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## **Reclaiming the Personal: The Influence of Consciousness Raising in the Netherlands From the Late 1960s Through 1980s on Feminism in the Transatlantic Area**

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## Abstract

From the late 1960s through 1980s, a new feminist wave surged throughout the transatlantic area, reaching from the United States through western Europe. Second wave feminism challenged the duality of hegemonic liberal feminism with a new notion: the personal is political. The personal as the political was both a theoretical notion, as a method for feminist activism. In the latter, second wave feminists explored those areas that had prior been considered personal or, more importantly, private. Private issues were especially those issues women faced, which were not considered deserving of political attention. Second wave feminists found each other in consciousness raising groups, and in their shared experiences. In the Netherlands, consciousness raising started in 1971. Among those groups was the group that later grew into the SocFem movement, a group that started under the name 'the women's little club'. Distinctive for the women's little club was their tolerant approach, in which they allowed the discussion of personal experiences; something that was not tolerated in organized feminist organizations.

In eleven volumes, the *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten*, the SocFem activists kept record of their first-hand testimonies of their experiences within second wave feminism, and they took place in the international scholarly debate on feminism by producing written articles. These volumes, as well as the SocFem activists' contributions to the Marxist journal *Te Elfder Ure*, and biographies of activists constitute the source base of this thesis, a source base prior left unexplored. By analysis of this case study, this thesis provides an answer to the question 'How did the personal approach to consciousness raising of the Dutch SocFem movement reshape feminism during the 1960s through 1980s?' Following the archival trail, the first chapter of this thesis will first illustrate how the women's little club evolved into one of the most prominent second wave feminist movements in the Netherlands.

In recent years, attention among historians has grown for the transatlantic influences on distinct feminist movements. However, their narratives of the feminist movement rarely transcend national borders. This case study will explore the ego documents produced by the SocFem second wave feminists, as well as other ego documents that form part of the narrative constructed by the activists. The Dutch SocFem movement focussed greatly on the incorporation of international sources and ideologies, making it a fitting case study for analysis of entangled paths of distinct and foreign feminist groups.

The discussion of personal experiences enabled not only the formation of a new collective – a new imagined community transcending borders – but also set feminists off from other groups within society. The second chapter of this thesis will construe those areas of society with which the SocFem movement described conflict. Within the left, where the second feminist wave finds its origin, feminists were met with resistance against the method of the personal as the political was dismissed, and dismissal of the feminist fight.

The third chapter will shine light on what made second wave feminists address problems that prior had no name. Exploring those areas of life that had prior been dismissed, the SocFem women contributed in the creation of a new language to give names to their experiences. More important is perhaps the discourse that followed from the discussion within consciousness raising groups, facilitated by this new language. Second wave feminists instituted structures for discussion which transcended movements, and even borders. Through the production of articles, feminists contributed to an international discourse in print. This print-based discourse, including testimonies of feminists from throughout the transatlantic area, then enabled a new understanding of feminism, and posed new requirements for politics. Connecting the arguments of this thesis shows that putting the personal in the political did not only reshape feminism, but posed new perspectives on the confined definition of politics.

**Reclaiming the Personal**  
**The Influence of Consciousness Raising in the Netherlands From the Late 1960s**  
**Through 1980s on Feminism in the Transatlantic Area**

Murielle P. Posthuma

27 June 2022

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“It was much pleasanter at home,” thought poor Alice, “when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what *can* have happened to me! When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one—but I’m grown up now,” she added in a sorrowful tone, “at least there’s no room to grow up any more *here*.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

## Introduction

While my lovers think I am oversexed I feel chaste and cold. Only come sadly on my own when none of the three is there. None of them ever asks himself if I have as much pleasure in fucking him as he with me.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing her personal experiences and expressing disappointment in her relationships with men, Anja Meulenbelt struck an emotional cord for many women in her autobiographic novel *De Schaamte Voorbij* (published in English as *The Shame Is Over*).<sup>2</sup> In her novel, first published in 1977, she writes about her discomfort with the sexual revolution, the internalized misogyny in leftist groups and within herself, and the solidarity she felt after her first consciousness raising group with other women. Half a million copies were sold in eleven languages. Withholding little of her own sexual life and with great profanity, Meulenbelt gave women what they perhaps did not even know they missed: the personal in the political.

In 1967, Joke Smit – a Dutch feminist activist, author, and later politician for the Dutch Labour Party, the Partij van de Arbeid – ushered in the second feminist wave in the Netherlands when she published her book *Het onbehaven van de vrouw* (The Discontent of Women); so state Meulenbelt, Joyce Outshoorn and Selma Leydesdorff – all three socialist feminist activists – in their contribution to the Marxist periodical *Te Elfder Ure* (*At The Eleventh Hour*) in 1975.<sup>3</sup> In July 1968, Smit and some others established the Werkgroep 2000 (Working Group 2000), influenced by the book *The Feminine Mystique* by American author and feminist activist Betty Friedan.<sup>4</sup> The working group later evolved into the orderly women's emancipation organization Man Vrouw Maatschappij (Man Woman Society). More

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<sup>1</sup> A. Meulenbelt, *De schaamte voorbij* (Amsterdam, 1977), p. 114; Translation from A. Meulenbelt, *The Shame is Over: A Political Life*, transl. A. Oosthuizen (Lancaster, 1980), p. ?; For the citing Meulenbelt's *De Schaamte Voorbij* throughout this thesis, citations from *The Shame Is Over* are used. The references will refer to pages of the English book and include the original spelling and punctuation.

<sup>2</sup> Sven Vitse, 'De nieuwe lichting: Anja Meulenbelt en de mannenbevrijding in Nederland', *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2019), 231-51.

<sup>3</sup> A. Meulenbelt, J. Outshoorn and S. Leydesdorff, 'Feminisme in Nederland 1968-1975' in J. Outshoorn, A. Meulenbelt and S. Leydesdorff eds., *Te Elfder Ure* (Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 606-22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



feminist organizations in the Netherlands followed, like the profoundly outspoken Dolle Mina, well-known for its bold actions and purposefully cheeky attitude.

The origins of the reignited fire to fight for drastic changes in the relations between women and men laid within the New Left's civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In the Western world, the New Left called for more personal freedom on a whole range of subjects, including abortion, sexuality, and the relations between the sexes.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it distanced itself from the prior hegemonic Marxist notion in the left that class lay at the foundation of all (other) forms of oppression within society.<sup>7</sup> Deriving from the belief that a person's privilege or domination is dependent on multiple axes of oppression – including gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity – postmodern feminist scholars introduced intersectionality,<sup>8</sup> and challenged the duality of liberal feminism. In 1990, the political theorist and socialist feminist Iris Young first articulated the theory that structures of domination are to be understood as a result of social, institutional and historical structures that govern the behaviour of individuals, especially in relation to one another.<sup>9</sup> Key to this understanding of the different forms of oppressions between women from different classes and race, was the sharing of personal experiences as a method for second wave feminism.

Personal experiences gained a prominent position in feminism in the Transatlantic, as consciousness raising groups became increasingly prevalent within women's movements. In the Netherlands, consciousness raising groups first emerged in 1971, and consisted of six to twelve women that met regularly to discuss women's issues without a moderator.<sup>10</sup> Such groups already held a significant role in the women's movement in the United States, where it

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<sup>5</sup> E. D. Carmines and G. C. Layman, 'Issue Evolution in Postwar American Politics: Old Certainties and Fresh Tensions' in B. E. Shafer ed., *Present Discontents* (Chatham, 1997), pp. 89-134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> L. Gordon, "'Intersectionality'", *Socialist Feminism and Contemporary Activism: Musings by a Second-Wave Socialist Feminist*, *Gender & History*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2016), 340-57.

<sup>8</sup> K. Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1 (1989), 139-67.

<sup>9</sup> I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> S. Leydesdorff, A. Meulenbelt, and J. Outshoorn, 'Feminisme 1' in *Te Elfder Ure*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Amsterdam, 1975).

followed the example of *soul sessions* of black Americans and the *speak-bitterness meetings* in China during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976.<sup>11</sup> Kathie Sarachild, an American feminist, reflected on her own experiences with consciousness raising groups in the broader women's liberation movement; she articulated how in the late 1960s in the United States, consciousness raising had become the principal educational and organizational forms of the women's liberation movement.<sup>12</sup> Over time, the presence of consciousness raising groups in the transatlantic area increased, expanding both in numbers and geographically. As this shows, western second wave feminists were not the first to discuss their experiences in consciousness raising groups, nor did they hold sole ownership of addressing personal issues to dismantle patriarchal power structures.

What was new to the transatlantic area, was the discussion of personal experiences for political purpose. Whereas earlier feminists adopted approaches that addressed universal issues and opted to steer away from personal experiences and emotions, second wave feminism in the transatlantic area explored exactly those areas of the personal life. Sharing personal experiences allowed for drawing parallels, and uncovering subconscious mechanisms within the relations between women and men. Consciousness about the power structures inherent to society was a result of the realization that many of women's personal experiences were no isolated incidents, but collectively endured occurrences. The discussions within consciousness raising groups, thereby, led to the conclusion that the personal is political.

Meulenbelt was one of the frontrunners of the Dutch *SocFem* movement, a group of feminists in the socialist sphere that critically addressed the relations between women and men from the early 1970s through the 1980s. Before it grew into a movement, SocFem started as a consciousness raising group. Following the American example, the SocFem

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<sup>11</sup> Leydesdorff, Meulenbelt and Outshoorn, *Te Elfder Ure*.

<sup>12</sup> K. Sarachild, 'Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon' in Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement ed., *Feminist Revolution* (New York, 1975), pp. 144-50.

women were the first in the Netherlands to discuss their personal issues in consciousness raising groups to dismantle patriarchal power structures. This raises the question as to how socialist feminist ideologies travelled beyond borders, and even across the Atlantic Ocean, impacting national activism and politics in the transatlantic area. The research question central to this thesis therefore reads as follows: how did the personal approach to consciousness raising of the Dutch SocFem movement reshape feminism during the 1960s through 1980s? Studying the case of the Dutch SocFem movement of the late twentieth century and its key activists poses specific benefits for constructing a framework for the transnational relations that impacted the hegemonic model for socialist feminism in the transatlantic area. Additionally, it contributes to the scholarly debate on the role of bottom-up transnational exchanges that influenced the course of politics through addressing and ultimately changing the position of women in society. To answer the research question, this thesis will tackle three sub-questions, each of which is expanded on below.

*Het persoonlijke is politiek* (the personal is political) came to be the most famous slogan of second wave feminism, which ignited in the Netherlands in the late 1960s.<sup>13</sup> There, the slogan was first voiced in the 1970s, among others by the Dutch platform for women's emancipation Man Vrouw Maatschappij, established in October 1968.<sup>14</sup> This highlights the extent to which the international women's emancipation movements of the second wave were intertwined. Whereas women's movement researchers agree the slogan cannot be attributed to one person or group, 'the personal is political' was first published in 1970 in the United States as the title of an essay by Carol Hanisch. The essay formed part of the pamphlet *Notes from the Second Year*, edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt<sup>15</sup> – who, according to

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<sup>13</sup> S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Zipper and J. Outshoorn eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 10* (Amsterdam, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> M. van der Klein, S. E. Wieringa, S. E. ed.s, *Alles kon anders. Protestrepertoires in Nederland, 1965-2005* (Amsterdam, 2006)

<sup>15</sup> S. Firestone and A. Koedt eds., *Notes from the second year: women's liberation: major writings of the radical feminists* (New York 1970).

Hanisch, came up with the title.<sup>16</sup> In the essay, Hanisch highlights the way in which the discussions between women in consciousness raising groups resulted not only in the belief that personal problems are political problems, but also that consciousness raising groups are a form of political action.<sup>17</sup> Firestone's own article *Love*, also published in the widespread pamphlet, later became the text that Meulenbelt recalled as the one that 'converted' her to feminism.<sup>18</sup> This archival trail outlining the influence of interplay between distinct movements throughout the transatlantic area is an aspect that deserves further inquiry. The first chapter of this thesis will therefore aim to answer the question: How was feminism in the transatlantic area influenced by the spread of consciousness raising groups to the Netherlands during the second feminist wave? Using excerpts of documents that constitute the print-based collective discourse among socialist feminists of the second wave, I will paint the picture of how consciousness raising as a practice spread to and throughout feminist movements in the Netherlands from the early 1970s.

The source base retraces the history of consciousness raising groups, starting with Anja Meulentbelt's autobiographic novel. The other sources under analysis are works written and edited by the SocFem women, constituting the first Dutch print-based discourse on socialist feminism. The first source is the contribution to the Dutch Marxist journal *Te Elfder Ure* (At The Eleventh Hour) in 1975, which attempted to ignite the discussion on the position of women in a capitalist society in the Netherlands. The largest chunk of the primary sources under analysis consists of the eleven volumes of the *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten* (further referred to as 'the volumes') produced by the SocFem women, some of which also contributed to the articles of *Te Elfder Ure*, published between 1978 and 1987. Analysis of volumes allows for constructing a framework to understand how the movements and works

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<sup>16</sup> C. Hanisch, 'The Personal Is Political', introduction to 'The Personal Is Political' in *Notes from the second year: women's liberation: major writings of the radical feminists*, (2006), 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> A. Meulenbelt, 'Het persoonlijke is politiek: Een ooggetuigenverslag', *Leidschrift*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2015), 137-48.

influenced activists, thereby determining the course of the feminist movement and influencing national politics. Together, the sources cover the two decades that governed the second wave in the Netherlands, from the late 1960s through the 1980s. On top of that, an interview with Anja Meulenbelt was conducted to gain first-hand experiences and offer context to the written sources to provide insight in the ways in which the Dutch SocFem movement has been influenced/has influenced other movements in the transatlantic area.

The source base contains testimonies of SocFem activists that provide not only insight in how their feminist ideologies and activist forms developed, but also in how those developments conflicted with other movements and groups in society. The second chapter of this thesis therefore provides an answer to the question: in what ways did the SocFem movement conflict with other parts of society? Providing a rich historiography of the movement and their own experiences as feminists, the SocFem activists share how the issues they voiced were dismissed by the left, and how the feminist fight itself went unacknowledged during the second feminist wave. Furthermore,

Consecutively, I will dive into the creation of the print-based collective discourse and its implications for feminism from the 1960s through the 1980s, which will be the focus of the third and final chapter of this thesis. Whereas First Wave feminism, from circa 1850 till 1940, was highly nationalized, feminists of the second wave established structures for transnational debates.<sup>19</sup> Influenced by the revelations of their consciousness raising groups, many activists throughout the transatlantic area explored ways to connect with feminists of other movements and countries, and establish a debate on feminism transcending national boundaries. This gives rise to the third sub-question: How did the personal approach to consciousness raising reshape feminism during the second feminist wave? By reflecting on the archival sources and oral testimonies with the literature on identity building, the third

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<sup>19</sup> K. Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950* (Stanford, 2000).

chapter of this thesis will reflect on the ways in implemented structures for feminist discussion that transcended movements contributed to a transatlantic feminist identity. Each chapter thereby explores a new way in which feminist identity was challenged by reform of the movement and external influences. It was the newly found understanding of personal experiences as political that urged for new forms of feminism, and a new transatlantic feminist identity in the late twentieth century. The SocFem activists called for an even further development: a new understanding of politics – one in which the personal and the political are no longer divided.

## I. Raising consciousness

Following her feminist awakening incited by the American pamphlets in the early 1970s, the then 26-year-old Meulenbelt turned to women she knew; two colleagues she had prior overlooked for their more interesting spouses.<sup>20</sup> One of them, who had just returned from the United States, mentioned that in the US, women gathered in small groups to discuss everyday problems. Giddily, Meulenbelt and her women acquaintances decided to start a group themselves as well, a discussion group ('praatgroep' in Dutch) as it was referred to more generally at the time in the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> They gave it the ironic name 'damesklubje' (the women's little club).<sup>22</sup> This group would later multiply, and be called the SocFem groups – which came to be a prominent Dutch socialist feminist movement. The founding of this discussion group, later evolving into an entire socialist feminist movement, highlights the influence of the interplay between distinct women's movements in the transatlantic area. This raises the question I will aim to answer in this chapter: How was feminism in the transatlantic area influenced by the spread of consciousness raising groups to the Netherlands during the second feminist wave? I will follow the personal narrative of Anja Meulenbelt to uncover the manners in which socialist feminists in the transatlantic area influenced one another from the 1960s through 1980s.

### **'The start of a whole other kind of feminism'**

As Meulenbelt, Outshoorn and Leydesdorff note in *Te Elfder Ure*, the first consciousness raising groups formed in the Netherlands in 1971.<sup>23</sup> Some groups split off from established feminist organizations, two from Dolle Mina and two from Man Vrouw Maatschappij (MVM); another group was established as part of the organization COC Nederland – a Dutch

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<sup>20</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij* (1977), p. 148.

<sup>21</sup> Dutch sources have been translated into English throughout; all translations are my own except where stated.

<sup>22</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij*, p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> Leydesdorff, Meulenbelt and Outshoorn, *Te Elfder Ure*.

interest group established under the name the Shakespeareclub in 1946 as an advocate for gay men, lesbian women and social emancipation.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, one group was founded independently from established organizations, the women's little club. Whereas the latter is not mentioned by name in the contributions to the Marxist journal, the reference to that group being the women's little club can be traced back with a reflective article of Meulenbelt in 2015:

I met up with a few friends and started one discussion group as well. Only to find out [Man Vrouw Maatschappij] also started with what they called 'goose board groups', and after great resistance of the men in Dolle Mina there, too, the first consciousness raising groups were formed. There appeared that a group of lesbian women from COC also came together. That was in 1971.<sup>25</sup>

Meulenbelt, here, reiterates how the women's little club started independent of established women's movements, only to find out other groups had also formed. Meulenbelt, Outshoorn and Leydesdorff attributed the forming of consciousness raising groups within and outside feminist organizations to the limited possibilities organized feminism offered and activists' discontent with the male dominance within the organizations:

The emergence of the first consciousness raising groups follows around 1971, partially out of rejection of the overorganized emancipation groups, in which there is no place to talk about own experiences, partially out of resistance against the in the groups present men, who are too eager to pose the 'right' analysis, and partially from a need to in a calm manner figure out the issues women have in common.<sup>26</sup>

This citation highlights this discontent of some activists with the state of affairs within overorganized emancipation groups, referring to Man Vrouw Maatschappij, and the presence of too eager men, a discontent also prevalent in their recollection of a Dolle Mina congress.

The congress was highly chaotic: it was bursting with resolutions, order proposals etcetera, and that all in the well-known mass meeting style from that time, in which only those with a big mouth got to talk, and at that time that were in Dolle Mina primarily men.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> E. van Alphen, 'Ethiek is politiek', *Tijdschrift voor genderstudies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2015), 179-95.

<sup>25</sup> Meulenbelt, 'Het persoonlijke is politiek: Een ooggetuigenverslag' (2015), p. 139, 'Ik zocht een paar vriendinnen bij elkaar en begon er ook een. Om te merken dat ook MVM was begonnen met wat ze 'ganzenbordgroepen' noemden, en dat na grote weerstanden van de mannen binnen Dolle Mina ook daar de eerste praatgroepen werden gevormd. Er bleek ook nog een groep van lesbische vrouwen van het COC bij elkaar te komen. Dat was in 1971.'

<sup>26</sup> Meulenbelt, Outshoorn and Leydesdorff, 'Feminisme in Nederland 1968-1975', p. 615.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 612.



Some women who felt out of place in the established organizational structures thus gathered in consciousness raising groups. These groups allowed women to take up more space in the discussion, and explore topics at their own pace. What distinguished the women's little club from the other consciousness raising groups was their tolerant approach; they allowed discussion of personal experiences.

It is the beginning of June 2022 when I visit Anja Meulenbelt in her senior flat in Amsterdam. The 77-year-old author of fifty books – and counting – frantically waves her hand above her head full of white curls when she sees me across the gallery. Books of Simone de Beauvoir and Joke Smit, carefully placed with their cover forward, draw attention in the seemingly endless stacks of books. They fill up the flat and cover a wide range of topics including feminism, racism, politics, and religion. Sitting opposite of me, with bowls of biscuits and Easter eggs between us, she tells me that she has feminism to thank for her life as an author. She recalls that the sessions of the women's little club incited the feeling that the women had something urgent to tell, which she dedicated her life to. Discussions of the women's little club, and later the SocFem groups, brought forward a wide range of themes regarding the relations between women and men. Meulenbelt devoted this to the freedom of the women to discuss any matter they wanted to during the sessions:

The agreement was: we can talk about everything that's bothering us, and it's all confidential. We don't judge. And you don't have to be right. We just pick a theme, that could be sexuality one time and the household another time, and we go off.<sup>28</sup>

This agreement allowed the women to discuss topics that at that time were not being discussed anywhere, from being unable to orgasm from penetrative sex to insecurities they

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<sup>28</sup> A. Meulenbelt interview, 9 June 2022, Amsterdam, 'De afspraak was: we mogen het overall over hebben wat ons dwars zit en we uh hoeve, uh ons en t is altijd allemaal vertrouweljk. Beoordelen niet. Uh, je hoeft geen gelijk te hebben, maar we gaan gewoon. We kiezen elke keer een thema en de ene keer was het seksualiteit en de andere keer was t huishouden.', p. 50.; Excerpts of the interview have been translated throughout. All translations are my own.

had about their bodies.<sup>29</sup> They felt a sense of identification in each other's insecurities about having 'a weird butt' or changes to their bodies after breastfeeding, and recognition in their often shared experiences of partner violence.<sup>30</sup> Despite the heaviness of some topics, the atmosphere in the consciousness raising groups was light-hearted, so Meulenbelt reminisces:

We were laughing so hard. It was such a party. It was like everyone had been waiting until they finally got the opportunity to tell what had been bothering them.<sup>31</sup>

The women's approach led to a range of revelations that Meulenbelt scribbled down in a little notebook, which is now part of the archive of Atria, a Dutch knowledge institute for emancipation and women's history. Reflecting on why she chose to document the sessions, Meulenbelt said she quickly realized that something historically important was happening. The discussion of personal experiences in her consciousness raising group, Meulenbelt remarks, 'was the start of a whole other kind of feminism.'<sup>32</sup>

### **Becoming conscious**

The process of becoming conscious of the ways in which society governed the private lives of women and men started vocalizing all those experiences that were previously rarely left unsaid. Within consciousness raising groups, discussion of what had prior been considered private affairs allowed women to give meaning to what had hitherto seemed to be personal and isolated events. This is apparent in Meulenbelt's recollection in *The Shame Is Over*:

I remembered my black eye for the first time when I interviewed two women from *Blijf van m'n Lijf* (Women's Aid). The rape only when I talked with my consciousness raising group. Experiences that had no name, which I had experienced in such isolation that they remained buried in my subconscious.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Meulenbelt interview, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 'rare billen', p. 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 'We moesten ook zo lachen. Het was ook zo'n feest van uh uh. Dus het was net alsof iedereen zat te wachten tot eindelijk nou eens een keertje de kans kreeg om gewoon te vertellen wat je allemaal dwars zat.', p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Dus uh, dat was eigenlijk het begin van een heel ander soort feminisme.', p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Meulenbelt, *The Shame Is Over: A Political Life Story*, p. 49.

Not only does Meulenbelt in the above-mentioned citation recall that hearing experiences of other women made her realize her own abuse, she also states that prior to such discussion, her experiences ‘had no name.’ Within consciousness raising groups, women who felt isolated in society found comfort in numbers. Mutual recognition through discussion legitimized their experiences. On top of that, they started to create a vocabulary, which was vital to express the mistreatment women experienced. This way, the discussion groups allowed for placing experiences and behaviour in a broader perspective and creating terms that made it possible to address them. To Meulenbelt, this is what it meant to become conscious.

What happened to us has a name now. Consciousness-raising, we call it, this other way of seeing through which our whole life is turned upside down, through which we begin to understand our past differently. And we call it de-conditioning. Because while we are becoming conscious of the way women are treated in our world, we see at the same time that we have not remained undamaged, that our self image is imposed on us, that we keep ourselves small because of the standards which we ourselves have internalised.<sup>34</sup>

As this citation highlights, the consciousness they gained not only affected the way in which they understood the relations between women and men, but their perception of themselves as well. As products of their environment, women were not exempted from being prejudiced about other women, and themselves. Women’s prejudice towards other women and themselves was one of the things that struck Meulenbelt after reading *Notes of the Second Year*. In her novel, she writes that she barely knew any women to go to, because she had long thought that she, in a way, was better than other women.<sup>35</sup>

This prejudice towards women and men’s issues provides an explanation for why the women chose to give their discussion group an ironic name. When I asked Meulenbelt about the name, the women's little club, she reacted puzzled. She had forgotten about that name, she said.<sup>36</sup> After giving it some thought, she ascribed the use of irony to self-protection. ‘At that moment, when we started with it, we couldn’t explain why we thought it was important

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<sup>34</sup> Meulenbelt, *The Shame Is Over: A Political Life Story*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij* (1977).

<sup>36</sup> Meulenbelt interview, p. 52.

either,' so Meulenbelt explained the discomfort the women felt when they had to explain to their boyfriends and husbands why they met up every week, and what they did.<sup>37</sup> Her tone changed when she reflected on talking about the discussion group to men in comparison to her excitement over the groups itself. To their partners' curiosity as to what they were doing, she answered 'talking about you,'<sup>38</sup> followed by a cynical laugh. The change of tone illustrates her discomfort with explaining this new occupation, which came up even talking about it all those years later. The discomfort highlights the complexity of laying bare the mistreatment and suppression of women in the relations between women and men, relations in which all women in the group were involved, be it with a partner or single.

The consciousness gained in the discussion group sessions affected how they perceived these relations, and the power imbalance that governed them. Discussing the personal experiences were crucial for creating this understanding. As Meulenbelt phrases it in her novel:

Pieces of the puzzle fall into place. I begin to see patterns...  
...We [are not] crazy, I say. Or if we are, we are all in it together.<sup>39</sup>

Women, sometimes for the first time in their lives, entered friendships and relationships with other women through consciousness raising groups. For Meulenbelt, the women's little club made her realize she was not alone, and see women no longer as less than men. And like that, isolated individuals became a collective; isolated experiences became patterns of suppression. Understanding the political nature of personal experiences marked the start of this other kind of feminism, which held place for personal experiences. Consciousness raising groups proved to be a viable vessel for generating an understanding of the ways in which the personal life was impacted by the political choices.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, '...wij konden op dat moment, toen we daarmee begonnen, ook nog niet uitleggen waarom we dat zo belangrijk vonden.', p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> Meulenbelt interview, 'praten over jullie', p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Meulenbelt, *The Shame Is Over*, p. 142.

Yet, for many of the socialist feminist activists, consciousness raising groups were not the final stop on their road to revolutionizing the relations between women and men. Discontent with the lack of development through consciousness raising groups, many feminists sought out new forms for feminist activism.

The consciousness raising group approach quickly deflated. (...) After a year, you would be over the outpourings, and rose the question as to what else you wanted.<sup>40</sup>

Several socialist feminist activists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean believed that the increasingly widespread approach to consciousness raising groups was insufficient in itself to gain equality in the relations between women and men. Activists, either grown bored with the monotony of consciousness raising groups or aiming to voice their need for a more inclusive feminism, turned to putting their experiences as women and as feminists into writing. Characteristic for the second wave feminists became the great and collective efforts of activists throughout the transatlantic area to contribute to the creation of an understanding of feminism and feminist movements through first-hand testimonies. A print-based collective space, a term posed by Brian Norman in his study of feminist dialogue, succeeded the consciousness raising groups, both chronologically and in its influential nature.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the consciousness raising groups gave words to events for the women in those groups, the reflections on those discussions in print allowed an ever greater group of women to extend their lexicon and partake in discussions.

### **Joining the transatlantic print-based discourse**

In the Netherlands, the first effort to put knowledge of the consciousness raising groups into writing was *De Vrouwenkrant* (The Women's Paper), composed by the ex-Dolle Mina

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<sup>40</sup> Meulenbelt, *Het persoonlijke is politiek. Een ooggetuigenverslag* (2015), p. 144.

<sup>41</sup> B. Norman, 'The Consciousness-Raising Document, Feminist Anthologies, and Black Women in "Sisterhood Is Powerful"', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2006), 38-64.

women who had joined the women's little club.<sup>42</sup> The women from the women's little club continued to contribute to the paper, and later contributed to books, leaflets, posters and postcards from the feminist publishing company De Bonte Was founded in 1974.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, women from the SocFem groups wrote fourteen articles for the Marxist journal *Te Elfder Ure* and, as mentioned earlier, produced eleven volumes of articles on women's issues. All these documents are part of the second wave feminist print-based collective discourse, which to a great extent consisted of reflections, experiences, and insights from consciousness raising groups.<sup>44</sup>

The eleven volumes offer exceptional archival sources for studying the second feminist wave, for the periodicals were the first regularly published results from collective feminists efforts. Over 200 pages each and with pink and purple-toned covers, the volumes provide a rich source for analysing both the SocFem activists' perspectives as the course of their actions during the second feminist wave. In 1978, the first volume was published, edited by SocFem women Selma Sevenhuijsen, Joyce Outshoorn, and Anja Meulenbelt. The editorial office would remain more or less the same, only Meulenbelt left the office after the seventh volume was published. The fifth volume was not edited by the regular editors, but by guest editors from the Vrouwengroep Anthropologie Amsterdam (Women's Group Anthropology Amsterdam). The total number of authors that contributed to the volumes exceeded one-hundred. The volumes consist of papers on feminist topics, the historiography of the movement, and reflections on the movement, and served three important functions for the evolution of feminism during the second feminist wave.

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<sup>42</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij*, p. 163.

<sup>43</sup> Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History, 'Publishing company De Bonte Was', *Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History*, <https://institute-genderequality.org/news-publications/feminism/feminism-20th-century/publishing-company-de-bonte-was/>, (accessed 20 May 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Norman, 'The Consciousness-Raising Document, Feminist Anthologies, and Black Women in "Sisterhood Is Powerful"'.

First, the extensive source base created by the SocFem women served as an extension of the confined consciousness raising groups, reaching and including knowledge of a more diverse set of actors than found within the homogenous groups. Through the volumes, the gained knowledge of the relations between women and men from the consciousness raising groups could be disseminated amongst a wider population. As Sevenhuijsen, Outshoorn and Meulenbelt wrote in the preface to the first volume, published in 1978, the purpose of the volumes is to provide theoretical material to stimulate the discussion on feminism and socialism, and to show the complexity of the position of women.<sup>45</sup> In the preface to the third volume, they add to this:

We theorize because anger alone is not sufficient to change suppression. (...) We have a need for more insight in all the mechanisms that keep us suppressed, inside and outside ourselves, and how they relate. Suppression does not only take place in our 'private life', neither only in that part of existence that the left has defined as political, the wage labour, the control by the state.<sup>46</sup>

To do so, the volumes include not only testimonies of SocFem women, but also translated articles by activists from other countries and stories of women not involved with the movement. Interviews with trade union women in the fourth volume, published in 1980, and with Turkish women in the Netherlands in the fifth volume, published in 1981, are examples of the ways in which they included experiences of women from beyond the SocFem movement in their knowledge distribution.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, the printed sources not only transcended the limited consciousness raising groups and even movements; through the inclusion of translations of international sources, they also acted as a bridge between international feminist movements. They translated

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<sup>45</sup> S. Sevenhuijsen, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 1* (Amsterdam, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt, *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 3* (Amsterdam, 1979) p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> L. Kroon, 'De Rooie Vrouwen: Feminisme en sociaal-democratie' in S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 4* (Amsterdam, 1980); L. Brouwer, 'Sinds ik hier ben lach ik niet meer: Turkse vrouwen in haar land van herkomst en in Nederland' in Vrouwengroep Anthropologie Amsterdam ed., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 5* (Amsterdam, 1981).

foreign sources to be understood for Dutch women and reflected on these contributions of foreign feminist activists and movements to the international print-based discourse. The first time a translation of an international source was included in the volumes was in the third SocFem volume, published in 1979. The articles in this volume included a Dutch translation of an essay by Chris Iles reflecting the historiography of the women's movement, based on the book 'Women's Body, Women's right: A Social History of Birth Control in America' by the American feminist and historian Linda Gordon.<sup>48</sup>

Originating from a 'New Left', which is now a few decades old, a new socialist movement for women's liberation now started to formulate slowly and by trial and error a programme for the demands regarding sexuality and reproduction.<sup>49</sup>

This way, the SocFem women opted not to reinvent the wheel, but to build on prior knowledge produced by feminist activists. The subsequent article in the volume contains remarks by Outshoorn on the article by Linda Gordon. Outshoorn reflects on the distinctions between the emergence of the Dutch and the American women's movement in relation to the national movements for birth control and attitudes towards sexuality. She concludes that the women's movements did not emerge in a one-on-one comparable fashion. Through the volumes, the SocFem activists contributed to the discourse in which feminism and its movements were reevaluated in a transatlantic context. By including novel knowledge, international sources, and reflections on these sources, the volumes contributed to the Transnational print-based discourse and acted as a small-scale print-based discourse in itself.

Thirdly, contributions to the shared print-based discourse constituted political acts in their own right. Reflecting on the production of the SocFem volumes, Meulenbelt emphasizes that politics is not restricted to politicians:

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<sup>48</sup> L. Gordon, *Women's Body, Women's right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York City, 1976).

<sup>49</sup> C. Iles, 'De strijd voor vrijheid van reproductie: drie stadia van het feminisme' in S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 3* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 36-59.



Most people see politics as party politics, but I believe working for a better society already is politics. Not just looking at your own development, but looking at where do we want to go, and how are we going to do that? And with whom we do that? And what is the strategy? I believe all of that is politics, so I believe writing books is politics too.<sup>50</sup>

This way, the SocFem activists' incited the start of another kind of feminism, based on consciousness raising following American example, and exerted their anger in political action. They produced volumes theorizing that the personal is political, included a wide range of actors in the production thereof, and aimed at a public bigger and more heterogenous than the actors engaged in the limited consciousness raising groups.

## **Conclusion**

Following Joke Smit's *Man Vrouw Maatschappij* and *Dolle Mina*, consciousness raising groups in the Netherlands explored a new territory of feminism during the second feminist wave. The SocFem women, being the first to discuss personal experiences in a consciousness raising group, aimed to explore the patterns of suppressions in society in order to address them. What makes these groups such an important aspect for studying second wave feminist movements, is the print-based collective discourse that resulted from it. *The Shame Is Over* and the eleven volumes produced constitute primary examples of Dutch sources within a transatlantic print-based discourse. Besides being political actions in their own right, the sources to constitute the print-based collective space allowed for generating a discourse in which feminist ideologies could develop on a transnational scale eminently fast, and with great consequences for societies in the transatlantic area. It led to novel, influential views on the relations between women and men by discussing shared experiences. By analysing the sources base, this chapter aims to give an answer to the question 'How was feminism in the

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<sup>50</sup> Meulenbelt interview, 'Dus de meeste mensen zien politiek als partijpolitiek, maar ik vind het al bezig zijn met een betere maatschappij. Niet alleen maar kijken naar je eigen ontwikkeling, maar kijken naar waar willen we heen en hoe gaan we dat? En met wie doen we dat? En wat is strategie? Dat vind ik allemaal politiek, dus ik vind mij boeken schrijven ook politiek', p. 52.

transatlantic area influenced by the spread of consciousness raising groups to the Netherlands during second feminist wave?’

The emergence of consciousness raising groups in the transatlantic area in the late 1960s and early 1970s facilitated the spread of feminist ideology within small groups. The discussion of personal stories in discussion groups allowed for new perspectives on the relations between women and men, and the integration of the personal experiences into their understanding of societal patterns. Following the revelations of those discussions, activists throughout the transatlantic area took their efforts to writing down their findings. It was this construction of a print-based collective discourse between the 1970s and 1980s that facilitated a critical shift in feminist identity that incorporated personal experience into political discourse, a shift that deeply marked second wave feminism. Consciousness raising and spreading, first through small groups and later through a transatlantic discourse, thereby fundamentally changed feminism and the historiography of its movements, which were prior confined within national borders. Yet, breaking with socialist and feminist conventions did not happen without conflict; efforts of the SocFem activists were met with a lot of resistance of other groups within society, and other feminist movements.

## II. Us versus them

In her flat in Amsterdam, Meulenbelt describes an overwhelming feeling of fellowship when reflecting on the years that marked the onset of the second feminist wave in the Netherlands, the late 1960s and early 1970s:

To me, the honeymoon phase was thinking that women were so pleasant. And how amazing it was that we found each other. And that now, we would get the great unity.<sup>51</sup>

That great unity, however, stayed elusive. In the mid 1970s, feminism in the Netherlands had evolved into a highly fragmented landscape. Feminist groups were divided by their ideology, sexuality, race, aims for the movement, and even strategy. The volumes show the internal struggles of women within the movement and the conceptualization of feminism during the second feminist wave, and especially regarding the place of personal experiences in the movement. It is important to understand the anomaly of discussing personal matters, as it was something first wave feminists as well as many second wave feminists steered clear from, and was especially frowned upon by leftist men. This chapter therefore aims to answer the question ‘In what ways did the SocFem movement conflict with other parts of society?’ to uncover the ways in which the SocFem women clashed with other groups by breaking with the conventional ways of feminism and socialist groups.

### Dividing feminists

Despite the advantages of the personal approach to consciousness raising for feminism posed by the SocFem activists, personal experiences were not discussed in all feminist consciousness raising groups. In her biographic novel, Meulenbelt recalls how the approach of her discussion group made them feel alienated from other groups:

It surely seems that it is becoming a movement.

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<sup>51</sup> Meulenbelt interview, ‘Voor mij waren de witte broodsdagen dat ik dacht van wat zijn vrouwen enig. En wat is het geweldig dat we elkaar vinden. En nu krijgen we de grote saamhorigheid.’, p. 51-2.

It begins with a phone call from a woman who says she is also in a women's group and do we want to come over to meet them. A group that has walked out of Dolle Mina, the first feminist action group, because they aren't allowed to talk about their own experiences there. More women like us!<sup>52</sup>

This citation highlights how slowly more women felt the desire to discuss their personal experiences, and distanced themselves from organized feminist movements to join the growing women's little club for their method. The personal approach to consciousness raising slowly gained traction among more feminist activists. However, the exclamatory remark paints the picture of the gap growing between different feminists: they who discussed personal experiences, the 'women like us', versus they who did not. In such a manner, diverging norms for feminist activism created divisions between the groups.

Yet, the diversity of the Dutch feminist landscape from the 1960s through 1980s itself was not considered bad for the feminist cause. The SocFem women showed optimism about the ways in which the divided feminist movements could contribute to the feminist fight. In fact, the diversity of the women's movement is even regarded as one of the most valuable principles, if not the most valuable principle, by Monique Corten and Annemiek Onstenk in their contribution to the sixth volume.

And because there is not one right theory on how to organize, women's groups are able to develop their own organization forms, depending on the kind of activities they engage in, and in the process these can change. The openness regarding organization forms is perhaps one of the most important organizational principle of the feminist movement.<sup>53</sup>

As this citation shows, it is the tolerance of different activities and organizational forms that enables the women's movement to change for what is needed at that place and moment in time.

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<sup>52</sup> Meulenbelt, *The Shame Is Over* (1980), p. 152.

<sup>53</sup> M. Corten and A. Onstenk, 'Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten: Een feministiese kritiek op leninistische organisatieprincipes' in S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministiese Teksten 6* (Amsterdam, 1981), p. 99, 'En doordat er niet één juiste theorie is over hoe je je hoort te organiseren is het ook mogelijk dat vrouwengroepen eigen organisatievormen ontwikkelen, afhankelijk van het soort activiteiten waar ze mee bezig zijn, en al doende kunnen deze veranderen. De openheid ten aanzien van organisatievormen is wellicht een van de belangrijkste organisatieprincipes van de feministische beweging.'

Furthermore, the volumes emphasize the importance of diverse feminist organizational forms and activist practices for societal change. In the fourth volume, Liesbeth Kroon points out the advantages of a diverse feminist landscape in her article on feminism and social-democracy:

A discussion group for consciousness raising has another purpose and uses other methods than an action group, even though activism can't go without consciousness raising and consciousness raising cannot establish societal change.<sup>54</sup>

In this excerpt, Kroon emphasizes how feminist methods could be used for diverse purposes, but she also expresses the limitations of the isolated methods. Especially, she addresses consciousness raising's inability to create societal change. According to her, consciousness raising groups alone, of which many had sprouted in the early 1970s, would not bring forth societal change; let alone the revolution in the relations between women and men many feminist activists were aiming for. She argued that for this, feminist groups have to cooperate, focussing on the ways in which individual groups could contribute to the feminist aims:

One of the strengths of the women's movement is that it consists of many organizational forms besides one another, of women who are active on various fronts and in different ways. Yet, if we work besides one another, are disconnected, and don't analyse what the different groups can contribute to achieving common feminist aims, this can also be a weakness.<sup>55</sup>

In this citation, Kroon points out the possibilities of the fragmented Dutch feminist movement. Different feminist groups could contribute differently to the fight for the feminist cause, connection among them would be feminism's strength. However, she states that weak connections between movements and lack of recognition of each other's values could be feminism's pitfall, which proved the case for Dutch second wave feminists.

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<sup>54</sup> Kroon, 'De Rooie Vrouwen', p. 67.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Een van de sterke kanten van de vrouwenbeweging is dat ze bestaat uit vele organisatievormen naast elkaar, uit vrouwen die op verschillende fronten en verschillende wijzen actief zijn. Maar dit kan ook een zwakte zijn als we naast elkaar en langs elkaar heen werken zonder te analyseren wat de verschillende groepen wel en niet kunnen bijdragen aan de verwezenlijking van de gezamenlijke feministische doelen.'

Rather than valuing each other's contributions to the second feminist wave, the groups were often in conflict with one another. Meulenbelt mentions many feminists groups in *The Shame Is Over* – lesbian feminists, radical feminists, Marxist feminists – frequently pictured in conflict with one another. The groups dismissed and even ridiculed one another for their relations to politics, their conservative or rather too radical ideology, and for addressing personal experiences. In her novel, Meulenbelt recalls a conference of Man Vrouw Maatschappij in which the radical lesbian feminist action group Paarse September (Purple September), was ridiculed. As part of a cabaret performance, a satirical song was sung, mocking lesbian women.<sup>56</sup>

A remarkable stance from the Paarse September group, which evolved out of the discussion group Purperen Mien (Purple Mien), was that they believed that it to be a political choice to be lesbian. 'I just thought that was nonsense,'<sup>57</sup> said Meulenbelt sitting at the dinner table, who at a certain point herself was in a relationship with another woman. She stretched her arm out besides her and clenched her fist. 'We stood there hand in hand shouting back at the women from Paarse September, who said that it's a political choice. "Don't insult me," I said, "surely, I am not with her to make my political homework?"'<sup>58</sup> This illustrates how ideology and norms for feminist activism divided feminist groups, sometimes leading to heated conflict. But it weren't just feminist activists among which a gap had become visible in the Netherlands between the late 1960s and 1980s.

### **The unfinished revolution**

Not only did other feminist groups frown upon the discussion of personal experiences for political purpose, but especially socialist men resisted this feminist development during the

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<sup>56</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij*, 1977.

<sup>57</sup> Meulenbelt interview, '...maar dat vond ik onzin', p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Wij stonden echt hand en hand terug te schreeuwen tegen die dames van de paarse september die zeiden dat is een politieke keuze. Ik zei beledig me niet. Ik ga toch niet met haar om om mijn politieke huiswerk te maken? Toevallig vind ik haar de leukste vrouw van de wereld en zij mij...?'

second feminist wave. In their contributions to *Te Elfder Ure*, the SocFem women claimed that a gap had grown between feminists and socialist groups. The preface to the Marxist magazine reads:

The gap that in practice has grown between feminists and socialist groups can only be closed after we recognize its existence. It is being said, and it is true, that women and men eventually will have to fight together for a better society. But before we get there, we have to be listened to. Solidarity cannot be a one-way street.<sup>59</sup>

In this, they recognized the existence of a division between feminist and organized socialism. More importantly, they acknowledged inequalities within these movements, claiming that solidarity at that moment was a one-way street.

In socialist groups, women were often asked to be in solidarity with men, and focus their efforts solely on the class fight, not on issues that could potentially be less beneficial for men. Women were accused of creating the breach in the Left by addressing the power imbalances between women and men, from which lower-class men benefited from as well.<sup>60</sup> In the sixth volume, published in 1981, Monique Corten and Annemiek Onstenk dedicated an article to reflections on the position of women within the Leninist party. Questioning the relations between women and men had to be limited within the party, they stated, as the party had to remain a unity. Those who created factions were hurting the class fight.<sup>61</sup> Women were expected to hold off their own fight, and support the working men in their fight against class-divisions. On this subject, Sevenhuijsen wrote the following in her article on the feminism in practice in the third volume, published in 1979:

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<sup>59</sup> Leydesdorff, Meulenbelt, and Outshoorn, *Te Elfder Ure*, p. 2, 'De kloof die in de praktijk is gegroeid tussen feministen en socialistiese groepen kan alleen gedicht worden als we eerst het bestaan ervan erkennen. Er wordt gezegd, en het is waar, dat vrouwen en mannen uiteindelijk toch samen moeten strijden voor een betere maatschappij. Maar voor we zover zijn zal er eerst naar ons geluisterd moeten worden. Solidariteit kan geen eenrichtingsverkeer zijn.'

<sup>60</sup> Corten and Onstenk, 'Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten'.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

It was said to distract women from politics and thereby undermine the ‘real fight’. That consciousness could just as well be gained through reading the right books. It is in fact the leftist male norms for politics and theory that play us part here. It is undoubtedly many men’s fear of emotions, which may be awakened in a small group, that plays a role in this. Yet, matters like these meanwhile do preserve the division between the personal and the political, which feminism constantly breaches through, within the Left as well.<sup>62</sup>

In this citation, Sevenhuijsen reiterated the dismissal of the feminist fight, and its alligated undermining of the class fight. She, however, accused men themselves of creating divisions amongst the Left, based on their norms for politics and theory. She emphasized how these norms that govern which topics were seen as political, and how the fight could be fought, acted against feminist efforts.

The resistance of established socialist groups against the approach of the SocFem women was not new. Twice in the volumes, a conversation between Vladimir Lenin and German communist Clara Zetkin in 1920 was cited, in which Lenin voiced his disappointment with Zetkin:

Your list of sins, Clara, is still longer. I was told that questions of sex and marriage are the main subjects dealt with in the reading and discussion evenings of women comrades. They are the chief subject of interest, of political instruction and education. I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard it (...) The situation in Germany itself requires the greatest possible concentration of all proletarian, revolutionary forces (...) But working women comrades discuss sexual problems and the question of forms of marriage.<sup>63</sup>

In this conversation, Lenin condemned Zetkin for addressing personal experiences in her efforts; efforts which, according to him, should have been aimed only at the class struggle. According to Meulenbelt, however, the dismissal of the feminist cause goes back even

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<sup>62</sup> S. Sevenhuijsen, ‘De Praktijk van de Theorie’ in Sevenhuijsen, de Vries, Outshoorn and Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 3*, p. 20; ‘Het zou vrouwen zelfs afhouden van de politiek en daarmee de ‘echte strijd’ ondermijnen. Bewustwording zou net zou goed voort kunnen komen uit het lezen van de juiste boeken. In feite zijn het de linkse mannennormen over politiek en theorie, die ons hier parten spelen. Op de achtergrond speelt ongetwijfeld de angst van veel mannen voor emoties, die los komen in een kleine groep, een rol. Door dit soort zaken wordt ondertussen wel de scheiding tussen het persoonlijke en het politieke, die het feminisme steeds doorbreekt, ook binnen links in stand gehouden.’, p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> A. Meulenbelt, ‘Over politiek bewustzijn en de kwestie met de “mannelijkheid”’ in Sevenhuijsen, Outshoorn and Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 1*, p. 95; Corten and Ostenk, ‘Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten’, pp. 93-4, translation from *Marxists.org*, accessible at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>



further: to Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. Meulenbelt goes so far as to say that Marx could not have produced what he has without benefiting from the free – and unappreciated – labour of women around him:

Marx was right, but he left out a piece of the process. He talked about labour power, which people sell if they have no property (...) and what he completely overlooked, which was perfectly possible for him to have noticed if he had looked around in his own family, is that his labour power was reproduced by two women: a permanent housekeeper and his wife. And that he had two more daughters to babysit and work as secretary. And that he had uncle Engels to care for the money. It never occurred to him that he could have never created his masterpiece if he didn't have a whole team around him.<sup>64</sup>

Not only were women thus asked to leave their personal experiences out of their political efforts, the contributions of women to society were ignored by even the greatest leftist thinkers.

This shows that leftist men had a longer history of dismissing not only personal experiences in their political endeavours, but also the feminist cause as distinct from the class struggle. Additionally, it provides further support for the argument that second wave feminists were not the first to discuss personal experiences. Despite efforts from the left to keep the personal out of the political, feminists established discussing personal experiences as a method for feminism during the 1960s through 1980s. This method led the SocFem women to their first revelation, stated Meulenbelt: 'that what we call domestic labour, and often thus don't call labour, is actually labour and contributes to society and to capitalism.'<sup>65</sup> The understanding of domestic labour as valuable labour was thereby a direct result of discussing personal experiences in consciousness raising groups. It was an insight that was gained by

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<sup>64</sup> Meulenbelt interview, 'Marx had wel gelijk, maar hij laat een heel stuk van het proces weg. Namelijk hij heeft t over arbeidskracht, de waren die mensen verkopen om in leven te blijven als ze zelf geen uh kapitalist zijn, als ze geen eigendom hebben ... en wat ie natuurlijk totaal over het hoofd zag wat ie heel goed had kunnen zien als ie even in zijn eigen gezin om zich heen keek. Dat zijn arbeidskracht werd gereproduceerd door twee vrouwen, een vaste huishoudster en en z'n vrouw. En dat hij nog twee dochters had die oppaste en als secretaresses werkten. En dan had die oom Engels die voor het geld zorgde. Hij begreep, heeft nooit bedacht dat zijn arbeidskracht dat dat hij nooit zijn meesterwerk had kunnen scheppen als daar niet een een team aan mensen omheen stonden...', p. 50.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, ...En dat was toen de eerste inzicht dat we toen krijgen. Is dat wat wij huishoudelijk werk noemen en wat je, wat we dus vaak geen werk noemen, dat dat werk is en dat dat bijdraagt aan de maatschappij en bijdraagt aan kapitalisme...', p. 50.

putting individuals' experiences besides one another to create an understanding of the societal patterns they were part of. It was the method of consciousness raising, which resisted the norms for politics and activism as set by men, that enabled the activists to have this revelation.

Yet, even during the second feminist wave, socialist women could not rely on support from their male counterparts. Addressing the feminist cause within left groups from the 1960s-1980s was met with the resistance of men. In her novel, Meulenbelt reiterated the response of leftist men to their feminist fight and addressing personal experiences:

If women have no say over their own lives, dare not to walk away for they have nowhere to go, because they are afraid of revenge or their children being taken away, then that's private. They have to solve it themselves, each separately. If we [women] get mad, our leftist comrades come to tell us that we're being neurotic and hysterical. That we've forgotten the main contradiction. That we're being a-political. That we're setting ourselves off against men, while we're supposed to be doing it together.<sup>66</sup>

The significance of this citation lies in the classification of women's issues as private issues, problems they had to solve individually. The attitudes of the socialist men the SocFem women encountered during the second feminist wave tried to reinforce previously set norms that dictated what leftist activists could address. Not only were issues voiced by women thereby dismissed as personal affairs, the feminist fight itself was dismissed as a-political.

Corten and Ostenk concluded:

The feminist fight is contested, dismissed as "bourgeois", ignored, postponed until after the revolution, some feminist demands are adopted, and eventually is the feminist cause also "recognized". At the moment of recognition, however, earlier reactions seem to be forgotten.<sup>67</sup>

This citation summarizes the feminist struggle throughout history; how the feminist fight was ignored and dismissed, and how even contributions of women to society were often forgotten,

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<sup>66</sup> Meulenbelt, *De Schaamte Voorbij*, p. 56.

<sup>67</sup> Corten and Ostenk, 'Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten', p. 93, 'Feministische strijd is bestreden, afgedaan als "bourgeois", genegeerd, uitgesteld tot na de revolutie; sommige feministische eisen zijn overgenomen, en uiteindelijk is feministische strijd ook "erkend". Op het moment van erkenning lijken eerdere reacties vergeten.'

even up until the 1980s. Looking back on those decades, Meulenbelt said that ‘in those days, I have not come across men who understood what we were doing.’<sup>68</sup>

The lack of cooperation of leftist men to the feminist cause has led to what Meulenbelt called the “unfinished revolution”,<sup>69</sup> the present situation in which women continue to produce most of the domestic labour, unpaid labour. Reflecting on the position of women in the Netherlands in the twenty-first century, she concluded that higher educated women are only free because they rely on lower educated women for their domestic labour; that the labour power of higher educated women is reproduced by lower educated women. For lower educated women, she stated, there is no such solution;<sup>70</sup> the revolution in the relations between women and men during the second feminist wave has stalled, resulting in a big layer of women who do not earn enough to provide for their family. They are forced to combine outside labour with domestic labour. To her, the freedom of higher educated women is merely based on the oppression of lower educated women, leaving both restricted by the unfinished revolution.

### **Reaching ‘them’**

It is therefore not illogical, so stated Meulenbelt, that lower educated women did not identify themselves with the feminist fight of what she calls ‘glass ceiling feminists’; feminists who, according to her, were concerned with making a career for themselves, climb up the ladder and get promoted.<sup>71</sup>

I am not against that, but if that is the only thing you have to offer women. In hindsight, I understand why a big group of women felt as though feminism was not for them. And it was not.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘Ik (...) ben geen mannen tegengekomen die begrepen waar wij het over mee bezig waren.’, p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> Meulenbelt interview, ‘dat is dus wel wat ik een halve revolutie noem, dat is waar wij nu in zijn blijven steken.’, p. 51.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘Die waren bezig met carrière maken, hogerop komen en uh promoveren. En uh, daar ben ik niet tegen, maar als dat t enige is wat je vrouwen te bieden hebt. Dat is- dan snap je ook wel- Ik snap dus ook wel, achteraf

This may explain why feminist groups in the Netherlands seemed, according to Meulenbelt, unable to include lower educated women, despite continued efforts of among others the SocFem women to reach those women. One of the ways in which feminists in the Netherlands aimed to include lower educated women during the second feminist wave was by developing ‘VOS’ courses, short for ‘Vrouwen Oriënteren Zich Op De Samenleving’ (translating to ‘Women Orient Themselves On The Society’). These courses, first organized in 1972, were designed for consciousness raising among housewives with little education, women often isolated within the household.<sup>73</sup> Its aims were to make those women conscious about their situation, break their isolation, and enhance their confidence and self-sufficiency within society.

The division between housewives and activists itself created a sense of discomfort among some. Reflecting on a personal experience within a women’s meeting before she joined SocFem, Sevenhuijsen writes:

The discussion mainly focussed on how we could ‘reach them’, so they could commit themselves to feminism-socialism as well. Something didn’t sit right with me in the discussion, but I couldn’t quite name it. Only when I later compared my experiences at platform meetings with later experiences in discussion group-like situations, it dawned on me. It was the division between us (who already know) and them, who had to be reached. It was banning of own personal experiences and problems, and using slogans about the family within capitalism.<sup>74</sup>

This citation encompasses three points of criticism on that discussion. First and foremost, the division between us and them, women who know better and those who

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gezien wel. Waarom een grote groep vrouwen het gevoel had dat feminisme gewoon niet voor hun bedoeld was? Dat was ook niet zo.’, p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> G. Dresen, ‘VOS in Nijmegen’ in P. J. Timmermans ed., *70’s in Nijmegen: Tien kreative aksiejaren* (Nijmegen, 2007), pp. 144-5.

<sup>74</sup> Sevenhuijsen, ‘De Praktijk van de Theorie’, ‘De discussie ging er voor een belangrijk deel over hoe we ‘ze moesten bereiken’, zodat ze zich ook in zouden gaan zetten voor feminisme-socialisme. Iets zat me niet lekker in die discussie, maar ik kon het nog niet goed benoemen. Pas toen ik naderhand mijn ervaringen op platformbijeenkomsten kon vergelijken met latere ervaringen in praatgroep-achtige situaties, werd het me duidelijk. Het lag aan de splitsing tussen wij (die het al weten) en zij die bereikt moeten worden. Aan het uitbannen van de eigen persoonlijke ervaringen en problemen, en het hanteren van slogans over het gezin in het kapitalisme.’, p. 18.

do not (yet). Secondly, she criticized the censorship of personal experiences within the discussion, and thirdly, the use of slogans about family and capitalism. The latter reflects the SocFem women's stance on capitalism. Throughout the volumes, it was argued that a true revolution in the relations between women and men was impossible within a capitalist society, or at least in one that did not recognize domestic labour as productive labour.<sup>75</sup> Building on the first point of criticism, she went on to say:

As though we are not housewives ourselves, whether or not full time. There I sat, as mother of two children, still thinking it was about them. Even though my own experience would enable me to come up with endless points which I would want to work on within the women's movement. If we just could develop forms, in which we can make our own experiences, including those with motherhood, count. Women who do not get stuck in discussions and positioning themselves as such, that women cannot recognize their own individual struggles anymore.<sup>76</sup>

In this citation, highlights feminists' internal conflict raised by being both housewives, mothers and partners, and fighters for women's emancipation of their role in society. Furthermore, Sevenhuijsen reiterated the importance of creating a method for feminism that enabled the discussion of personal experiences to empower women in their experiences, to make them count. The importance of this citation lies in its call for a feminism in which individual struggles are represented as such that all women recognize themselves in the cause. Furthermore, it adds to the argument that legitimization is found in reciprocal acknowledgement of experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The archival trail going back decades shows that breaking with convention gave rise to conflict. In the Netherlands, the SocFem activists were reprimanded for their efforts to

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<sup>75</sup> J. Outshoorn, 'Marx en Engels Kijken Naar de Vrouwen – Een Feministische Kritiek' in Outshoorn, Meulenbelt and Leydesdorff eds., *Te Elfder Ure*.

<sup>76</sup> Sevenhuijsen, 'De Praktijk van de Theorie', 'Alsof we zelf geen huisvrouw zijn, al is het dan niet full-time. Daar zat ik dan als moeder van twee kinderen, en dacht nog steeds dat het over zij ging. Terwijl ik uit eigen ervaring eindeloos punten kan bedenken, waaraan ik binnen de vrouwenbeweging iets zou willen doen. Als we maar vormen kunnen ontwikkelen, waarin we onze eigen ervaringen, ook over moederschap, kunnen laten tellen. Vrouwen, die niet blijven steken in discussies en standpuntbepalingen, waarin vrouwen haar eigen individuele worstelpartijen niet meer kunnen herkennen.', p. 18.

address personal experiences. But, whereas earlier generations of feminists gave into men's domination within left movements, the SocFem women refused to adhere to the norms set by leftist men. In their perseverance, they were met with resistance of other feminists and their leftist comrades. By analysing the personal experiences described by the SocFem women in the volumes of the *Socialisties-Feministiese Teksten*, this chapter gives an answer to the question 'In what ways did the SocFem movement conflict with other parts of society?'

With their personal approach to consciousness raising, the SocFem activists set themselves off from other feminist movements, their male comrades, and even women they wanted to reach. The latter for not all women could relate to the problems discussed in the groups. The diversity of feminism posed possibilities for the creation of new forms for activism, such as the consciousness raising groups, but proved to also create fractions within the movement. Activists' inability to utilize the strengths of movements of the left and feminist movements, as well as the lack of connection between different feminist movements, proved the weakness of the left during the 1960s through 1980s. Socialist men's unwillingness to recognize women's struggle and feminists' resistance to follow male norms any longer resulted in a breach between socialism and feminism. Feminism, then, failed to appeal to enough women to bring about the revolutionary changes in society, which can be attributed to a lack of perspective on the situation of lower educated women, mothers, and housewives.

### III. A new feminism, a new form of politics

In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan describes the ‘problem that has no name’, a discontent felt by women throughout the United States; a phenomenon also known as ‘the housewife’s syndrome’, as coined by a Cleveland doctor.<sup>77</sup> According to Friedan, there was no place for women’s individual identity in a society that had already decided the feminine role, the destination of women to become mothers and housewives. Developing an own identity, as is tied to the crisis of adolescence for both women and men,<sup>78</sup> would for women inescapably conflict with the predetermined feminine mystique, the role imposed by society and myth of the attractive wife, decent housewife and loving mother.<sup>79</sup> Friedan believed the problem that has no name could only be solved by societal change, which she believed women could bring about:

My answers may disturb the experts and women alike, for they imply social change. But there would be no sense in my writing this book at all if I did not believe that women can affect society, as well as be affected by it; that, in the end, a woman, as a man, has the power to choose, and to make her own heaven or hell.<sup>80</sup>

Through the publication of Joke Smit’s book and working group, the fight against the problem that has no name gained ground in the Netherlands as well. Through consciousness raising groups, feminist activists created a vocabulary to address women’s struggle. In this chapter, I therefore aim to give an answer to the question ‘How did the personal approach to consciousness raising reshape feminism during the second feminist wave?’ Reflecting on the need and power of language in legitimizing personal experiences, I will illustrate why a reclaiming of the personal was necessary for creating a new feminist identity – one that acknowledges the diversity of feminisms and calls for new forms of politics.

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<sup>77</sup> B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York City, 1963), p. 20.

<sup>78</sup> E. H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study In Psychoanalysis and History* (New York City, 1958).

<sup>79</sup> I. Costera Meijer, *Het persoonlijke wordt politiek: Feministische bewustwording in Nederland 1965-1980* (Amsterdam, 1996).

<sup>80</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 10.

## The power of language

Finding a solution to the problem that has no name required to bring to the surface that what had been subconsciously affecting the position of women within society. While consciousness raising groups did not in the first place aim to provide solutions for their issues, feminists in these groups uncovered the mechanisms that had subconsciously affected the relations between women and men.<sup>81</sup> The groups made the invisible visible and allowed women to search for forms to make their personal problems political. Forming the organizational and ideological basis for the SocFem movement, it allowed them to bring 'the personal is political' into practice for the first time in the women's movement in the Netherlands. Corten and Onstenk argued that consciousness raising groups during the second feminist wave enabled this by creating a space for women to explore their individual experiences:

In the relatively short history of present-day feminism, it can be seen that time and time again, new groups of women take new initiatives; new initiatives or ideas cannot be localised or stemming from a central device. They could and can only arise in a 'structure' that enables creativity (...) In women's groups is more space for an individual process of becoming conscious, radicalization, making choices and making politics yourself.<sup>82</sup>

In this citation, Corten and Onstenk argued that new ideas and initiatives could only arise in consciousness raising groups that respected individual's diversity and personal development. Consciousness raising as a practice thereby proved to be an exceptional method for activism.

Consciousness raising groups enabled women not only to share their experience and identify themselves with one another, but also to create a language to convey the need for political action. To reiterate earlier mentioned words from De Vries, 'We have to be listened

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<sup>81</sup> Meulenbelt, Outshoorn and Leydesdorff, 'Feminisme in Nederland 1968-1975', pp. 606-22.

<sup>82</sup> Corten and Onstenk, 'Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten', p. 99, 'In de relatief korte geschiedenis van het huidige feminisme zie je dat telkens nieuwe of andere groepen vrouwen nieuwe initiatieven nemen; nieuwe initiatieven of ideeën zijn niet te localiseren of afkomstig van een centraal apparaat. Ze konden en kunnen ook alleen maar ontstaan in een 'structuur' die creativiteit mogelijk maakt. (...) In vrouwengroepen is meer ruimte voor een individueel proces van bewustwording, radicalisering, keuzes maken en zelf politiek maken.'



to.<sup>83</sup> Creating a vocabulary was a necessary step for addressing the problem that put restraints on women's development, imposing on them a life that was not theirs to choose. The discussion of personal experiences within methods of consciousness raising groups was integral for creating this vocabulary and uncovering the patterns that guided women's seemingly personal experiences. Consciousness raising groups gave women a language for their experiences for the first time.<sup>84</sup> This new language allowed women to discuss problems that were prior left unaddressed, both within their consciousness raising group, as in the print-based discourse that followed. Above all, creating a language for experiences seemed to have a legitimizing power.

Besides enabling addressing problems that prior to second wave feminist's efforts had no name and legitimizing women's experiences, language became a tool for strengthening community ties; printed language bridged the gap between feminist movements and countries, but more important was perhaps the way in which language enhanced the sense of collectivity. Scholars have longer addressed language's function in symbolizing group membership or creating an imagined community.<sup>85</sup> In her book on feminist consciousness raising in the Netherlands between 1965 and 1980, Irene Costera Meijer addressed coherence building as a property of language in feminist activism. According to her, language functions not as a criterion for distinction or merely personal expression, but primarily as a tool to express collectively felt desires, truths, and ambitions.<sup>86</sup> This coincides with Iris Young's – a political scholar from the United States and socialist feminist herself – requirement for belonging to a social group. According to Young, 'a social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity.'<sup>87</sup> Language became an important element

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<sup>83</sup> See page 24.

<sup>84</sup> Meulenbelt, 'Het persoonlijke is politiek: Een ooggetuigenverslag'.

<sup>85</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); L. Milroy, 'Language and Group Identity', *Language and Ethnicity*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1982), 207-16.

<sup>86</sup> Costera Meijer, *Het persoonlijke wordt politiek*.

<sup>87</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the politics of difference* (Princeton University Press 1990).

for their shared sense of identity. Identity not in the sense of one's individual self, but as a group.

In her contribution to the tenth volume, De Vries reiterated the uncommon practice of consciousness raising as a method for activism and exploration of the problems within society:

The peculiarity of the consciousness gaining process was that what people would become conscious of was already known (...) This [consciousness raising] entails that it is not expected that women are not aware of their position, of their powerlessness, it was merely hidden deep. With other words, the personal was already there before the political.<sup>88</sup>

According to De Vries, the political had thus always been personal. The relation between the personal and the political, or rather the analogy between the two became the foundation of the feminist movement in the Netherlands during the 1970s and 1980s; this fundamentally changed the meaning of feminism.

### **Redefining feminism**

According to de Vries, the personal as the political was not just a theory, but also a practice that allowed women to become a community.

'The personal is political' wasn't merely a theoretical notion (...), but also referred to a method. A method of consciousness raising that simultaneously constituted the basis of the organization as its shape. (...) Saying the untold. Building a new identity. A new collective and culture arises...<sup>89</sup>

The importance of this citation by de Vries in the tenth volume, published in 1987, lies in the way in which the relation between the personal and the political, both as an understanding of society and as a method for activism, created a new collective. The basis of consciousness raising groups, finding recognition in each other's experiences, made from isolated individuals

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<sup>88</sup> Petra de Vries, "'Het persoonlijke is politiek'" en het ontstaan van de tweede golf in Nederland 1968-1973' in Sevenhuijsen, de Vries, Zipper and Outshoorn, eds., *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 10*, p. 33.

<sup>89</sup> Petra de Vries, 'Het persoonlijke is politiek' en het ontstaan van de Tweede Golf in Nederland 1968-1973, in *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 10* (Amsterdam: Feministische Uitgeverij Sara 1987), p. 30.

a collective. It allowed them to create a new identity for themselves as part of a group, giving rise to a new culture.

The volumes of the SocFem activists show the internal struggles of women with the conceptualization of feminism and identity, especially when reflecting on experiences within different anti-oppression movements. The way feminists came to view that people could adhere to multiple identities started with the awareness of the internal differences between socialist feminists. The seventh volume included an article by Philomena Essed on racism and feminism, explaining her discontent with feminist identity being governed by white women, and with sexism within anti-racism movements. Starting with her explanation of racism in the Netherlands, she articulated that the feminist identity pertains to primarily white women, leaving black women to feel restricted both in the feminist movement and the anti-racism movement:

If we want to address racism within the women's movement, we should take into consideration that white women themselves are suppressed as well. If we resist sexism within the black movement, we are told that black men are going through enough already. Our own scream is threatened to be murdered by the gag of frustration with sexism and racism that white women and black men force down our throat, as if we have to swallow and digest for them as well.<sup>90</sup>

As can be seen in Essed's struggle with the lack of a sense of belonging to the feminist and anti-racism movements, the experiences of black American feminists were eminently different to those of white Dutch feminists. Meulenbelt, too, addressed sexism within the anti-racism movement, leaving her confused. About her efforts within the Black Panther Party, a party against the suppression of black people, she wrote:

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<sup>90</sup> P. Essed, 'Racisme en feminisme' in S. Sevenhuijsen, P. de Vries, J. Outshoorn and A. Meulenbelt eds., *Socialistische-Feministische Teksten 7*, p. 35, 'Willen we racisme aanklagen in de vrouwenbeweging, dan moeten we rekening houden met het feit dat blanke vrouwen zelf ook onderdrukt worden. Verzetten we ons tegen seksisme in de zwarte beweging, dan krijgen we te horen dat zwarte mannen het al moeilijk genoeg hebben. Onze eigen schreeuw dreigt vermoord te worden door de prop van frustratie over seksisme en racisme die blanke vrouwen en zwarte mannen in onze mond duwen, alsof wij óók nog eens voor hen moeten doorslikken en verteren!'

I don't feel at home there, but I can't really say why not yet. I understand what racism is. But the term sexism has not yet been invented.<sup>91</sup>

Reflecting on the onset of the movement, Meulenbelt wrote in this citation that she understood that women and black people were both suppressed. Yet, it was different, she wrote, without being able to articulate a clear explanation as to how it was different. Without having experienced racism herself, she stated to understand what it means. She attributed her lack of sense of belonging to sexism within the anti-racism group. This highlights how the SocFem activists were able to create a language to address the problems of their majority, white women, but did not manage to succeed in doing the same for a more intersectional discourse. Meulenbelt's experiences with sexism in the anti-racism movement affirmed Essed's conclusion, which stated that there was no place where black women found themselves in an equal solidarity relationships. During the second feminist wave, black feminists were to white feminists what socialist women were to socialist men.

Through these experiences, feminists realized that people can adhere to multiple identities. During the second feminist wave, an understanding grew of how individuals were suppressed within social relations, but an understanding of how individual people were suppressed differently within society had not yet been articulated. Sharing and reading personal stories from far beyond one's own network proved to be the missing puzzle for this. Contributing to the print-based transatlantic discourse allowed feminists of distinct movements to add to feminist knowledge and a restructuring of feminist identity, incorporating experiences that not all feminists shared. Discourse transcending often homogenous feminist groups proved essential for the restructuring of feminist identity and knowledge. The transnational discourse between women from distinct movements throughout the transatlantic area allowed feminist scholars to come to the understanding that a person can be oppressed based on a multitude of factors; it gave way to the introduction of

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<sup>91</sup> Meulenbelt, *De schaamte voorbij* (1977), p. 111.

intersectionality, a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw at the end of the second feminist wave.<sup>92</sup> It is founded on the belief that people can belong to a plethora of identities, making them subject to suppression based on belonging to multiple social groups. According to Young, the ‘discussions, along with the practices feminists instituted to structure discussion and interaction among differently identifying groups of women, offer some beginning models for the development of a heterogeneous public.’<sup>93</sup> The print-based collective discourse represented such instituted structure for discussion among differently identifying groups of women. The print-based collective discourse enabled the feminist discussion to transcend the confined consciousness raising groups and evolve into a transnational and transatlantic communal discussion on feminism.

### **A need for new forms of politics**

Reflecting on the insights they had gained in their efforts to change the relations between women and men, Corten and Ostenk brought in different elements that contributed to this new way of pursuing political change:

When we trace the process of our own political change, we see that a multitude of influences have been important. In our consciousness, *knowledge* is not separated from *experiences* by power relations, both in the public and in the private sphere. And not only our *intellectual*, but also our *emotional* processing of those experiences appears to play an important role (...) The complexity of consciousness, the emotional and ‘personal’ aspects of consciousness, the importance of creating a different culture and of ‘prefigurative political forms’, are alternatives that anticipate a different society.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine’, *Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, vol. 1, no. 8 (1989).

<sup>93</sup> Young, *Justice and the politics of difference*, 1990, p. 162.

<sup>94</sup> Corten and Ostenk, ‘Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten’, p. 100, ‘Wanneer wij het proces nagaan van onze eigen politieke verandering zien we dat daar een veelheid van invloeden belangrijk in is. In ons bewustzijn is *kennis* niet zo gescheiden van *ervaringen* binnen allerlei machtsverhoudingen, zowel in de openbare als in de privésfeer. En niet alleen onze *intellectuele* maar ook onze *gevoelsmatige* verwerking van die ervaringen blijkt een belangrijke rol te spelen. (...) De complexiteit van bewustzijn, de gevoelsmatige en ‘persoonlijke’ kanten van bewustzijn, het belang van het creëren van een andere cultuur en van ‘prefigurative political forms’, alternatieven die vooruit lopen op een andere maatschappij.’

In this, they emphasized how knowledge and experience are inextricably intertwined, and that consciousness could not have been gained without exploring emotional processes. Traditional feminist and socialist approaches could, according to them, not have led to the breakthroughs made by second wave feminists. They concluded:

We need different political forms, alternatives, to counter the continuously undermining of our capacity to resistance, that characterizes capitalism and the patriarchy.<sup>95</sup>

Their call for new political forms conformed to the line that had been set out by Sevenhuijsen, de Vries, Meulenbelt and Outshoorn in the introduction to the third SocFem volume, published in 1979:

We don't see it as simple as Joke Smit, who pleads that we should re-enter 'men's land'. We believe that solution leads the old division between the personal and the political to be restored to honour. It seemed clear to us by now, that the organizational structures developed from our 'private life' have more political meaning than merely 'consciousness' and that they politicize whole areas of our existence. It isn't just politicians that engage in 'real' politics. It isn't just in 'men's land' where the world is changed.<sup>96</sup>

Referring back to earlier clashes between feminist approaches, this citation stressed how SocFem women appreciated consciousness raising groups as a form of politics. Rather than being stepping stones for joining the prominent, male-dominated political arena, they constituted a new form of politics; a method that validated experience and reconnected the personal with the political. I say reconnected, for the SocFem activists stated that the personal had already been there before the political.

Despite a discourse that transcended movements, it appeared second wave feminism was unable to create these new forms of politics, leading feminists to return to old forms of politics. Between 2003 and 2011, Meulenbelt was senator for the Dutch Socialist Party and

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<sup>95</sup> Corten and Ostenk, 'Sterft, gij oude vormen en gedachten', p. 103, 'We hebben andere politieke vormen nodig, alternatieven, om het continue ondermijnen van ons vermogen tot verzet, dat karakteristiek is voor het kapitalisme en het patriarchaat, tegen te gaan.'

<sup>96</sup> Sevenhuijsen, de Vries, Outshoorn and Meulenbelt, *Socialisties-Feministische Teksten 3*.

anno 2022, Meulenbelt has for years been a prominent member of the in 2016 founded Dutch anti-capitalist and left-wing political party Bij1.

...not because I believe politics is more important than other forms of action, but because I believe you cannot leave politics to politics. Then, decisions will be made on which we can exert no influence.<sup>97</sup>

It seems that the unfinished revolution has not only left a large group of women out of emancipation, but also left revolutionary changes to the political system elusive.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the transatlantic area, women were faced with problems they had no words for. Problems with their role in society and their relations with men, leaving them conflicted in their place in society and their sense of identity. After Betty Friedan wrote about the problem that has no name in the United States, Joke Smit's book on women's discontent gained traction among Dutch women, ushering in a new feminist wave in the Netherlands in the late 1960s. 'The personal is political' came to be characteristic for this second feminist wave. It referred to a slogan, ideology, and a feminist method. This chapter aimed to elucidate on the importance of this phenomenon by giving an answer to the question 'How did the personal approach to consciousness raising reshape feminism during the second feminist wave?'

The personal is political as a method referred to a form of consciousness raising that focussed on the discussion of personal stories. By exploring women's individual experiences, the SocFem activists aimed to uncover the subconscious ways in which women were suppressed. In doing so, they created a language for the problem that prior had no name. Perhaps more important was, however, the way in which this language strengthened the sense of community among feminists; not only among the feminists in the SocFem groups, but also among those partaking in the transnational print-based discourse. The transnational discourse

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<sup>97</sup> Meulenbelt interview, '...niet omdat ik politiek belangrijker vind dan allerlei andere vormen van actie, maar omdat ik vind dat je in de politiek niet aan de politiek over kunt laten, want dan worden de dingen over ons beslist waar we geen invloed op hebben.', p. 52.

allowed activists from diverging feminist groups throughout the transatlantic area to read the personal stories of others, whom they otherwise would not have come into contact with. It opened the way for the understanding that people can identify with different social groups and relate to multiple identities, resulting in individual experiences of suppression. The creation of a print-based collective space, a shared discourse, and the relations that governed and followed from that, contributed to a great extent to the transnationalization of socialist feminist movements at the end of the twentieth century. This way, the personal approach to consciousness raising along with the following instituted practice of a transnational print-based discourse incited a redefining of feminism in a transatlantic context.



## Conclusion

In the introduction to the SocFem activists' first periodical, *Socialisties-Feministiese Teksten 1*, Sevenhuijsen, Outshoorn, and Meulenbelt depicted the way in which addressing women's issues was excluded from the political sphere:

If men talk about how to it is supposed to be done in society, it is called politics. If women do so, it is suddenly called feminism.<sup>98</sup>

The *Socialisties-Feministiese Teksten* were the first feminist periodicals of the second feminist wave. It followed from the feminist activists' contribution to the Marxist journal *Te Elfter Ure*, Dutch second wave feminism's first attempt to theorize on the position of women in a capitalist society. Confident in their long-term ambition, they named their book *Socialisties-Feministiese-Teksten 1*, implying more were to follow. And indeed, over the course of a little over a decade, ten more volumes would follow. They constitute a valuable source base for analysing not only the ways in which feminist ideology changed in the Netherlands between the late 1960s and 1980s, but especially for witness statements of the ways in which the practice of feminism evolved in that time.

Following in the footsteps of feminists before them, the SocFem activists reclaimed the personal in the political. This time in history, however, not letting them be governed by the political norms set by men, they stood firm against standards of prominent leftist men. 'The personal is political' as a practice for consciousness raising first employed in the Netherlands by the Dutch SocFem activists marked the start of a new kind of feminism. Earlier feminist and women's emancipation activists fought against oppression in more visible parts within society, such as their political power. Second wave feminists fought for equality in those areas in which oppression lurked beneath the surface. The approach to consciousness raising groups of the SocFem groups distinguished them from other groups

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<sup>98</sup> Sevenhuijsen, Outshoorn and Meulenbelt eds., *Socialisties-Feministiese Teksten 1*, p. 17, 'als mannen praten over hoe het in de maatschappij moet heet 't politiek. Als vrouwen dat doen dan heet het plotseling feminisme'.

that formed in the early 1970s, for they allowed women to bring up personal experiences for political purpose. Breaking the taboo on sexuality, relationships and body image, they were able to create a language to address problems that prior had no name. Fighting these problems, which were rooted so deeply in personal experience, required a new form of activism, one in which there was place for the diversity among women and their experiences.

Consciousness raising groups enabled women to place their experiences in a broader perspective, laying bare patterns of suppression, and creating terms that made it possible to address them. The basis of consciousness raising groups, recognizing each other's experiences, broke women's isolation. That recognition was of the utmost importance to counter women's prior tendencies to blame themselves for not being able to fit in the role society imposed on them. According to the SocFem activists, second wave feminism's most important contribution – that the personal is political – came, and could have only come, about through the spread practice of exploring the personal in the political.

Creating a language for their shared experiences added to the women's sense of group identity within feminist groups. Feminists claimed political language as a means to express shared feelings of desire, ambition, and their perception of the truth. Furthermore, the created language facilitated discussion, both in consciousness raising groups and the transatlantic print-based discourse. It enabled feminist discourse to transcend movement and bridge the Atlantic through reading, translating, sharing, and reflecting on each other's experiences, ideas, and revelations. Through this discussion, second wave feminists came to the realization that identity was not a singular, nor fixed construct.

Despite the SocFem women's efforts to include women from more diverse background, discussing personal experiences in consciousness raising groups failed to involve lower-class women. Too many women still could not identify with this fight. A combination of the class-fight as well as the feminist cause stayed elusive. According to

Meulenbelt, after the second feminist wave, higher-class women were only free as their labour power was reproduced by lower-class women. Revolutionizing the relations between women and men within society required therefore not only a new form of feminism, but a new form of politics all together. This change, however, remained unattained by the feminist movement, leaving the original men's land the centre of politics. Believing politics could not be left to politics, Meulenbelt chose to join men's land after all, continuing her political efforts even fifty years later.

Besides her engagement in politics, Meulenbelt continued to write books. She radiated an intense fighting spirit, talking about book fifty-one, fifty-two, and fifty-three. Books about what she believes should change how people think of the class struggle, the reproduction of labour and the need for a new view on motherhood, and the relationship between feminism and socialism. I remarked that all these topics already flourished on the pages of the volumes she contributed to fifty years ago. An uncomfortable smile creased her face. 'What disappoints me sometimes,' she said, 'is that I have to keep saying the same things over and over,' in different ways.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Meulenbelt interview, 'Wat mij wel eens een beetje tegenvalt is dat ik steeds weer opnieuw hetzelfde verhaal moet houden, alleen dan nu uitgebreider en beter onderbouwd en meer over nagedacht en een beetje geactualiseerd', p. 50.

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<sup>100</sup> Given the contemporary nature of this historical enquiry—and the fact that many activists have written histories both during and after their movement activity—there is not a clear distinction between primary and secondary sources. Sources have been categorized according to their use in this study

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## Appendix I - Consent form

Murielle Posthuma  
Leiden University

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

### From Consciousness Raising to a Transatlantic Feminist Identity: Transnational influences on the Dutch Socialist Feminist Movement of the 1960s-1980s

#### Introduction

I, Murielle Posthuma, am an independent Master's student at Leiden University. You are asked to participate in the research project: 'From Consciousness Raising to a Transatlantic Feminist Identity: Transnational influences on the Dutch Socialist Feminist Movement of the 1960s-1980s' (working title). This research explores the ways in which the practice of addressing personal experiences in consciousness raising groups evolved in the Netherlands and influenced the second feminist wave from the 1960s through 1980s. Please read the following information and indicate whether you agree to the specified conditions:

Any information provided to me (the researcher), both in the form of written statements, documents, reports, etc., and verbally, during interviews and conversations, will be treated as confidential: I will not distribute the information to third parties unless specific consent is asked for, and given. All information will be used for scientific purposes and publications only. If, at any point in the future, the participant would like to withdraw given information, the participant can notify me and I will make no further use of that statement/document/report in my current or future research. Upon request, the participant can be identified as an anonymous source or a description of position/function can be agreed upon.

#### The participant

- 1) agrees to an open interview and gives permission to use the information for scientific purposes      yes / no
- 2) understands that, if so desired, the interview can be stopped at any given moment      yes / no
- 3) gives permission to use an audio-recorder during the interview, and the creation of a transcript afterwards      yes / no
- 4) gives permission to take notes during the interview      yes / no
- 5) gives permission to use the given written statements/documents/reports/etc. for scientific purposes      yes / no
- 5) understands that, if so desired, all given information may be revoked in the future      yes / no

Further specified agreements<sup>101</sup>

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Date:

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Location:

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Murielle Posthuma

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<sup>101</sup> This is the form that was signed by the interviewee. The empty form is included in this thesis for the privacy of the interviewee after publishing. The signed form is handed in at all required offices for assessment of this thesis.