

The impact of the LOVA Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award

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Fifteen years ago, in November 2003, Lorraine Nencel and Marina de Regt discussed the possibilities of installing a bi-annual Master's Thesis Award for the best thesis in feminist anthropology in the Netherlands. The prize would be funded by the Marjan Rens Foundation, a foundation that was established in 2000 after the death of Dutch feminist anthropologist and LOVA member Marjan Rens. The first call for submissions was sent around in 2004 and in 2005 the award was handed out for the first time. A jury of three senior LOVA members read and evaluated the submitted theses and decided on the first, second and third prize. In the past fourteen years the prize has been awarded seven times, 63 theses were submitted and 21 young scholars won the (first, second or third) prize. As a recurring event that has become known among those interested in gender and anthropology, the award has become one of the main pillars of LOVA. It has also proven to be an excellent way to promote LOVA among students interested in gender and anthropology.

After eighteen years of funding small projects of women's organizations in mountainous areas such as the Andes and the Himalayas, and fieldwork of students in anthropology, the board of the Marjan Rens Foundation

decided to put an end to the foundation in June 2018. LOVA has received a sum of money of the foundation that ensures the continuation of the LOVA/Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award in the coming years. We are very thankful to the Marjan Rens Foundation!

LOVA would like to take this moment to reflect on the impact of the award for those who won. We have sent the award winners who we could trace five questions and made a selection of the answers we received for this article. At the end you find a list with the names of the prize-winners and their current affiliations.

What did winning the LOVA/Marjan Rens MA Thesis Award mean to you?

Everybody valued winning the prize as it meant appreciation, recognition and acknowledgment for their efforts. For some of the winners it inspired them to continue an academic career, to work on gender issues, and to become a member of LOVA. Here are some of the responses:

“Acknowledgment. For my work and effort. But more important: Acknowledgement for the fact that I delivered something that in its value carried beyond me and graduating as an anthropologist. To me the prize meant that I had contributed something to the larger body of knowledge in a specific field. My thesis has been published by Leiden University and is freely available online. After so many years, statistics show me it is still of interest to other students and researchers.” (Janneke van Gog)

“It was a tremendous surprise to win. I hadn't really considered my own research and writing as particularly gender-focused; it was simply that my findings led me to consider gender. Perhaps winning the prize made me realize that I had taken a road that was still new to me, but fascinating and urgent at the same time. And, of course, it is always an honour to win a prize!” (Roanne van Voorst)

“The prize gave me the recognition that my master thesis had some scientific relevance and quality, which gave a boost to my fragile desire to pursue a career in research. I always mention this prize in my CV. This competition was valuable to connect students and experienced scholars in feminist anthropology. When I started my PhD research in Sociology, I invited Lorraine Nencel who was in my jury to become my PhD supervisor, because I knew we had similar disciplinary backgrounds, she was an engaged academic, and had reviewed my thesis positively.” (Jantine van Lisdonk)

“I thought it was an overwhelming surprise to win the prize and very honorable. I had also won the department's thesis prize and in addition to this, the LOVA prize was a wonderful recognition for my hard work. Apparently I had delivered a piece of work worth reading, without being very aware of it. I am a so-called *'stapelaar'* in Dutch (from a MAVO-degree to now a having a PhD) as well as social climber (I am the first from my family with a university degree). The hard work is definitely in my blood, but that that was also redeemed in winning two prizes was of course a

wonderful achievement and gave my self-esteem a tremendous boost.” (Sylvia van de Raad)

“I put a lot of work into my research, so I felt happy to receive appreciation for this work. In addition, the prize has helped me to progress my academic career - which I am thankful for.” (Menal Ahmed)

“When I won the LOVA thesis award in 2015 for my master thesis about female clients of male sex workers I had just started my PhD. I remember that I travelled to the Netherlands from Italy for just a few days to be able to attend the award ceremony. I did not expect to win the award, so I was a bit overwhelmed! Winning the award gave me an extra stimulant to continue with my PhD and to perceive myself as a feminist scholar.” (Merel van Mansom)

“Winning the Lova/ Marjan Rens Thesis prize, was the highlight of my academic career. I still look back on it with great pride.” (Ilse-Marie Scheffers)

What kind of work have you been doing since you graduated? And what are you doing now?

Quite a number of winners of the prize continued in PhD studies. Six obtained their PhD and three are still working on their PhD's. In addition, some winners became post-doctoral researchers. None of the prize-winners have a permanent academic position yet, but those that are in academia do aspire such a position. Those that have not pursued an academic career, have very interesting careers ranging from

documentary making and writing to policy advisors. See the list of present positions at the end of this article. Only one of the prize winners did not succeed in following the career path that she had in mind:

“I graduated in 2009. It was in the midst of the economic crisis, which had an impact on the labour market in general and in particular on the social domain in which I wanted to work. For one year, I did community work on a voluntary base, hoping to find a job through my experience and network. One of the projects that I participated in was Quiet500, a magazine which highlights the silent poverty in the Netherlands. I wrote a portrait of a woman in poverty. The magazine got national recognition. I am proud to have been part of that. My plan unfortunately didn’t work out though. That’s when I decided to build a different career in banking, a field that I had some experience in. I was in a serious relationship and wanted to take steps on a personal level too. Nowadays, I live with my partner in our newly build home in Brabant and work as an account manager MKB for the Rabobank, a bank with a cooperative identity, which I consciously chose.” (Ilse-Marie Scheffers)

In which ways are gender and anthropology still important in your life/work?

Not surprisingly all of those that responded make use of the gender lens and an anthropological perspective in their current work.

“I teach midwifery students courses on ethics, respectful maternity care and cultural competence in care for migrants and vulnerable groups. It is a nice mix: I make use of my medical and anthropological background and I try to sneak in some old-fashioned feminism whenever I can.” (Lianne Holten)

“I think gender cuts across everything I do in my work. I do not work directly on gender related issues but I do carry my work with a gender lens to development. In my personal life, gender studies still remain my biggest interest - I continue to read about this field of work, discuss it among friends, I attend marches and events on this issue as much as possible, etcetera. Hopefully, I can go back and work more directly on this in the future through more studies or in my professional career!” (Belen Gianquinta)

“I consider the topic of gender in all of my research. It has become a second nature, without me being only or overly focused on the topic. It just makes sense to consider gender, because it has such a profound impact on everything that we do, say, and believe. At the moment I am writing a non-fiction book that explores the future of our world in what I call the post-cruelty era, and I am combining ecofeminist theories with futuristic perspectives on what gender might look like in one or two generations from now. The changes that we are about to experience are absolutely incredible!” (Roanne van Voorst)

“These are themes that run through (my) life as a red thread. I have never taken off the anthropology ‘glasses’, (almost) all issues (varying from political, social, cultural, personal issues) I view from a certain anthropological angle. Gender and diversity issues benefit greatly from being viewed from that angle, I notice again and again. I see it mainly in my consultancy work for (private and public) organizations. As an anthropologist you really offer a different view of the world – or on a small scale – in the workplace. One can ask the ‘other’ question, scrutinizing blind spots and make people re-think the world they take so often for granted in their everyday (work-) life. But also in discussions with friends or family one can always just set the accents differently so that the discussion takes a deepening, in my opinion.” (Sylvia van de Raad)

“Gender has always been important in my work and since I am an engaged person I cannot really separate that from my life. I just always wear those glasses and observe the world from a gender and sexual diversity lens. During my quantitative years at the SCP and in my first phase of my PhD, my anthropological background was sometimes difficult to integrate. I definitely felt more connected again to my ‘academic roots’ at the end of my PhD, which focused on qualitative data and left more space for reflexivity. In the last 1.5 years, I conducted research in an international progressive advocacy-related NGO context. I have the freedom to design a study from scratch and it is exciting that I am now using anthropological methods. It is participatory

research. I work with two research teams on different continents and use participant observation, amongst other methods. In the Netherlands, my work focuses on sexual and gender diversity. My anthropological skills to study cultures and to always see multiple views is useful in following societal developments related to hetero-normativity, intersex and bisexuality – my current research interests. I also use these skills to sometimes form a bridge between ministries, activists and health professionals. My drive is to contribute to social change towards a world that offers equal opportunities for all people and celebrates all kinds of diversity in people, so that people can be their best selves and live to their full potential. Although I nowadays identify more as a social scientist, I still have the drive of an engaged anthropological feminist.” (Jantine van Lisdonk)

“Gender and anthropology gave me a conceptual framework that I still use very much in my analysis of society, policy and the world as it appears to me. I still consider myself an anthropologist as much as I consider myself a (psychiatric) nurse, although not practicing as such. Essentially it offers me ways to grasp multiple perspectives on truth and meaning. It helps me to bridge and connect daily practice to the more conceptual and strategic level.” (Janneke van Gog)

“While a specific feminist methodological gaze became inseparable from my research interests, I am also trying to become an ally for sex workers. I came to the

understanding that there is no feminism without sex workers. Even more so, that a feminist could be a sex worker and an academic. I hope to be able to work as a scientific research associate for quite some time at the Expertise Centre to carry out research in a more applied manner. Which, according to me, should be a part of the social sciences or maybe its future.” (Merel van Mansom)

“Anthropology is still a major passion in my life, I cannot think of something more interesting and exciting than to listen to people’s life stories, what matters to them, and then think with these stories and write about them. Gender to me, is a lens through which I approach the world, both in my work and beyond.” (Natashe Lemos Dekker)

“Both gender and anthropology are still important in my work. I just got back from Indonesia where I did fieldwork on the impact of the expansion of a big harbour (port-industrial complex) on fisher communities. During my study I would not have dared to dream that doing fieldwork would be part of my professional activities. Gender is also still important in my work, although I always try to extend it to a more intersectional approach, where class, race, ability and ethnicity are as important as gender. Together with other feminists within SOMO and other organizations that we often collaborate with, we try to put intersectionality and power relations high on the agenda, both related to internal processes (such as recruitment of

new colleagues) as in our research and collaboration with partners from different parts of the world. Hopefully, you won't find people anymore within SOMO that don't know what intersectionality means!” (Ilona Hartlief)

What do you think of LOVA? Are you still a member?

Some of the winners of the prize only heard about LOVA when they saw the call for the thesis award, sometimes encouraged by their thesis supervisors who are LOVA members. Most of them are positive about LOVA, but are no longer members because they left academia or moved out of the Netherlands. Those that are still active in academia in the Netherlands fortunately remained members. Below are some of the responses we received:

“I have been a member on and off, generally depending on my financial possibilities and connections to the academic field. I have experienced LOVA as a co-organizing partner on a workshop last year, which was both intellectually and professionally a very good experience. I am very positive about LOVA running a journal now that fits academic requirements.” (Brenda Bartelink)

“I only found out about LOVA about a year ago. The supervisor of my master research told me about LOVA and she suggested me to submit my thesis for the LOVA/Marjan Rens Master’s Thesis Award 2017. I admire the work LOVA does, and that it gives voice to feminist anthropologists.” (Menal Ahmed)

“I wasn’t a member of LOVA at the time of the award, but was introduced to the award by Marina de Regt, who was one of my thesis supervisors. I haven’t followed LOVA’s developments much because I left The Netherlands soon after. I also moved away from academia to applied research and international development work. Interestingly, I recently found myself turning more to academia again in the eager need to dig deeper into feminist theory – which can be found outside anthropology as such. When I was a young student, I think the academic world evolved more around specific academic fields for me, while as I have developed as a professional I find myself turning more to specific academics who combine multi-disciplinary fields to shape the researches they are interested in. I think LOVA’s linking of feminisms with anthropology is very relevant at this time of increased interest in feminisms.” (Joni van de Sand).

“I have been a member for more than ten years. For me LOVA is a respectful academic environment where women help women to reach their potential without the hard competitiveness found in many other settings.” (Lianne Holten)

“I believe LOVA to be an important network to advocate feminist anthropology that makes academic insights assessable for both in- and outsiders.” (Afiah Vijlbrief)

“I have good memories of LOVA (the International Summer School for example) and I am really grateful for their recognition of my thesis, but I am not a member anymore. Having left the academic field, I started to feel a bit disconnected after a while, like a ‘stranger in our midst’. Also, I found LOVA to be oriented on Amsterdam in its activities. Travelling three hours to Amsterdam is difficult to combine with a fulltime job during the week. Perhaps, the best tip I could give, is to focus more, on creating a community throughout the Netherlands, with activities in all provinces.” (Ilse-Marie Scheffers)

What are your future plans or ambitions?

Those who finished their PhD often aspire to continue an academic career, and some of those who are no longer in academia sometimes play with the idea to do a PhD. In general, it is clear that all the winners are very aspirational and creative, enjoying their current jobs but full of plans for the future. Maybe those that did not respond to the questions are doing less well, but I hope that the outcome of this small survey is representative for all the winners.

“I absolutely love my current job. I would love to gain more experience within this field of work, and develop myself as a researcher. My ultimate ambition is to be a PhD candidate, ideally I would like to explore LGB and trans youth identities in more depth.” (Afiah Vijlbrief)

“For now, I am focusing on my PhD research. My interests and ambitions are mostly related to

understanding and improving societal challenges, with a focus on topics such as cultural diversity, gendered structures, and citizenship. In the future I plan to continue this focus, and to approach it from an anthropological and intersectional point of view.” (Menal Ahmed)

“Hmmm - I can't say I am someone that likes to set big goals for herself that are far down the line. I like to go with the flow and that has taken me to London right now and I am really enjoying being here! I just hope to continue on the path of learning: learning how to work in the development field more responsibly and with an open heart; how to continue to have a gender lens to all the work I do; how to make this sector more honest, resilient and inclusive... Alas, how to personally reconcile the many things about international development that frustrate me or disappoint me (that I know I can't change), while finding creative ways to work around such frustrations without reinforcing them! That's where I hope I am in five years :)” (Belen Giaquinta)

“I really want a UD (Assistant Professor) teaching position, although it seems challenging to access that. I have a strong interest and profile in work that crosscuts academic research, civil society and policy that I would ideally like to continue and expand in an academic setting, but if that is not possible I hope to find another position in society where I can continue working on

linking and learning between academia and society.” (Brenda Bartelink)

“There still is and probably always will be a secret longing of doing in-depth anthropological research. Maybe (or maybe not) it will happen in some way. My future ambition is that I would like to stay on the move. I have just started a three-year study at a small school for photography. Hoping to become a photographer and being able to integrate my anthropological identity in constructing images of the world in which we live. One way or the other my personal mission is to tell humanity stories about themselves.” (Janneke van Gog)

“For the next years, I wish to keep doing engaged research that contributes to social change, ideally both nationally and internationally. I like to develop and share knowledge across disciplines and professions, to bring marginalized people and their problems more in the spotlight, to show and eliminate blind spots and subtle inequalities, and I love to see people grow. Research is the tool that I developed in the last decade. However, I am open to other opportunities that cross my path to achieve those ambitions: writing non-academic articles, books or blogs; critical journalism; public speaking; advisory and consultancy work, and storytelling. Finally, it is my future dream to sometimes link my engaged work to music and travelling, my other passions.” (Jantine van Lisdonk)

“My ambition is to further support the transformation of Men Engage Alliance into a feminist coalition at every level: from the ways we re-organize leadership as held by a few, to shared ‘power-with’ by many to take positive action, to putting feminist analysis of power privilege and patriarchy at the core of understanding men and masculinities, and being clear that we do not work ‘for men and boys’ but with a coalition of people of all walks of life, towards improving women’s rights and gender justice for all.” (Joni van de Sand)

“In the future I would like to set up a consultancy, using my expertise in qualitative research to help medical/anthropological/feminist (PhD) researchers in their study design and data analysis.” (Lianne Holten)

“My biggest ambition and most desired goal is to delve into ethic-political feminist new materialism in relation to sex work research and the importance of acknowledging and reflecting upon ones situated knowledge. To put it more precise, I would like to carry out research on scholars who are pursuing an academic career while working as or having worked as a sex-worker.” (Merel van Mansom)

“I hope to be able to continue doing ethnographic research on end of life care and dementia and I am currently preparing a research project in Brazil on this topic.” (Natashe Lemos Dekker)

“At this moment, writing my book is the number one priority; I expect it will be published in 2019. I also supervise three brilliant researchers in a project on humanitarian aid in conflict- and disaster settings, and I'm opening a year program on January 2019 for academics and other creative thinkers on stress-free productivity – can't wait! People can find more about my books and programs through my website, www.roannevanvoorst.com.” (Roanne van Voorst)

“I like to continue with (freelance) teaching, consultancy and research work as I think it is a challenging and stimulating combination, and it is good to combine with having a family with three young children. My very future ambition is writing a fictional novel.” (Sylvia van de Raad)

“My goal is still to work for an organisation (for example Rabobank Foundation) which supports nationwide and international projects aimed at boosting social participation and self-reliance of disadvantaged groups. I am sure that I will get there, someday.” (Ilse-Marie Scheffers)

“In the future I hope I can make a short series about the country I once did my fieldwork for my master thesis: Egypt. I still am in close contact with friends there, and visit the country regularly. Despite the difficult situation this country is in, a lot of positive initiatives and cool stuff happens as well.” (Ilona Hartlief)

**Winners of the LOVA/Marjan Rens MA Thesis Award
2005-2017**

- 2005 Joan van Wijk (finished her PhD and is now psychiatric nurse at GGZ In Geest) (no response)
Jantine van Lisdonk (finished her PhD and now researcher at Rutgers, a Dutch centre of expertise on sexuality and reproductive health)
Sandra Coolen (trainer at the municipality of Tilburg) (no response)
- 2007 Janneke van Gog (senior policy advisor at Arkin, a large mental health organization in Amsterdam)
Brenda Bartelink (finished her PhD and is now post-doctoral researcher at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)
Sylvia van der Raad (freelance academic and consultant on diversity issues).
- 2009 Lianne Holten (finished her PhD and now lecturer and researcher at the Midwifery Academy Amsterdam)
Joni van de Sand (Director of Men Engage, Washington)
Roanne van Voorst (finished her PhD and now post-doctoral researcher at the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS), writer of fiction and non-fiction books, and independent mentor for academics and other creative thinkers on the topic of stressfree productivity).
- 2011 Ilse Marie Scheffers (Account manager Rabobank)
Lenny Schouten (documentary maker and writer) (no email address found)
Jenna Henderson (no email address found)

- 2013 Natashe Lemos Dekker (almost finished her PhD and is now post-doctoral researcher Leiden University)
Tessa de Vries (editor and researcher at VPRO, a Dutch Broadcasting organization)
Ilona Hartlief (researcher at SOMO, Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen)
- 2015 Merel van Mansom (finished her PhD and is now content analyst and scientific research associate Expertise Centre of Online Child Abuse in Amsterdam)
Ine Beljaars (PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia)
Fiona Reidy (no response)
- 2017 Bélen Giaquinta (programme officer at CIVICUS for the Resilient Roots Initiative)
Menal Ahmad (PhD candidate University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht)
Afiah Vijlbrief (researcher at Movisie)