

Changing Chair: LOVA then, now, and tomorrow

An interview with Marina de Regt and Jasmijn Rana

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Utrecht University in 2020

Amsterdam, January 1985. A young and ambitious nineteen-year-old anthropology student is invited to join a women's group with the aim of strengthening feminist anthropology at the University of



Amsterdam. As a member of this group, the young student is introduced to a national network of feminist anthropologists. Little did this student know then that she would later serve this network as its chair for almost ten years. Of course, I am referring to the beloved Marina de Regt, who served as LOVA chair until June 25, 2020. Marina was introduced to LOVA through her friend Marjan Rens:

“Marjan [Rens] was impressive in a way that she really urged us to do something. I was a young student; I knew nobody in Amsterdam, and immediately I found a group of women who said: come, we are going to do something about it! LOVA was more a network of which I thought ‘Wow, I just want to be part of this!’” She was involved in the organization of the LOVA Study Day in Amsterdam on March 27, 1987, titled *Wat is er feministisch aan feministisch antropologisch onderzoek?* (*What is feminist about feminist anthropological*

research?) and co-authored her first contribution to the LOVA Journal on the same topic. She continued to be a member when her career brought her to Yemen (1991-1998). After her return to Amsterdam and during her job as a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, she took up organisational tasks again, now as a member of the Study Day Committee (LOSCO), and since 2005 as the committee's representative in the LOVA board. In this function, she contributed to the organisation of many Study Days. Marina's academic career and feminist anthropological activism flourished through the years. In 2011 Marina is invited to become the new chair of LOVA, a task she took up and performed with great pleasure until June of this year.

Jasmijn started her studies in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam in September 2003 and completed both her Bachelor's and Master's. During her Master's, she became interested in gender studies and feminist anthropology: “At first I was resisting the idea that women always need to talk about women issues and migrants always need to talk about migrant topics. I wanted to go against that. Yet, during the last year of my Bachelor's I became more aware of what the important things are in life, and I realized that you cannot resist such topics because they are a part of your own lived experiences.” Jasmijn explains her earlier lack of interest in feminist studies to the socio-historical context when feminism was discharged as something old fashioned and not trendy. However, in retrospect, Jasmijn identifies a clear interest in topics like gender equality and shaping femininity. During her Master's, Jasmijn profiled herself as someone who is interested in questions such as how female beauty and beauty standards are shaped.



It was also the time when Jasmijn discovered her interest in gender in relation to sports, a topic on which she obtained her PhD in 2017.

Jasmijn's and Marina's paths crossed in 2009, through Annelies Moors who was both Jasmijn's Master's thesis supervisor and Marina's PhD promotor. By then Jasmijn had responded to a call for contributions to the LOVA Journal which had led to her first-ever publication. She became a LOVA member in that same year: "For me, personally, the LOVA Journal was important as it contains my first publication. However, along the way, I noticed how important and amazing it really is because, via the journal, you can let various people talk about their interests and research. Through the journal, you notice we have such a rich collection of people in our network, how big that network actually is, and that you can count on people in it. So, through such practical work, I noticed how valuable it is to be part of this network." In 2013 Jasmijn joined the LOVA Journal editing board in which she was active, with a short pause, until she recently took up LOVA's chair position.

This interview (on October 1, 2020) was held to commemorate the end of a period and the beginning of a new one. After nine years – three terms of three years – Marina de Regt decided to step down as LOVA's chair, and Jasmijn Rana takes over her tasks. What did LOVA look like when Marina and Jasmijn got involved? What changed over the years? What do they hope that will change in the coming years? And how can LOVA position itself in the debates concerning feminist anthropology, gender studies, queer studies and interdisciplinary networks?

Jasmijn: It was a great opportunity for me as a student to have my first publication. At the same time, it was hard for me to join LOVA and feel at home within the network. I remember that annual dinners were organised. I doubted every time about participating. In the end, I just went once. It took me a few years to overcome the boundary and to think "yes, I may be young, but I really want to

join this network." [...] At the moment I am actually quite proud about that stereotype [as feminist], but when you are younger and get confronted with so many different stereotypes and identifications that you need to negotiate and see where you fit, then it becomes an extra burden.

Jasmijn refers to a discussion that is still urgent today within LOVA: how to attract students and give them a place where they can develop themselves as young academics? This is both vital for LOVA and one of its most difficult aspirations. Marina remembers a similar dilemma:

Marina: I'm not sure, but if Marjan had not pushed me, maybe I wouldn't have liked it either, although I already was a feminist in heart and soul. So I thought, I just want to belong to this group. We always have had this struggle of being associated with a symbol or specific stereotypical image. When we talk about the eighties when we had our women's group (*Vrouwenoverleg*), a lot of women with whom we studied were not members of that group. Sometimes I think, why weren't we a bit more open? It is not only a question of who is to blame, but the question is, why is it that feminism also includes a sort of obstacle that you need to overcome in order to fit in? And that is also the challenge for LOVA.

Jasmijn: I think from my perspective and my generation, it is also kind of easy to settle for the idea that "It is okay how it is right now", the idea of "What do we still need to fight for? The world is equal, right?" By not seeing how fragile that idea is, for example, concerning abortion. Well, in my time, that was a non-issue; that battle was already fought and won. Now we see that forty years later that battle is not won, but rather a battle constantly in need of fighting. So, that is also a difference: that idleness is partly a *Zeitgeist*, but it is also a bit too easy.

Clearly, LOVA can accommodate various people with different quests and desires. For some people such as Marina, LOVA offers a group of soulmates: “As a thirteen-year-old, I was already busy with feminism. I was quite radical and activist, and I like being in groups. I like surrounding myself with soulmates.” Others, such as Jasmijn, find their way to the network whilst keeping a practical approach: “It is funny that you say ‘I like being in groups’ because that could also be part of the decision to join LOVA. I don’t like groups, that is something in which I personally grew a lot. For me, it was more a practical position: I stand behind this political agenda, so I decided to help the editorial board. As soon as I can contribute and work together on a topic it feels good.” The variety within the network – both on an academic level and personally – could possibly be one of the reasons why LOVA exists already for more than forty years. However, this variety also means that critical discussions are necessary concerning LOVA’s profile in order to keep the openness the network cherishes.

Marina: What we see is that “feminist anthropology” as a term is contested in a way as also discussed in the article *Forty years of LOVA, forty years of LOVA Journal* by Ina Keuper in last year’s LOVA Journal.¹ We talked about it a lot: do we need to change LOVA’s name?² Women’s Studies Anthropology is really outdated now. Would Gender Studies in Anthropology be better? Or do we keep feminist anthropology? That is a great conflict. Some people say: surely not feminist anthropology, as that still is not popular among students.

Jasmijn: But that is changing now, right?

Marina: I think we should keep calling it feminist anthropology. I also think that here in the Netherlands, we are unbelievably behind or slacking when it comes to gaining attention for the field. For example, in the United Kingdom and the United States of America,

feminist anthropology and feminist studies are flourishing. Really, they are acknowledged as fields there. While here in the Netherlands, it still has a stigma. [...] I find it difficult that LOVA has not yet succeeded in attracting more people. I find it difficult to realise that the network function of LOVA has become even less important in the Netherlands. I see many colleagues working in the field of gender studies who do not want to be part of LOVA’s network. This makes me think of what it is that people do not want to become a LOVA member? Is it because of the name? Or that we are a circle of specific people? I think LOVA could play a larger part in the discussion of the field in the Netherlands. Having been chair during the last nine years, I have witnessed how hard it is. We should be happy with everything we can do, but I would now work more on the political level to get more recognition for feminist anthropology in the Netherlands. We should also work on the network function of LOVA by stimulating debates in our field. Do not get me wrong; I am not blaming LOVA.

Jasmijn: I am happy that LOVA emphasises gender studies and keeps feminist anthropology. The subtitle of LOVA [gender studies and feminist anthropology] is still not perfect, but I am very happy that we involve qualitative researchers from gender studies. However, feminist anthropology gains importance today.

Marina: That is exactly what I mean! I mean there are a lot of people, anthropologists, colleagues of mine, who practice gender studies or research subjects of which I think these are part of our field, but they are not members of LOVA.

Jasmijn: Well, maybe because of creating groups, and that people such as myself are not that keen on joining groups. But also, what is feminist anthropology? If you ask me, there are three objectives: 1) “Feminist anthropology” in our subtitle stands for a specific

political goal you need to support. Some people feel that “gender studies” is not the same, and not enough to support feminist anthropology. 2) LOVA also stands for women within the field of anthropology, but that function is considered as unimportant because there are now a lot of female anthropologists, even as university professors in the Netherlands. However, a new point is: 3) A lot of people in the field of gender studies see themselves being involved to a greater extent in queer theory rather than in feminist anthropology. Feminist anthropology lags behind when it comes to the constructions of gender and discussions of it in relation to nature/nurture debates. It is so multi-layered, and I personally think that it is important for LOVA to include queer studies in order to broaden the network and to start the discussion about these topics. This was also a point of discussion in the last few years within LOVA: for example, can we talk about masculinity? In the eighties, this was probably not done often. And now we do have these discussions.

Marina: I think it is, masculinity is part of feminist anthropology. When people do not think it is, they use quite a narrow definition of feminist anthropology.

Jasmijn: I think a lot of people see it like that, although it is not like that.

How should LOVA position itself in relation to all these overlapping but different fields of studies? When discussing LOVA’s position, it becomes clear that it can be identified as a network more focused on gender and sexuality, rather than for example, queer studies. However, is this a position to hold on to or should LOVA become broader and attract people in other (sub)fields in order to enrich the discussions? Our new chair Jasmijn Rana thinks we should open-up to queer anthropology. “There should definitely always be space to question

and research the category ‘woman’,” Jasmijn argues. Although in recent years, the category “gender” has taken its place within feminist anthropology, there is still a considerable difference between the fields of gender studies and feminist anthropology. Gender studies is not necessarily a part of anthropology in its methods and discourses. However, this does not mean that (intellectual) overlap is non-existing. We see this for example in the theoretical addition of gender studies which is used in anthropological publications. Furthermore, “typical” anthropological methods are used in gender studies. This leads to the question: to what extent is it necessary and desirable to affiliate yourself with a specific discipline and/or field? And specifically, what does it bring LOVA to associate itself to a specific field?

Marina: We need to do something with this question; we do not have a choice. As I mentioned before: for too long, LOVA has difficulties in attracting different kinds of people and sometimes lacks inclusivity. Is this because of LOVA? What we aim to do, and our urge to stick to the identification as anthropologists? Still, we are first and foremost an anthropology network. It is necessary to attract new members, young members. I see myself as an old-school-anthropologist: my research is in a faraway country, it is about gender inequality and specifically about women in difficult positions. My research is very classical, and I think it is urgent that on a generational level, things change within this network.

Jasmijn: Yes, I can imagine that such changes automatically happen over time and that we should not make such changes artificial, for example by deciding “okay now we are a queer network, with a queer journal.” That is not what we are. Nevertheless, I think that the feminist struggle should exist next to the queer struggle. The category “woman” should also be debated from a queer perspective. Already very important work is done on

the latter point. At the same time, there are so many situations in which “women” are oppressed, and therefore we should also focus on feminism. So yes, LOVA should take steps in opening-up, whilst thinking about what we want to emphasise. Either way, my position is that we should aim for connection rather than change.

Changing fields of study and dynamic societies have affected LOVA’s positionality and identification. In current times discussions are going on about the form of fields and disciplines, and the question of interdisciplinary work is more pressing, LOVA’s new chair Jasmijn Rana is advocating for connection. An ambition that cannot be taken for granted but should be actively discussed and pursued. With this intention, Jasmijn builds on Marina’s legacy to maintain an open network that welcomes bottom-up initiatives. In her own words, Marina tells us she “just made sure the network lives on.”

Many know that Marina as chair has meant much more for LOVA. Not only the continuity of – and within – the network was so valuable, Marina’s creativity and her professional attitude within the board will be missed. Especially in a period when feminist anthropology was considered to be less necessary, Marina’s determination to keep it going was essential. With pride and new energy, Jasmijn will carry on this task to maintain the network. “Especially now, in a time in which anti-feminism is growing, the importance of our network and the theoretical debates we discuss are critical,” Jasmijn says. Jasmijn’s ambitions for LOVA are already taking shape with the creation of commissions within LOVA, in which member-participation is stimulated and welcomed. With this, Jasmijn is building on the shoulders of giants, whilst stimulating connection between members and befriended networks.

I want to thank both Marina and Jasmijn for their openness in our conversation. Marina, thank you for all your hard work as LOVA chair; we welcome you to stay active and continue your role as a central figure within the network. Jasmijn, welcome and good luck!

The LOVA board is looking forward to working with you as our new chair and supports your visions and ambitions for our beloved network.

Notes

- ¹ Keuper, Ina. 2019. “Forty years of LOVA, forty years of LOVA Journal.” *LOVA Journal of Gender Studies and Feminist Anthropology*, 40: 103-109.
- ² LOVA is the Dutch acronym of *Landelijk Overleg Vrouwenstudies in de Antropologie* (National Network Women’s studies in Anthropology).