

***Is feminism a bad word?***

*A series of videotaped interviews between a feminist and her Dutch friends about the label 'feminist'.*

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## Introduction

I am a half Swedish/half Dutch, white woman<sup>1</sup> and a feminist. I think I more or less share the same norms and values with most of my Dutch friends and family and I am quite sure they would agree that men and women should be politically, economically and socially equal. What puzzles me is why so few of them would identify as feminists. I notice this phenomenon every time I get back to The Netherlands after I have been to Sweden. In the Netherlands I experience a discrepancy between the basic content of feminism and *how* a feminist *does* things. Identifying as a feminist has become increasingly important to me during the last couple of years, but I still do remember why before my twenties I did not want to identify as feminist; I did not want to seem radical and man hating. Ever since I have been more open about being a feminist, I have encountered a lot of questions and resistance.

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, world known by her TedXspeech “We Should All Be Feminists”, concludes her speech by saying: ‘[...] My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better’ (2012). Just as Adichie inspired me to be explicit about my feminism, Dutch writer Rob Wijnberg’s essay “Why our politics are run by agony” (2016) inspired me to believe in the fact that we must believe that we can do better. Wijnberg writes about ‘terror management theory’, which argues that everything human beings do can be traced back to agony. Humans are the only animals that realise that they will die, but in order not to be constantly terrorised by this awareness we invented culture, according to this theory. For a long time religion was the biggest glimmer of hope (after death we could look forward to a infinite hereafter), later there was the idea of progress: our future generations would have a better life as long as we keep on working. Currently, this belief that future generations will have a better life is loosing its stabile ground. Instead, a national-nostalgia—the idea that it was better in the past than it will be in the future—is gaining ground in the Western world. Some think that their own parents were better off then they are themselves nowadays. I do not agree with this and I will not give in to this fear of the world not being able to progress anymore. We can do better! ‘The only thing that can change this [agony and fear]’, Wijnberg argues, ‘is a Bigger Story about Progress in the twenty-first century’. Wijnberg continues: ‘A

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this thesis I will make use of the categories women/men. I am aware of the fact that this binary opposition excludes many who do not identify with these categories (nonconforming, queer, transsubjects), and that the act of repeating these is problematic. Also, I am aware that this categorization neglects intersectional differences such as class, ethnicity, location, sexuality, abilities and so on. But because my research is focussed on popular understandings of ‘feminism’, which in the Netherlands commonly is seen as a movement that advocates equality between men/women I chose to stick with these (static) categories.

story about the Next Step Forward'. I personally believe that feminism should be part of this bigger story about progress and I firmly believe that feminism can be a guide to a better life for all human beings.

In this thesis I explore to what extent the label 'feminist' is experienced as a burden; something people do not want to be associated with. Central to this thesis will be the analysis of video taped interviews with my Dutch friends and family. My aim is to create a conversation about what feminism means for myself and others, and ask my friends and family whether they call themselves feminists or not. I am using visual ethnography as a tool to produce personal and bodily knowledge, and start a conversation that can be of use outside of academia as well. This is what I find very important for this thesis. Despite its focus on everyday topics and issues such as sexism, racism and homophobia I experience that Gender studies seems to have trouble getting out of its ivory tower. I notice this because knowledge about feminism—at least in my surroundings and in popular media—is often concise. I think that a short documentary is more accessible to people because it demands less concentration than reading an academic text in English. I hope to create a video that will be a “conversation-piece”; a piece that makes people discuss feminism. My goal is to publish the video in multiple popular media forums in order to invite to discussions.

I want to research what arguments are used in justifying why people do not identify as feminists. I want to find out in what way the label feminist carries a stigma and look at how stigmas work. Part of this stigma is the idea that feminism has already passed away, how is this articulated in the interviews? Can the act of explicitly reclaiming the word feminist be a potential tool to create change in the stigma of feminism and potentially create social change? I wonder whether self-labeling also can be counterproductive, in the sense that it creates unnecessary boundaries between people (I am a feminist, you are not). In order to find answers to these questions In the next chapter I will start with elaborating on three important concepts that will be central to this thesis: the feminist label, stigma, and postfeminism.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

### **1.1 The feminist label**

What is the relation between affirming to feminist thought (simply articulated as gender-equality) and the act of using 'feminist' as an identity label? How do people speak about and

experience feminism and the feminist label? The interpretation of the videotaped interviews where I ask people whether they consider themselves as feminists, will be related to the background of feminism as a historically and culturally shifting concept. The important, and simultaneously confusing, thing about feminism is that it has different meanings for different people in different contexts. In this thesis I discuss feminism and the feminist label the way it is perceived in the current dominant discourse in the West.

Through the representation of feminism there has been created a label that is linked to a certain (often negative) stereotype. The feminist label with its contested meanings has therefore carried a stigma for a long time. Not many people in the Netherlands openly use the feminist label to identify with. Scholar Debra Baker Beck states that ‘a primary obstacle for anyone who advocates a position even slightly outside of the norm is that the media world—and Western thought in general—emphasize opposition and dichotomies’ (1998, 140). And since feminists challenge the very notion of this black-and-white dichotomous thinking about what is good/bad, inevitably they become casted as outsiders or troublemakers. An example of this oppositional dualisms that surround feminists is that when you express you are feminist (thus pro-women) you are intrically anti-men.

In this thesis I am trying to find answers to the question of how the stigma around feminism is articulated. Where does the stigma begin and where does it end? This might seem like an impossible question but nevertheless this research will focus on the area between affirming to feminist thought and the usage of the feminist label. Within feminism there is no such thing as a clear definition of what a feminist is. It is more a matter of who feel included in feminism and want to use the label feminist, and who feels excluded. Gay explains why she has had trouble identifying as a feminist and says the following: ‘Such willful ignorance, such willful disinterest in incorporating the issues and concerns of black women into the mainstream feminist project, makes me disinclined to own the feminist label until it embraces people like me’ (2014, 308). Feminism is flawed and has its struggles. Beck looks at feminism from an American standpoint and states that ‘the movement's struggles to survive can be traced to several factors, including its own inability at times to deal effectively with the diversity of viewpoints and experiences of American women’ (1998, 139). In the next chapter I will explore what a stigma is and how it works.

## 1.2 Stigma

As I already mentioned in the previous chapter, feminism has been carrying a stigma for a long time. In this chapter I will discuss what a stigma is and explore the way it works. Scholars Bruce Link and Jo Phelan state that social research on stigma has grown but has also been criticized for its vague and individualistic ways of defining the concept. Link and Phelan constructed a revised conceptualization of the concept 'stigma' by arguing that '[...] stigma exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold' (2001, 382). Simply said: it takes power to stigmatize. Also, the amount of stigma people experienced is shaped by the relative power of the stigmatized and stigmatizer. This is a power relation that has to be further analysed, especially in the context of the feminist label. An example of how a stigma works is given by Coleman and Zayer's research on how stigmas control discourses on feminism. Their research reveals '[...] the emergence of online voices who deploy stigmas as a way to control and divert the conversation, a tacit other claims that is common response to feminist arguments' (2015, 257). The stigmatizer thus exerts power over the stigmatized by the act of diverting the conversation and drawing away the attention from the actual message of feminism, which is anti-capitalist.

Link and Phelan argue that we cannot merely look at stigma as a label that is linked to a certain stereotype (for example: the angry feminist) but we must also look at status loss, structural discrimination and people's effort to cope with stigma (by for example working extremely hard to disprove the negative characteristics of the stereotype). Thinking about stigma, stereotypes and labelling can provide a deeper insight in which ways people argue against identifying as feminists. Part of the stigma is the idea that feminism is not needed anymore, something which is present in the notion of postfeminism, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

## 1.3 Postfeminism

Postfeminism stands for moving beyond, or transcending the absolute need for gender-equality. In what ways are ideas about feminism and the emancipation of women articulated in the videotaped interviews? How is the idea of feminism being completed, and therefore not necessary anymore, constructed? Scholar Lisa Adkins suggests in her article "Passing on

Feminism” ‘that recent declarations of the passing away of feminism share a number of characteristics and assumptions’ (2004, 439). These characteristics contain the operation of a generational narrative which reflects the idea that the present and future must be shaped by the past, assumptions concerning what the proper object of feminism should be, and ‘[...] a melancholic attachment to and mourning for a particular kind of social formation and a particular way of knowing about that social formation’ (2004, 440). The way I understand Adkins is that she is trying to say that we talk and think about feminism in a certain logical framework that creates the idea that feminism is impossible to pass on because feminism has passed away. Adkins concludes her article by stating that we should not look at feminism as a spectator, but rather that ‘[...] feminism is implicated in and is co-determinous with the rapid transformations of cultural and social life that accompany modernity’ (2004, 441).

In the Dutch context feminism is often used interchangeably with ‘emancipation’<sup>2</sup>. In the Netherlands the word ‘emancipation’ seems to be a more favourable option than using ‘feminism’. The reason for this seems to be that feminism is high jacked by a series of negative connotations and stereotypes, while emancipation can be used more “neutrally” for any process involving getting free from restraint. Professor Gloria Wekker states that ‘the hegemonic Dutch reading is that the women’s and gay movements have largely accomplished their aims, as is abundantly clear from the national pride taken in their accomplishments by politicians and the media, and in everyday discourses’ (2016, 113). The national self-image of the Netherlands includes the idea that the emancipation is completed. This rhetoric serves to make speaking about feminism and feminist issues superfluous.

In conclusion, the three concepts I discussed above: feminist label, stigma and postfeminism will help to answer my research question in the sense that they offer rich insights in how feminism and the label feminist are framed by ideas about who is in- and excluded, stereotypes, power relations that are at stake between stigmatizer and stigmatized and a constricting national self-images. Also, these concepts are useful in the sense that they will function as nodes in my analysis. In the following chapter I will speak about the methodological background of this research.

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<sup>2</sup> Latin root: ‘ēmancipātus’ which means “freed from control”.



## 2. Methodology

In this chapter on methodology I will firstly explain what my epistemological considerations are and why I am so passionate about the academic field of Gender studies. Secondly, I will discuss why ethics are important for conducting this research and finally, I will touch upon my motivations to engage in an interdisciplinary project.

### 2.1 Epistemological background

As a feminist researcher I find it important to be aware of the fact that you cannot separate the research subjects from their social context. This idea is typical for feminist standpoint theorists, who argue that the subject is always a social and cultural actor that cannot be studied as if in total isolation. Scholars Elana D. Buch and Karen M. Staller argue that standpoint theory is an extremely important approach within feminist theory because of the ‘[...] theory’s emphasis on a process of dialogue, analysis, and reflexivity, the approach has proven extremely vibrant and, over time, open to reassessment and revision’<sup>3</sup>. Donna Haraway discusses the question of ‘objectivity’ in science in relation to power and privilege. When the ideal is to produce “neutral” scientific knowledge many believe that you as a researcher should not let human factors such as the body and emotions influence your research. Haraway warns researchers for using the so-called “God-trick”: ‘[...] seeing everything from nowhere’ (1988, 581), which creates the illusion that a researcher is able to create universal knowledge free from a invisible location. All humans have bodies that characterise the way we collect and interpret data, and the more you reflect on this and take this into account, the more objective science becomes. ‘I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*’ (1988, 581), Haraway states.

Following Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges I think it is important to be able to position yourself in your research. Every decision you make in your research process becomes stronger when you are able to reflect about your own position and biased gaze. Buch and Staller go on by arguing that ‘underlying all of the approaches brought from feminist postmodern, poststructuralist, and critical thinking is the desire to identify and challenge oppressive practice against women’<sup>4</sup>. This feminist agenda of changing the social world around us is what inspires me to do feminist research, and makes me so passionate about

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<sup>3</sup> Hesse-Biber, 2013, in conclusion of chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> 2013, conclusion chapter 3.

studying Gender studies. My challenge for this thesis is to be as inclusive and reflexive as possible in my research praxis. An effort in being reflexive and inclusive will be amongs visible in my choice of methods, which I discuss in the following chapter.

### **3. Method**

In my research for this thesis I use several methods: autoethnography, ethnography (interviewing), and visual ethnography. My research question stems from my own experiences as a feminist, which has led me to engage with auto-ethnography as a method. I have chosen to use ethnography because I wanted to produce knowledge through speaking with actual people. By interviewing my friends I aim to obtain in-depth insights in how they make sense of their lived reality. The reason I chose visual ethnography is firstly because a video is a more accessible medium to many people than an academic text, and secondly because I believe that seeing actual bodies speaking and moving adds a deeper level to the interpretations of interviews.

I will contextualize the outcome of the interviews: the arguments and patterns that I expect to find, by using literature (both academic and popular texts) to support returning arguments and debates. In this way it allows for analysis of the knowledge produced in the interviews of self-observations. For the video-part of this thesis I have interviewed nine people in my Dutch surroundings (mostly friends and family members with whom I frequently spend time with). The interviews are around 15 minutes and include at least the two questions: ‘Are you a feminist?’ and: ‘Do you call yourself a feminist?’ This might seem as two very similar questions, although I have already noticed that being feminist (sharing certain kind of ideals) and calling yourself a feminist (using the label to position yourself politically) are two very different things I believe that the visual aspect of interviewing on camera can enrich the knowledge produced because of the seeing the actuals bodies speaking. As not only their words, but also their expressions, movements and gestures can now be taken into the analysis as well.

#### **3.1 Ethnography**

In my thesis I will use interviewing as a method to gain knowledge about how my friends and family<sup>5</sup> relate to (the word) feminism, its connotations and everyday life experiences concerning feminist issues. The use of interviewing as a way of producing knowledge is seen as part of doing ethnographic research.

According to Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner researchers implementing ethnography ‘study a culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping *insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers) better understand the culture’ (2011, paragraph 2). Researchers do this by becoming ‘participant observers’, by taking field notes and participating. This can also take shape in interviewing cultural members and examining ‘[...] members ways of speaking and relating, investigate uses of space and place [...]’ (2011, paragraph 2). Therefore my data will consist of my conversations with people about the topic of feminism. According to Pink, ethnography is not just another way of collecting data by going somewhere, staying there for a period of time and collecting information and taking it away, but instead she understands ethnography ‘[...] as a process creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on ethnographers’ own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process’ (2013, 35). Pink sees visual ethnography rather as a methodology than a method. With which she means that she sees visual ethnography more as sets of different practices, rather than one order of things to follow as ‘method’. An important factor of this definition of ethnography is the way the researcher intersects with the persons, places and things encountered during the process.

Buch and Staller argue that ‘much of what sets ethnographic research apart from other research methods is that ethnographic knowledge is created in and through the ethnographer’s relationships with those he or she studies’ (2007, chapter 5). In my case, the relationships with those I study are already shaped by the past, as I study my friends and family. As an ethnographic researcher you must be able to engage in these social relationships as well as observe them. Because of the importance of the self in ethnographic research ‘each feminist ethnographer must also carefully attend to the ways in which his or her position in the world might impact what and from whom he or she is able to learn’ (2007, chapter 5). Because I interview my friends it is quite difficult for me as a researcher to keep distance, although I wonder whether that distance is favorable. The epistemological value of proximity is to be

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the participants I interviewed are white, middleclass, educated, young and brought up (or currently living) in a prevalingly leftist environment.

found in the relation of trust between the researcher (or ethnographer) and participant. I believe that the participants must to some extent already feel comfortable with and have trust in the researcher beforehand in order to be able to speak freely.

Feminist ethnography, according to Hesse-Biber, is more specifically focussed on the way that gender is understood and made meaningful in social life, as well how gender relates to power. I will try to show how gender is understood and performed in the interviews about feminism. The next chapter will discuss why and in what manner I will use autoethnography as a method.

### **3.2 Autoethnography**

This thesis will be partly autoethnographic because this research derives from my own experiences as a feminist. My research questions are founded in observations of what it means to identify as a feminist in a patriarchal society nowadays. Autoethnography, which is a way of gaining insight from personal experiences to open up colonized spaces and discourses (2014, abstract Smailes), is the methodological foundation for this thesis. Smailes explains how the process of an auto ethnographic research makes us work with both memories and prior insights as well as the emergent, for example negotiations with academic literature (2014, 52). And in order to not only describe but also show how feminism is can be difficult at times an uncomfortable topic, to both the participants and myself, I have chosen to use visual ethnography as a method.

### **3.3 Visual ethnography**

Important to this research is the filming of the interviews during my fieldwork<sup>6</sup>. In this chapter I will reflect on why I chose visual ethnography as a method and argue how the audio-visual footage enriches my analysis.

Scholar Sarah Pink addresses the shifting context of visual ethnography and signaled the crisis in anthropology in the 1980's as a turning point of how scholars thought about knowledge, truth and objectivity. Pink argues that 'these ideas paved the way for the visual to be increasingly acceptable in ethnography as it was recognized that ethnographic film or

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<sup>6</sup> Because I previously had no experience in filming and editing whatsoever, I started collaborating with two documentary students from DIA (Documentary Institute Amsterdam) who were interested in my project. Dido and Elsa have helped me with editing the video and offering relevant literature.

photography were essentially no more subjective or objective than written texts and thus gradually became acceptable to (if not actively engaged with by) most mainstream researchers' (2013, 3). One must ask her self what makes these video taped interviews ethnographic? Pink argues that '[...] ethnographic video can be almost any type of recordings and that footage becomes ethnographic when they are implicated in an ethnographic project' (2013, 106).

Because I wanted to research whether the participants would experience a similar kind of discomfort as I have experienced myself when speaking about feminism, I chose to videotape the interviews. This discomfort is easier to show through the visual; that is by seeing the participants' body language and seeing them struggle in finding answers. I wondered how I could show what I experience in my daily life. Video has become a way of making something invisible visible. As Pink states: '[...] doing visual ethnography offers a route to comprehending those aspects of experience that are very often sensory, unspoken, tacit and invisible' (2013, 47).

Another reason for choosing visual ethnography was to eventually be able to make a small documentary out of the footage. My wish to do this is grounded in my interest in creating a bridge between the academic and non-academic world. I wanted to create more than just an academic text, something that I could easily share with my family and friends. Entering the academic world has not been a self-evident step for me. Neither my parents nor most of the people surrounding me in my youth have studied at the university. This "outsiders" perspective inspires me to find ways to try to bridge this chasm between the academic and non-academic world. One way of making academic knowledge more widely accessible to people who have not studied at the university is by changing the form. A video is more accessible because of its audio-visual aspects and the fact that the "reader" is seeing and hearing actual bodies speaking instead of just reading letters on a piece of paper.

As I mentioned earlier, the debate about objectivity/subjectivity in ethnography has been going on especially from 1980's and on. 'Visual ethnography', Pink argues, 'does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences, and the negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced' (2013, 35). As a researcher, I must be aware that the knowledge does not really exist within the footage but that it is produced in the conversations with the participants. Pink states that 'knowledge is produced in negotiation

between research participants and researcher, rather than existing as an objective reality that may be recorded and taken home in a notebook, word processing file, audio recording, photograph or video' (2013, 105). Which leads me to the following chapter where I reflect on the process of making a video.

### **3.4 The process of making and editing video**

The process of doing interviews, filming, and editing has been as important to this projects as the actual analysis of the filmed footage itself. And as Pink argues: '[...] video ethnography practice can be seen as both a site of knowledge production, and as the process of making a reflexive video document that is itself a trace of that site' (2013, 106).

The interesting aspect of working with footage and seeing the interviews over and over again is that the material changes every time you look at it. The more you (re)view it, the more details become visible. This is where new knowledge is produced. Pink articulates this phenomenon by saying '[...] that when we view video that we have recorded we should understand it not as being 'played back' which is how we would usually term it, at least in the English language, but instead we play video forward (Pink 2011d; Pink and Leder Mackley 2012) (2013, 107). This playing forward of the video is happening both when I as a researcher watch it as well as when I look at it together with others. Pink goes on by stating that 'when ethnographers produce photographs or video, these images, as well as the experience of producing and discussing them, become part of their ethnographic knowledge' (2013, 1). The process of making the teaser helped me realize what I really wanted to show with this video-project. In the following chapter I will analyze carefully selected quotes taken from the interviews by placing them in the light of the theoretical concepts I discussed in my theoretical framework.

## **5. Analysis**

In the analysis I will go into several popular arguments that people articulated during the interviews for not identifying with the feminist label. By connecting quotes to both academic and popular literature I will try to trace returning arguments and debates. Also, the arguments will be held against the background of the concepts discussed in my theoretical framework: the feminist label, stigma and postfeminism.

## 5.1 I don't know so much about feminism

A reason for some of the participants to eschew the label feminist is the fear of not being able to properly argue for feminist issues. This chapter will discuss the idea that in order to call yourself a feminist you should *know* a lot about it.

*Anna: Do you call yourself a feminist?*

*Erik: Well, I have the feeling that ... I think that I ... The things I know about feminism appeal to me. With that I feel ... It fits the way I look at things but I don't know if I understand the concept of feminism enough in order to call myself a feminist. If I would really explicitly say that I am a feminist I should be able to explain and to substantiate and I don't think I have thought it through enough for that.*

Following Erik's quote, I recognize this insecurity about not knowing enough. It is very hard sometimes to explain clearly why you feel uncomfortable in certain situations where you experience that differences between people are made on the basis of gender. I actually started studying Gender studies in order to be able to put in words what I had been feeling for many years. But having studied Gender studies for a couple of years now I realised that is absolutely no necessity to study at the university in order to call yourself a feminist, although I must admit it has helped me a lot. I wonder whether the institutionalization of feminism in the 1970's, when 'Women studies' (later: Gender studies) became a faculty at some Dutch universities, plays a part in this idea that in order to be a feminist you should be (academically) educated.

When I interviewed a former classmate (in Gender studies) I assumed that she would call herself a feminist. But to my surprise calling herself a feminist was a recent development to her. When I asked her whether she is a feminist she answered the following:

*Yes, but only since I started doing my masters (Gender & Ethnicity). Before that I was very careful with the word [feminist] and its connotations. But the more I think about it the more I think: yes, if you stand for equality, not only between men and women, but between everyone, that makes you a feminist. And you don't have to be ashamed. It has been quite a hassle for me to realise that. And that's why I know that for many people it is very hard to identify as feminists. But I think many more people are but they just wouldn't admit it. - Sanne*

It surprised me that even a Gender studies student in her masters was still until recently struggling with using the word 'feminist'. The next chapter will deal with the idea that the word 'feminism' itself is part of the problem of the stigma feminism is dealing with.

### 5.3 I don't like the way the word sounds

*“Yes, I think that my first association with a feminist ... yes, that it is harder for a man to be one and that I don't really ... I cannot relate to the word in itself ... I just don't like it. That's why I would never call myself that way. With that I mean the word 'feminism' apart from the content of the concept, because, to be honest, I haven't really thought about it so much yet ...what it really is about” -Friso*

Following Friso's quote, it seems that focussing on the word becomes a kind of distraction from the content of feminism, what feminism is really about. Problems with the word 'feminism' are both expressed by men and women in the interviews for this thesis. The word is seen as out-dated and exclusive. Gay states that expresses her anger '[...] when women disavow feminism and shun the feminist label but say they support all the advances born of feminism because I see a disconnect that does not need to be there. I get angry but I understand and hope someday we will live in a culture where we don't need to distance ourselves from the feminist label, where the label doesn't make us afraid of being alone, of being too different, of wanting too much' (2014, xii). I agree with Gay and consider the word 'feminism' as an ode to all women who started the movement and devoted themselves for equal rights between men and women. I wonder in what way the word 'feminism' plays a part for men to feel excluded from the movement. In the next chapter I discuss the gendered image of who can(not) be feminist.

### 5.2 I'm not a woman

In this chapter I touch upon the idea that feminists are assumed to be women and women are always feminists. Men, on the contrary, can't be feminists.

***Friso:** I also feel sometimes that I am not allowed to be a feminist because I am a man.*

***Anna:** Really?*

***Friso:** Yes.*

***Anna:** Why?*

***Friso:** Yeah, I don't know actually ... I have the idea that it has something to do with the fact that you ... as a man, do not know certain things. How it feels to be a woman, or something. Or how it feels to be in that role. I don't think it really is about being a woman but rather how it feels to be in that role.*

Following Friso's quote, it seems to me that some men use this kind of argumentation to protect themselves from having to engage with potentially painful or complex issues. Jens van Tricht says the following:



*“Men cannot cry, men can’t be vulnerable, men can’t be wimp’s, men can’t be effeminate. Men have to always work hard, be strong, tough, independent and confident. Yes, that’s not necessarily who we are. I daily stand on the barricades because feminism and emancipation are topics in which men usually engage. They don’t think it is about them or at best that it is against men.” – Jens van Tricht.*

This tendency of thinking that feminism is only about women or even anti-men seems to be a burden for many to identify as feminists. This disidentification is often articulated as a kind of disinterest. It seems that some men not take the effort to empathize with issues not concerning themselves, or other men. As we live in a patriarchal world where most of the time men and masculinity are seen as the norm, it seems like men do not really learn how to empathise with others than themselves. One of the participants says the following:

*“And with men ... they still seem to be having to convince each other maybe. To call yourself a feminist as a man is even more abnormal than when a woman does it” - Yrene*

It is sad but sometimes Yrene’s statement seems to be true; men might listen more to other men. A prominent Dutch newspaper launched a website with all kinds of small video’s that says something about the identity of the persons in the video’s. When you enter the website you see the question “What do you call yourself?”. In one of the videos a man calls himself a feminist:

*“I’m a feminist. I believe in the good in men. I believe that men can contribute to a better world. And that they can also free the feminine in themselves; shape their humanity (“humanness”) more. Because constricting images of what masculinity entails are restrictive and destructive to both women, men and the world.” – Jens van Tricht*

The “feminine” seems to be brought in direct connection to “humanness”, which is interesting in itself, and as something every man holds inside but cannot (easily) let out. The sentence: “I believe in the good in men” seems to point at a fear of men to become anti-men as soon as they identify as feminists. The idea that feminists are intrinsically anti-men is frequently expressed in the interviews and will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **5.3 I’m not anti-men**

To be pro-women is often associated with being anti-men. The link between feminism, whereas ‘woman’ is already in the word itself<sup>7</sup>, as something that is anti-men is often made. One of the participants expressed how the word can be perceived as exclusive for men:

*“And I notice that many people quickly feel excluded, especially men. Because I think it is really important that men ... yeah, feel more included in the topic. And then I think: yes, if men so quickly feel excluded by that word [feminism] I think they should be listened to more. Men who do think it is important [feminism], why do they feel left out and how they would like to talk about the topic. So I still notice this doubt about it. I notice that I find it important to find a right word but ... for that it is important to find male feminists and hear what they think.” –Mare*

Mare brings up the issue that feminism, in particular the word itself, excludes men. Mare states that men should be listened to more when it comes to the question how we should speak about feminism. I find it very hard to agree because I would rather argue that men should train more in listening but I do recognize this anxiety about leaving men out. But as I have been calling myself feminist for a couple of years now I have realized that is a pity for men themselves that they feel left out. For both men and women to be seen as anti-men is seen as a dangerous business, because they are our fathers, bosses, teachers and sources of finance: they (commonly) have power. I firmly believe that feminism is beneficial for everyone, including men. Just as women suffer from the fact that men are the norm, men also suffer from this same norm. Some argue that this association of feminism being anti-men is caused by the way second wave feminism in the Netherlands (in the 1960’s) is framed, namely as a pretty man-bashing movement, in lectures about feminism at high schools:

*“I think that the history of the “Dolle Mina’s”<sup>8</sup> in the Netherlands has had a great impact when feminism is at issue. Everybody learns a little about them in Dutch High schools, it is obligatory. It is weird when that is the only thing you learn about feminism. The only thing we learn about feminism is something that happened forty years ago!” – Sanne*

Sanne’s statement can be an explanation of why feminism is often associated as something out-dated, something that happened in the past. This way of thinking can be put in relation to the postfeminist idea that feminism has already passed away, as well as an affirmation of the national self-image of the Netherlands as modern and emancipated.

In order to return to the idea that feminism would be anti-men, the question if Dutch people are pro-women is much closer to the national self-image of the Netherlands:

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<sup>7</sup> ‘femina’ is the Latin word for ‘woman’.

<sup>8</sup> The “Dolle mina’s” (mad mina) was a Dutch feminist group who campaigned for equal rights for women in the 1970’s.

*“But the word is, yeah, “femin”, so “feminine”, so feminism has something to do with women. Femininity. So, yeah ... But I think when the question would be: “Are you pro-women?” or something I would immediately say: “yes!” –Friso*

To conclude the analysis I would like to discuss one final popular argument, and that is that many feel that they cannot legitimately claim the label of feminist because they are not *active* enough.

#### **5.4 I’m not in the streets demonstrating**

This chapter will deal with the argument of not calling yourself a feminist because of a felt lack of being an activist in general and especially a lack of joining in feminist protests. I will also discuss the concept of resistance that is often associated with feminism, versus offered alternatives.

*“I immediately think of very strong activism that eh... is a little ‘rucksichlos’ (reckless). A kind of action for the sake of action” – Friso<sup>9</sup>*

In nearly all nine interviews feminism is associated with activism in its most traditional sense: a feminist is a person who practices feminism by demonstrating in the streets. Many of the participants answered the question of what feminism connotes (for them) by describing a person (mostly a woman) who regularly goes out on the streets holding a banner. This regularity (or lack of it) is also articulated in the sense that many, although affirming to feminist thought, do not call themselves feminists because they assume that in order to legitimately call themselves a “real” feminist they should *do more*.

*Anna: Do you call yourself a feminist?*

*Angelica: No, never. No, I am not at all ... I never call myself a ... I never label myself.*

*Anna: Why not?*

*Angelica: Because I think that in order to call yourself a feminist you should always be active. You should be doing it a 100% and I am not. Or, at least I do not practice it 100% of the time.*

*Anna: Could you explain this?*

*Angelica: What I already said: I sometimes just let go and adapt to the mainstream. Because you are tired or because you ... are scared or insecure. You do not dare to fully stand up for yourself or you just don’t want to be called a whiner or something like that.*

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<sup>9</sup> I have obtained authorization of all participants to use their real names in this thesis. The interviews are held in Dutch and are translated to English by me, with help from a friend who did his masters in English literature.

Following this later quote, it seems that this reluctance to identify as feminist relates to the fear of being judged by others as a ‘fake’ or ‘bad’ feminist. Author Roxane Gay writes about this fear of being a “bad feminist”: ‘There is an essential feminism or, as I perceive this essentialism, the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be feminist and that there are consequences for doing feminism wrong’ (2014, 304). This essentialism Gay brings up is a problem because it does not allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality. Also, as the following quote will show, the fear of being inconsequential is prevalent by some of the participants.

*Angelica: I think that for me ... it is not an easy story to sell when I say: “I am a feminist” and the next thing I do is something that I can’t ... or when I am not consequential. I then have the feeling that I can’t explain it. I think it is hard...*

*Anna: Are you then scared that somebody will criticize you and say: “Huh, yesterday you said you were a feminist and today you are painting your nails” or something?*

*Angelica: Haha! Yes, maybe that is it. That I will be attacked or something.*

One of the participants has trouble identifying as a feminist because of the resistance that it often entails:

*“Initially I struggle with the word [feminist] because it invokes a lot of things. And it invokes some kind of resistance... against a group of people, men or others. And I don’t really like that; that immediate resistance against stuff. I think that if you want to change something you should rather eh ... offer an alternative instead. Not just advocate resistance. And also I associate feminism with going out onto the streets and eh ... that when someone says something negative about women you immediately say “this is wrong”. – Mare*

Mare raises a prevalent feminist debate about what tone to use; some feminists swear by being direct and even advocate violence (sometimes in its most literal way) while others strive for a more sophisticated way of creating change. I do see the point of carefully choosing the way you react and deal with social inequality, but at times I experience that this “carefulness” of choosing *how* to react taps into a feminine rhetoric where you, especially as a woman, are not allowed to let emotions take over because you run the risk of being over-emotional, non-rational and therefore to not be taken seriously.

Some of the people who I interviewed did not see the point of being explicit about their identification as feminists. What is the value of being explicit about identifying as a feminist? Does a label just create boundaries between people (I am a feminist, you are not)? Is it better to just ask questions, and offer alternatives instead of making statements about things

that you do not agree with? I would argue that firstly there is a need for knowledge about feminism, which raises awareness for issues concerning gender, and ultimately that awareness would lead to creating (better, less oppressive) alternatives. Finally, I agree with Gay when she says: '[...] Let us (try to) become the feminists we would like to see moving through the world' (2014, xiv).

## **Conclusion**

My aim was to explore to what extent people in my surroundings (family and friends) experience feminism and the label 'feminist' as something they do not want to be associated with. I wanted to analyze the arguments they gave in the video-taped interviews for justifying why they did not identify as feminists. The five arguments that were most prevalent in the interviews were: 'I'm not in the streets demonstrating', 'I'm not anti-men', 'I'm not a woman', 'I don't like the way the word sounds' and 'I don't know so much about it'. All arguments carry certain stereotypes that made it clear that feminism is stigmatized. In the Netherlands I experience a discrepancy between the basic content of feminism, often articulated as equal rights between men and women, and *how* a feminist *does* things. I found out that the label feminist carries a stigma that focuses mostly on the form of feminists practices; angry, resisting, disciplining and out-dated. I have discussed how the framing of second-wave feminists in the 1970's as anti-men still sticks to feminism even after more than forty years later. I wanted to get more insight in whether the act of explicitly reclaiming the word feminist can be a potential tool to create social change but could not really get into depth with that, although I personally think that it can, due to the maximum length of this thesis.

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## Appendix



## 1. Teaser

Attached in email!

## 2. Translated quotes

Black = original Dutch quote

Green = English translation

~~“Nou ja, het veranderd een beetje mijn idee daarover want eh, in eerste instantie heb ik een beetje moeite met het woord. Omdat het allemaal dingen oproept. En ook verzet oproept tegen iets. Tegen een groep of tegen mannen of tegen anderen. En ik houd niet zo van, zeg maar meteen ergens tegen verzetten, ik denk dat als je iets wilt veranderen dat dat beter kan door eh .... niet je te verzetten maar meer een alternatief te bieden. In plaats van alleen maar verzet te geven tot iets. En ik denk bij het woord feminisme aan de straat op gaan en ehm... als er iets negatiefs over vrouwen wordt gezegd dat je meteen zegt van: "dit vind ik niet goed".”~~

“Initially I struggle with the word [feminist] because it invokes a lot of things. And it invokes some kind of resistance... against a group of people, men or others. And I don't really like that; that immediate resistance against things. I think that if you want to change something you should rather eh ..... not resist but offer an alternative instead. Not just advocate resistance. And also I associate feminism with going out onto the streets and eh ..... that when someone says something negative about women you immediately say “this is wrong”.

F: “ik heb ook een beetje het gevoel dat ik het niet, omdat ik een man ben dat ik het niet mag zijn.

A: Ja?

F: Ja.

A: Waarom?

F: Ja, ja dat weet ik eigenlijk niet..... Ja, ik heb het idee dat het iets te maken heeft met dat je ... misschien als man iets niet zou weten. Hoe het is, ofzo, om vrouw te zijn. Zoiets. Of hoe het is om in die rol te zitten. Het gaat niet zozeer om vrouw zijn denk ik maar meer om in die rol te zitten.

F: I also feel sometimes that I am not allowed to be a feminist because I am a man.

A: Really?

F: Yes.

A: Why?

F: Yeah, I don't know actually ..... I have the idea that it has something to do with the fact that you .... as a man do not know certain things. How it feels to be a woman, or something. Or how it feels to be in that role. I don't think it really is about being a woman but rather about how it feels to be in that role.

T: Ja, omdat ik me voorstel om echt feminist te zijn moet je zelf feminist zijn, of moet je zelf vrouw zijn bedoel ik. En .... Ik ben wel voor gelijke rechten en weet ik veel wat maar ik streef niet meer vrijheid of meer gelijkheid voor vrouwen na.

T: I think that in order to be a feminist you should be a feminist yourself ..... or I mean in order to be a feminist you have to be a woman yourself. And ..... I am in favour of equal rights and what not but I don't strive for greater freedom or equality for women.

Y: En bij mannen ..... die moeten elkaar nog een soort van overtuigen misschien. Van: dat is al helemaal abnormaal dat een man zich feminist zou noemen. Maar dat kan dus ook, dat hoeft dus niet door te zeggen: "ik ben een feminist" want kunt zoveel roepen en uiteindelijk anders handelen.

Y: "And with men ..... they still seem to be having to convince each other. Like: that, being a man, it's really exceptional to call yourself a feminist. But that it's possible without having to say "I'm a feminist" since you can call yourself many things only to act contradictory.

J: "Ik ben een feminist. Ik geloof in het goede in mannen. Ik geloof dat mannen een bijdrage kunnen leveren aan een betere wereld. En dat ze ook het vrouwelijke in zichzelf kunnen bevrijden, hun menselijkheid meer vormgeven. Omdat beknellende beelden van mannelijkheid voor mannen en voor vrouwen en voor de wereld beperkend en destructief zijn.

"I'm a feminist. I believe in the good in men. I believe that men can contribute to a better world. And that they can also liberate the feminine in themselves; shape their humanity ("humanness") more. Because narrow/constricting images of what masculinity entails are restrictive and destructive to both women, men and the world." – Jens van Tricht

Jens van Tricht: "Mannen mogen niet huilen, mannen mogen niet kwetsbaar zijn, mannen mogen geen mietje zijn, mannen mogen niet vrouwelijk zijn. Mannen moeten heel hard werken, altijd sterk en stoer, onafhankelijk en zelfverzekerd zijn. Terwijl we dat niet altijd zijn. Ik sta eigenlijk dagelijks op de barricade want emancipatie, feminisme zijn thema's waar mannen zich over het algemeen niet mee bezig houden. Ze denken dat het niet over hen gaat of hooguit tegen hun is.

"Men cannot cry, men can't be vulnerable, men can't be wimp's, men can't be effeminate. Men have to work really hard, always be strong and tough, independent and self-confident. Yet, that's not the necessarily who we are. In fact, I'm on the barricades daily because feminism and emancipation are topics in which men are usually not engaged. They think it is not about them or at best is against men." – Jens van Tricht.

M: En dat ik dat ook merk dat mensen zich heel snel buiten gesloten voelen, vooral mannen. En dat vind ik gewoon heel vervelend ook voor mannen vooral. Omdat ik het juist heel belangrijk vind dat mannen het meer ehm .... ja, meer zich echt erbij betrokken voelen bij het thema. En als ik denk: ja, als mannen dat zo snel hebben bij dat woord dan vind ik wel het heel belangrijk is dat er naar hun geluisterd wordt! Mannen die dat wel belangrijk vinden, waarom dat dan is en wat zij dan wel .. hoe ze er wel over zouden willen praten. Dus dat merk ik ook nog steeds wel, een soort twijfel daar in. Ik merk dat het belangrijk is om een woord te

vinden maar ... Dan is het wel vooral belangrijk, vind ik, om dan inderdaad mannelijke feministen te vinden.

“And that I notice that many people quickly feel excluded, especially men. Which I feel is just bothersome, especially for men. Because indeed I think it is really important that men ..... yeah, feel more sincerely included in the topic. And when I think: yes, if men feel excluded by that word so quickly [feminism] then I think it’s crucial that their voice should be heard. Men who do think it is important [feminism], why do they feel left out and how they would like to talk about the topic. So I still notice this doubt about it. I notice that I find it important to find the right word but ..... subsequently, I believe it is of crucial importance to indeed find male feminists and hear what they think.” –M

S: En ik denk dat dat heel veel mensen tegenhoudt om openlijk feminist te zijn omdat ze dan het gevoel hebben ... je merkt dat mensen heel snel in de verdediging schieten natuurlijk. Ik denk dat dat een beetje met die retoriek te maken heeft, dat mensen bang zijn dat jij ze nu allemaal even op een hele boze, strenge manier komt vertellen wat ze allemaal wel niet fout hebben gedaan.

“And I think that that is what keeps people from openly identifying as feminists, because they experience .... you notice that people start defending themselves very quickly off course. I think that that’s linked to this rhetoric, where people are weary of feeling patronized by you making them aware of their many faults in an angry and disciplinary manner.

F: Maar het woord zelf is wel, ja, feminien, dus feminisme, dat heeft iets met vrouwen te maken. Vrouwelijkheid. Dus, ja..... Maar ik denk als het meer: ben je pro-vrouw, ofzo, of ben je voor vrouwen? Dan zou ik gelijk 'ja' zeggen.

F: “But the word is, yeah, “femin”, so feminine, so feminism has something to do with women. Femininity. So, yeah ..... But I think when the question would be: “Are you pro-women?” or something I would immediately say: “yes!”

E: A: Noem jij jezelf feminist?

E: Nou, ik heb het gevoel ... ik denk dat ik .... wat ik weet van het feminisme, dat spreekt me aan. Daar voel ik me ook wel .. Het sluit aan bij hoe ik tegen de dingen aankijk maar ik weet niet of ik het begrip feminisme voldoende begrijp en voldoende kan doorgronden om mezelf ook zo te noemen. Als ik mezelf naar buiten feminist zou noemen dan moet ik dat ook heel goed kunnen uitleggen en argumenteren en zo diep het ik er nog niet over nagedacht denk ik.

**A:** Do you call yourself a feminist?

**E:** Well, I have the feeling that .... I think that I .... The things I know about feminism appeal to me. With that I feel ..... It fits the way I look at thing but I don’t know if I understand the concept of feminism enough in order to call myself a feminist. If I would really explicitly say that I am a feminist I should be able to explain and to substantiate and I don’t think I have thought it through enough for that.

A: Ben jij feminist?

S: Ja. Maar wel echt sinds dat ik die Master (Gender & Ethnicity) doe. Daarvoor was ik altijd een beetje terughoudend over het woord, de connotaties er om heen. Maar hoe meer ik erover nadenk hoe meer ik denk van: ja, als jij staat voor gelijkheid, en dat betekend niet alleen tussen mannen en vrouwen, dat betekend tussen iedereen dan maakt dat jou een feminist. En dan hoeft je je daarvoor niet te schamen. En dat is best wel een brug die ik over heb moeten gaan. En daarom beseft ik me ook heel goed dat mensen zich daar niet mee willen identificeren, maar daardoor denk ik ook dat veel meer mensen het zijn dan dat ze dat zouden toegeven.

Yes, but only since I started doing my masters (Gender & Ethnicity). Before that I was very careful with the word [feminist] and its connotations. But the more I think about it the more I think: yes, if you stand for equality, not only between men and women, but between everyone, that makes you a feminist. And you don't have to be ashamed. It has been quite a hassle for me to realise that. And that's why I know that for many it is very hard to identify as feminists. But I think many more people are but they just wouldn't admit it.

F: Ja, dat is denk ik echt mijn eerste associatie met feminist is .. Ja, gewoon dat het als man moeilijker is om dat te zijn en dat ik dat woord gewoon, dat ik me niet zo goed tot dat woord zelf ... dat ik het gewoon een niet zo'n mooi woord vind. Dus daarom zou ik mezelf niet zo noemen. Even los van wat het dan inhoud want om eerlijk te zijn heb ik daar nog niet heel veel bij stil gestaan ook, wat dat woord allemaal inhoud.

**F:** Yes, I think that my first association with a feminist ... yes, that is harder for a man to be one and that I don't really ..... I cannot relate to the word in itself .... I just don't like it. That's why I would never call myself that way. With that I mean the word 'feminism' apart from the content of the concept, because, to be honest, I haven't really thought about it so much yet ..... what it really is about.

R: "Het enige dat daar iets aan kan veranderen, is een Groter Verhaal over Vooruitgang in de 21ste eeuw. Een verhaal over de Volgende Stap Voorwaarts."

R: 'The only thing that can change that [agony and fear]', Wijnberg argues, 'is a Bigger Story about Progress in the twenty-first century'. He continues: 'A story about the Next Step Forward'.

