

Gerdien Steenbeek

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On 25 November 2022, Gerdien Steenbeek retired from Utrecht University, and LOVA is proud to have been able to award her an honorary membership on that occasion. She receives this pin for two reasons: for her years of commitment to LOVA, and for her great contributions to feminist anthropological education in the Netherlands.

When Gerdien enrolled as a first-year anthropology student at Utrecht University in 1975, women's studies were on the rise, yet they were not taught in the cultural anthropology course. Together with other students she decided to form a women's group to study the new theorising around the position of women. Her studies, she recounted in an interview during a LOVA promotion afternoon in 1989, were marked by struggles for the recognition of feminist anthropology: "You did that in your spare time. We had formed a study club with friends" (Ypeij 1989). In 1979, José van Santen took the initiative to bring all these women's groups – such groups were active in all anthropology courses – together in a national platform. This was the birth of LOVA, the National Organisation for Women's Studies in Anthropology.

Some eight years after Gerdien, we ourselves started our studies in cultural anthropology. The LOVA women's anthropology group was very active, and organised courses on women's studies and feminist

anthropology. Obviously, we became members. There were courses on women's studies and feminist anthropology. Helen Safa was invited to the Netherlands to teach, and José van Santen taught a course. And above all, Gerdien was available as a supervisor and lecturer. In short, as second-generation feminist anthropologists, we experienced a completely different intellectual climate than Gerdien must have experienced, one in which feminist teaching and research were now accepted. Nonetheless, the battle for the institutionalisation of gender studies was far from over, and for the years to come, Gerdien committed herself to this.

At the time, our LOVA women's group consisted of about eight to twelve students. Although we were self-reliant, Gerdien, meanwhile appointed as a lecturer, remained heavily involved. We remember working group meetings where we discussed texts for publication in the LOVA journal, which Gerdien led with enthusiasm and great critical thinking. Gerdien herself made several contributions to the LOVA journal, such as the 1987 article "Towards a liberating feminism" (Steenbeek 1987). Her greatest contribution from that time is undoubtedly the lecture she gave at the LOVA Day on 13 December 1985 on the machismo-marianismo complex. Although she later published on *quinceañeras* and Surinamese single mothers in the Netherlands, her work on this complex had the most impact. Her lecture resulted in her famous article "Power and mystification," and her theorising was used for many years in the teachings of her colleagues at other universities (Steenbeek 1986).

In 1995, LOVA's organisational structure changed from an informal platform to a formal association. From then on, Gerdien served on the national board for many years. Initially, she did so as chair of the LOVA Study Days Committee (LOSCO). In cooperation with local LOVA groups, she organised study days on Sexuality and the Body, Multiple Identities and Ethnicities, Fundamentalism, and Ethics. She subsequently became chair of the LOVA board, first replacing Karin Willemsse during her maternity leave and then – together with Annelou – as co-chair.

Thanks to a strong board, a lot of work was done during that period. The first international conference on Gender and Globalisation was organised in 2008; the website was professionalised; the name of LOVA changed to Dutch Association for Gender Studies and Feminist Anthropology; and, last but not least, on the initiative of Reinhilde König, LOVA managed to build a good reputation in gender studies with the organisation of an annual Summer or Winter School. Thanks in part to Gerdien's tireless efforts, LOVA is an organisation that is alive and kicking after 43 years, with board members and chairs who can be counted among the youngest generations of anthropologists.

Perhaps even greater is Gerdien's impact on teaching. She was appointed lecturer at the department of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University, where she combined her work for her dissertation with teaching, first as a supervisor of students during their research, and later also by developing courses and teaching those. The content of her courses followed the latest theoretical insights within feminist anthropology. One of the first courses she developed was "Gender, labour and development issues in Latin America." "Gender, power and multiculturalism" followed later, and more recently she developed the course "Anthropology of gender, sexuality and the body." During her 40-year career, she has taught gender sensitivity to hundreds of students. Testimonies in the *liber amicorum* compiled on the occasion of her retirement do not only reveal Gerdien's enthusiasm and her keen interest in students, but they also show how much students have learnt from her, how approachable she was and how she provided them with an important tool, namely a gender lens. Gerdien's teaching changed how the world looks for these students. Her popularity among students led her to win Utrecht University's best teacher award in 2003. Upon winning this award, she was invited to teach anthropology in the Liberal Arts programme, and so the number of students she took under her wings grew once more.

The importance of Gerdien's teaching and the excellent way she conveyed it, go beyond preparing an individual student for society.

The fact that she has taught hundreds of students and sensitised them to gender relations does not only mean that there continues to be an interest in the work of LOVA from the youngest generations, but also that Gerdien is part of a movement towards a society in which young people dare to speak frankly about their sexual preferences, dare to question binary categories and speak out against racism. Full of commitment and passion, Gerdien has contributed enormously to the transmission of theoretical developments and feminist anthropological perspectives to younger generations in the Netherlands over the past 40 years. In her own words: “My goal is to train critical anthropologists who have learned to think creatively and independently. They should choose their own path, but the argument leading to that choice should be consistent and they should consider the consequences of their choice” (Coster 2003). She did not make it easy for students.

LOVA says to Gerdien: thank you, chapeau and kudos!

References

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