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# SYMPOSIUM

## lost in the mainstream? gender in dutch political science education

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### **Abstract**

What have been the losses and the gains of the shift from women's studies to gender studies for political science in The Netherlands? What are present-day opportunities and how should we move forward? Our systematic analysis of the Bachelor programmes offered by four Dutch political science departments shows that gender is not a central feature in the current curricula. Gender in political science has become dependent on personal interests and engagements at the individual level rather than being sustained by structural commitments at the departmental level. This article argues that a gender perspective should be part of the analytical toolkit of anyone trained as a political scientist. Students should be made aware that gender is a fundamental aspect of the organisation of power and therefore unambiguously *political*. Gender awareness impacts upon both students' academic development and Dutch politics given that many graduates take up jobs in or close to the political environment. With this in mind, being equipped with a 'gender lens' will enable students to identify and explain gender inequalities and more importantly stimulate them to develop innovative strategies to close the gaps.

**Keywords** political science; teaching and learning; gender; feminism; women's studies; The Netherlands

Political science is fundamentally concerned with the exercise of power. Gender and politics proposes an analytical perspective on how power is distributed and negotiated between and within genders in politics and society. Within the political science discipline, basically every topic in current theoretical, empirical and methodological research is addressed through a gendered lens (ECPG-convenors, 2014). On the one hand, scholarship 'genders' existing political science concepts, such as representation, democracy and governance, which means that gender is introduced to an existing concept and integrated in the analysis (Goertz and Mazur, 2008). On the other hand, gender and politics introduced new gender specific concepts, such as feminism and intersectionality in political science (for an overview see Mügge, 2013; Mügge and De Jong, 2013). Gender is a tool to reveal and explain how and why political inclusion and exclusion are fundamentally gendered. This makes gender a valuable, critical partner to political science. Drawing on the Dutch case, this contribution argues that a gender perspective should be part of the analytical toolkit of anyone trained as a political scientist.

As elsewhere in both Europe and the United States, the teaching and researching of gender in The Netherlands is rooted in Women's Studies (cf. Beckwith, 2005; Mügge *et al*, 2016; Sauer, 2016). Whereas women and women's bodies were central to the analysis of Women's Studies, gender and politics is broader and more inclusive (cf. Mazur and Appleton, 1997). Owing to its political, but unmistakably interdisciplinary, character, Women's Studies has been based in political science departments, but not in the discipline. We study how gender has been represented in the curricula since Women's Studies dissolved in the 1990s. Our analysis makes clear that gender as a key concept is not well integrated in Dutch political science education. The upshot of

this is that attention to gender in the curricula is uneven and depends on goodwill and personal initiatives. While specific gender and politics courses are offered in some political science departments, hardly any attention is paid to gender in the basic training students receive. The explanation for this shift is twofold. First, political and thus financial support for Women's Studies decreased. Second, the availability of full professors with a strong gender and politics research profile, and herewith the institutional power to firmly position gender in political science education, is low.

We argue that curricula have much to win by integrating gender and politics into the core programme. It would make programmes more in sync with cutting-edge contemporary research. An additional expected side-effect is that a gender lens contributes to more gender equality in politics and society (Matthes, 2013). Before we take stock of the current position of gender in political science curricula, we discuss the legacy of Women's Studies and feminism. Next, we present the numbers of full professors who have or had a gender component in their research profile. Finally, we argue that integrating gender and politics in Dutch political science education requires collective action of engaged scholars.

## LEGACY: FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

The emergence of the social-scientific study of women in the 1970s in The Netherlands and its evolution is deeply intertwined with the development of feminism. Women's Studies became an established feature in the social sciences and the humanities. In its early years Women's Studies was highly interdisciplinary, catering to feminist awareness among students. On the principle that 'the personal is political', women's studies was closely related to the grassroots and had

a clear activist agenda (cf. M'charek *et al*, 2005; Messer-Davidow, 2002; Van Soest, 1975). It critically addressed and challenged structural inequalities between men and women in the private and public spheres (Akkerman *et al*, 1986; Meulenbelt, 1979; Outshoorn and Van Soest, 1977). Despite different disciplinary approaches and foci, ranging from historical power relations to the struggle to legalise abortion or household responsibilities, scholars found common ground in being engaged in a political project. They tried to understand the underlying mechanisms of inequality and offered suggestions for change, often in the form of collective protest.

Over the years the involvement of Women's Studies in public and political activism decreased. Feminism professionalised, and some activist scholars were integrated in state-funded advisory boards to advise their governments. Others found their place in bureaucracies and continued their pleas for justice as 'femocrats'. Feminists gradually navigated more formal routes to make their voices heard. Parallel to this development, Women's Studies gained a position within the academy and transformed into the study of gender in the late 1990s.

In the mid-1970s feminist students lobbied for Women's Studies programmes in The Netherlands. In 1976 the University of Amsterdam, University of Groningen and the Catholic University of Nijmegen<sup>1</sup> created temporary faculty positions to set up women's groups across the social sciences and humanities or to initiate women's studies courses. Political science departments, particularly at the University of Amsterdam and Catholic University of Nijmegen, were among the pioneers in this emerging field. The interdisciplinary Women's Studies Network became one of the driving forces behind the lobby for the recognition and institutionalisation of Women's Studies (e.g., the launch of the *Dutch journal for Women's Studies*).<sup>2</sup>

Early initiatives were closely monitored by the Dutch Ministry of Education. In 1979, the Ministry created the Provisional Committee Emancipation Research (VBEO, 1981) to 'stimulate, coordinate, programme and evaluate scientific research in relation to the emancipation process'. Although many Women's Studies scholars feared co-optation of their research agendas – and therefore resisted the label 'emancipation research' – the VBEO provided the funding to build women's studies programmes and strengthen their research. Owing to the financial means provided by the Ministry, almost all Dutch universities appointed lecturers and professors in Women's Studies in the early 1980s.

Within Dutch academia two types of organisational models developed that determined the integration and institutional anchoring of gender in political science curricula and departments. In the first model – adopted by the University of Amsterdam, VU Amsterdam University and Leiden University – separate interdisciplinary Women's Studies working groups emerged, including political science. These groups transformed into departments within the Faculty of Social Sciences of the respective universities. Women's Studies became a separate academic field with an explicit interdisciplinary focus in research and teaching (cf. Pande, 2014). At the same time, feminist lecturers within political science departments plead for the mainstreaming of women's studies in the political science education.

The second model – developed at Radboud University – promoted autonomy and integration. Women's Studies lecturers were appointed by different departments that were linked to an overarching Institute for Women's Studies. The Institute employed a small staff to initiate and coordinate joint research and education. Consequently, faculty members with gender expertise were embedded in each department. They offered gender courses

within their respective disciplines, while participating in interdisciplinary activities of the institute.

State funding has been crucial for the development and institutionalisation of Women's Studies in The Netherlands. The central government subsidised university positions, research, networks, seminars and conferences. Government support, however, had its drawbacks. In the mid-1990s Women's Studies programmes and departments dealt with various financial cutbacks and reorganisations resulting in the dismantling of Women's Studies programmes and departments in several universities.<sup>1</sup> The institutional anchoring of what became Gender Studies proved to be weak, with few formal arrangements to guarantee the continuation of programmes and courses. With the introduction of the term Gender Studies in the late 1990s, feminist scholars hoped to turn the negative tide for Women's Studies in The Netherlands. Many considered the renaming a positive development, both theoretically and strategically. It was seen as a logic consequence of the introduction of gender as central analytic concept that had broadened.

The more neutral concept of gender had the potential to facilitate and attract men into gender studies. Yet, Outshoorn (1998) professor of Women's Studies in the Department of Political Science at Leiden University – claimed that the potential pitfalls should not be neglected. Following Richardson and Robinson (1994), she argued that the less might negatively affect the feminist research agenda as well as the struggle for more 'space' for women in male-dominated curricula and institutions. Over the last two decades, gender in political science departments grew dependent on personal interests and engagements of individual scholars rather than being sustained by structural departmental commitments. This is reflected in gender courses being taught by faculty on temporary teaching contracts and with next to no

## *'State funding has been crucial for the development and institutionalisation of Women's Studies in The Netherlands'.*

institutional power. Women's Studies has never been well anchored in political science departments, and as the next section will show, gender and politics, unsurprisingly, did not become an integral part of political science curricula.

### **GENDER IN DUTCH POLITICAL SCIENCE CURRICULA**

The Netherlands counts fourteen universities that are affiliated with the Association of Universities in The Netherlands (VSNU, 2015). Up to the academic year 2011–2012 the Women's Studies Network (NVG) provided the annual Course Catalogue Women's Studies/Gender Studies that documented Women's Studies and Gender Studies instruction at Dutch universities. Albeit not fully complete – because to non-response of institutions<sup>3</sup> – this catalogue shows that a total number of 270 Women's Studies and Gender Studies courses were offered in Bachelor and Master programmes at eleven universities. The supply of courses is predominantly strong in the humanities and social sciences and available in smaller numbers in law and life sciences in 2011–2012 (see Table 1).

Four Dutch universities offer Bachelor and Master programmes in political science: Radboud University Nijmegen, Leiden University, the University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam. To assess the impact of the weak institutional support for gender in political science curricula, we made an inventory of courses on gender and intersectionality

that are offered by political science departments in 2014–2015. We have systematically analysed the Bachelor course catalogues of all compulsory and elective courses using the following keywords: ‘gender’, ‘woman/women’ and ‘intersectional/intersectionality’.<sup>4</sup> While a comprehensive assessment of the integration of gender in political science research would require further research including analysis of syllabi and interviews with staff, our analysis of course catalogues does allow us to evaluate the place of gender among the thematic priorities in the curriculum. This assessment reveals that the place of gender in political science education in The Netherlands is very modest indeed.

Nowhere in The Netherlands is gender mentioned as a core learning goal or theme in the compulsory part of the political science Bachelor programme. At the VU University Amsterdam, the track ‘International Politics’ – one of two tracks that students can follow in their second year – includes one compulsory course on ‘Social Inequalities in the Welfare State’. The course addresses the role

*‘Nowhere in The Netherlands is gender mentioned as a core learning goal or theme in the compulsory part of the political science Bachelor programme’.*

of educational systems in explaining persistent inequalities on the basis of social background, gender or ethnicity. However, students who opt for the other track ‘Politics and Policy’ never come across gender in their compulsory courses. Nowhere in The Netherlands are concepts and theories developed in gender and politics considered to be part of the foundational knowledge and skills that political scientists should be introduced to.

The number and variety of elective courses available to political science students interested in gender varies substantially between the four political science departments. The University of Amsterdam and the Radboud University Nijmegen,

**Table 1: Women’s studies/gender courses in B.A./M.A. programs in The Netherlands (2011–2012)**

University	Number of students enrolled on 1 October 2013	Number of women’s studies/gender courses B.A./M.A.
Utrecht University	30,152	62
Radboud University Nijmegen	18,469	53
University of Amsterdam	31,123	51
Leiden University	23,007	37
VU University Amsterdam	23,662	34
University of Groningen	27,169	11
University of Maastricht	14,894	10
Wageningen University	8,299	5
University of Tilburg	12,589	4
Delft University of Technology	19,135	2
Erasmus University Rotterdam	22,064	1

Source: [http://vsnu.nl/f\\_c\\_studentsen\\_downloads.html](http://vsnu.nl/f_c_studentsen_downloads.html), accessed 15 January 2015; and adapted from the course catalogue of the NGV [http://www.genootschapvrouwenstudies.nl/?page\\_id=783](http://www.genootschapvrouwenstudies.nl/?page_id=783), accessed on 15 December 2014.

which were at the vanguard of the establishment of Women's Studies in the 1970s, still offer the widest range of courses addressing gender and intersectionality. The University of Amsterdam in particular provides a relatively wide range of political science courses in which gender is either the core topic or one of the issues addressed. In contrast, at Leiden University and the VU University Amsterdam, gender is absent in the elective part of the Bachelor political science programme.

The University of Amsterdam houses the second largest political science Bachelor programme in The Netherlands, in terms of the number of students enrolled.<sup>5</sup> The third year of this Bachelor programme consists entirely of optional courses, including a minor of thirty European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) additional electives amounting to eighteen ECTS and a Bachelor project of twelve ECTS during which students write their bachelor thesis. The political science department coordinates a thirty ECTS minor on gender and sexuality, which consists of a twelve ECTS core course 'Introduction to Gender and Sexuality' that is taught jointly by a sociology and a political science lecturer. The remaining eighteen ECTS of the minor consist of electives. These electives are embedded in different disciplinary programmes and are open to, but not explicitly designed for the minor: political science (five), sociology (four), history (one) and the philosophy department (one).<sup>6</sup> Beyond courses in which gender is the central theme, there are three electives in the political science Bachelor of the University of Amsterdam in which gender and feminism are among the issues addressed, that is, 'International Political Economy', 'Interest groups and social movements' and the Bachelor project 'Critical security studies: pre-emption'.

The political science department of the Radboud University Nijmegen offers two electives on gender to its Bachelor students: 'Gender Theories and Equality

Policies' (ten ECTS), and 'Politics, Power and Gender' (six ECTS). Gender is not addressed in other political science electives. However, political science students at the Radboud University do have access to the interdisciplinary courses on gender and sexuality proposed by the Institute for Gender Studies, including 'Introducing Gender Theories' and 'Applying Gender Theories', 'Global Sex: The Travels of Desires, Identities, and Politics in a Globalising World' and 'Sexuality in Contemporary Media Culture: Pornification, Censorship, Innocent Pleasure?' Political science faculty regularly lecture in these interdisciplinary courses. In addition, other departments – including cultural sciences, history, anthropology, business administration and philosophy – also offer gender electives (see <http://www.studiegids.science.ru.nl/2014/socsci/prospectus/genderstudies/?mark>, accessed 23 January 2015).

At the VU University Amsterdam, neither the political science department nor other departments at the Faculty of Social Sciences provide electives that address gender or intersectionality. Of the almost forty minors accessible to political science students, only one, 'Frontiers of Multiculturalism', contains a course in which gender is mentioned, that is, 'Identity and Diversity in Organisations'.

Political science Bachelor students who are interested in gender are worst off in Leiden. The themes of gender and intersectionality are fully absent from both the compulsory and the elective parts of the political science Bachelor programme of Leiden University. However, political science students in Leiden do have access to the minor on 'Gender and Sexuality in Society and Culture' taught by the Humanities Faculty, which consists mostly of history and cultural science courses.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are no Master tracks in gender and politics in Dutch universities. However, that is not to say that there is a complete absence of

gender and politics teaching at the taught postgraduate level. Several universities offer M.A. programmes that focus on gender in the humanities and sociology.<sup>7</sup>

## THE POWER OF PROFESSORS

Full professors in Dutch academia head a group (*leerstoelgroep*) of associate and assistant professors, and Ph.D. students. The profile of the chairs largely determines the profile of faculty to be hired. This, in turn, influences the topics that are promoted in curricula and the supply of lecturers capable to staff the attendant courses. A popular explanation for the unstable position of gender and politics programmes is the lack of support by scholars in powerful positions. Most of these powerful positions in Dutch academia are held by men; only 15 percent of the professors are female (Gerritsen et al, 2012). While men also teach gender, the likelihood of women focussing their research and teaching on gender is overall higher (cf. Abels, 2016; Evans and Amery, 2016; Sauer, 2016). Therefore, the gender imbalance among professors is believed to have a particular negative effect on the integration of gender in curricula.

Currently, two full professors in political science have an explicit gender and politics research agenda: Monique Leyenaar and Mieke Verloo, both based in Nijmegen. It is therefore no surprise that the availability of gender and politics courses in Nijmegen is relatively higher than at other political science departments (the Nijmegen department is considerably smaller than the one at the University of Amsterdam). Yet, their chairs are not structurally embedded in the department and the gender focus may disappear once these professors retire. Previously, two political science professors held a gender or women's studies chair elsewhere,

namely Joyce Outshoorn (Leiden University) and Frances Gouda (University of Amsterdam). Both recently retired. So far their chairs have not been replaced and it is uncertain whether they will be in the future.

There is a large pool of gender scholars based at Dutch universities, but chairs that are designed for professors of gender studies or women's studies are scarce. There are currently only six professorships in The Netherlands with an explicit gender or women's studies profile; none of them in political science.<sup>8</sup> Four of those chairs are 'extraordinary', which means their chair is funded by an external institution or entity, often state sponsored. While extraordinary chairs have an important societal function, these appointments are often small (around 1 day a week), temporal and therefore less well embedded in the power circles of the university (see for instance Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al, 2005). In the current climate of austerity the funding for these specialised chairs is far from stable.

In sum, for the integration of gender in the curricula it matters if gender is a substantial part of a professor's research agenda – as is the case in Nijmegen – even if this position is not a 'gender and politics' chair. Professors who have an all-round political science profile and are strong players in the international arena – through research networks, prestigious grants, international mobility and publications in highly ranked journals in the discipline – are more likely to have a strong voice within their institutions and may so promote a gender and politics perspective within the education curricula.

## CONCLUSION

Nowadays structural inequalities are often hidden under the general belief that women and men have obtained equal political rights and opportunities.



Gender and politics scholarship in Europe and beyond reveals that gender gaps in politics are closing, but that this process evolves only very slowly. So slowly, in fact, that gender remains a fundamental axis of social and political inequalities, decisively shaping the distribution of power also in Western societies. To point students to gendered inequalities and the structural political mechanisms that reproduce these, gender should be firmly integrated in the curricula. Now that collective feminist activism has given way to more individual acts within universities, political science students need to know how concepts, methodologies and political phenomena are gendered. The act of making structural gender inequality and gendered power mechanisms visible provides a new window of opportunity to emphasise that gender is not a women's issue, but a fundamental aspect of the organisation of power and therefore unambiguously *political*. Gender is composed of more than one gender and genders intersect with other social positions and ascribed identities, such as citizenship, age, ethnicity, religion and class. In other words gender is a social, and by extension political, relation, not a property of individuals: it affects political life as a whole.

Feminist scholars have successfully established women's studies in The Netherlands, but did not manage to structurally anchor gender and politics programmes within political science departments. Gender is not integrated in the basic training of political science students in The Netherlands. Departments that offer electives – the Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam – employ faculty members with a strong gender and politics research profile. The lack of full professors with a gender and politics research agenda has severe consequences for the integration of gender in political science

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education. Professors have institutional power and through this are able to influence the profiles of new faculty, as well as the way money is distributed and the development of curricula.

Presently, gender is indeed lost in the mainstream of Dutch political science. Becoming part of the mainstream entails convincing departmental leadership that a gender perspective is an essential tool for understanding and analysing power dynamics and the (re)production of political and social inequalities and that female and male students should be made aware of this. Such awareness will not only impact upon students' academic development, but eventually also Dutch politics. Many political science graduates take up jobs as policymakers in governmental agencies, become public opinion leaders, lobbyists, political

advisors or diplomats. Being equipped with a gender lens will therefore mean that graduates are more likely to identify and explain gender inequalities, and will ideally be eager to develop innovative tools to close the gaps. To set gender mainstreaming in political science education in motion, the new generation of gender and politics scholars should resurrect academic feminism and tailor it to the contemporary academic and political environment.

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## Notes

1 Renamed Radboud University in 2004.

2 The network emerged informally in the late 1970s and professionalised in 1980. It received state funding between 1983 and 2003. Today it continues as a voluntary organisation under the name *Nederlands Genootschap Vrouwenstudies* (NVG). The networks' journal first appeared under the name *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* and continued from 1998 onwards as *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*.

3 E-mail correspondence with co-editor Niels Spierings on 10 December 2014.

4 Political science course catalogues are available online at: <http://studiegids.uva.nl/xmlpages/page/2014-2015/zoek-opleiding/opleiding/78/75538> (University of Amsterdam); <http://www.vu.nl/nl/opleidingen/bacheloropleidingen/opleidingenoverzicht/l-p/politicologie/inhoud-van-de-studie/vakbeschrijvingen/index.asp> (VU University Amsterdam); <https://studiegids.leidenuniv.nl/studies/show/2781/politicologie> (Leiden University); <http://www.ru.nl/politicologie/onderwijs/bachelor/> (Radboud University Nijmegen), accessed on 25 November 2014.

5 The number of first-year students enrolled in Bachelor programmes in 2013 was: 75, 102, 215 and 309 at the Radboud University, Amsterdam VU University, the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University, respectively (see [www.studiekeuzeinformatie.nl](http://www.studiekeuzeinformatie.nl), accessed 19 December 2014).

6 The political science electives include 'Gender, Sexuality and Institutions' (six ECTS), 'The Politics of Gender and Ethnicity in (Post) Colonial History' (twelve ECTS), 'Gender, Conflict and International Relations' (twelve ECTS), 'Power and Gender in Global Politics' (twelve ECTS) and 'Experiencing Differences' (twelve ECTS). The latter is a lecture series that focuses on cultural diversity, gender and sexuality, and the construction of identities and communities in The Netherlands.

7 Master in Gender Studies and Master in Gender and Ethnicity (both Utrecht University) and Master in Sociology: Gender, Sexuality and Society (University of Amsterdam) (<http://www.mastersportal.eu/study-options/268451916/gender-studies-netherlands.html>, accessed 15 December 2014).

8 Kea Tijdens professor of Women and Employment (sociology Erasmus University) ([http://www.eur.nl/erasmusstudio/people/current\\_members/prof\\_dr\\_kg\\_tijdens\\_kea/](http://www.eur.nl/erasmusstudio/people/current_members/prof_dr_kg_tijdens_kea/)); Willy Jansen professor of Women's Studies (anthropology Nijmegen) (<http://www.ru.nl/genderstudies/staff/senior-staff/vaste-stafleden-igs/jansen-mevr-prof-dr/>); Saskia Keuzenkamp extraordinary professor of Emancipation in International Perspective (sociology VU Amsterdam University) (<http://www.fsw.vu.nl/en/departments/sociology/staff/keuzenkamp/index.asp>); Mieke Aerts extraordinary professor of the Political History of Gender in The Netherlands (history University of Amsterdam) (<http://www.uva.nl/over-de-uva/organisatie/medewerkers/content/a/e/w.d.e.aerts/w.d.e.aerts.html>); Lies Wesseling extraordinary professor of Gender, Cultural Memory and Diversity (literature and art University of Maastricht) (<http://www.opzij.nl/nl/artikel/41504/lies-wesseling-aanvaardt-opzij-leerstoel.html>); and Saskia Wieringa extraordinary professor of Gender and Women's Same-sex Relations Crossculturally (anthropology University of Amsterdam), all accessed on 16 December 2014.

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