political recruitment, making internal party structures especially important for understanding who gains access to political power.

At the same time, the Netherlands presents a paradoxical case. Women currently occupy over 40 percent of seats in the Dutch parliament, placing the Netherlands comparatively high internationally, yet women remain underrepresented in many executive and local political positions (Mügge et al., 2024). Similarly, the descriptive representation of politicians with a migration background has increased over recent

decades, particularly in the national parliament, but still remains uneven across parties and especially levels of government (Runderkamp et al., 2025).

Previous research in the Netherlands and outside of it has also shown that politicians from underrepresented groups often continue to encounter informal barriers, tokenisation, hypervisibility, and exclusion (Hawkesworth, 2003; Leyenaar, 2004; Runderkamp, 2023; Runderkamp et al, 2025). In this context, networks that work on diversifying political parties provide an important lens through which to examine who becomes and remains politically active, and even who gets elected (Runderkamp, 2025). The Dutch case is particularly interesting because of the relatively broad presence of such networks across a high amount of parties and ideologies, and at the same time the persistence of unequal political power structures.

The Broader Literature on Diversity Networks

There has been more research outside of politics about the role and usefulness of diversity networks than from inside politics in the Netherlands.³ For instance, the article ‘Diversity networks: Networking for equality?’ (Dennissen et al., 2019) shows that many networks primarily focus on individual career development and community building, without questioning structural organisational processes. As a result, diversity is often ‘tamed’ rather than used as a driver for change. A tension emerges between visibility and normalisation: networks seek to make difference visible, yet often avoid directly challenging dominant norms for fear of stigmatisation.

The authors build a theoretical framework in which they distinguish three levels at which diversity networks can contribute to equality: the individual level (focusing on members’ personal career development), the group level (fostering a sense of community and reducing isolation), and the organisational level (challenging systemic inequalities and promoting structural inclusion). Their analysis shows that while many networks are active at the individual and group levels, they often fall short at the organisational level. This means that although members may feel more supported or connected, the broader institutional structures that reproduce inequality often remain unchanged.

Moreover, ‘Rethinking diversity management: An intersectional analysis of diversity networks’ (Dennissen et al., 2020) shows that diversity networks within organisations are often aimed at supporting employees with a specific single-axis marginalised social identity—such as women, ethnic minorities, or LGBT individuals—just like in politics, but that these networks rarely succeed in addressing deeply rooted

3 This is, perhaps, also part of the ‘secret garden’ of recruitment within political parties (see Bjarnegard & Kenny, 2015).

systemic (intersectional) inequality within the organisation. Though the authors do not write about politics specifically, their insights might be applied here. The authors argue that the structure of single-axis identities of networks marginalises those with multiple disadvantaged identities (Dennissen et al., 2020).

Research by Friedman & Holtom (2002) (outside of the Netherlands) further shows that diversity networks can play an important role in retaining minority employees, particularly at the managerial level, by offering support and a sense of belonging. Translated to the political domain, such networks could similarly help retain politicians from underrepresented backgrounds by creating spaces for connection, peer support, and professional development. Such research suggests that diversity networks hold potential to not only attract but also sustain a more diverse group of politicians over the long term. However, they might similarly struggle to contribute to the organisational level of equality, where systemic inequalities are fought.

The study ‘Women’s networks: A career development intervention or impediment?’ (Bierema, 2005) highlights that while women’s networks aim to support recruitment and retention, their effectiveness is limited when members lack gender consciousness and when the broader organisational culture remains patriarchal. Instead of challenging existing power structures, such networks may inadvertently reinforce them. This underscores that for networks to succeed, whether in politics or other places, they must be backed by both critical awareness and structural support.

Given this literature from outside politics, while more specific empirical work is lacking in politics, it seems worthwhile to further understand, in the future, how these networks work in practice: how they are organised, how they gain influence and power. These studies also provide a useful lens for learning about how success of such networks might be achieved. Taken together, they suggest that the key question is not only whether diversity networks exist, but also how they are organised, institutionalised, and positioned within broader structures. It matters which conditions are met and which are not, to make a tangible contribution to making representation more inclusive. But the question remains: what about the specific case of politics?

Current Landscape

To map the current presence of women’s and diversity networks in Dutch political parties as of January 2026, we relied on organisational contacts and internal documents compiled by Stem op een Vrouw [Vote for a Woman].⁴ This foundation maintains close ties with most of these networks and regularly updates its internal contact lists and outreach records, and convenes a working group for these networks. The

⁴ See also: <https://stemopeenvrouw.com/>

overview is based on direct communication with network representatives and reflects all formally active networks known to the NGO as of January 2026. The inventory offers a detailed and timely snapshot of the current state of internal party networks in the Netherlands. Parties that are not shown do not have any networks known to Stem op een Vrouw.

In Table 1, we see that progressive and centrist parties tend to maintain multiple active internal platforms focused on gender, ethnicity, ability, youth, and LGBTQI+ inclusion (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2024). This connects with broader findings that left-wing and progressive parties are generally more likely to institutionalise gender and diversity measures (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Krook, 2009). For instance, the PvdA⁵ supports a robust network structure, including the again standing Rooie Vrouwen, a national diversity and inclusion network, and additional platforms on disability and LGBTQI+ rights (Roze Network). GroenLinks similarly offers both a feminist network (FemNet) and the Kleurrijk Platform focused on ethnic diversity, alongside active youth (DWARS) and LGBTQI+ groups (RozeLinks). Partij voor de Dieren has one network, focused on broader diversity (DIER).

D66 has institutionalised multiple diversity streams, with the Els Borst Network for women, a distinct diversity network, an ability-focused group, and the LGBTQI+ collective Pride66. Volt, a newer progressive party, follows suit with Vrouwen van Volt, Queer Volt, and other age-based initiatives.

5 As our overview dates January 2026, we have added PvdA and GroenLinks separately, before they became one party 'Pro' in June 2026. Notably, they have also started an intersectional network "Young & Spicy", for young people with a migration background.

Table 1 Networks per January 2026

Political party	Gender	Ethnicity	Diversity	Ability	Youth	LGBTQI+	Elderly	Other
VVD	Liberaal Vrouwen-netwerk				JOVD, including young women's committee	VVD LHBT (VVD Pride)		Young Professional
D66	Els Borst Network		D66 Diversiteit	D66 ability	Jonge Democraten, including a working group on diversity	Pride 66		
CDA	CDA Vrouwen		CDA Diversiteit Netwerk		CDJA	CDA Pride	Senioren-netwerk	CDA De Dertigers
PvdA	Rooie Vrouwen		Landelijk netwerk Diversiteit en inclusie	Werkgroep handicap en beleid	Jonge Socialisten	Roze Netwerk PvdA	Ouderen Netwerk PvdA	
Groen Links	FemNet	Kleurrijk Platform			DWARS	RozeLinks		
SP					SP Jongeren, Rood (independent split)			
FvD					JFVD			
Christen-Unie	Vrouwennetwerk	Veelkleurig			Perspectief	CU4all		

Political party	Gender	Ethnicity	Diversity	Ability	Youth	LGBTQI+	Elderly	Other
Partij voor de Dieren			Commissie DIER (Diversiteit, Inclusie, Equity en Rechtvaardigheid)		PINK!			
SGP	Sapientia				SGP Jongeren			SGP Next (young professionals)
Volt	Vrouwen van Volt				Violet	Queer Volt	Volt Silver	
JA21					Jong21			
BBB					BBB Jong			
DENK					DenkJong			
BIJ1					Radicaal			
NSC					Jong Sociaal Contract			
TOTAL	8	2	4	2	16	7	3	3

Christian parties present a more varied picture. The ChristenUnie has established several inclusive internal structures, including a women's network, the ethnic diversity platform *Veelkleurig*, and *CU4all* for queer party members. It also has youth engagement via *Perspectief*. Notably, the SGP, the party which historically excluded women from political participation, have a women's network named *Sapientia*. They also operate youth groups like *SGP Jongeren* and *SGP Next* (focused on young professionals). The CDA has several networks, amongst them *CDA Vrouwen* and *CDA Diversiteit Netwerk*, as well as a queer network (*CDA Pride*), seniors and youth platforms, and professional groups like *De Dertigers*.

The VVD maintains its *Liberaal Vrouwennetwerk* and a youth branch (*JOVD*), which includes a women's committee, as well as a group for queer members (*VVD LHBT*), but does not have ethnic or diversity-wide platforms.

In contrast, parties on the far-right such as *FvD*, *JA21*, and *BBB* lack any formal networks for women, ethnic minorities, or LGBTQI+ members. These parties do often maintain youth branches (e.g., *JFVD*, *Jong21*, *BBB Jong*). *PVV* does not have members and no member networks.

Which identities are best represented in the diversity networks? With this overview we can only speak to the amounts. First and foremost, there are 16 youth networks. They are by far the most often represented. These numbers resonate with the research by *Dennissen et al. (2020)* showing that the young employee network is considered most important, and highest in the 'pecking order' (p.232). Unlike other identities, youth organisations are generally fully institutionalised and widely accepted across the political spectrum. They are followed by 8 women's networks. The third place is for LGBTQI+ networks, of which there are 7. There are currently four networks focused on broader (intersectional) diversity.

An Intersectional Turn?

Taken together, the overview shows two things: (1) a big growth in single-identity networks throughout most of the party landscape since 2013 following fragmentation in the Dutch party landscape, and (2) some recent transitions from single-axis structures toward broader diversity formats. Rather than replacing women's organisations, broader diversity structures also coexist alongside them.

Earlier research by *Mügge and Damstra (2013)* showed that the *PvdA* and *CDA* briefly hosted networks specifically aimed at Black, migrant and refugee women. At the time, however, these initiatives, while focused on more than one identity marker, remained relatively limited in scope and concentrated within a small number of parties. Most networks still largely followed a single-axis logic, focusing either on gender or ethnicity separately. The current landscape suggests a broader and more institutionalised shift toward diversity structures that explicitly combine

multiple dimensions of inequality within one organisational framework. Rather than only separate women's or ethnic minority platforms, several parties now maintain broader diversity networks encompassing several identities simultaneously. The most recently established is the Partij voor de Dieren diversity committee 'DIER' (the name signaling 'diversity, inclusion, equity and representation'). Their committee reflects the shift from single-identity to intersectional approaches where exclusion is understood as the result of multiple overlapping and interlinked systems of oppression.

This shift signals a growing awareness of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), where political inequality is not only experienced along a single axis, and that internal advocacy must reflect this complexity. Dennissen et al. also argue that such single-axis networks invoke reversed 'Oppression Olympics' ("a competition between disadvantaged groups to prove themselves as the most oppressed" (Hancock, 2007, as cited in Dennissen et al., 2020, p. 226)), but reversed, where they all have to prove themselves as having added value for the company. The single-axis nature of networks does not help collaboration to address issues of diversity in organisations. They argue that "organisational inequalities cannot be dismantled separately because they entail multiple intersecting identities that mutually reinforce each other" (Dennissen et al., 2020, p. 221). And, as an effect, the single-axis design of networks "sustain intersectional inequalities in organisations, (...) and hinders collaboration to address diversity and inequality (...)" (Dennissen et al., 2020, pp. 235, 236). Translated to politics, an increasingly intersectional turn should then be seen as a positive development to address inequality in politics. However, the question remains whether and how these networks are made able to question and transform structural inequalities within larger party organisations (e.g. dependency on party, finances), and thus whether they are (made) able to address underlying power structures.

Conclusion

The Dutch case shows a myriad of different diversity networks within political parties, given also its very high amount of political parties. Moreover, intersectional networks have been on the rise. Yet the coexistence of traditional single-axis networks and broader diversity structures also demonstrates that single-axis representation continues to play an important role in political organising. The current developments should not be understood as a break with earlier forms of organising, as some forms of intersectional networks already existed before. Most importantly, we can see them as an expansion and sometimes reformulation (and certainly more explicitly 'intersectional') of earlier diversity efforts.

For decades, women's organisations within parties have helped break male dominance and have promoted women political leaders. Similarly, the more recent

diversity networks offer a springboard for politicians from minority groups and help to make talent visible that might otherwise be overlooked. These developments coincided with broader increases in diversity in political representation and growing attention to diversity within parties. Although causal relationships are difficult to establish when it comes to the role of such networks per se, the change is visible both in numbers (a steady increase in the diversity of candidate lists) and in cultural change (more attention to diversity).

At the same time, it is clear that these networks do not operate in isolation: their effectiveness depends on how they are embedded and supported in their political parties. Research from outside politics suggests that networks that are taken seriously, represented in party bodies, and have sufficient resources can make a difference.

Taken together, beyond providing an updated overview, this research note suggests that Dutch political parties are experimenting with new ways of organising the representation of diversity internally. The emergence of broader diversity networks alongside traditional single-axis networks points toward a possible intersectional turn in party organisation—one that deserves closer scholarly attention in future research.

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