

**Bristol University Press  
Policy Press**

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Chapter Title: Older volunteers in the Netherlands: new challenges to an old tradition  
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Book Title: Active ageing  
Book Subtitle: Voluntary work by older people in Europe  
Book Editor(s): Andrea Principi, Per H. Jensen, Giovanni Lamura  
Published by: Bristol University Press, Policy Press. (2014)  
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ggjk6v.16>

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# Older volunteers in the Netherlands: new challenges to an old tradition

*Joop Schippers and Wieteke Conen*

## Introduction

When Esping-Andersen (1990) wrote his famous study on the different types of welfare states, he characterised the Netherlands as a member of the conservative, corporatist family of continental welfare states in Europe. Based on the image of the 1960s and 1970s, this qualification may have been correct. But during the 1980s one could already see the start of a process of the Netherlands drifting away from its continental anchors. During the 1990s it looked like the Netherlands evolved into a mixture of the social democratic and liberal welfare state model, turning the ideas developed by Giddens (1998) about a 'third way' into reality. However, after the turn of the century and the rise of populist right-wing political parties, the welfare state came under attack. During the last decade privatisation, market orientation and own risk and responsibility became leading notions with respect to the reorientation of the welfare state. Especially after the budget cut-backs related to the banking and Euro crisis during a long period after 2008 the Dutch welfare state – or what is left of it – will be hardly more than a shadow of what it used to be in the 1980s. In particular, there will be major cut-backs in the field of care, compelling people in need of help to rely more on family members or other people from their social networks.

Compared to other European countries, unemployment has been and still is relatively low, even though during 2012 it increased rapidly. Unemployment hits older workers particularly hard. From all vacancies filled during 2011, only 2 per cent went to people over 55 years old. So, older people becoming unemployed experience more and more that they are likely to remain unemployed for the rest of their life. A growing share of these long-term unemployed start to

shift focus and make inquiries as to whether there is an option to do voluntary work. Even though this is unpaid work, it offers them the opportunity to do something useful in society, gives them a goal in life again, and adds to their social network.

Despite growing unemployment, labour market participation in the Netherlands is still high, especially for women. When it comes to the share of women in employment, the Netherlands is close to the Scandinavian frontrunner countries. Yet most women (two thirds to three quarters) work in part-time jobs. This used to allow women to take up family responsibilities quite easily, and also to spend much more time on voluntary activities. As the traditional breadwinner wages for men have almost completely disappeared, and individualisation has moved forward, it is now more or less the natural thing that families consist of two earners holding one-and-a-half to one-and-three-quarters of a job. Despite the growing participation of women in the Dutch labour market, there is still a considerable degree of labour market segregation. Many women work in care, education and public health, while the Netherlands has one of the lowest shares of women in technical jobs of all European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Of course, this evolution has not passed by the voluntary sector. Many organisations that have lost (part, and often most of) their public subsidies during the last decade had to fire professionals on their payroll and became more dependent on voluntary workers. We see this, for instance, in museums, libraries, scouting and welfare organisations. Due to budget cuts many primary schools would not survive without parents helping with reading, lunch break supervision or even swimming lessons. Or at least, they would have to stick to core activities such as reading, writing and arithmetic. A similar picture can be drawn with respect to older people in need of care. Privatised home care workers only have a few minutes to wash people who are not able to take a shower independently. So again, it is volunteers who devote their time and attention to older people in need of care to guarantee them at least some quality of life. Even though this is not the largest voluntary sector in terms of participants and hours (as we show later, see p 226), it is the sector where the need for voluntary workers and the impact of voluntary work is the largest. In sport, the absence of volunteers to run a canteen would simply imply that there would be no drinks after a match. In schools and in care, the absence of volunteers could imply a breakdown in the sector.

What has not changed, despite the rough times the Dutch welfare state is going through, is the spirit of voluntary workers and the

commitment of the Dutch population to spend part of their time on voluntary work. Throughout the period 1997–2008 the share of the 18+ population participating in organised voluntary work was around 45 per cent, with a slightly decreasing trend (from 47 per cent in 1997 to 43 per cent in 2008). During the same period the share of the adult population participating in informal help (mostly care) remained constant, at 30 per cent. Altogether, almost 60 per cent of the adult Dutch population participates in some form of voluntary work. However, other sources report different figures, and we come back to this later (see p 223). It is not known and recorded in the Netherlands how much voluntary work contributes to gross domestic product (GDP). The same holds for the number of voluntary organisations. As a matter of fact, most voluntary workers work in mixed organisations, that is, organisations that employ a number of paid employees and a number of voluntary workers. This mix ranges from organisations with only a few paid employees and mostly voluntary workers to organisations with mostly paid employees and only few additional voluntary workers.

Even though the share of people participating in voluntary work has been relatively stable, the hours spent on voluntary work has been affected by changes in the labour market. The most marked development of the last few decades in the Dutch labour market has been the emergence of the Dutch working wife and mother. It looks as if this increase in women's labour market participation has reduced women's opportunities to spend time on voluntary work. While the average number of hours for men remained the same over the period 2001–09, at 5.5 hours, women's hours spent on voluntary work dropped from 4.9 to 4.3 during the same period.

In the meantime, even though it is difficult to establish, there is some evidence that the role of voluntary work in society has changed over time. While in the past voluntary work was something that had to be done and was done primarily based on feelings of social responsibility and altruistic motives, it looks like enjoyment and 'expressing yourself' has become more important, at least if we take the increasing share of voluntary workers indicating that they *always* enjoy their voluntary activities as a proper indicator. That is, voluntary work in the Netherlands is on the verge of changing from being predominantly 'philanthropic/altruistic' to being predominantly 'self-centred/self-expressive' in nature. We discuss this issue into some more detail later. Here we can already mention that this tendency is particularly strong among older volunteers. Their participation in voluntary work has

increased substantially over the last decade, especially for the two age categories, 65–75 and over 75 years old.

To a large extent people's participation in voluntary work reflects their life course position. While adolescents are overrepresented in voluntary youth work, and parents with young children in voluntary work at school and in sports organisations, older volunteers are often found in care, cultural, philosophical and religious organisations.

This chapter now continues with a brief description of the roots and history of voluntary work in the Netherlands and its current legal framework. In the second section we present statistics on participation in voluntary work in general and then focus on the participation of older people. In the third section we discuss opportunities and restrictions for older people's participation in voluntary work in the Netherlands, while the fourth section looks at future developments. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

### *The Dutch tradition of voluntary action*

Volunteer work in the Netherlands has followed the pattern of pillarisation that is characteristic for politics, labour, care and education (see, for example, Lijphart, 1968). As part of the emancipation process that started in the middle of the 19th century, different religious groups developed their own institutional structures in society. With the start of the emancipation of the lower social classes and the growing social democratic movement during the first quarter of the 20th century, a social democratic pillar was erected next to the Roman Catholic and Protestant pillars. Each pillar included all relevant institutions for different stages of the life course: schools, hospitals, volunteer organisations, trade unions, political parties, papers, broadcasting companies, old age homes, and so on. So, if you were a Roman Catholic you could live your life completely within the Roman Catholic pillar. On Sunday you went to church, you read a Catholic newspaper, listened to the Roman Catholic radio service and sent your children to a Roman Catholic school or even university. If you belonged to the social democratic pillar you were member of the Social Democratic Party, went to a Socialist holiday camp in summer and spent your old age in an old-age home called 'Aurora'. As a result, volunteer work remained segmented along the lines of the Dutch pillars. And even as the pillar system more or less collapsed during the 1970s and 1980s, many Dutch volunteer organisations still bear the marks of their origin. Even though many of them have become 'neutral' organisations in a formal sense (with the articles of association

no longer pointing to specific religious or political principles), most still 'breathe' their traditional values.

Because all pillars devoted themselves to keeping as many societal activities within their own control – and out of state control – voluntary work in the Netherlands has expanded enormously during the course of the 20th century. Voluntary work was also partly seen as an instrument to ensure cohesion within the pillar. If organisations belonging to the pillar looked after you in times of need, and offered you social support and 'cosiness', this lowered the risk of people turning their back on the pillar. So, traditionally, the Netherlands has a high level of volunteering compared with other European countries. Most volunteer work takes place on the level of NGOs (non-governmental organisations; in Dutch, *maatschappelijk middenveld*), and within relatively small organisations. From a governance perspective these organisations are independent of the government, but particularly during the construction period of the modern welfare state during the 1960s and 1970s many volunteer organisations (for instance, organisations dealing with the help of women who have been victims of sexual abuse or organisations helping ex-convicts to start up a new life) became more or less dependent on government subsidies, either from the national or local government. However, the trend towards reduction of the welfare state and the introduction of market principles in the world of volunteer work has (especially after 2003, when the government realised a first series of major budget cuts) resulted in a substantial reduction of government subsidies for volunteer organisations. Some of them have had to close or scale down, while others are still busy finding other sources of finance, for example, sponsoring by private firms and companies. One of the consequences of the budget problems of many NGOs is that the balance between paid professional workers and unpaid voluntary workers in these organisations has shifted, and organisations have to rely more on voluntary workers. As a result, the professionals have less time for coaching and counselling volunteers, and often the tasks, responsibilities and workload of voluntary workers has increased. This may particularly harm older voluntary workers if they depend more on the counselling and support of the professionals. Moreover, several organisations working with large numbers of voluntary workers had to decide to end their activities, because they were no longer able to pay their professional workers who constituted the backbone of the organisation and organised the activities of the voluntary workers (for instance, organisations promoting women's emancipation or organisations trying to combat older workers' discrimination). Of

course, this problem is felt less in an organisation with a large number of professionals and a small share of voluntary workers.

### *The legal framework*

The Netherlands does not have a specific law on volunteers or voluntary work. Yet a lot of laws designed for other purposes also apply to voluntary work and volunteer organisations. Organisations working with volunteers report that they have to deal with:

- fiscal laws, for example, when they want to reimburse volunteers' travel costs;
- the law on social benefits (*Algemene Bijstandswet*), for example, if a volunteer is on benefits and the organisation wants to award him/her an allowance for all the time and effort the volunteer puts into the volunteer work. If the allowance exceeds a certain amount of money or is not 'labelled' properly, the volunteer runs the risk of losing part of his/her benefits (Pennings, 2001);
- the law on social support (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning*) that grants people social support from local government. This law is relevant when voluntary work (partly) overlaps with professional services offered by/paid for by local government;
- the law on working conditions (*Arbo-wet*). Rules on safety, working hours and working conditions also serve to protect and apply to volunteers;
- the law on catering (*Horecawet*). This law applies, for example, in case a volunteer is behind the bar or working in a canteen or a kitchen with food;
- liability law. If a volunteer acts on behalf of the organisation and causes damage doing his/her work, the organisation is responsible (and will probably opt for a liability insurance);
- health and safety regulation, including, for example, rules on the use of tobacco and alcohol.

None of these laws and regulations makes a distinction with respect to age, and so they do have not a different impact on younger and on older volunteers.

For many organisations, complying with all these legal rules brings along a lot of administration and administrative burden. For a long time there has been discussion on whether all these laws and regulations must also apply to organisations working with volunteers. In many cases they have been developed for a professional setting

and not for the informal setting of many volunteer organisations. Yet public authorities argue that, for example, when a volunteer is working with a group of children, the necessity of complying with all kinds of safety and protection rules is as important in case a professional is working with that same group. So in such cases the law does not allow any concessions to the 'normal' legal rules, and treats volunteer organisations the same as professional organisations.

A specific problem is the taxation of volunteer allowances (ANBI, 2010). According to many experts in the field, the fiscal exemption for these allowances is too low. In many cases volunteers have additional costs resulting from the voluntary work they do (for example, travelling costs or costs from special clothing/shoes, materials they use). Reimbursing these costs (completely) often results in allowances that exceed the exemption limit (Lankers, nd). This implies that the volunteers have to pay taxes over their allowance (Kollen, 2007). Consequently, they not only have to spend time on their voluntary work, but also their own financial means. In some cases it has been reported that volunteers had to give up their voluntary work because they could no longer afford it financially.

## **The dimension of volunteer work**

Different statistical sources report different participation rates for voluntary work. The differences partly result from the use of (slightly) different questions and definitions, but also from the use of different samples of the population. Of course, one may get different answers depending on whether the question relates to voluntary work 'during the last year' or 'during the last week'. Moreover, asking for the main activity during a particular period of time may result in different findings than counting all forms of time use. Table 10.1 includes participation figures in voluntary work of the Dutch adult population for the first decade of the 21st century from different statistical sources.

The CBS (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* – Statistics Netherlands) figures from the statistics on living conditions in the Netherlands are closest to those frequently reported in Eurobarometer. We cannot explain why the figures from the Labour Force Survey are so much lower than those from the other studies. Even though the levels of participation in voluntary work differ between the various statistical sources over time, all sources show a rather stable picture.



**Table 10.1: Participation of the Dutch population in volunteer activities (%)**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>Different studies</b>									
<i>GIN (Giving in the Netherlands)</i>									
Percentage of the 16+ population that has participated in voluntary work for civil organisations during the last year		46		41		42		45	
<i>SCP (2005) (Time Use Studies)</i>									
Percentage of the 16+ population that has participated in voluntary work for civil organisations during the last year				30	32				
<i>CBS (Statistics Netherlands, Living conditions in the Netherlands)</i>									
Percentage of the inhabitants of the Netherlands of 18+ years that has participated in organised volunteer work	43	42	42	43			44	42	
<i>CBS (Statistics Netherlands, Labour Force Survey)</i>									
Percentage of the inhabitants of the Netherlands of 18+ years who participate in voluntary work and indicate that they do this within an organisation	18	19	20	21	21	22	21	21	22

### Voluntary organisations

In the Netherlands there is no registration of voluntary organisations, and their number is not known and recorded (see p 219). Voluntary organisations – just like other private firms, NGOs or publicly financed organisations – can have different legal statuses, varying from foundations or cooperations to different forms of corporation. So, from the legal form (and that is the only way organisations are registered in the Netherlands), one cannot tell whether and to what extent an organisation works with volunteers, and for this reason it is also difficult to get a clear picture of employees working in these kinds of organisation. As already mentioned, most organisations that work with voluntary workers can be characterised as mixed organisations: they employ both paid professional workers and unpaid voluntary workers. Of course, there are differences with respect to the role of voluntary workers. For instance, in a hospital or in a school paid professional workers do the majority of tasks. Voluntary workers have additional tasks, which usually do not involve the core business of the organisation. Yet voluntary workers are often characterised as the cement of organisations: without them filling the gaps between

the bricks of the organisation, the quality of the organisation's performance would be far worse. In other organisations, such as a brass band or an association that organises the annual celebration of a carnival or the queen's birthday, the emphasis is on voluntary workers. Sometimes these associations work without or with only one or two professionals. However, the law does not make a distinction between organisations – be it associations, foundations, corporations – based on the question as to whether they do or do not employ voluntary workers only. As an association of voluntary workers they still have to sign a memorandum of association with a notary and register with the local Chamber of Commerce before they can act legally.

A good impression of the wide variety of organisations working with voluntary workers can be found at <http://vrijwilligerswerk.startpagina.nl> (voluntary work start page). This serves as a kind of meeting point for organisations in search of voluntary workers and voluntary workers looking for interesting voluntary 'jobs', and shows that voluntary organisations can be found throughout the country. Most organisations that post their job openings on this website belong to the welfare and care field. One should realise, however, that sports clubs, schools, political parties, religious organisations or unions can recruit voluntary workers from their own members, parents and so on, and may not need this web page.

Most voluntary organisations can be found in cities and larger villages, depending, of course, on the composition of the population. People with children tend to live more often in the highly urbanised western part of the Netherlands. So voluntary organisations related to education and sports are more often found there. The same holds for cultural voluntary organisations, often depending on higher educated volunteers. Logically, an organisation such as the traditional Federation of Rural Women, which originated from farmers' wives who wanted to exchange recipes and knitting patterns, but who also wanted to escape once in a while from the daily worries of their work, has more branches in the rural areas of the Netherlands.

### *Volunteers by sector, gender and age*

Based on the Labour Force Survey by Statistics Netherlands, Table 10.2 summarises how many men and women of various age categories were active in voluntary work in different sectors in 2009. The table also includes the average number of hours participants spent per week on their voluntary work.

**Table 10.2: Participants in voluntary work (n, x1,000) and their number of hours (H) spent per week on volunteering in different sectors, by gender and age, 2009**

	Total		School, youth work, scouting		Care and nursing		Sports, hobby, culture		Church, philosophy, religion		Union, political parties, action and lobby groups		Share of volunteers (%) <sup>a</sup>	
	n	H	n	H	n	H	n	H	n	H	n	H	n	H
Men														
Total	1,368	5.5	185	4.1	125	5.5	641	4.8	255	4.5	63	5.7	257	5.8
18-25	104	5.1	25	5.5	.	.	56	4.1	10	3.7	.	.	13	7.2
25-35	152	4.4	30	3.6	6	6.3	75	3.9	23	4.4	5	5.6	24	4.6
35-45	253	4.0	46	2.6	11	5.0	127	3.8	35	3.9	7	3.9	45	4.0
45-55	298	4.7		3.5	21	5.1	162	4.3	46	3.5	13	4.5	44	5.2
55-65	291	6.8	26	5.3	37	6.1	133	6.2	56	5.1	19	4.8	64	6.2
65-75	193	7.7	15	7.1	32	4.8	69	7.1	60	5.6	11	7.2	43	7.3
75+	76	6.4	-	-	14	6.6	17	5.4	24	4.0	5	10.0	23	6.5
Women														
Total	1,470	4.3	344	3.0	307	4.1	370	3.7	329	3.6	41	3.6	292	4.3
18-25	91	3.8	22	3.9	10	5.0	38	2.8	14	3.2	-	-	12	4.1
25-35	164	3.1	49	2.9	16	2.4	45	3.1	30	2.6	-	-	34	2.8
35-45	343	3.0	167	2.2	34	2.5	82	2.9	59	2.6	6	2.4	56	3.0
45-55	311	4.2	67	3.2	58	4.2	96	3.8	71	3.3	10	3.7	53	4.1
55-65	290	5.6	27	5.7	94	4.5	67	5.0	70	4.8	9	4.2	66	5.1
65-75	186	5.3	7	3.8	67	4.4	32	4.2	56	3.5	5	5.3	53	5.7
75+	85	5.4	6	4.0	28	4.7	10	4.9	29	5.1	-	-	18	5.5

Note: <sup>a</sup> Percentages refer to the whole surveyed population of the same age.

Source: www.statline.nl

The table shows that the sports, hobby and culture sector is by far the largest when it comes to the number of voluntary workers, with over one million participants. The school, youth work and scouting sector, the church, philosophy, religion sector and that of other organisations are equally large, with between 500,000 and 600,000 voluntary workers. The care and nursing sector counts about 430,000 voluntary workers, while the union, political parties and action and lobby groups sector is the smallest, with just over 100,000 voluntary workers.

As with paid work in the labour market, voluntary work shows a high degree of gender segregation. Voluntary work at school is much more women's domain, in particular women aged between 35 and 55, than that of men. The same holds, even more so, for care and nursing, but here the focus is more on older women. To a large extent the sports, hobby and culture sector is a male domain. Within this broad sector there is segregation again between sport where men are overrepresented, and culture, which is much more a female domain.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, participation in voluntary work follows the average life course pattern of individuals. At younger ages they are busy with school or working on their career, so there is relatively little time for voluntary work. Among the younger generations the sports sector appears to be the most favoured one. After people have started a family, many women engage in voluntary work at school, while men make themselves available for various leisure activities, such as for the sports, hobby or culture sector. When the children grow older, women in particular become active in organised voluntary work in care, health or nursing and in organisations that are active in the field of religion and philosophy. One reason may be that their own parents or other relatives become infirm or ill, or the loss of older relatives may confront them with questions related to the purpose and meaning of life. In particular, these categories of voluntary work are most important for women. The figures on voluntary work in unions and political organisations confirm the picture that these organisations are still the strongholds of older males.

Next to the numbers of voluntary workers we have also included the average number of hours voluntary workers spend per week on their voluntary activities. Here one sees that men and especially women in the 'rush hour of life' have only limited time available for voluntary work. After the life stage where career and children compete for the scarce hours, there is more room for voluntary work, in particular among retired men. As most women never retire from

their household duties, reaching the higher age brackets does not offer them as much additional time to spend on voluntary work as it does men. In particular, men's involvement in voluntary work for a union or some political organisation requires a lot of time.

In addition to the figures presented in Table 10.2, Table 10.3 includes figures on participation in voluntary work among the population by educational level, main activity, household type and degree of urbanisation.

The figures from Table 10.3 show that higher educated individuals and those working in management and white-collar jobs are more active in voluntary work than low educated individuals and people in blue-collar jobs. Unemployed and early retired workers have more time available for voluntary work, while those who are disabled may lack the capacity and energy to participate in voluntary work. Among households and families, traditional families are the main suppliers of voluntary work. This should not come as a surprise as we saw earlier that many women/mothers are doing voluntary work at school (in many cases probably the school their children attend). Single parents do not often have any time left to participate in voluntary work, as they are responsible for making a living and all the care and household tasks on their own. Furthermore, the table shows that participation in voluntary work is indeed related to the degree of urbanisation. In the country people engage more in voluntary work than in the cities and suburbs of the Netherlands.

After presenting in some detail the picture on voluntary work for the Netherlands for 2009, we would like to shed some light on developments over time. Figure 10.1 shows the development of the number of people participating in voluntary work for the period 2001–09, by age category. The upper panel shows the development for men, while the lower panel shows the development for women.

While the younger age categories show a relatively stable pattern, both men and women show a steady increase in the number of voluntary workers in the age categories 55–65 and 75+. Over the whole period the number of voluntary workers aged 65–75 also increased, but the increase is less spectacular and came to a halt for men after 2006.

If – despite all variety – one wants to characterise the prototypical volunteer in the Netherlands, one would probably see a higher educated mother with a part-time job, in her late thirties or early forties, husband present, living in a village somewhere in the country, doing voluntary work at her children's school. Maybe she is a 'reading mom' for three hours a week, who helps the young children learning

**Table 10.3: Share of the Dutch population, 15-65 years old, participating in voluntary work, by education, main activity, family type and degree of urbanisation, 2009 (%)**

Characteristic	%
<i>Educational level</i>	
Primary education	23
Basic vocational training	36
Basic secondary education	43
Higher secondary education or intermediate vocational training	45
Higher education (higher vocational training and university)	54
<i>Main activity</i>	
Management job	51
Other white-collar job	42
Self-employed	36
Skilled blue-collar job	34
Unskilled blue-collar job	34
Unemployed	47
Disabled	31
Early retired or in pre-pension scheme	51
<i>Household type</i>	
Single-person household	36
Single-parent family	31
Couple without children	39
Couple with children	50
<i>Degree of urbanisation</i>	
Very high	37
High	37
Moderate	44
Low	47
Very low	48

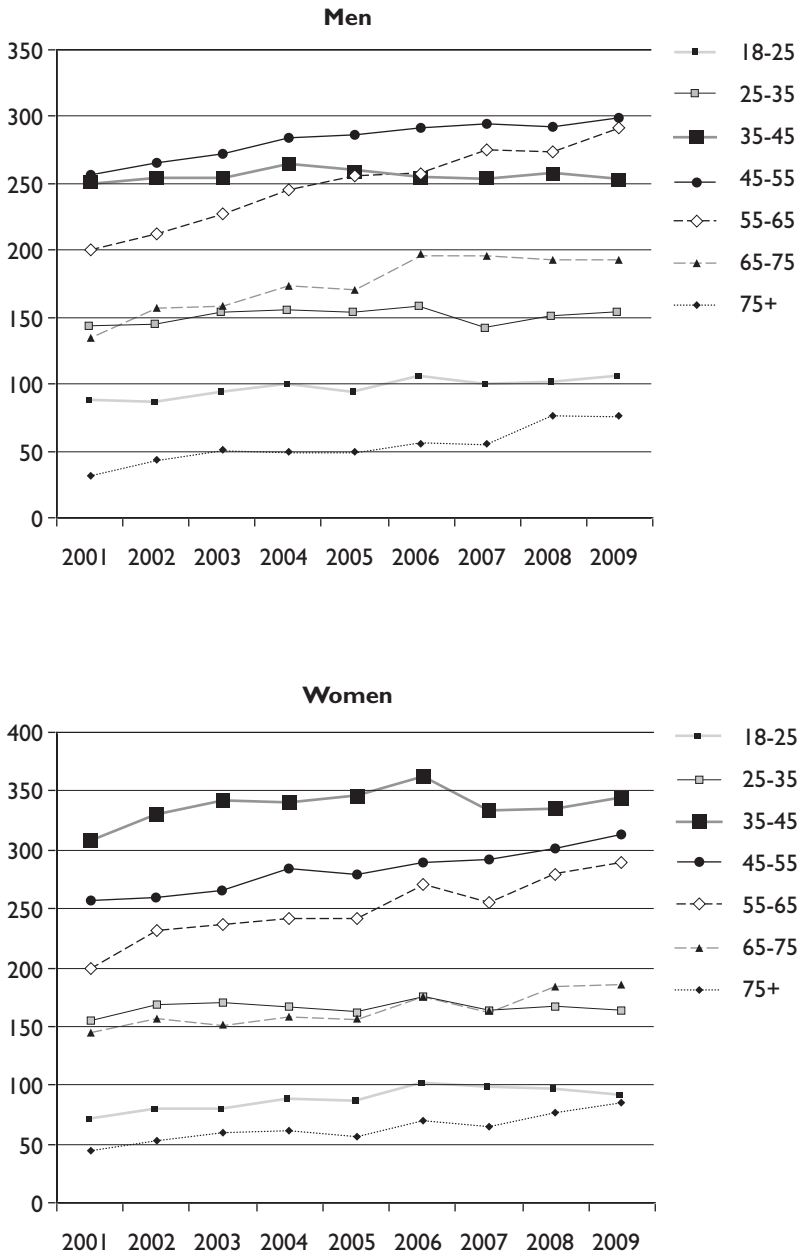
Source: [www.statline.nl](http://www.statline.nl)

to read, or maybe she looks after the schoolchildren who cannot go home during the lunch break, on the one or two days she does not work herself.

### *Participation of older volunteers*

The prototypical *older* volunteer is probably a man in his early sixties, most likely recently retired from a white-collar job, with two grown-up children and a wife who does most of the housekeeping. He is active in an organisation in the field of sports or leisure, maybe the

**Figure 10.1: The development of the number of people participating in voluntary work in the Netherlands, by gender and age, 2001-09 (×1,000)**



Source: www.statline.nl

tennis club or the association that organises the annual fair on the square in the middle of the village. On average he spends almost a day a week on voluntary work. Older women in particular are engaged in care, nursing activities and religious organisations.

This image of an older volunteer in the Netherlands is no coincidence. On the one hand, it reflects developments on the supply side of 'the market for volunteers'. Around the turn of the century the first of the large post-war baby-boom cohorts reached the age of 55. Many members of these cohorts retired at some point during the first decade of the new century. So they are a group with plenty of time on their hands for voluntary work. When they entered the labour market in their late teens or early twenties, many of them got a job in an office. Many dirty and heavy jobs in manufacturing in the Netherlands were taken over by machines, while employment increased in trade, banking, commercial services and the public sector, including education. So many of them did not suffer from bad working conditions and are still in good health. Moreover, they have reasonable pensions that allow them a lifestyle where they do not have to count every cost. And because this age group is healthy and still has a substantial life expectancy, that is increasingly higher for every vintage that reaches the age of 65 (Bruggink, 2009), they find it worthwhile investing in new contacts, maybe developing new skills and looking for new goals in life after a labour market career of 30–40 years.

On the other hand, as already pointed at in the introduction to this chapter, many organisations in sectors such as sports, culture, care and religion are in need of extra hands. Budget cuts mean they have had to reduce the share of professional workers to a minimum, but a lot of tasks still need to be done. So experienced retirees with various skills and a lot of time available come in handy. Altogether, the demand for high skilled voluntary workers has increased, and voluntary workers are no longer just the 'hands' who put out the chairs ready for the local choir's concert, selling tickets at the entrance and serving coffee and tea during a break.

Older volunteers – men and women – may have been active in voluntary work during earlier stages of their life. Retirement might be a natural moment for reorientation on the kind of voluntary work that best suits their stage of the life course. For many people reaching the official retirement age of 65, after which they receive their first pension benefits, brings a moment of reflection. And if it is not reaching the age of 65 that provokes some reflection it might be the birth of a first grandchild or the loss of one's last parent. So it should



not come as a surprise that for older volunteers' activities that have to do with care, nursing, religion, history or philosophical issues become relatively important. And other older volunteers continue their activities for their football club or the music hall they joined when they were still teenagers. The general picture shows that volunteers are primarily involved with volunteer work that fits the stage of their life course.

Over the years older volunteers, in particular those beyond official retirement age, seem to enjoy their voluntary work more than younger volunteers. Moreover, the overall share of volunteers who agree with the statement that they 'always' enjoy their voluntary work has risen over the years (see Table 10.4).

Looking from an organisational perspective one cannot say that (even some) organisations are specifically targeting older volunteers. Depending on the nature of the voluntary work, of course, some organisations attract more older volunteers, while others attract more younger volunteers, as already seen in Table 10.2. As a matter of fact, targeting any specific age category would be a violation of the Dutch law against age discrimination. This law not only refers to paid labour, but also to voluntary work. However, when it comes to actual recruitment, many organisations working with volunteers show a bias in favour of older volunteers. This bias can primarily be explained from limitations on the supply side. Many voluntary workers find their way to organisations through 'hear say'. They meet someone at a birthday party, in the pub or at some festival or meeting of the organisation, show an interest in the organisation's activities and are asked to join. In practice, this often implies that an organisation with older voluntary workers will attract older voluntary workers (this may

**Table 10.4: Share of volunteers who always enjoys their voluntary work (%)**

Age	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2007	2008
18-25	62	58	59	61	65	56	67	68
25-35	59	59	57	63	55	59	63	66
35-45	56	56	59	61	56	63	70	70
45-55	59	59	62	57	58	56	67	71
55-65	67	63	61	69	65	67	73	71
65-75	72	67	64	64	79	71	71	81
75+	63	na	76	69	79	80	77	75
Total	61	60	60	62	61	62	69	71

Note: na = not available.

Source: [www.statline.nl](http://www.statline.nl)

apply, for example, to organisations operating in the care and nursing, church, philosophy and religion sectors), while an organisation with younger volunteers will probably recruit younger voluntary workers. In addition, there is the process of self-selection: some voluntary workers may prefer an organisation where they can cooperate with people from their own age.

### **Older people's participation in voluntary organisations: opportunities and restrictions**

When we look at the factors that have determined opportunities for participation of older people in voluntary work over the past decades, several developments come into mind: the – for the Netherlands – historically low, but increasing participation of older people in paid work and the emancipation of women making their way into the labour market. But another development that calls for attention is the changing nature of much of the voluntary work itself. At the individual level one may point to the fact that everyone in society, including older people, seem to be ever more busy. Another development is the changing family network: fewer siblings and parents who live longer. In this section we discuss these opportunities and restrictions in some more detail.

#### *Opportunities and restrictions for volunteering for older people*

Looking from the individual perspective, older people's better health could contribute to their opportunities to engage longer and until higher ages in voluntary work. That same better health, however, is also brought forward by the government as an argument to raise the official retirement age, thereby possibly restricting again older people's opportunities to engage in voluntary work. Older people who are in good shape are also inclined to spend more time travelling and on sport. Many retirees enjoy travelling, may buy a boat or a house in the country. Some enjoy their work so much that they take up another job or engage in self-employment. This again also limits their time available for voluntary work. As increasing life expectancy not only offers additional healthy years, it would be a mistake to think that older people's opportunities to engage in voluntary work will increase just as fast as life expectancy. Given the smaller number of siblings of successive generations on the one hand, there are fewer relatives to care for than in the past. As such this would increase the opportunities for participating in voluntary work. On the other hand, if a relative is

in need of care and support, the circle of potential carers is smaller, and this may limit opportunities for participation in voluntary work. In any case, since altruistic motivations seem to have a considerable role in driving Dutch older volunteers (Principi et al, 2012), the care sector may potentially also offer volunteer opportunities to older people, and women in particular. For each individual, the balance may be different.

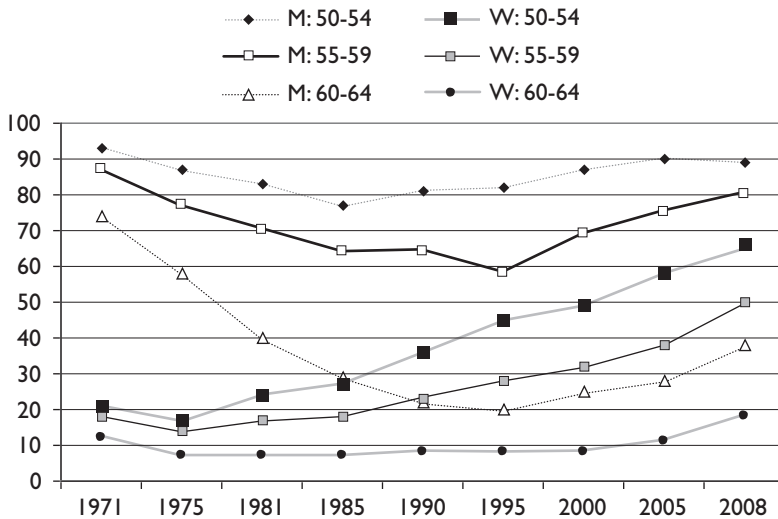
At the organisational level coordinators of voluntary work report that, just as in the domain of paid labour, the work has been changing, especially during the last decade. Three major developments call for attention. The first is the emergence of ICT (information and communications technology). If someone works in the library as a volunteer (s)he will have to adapt to the fact that the books are no longer registered on small cards in a card tray, but can only be found when accessing the library computer. If, as an older person, you have not had the opportunity to learn how to use a computer as part of your daily work routine, it might be a barrier if a volunteer job requires computer skills. A second change in the nature of voluntary work is the high level of professional requirements also requested in voluntary organisations. In branches of industry such as institutional care, childcare, culture (think again of the library, museums) and recreation work, standards have increased tremendously. Many professional jobs require some kind of education and a certificate to prove that you have the right skills. As the director of SCP (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research), one of the major policy advisers of the Dutch government, puts it: 'Quite some demands are requested from volunteers: to become a treasurer of a bigger voluntary organisation you almost need a professional financial background'.<sup>1</sup> Related to this professionalisation is the third development, the emancipation of 'clients'. Many clients, patients or visitors of the volunteer organisations are well educated busy professionals. They have learned to stand up for themselves and they have got used to professional service levels in all corners of society. In the Netherlands in particular this 'empowerment of the client' has developed so much that people are likely to complain – and often loudly. It requires the professionals' utmost to prevent a client losing his or her head. That is why nowadays bus drivers, desk clerks, doorkeepers and a whole range of other workers have to have training in 'how to deal with difficult clients'. In such a world not every volunteer worker may find it easy to join the volunteer organisation. Fortunately, even in the Netherlands this is more the exception to the rule, but it is a tendency that makes it increasingly less likely that people, and especially older people, will join in voluntary work.

As already mentioned, the increase in the official retirement age in the Netherlands (to 67 years by the end of this decade) will potentially limit the availability of (full-time) volunteers. Reduction of pension income may work in the same direction, as a growing share of people beyond official retirement age may want to earn additional money in the paid labour market. We have also already mentioned the growing individualisation and abolishment of breadwinner wages (and breadwinner social security benefits), which compels younger generations of women to earn their own living. This may also limit opportunities for voluntary work. Limited growth of the economy and continuous budget cuts will result in growing unemployment during the rest of the current decade, offering more people time to engage in voluntary work. It will depend on the regulations regarding unemployment benefits and welfare to what extent (long-term) unemployed people will actually be allowed to participate in voluntary work. In the Netherlands there are no volunteer programmes run by the government, or other measures to support volunteer work.

### *Older people between employment and volunteering*

In the Netherlands, during the period 1970–95 the average age at which workers actually retired fell from almost 65 (the mandatory retirement age) to below the age of 60, with some sectors of industry or occupations offering the opportunity to retire at 55, and participation rates of 50+ workers sinking to as low as 20 per cent for men between 60 and 65. The rather low participation rates paired with a not so high work orientation in the Netherlands, since only 48.6 per cent of people aged 50–65 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money’ (ISSP, 1997). As Figure 10.2 shows, this tendency has reversed since the mid-1990s.

Despite this increase in the participation of older people in paid work, this has not resulted in a decrease in participation in voluntary work (as already seen in Figure 10.1). However, even though between 2001 and 2009 the share of older men and older women between 55 and 65 participating in voluntary work went up from 24 to 27 per cent (so there is no gender difference), the average number of hours spent on voluntary work slightly declined: from 7.4 hours a week to 6.8 hours a week for men and from 6.2 hours a week to 5.6 hours a week for women. So it looks as if increasing participation in paid work does not affect the share of older people active in voluntary work, but is itself reflected in the number of hours they have available. Here it

**Figure 10.2: Participation rates in paid work of older workers, by gender, 1971-2008 (%)**

Source: Authors' own calculations based on information from Statistics Netherlands (different years)

should be noted that many women and older men work in part-time jobs, which also allows them to spend some time on voluntary work.

Volunteering in older age may be driven by corporate efforts to promote it among employees, yet in the Netherlands a very limited number of private firms offer their employees (of all ages) the opportunity to work as a volunteer some days a year.

### *Older people between family care and volunteering*

While longevity has been increasing, many people in their fifties or sixties still have to care for an older generation of people in their eighties or nineties. The reverse of smaller numbers of siblings is that you cannot share the care with a large number of kin. Yet the presence of an extensive network of formal, public (health) care – even though it has been eroding as a result of budgetary cuts – means that the increasing numbers of 80+ people do not currently constitute a threat to older people's voluntary work, but possible future developments in this respect should be monitored. In the Netherlands formal long-term care services are largely available to people aged 65+, as recent data show that 21.1 per cent of them receive home care while 6.5 per cent are in residential care (Huber et al, 2009). This makes the

Netherlands one of the European countries with the highest provision of long-term care services for older people. This is in line with elder care values, since 81 per cent of the Dutch population thinks that the best option for an older parent living alone and in need of regular help is that service providers should visit their home and provide them with appropriate care (Eurobarometer, 2007).

Another dimension of the lower number of siblings that might be especially relevant for future generations of older voluntary workers is the increasing importance of fellow volunteers as network members. If you do not have any siblings or only siblings living far away, participating in voluntary work may become more relevant as an opportunity to build a new network in old age.

Furthermore, with the emergence of the working mother in the Netherlands there has been a growing demand for childcare. An increasing share of parents bring their young children to a professional childcare centre, but often for only two or three days a week. During the other days they care for their young children themselves or they ask their parents (in law) to step in. Many grandparents enjoy this 'golden occasion'; for many grandfathers it is an opportunity to make up for their absence, in the literal or figurative sense, while their own young children needed care. The large increase in public childcare facilities over the last decade has mitigated the demand for grandparents' childcare. Consequently, even this grandparental task has not been a serious threat to older people's participation in voluntary work. Moreover, the number of grandchildren per grandparent is still declining.

### **Improving the match between supply of older candidates with the demand of voluntary organisations: future scenarios**

There are two major threats to the match between the supply of older voluntary workers and the demand from organisations wanting to hire volunteers. The first threat, relevant for voluntary organisations, lies at the supply side, that is, with older people who will make a decision on whether or not to engage in voluntary work, what kind of voluntary work and for how many hours. As already mentioned (see p 233), as older people become more healthy and wealthy, their scope of opportunities increases. So organisations that want to attract or hold on to voluntary staff have to compete with an increasing range of alternative forms of time use by older people. A growing share of retirees has had interesting and challenging jobs. So many

of them are also likely to prefer interesting and challenging work as volunteers. Unfortunately, not all voluntary work falls into this category. Sometimes it is repetitive or involves simple tasks such as clearing out a dishwasher and making coffee. To attract older volunteers, organisations should emphasise that volunteering may increase their social contacts. Indeed, one major point of attraction of participation in voluntary work, especially as people get older (75+ and beyond), is the social network function already mentioned, and the idea of contributing something to society. One may speculate that demographic developments (fewer siblings, a higher divorce rate) may give rise to more older people feeling lonely and 'useless'. Voluntary organisations might be one of the answers to this development. And indeed they might capitalise on the role they could play in older people's life and invest in this role. In the meantime, the voluntary work still has to be done. Earlier we mentioned the pressure many volunteer organisations are under these days to perform at an almost professional level.

The second threat is the austerity of the Dutch welfare state. This threat will manifest itself in several ways:

- In 2012 Parliament agreed to increase the official retirement age stepwise to 67 by 2023, and older workers will be pushed to continue working until the official retirement age. In addition, women will be encouraged to work more hours, that is, to extend their small part-time job into a larger one. This will leave older people with less time to spend on voluntary work. And even if the share of voluntary workers may not decline (see p 235), increased participation in paid work may have a negative impact on the number of voluntary hours.
- Budgetary cuts in health, social support and childcare may prompt people (often family members) to take up more tasks in these fields themselves.
- A further reduction in the budgets of volunteer organisations will increase demand for volunteers, and in particular, for experienced retired professionals. It may also reduce organisations' possibilities of coaching and counselling (new) volunteers. This may be particularly discouraging for lower educated volunteers.

So there seem to be a need that at the institutional level, there should be more attention on the consequences of what has just been said above on volunteering in general and the volunteering of older people

in particular, in this current era which is characterised by a European call for active ageing.

Of course one can only speculate about the extent of the effects of the general tendencies just mentioned, because there are still a large number of uncertainties: how will paid employment develop? Will additional budgetary cut-backs be necessary? How will older people and organisations adapt to changing conditions?

Governments *should* be sensitive to the role voluntary organisations could play, not only for the supply of (additional) services in care, health, culture, sports or education, but also for the well-being of older voluntary workers who participate in these organisations. However, with the cold wind of budget cuts blowing all over Europe, and the Netherlands in particular, it is not so clear if in the near future there will be renewed room for additional investments in professionals coaching older voluntary workers, or for fiscal facilities reimbursing the costs of older people in participating in voluntary work.

## **Conclusions**

The Netherlands is a country with traditionally high rates of participation in voluntary work. Major changes in its welfare state regime over the last two decades has shown that the supply of voluntary work is relatively 'inelastic' (as economists like to call it); it is not strong in responding to policy changes. As a matter of fact, the number of older volunteers has been, and is still, increasing. This may reflect the increasing longevity and better health situation of the 50+ population. The typical Dutch older volunteer is a man in his early sixties, well educated, active in an organisation in the field of sports or leisure, or a woman engaged in care, nursing activities or a religious organisation.

Yet new challenges are arising. Increasing time pressure (from work, family obligations or other leisure activities) appears to have resulted in a small decline in the number of hours older people have available to participate in voluntary work. Higher demands with respect to the quality of voluntary work, less capacity for coaching (new) volunteers and competing claims on older people from various domains of life constitute a puzzle for the future of voluntary organisations, for which there is no easy solution. It will require their utmost creativity to match organisational demands and the needs and preferences of older people to entice them into engaging in voluntary work. Just as in paid employment, it looks as if there is a particular need for tailor-made solutions. And just as in the paid labour market, organisations and their



managers have a major responsibility to integrate the talents of older people. Despite the higher retirement age and the growing necessity for older people to take care of their relatives, older volunteers will be available (after retirement, when they have no one to take care of or because their care tasks are relatively small), but the challenge lies with organisations, and not primarily with the government, since this does not seem to be ‘a priority’ for government, to integrate them in a proper way that satisfies both the increasingly complex organisational needs and older volunteers’ preferences to be active, to contribute something to society and to be part of a network of a congenial group.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> As quoted during the 2010 ASPA (Activating Senior Potential in Ageing Europe) national focus group meeting, ‘Opportunities for older people in the civil society’.

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