

Dear friends,

In the early 18th century, a wave of homophobia swept through the Netherlands. Hundreds of gay men were targeted in a witch-hunt that came to be known as the 'Utrecht Sodomy Trials'. The first man accused of sodomy was pressured to reveal the identities of other so-called 'deviants'.

At the time, an epidemic was ravaging the country's livestock population, and natural disasters were threatening the dikes that held the sea at bay. People were scared, the dangers were real. But instead of addressing the true problems, the Netherlands turned gay men into convenient scapegoats.

The Utrecht trials ended with eighteen men convicted of sodomy and publicly executed in Utrecht. Many convictions and executions followed in the rest of the country.

The tragic truth is that homophobia is nothing new: it can be found throughout human history, in all parts of the world. In the Netherlands, homophobia reached a fever pitch in 1730. Today, reports of anti-LGBTI violence are pouring in from all over the world. Just look at today's news from Atjeh, where a young gay couple has been condemned to 85 lashes each...

And just look at recent reports from Chechnya - another horrifying case in point. Here, the parallels with the Netherlands of the 18th century are striking.

Again, a few homophobic incidents have rapidly spun out of control. Again, people are being pressured and even tortured to give up the names of others - people guilty of nothing more than differing from what is considered the norm. And again, homosexuality is being portrayed as 'immoral' and 'incompatible with national values'.

And things are taking an even darker turn in Chechnya. Not only are gay men the target of police brutality and torture, regional authorities have even publicly encouraged families to kill their gay relatives. A particularly gruesome report emerged last week. A 17-year-old boy was pushed to his death from a ninth-floor balcony - by his own uncle...

These and other accounts represent horrific violations of equal rights / gay rights / human rights. When these principles are under threat, we must all speak up - whether we're gay or straight, black or white, women or men. Because it concerns us all.

The measure of respect given to minority rights is an indication of a state's attitude to human rights in general, as they apply to you, to me, to all of us. Because the rights of LGBTI people are often the proverbial canary in the

coalmine – when their rights are not respected, there's often a lot more that is wrong in a society.

That's why the Netherlands works tirelessly to promote LGBTI rights, as part of our broader human rights advocacy. We emphasised this again in our 2016 Human Rights Report, published this week.

That's why I look back with pride on the creation of the Equal Rights Coalition, which I helped launch in Montevideo last year, together with my distinguished colleague Rodolfo Nin Novoa of Uruguay. The Coalition is an alliance of 33 countries from all over the world, advocating equal rights for the LGBTI community.

And that's why I value an initiative like the Amsterdam Rainbow Dress so much: it raises awareness of the importance of openness and inclusiveness, across the globe – for all people.

The dress is made up of 75 national flags from countries where homosexuality is still punishable by law. Seventy five countries! This project underscores the enormity of the challenge before us: equal rights for LGBTI people around the world.

And changes in the law are not enough. The fact that the Russian flag isn't even part of the dress is as an important reminder of this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to be here with the ambassadors from the Coalition member states, and from two aspiring member states that will soon be joining us: Malta and Lithuania. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to the hard-working NGOs represented here today. Close cooperation between governments and NGOs is crucial for the coalition.

The Coalition released its first public statement a few weeks ago, calling on Russia to investigate the homophobic violence in Chechnya and to hold those responsible to account. The Russian authorities have now started an investigation. As members of the Coalition, we will closely monitor this investigation and whether it brings any relief for LGBTI people in Chechnya.

As members of the coalition, we also have to practice what we preach. And even though the Netherlands today is largely a hospitable place for LGBTI people, full equality and acceptance still require a lot of work. In all parts of society, including some quite close to home: for instance, my own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For two years now, the foreign ministry has had its own LGBTI staff network, appropriately named 'Out There'.

'Out There' seeks to raise awareness of the stereotypes and misunderstandings that still exist – yes, even in the minds of diplomats, who are supposed to be uniquely open-minded, given the nature of their training and work.

I sincerely hope that our Ministry can be a place where everyone can reach their full potential, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Friends, I would like to end on a high note.

Nowadays, Utrecht is a beautiful town filled with open-minded people. It has a specific 'Rainbow Agenda' focused on LGBTI acceptance. The municipality was the first public authority in the country to introduce gender-neutral bathrooms. And the eighteen gay men executed almost three hundred years ago, are now honoured with a memorial on Dom Square.

There's no reason why other places cannot go through the same process. There are promising trends all over the world.

Belize, Nauru, the Seychelles and Mozambique have all recently decriminalized homosexuality. In more and more countries, openly gay politicians are being elected. The first ever gay pride event is taking place this week in Lebanon.

The LGBT Core Group in New York makes sure that the UN stays focused on the issue; the Secretary-General has been very outspoken in his support for this agenda. And the UN has now appointed an Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

I am confident that many more high points will follow. And that soon, the members of the Equal Rights Coalition will outnumber the national flags in the dress.

In closing, and to show our dedication to the cause of the Equal Rights Coalition, and the Amsterdam Rainbow Dress, I'd like to invite you all to join me for a photo with our model, Valentijn de Hingh, who is so strongly committed to this important cause herself.

Speech minister Koenders IDAHOT - 17 mei 2017

Let's keep up the good work – for the benefit of all of us.

Thank you.