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From Pioneers to Players: Women in the Netherlands

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As in other European countries, women in the Netherlands have always been encouraged to act as homemakers and caregivers, while the husband has the traditionally held role of breadwinner. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches propagated the ideology of the nuclear family and motherhood as the natural destination for women. Consequently, until the 1980s the majority of Dutch adult women were not involved in paid employment.

This view of the proper role of women came under fierce attack at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Religion became less important in the lives of many Dutch citizens and, more importantly, the wave of feminism that swept Holland led women to question the “naturalness” of this strict division of labor. Politics reacted to the lobby by feminist organizations by putting the issue of gender equality on the agenda of the national government and parliament. The government began to adopt policies designed to improve the position of women, and from 1974 onward a variety of governmental institutions were established to deal with different aspects of the advancement of women. The 1980s and 1990s brought an influx of women into the labor market and women caught up fully with men in educational attainment.

From having a confessional, patriarchal, breadwinner/homemaker mindset, the Netherlands has slowly evolved into an increasingly secular and individualized society in which ideas on gender equality have taken root and spread effectively. This essay describes and analyzes these developments by looking more closely at the historical values with respect to women’s place in society, their economic participation, their empowerment, and the importance of feminism and women’s organizations, as well as government’s answer to this: equality policies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For more than 100 years the Netherlands has been ruled by a woman. Queen Emma became queen regent in 1890, and Queen Beatrix, her great-granddaughter, has reigned since 1980. The position of queen, however, is acquired by heritage. For other professional and leadership positions, women have had to fight. For example, Aletta Jacobs needed permission from her father and the prime minister to become the first woman to enter university in 1871 (Posthumus van der Goot 1968, 54). She also challenged the existing gender ideology by demanding voting rights in 1883, pointing out that until 1887 there was no explicit constitutional prohibition barring women from the vote. She asked to be placed on the voters' list because she met all conditions for eligibility. Her request was denied: the author may refer to the Law, but according to the Spirit of our Political Institutions, women do not have the right to vote. And even, if one denounces the Spirit of our Laws, one should question whether women should possess all the rights of citizenship. Looking at civil laws, women are barred from custody with the exception of the custody of their children. (Jacobs 1924, 94).

Appeal to the higher court did not help. The higher court ruled that, when the constitution refers to an "Inhabitant of the Netherlands" it is referring to men, as "otherwise this would have been explicitly stated." Moreover, it was argued, that, because it is the husband and father who pays taxes for his wife and children, it is logical that women should not be allowed to vote. The result of Jacobs's action was that, in 1887 when the constitution was renewed, the word "male" was added to "inhabitant of the Netherlands" (Jacobs 1924, 95). It stayed there until 1919, when women at last acquired the right to cast their votes in elections.

The extension of women's political citizenship, however, did not result in a change of gender ideology. A woman's destiny was within the home, in marriage, where she was a housewife, spouse, and mother, whereas men were defined by their roles in the outside world (Plantenga 1998, 51). Most governmental policies therefore were geared to the traditional male-breadwinner model, encouraging women to quit paid employment at marriage. In the first decade of the 20th century, only around 10 percent of married women were active in the labor force, and it took until 1957 before married women were entitled to act independently in legal matters. With regard to equal social rights, such as unemployment benefits, married women had to wait much longer, because they were meant to be protected through their husbands. In the 1980s, more and more social legislation took the individual instead of the family to be the basis of entitlement, and equal opportunity policies became firmly embedded in the government agenda (Bussemaker 1998, 34).

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

In the Netherlands, unlike other countries of the European Union, women have never been a large part of the labor force. From 1900 to 1960, women formed around one-fifth of the working population, a proportion that varied only slightly during this period.



(ABC-CLIO)

Significant changes did occur, however, in the type of women who participated in wage labor. At the beginning of the 20th century, most working women were either married or single working-class women or the wives of shopowners and farmers. Later, many married women withdrew from the labor market mainly because of the steady rise in the standard of living and the dicta of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches that married women belong at home. The percentage of women in the working population declined from 24 percent in 1947 to 22 percent in 1960. After 1960, the percentage of women in paid employment increased again, mainly because of married women who carried on with their paid work until they expected their first child. Between 1960 and 1981, the proportion of employed married women rose from 7 to 33 percent (Oudijk 1984, 192). Other reasons for the relatively low rate of workforce participation of women compared with other countries include the late industrialization of the Netherlands in contrast to Britain, France, and Belgium and the fact that the Netherlands was involved in neither the Franco-Prussian War nor World War I. This meant no shortage of men occurred (Hooghhiemstra and Niphuis Nell 1993, 27). Given the ideology of motherhood, it was not very surprising that in the 1930s, when unemployment figures were raising daily, the government made several attempts to ban married women from jobs in the civil service. The first attempt was a proposed 1904 law stating that women civil servants were to be fired the moment they married. This proposal was defeated. Other attempts, however, were more successful,



Queen Beatrix became queen of the constitutional and hereditary monarchy of the Netherlands in April 1980. (Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst, afd/Royal Netherlands Embassy)

including the law proposed by a Catholic minister of social affairs and accepted by parliament in 1937, which forbade married women (or women who “lived in sin”) to be employed. In 1935, a Committee to Defend the Right of Women to Paid Labour was founded, in which several women’s organizations participated. The committee was able to draw attention to this injustice with newspaper advertisements and pamphlets. They also organized large protest meetings in Amsterdam and other towns. As a result of all this pressure, the next minister of social affairs—a socialist—discarded the contentious law (Posthumus van der Goot 1977, 267–281). However, after World War II, the government again tried to restrict married women’s work outside the home. For example, the Catholic minister of interior asked other ministers to reduce their employment of married female staff to a minimum. And a 1952 report suggested that female civil servants who marry should be dismissed, but that this regulation should not apply to women older than 30 years, women in leadership positions, or women who had been in service for 10 years or longer (Plantenga 1998, 56). The attempts to restrict women’s right to paid employment finally ended in 1955, when parliament passed a motion submitted by a female Labour member of Parliament (MP) stating that government should not intervene.

The postwar welfare state was founded on the assumption of the nuclear family, where the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is a full-time mother. Bussemaker (1998) points out how the Dutch government discouraged married women from entering or remaining in the labor market. For example, the tax system imposed negative incentives on a second income within the family and did not facilitate child care by making this tax deductible. “The identification of men with family maintenance meant that the male breadwinner earned a family wage

and received child benefit, and that his wife and children were, by definition, included in his insurance provisions without the need for additional contributions” (Bussemaker 1998, 30). The general consensus was that to have married women participating at the labor market would be “detrimental to healthy family relations.”

A full time housewife was not only a major safeguard against miscarriages and infant mortality, she was also seen as a weapon against alcohol abuse and could play a positive role in the fight against anti-social behaviour in the broader sense. (Plantenga 1998, 53)

The public debate on women’s and men’s roles in society that started at the end of the 1960s, combined with the expansion of the service and public sectors of the economy, both of which employed a large number of women, are responsible for the rise in employment of women. In 1981, 84 percent of employed women had jobs in the service and public sectors, compared to 55 percent of the employed men. In 1963, 70 percent of the women and 41 percent of the men worked in these two sectors (CBS 1979). Contributing to this development was the availability of contraceptives as well as labor-saving devices such as central heating, showers, and washing machines. Further, women’s organizations demanded more and better child care facilities, and, after they had a baby, more women decided to stay in paid employment part-time or reenter the labor market after a few years of taking care of the children. The government also became more inclined to increase the labor supply, given the growing concern over the ratio of dependents to taxpayers (Gustafsson 1994, 55).

In 2005, 54 percent of women between 15 and 64 years of age were engaged in paid employment for more than 12 hours a week, compared with 72 percent of men. This was an increase of 19 percent since 1985. When those women and men who want to work but cannot find paid employment are included, the percentage rises to 59 percent in 2005 compared with 77 percent of men. Still, a majority of women work part-time: only 35 percent of working women work full-time, and 68 percent work 12 to 34 hours a week. The respective figures for men are 86 and 8 percent, respectively (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 69–78). Many mothers did and do not feel comfortable leaving their children in somebody else’s care for eight hours a day. And, because it is financially feasible, women with small children often compromise and accept part-time work. Although many more child care facilities were created in the 1990s and different parental leave schemes were introduced, the figures did not change. Compared with other European countries, the percentage of women working part-time is high (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 144).

The rise in the number of women involved in paid labor did not dispel gendered job segregation. In the 1970s, one-third of all employed women worked in four occupations: salespersons, secretaries or receptionists, administrative positions, and such “caring” professions as nursing and teaching. In comparison, one-third of all employed males worked in 14 different occupations. In 2005, almost 80 percent of all employees in the health sector were women, whereas only 10 percent of those working in construction were women (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 83). The unemployment rate was 7.7 percent for women and 5.6 percent for men in 2005 (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 87). There is still a difference in rates of

payment as well: in 2004, women received, on average, 81 percent of the gross payment per hour of men (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 188).

Overall, the position of Dutch women in the labor market is one in which family responsibilities are still crucial. This goes for the private and the public sector. With regard to all general educational levels, the percentage of girls is about the same as that of boys. About the same percentages of boys and girls continue their education, but more girls than boys finish their higher education and get a degree. For all women over age 15, fewer women (23 percent) than men (29 percent) had a university or college degree in 2005 (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 52–54). But when distinguishing by age groups, gender differences disappear or are flipped: for the younger age groups, relatively more women than men have completed higher education. Segregation does exist in the education system: fewer women choose technical subjects or economics and fewer men choose languages, medicine, and teaching (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 54).

Government policy is now focused on improving labor participation in general and that of women in particular: “Higher labour market participation not only increases women’s economic independence, but also the support base for social security provisions” (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2001, 17). The government’s aim is to make provisions that allow for a combination of work and care, shared by members of a household. However, these government policies are still somewhat contradictory (Knijn 1998, 74). On the one hand, some policies encourage women to enter or reenter the labor market or to work more hours; on the other hand, however, the government stresses the need for care by the family and community, because the cost of professional care is so high. This message, combined with the wish of many individual women to bring up their children at home, has led to the high number of part-time women employees. Another consequence is that women are postponing the age at which they have children. The average age for childbirth is now 30 and a growing number of women are deciding not to have children at all (Emancipatiemonitor 2006, 30).

In the 21st century, a family model of one male breadwinner and one woman who is half breadwinner and half housewife has replaced the model of a male breadwinner living with a housewife who takes care of the children. Men work full-time and most women continue their paid employment after having children, but they do this part-time.

One may conclude that in general the position of women in Dutch society has improved over the years: women in the Netherlands have caught up with men in higher education, and their participation in the labor force has clearly increased. Economic factors, such as the shortage of employees in the 1990s and the expansion of the service sector in the years before that, were largely responsible for these changes, but the fact that the cultural climate changed under the influence of equality policies also had a big impact. Compared with other European countries, the Netherlands ranks fifth with regard to women’s participation in the labor market. Only in the Scandinavian countries do more women participate in wage labor. There, women are also doing part-time work, but the percentages are substantially lower compared with the Netherlands (more than 60 percent). In 2005, 15 percent of women in Finland, 21 percent in Sweden, and 25 percent in Denmark worked part-time (Emancipatiemonitor 2006 143, 145).

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Now that women and men share more or less similar educational levels and participate in the labor market, the next question is whether women and men play a similar role in the decision-making institutions. How many women can be found on the boards of directors of large firms, universities, and hospitals? How many women are involved in governing the country, the provinces, and the cities? In this section, some recent data on women's share of top management and decision-making positions in the private and public sectors are presented, followed by a more detailed analysis of the political empowerment of women. Table 1 shows the high-level management positions, the boards responsible for the daily operation of the enterprises (including the chief executive officer), and the boards of commissioners, which advise the company or organization on long-term policies. Being a commissioner is not a full-time job; depending on the size of the company or organization, it takes a few hours a week or month. Private companies are still mainly run by men; very few women are involved in running businesses on a day-to-day basis. More women take part in the decision making in chambers of commerce, pension funds, employers' organizations and trade unions, and hospitals. In the welfare sector, however, especially in those areas where relatively more women operate, such as youth care and child care, many more women take part in running the organizations. One would expect to find more women in top positions in the public sector, given the policy of affirmative action for women that the Dutch government has been conducting since the 1980s. Table 2 shows 2005 data for the public sector.

Table 1. Percentage of Women in Decision-making Positions in the Netherlands, Private Sector, 2005

Type of Organization (Total Number)	Women on Boards	Women Commissioners
Child care organizations (9)	53	23
Youth care (15)	37	47
National health care institutions (14)	34	30
Pension funds (14)	19	6
Chambers of commerce (19)	17	8
Employers' and employees' organizations (7)	11	8
Hospitals (18)	11	26
Universities (12)	9	—
Private companies (500 largest)	3	6

Source: *Emancipatiemonitor* (2006, 218–220).

Table 2. Percentage of Women in Decision-Making Positions in the Netherlands, Public Sector, 2005

Position	Women
Public prosecutors	48
Judiciary	47
Netherlands Court of Audit	37
Member of external advisory body	26
Council of State	25
Director general ministry	20
Chief of police	11
Secretary general ministry	8
Chairperson of independent administrative body	3

Source: Emancipatiemonitor (2006, 226–227).

Of the 20 members of the Council of State, 5 are women. Of the 3 members of the Netherlands Court of Audit, 1 (the chairperson) is a woman. The 26 percent female composition of the external advisory boards is the consequence of the law on the composition of advisory boards, which includes a directive on gender. At the highest levels of the police force only 11 percent are women, and only 3 percent of the chairs of the independent administrative bodies are women. However, women did successfully break into the world of justice: 47 percent of all judges are women and 48 percent of public prosecutors are women. In the Netherlands one becomes a judge or public prosecutor only after finishing law school, followed for those with no relevant work experience by an additional six years of training. For those who have worked for at least six years as a lawyer, an additional year of training is sufficient. One explanation for the “feminization” of the judiciary is that working conditions are favorable for combining work and caring for children. For most public positions there has been a gradual increase in the number of women.

Breaking through the glass ceiling has been an item on the gender-equality agenda of the government since the 1970s. Lately the government has set targets in order to put some pressure on companies, nonprofit organizations, and political parties to nominate more women in top positions: a range of 20 percent for senior posts in the private sector to 50 percent in government and parliament by 2010. The targets make it possible to monitor developments over time and to see whether efforts have been successful or whether additional policy measures are needed.

Political Empowerment

Legally, women’s political representation began in 1917 when women were granted the right to stand for election, but in practice it took until the end of the 1970s before a substantial number of women participated in parliament and other areas of government.

GLASS CEILING AMBASSADOR NETWORKS: MOVING WOMEN TO SENIOR POSITIONS IN PRIVATE COMPANIES, THE PUBLIC SECTOR, AND POLITICS

In 2003, the Netherlands government established its first Glass Ceiling Ambassador Network. A group of 15–20 prominent women and men from trade, industry, and labor organizations acted as ambassadors for one year in order to promote a more balanced participation of women and men in top-level decision-making positions. Each member formulated at least three personal action points that had to be realized within one year and that were focused on his or her own company, organization, or sector or that focused on agenda-setting in general. So, for example, the chief executive officer of Schiphol, the Netherlands' main airport, established training programs for women in his company, which enabled them to move up the career ladder. The Ambassador Network also jointly sought (and got) publicity with these action points. Since then several other Glass Ceiling Ambassadors Networks have been set up, including one for promoting more women in high-level political positions. This Ambassador Network on Women in Governance was chaired by the mayor of Rotterdam, one of the largest cities in the Netherlands, and had among its members a provincial governor, the chair of an important advisory board, the chair of an umbrella organization for housing corporations, and a member of Parliament.

The Glass Ceiling Ambassador Networks have been successful for several reasons. First, because of the presence of the VIPs, the issue of the unbalanced gender representation in positions of power enjoyed a lot of media attention. Second, high-level male decision makers got involved in the issue. Third, the commitment of the ambassadors, which was reflected in their personal action points, resulted in an actual increase in the number of women that moved into senior positions.

The first woman minister was appointed in 1956, but in the 11 cabinets governing between 1956 and 1977 only one woman served as a minister or junior minister (Leyenaar 1989, 125). The mid-1970s mark a turning point in the political representation of women in the Netherlands. In the 1960s, the Dutch political system had been confronted with such developments as depillarization (pillarization is strong segregation along lines of religion and class, both socially and politically) and secularization, as well as with a growing demand for more political influence and a less paternalistic, more open attitude on the part of the political elite (Andeweg and Irwin 2005, 23). In the late 1960s, emerging women's organizations were pursuing equal rights for men and women. The combination of these demands for more participation and for equal rights turned out to be a strong catalyst in the fight for equal political representation. After the 1977 parliamentary elections, the percentage of women MPs increased from 9 to 14 percent and four women junior ministers and one female minister were appointed to the cabinet formed that year. From that time on, the debate focused primarily on the question of how, not whether, to increase the participation of women in politics (Leyenaar 2004, 128–135). Table 3 presents the data for the main political offices for each decade since the 1970s.

Table 3. Percentage Share of Women in Political Positions in the Netherlands, 1972–2007

	1972	1982	1992	2002	2007
<i>Elected</i>					
MP	9	14	32	32	39
Senator	3	21	25	31	35
Provincial councillor	12	21	30	29	36
Local councillor	10	16	22	24	26
Member of European Parliament	8	28	28	29	32
<i>Appointed</i>					
Minister	6	7	19	7	31
Junior minister	0	29	25	29	54
Provincial governor	0	8	8	0	17
Mayor		3	9	17	20
Provincial deputy	3	11	25	21	17
Local alderman	5	9	17	17	18

Source: Leyenaar (2004, 119–143); *Emancipatiemonitor* (2006, 225).

The political parties have a large say in recruiting and selecting the political personnel noted in Table 3. With regard to the elected positions, parties draw up a list of candidates and, depending on the number of seats a party acquires, one or more candidates from the list (often according to the order of the list) take up their seats in parliament or in the local and provincial councils. This procedure means, however, that the chances for electing women candidates depend fully on their place on the party list and thus depend on party attitudes toward integrating women in politics. Traditionally, the religious parties have been more reluctant to nominate women for office; in contrast, the socialist parties used quotas to ensure the participation of women. In 2007, all the traditional parties, with the exception of a small orthodox religious party, acknowledged the importance of having a substantial number of seats held by women and design their lists accordingly. But the new populist parties that entered the arena in 2002 and have gained electoral strength since then have fewer women delegates. Research into the emergence of these new right-wing parties shows that they are much more likely to be supported by men than women (Betz 1992, 14–146). In 2002, these new populist parties (19 percent of the vote in 2002) bucked the upward trend; one had no women MPs and the other had only three, which decreased the overall percentage of women in parliament from 38 in 1998 to 35 in 2002.

As Table 3 shows, women's numerical representation at the provincial and local levels is lower than for the national representative bodies. The assumption that it is easier for women to win elections in local councils than in national assemblies, because eligibility criteria are less stringent and these are not full-time jobs, seems not to be true for the Netherlands. There are several explanations for this lack of

progress at the local level. First, the Christian Democratic Party has always had the majority in most local communities, and this party has been less favorable toward selecting women. A second explanation is that most Dutch communities are rural, and the effects of the new women's movement have been less pronounced in rural areas than in the larger cities. There has always been a clear correlation with the size of the local community and the percentage of women councillors. A third reason is the merging of local communities into larger ones. For efficiency reasons, communities have been combined: in 1960 there were 1,200 communities in the Netherlands; in 2007 there were 450. A merger also means the mergers of local party organizations that are active in the different communities. What then happens is that the local party leaders, who are often men, take the first places on the candidate lists. A fifth explanation refers to the selection procedures of most parties: the local branch of a party is responsible for candidate selection, and in most parties the national executive has very little to say influencing the process. (In general, national party leaders are more concerned about female-male balance than are the local or regional branches.) A sixth explanation for the lack of progress in the percentage of women councillors in the elections of the 1990s is the increasing importance of the so-called local lists. These parties participate only in the election to one municipality and have no ties to a nationally organized party. Local lists tend to nominate fewer women to the councils than the nationally based local parties. In these local-list parties there is no tradition of affirmative action for women, nor are there any instructions from national party leaders to balance the list according to gender and ethnicity. Local lists can decide how to arrange the selection process and consequently appoint fewer women to eligible places on the list. A final reason for the lack of increase in the overall percentage of women councillors is the fact that women, once elected, tend not to return to office for a second term. The main reason for this early "retirement" is, as survey data has showed, that combining the council, a job, and caring for children is too time consuming (Castenmiller 2002, 28-30). This is also an important reason for many women not to stand as a candidate for local office (Leyenaar 2004, 193-194).

Starting in the 1970s, the upward trend of women's political representation has continued, and in the 21st century more women than ever are in elected and nominated positions. Various developments had a positive impact on the empowerment of women. The aforementioned economic and social advancement of women in Dutch society and the greater availability of child care made it easier for women to emerge from their private domains. The greater number of women politicians is also certainly a result of changes in the outlook of selectors. Party leaders and policymakers are increasingly recognizing that having more women in their midst may be an asset for the organization. Taking ideas from management and organization studies, the selectors of political personnel assume that having more women will bring about a different atmosphere and change in focus—in short, women will offer a fresh perspective in politics. As a consequence, party leaders are now actively seeking women candidates.

Apart from the political parties, another prime mover in the process of empowering women has been the Dutch government. From the early 1980s there was an active government policy to increase women's participation in politics and public administration.

Important policy instruments have been financial support, research, and regulation and/or legislation. Still, the Netherlands government, contrary to the Belgian or French government, has always been reluctant to introduce legislation promoting the participation of women in electoral bodies. The main argument used was the fact that it was seen to be unconstitutional, given the existing constitutional articles on nondiscrimination and the autonomy of political parties (freedom of organization). Instead of introducing legislation and thus interfering with party politics, the government decided to take additional measures in 1992 to raise the percentage of women in politics and public offices. In a specific policy program submitted by the cabinet and accepted by the parliament, 19 concrete measures were mentioned, including the publication of yearly statistics on women in politics; half-yearly talks between the minister of internal affairs and the leaders of the political parties on the progress in this matter; requests for provincial governors (who are responsible for nominating mayors) to nominate at least 50 percent qualified women candidates for mayor; and a regulation that the nominating organizations of external advisory bodies with fewer than 15 percent women members could only nominate women candidates (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken 1992). The implementation of these policies had a great impact on the political empowerment of women.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Women's organizations have been instrumental in the social, economic, and political advancement of Dutch women. In 1894, the first organization for female suffrage was founded, and many others followed. Since then, several other issues, such as poverty, pacifism, and the restriction of women's right to paid labor, have united many women and led to their organization. Examples of long-standing women's organizations are the Dutch Organization of Housewives, the Dutch Catholic Organization of Farmers' Wives, and the Dutch Organization of Women's Interests. Most of these organizations, however, operated on their own. Between 1920 and the 1960s there was no formal women's movement in the Netherlands (in the sense of having a network of organizations aiming to organize women in order to advance their position in society) (Oldersma 2002, 286). During its early years (1967–1974), the new women's movement focused on pursuing equal rights and increasing public awareness of the fact that gender roles are not a consequence of "natural inclinations." From 1974 onward these activities were gradually replaced by consciousness-raising groups, the first step toward developing a critique of patriarchy and power relations between men and women. Many radical feminist groups were primarily concerned with developing women's culture and campaigning against sexual violence and pornography. They started feminist publishing houses, feminist bookshops, women's centers, and women's cafes. In addition to these radical feminist groups, there was an autonomous socialist feminist movement, which stood for both feminist and socialist change but sought to pursue its goals independent of male-dominated political organizations, while not objecting to working with these organizations for the right cause. They were prime movers in the struggle to legalize abortion and other

political issues. A main difference between these two autonomous groups is that the socialist feminists were willing to cooperate with men and with left-wing political groups, whereas radical feminists were not (Swiebel and Outshoorn 1991, 10).

Besides the traditional women's organizations and the feminist groups, a third category included the women's groups operating within other social movements, such as the women's sections within the political parties and the women's committees in the trade unions, churches, and universities. Given this heterogeneity of the women's movement, it was only possible to combine strength when there was a specific issue to pursue. Efforts were then made to overcome ideological divisions by setting up groups with a specific focus point. An important example in the history of the Dutch women's movement was the coalition formed to campaign in favor of the legalization of abortion. Other joint campaigns included the demand for economic independence and the demand for a more equal division of labor between men and women.

In the 1990s, many women's organizations were still active, most of them subsidized by the government. At the same time, a women's public policy support structure was firmly in place, consisting of a national department for the coordination of gender equality policies and regional and local women's bureaus (Outshoorn 1991, 112). Both the women's organizations and the governmental policy network have contributed to the overall change in attitude.

But in the 21st century, the women's movement has become relatively weak in terms of institutionalization and numbers of supporters. Women's organizations seem to have lost their relevance for individual women and membership is declining steadily (SCP 2008, 85). A so-called feminist backlash is noticeable in many parts of Europe, including the Netherlands. Young, highly educated women in their 20s, who themselves have experienced no gender discrimination in their education and job search, do not see any problems for women as a group. They perceive feminism and the separate treatment of women, using devices such as positive action and quota setting, as degrading. It fits the zeitgeist of the 21st century to say women should no longer be viewed as victims, as people in need of special treatment. As a consequence, there are fewer women's organizations and they tend to be more professional, focusing mainly on women's economic position.

Women's organizations have also lost their relevance for many people now that the government has embraced gender mainstreaming as the approach to overcoming the remaining barriers to gender equality in the 21st century. The approach of gender mainstreaming originates with the Council of Europe, which defines it as "the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making" (Council of Europe 1998, 15). The Dutch government views gender mainstreaming as a new phase in equality policy. It follows "the phase in which the emphasis was on introducing formal equal rights and ensuring that women also had access to all important living spheres" (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2002, 5). It was therefore no surprise that the cabinet that came into office in 2003 discarded the post of secretary of state for equal opportunities and gave the portfolio, as one of the many, to the minister of social affairs instead.

Some political parties have discarded their women's sections altogether and gender issues and women's participation are now explicitly the responsibility of the whole party organization. The practice of gender mainstreaming, however, may turn out to be a threat instead of a blessing. To attain equality and reach a balance of power, departments of equal opportunities have presented many women-specific policies. The danger is that mainstreaming might be used to displace or eliminate these specific women's programs before there is a guarantee that women's needs and interests will be integrated in general policies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A culture of gender equality is now firmly rooted in Dutch society. Since the 1970s the Dutch state has promoted and implemented policy initiatives aimed at achieving an equal distribution of economic, social, and political resources between men and women. Considering educational levels, women are participating on an equal footing with men. Once a country where men were breadwinners and women were caregivers, the Netherlands now ranks fifth in Europe regarding participation of women in the labor market. And by the beginning of the 21st century, women had definitely become a force to be reckoned with in Dutch politics. Albeit at a very slow pace, "pioneers" have been replaced by "players." Since 1977, the number of women involved in political decision making has been increasing, reaching almost 40 percent participation in parliament and government—the Netherlands takes seventh place on the ranking of the number of women in parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007). Only in the private sector has little progress been made: top positions and management are still in the hands of men.

From the description of the advancement of women in the Netherlands it becomes clear that three actors have been instrumental: women's organizations, political parties, and the government. They used many different strategies ranging from raising awareness among citizens to demonstrations for the legalization of abortion by women's organizations; from training potential women candidates to quota setting by political parties; from constant monitoring to putting pressure on provincial governors to nominate women mayors. The roles of these three types of actor have changed over time, however. The women's movement has taken on a new appearance: from once being a participatory movement defining women's strengths, it has become an institutionalized and professional network of organizations working on gender equality. The government now structurally finances only a few of these women's organizations. The national machinery for gender equality is still in place, but the number of institutions has declined. There is no longer an external committee advising the government on gender issues, and the Junior Ministry for Emancipation has been abolished, using the argument that gender mainstreaming is now the policy approach. With regard to the focus of equality policies, a substantial part of the funds available for gender equality are spent on projects to combine paid and unpaid labor by women *and* men (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken 2004, 4). Considering the role of the political parties, the traditional center and left-wing parties are willing to share power

with women. In the 1990s, they adopted all kinds of policies to increase the participation of women. Now they are extending this policy of inclusiveness to groups of immigrants, taking into account the steady growth in this population and the strong ethnic voting patterns.

The question now is whether this culture of gender equality is permanent. What factors may threaten the further advancement of women in Dutch society? First, there is the attitude that gender equality now is a fact and, as a consequence, the still-existing inequalities between men and women in caring responsibilities, income level, and economic power as well as other gender-related social problems, such as sexual violence and trafficking, will be ignored. The embracing of gender mainstreaming as a policy approach and the discarding of specific women's policy programs and policy structure fit this attitude, as does the anti-feminist attitude of many young women. There are still many policy areas where women as a group are disadvantaged and where specific policies still need to be monitored and implemented. Also, gender relations in the growing Muslim community need to be addressed by the government, political parties, and women's organizations. In general, gender differences are larger and occur in more areas among the migrant communities (Keuzenkamp and Merens 2006, 6–42).

Second, women themselves form a threat to a future balanced participation in political and economic leadership positions. Fewer women than before are willing to adhere to the demands of leadership positions, both in politics and in business. A trend is noticeable that capable women are increasingly deciding not to accept high-level management or political positions because of the demands of the job in question (Woodward and Lyon 2000, 92–93). Without changes to the working conditions of these institutions it may become more difficult to find enough qualified women willing to set their private lives aside for a while.

Third, a factor that can stop the progress in women's political representation is the rise of populist parties. These parties, with their great emphasis on law and order and their hostility to expanding the public sector and the welfare state, are far less popular with women voters. One consequence is that they delegate far fewer women to the representative bodies.

In order not to lose the ground that has been won in recent years, there is a need for great clarity on the importance of gender equality in all aspects of society.

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