

## Three feminists, five decades of feminism, and forty years of LOVA

Feminist baptisms, academic breakthroughs, motherhood: 48 years after the first Women's Liberation March in London, three feminists reflect about the world-changing shifts we have seen in the last few decades in The Netherlands and the change they would most like to see coming next.

### Filipa Oitavén

**MA in Social and Cultural Anthropology  
at VU Amsterdam in 2015**

**and currently doing action-research  
at CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality**

**In 2016 she joined the board of LOVA as secretary**

*An interview (on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019) with:*

Joke Schrijvers, born in 1944 - retired in 2002.

Joke finished her PhD at Leiden University in 1985 with the important work *Mothers for Life* on motherhood and marginalization in Sri Lanka. In 1991, she became Professor of Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam, where she co-founded and chaired the Institute for Development Research Amsterdam (InDRA) in 1989. Joke took part in the early movements of feminism while being a young academic since her graduation in anthropology at Leiden University in 1969. She co-founded VENO (Vrouwen en Ontwikkeling, in English: Women and Development) in 1976, which later became VENA (Vrouwen en Autonomie, in English: Women and Autonomy). She chaired LOVA from 1995 to 1998. In 2002, a

special issue of the LOVA Journal, *Making Waves: Inspiring Critical and Feminist Research*, was edited by Ellen Lammers, one of Joke's PhD students. It was a tribute to her, with articles by close colleagues, PhD students and academic friends. In this collection of work, I marvelled at the exceptional introductory chapter by Karin Willemse. This chapter was an interview with Joke that Karin calls a 'biographic narrative'.

Ina Keuper, born in 1949 - retired in 2014.

Ina studied at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) and started working at the Anthropology Department of this university during her studies as a student assistant and since her graduation in 1978 as a part-time assistant professor. Between 1985 and 2000 she taught in the Master's study programme Woman and Policy, later called Social Issues and Policies at the Department of Anthropology at the VU. From 2001 to 2014, Ina was a lecturer and teaching programme manager at the same university. In the more than forty years at VU Amsterdam Ina has guided many students in their introduction to the field of women/gender studies and anthropology. Ina was involved when LOVA was founded and is LOVA's treasurer since 2001.

Karin Willemse, born in 1962.

Karin wrote about Joke's life in the liber amicorum *Making Waves*, using a research methodology that she coined 'con/text analysis': the analysis of biographic narratives through 'listening, reading and writing against the grain'. This method for investigating women's biographic narratives is the backbone of her PhD thesis *One Foot in Heaven: Narratives on Gender and Islam in Darfur, West-Sudan* of 2001. Karin concluded her PhD trajectory in Leiden, where she had studied anthropology and taught feminist studies and African studies when she was a PhD student. She was supervised by Joke. Nowadays, Karin combines history and anthropology as assistant

professor of History of Africa, and of Gender and Islam at the History Department of the Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. She is also a member of the Academic Advisory Board of the Islam Research Project, a research cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Leiden University. Karin chaired LOVA in 1998-2000 and 2003-2004.



From left  
to right:  
Joke  
Schrijvers,  
Karin  
Willemse,  
Filipa  
Oitavén,  
Ina  
Keuper.

Photo by  
Filipa  
Oitavén

### Tales of a feminism baptism

The year is 1971. Nearly five decades ago, the first Women's Liberation March is taking place in London. On the 8th of March, an estimated 4000 women, men and children march from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square on a biting cold Monday. They carry banners with various demands: from equal access to education, wages and job opportunities to free contraception and government-funded preschools.

Joke, who is now well in her seventies, does not remember the day of the march but remembers those were times of growing awareness. "I had had my first baby, and that was a starting point for becoming acutely aware of inequalities (between women and men). Before that, I was aware, but there were no concepts for it."

One of the first times Joke remembers noticing inequalities between women and men she was only five. She was walking with her brother to school: "He was with a male friend, and he was responsible for taking care of me. As soon as the house was out of sight, the two men decided that I was not allowed to walk next to them, I needed to walk behind... I felt this deep anger and sense of injustice. I was so angry that I started running and I ran all the way to school, which was quite far! Later on, I reported this to my mother, and I think she reacted very wisely, saying: "Well if you can do that, I allow you to go by yourself."

Karin's 'feminism baptism' also happened during her childhood. Coming from a big family, she had many cousins of her age. One day as they were playing the so-called 'Cowboys and Indians' game, Karin, who was six or seven years old at the time, was assigned the role of being an 'Indian' woman. Her reaction was "I don't want to be an Indian woman, I want to be Indian." Her cousins reacted provocatively, saying: "Oh well, we are gonna do a pee contest and if you can pee as far as we then you can be an Indian... But you cannot use your hands!" Karin, who never had the idea that women were physically weaker than men, responded wisely "If I cannot use my hands, you cannot either." And she won.

Today we all laugh and indulge in these stories. Still, the staggering truth is that five decades ago, the situation for many women in Dutch society was very different from now. They were expected to be housewives and mothers and had to fight for the right to a good education. Ina, raised in the far-east Dutch countryside, counted only on the support of one of her teachers who encouraged her parents to let her continue her studies. "I think my parents were

not that really supportive, but also did not object to my wish to gain more education ... they respected my choice and I left the village.”

### **Feminists changed laws and policies, hearts and minds**

In the 1960s and 1970s, two feminist groups played an important role in campaigning for the rights of women in The Netherlands. The first was ‘Man Vrouw Maatschappij’ (MVM, in English: ‘Man Woman Society’), an action group founded in 1968 by two very active feminists: Joke Smit en Hedy d’Ancona. Joke Smit, whom Joke (Schrijvers) remembers as very sweet and delicate in appearance, had a fierce demeanour and inspired a whole movement through her books, talks, and work as a member of the City Council in Amsterdam (1970-71). D’Ancona was one of the founders of the journal *Opzij* in 1972, a Dutch feminist magazine that has remained alive to this day. Ina received her first subscription from friends in 1978 and has remained a subscriber to this day.

The ‘Dolle Mina’ (in English: ‘Raging Mina’)<sup>1</sup> was another Dutch feminist group, which led and documented many feminist actions and received wide media coverage for their less orthodox methods. These included tying pink ribbons across male public toilets or kidnapping the jury of a Miss Cinema event in 1970. The MVM and Dolle Mina also published numerous articles, manifests and appeared in news clips with one-liners such as ‘Baas in Eigen Buik’ (in English: Boss of your Own Belly!) written on their bellies. “When I read their stuff I thought: this speaks to me, this is exactly how I feel,” Joke tells, recalling the relief of “suddenly discovering that there were words and concepts for things I had felt for quite some time. It provided enormous support for my vague feelings of frustration and anger.”

Ina, who was a young student then, remembers very well what was happening in Amsterdam, where she lived. Even if during her classes in anthropology she did not hear much about women and men relationships, outside her study programme she was devouring the

publications of MVM and Dolle Mina too. Ina recalls one article in particular, the *Het onbehagen bij de vrouw* (translated best to *The discontent of women*) published by Joke Smit in *De Gids* magazine in 1967. In this essay, Smit talks of the frustration of married women who want more than being solely mothers and housewives. “Joke Smit was a hero for me, for us,” Ina says. There was also the ‘Vrouwenhuis’ (in English: ‘Women’s House’) at the Nieuwe Herengracht in Amsterdam, an empty building that women occupied in 1973, where Ina and many other women gathered to attend meetings and discussions.

The shattering legacy of these types of groups was a recurrent theme of the interview. “It was a very exciting time,” Karin says, “it was a tough time, but there was this booming of groups coming together... there was a crossing of boundaries between activists, universities, ethnicities, nationalities, generations. And above all, this sense of excitement: a lot was going on.”

Through these groups, women organised themselves all over The Netherlands in a countrywide movement to stand up to the status quo and ask for equal treatment. And progressively, the social struggle of women in society found its way to the Dutch universities. In every university city, groups of students and a few teachers became active to fight for giving attention to women in their studies, also in the field of cultural anthropology.

### **VENO, VENA and LOVA: the rise of feminism in Dutch anthropology**

It was 1975 when Joke coined the concept of viricentrism in anthropology in one of her first publications. In this article in the Dutch journal *Sociologische Gids*, she criticised the way anthropologists’ own western values and perceptions about gender relations were used as a standard when studying other societies. Anthropological viricentrism was an invisible form of ethnocentrism, an already widely used concept in anthropology.

That same year had been proclaimed by the United Nations as the International Year of Women and the first UN World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City that summer. For the occasion, Joke Schrijvers and her colleague Els-Postel Coster at the Anthropology Department of Leiden University had been commissioned by the then Minister of International Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk, to write a pre-advice on the role of women in development.

“Through his [Jan Pronk] personal network he got to know that some women anthropologists in Leiden were doing work in this field,” Joke tells. “So he contacted Els-Postel and she, being a close colleague, came to me for help as I was already actively involved in teaching about ‘men-women relations’. This was the very starting point.” The pre-advice was written in only six weeks, together with a few colleagues and students. After the UN conference, it was extended and published as the book *Vrouwen op weg: Ontwikkeling naar emancipatie* (in English: *Women on their way: Development for Emancipation*) in 1976<sup>2</sup>. It has played an important role in the thinking and debates about the position and rights of women in development cooperation.

Following these events, Joke together with colleagues, among whom Claudine Helleman and Mary Boesveld, designed a research program entitled ‘Vrouwen en Ontwikkeling’ (VENO, in English: ‘Women and Development’) at Leiden University. VENO conducted policy-oriented research for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1975-1981) and would, later on, originate the ‘Vrouwen en Autonomie’ (VENA, in English ‘Women and Autonomy’) Research and Documentation Centre. “All of a sudden we had an enormous basis from which to organize things, and that is how we also started the documentation centre – Mary Boesveld’s idea – because earlier there was nothing. There was no literature at all about women in development!”, Joke explains. A successful flow of funds would support the work carried out for two decades, until 1996.

VENO and VENA were very successful in generating a great deal of research and putting women and gender issues on the development agenda. Within the field of development cooperation, their work has found resonance and attention. “Still, sometimes, I meet women who read our stuff back in those days!”, Joke adds with a genuine smile.

Ina was one of these women. Midway the 1970s, she had started to relate the broader societal struggle of women to her anthropology studies. She was inspired by, among others, Joke’s publication on viricentrism and the work of VENO. But not only in Leiden changes were underway, she says. At the time, many other anthropology study programs in The Netherlands had these so-called ‘women’s groups’. These were groups of students, sometimes supported by a female student assistant, lecturer or assistant professor. Their members questioned the position of women and gender within the anthropology study programs.

Ina adds: “In Nijmegen there was an active group, in Utrecht there was an active group and also at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The UvA women’s group even published a book titled *Vrouw in zicht: Naar een feministische antropologie* (in English: *Women in Sight: Toward a Feminist Anthropology*), based on essays they had written about women’s studies in anthropology.” In these essays, they used seminal books and articles from the USA, of which two have to be mentioned: *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Rapp Reiter (1974) and *Women, Culture, Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (1975).

Being a student at VU Amsterdam, Ina was involved in organising the VU’s women’s group of anthropology students in 1977. “In our first meetings, we asked: we are all feminists, how can we relate this to our studies and our position as students? And, how can we get credits for our reading of all those interesting articles and books? The students of the UvA women’s group who published the book had already succeeded in doing so as their book was based on a formal course taught by a student assistant,” Ina says.



The three interviewees. Photo by Filipa Oitavén

Then, the women's group at VU Amsterdam succeeded in getting a subsidy from the Department of Anthropology to create a student assistant position. In the spring of 1979, José van Santen was appointed to research and report on the status of courses on women studies in anthropology across The Netherlands. The goal was to find arguments to create such a course at VU University. During her research, José visited the women's groups of the anthropology departments at the other Dutch universities. She also launched an idea: to organise a meeting with representatives of the women's groups to share information about what each group was doing. An invitation letter from José, Mary Boesveld (Leiden University) and Wientje Meeuwesen (Radboud University Nijmegen) was sent to all the women's groups.

As a result, fifteen women gathered in a room of the Utrecht University on October 12th, 1979. All were active in the women's groups of Utrecht, Leiden, Nijmegen, Groningen and VU Amsterdam. They expressed the need for a substantive platform for building up knowledge in women's studies and discussing strategies

to integrate women's studies in the study programs. Shortly after, on December 14<sup>th</sup> at Leiden University, LOVA (Landelijk Overleg Vrouwenstudies in de Antropologie, in English: National Network on Women's Studies in Anthropology) was born.

With the network came a magazine – you are now reading volume 40. Ina swiftly pulls her bag and unpacks a pile of old magazines. Among them is the first issue of February 1980. The LOVA Newsletter, as it was called back in those days, was published in preparation of LOVA study days, three and later two times a year, each time at a different anthropology department in The Netherlands. After more than a decade full of activities it became more and more difficult to organize the newsletter and study days. In 1995 the network was transformed into a formal association with a board and a bank account. Since then, the national LOVA meetings are held once a year. The newsletter became a journal where students and young academics are encouraged to publish for the first time. From 2008 on international summer schools as well as international conferences have been organized to bring gender research to the spotlight – the next will take place in 2020.

It was official. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist anthropology had started to make waves in academia and research providing insight into women's experiences, visions and opportunities. Sometimes, this required some hands-on activism too. A memory shared by Joke and Karin captures one of these peculiar stories:

J: "I had my last baby in my arms when we occupied the faculty's office (Joke refers to an event that happened in Leiden in November 1982). They wanted to take away one of the women's studies posts. We were so angry that one morning at 8:30 we marched in. A lot, a lot of women! The director, who was there as the only man, became so scared that he

fled...”

K: “Yeah, I was there as well!”

J: “You were there too... and we sat there for three days or so. I was still breast-feeding, so I had to bring my baby. I mean... we just did it!”

F: “You just did it!”

K: “We sat on the ground, and I remember making coffee for the other women, and that was the picture that made it to the newspaper! Did we finally make it into the newspapers, did they feature a picture of a woman who was pouring coffee... I mean, that was so stereotypical!”

As these recollections show, feminist activism took many forms in academia. From commissioned research projects to the formation of student groups, to endless days of sitting on the floors of university buildings. One thing for sure, VENO (1975-1981), VENA (1981-1996) and LOVA (1979-present) and the women behind them were at the forefront of defining the role of gender in contemporary society and academia and how gender is addressed by in research. Numerous working groups, study programs, publications and other initiatives have been driven by their pioneering efforts. Their influence has extended far beyond the past decades to the present day.

### **Backlash and new-feminisms: The effects on women's words, minds and jobs**

In 2017, ‘feminism’ became one of the most searched words online. The search volume increased by more than seventy per cent compared to 2016, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. “No one word can ever encapsulate all the news, events, or stories of a given year, particularly a year with so much news and so many stories. But when a single word is looked up in great volume, and also stands out as one associated with several different

important stories, we can learn something about ourselves,” said the dictionary.

The contemporality of the F-word seems justified. In 2017 the ‘post-feminist illusion’, that feminism has reached its goals, and that contemporary women have little or nothing to nag about, shattered. To start with, 2017 was the year of the start of Trump’s presidency in the USA, an event followed by a record number of women’s marches around the world. It was also the year of the pussy-hat, a pink hat, handcrafted and used by thousands involved in those marches, for added visual impact. Above all, 2017 showed the world that feminist mobilization still works, not only in the streets but also digitally. With the Hashtag MeToo, the movement to expose women’s protest against experiences with sexual violence began to spread globally and went viral on social media.

Also, 2019 is a very special year for Dutch women, says Karin. The Dutch celebrate a hundred years of women’s suffrage in The Netherlands. Around the country, a comprehensive programme of events includes history, art, and theatre (note to myself: do not miss *De Verleiders Female* on stage until 28 February 2020) to celebrate a year so special for Dutch women.

But while feminist activists seem to be sweeping the world again and bringing gender to mainstream discussions, its position as a central subject in academia and research should not be taken for granted, Karin says. In universities, gender is brought up to the discussions only when teachers have an affinity with it, lacking overall institutional anchoring and continuity. This can be partially explained by the fact that universities in The Netherlands are fairly hierarchical institutes. Most decision-making positions are still dominated by men who are generally unaware of what is going on in the field of gender studies. “Men in power prefer to appoint in higher positions other men with a similar background and attitude, which is mostly white, middle-class and of a certain age,” says Karin. Also,

nepotism and ‘us-know-us-networks’ complicate institutional change and the establishment of gender authority at and from the top.

Attempts to address this issue more radically are often met with suspicion. This summer, the Eindhoven University of Technology took radical action to increase its share of female professors by opening job vacancies to women only, Joke tells us. The university was met with a lot of criticism. Many academics, women and men, have double feelings about this type of quota arrangements.

A second dimension to mainstreaming gender in academia concerns the shift from gender used in relation to social change and activism towards the concept of gender as a neutral analytical tool. First of all, the term ‘women's studies’ has been replaced by ‘gender studies’, and in gender studies, the ‘women's oppression’ of the 1970s has given way to ‘intersectionality’. It is as if “gender has lost some of its sense of urgency,” Karin says. Joke, for whom commitment to the good cause always mattered the most, thinks this happened mainly because gender research has “lost its activist orientated social goal. It has become an analytical concept, a popular academic concept, but there is little action or immediate relation with changing the real world.”

LOVA has struggled with this transition too, Ina explains. “In the past ten years, in the LOVA board, we have had lots of discussion about these concepts. Including discussions about re-naming LOVA.” After all, LOVA derived its name from the old term ‘women’s studies’. “In the end, we decided on gender studies and feminist anthropology. We decided to keep the word feminist in it because we thought that activism should continue being part of it.”

Nowadays, even if without the sense of urgency that characterised feminist activism in the old days, LOVA continues to connect researchers, lecturers, students and alumni outside the regular study program (the four of us are a strong example). The challenge for LOVA and each one of us as feminists seems to be: how we channel

this new awareness and activism into productive and strategic action in academia and research?

### **On motherhood, the future of feminism and the pressing questions**

My pressing question is: With the focus of feminism continually expanding to take on new issues and finding new approaches to old ones, how would we like to see it evolve in the years to come? To move our conversation into the future tense, I showed a video of Chinaka Hodge, American poet and activist, reading out loud one of her poems for TED in 2016. I had decided to bring up this poem because it shows feminism as an urgent question for women's self-determination, freedom, unity and justice. Joke, who writes and publishes poems too, subscribes to the idea excitedly: “Poetry as a form of activism - how wonderful!”

In her poem, Chinaka Hodge talks about women. Women who wake up and compulsively check the news, and get out and march as much as they can, women who ride a roller coaster of outrage and defeat and women who are trying to disconnect entirely. Her pressing question is: What do we tell our granddaughters?

For Joke, feminism lives on in a younger generation of sons and granddaughters: “I have six grandchildren, of whom two are girls. Where relevant, I encourage them to reflect on feminist issues. It is important how children are being brought up. What they read, what they see. Youth is a crucial issue for me.” And it has been, ever since 1991 when Joke co-founded InDRA and selected three umbrella fields for her group’s research activities: gender, youth and environment.

Karin, who was 8.5 months pregnant when she defended her PhD thesis, adds: “My son will be 18 tomorrow. The first steps (for raising a feminist) are in the household: Not to take over, not to be too critical... It’s important to discuss things instead of saying ‘this is bad or this is good’.”

“One of the issues at the household level is that some human qualities and responsibilities seem to be divided up and labelled as masculine or feminine, and the feminine gets devalued. Traditionally those have been things like compassion, nurturance, intuition. What we hope is that we will head towards a time when all children get the full range of human qualities, so we allow girls to be strong and powerful and boys to be emotional and caring,” Karin says. For Ina, motherhood was already a pressing question in the 1960s and 1970s, and it remains very actual: “The caring role of mothers is stressed too much, and the caring role of fathers far too little.” The debate on the balance of work-child care haunts mostly women only.

Not that long ago Karin wrote an article with her colleague Tine Davids on how two nation-states with conservative regimes use motherhood. They were recently asked to compose an edited volume on the topic: “Well, we sent out a call just two months ago and we had an enormous response!,” confirming the urgency of this topic, she says. Joke also recalls her earlier reflections of motherhood as being “a source of both power and powerlessness.” If an emancipated woman wishes or has to work and take care of the family, she cannot carry the majority of this responsibility by herself. Women need to cooperate with other women or with men, who remain more or less out of the picture. In 2019 paid parental leave for young fathers in The Netherlands increased from only two to a meagre five days. “That’s a start, but it’s far too little,” Ina adds.

For Joke, another pressing question is how to relate to the climate change question as feminists. Because “there is a certain ambivalence... if we link women and environment too much, it is as if women can be held responsible for carrying the moral load and saving everything that goes wrong in the world.” The climate emergency and recent events make Joke’s question even more pressing. Karin adds: “We demonstrated for various sorts of emancipation and against the bomb. And nowadays, kids demonstrate for the climate. My son took a day off from school

because of this very brave little girl (Karin refers to Greta Thunberg) who has been skipping school to strike for the climate.”

On this rainy afternoon in November, our time is running out, but as I turn off the recorder, the conversation continues to unfold future possibilities. There are many other pressing questions which remain unresolved for young feminists (of whatever gender) to take upon themselves. As I return home, our conversation is still vividly in my thoughts. These women, these feminists who have changed laws and policies, hearts and minds, and academia itself, are rare gems that shift every idea you have had about everything and who leave you wanting to remake the world. What about you, reader? What is your pressing question? Or, how Chinaka Hodge puts it:

Where were you? Did you fight? Were you fearful or fearsome? What coloured the walls of your regret? What did you do for women in the year it was time? This path you made for me, which bones had to break? Did you do enough, and are you OK, momma? And are you a hero? She (your granddaughter) will ask the difficult questions.

### **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank Joke, Karin and Ina for, so generously, sharing with me insights into their lives as feminists. My thanks also go to the staff at Atria for helping me find various articles and books in their incredible archive. From all of you, I have learnt so much.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In reference to Wilhelmina Drucker (1847-1925), a staunch feminist of the first hour in The Netherlands who was referred to as ‘Iron Mina’

<sup>2</sup> Co-written by Mary Boesveld, Els Postel and Joke Schrijvers.