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**Feminism in five-inch heels:  
A critical analysis of Sigrid Kaag and Dilan Yeşilgöz'  
enactment of neoliberal 'feminism' in the Dutch political field**

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## Table of contents

Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Scientific relevance	7
Societal relevance	8
Method	9
Critical, feminist perspective	9
Intersectionality	9
Situated knowledges	10
Content analysis	10
Theoretical framework	13
Conceptualizations of neoliberalism	13
Conceptualizations of feminism	14
Conceptualizations of neoliberal ‘feminism’	14
Neoliberal ‘feminism’ in the Netherlands	15
Women in Dutch politics	16
The current state of feminism in the Netherlands	17
Dutch neoliberal ‘feminism’	17
State of the art	19
Margaret Thatcher	19
Hillary Clinton	20
Angela Merkel	21
Summary	22
Content analysis	24
Sigrid Kaag	24
Policy approaches	24
Women’s rights and gender equality	25
Economy	26
Political strategies	26
First female prime minister	26
Being a woman in politics	27
Women’s rights and gender equality	28

Misogyny	29
Economy	29
Sigrid Kaag and neoliberal ‘feminism’	30
Dilan Yeşilgöz	31
Policy approaches	32
Women’s rights and gender equality	32
Economy	33
Political strategies	33
First female prime minister	33
Being a woman in politics	34
Women’s rights and gender equality	35
Misogyny	36
Economy	36
Race	36
Dilan Yeşilgöz and neoliberal ‘feminism’	38
Key findings	39
Radical feminism in the neoliberal ‘feminist’ Netherlands	42
Systemic change	42
Different voices	43
Bottom-up approach	43
Conclusion	43
Discussion and conclusion	45
Bibliography	48
Appendix A	57
Appendix B	62
Appendix C	63

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines neoliberal ‘feminism’ in the Dutch political context through the case studies of Sigrid Kaag and Dilan Yeşilgöz, two prominent female politicians in recent Dutch political history. I view these women as symbolic for the state of feminism in Dutch politics and explore how their ‘feminism’ limits a more radical feminism. This research was done through a critical, feminist perspective and builds upon prior research on other Western female politicians that enact neoliberal ‘feminism’.

To look at the Dutch context more specifically, a critical discourse analysis was used in which I found that while Kaag and Yeşilgöz both enact vastly different strategies, they both fall under neoliberal ‘feminism’. Kaag’s ‘feminism’ is clearly influenced by neoliberalism and Yeşilgöz’ neoliberalism has some ‘feminist’ aspects. This makes the two politicians different at first glance, but in the end quite similar. In relation to prior research, I have found a resemblance between Clinton and Kaag’s ‘feminism’, as both are enthusiastic ‘feminists’, yet are influenced by imperialist, neoliberal notions. I also found Merkel’s reluctant approach to ‘feminism’ similar to that of Yeşilgöz and lastly I argue that both Kaag and Yeşilgöz profit from their campaigns being viewed as inherently ‘feminist’ because they are women, just like Thatcher did.

Moreover, I discussed how this neoliberal ‘feminism’ that Kaag and Yeşilgöz enact – that I argue is symbolic for the whole political Dutch field – limits radical feminism and how perhaps space can be made for it. I discuss how by working on radically changing the political system itself, working on the lack of diversity within it and by taking a bottom-up approach to politics and activism, a desperately needed radical feminism can take up more space in Dutch politics.

## Introduction

“Women can do anything men can do... and in five-inch heels” seemed to be an overarching theme when I was campaigning for one of the Dutch left-leaning, progressive political parties. It illustrates how while there was a priority on mentioning women and ‘femininity’, this was always in the context of the Dutch political field, which I perceived as largely informed by masculine, heteropatriarchal logics. What they considered to be ‘feminism’ was filled with stereotypes about women, men, femininity, masculinity, but most of all about feminism itself. I have experienced firsthand how Dutch politics seems to struggle with first of all finding a place for feminism and secondly how to adjust this feminism to a context that does not allow for much radical thought. This I found to be the case both within the traditional political field, like in campaigns, debates, and news media, and in the Dutch academic political science field. Both provide little room for more radical, broader discussions of social, economic and political issues that my kind of feminism would concern itself with. Instead, ‘feminism’ – I feel – is used as strategy.

In the 2021 Dutch national elections the progressive-liberal political party D66 ran their campaign largely based on the fact that their leading candidate Sigrid Kaag could become the Netherlands’ first female prime minister. Kaag emphasized the importance of visibility of women in politics and encouraged women to “take their roles” (D66, 2020). Women’s magazine ELLE spoke of a tipping point in Dutch politics (Goudsmit, 2020) and multiple newspapers discussed whether the Netherlands was ready for a female prime minister (Brouwers & Hendrickx, 2020; NOS Nieuws, 2020, Wagendorp, 2020). And while Kaag might not have succeeded in becoming the Netherlands’ first female prime minister, D66 certainly succeeded in its campaign as it became the second biggest party in the parliament in the 2020 elections (Kiesraad, 2021). In 2023, Kaag left Dutch national politics. She stated the hate and threats she received for being a woman in politics became too much for her and her family (Nieuwenhuis & Peer, 2023). With this, Dutch politics lost a politician who continuously used gendered language and highlighted women’s rights.

Three years later, the conservative-liberal political party VVD chose the opposite strategy, as they posited their female leading candidate Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius who stated that her gender was “irrelevant in relation to the job” (Algemeen Dagblad, 2023a) and argued she would never “play the woman card” (NOS Nieuws, 2023). Once again, news media seemed to strongly believe that the Netherlands would be getting its first female prime minister. It was actually argued to be even more likely this time, as Yeşilgöz was the leader of the biggest party in Dutch politics of the last several years (Candan, 2023; Vanderstraeten, 2023). However, the

VVD lost ten seats in the 2023 elections, beaten by two parties with men as leading candidates (NOS Nieuws, n.d.).

Both of these attempts illustrate how feminism and women's rights are invoked differently in Dutch politics yet I would argue still through a neoliberal 'feminist' lens. A 'feminism' focused on individual (gender) identity, individual agency, 'empowerment' tactics and profit – whether this is financial or political.

This leads me to explore the role this specific form of 'feminism' plays in the Dutch field. To do so, I first explore the conceptualizations of the terms neoliberalism, feminism and neoliberal feminism. Furthermore, I discuss several feminist political science scholars, who have applied this concept when discussing Western female politicians Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel. From this point, I analyze Kaag and Yeşilgöz' usage of neoliberal 'feminism'. How do they explicitly and implicitly make use of their gender identity and of feminist or non-feminist rhetoric? The aim of this paper is to critically look at the Dutch political field specifically by using the concept of neoliberal 'feminism', to then be able to have a more in-depth perspective on how this puts limitations on a more radical feminism, but also how this perhaps can be changed. This brings me to the following research question: 'How is neoliberal 'feminism' enacted in the Dutch political landscape and how does this limit Dutch radical feminism?'.

### **Scientific relevance**

The scientific relevance of this research lies in the fact that little research can be found on the place of women and the role of feminism in Dutch politics, despite it being quite an interesting context to study as it is one of the few Northern European countries that has not had a female prime minister and is a country that considers itself progressive and tolerant (Mijnhardt, 2014).

Before I start my analysis, I extensively go over the concepts of neoliberalism, feminism and neoliberal 'feminism' and how these are viewed by feminist political science scholars in the theoretical framework. This is necessary as neoliberalism, feminism and especially neoliberal feminism are contested terms and I clearly need to set out what definition I am referring to in my thesis. The state of the art discusses prior research about feminism and neoliberal 'feminism', specifically in the context of other prominent Western female politicians Angela Merkel, Margaret Thatcher, and Hillary Clinton. Moreover, I am building on prior research on female politicians to be able to do my own analysis and apply it to a different context.

My scientific relevance is found in the fact that the combination of gender studies and political theory is lacking in the Dutch context. Specifically, when it comes to the existence of neoliberal ‘feminism’ in the Dutch political field, no research has been done. As I show through the state of the art in which other political contexts will be discussed, this is a topic that is analyzed frequently in both gender studies and political theory contexts, just not yet in the Dutch one. I am building on and drawing from this prior research to be able to do my own analysis in a new context.

### **Societal relevance**

I look into the case studies of Sigrid Kaag and Dilan Yeşilgöz, who have both played important roles in recent Dutch political history and were both some of the first women ever to be considered for the role of prime minister. As prominent politicians, Kaag and Yeşilgöz both directly and indirectly impact the people of the Netherlands and so it is of importance for their actions to be analyzed critically. Moreover, I wonder why neoliberal ‘feminism’ is so prevalent in Dutch politics, as I feel all Dutch women and radical feminist thought deserve to be represented in the political field, which I feel does not happen currently. With my thesis I aim to take the first step into analyzing this.

In the later part of my thesis, I discuss how ‘feminism’ in Dutch politics limits a more radical feminism and how more space can be made for it. With this chapter, I am tying my research into real-life ways to move further within Dutch politics, as this is not only something I am desperately missing currently but I also feel this is lacking in the Netherlands overall. I have personally felt how hopeless Dutch feminist activism can feel when dealing with a narrow-minded and non-idealistic context. Making Dutch politics accessible, inclusive, and open to radical change would be the ultimate end goal, and one I hope to provide some help to through my research.



## **Method**

### **Critical, feminist perspective**

My thesis is written from a critical, feminist perspective. With feminist I am referring to a framework in which feminist, critical race, queer theory and more are considered, as well as an approach which aims to produce knowledge that contributes to meaningful change when it comes to any forms of injustice and marginalization. Moreover, this thesis is inspired by what inspires me personally as I myself am invested in Dutch feminist activism. Lastly, my positionality as a researcher is a part of the research itself rather than something I did not consider to feign objectivity. These aspects of my research make this thesis – in my opinion – a feminist one. After all, feminist research practices are plural, unclear, and do not assume innocence or objectivity, like Hesse-Biber (2013) states:

Feminist research positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process. By using a variety of research methods – quantitative, qualitative, mixed – feminist researchers use gender as a lens through which to focus on social issues. Research is considered ‘feminist’ when it is grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences. (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 46)

### **Intersectionality**

As Collins (2019) argues, with critical analysis intersectional thinking is of importance. A one-at-a-time-approach is not useful as it does away with the complexity of the human experience. After all, the human experience cannot be understood through only one of one’s social identities, but should be viewed through the overlap of different factors (Crenshaw, 1991). The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) who examined how Black women were failed by anti-discrimination law, as she found that Black women do not experience discrimination as Black people or as women, but as Black women. Crenshaw (1991) created this approach to describe the interlocking of oppressions that takes place and it has since been broadened to apply to many more different ‘intersections’ or interlockings than race and gender. As Kaag and Yeşilgöz have different positionalities, I will be discussing this in light of their political personas.

My experiences, upbringing and social identities shape the way I view the world. Born and raised in the Netherlands, I have followed politics and identified with feminism since I was about 15 years old, and have since then been quite a fierce supporter of left-wing, progressive arguments and parties. Moreover, I consider myself a radical, intersectional feminist. This

means I have my opinions on the politics of both Kaag and Yeşilgöz. I do not necessarily agree with them, nor have I ever voted for them. I am aware that my point of view is not a neutral one, nor will I pretend it is in this thesis.

### **Situated knowledges**

Discussing feminist research, Haraway (1988) coined the concept of situated knowledges to describe how all knowledge is situated within a perspective that is influenced by experiences, values and interests of the individuals that produce this knowledge. This also means this knowledge is not able to be fully comprehensive and can only reflect particular and partial aspects of reality.

Many scholars have embraced Haraway's (1988) concept and built upon the framework, yet it has also been critiqued for essentializing marginalized perspectives and having practical implications (Simandan, 2019; Withers, 2010). In response to this, intersectionality is offered. Situated knowledges can be further built out by incorporating an intersectional perspective, as it would help with the risk of essentializing marginalized perspectives (Yuval-Davis, 2017), which is why I decided to use both perspectives in my thesis by clearly stating my positionality and being aware of its potential influence.

### **Content analysis**

As no prior research has been done on Kaag and Yeşilgöz, I have done a content analysis on them via a critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA's revolve around the role discourse plays in the representation of reality. With discourse, I am referring to Foucault's (1990) idea of a construction of knowledge about a particular topic, practice or cluster of ideas, which provides ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. In this particular CDA the representations of power relations in society were analyzed critically (Jørgenson & Philips, 2002), in line with Foucault (1990) and Scott's (1991) ideas on the intertwining of power and knowledge; the idea that everything is construed through power.

My CDA is based on Machin & Mayr's (2012) work. They discuss how both text and visuals can be seen as communicative choices that construct meaning. Via a CDA these choices can be identified and analyzed. Moreover, their implicit ideological meanings can be found. With CDA's, the researcher's perspective is still of course influenced by their own discursive reality. This is why I chose to do a CDA with an intersectional and situated knowledges perspective in mind, meaning I did not aim for impossible objectivity by acknowledging my

own situated knowledge as well as aimed to be intersectional in my research by being wary of essentialism and identity politics. I have done so by discussing a variety of media sources in my analysis, in which Kaag and Yeşilgöz largely represent themselves and by being aware of my own perspective.

For both Kaag and Yeşilgöz, I have analyzed sixteen texts, as seen in Appendix A. I first looked into both Kaag and Yeşilgöz' policy approaches, with a focus on their 2021 and 2023 election campaigns. This meant their parties' election programs and profiles of them. Moreover, I looked into their political strategies, for which I have analyzed written and spoken interviews, election debates, and other media such as talk show appearances and a documentary. Of these, three were party related, four were interviews, three were election debates and for Kaag five were other media and for Yeşilgöz six were other media. For the sake of clarity, I am grouping together the talk show appearances from the same talk show but this concerns eighteen appearances from Kaag and seven appearances from Yeşilgöz.

After my first 'reading' of the texts, I chose the following codes related to neoliberal 'feminism': first female prime minister, being a woman, being a woman in politics, women's rights, gender equality, discrimination/diversity and equality, misogyny/hate comments, (stereotypical) femininity, (neo)liberalism/capitalism/womenomics, and race/migration/discrimination. With these codes I was able to find the recurring themes both women enact to talk about 'feminism' more easily. After transcribing the texts that explicitly or implicitly mentioned these themes – which were fourteen for both Kaag and Yeşilgöz – the codes women's rights and gender equality morphed into one another, stereotypical femininity was not addressed and I decided on more clear names. This led to the following codes: first female prime minister, being a woman in politics, women's rights and gender equality, misogyny, economy, and race. This can all be seen in Appendix B.

Since this is a discourse analysis with different types of texts, I used different ways of transcribing the texts. Most were done through either coding of the articles and election programs, or – when it came to spoken text – first making an exact transcript of the people speaking. When deemed necessary – for example if there were things happening in the edit, a lot of movement, or music – I made use of a table, as seen in Appendix C.

CDA fit this research well as it has the ability and goal to analyze certain representations and question how and why these representations are used. CDA is also helpful when it comes to topics or statements that are perceived as 'innocent' but are produced by powerful and influential organizations or people and thus can have a big impact on the public's perspective on these topics. On the other hand, CDA has its limitations. It somewhat solely depended on

me to determine what discourses lie ‘behind’ the representations, and to somehow ‘uncover’ the ideologies and socio-cultural practices that have come into play while creating these representations. This brings me back to my intersectional situated knowledges perspective I discussed.

## **Theoretical framework**

Before getting into the specific Dutch political context, it is critical to discuss the concepts used in my analysis. The concepts feminism, neoliberalism and neoliberal ‘feminism’ are heavily contested and differ per geopolitical context, sector and even individual. For the sake of clarity, I will provide an overview of the way I understand these concepts. With neoliberal ‘feminism’, I am referring to the co-optation of feminism as a tool to fit neoliberal ideals. Therefore, before clearly stating what that concept exactly means in thesis, I will explore the concepts neoliberalism and feminism first.

### **Conceptualizations of neoliberalism**

As Thorsen (2010) discusses in their discussion of its definition, neoliberalism is characterized by privatization and deregulation. Privatization concerns itself with the privatizing of public sectors such as healthcare and education while deregulation concerns the removal of state control, which in turn – according to neoliberal logic – would enhance competition, free trade, and globalization. According to Shaikh (2005), a critic of neoliberalism, neoliberalism is justified by the claims it makes about society and the economy. In neoliberal logic, markets would serve all economic needs if they were allowed to function freely. It even argues that the reason poverty, unemployment and economic crises exist, is because the market is not ‘allowed’ to function freely. This would apply to all contexts, no matter whether the neoliberal ideas were implemented in a welfare state or whether the country was just recently decolonized. According to neoliberalism, a free market that allows for privatization and deregulation would thrive anywhere and for anyone (Shaikh, 2005).

The idea of neoliberalism as an economic philosophy stems from European liberals in the 1930s who were trying to revive classic liberalism. Following the Great Depression, the popularity of classic liberalism had taken a dive and the desire to control markets grew stronger. The ‘neo’ in neoliberalism thus stems from this attempt at renewal (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015; Hardin, 2014). But neoliberalism is more than an economic doctrine, as political scientist Venugopal (2015, p. 165) states: “[it] is everywhere, but at the same time, nowhere”. It is described as an ideology, as a political theory, or a philosophy. I view neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology, one that broadly encompasses the way our society operates. Critical of neoliberalism, Monbiot (2016) argues that neoliberalism is so pervasive that it has become difficult to recognize as an ideology; we merely accept that this is the way society is, as if it is our biological, innate way of enacting economic, political, and social life. While I would argue no one thrives under neoliberal logics, that humans do not innately crave competition nor

consumption, and that the best ways to promote efficiency and democracy certainly would not be within this system, psychosociologist Hoggett (2017) describes the psychology of neoliberalism as so pervasive that we are persuaded it is the fair, equal way. The rich believe to have acquired their wealth through hard work and refuse to acknowledge socioeconomic advantages and the poor blame themselves for not working hard enough despite not being able to escape their respective positions. Venugopal (2015) adds that as we internalize the neoliberal narrative, the belief that the wealthy have acquired their wealth through merit and the poor are failing, privileges are ignored and the giant corporation gets glorified, instead of it taking responsibility for being the cause of many problems in our contemporary world.

### **Conceptualizations of feminism**

As perhaps one of the most contested concepts in the field of humanities, feminism is almost impossible to define. Thus, this definition will be a broad one and one that fits within the framework. Using the conceptualization of feminist waves, with the first wave focusing on the right to vote, the second wave on bodily autonomy, the third wave on a more inclusive feminism and the fourth wave being defined by social media activism, feminism seems somewhat organized and categorized (Grady, 2018; Pruitt, 2023). I – along with many scholars – argue it is not (Daum, 2010; Garrison, 2014; Nicholson, 2010). Feminism is more than the right to vote and the right to abortion, it includes the entire socioeconomic system and cannot nor should be reduced to the rights of white women. That is not to say, that the concept of feminism is not still often used in this context, for example when it comes to neoliberal ‘feminism’.

I draw from Arruzza et al.’s (2019) ‘Feminism for the 99%’, in which they argue for an anti-capitalist, eco-socialist, and anti-racist feminism in which the 99% are represented. The manifesto calls for feminism to concern itself with anything and everything going on in society, with the problem at the root being capitalism and neoliberalism. Arruzza et al. (2019) connect struggles such as poverty, climate change, gender violence, and inadequate healthcare and vows to eradicate them all through a broad, all-encompassing analysis of our capitalist, neoliberal ‘feminism’ and aims for a truly radical feminism. Thus, while the word feminism is used for many different forms of ‘feminism’, I use the concept to refer to a radical feminism that represents the 99%, and perceive neoliberal ‘feminism’ as not falling under this concept.

### **Conceptualizations of neoliberal ‘feminism’**

Sociologists Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2004) state that neoliberal ‘feminism’ separates itself from social ideals like equality and social justice that I argue should be inherent to feminism,

and instead focuses on individual women's empowerment and agency. It hereby denies that our lives are shaped by socioeconomic, geopolitical and cultural structures.

McRobbie (2004) further argues that we have entered an era of post-feminism; an era in which feminism is considered, yet not needed. Post-feminism and neoliberal 'feminism' are closely related, as they both focus on individualism, choice and empowerment. Moreover, within an individualistic 'feminism' that internalizes neoliberalism, women are deemed responsible for their own successes and their own failures. In a critical essay Retallack et al. (2016) argue that 'feminism' within this context is also often commodified: used as way of making connections, making money, and gaining power. This would all make "feminism [...] compatible with neoliberal governance nationally and internationally and is, willfully or not, buttressing [its] agenda." (Cruz & Brown, 2016, p. 75). Or like critical theorist Fraser (2013) states:

In a cruel twist of fate, I fear the movement for women's liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society. That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms. Where feminist once criticized a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to 'lean in'. A movement that once prioritized social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorized 'care' and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy. (Nancy Fraser, 2013)

All in all, neoliberal 'feminism' is a version of 'feminism' that fits neoliberal ideas. Whether neoliberalism co-opts feminist ideals or vice versa, the two operate in conjunction. This means neoliberal 'feminism' has feminist ideas but through internalized neoliberalism, turns solidarity into individualism, freedom into 'choice', intersectionality into tokenism, economic justice into commodification and consumerism, and eco-socialism, anti-racism and anti-capitalism into identity politics. As Fraser (2013) states: it has been a choice to let 'feminism' and 'empowerment' be for the sake of "individual autonomy, increased choice, and meritocratic advancement", rather than for the sake of "a world in which gender emancipation went hand in hand with participatory democracy and social solidarity".

### **Neoliberal 'feminism' in the Netherlands**

It is of importance to contextualize the concept of neoliberal 'feminism' to the Dutch context, as it is often viewed within an American or British context, especially in scholarship. To do so,

I will briefly discuss the position of women in Dutch politics and the current state of Dutch feminism to then discuss Dutch neoliberal ‘feminism’.

### ***Women in Dutch politics***

Only in 1917 Dutch women got the constitutional right to be elected, which is how Suze Groeneweg became the first women in the House of Representatives in 1918. In 1919, Dutch women got the right to vote, but only in 1953 the first female government official was appointed and three years later the Netherlands had its first female minister (Parlement.com, n.d.-b). Groeneweg was able to implement rules and regulations that furthered the position of women in Dutch society. She made sure women could become mayors and pled for paid pregnancy leave for both married and unmarried women. Dutch women getting the right to vote can be led to Aletta Jacobs’ *Vereeniging voor Vrouwenkiesrecht* (women’s suffrage association) and a bill introduced by Henri Marchant (Koster, 2018). Dutch feminist groups from the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like, *Man Vrouw Maatschappij* (Man-Woman-Society) and the *Dolle Mina’s* (Crazy Mina’s) were influential and important to creating equal social security for men and women and the right to abortion. However, it is important to note that Dutch feminism was largely based on the rights of white women for a long time and that only in the 1980s did the feminist movement start focusing more on women of color, inspired by the rise of Black feminism in the United States (Captain & Ghorashi, 2001).

Over the last couple of years women have become more and more visible in politics, but this is not yet representative of Dutch society. On many levels in politics, it is still mostly men. Especially Dutch cities and provinces are way behind when it comes to equal representation of men and women (Sjouwerman, 2023). Like in many countries in the Global North, men and stereotypically masculine people are still considered more fit for political positions (Cavazza & Pacilli, 2021). And like many political systems, the Dutch one was created when only wealthy, white men had a voice. Even since allowing other men and women to vote, the system has pretty much remained the same, with the last constitutional amendment happening in 1983 (NIMD, 2008). There have been little efforts to make the system more inclusive, and it is showing. Dutch political scientists Mügge & Runderkamp (2023) state that not only are there barely any networks and role models for Dutch women to look up to, but the political atmosphere is also not a very safe place for women to be. Or for anyone other than white, middle-aged, university educated men for that matter.



### ***The current state of feminism in the Netherlands***

Elgershuizen (2023) – who proposes feminism as a solution to the current rise of distrust in Dutch politics – states that feminism takes an interesting position in Dutch society as topics around women’s rights and feminism are not often picked up on in political party programmes, television shows, or magazines. Yet the Netherlands has not at all achieved the perfect, equal society it considers itself to be, so leaving women’s rights to the side in national discourse and playing into gender-blindness allow for counterproductive policies to be instated. Moreover, women’s voices are taken less seriously, and actual problems are hardly grappled with, like femicide, sexual violence, the pay gap and reproductive health care (Elgershuizen, 2023). This does not mean there are no feminist organizations within the Netherlands, although most are focused on foreign policy and promoting gender equality abroad (Rijksoverheid, n.d.-b). I find that radical feminism in the Netherlands is more often found in smaller organizations or groups that do not have any funding, and do most of their activism within their community or through social media. Dean & Aune (2015) – who explore feminist activism in Europe – agree, as they state feminist activism in the Netherlands is most often done through social media, blogs and magazines. I think of feminist magazine *Opzij*, feminist platform The Titty Mag, and Instagram account *Zeikschrift*, just to name a few.

### ***Dutch neoliberal ‘feminism’***

Historian Mellink and political scientist Oudenampsen (2022) specifically discuss the concept of neoliberalism in the Dutch context by stating that it is not an import from the American context, like is often believed, but rather is “an ideological product of the 1930s that strongly influenced [...] the Dutch welfare state”. This way, when the welfare state fell apart in the 1970s, neoliberals were ready to transform Dutch society into a neoliberal one, even more radically than in other European states. Mellink & Oudenampsen (2022) discuss how this has been quite unnoticeable, as no Dutch political party or movement actively organized around the concept of neoliberalism, and instead it slowly crept into every part of political, academic, and economic institutes. This connects to the pervasive nature of neoliberalism that Monbiot (2016) discusses, in which neoliberalism is so ingrained as a hegemonic ideology, it is perceived as natural and inherent.

This prevalence of neoliberalism in Dutch society that Mellink & Oudenampsen (2022) discuss, I feel leads into the prevalence of neoliberal ‘feminism’ in Dutch society. The mindset of not needing feminism anymore seems endemic in some parts of Dutch society (Hofstede, 2018; NPO Kennis, 2018). This makes room for the neoliberal ‘feminism’ discussed prior:

a feminism that is about individual 'choice' and empowerment through consumerism and capitalism, instead of a feminism about socioeconomic justice as the hegemonic discourse is that this justice is already the case. Even when a more radical feminism is 'used', it is not related to the Dutch context but rather abroad, which can be argued as a form of Western superiority, Orientalism and white saviorism rather than a real feminism for the 99% (Combrink, 2019).

## **State of the art**

In order to do an analysis on neoliberal 'feminism' in Dutch politics, it is of importance to explore prior scholarship. While this research has not yet been done in the Dutch context, the concepts have surely been explored in relation to other Western female politicians. I will discuss three other female politicians who are often mentioned when it comes to neoliberalism, feminism and neoliberal 'feminism' in Western politics. This concerns research on former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, former U.S. President candidate Hillary Clinton, and former German chancellor Angela Merkel.

### **Margaret Thatcher**

English Marxist feminist Beatrix Campbell (2003) notes that Margaret Thatcher is often associated with neoliberal policies due to her focus on 'free market' capitalism, deregulation and privatization during her time as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990. She is seen as a somewhat complex and controversial 'feminist' figure, as she never addressed systemic inequalities against women, but was also perceived to be breaking gender barriers by becoming the first female Prime Minister in Europe (Campbell, 2003). Nigel Lawson – who was Thatcher's Minister of Finances for five years – called Thatcherism "a mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, 'Victorian values', privatization and a dash of populism" (Berlinski, 2011, p. 115). All to say, while Thatcherism might not be completely the same as liberalism, it sure fit well into the traditional British political institute, as it did not challenge any of its age old traditions such as the monarchy. However, Thatcherism did challenge more modern parts of it, such as trade unions (Wood, 1991).

In her article exploring feminist politics after Thatcher, Campbell (2003) discusses the relationship between Thatcher and feminism, as she states it is logical to think that she rejected a feminist notion, as her conservative, patriarchal politics certainly did not align with an "endorsement of the feminine" (Campbell, 2003, p. 14). In opposition even, Thatcher used her power in a way women were not expected to, and she could be said to have adjusted to a stereotypically masculine way of ruling. She disavowed her connection to women or her own experience of being a woman completely as this would not have fit into the Thatcherist picture she was painting.

Weaver (2016) explores the distinction between policy and perception, which is quite prevalent in the case of Margaret Thatcher as Thatcher's policy can be argued to be anti-feminist but her existence within a male-dominated political field can be perceived as 'feminist'. Either

way, her being the first female Prime Minister in both Europe and the United Kingdom, would make her policies be perceived through a ‘feminist’, or at least being-a-woman lens. This made her anti-feminist, neoliberal policies still speak to women, even if they were being disadvantaged by Thatcher's policies, as younger women who identified with Labor voted overwhelmingly voted conservatively in the 1992 election, most likely because of Margaret Thatcher (Weaver, 2016). I feel this makes Thatcher an interesting case when it comes to neoliberal ‘feminism’, as she clearly did not align with feminism but her existence as a woman still influenced her political career and was even considered empowering as seen in the following quote in British newspaper The Guardian.

Women who complain that Margaret Thatcher was not a feminist because she didn't help other women or openly acknowledge her debt to feminism have a point, but they are also missing something vital. She normalized female success. She showed that although female power and masculine power may have different languages, different metaphors, different gestures, different traditions, different ways of being glamorous or nasty, they are equally strong, equally valid. [...] No one can ever question whether women are capable of single-minded vigor, or efficient leadership, after Margaret Thatcher. She is the great unsung heroine of British feminism. (Walter, 2012).

So, not only did Thatcher herself profit off of neoliberal ‘feminism’, she is also argued to be an icon within this type of ‘feminism’, as she perfectly emulates the co-optation of masculine norms instead of fighting them and the idea of individualism over community. While Thatcher might have considered feminism to be “poison” (Baars, 2013), neoliberal ‘feminism’ sure enjoys drinking from that vial.

### **Hillary Clinton**

In an article discussing neoliberal ‘feminism’ in the U.S. presidential election process Ullus (2018) argues that former U.S. President candidate and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton embodied a neoliberal, white ‘feminism’ during the U.S. presidential election of 2016, as she framed her presidential race as a feminist one, yet was found to be lacking in feminist policies. Clinton is different than Thatcher in the fact that she unabashedly calls herself a feminist and argues to enact feminist policy, but as Eisenstein (2016) argues: “having a female U.S. president might break a glass ceiling, but the policies of the woman holding the office could still leave women in the basement”. Many of Clinton’s rhetoric during the 2016 U.S. elections revolved around cracking the glass ceiling, yet concrete discussions around policies for women’s issues such as sexual violence, economic independence, or reproductive rights seemed few and far

between in her campaign. The neoliberal ‘feminist’ argument of it being time for a female president might have made sense in 2016 – and it still does – but it is not enough to simply have a female president, and Hillary Clinton is the perfect example of that. Simply being a token for a marginalized community is not going to change or uproot the patriarchal and masculine roots of the political field, nor did Clinton ever argue she would (Eisenstein, 2016). Her campaign was run based on an imperial, neoliberal ‘feminism’ and Clinton herself is the poster child of a white, not-intersectional, individualized, and unaware of privilege kind of ‘feminism’. This form of ‘feminism’ silenced voices and continues to silence voices of people of color and sustains and even feeds into systems of oppression (Ulus, 2018). This is clear in Clinton’s policymaking concerning the Middle East, as she enforced the American notion of democracy: one that is based on colonial, racist and patriarchal logic and that convinces itself that the U.S. is able to “spread freedom and democracy” (Eisenstein, 2016). The women in Palestine, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others are not considered. What kind of ‘feminism’ is that?

Moreover, Hillary Clinton seems to be an advocate for a corporate ‘feminism’ as she stated that “giving women the tools to fully participate in their economies, societies, and governments” was the way to finally break the glass ceiling (U.S. Department of State, 2010). In reality, this thinking supports a system of neoliberalism, capitalism and consumerism that is inevitably making life harder for women, as their lives continue to be ruled by big corporations. It also solely assumes the U.S. perspective and leaves other women around the world completely in the dust (Featherstone & Frost, 2016).

So, while Hillary Clinton certainly has had a symbolic power that can be viewed from a feminist perspective and can be credited for a wave of feminist discussions surrounding sexual assault via #MeToo (Chozick, 2018), one can wonder whether Clinton had been made out to be this ‘feminist’ hero had she not lost the U.S. presidential race to the figurehead of misogyny that is Donald Trump.

### **Angela Merkel**

The former German chancellor Angela Merkel is perhaps one of the more underestimated women in European political history. After all, she did win four consecutive national elections, a feat not many are able to follow. Merkel rarely called herself a feminist; her tactic has always seemed to want to be seen as a leader – not a female leader (KRO-NCRV, n.d.). In comparison to Clinton, who operated politically during somewhat of the same time period, this is notable. Merkel’s tactic seemed to have worked out the way she wanted it too; she is rarely perceived as feminist icon and is not often praised for breaking glass ceilings.

However, during her last years in office, Merkel changed her tactics and explicitly referred to herself as feminist, as she stated: “Essentially, it’s about the fact that men and women are equal, in the sense of participation in society and in life in general. And in that sense, I can say: ‘Yes, I’m a feminist’.” (Deutsche Welle, 2021). She moved on to say that over her tenure as German chancellor she had more and more realized how little women there were in the political top and that she started perceiving this as something negative.

As Havertz (2018) – who explores neoliberalism in Germany – argues, neoliberalism has become the hegemonic ideology in Germany, like in many places, and it can be argued that Angela Merkel was once the most neoliberal of neoliberals. Under Merkel’s wing, Europe created its own brand of “neoliberal resilience”, as it somehow survived multiple financial crises, refugee crises, Brexit, Donald Trump and COVID-19, and still stayed intact as the hegemonic belief (Karas, 2023). Merkel presented neoliberalism on a silver platter as the only solution to Europe’s and Germany’s problems, and we ate it gladly.

Often described as the “de facto leader of the European Union”, “the most powerful woman in the world” and the “leader of the free world” (Forbes, n.d.), Merkel certainly took quite the position, which – while impressive – she did not use to promote a radical feminism or even a feminism at all during the majority of her time as chancellor. Instead, her power was enacted to promote neoliberal ideology and capitalist logic while almost wholly disregarding women’s rights for the majority of her political career.

## **Summary**

Looking at the research about these three female politicians who have all had very different careers, different policies, and different political strategies, the three of them still all fit under the umbrella of neoliberal ‘feminism’. Whereas Thatcher was clearly not aligned with feminism, she is still perceived as a ‘feminist’ icon by some, and thus profited off of ‘feminism’ – in a neoliberal and conservative flavor. Hillary Clinton is an enthusiastic ‘feminist’, but her ‘feminism’ is influenced by neoliberal ideas through and through, as her ‘feminism’ is a white, imperial one with a focus on individual economic empowerment. Lastly, Angela Merkel is more of the reluctant ‘feminist’. She is the epitome of contemporary neoliberalism which for a long time did not align with the flavor of ‘feminism’ that she embraced later on in her career as chancellor of Germany, finding a bit of a disingenuous way to combine the two.

I am of the opinion that these women show the different approaches to neoliberal ‘feminism’, as all three women still fit into neoliberal logics that influences their explicit or

implicit 'feminism'. This is important to keep in mind while I explore the two case studies in the Dutch context, as neoliberal 'feminism' can clearly be enacted in a myriad of different ways.

## **Content analysis**

With the conclusion in mind that neoliberal ‘feminism’ can be enacted in multiple different ways, and the goal to put a critical focus on the Dutch political field in line with prior research on other Western female politicians, I have critically analyzed texts produced by and about the two prominent Dutch female politicians Sigrid Kaag and Dilan Yeşilgöz. The texts were largely produced around their respective election campaigns and were analyzed through the following themes: first female prime minister, being a woman in politics, women’s rights and gender equality, misogyny, economy, and race

### **Sigrid Kaag**

Sigrid Kaag was born in Rijswijk, the Netherlands and after studying Arabic and philosophy at Utrecht University, she continued her education at multiple universities around the world. After working for Shell International, she worked with multiple organizations in the Middle East, most of them connected to the United Nations. In 2017, Kaag started her political career in the Netherlands for the progressive-liberal party D66 (Rijksoverheid, n.d.-a). Sigrid Kaag is a Dutch, white woman who spent the first 30 years of her life in the Netherlands, after which she spent the next 25 years living and working abroad. She is married to a Palestinian former politician, identifies as catholic and has four children (Collombon & Vallinga, 2021).

Kaag came back to the Netherlands in 2017 to fulfill a position as Minister of Trade and Development Cooperation, as she was quite familiar with the topic from her work in the United Nations (de Boer & Kieskamp, 2017). She quickly made a name for herself both within her party and Dutch politics itself, and in 2020 she became D66’s leading candidate for the 2021 national elections. These elections worked out well, as D66 became the second biggest party in parliament (Tan, 2021). In August of 2023, Kaag withdrew herself as leading candidate as well as from her position as Minister of Finance. In 2024, she is back working for the United Nations (Algemeen Dagblad, 2023b).

### ***Policy approaches***

Kaag’s party D66 – short for Democrats ‘66 – has been a moderate to big player in Dutch politics over the last decades. It describes itself as green, progressive, and open-minded. Their primary principle is that “the human should be central in politics”, and it does so by enacting classic liberalism and adding a social component (Parlement.com, n.d.-a). This theme continued under Kaag’s leadership, as the party seemed to focus on progressive-social topics such as euthanasia, women’s emancipation, and climate change as well as liberal topics such as



empowering smaller companies, competition, and a form of a controlled free market. Or as they call it: “progressive capitalism” (D66, 2021, p. 9-10).

### ***Women’s rights and gender equality***

D66’s election program for the 2021 national elections mentions women’s rights in a few different ways. An issue that is discussed often in D66’s election program is that of the right to bodily autonomy as they state they “cherish the right to determine your own body” (D66, 2021, p. 9-10). It is not made clear exactly in which way they mean, but I read it as quite broadly as both euthanasia and abortion are mentioned in the election program.

Moreover, D66 pleads for women to break the glass ceiling by holding more top positions in governments and companies. They want to make this easier by providing free childcare and a longer parental leave (D66, 2021, p. 142-143). The election program also has a paragraph dedicated to the “position of the woman”, which discusses sexual intimidation and assault, domestic violence, financial independence, better women’s healthcare, religious practices, better rights for sex workers, free birth control and a stronger abortion law. Most of the ‘solutions’ are quite vague and can be summarized in ‘this is a problem, and we should focus on it more’, without actually providing an explanation of how to go about this (D66, 2021, p. 142-147). Lastly, it is of note that it is discussed multiple times how the position of women in the Global South should be “bettered” (D66, 2021, p. 135-147 & 176).

D66’s focus on women’s rights is admirable and is certainly more than many other political parties discuss in their election programs (WOMEN Inc., n.d.). What is problematic, however, is that these plans are not concrete and also do not align with their position regarding economics. In the progressive capitalism they are aiming for, free birth control, financial independence and better women’s health care should be accomplished within the system of a free market, as the only impositions D66 is aiming to put on this free market mostly revolve around restricting endless growth and some regulations on sustainability. The focus remains on innovation and investing (D66, 2021, p. 92-93). So, while D66 might not argue for a fully free market, it still follows the neoliberal belief that within a free market societal problems somehow can be solved, as long as there are some regulations in place. It still buys into the perspective that capitalism can create an equal world, an idea of which many scholars have argued the opposite, as they state a neoliberal, capitalist society is a breeding ground for inequality (Hoggett, 2017; Monbiot, 2016; Venugopal, 2015).

Moreover, D66 proposes the following regulations in regard to labor: a temporary quota for women within the government, obligatory equal pay, stronger labor agreements surrounding

paid leave, lengthening paid parental leave to ten weeks, forbidding pregnancy discrimination, and free childcare (D66, 2021, p. 142-143). These regulations seem to have a stronger legal foundation yet are still very focused on the economy. Making everyone an equal worker helps out the capitalist system, as the more people who do labor, the better according to capitalist logic. It does not allow for a deviation of the capitalist goal of humans as workers and consumers, and simply makes everyone equally complicit in capitalist labor.

### ***Economy***

In line with this capitalist logic, D66 argues a strong economy and a successful company environment are crucial to a thriving society. This way they can invest in education, healthcare and “all other beautiful things” (D66, 2021, p. 92). They argue to aim for a balance between the capitalist system and a controlled economy, which would result in economic welfare for everybody (D66, 2021, p. 92). This idea of progressive capitalism can be related to neoliberal ‘feminism’, as both claim that you can have your cake and eat it too. According to D66’s logic, we can have an equal, fair world and live under a capitalist society. It is similar to what Shaikh (2005) discusses, as he states that via neoliberal logic any free market would serve all economic needs, regardless of the needs or the market in these scenarios. These broad, vague ideas are what justifies our following of a neoliberal logic, according to Shaikh (2005), however many agree that in practicality only the one percent thrive under neoliberalism (Monbiot, 2016; Venugopal, 2015).

### ***Political strategies***

In regard to political strategies, I am referring to the way Kaag’s political persona has been represented, specifically by herself. Here, persona is referring to an aspect or idea of someone’s character that is presented to or perceived as by others. In the case of a political persona, this is the character that Kaag is presented and perceived as within the political context.

### ***First female prime minister***

In the 2021 election campaign, Kaag heavily played into the possibility of her becoming the Netherlands’ first female prime minister. This was mostly done in the tone of ‘it’s about time’. She stated that the fact that the Netherlands has not had a female prime minister is outdated (Hoedeman, 2019). However, she often added to this notion that the voter should not pick her just because she is a woman, but also because of who she is and her experience (Hoedeman, 2019; Tan, 2021). During the 2021 campaign, Kaag was often questioned about

how she would do as the first female prime minister (College Tour, 2023a; EenVandaag, 2021; Op1, 2020a; Tan, 2021), of which she made note, as she mentioned:

I am the only one of the leading candidates who gets continuously asked whether I want to become prime minister. With all the male leading candidates, this is assumed. But with me, it seems completely unattainable and unthinkable to people. I find that very interesting.

(College Tour, 2023a, 36:09)

After analyzing Kaag, it is clear to me that the playing into her potentially becoming the first female prime minister was a part of her and D66's strategy for the 2021 election campaign. After the prime minister at the time had come under fire for his leadership and the culture that had been created in parliament, D66 started using the campaign slogan 'It is time for new leadership' (D66, n.d.), indicating that they were this new leadership. Adding this to her playing into becoming the first female prime minister, and D66 had quite the successful election campaign at its hands. This reminds me of Hillary Clinton's political strategy during her run for U.S. President in 2016, which focused mostly on the symbolism that her becoming the first female U.S. president would hold, rather than actually uprooting the patriarchal and masculine traditions in politics (Eisenstein, 2016). It seems to be a somewhat shallow type of 'feminism', because while – of course – it is time for a women to become the Dutch prime minister or the U.S. president, their gender does not make this an inherent feminist action. However, in a more neoliberal 'feminist' perspective, it would.

### ***Being a woman in politics***

The way Kaag discusses the notion of being a woman in politics is complex. On the one hand she discusses the difficulties of it, as she states that there are times where she feels she has to 'man up', has to try three times harder to be taken seriously and is underestimated constantly. On the other hand, she also discusses how she has realized that she can just be herself, and people will listen eventually, as she states: "you have to make yourself heard but it does not have to be loud, it does not have to be dominant" (New Female Leaders, 2021, 18:50). She adds to this that women of this generation are able to do that without having to copy men's behavior, but to be able to this women need to grow thicker skin (College Tour, 2023a; New Female Leaders, 2021; Tan, 2021)

Moreover, it is noticeable that Kaag likes to play into the fact that she is a woman in politics, as she takes about any chance she gets to drive the conversation to this topic whether

it is about women rights or about herself personally. She is even seen asking her assistant for more “facts about women in politics that [she] should know” (Tan, 2021, 0:12:10).

With the topic of being a woman in politics, Kaag acknowledges that this can be difficult and harsh, but she does not connect this to the political field being a traditionally masculine one nor does she state the intent to change this. Instead, she advises women to stay true to themselves. This is a nice sentiment, but it is not a radical one and also one that keeps you popular with both young women who view her as an inspiration and people on the fence about a female prime minister. It feeds into a hegemonic ‘feminism’ that focuses on empowerment through consumerism and individualism, rather than acknowledging how community building and social justice might be actual solutions to the problems women in Dutch politics face.

### *Women’s rights and gender equality*

Like mentioned, Kaag is skilled at gearing many topics more specific to women’s issues. For example, when asked about more police on the street, she turns it into a women’s safety issue, stating the following:

I do not think more police will solve this problem. There are many neighborhoods with problems [...] including the raping of girls. [...] Everybody wants to know where to go, also with very serious domestic problems. We cannot expect the neighborhood cop to do this, [...] we need the whole State. (RTL Nieuws, 2021a, 50:50)

When asked about how to tackle misogyny, she states that the strong disapproval of it – especially when it is men doing it – would be a big help. Furthermore, she states that we need to show that men and women are on equal footing. She argues that this can be done via equal pay, free childcare, and free choice (Buitenhof, 2021, 10:30). This leads into her discussion of gender equality, which she also equates to equal pay, free childcare and free choice (New Female Leaders, 2021, 18:50).

It is impressive how much Kaag steers conversations towards the topic of women’s issues, and certainly is a quality that is needed in Dutch politics. It is disappointing, however, that these issues remain on topics that are not too controversial, and fit into the neoliberal ‘feminist’ perspective. Her focus on free childcare, equal pay, and free choice is apparent in D66’s election program, the election debates, and her interviews. While these all have feminist themes of course, it barely scratches the surface of what women’s rights and gender equality can entail. Moreover, it is an individualist, money-focused lens on what are the most important issues for Dutch women. It also presumes that once we have achieved these goals, ‘feminism’

would be 'done'. It is the perfect example of a 'feminism' compatible with the neoliberal agenda, as these themes would not get in the way of making money, doing labor or consumption (Cruz & Brown, 2016).

### *Misogyny*

The topic most discussed by Kaag in the 'feminism' realm is that of misogyny, specifically when it comes to the hate comments she receives. She discusses how she thinks this is not really based on her politics, but more so on the fact that "a small group of people" does not like the fact that she is "a strong female leader" (Tan, 2021, 7:00). She has described the hate as "unbearable" and noted that it has made her question whether she should continue the work she does (Tan, 2021, 00:53). She stands her ground as she continuously emphasizes that the hate comments she receives are not because of what she is doing and that it is "up to the people committing the character assassination to explain why [they do it]" (Op1, 2022b, 00:31). What is interesting is how Kaag discusses in her documentary that she feels a large part of the hate is not just based in misogyny but also in the fact that she is married to a Palestinian man. This shows she recognizes there is probably more at play than just her gender, but also issues of racism and xenophobia. She also states that she feels the problem people have with her having a Palestinian husband became "about 50 to 60%" bigger because she is a woman (Tan, 2021, 59:10), hereby connecting the intersection of misogyny and xenophobia.

In the context of hate comments and threats rooted in misogyny and xenophobia, Kaag is not afraid to speak up, even though she might alienate her potential voters with this. Sadly, this misogynistic hatred did end up alienating Kaag herself from Dutch politics as she stepped down in 2023 (Kieskamp, 2023). While in this instance the problem is somewhat individual, it does seem Kaag saw the problem as bigger than herself, an attribute that does not fit into the individualistic nature of neoliberal 'feminism' (Fraser, 2013, McRobbie, 2004).

### *Economy*

With the comment below, Kaag once again comes back to D66's idea of a progressive capitalism, in which ideals are not possible, and one will have to settle for compromises. This not only effectively shuts people up, it also does not allow for radical change at all.

Ideals and compromises do not exclude each other. At the United Nations all you do is make compromises. The truth can be absolute but the way to it is made out of compromises and choices. It cannot be absolute. Of course, sometimes you get to a level of wishing for a bit more ambitious. But every step gets you closer. (Tan, 2021, 22:24)

Moreover, Kaag highlights the importance she finds in having women in the workplace and in the economy – specifically in leadership – as a way to garner gender equality, as she states: “if you want to change politics, if you want to change economics, I believe that [we] need to focus on the place of women.” (Tan, 2021, 53:12). The focus on ‘empowering’ women to work once again shows how D66 and Kaag truly believe a progressive capitalism can co-exist with their version of ‘feminism’. This ‘feminism’ being one that empowers women through labor and consumerism and celebrates women for individually profiting of the capitalist system, even if that means other marginalized communities – including women – might suffer more. A female billionaire is no more ethical than a male one. Like Fraser (2013) argues, this ‘careerism’ advises women to ‘lean in’ as it “celebrates female entrepreneurs [...], individual advancement and meritocracy” over “social solidarity [...], care and interdependence”, and Kaag’s ‘feminism’ seems to be full of ‘careerism’.

### ***Sigrid Kaag and neoliberal ‘feminism’***

To discuss how Kaag has enacted neoliberal ‘feminism’ in her policy approaches and political strategies, I have analyzed and summarized the recurring themes related to ‘feminism’ found in different types of media in which Kaag mostly self-represents. While Kaag openly calls herself a feminist and she and her party discuss women’s rights at length, I have still found that this ‘feminism’ is largely influenced by neoliberal logics. This is not surprising as Kaag’s party D66 is built on liberalism, yet it is of note that she uses this ‘feminism’ as a campaigning strategy. Something I not only find disingenuous as voters are being drawn in by this ‘feminist’ promise, but also problematic as it puts limitations on the more radical feminist movement.

To dive deeper into to why I argue Kaag’s ‘feminism’ is not an all-encompassing, radical feminism, but rather an individualized, watered down version of it, I will summarize the recurring themes I found in Kaag’s enactment of neoliberal ‘feminism’. To start, Kaag and D66 believe that capitalism and feminism can co-exist, I do not. Following Arruzza et al. (2019), I believe feminism should be for the 99% and this is simply not possible within a capitalist structure that needs inequality, exhaustion of resources and individualism to thrive, or even to exist.

This is firstly seen when it comes to her policy approaches, which do discuss women’s rights and gender equality very extensively – although exact details are missing – yet still fit into the neoliberal mould. The focus on strengthening women’s position in the workplace is apparent, and it assumes an assimilation rather than a radical change of the system informed by

masculinity. In Kaag's 2021 election campaign, it is clear the choice was made to play into her possibly becoming the first female prime minister of the Netherlands. I relate this to the distinction between policy and perception Weaver (2016) discusses, in which – in Weaver's case Thatcher's – policy does not have to be feminist for the politician or party to be perceived as feminist. The simple fact that Kaag is a woman, and could have been the first female prime minister, is seen as a feminist action. It was a clever campaign tactic, and it worked. This does not necessarily make Kaag as a politician less admirable, she is skilled at humanizing herself and other women, is not afraid to speak out against the misogyny she receives and has surely been inspiring for many Dutch girls and women. These are all incredibly needed in Dutch politics, and Kaag was only one of the few addressing them.

This does not, however, make her a feminist instantly. Her drawing on women's issues in many interviews and debates was also a way of campaigning and enacting identity politics, which made it feel shallow and disingenuous at times. Moreover, her 'feminism' seems to revolve around three points: free childcare, equal pay and free choice. While these are definitely a starting point, they will not radically change the system of the sexes, nor are they described very intersectionally by her. Rather, these three points fit right into McRobbie's (2004) description of neoliberal 'feminism': a 'feminism' that focuses on individualism, choice and empowerment rather than solidarity, liberation, and economic justice. In McRobbie's (2004) eyes it would be a shame that Kaag does not dare to take her 'feminism' some steps further, outside of the realm of neoliberal and capitalist logic, because the potential is definitely there. She is an incredibly inspiring speaker and captivated me with her intelligence and wit. However, promoting yourself as feminist while your 'feminism' does not dare to really challenge the patriarchal, masculine status quo of Dutch politics is problematic and dishonest towards your voters. I find Kaag's politics to be in line with both Clinton's and Thatcher's politics. Just like Clinton, Kaag knew the optics of a 'feminist' campaign and heavily played into them, and just like Thatcher, Kaag profited off of her campaign being perceived as a 'feminist' action by voters.

### **Dilan Yeşilgöz**

Dilan Yeşilgöz was born in Ankara, Turkey and got to the Netherlands at eight years old as her dad, a Turkish human rights activist, had to flee his home country as a political refugee (VVD Amsterdam, 2014). Yeşilgöz studied sociocultural sciences at the VU Amsterdam and afterwards joined the Socialist Party around 1999. However, in 2009 she surprisingly switched to the conservative-liberal VVD and joined the national parliament in 2017 as a member of this

party. Yeşilgöz uses her husband's name Zegerius intermittently next to her maiden name (Blokker, 2023). In an interview in 2023 she stated to have only recently found out she had a Turkish passport next to her Dutch one, but identifies with just the latter (KRO-NCRV, 2023).

Yeşilgöz worked for the VVD Amsterdam city council from 2014 to 2017. After being elected in the national elections in 2017 she worked as a member of parliament, she filled the position of Deputy Minister of Energy and Climate and later on as Minister of Justice and Safety. In 2023, Yeşilgöz became the political leader and leading candidate of the VVD (VVD, 2023a).

### ***Policy approaches***

The VVD, which stands for Party of the People for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*), was founded in 1948 and follows an economic and conservative liberalism. The VVD describes itself as a “center-right party” that wants to create a society with as much freedom as possible. They are driven by five “liberal core values”, which are freedom, responsibility, tolerance, social justice and equality (VVD, 2019). Their main focus seems to be on a free market, higher punishment of crimes, a strong military, a focus on nuclear energy and progressive policy surrounding abortion, euthanasia and LGBT-rights (VVD, 2023d).

### ***Women's rights and gender equality***

In their election program for the 2023 national elections, VVD barely discusses women's rights explicitly. Interestingly enough, when it is mentioned it is in the context of foreign policy, as they state to want to prevent genital mutilation and arranged marriage abroad by forbidding people to travel to be able to do so. Moreover, they discuss “honor related violence” as they call for higher punishment of it, which fits with their focus on higher punishment for crimes overall (VVD, 2023d, p. 15-16).

It is not surprising that the VVD barely mentions women's rights in their election program. It is of note that when they do, it is in the context of non-Dutch women or at least non-Dutch traditions. This relates to a type of ‘feminism’ where white, Western women are perceived to be free already, and it is Global South women that need to be ‘rescued’ by them. This is a type of thinking based in Eurocentrism and Western superiority and does not consider the agency of these Global South women. It is similar to Hillary Clinton's imperial ‘feminism’, as it assumes superiority of the home country which then would and should be in charge of what freedom looks like for other countries (Eisenstein, 2016).



## ***Economy***

What the VVD does discuss extensively is the Dutch economy. Their main thoughts on the economy and labor seems to be that ‘working needs to pay off’, as they aim to motivate people to work or work more by lowering taxes on labor and making childcare and travel costs cheaper for those who work. Moreover, they especially focus on the middle class, or people with average incomes, as they want them to “see their effort” by lowering their energy bill and mortgages (VVD, 2023d, p. 37-44).

In true neoliberal fashion, the VVD follows the belief that working hard equals being deserving of basic human rights. It imposes this hegemonic ideology and strengthens it by continuing to argue it is inherently natural for humans to compete and consume and it is effective and democratic to have a free market. Doing so, the VVD denies the existence of marginalization and socioeconomic disadvantages and instead blames these on the individual not working hard enough (Hoggett, 2017; Monbiot, 2016). It succeeds with this neoliberal narrative as it is already internalized in Dutch society and its individuals; the belief that the wealthy are so because of their merit is hegemonically accepted (Venugopal, 2015).

## ***Political strategies***

I am again referring to the way Yeşilgöz’ political persona has been represented, specifically by herself. This includes the same amount of interviews, election debates, and talk show appearances as Kaag as well as a column and statement written by Yeşilgöz.

### ***First female prime minister***

Just like Kaag in 2021, Yeşilgöz was often asked about becoming the first female prime minister during her election campaign. She took a different approach though and often did away with her being the first women to do so, as she stated “yes, it is about time [...] but I do not think [my being a woman] has anything do to with [my] leadership qualities.” (de Koning & Valk, 2023). Almost every time she is asked, she answers something in this realm (College Tour, 2023b; Omroep PowNed, 2023; RTL Nieuws, 2021a; RTL Nieuws, 2021b; VVD, 2023c), and even jokingly plays into it saying:

Well, I have this crazy idea that women are just people! I am not going to do anything that different in [that position]. I am just going to do what I am doing now. My most important task – in whatever position – will be to serve the Netherlands. (College Tour, 2023b, 19:00)

With this, it is clear that Yeşilgöz is not interested in relating her gender identity too much to her politics. I would argue this is a campaign strategy, as she has stated she does not want to use the “women card” (Omroep PowNed, 2023, 1:06). This would go against VVD values, and potentially scare away too many voters. The VVD notably has a sober, pragmatic approach, which can be summarized in their past campaign slogan that stated ‘Act. Normal.’ (Wagendorp, 2017). This insinuates anything besides their idea of normal, would be not okay or over-the-top (Camfferman, 2017). Moreover, the VVD and therefore Yeşilgöz embrace conservative and liberal politics that are based in patriarchal logics (Campbell, 2003), thus, making too big a deal about Yeşilgöz potentially becoming the first female prime minister would not align with this. As seen throughout my analysis of Yeşilgöz’ political strategies, she stands her ground in men and women being equal already, and that her gender identity is not a reason to be treated exceptionally.

### ***Being a woman in politics***

When asked about what it is like to be a woman in Dutch politics, Yeşilgöz answers that she gets judged for every choice even more so than her male colleagues, whether it is the color of her shoes or the sound of her voice, however, she feels this is a part of the job as “everybody is allowed to have their opinion” (de Koning & Valk, 2023) and it is good to know how to take a “beating” (VVD, 2023c). Fitting this narrative, she has been referred to as a “pit bull in heels” and she stated to have taken this as a compliment (Mohunlol, 2021). It is clear that Yeşilgöz is aware that she is treated differently as a woman, however, she does not seem to mind all that much or feel much of a desire to change this. She actually sees it as a positive thing to be referred to both as a fighter in the word ‘pit bull’ and in the stereotypical feminine idea of ‘in heels’, which relates to her overall tendency to somewhat acknowledge her gender identity yet not letting it be too much a part of her political persona.

On the VVD’s 2021 candidate list for the national elections, four out of the top five candidates were women. When asked about this on a talk show, the four women all note how surprised they were about people’s reactions to this as they had not even noticed it themselves (Op1, 2020b). Yeşilgöz even notes that it “would have been extremely risky” had the VVD done this as a campaign tactic, as “VVD members would definitely have gotten annoyed”. Because in their party, “that is really not a thing. [...] Nobody is in a spot because they are a woman, an immigrant or a combination of the two” (Mohunlol, 2021). Here, Yeşilgöz acknowledges how it does not fit into VVD politics to highlight or emphasize gender identity nor acknowledge privileges men might have in politics. Everybody is equal after all, right? It resembles

Thatcher's approach to 'feminism', who during her political career rarely discussed her being a woman or the struggles this might bring, and while it is of course not exactly clear why Thatcher did so, Campbell (2003) discusses it would certainly not have fit with her party's school of thought.

### *Women's rights and gender equality*

One of the few times Yeşilgöz does discuss feminism explicitly is in a column written for a newspaper. She discusses that she feels "real feminists" are too busy to worry about the oversexualization on women, as they just have to accept that "sex sells". "Real feminists", according to Yeşilgöz (2016), should be worrying about life or death situations. She brings up how sexual intimidation, genital mutilation, and honor related violence are the real issues and worrying about other aspects of womanhood is "a luxury position that feminism [...] cannot afford" (Yeşilgöz, 2016).

This rhetoric comes up again when Yeşilgöz cuts off her hair in support of Iranian women in a talk show appearance. She is asked what more we can do in the Netherlands to connect to the worldwide women's struggle and she responds somewhat agitated, stating that "the fight is for feeling the sun on your skin, deciding for yourself who you are allowed to be, being able to feel the wind in your hair. There is no nuance in that." (Op1, 2022a, 1:55). With which she leads the conversation back to what she considers 'real feminist issues' and disregards the more nuanced feminist issues in the Netherlands.

This fits into the narrative Yeşilgöz aims to create in which the Netherlands is an evolved, progressive country, and we should all be appreciative of that. Whenever women's rights or emancipation are brought up Yeşilgöz skillfully brings to topic to women abroad, often in the Global South and in the same sentences notes that Dutch women are allowed to go to school, wear their hair down, and get an abortion (Op1, 2022a; Rijksoverheid, 2022; Yeşilgöz, 2016).

This shows how Yeşilgöz views women's rights and feminism as concerns for women in countries where women's rights are life or death issues. This first of all does away with the fact that in the Netherlands too, women's rights still are life or death issues. Second of all, the assumption that just because other people might have a larger struggle means you should not concern yourself with local, smaller struggles anymore is problematic and reductive. This does away with a feminism that is interconnected and intersectional, instead seeming more like the imperial 'feminism' born out of Western superiority that Eisenstein (2016) discusses.

### ***Misogyny***

Just like Kaag, Yeşilgöz has fallen victim to hate comments since participating in the Dutch political field. Interestingly, Yeşilgöz opts for a different narrative than Kaag as she rarely relates the hate she receives to being a woman. She either writes it off as part of the job or connects it to her migration background. A recurring theme is that she emphasizes she is not intimidated, and that the comments roll off her back (Mohunlol, 2021; NOS, 2023)

I have experienced many times how one can truly be bombarded [with hatred], but by now I am able to shake it off quite easily. I just think: it is an anonymous account of someone who is probably cursing at me from their mom's basements. I would not call that criticism. (NOS, 2023, 2:35)

While it is impressive that Yeşilgöz continues to do her work despite receiving lots of backlash, it is of note that she does not relate this to her being a woman at all. It once again relates to the unwillingness she has to put herself in even somewhat of a different position than her male colleagues, as this does not fit her conservative, liberal politics. Moreover, the narrative of not letting the comments get to her fits into the idea of her as a 'pit bull in heels'; she is strong and does not back down easily. A trait usually credited to masculinity and masculine leaders, and therefore often viewed as positive in the eyes of many voters who are used to masculine leaders and more masculine leadership styles (Johnson et al., 2008).

### ***Economy***

As a true liberal, Yeşilgöz often reiterates how 'working has to pay off', following the VVD policies surrounding economics and finances, she confirms her opinion on the idea that rich people work hard for their well-deserved money, and those who do not, need to step up (VVD, 2023b). Unsurprisingly, as she self-identifies as liberal, Yeşilgöz is the prime example of neoliberal beliefs. She believes it is naturally the way the market and human nature has to work, and that wealth is acquired by merit rather than through one's socioeconomic status. This thinking does not allow for acknowledging of privileges or marginalization – including being a woman – and rather glorifies the liberal system (Venugopal, 2015).

### ***Race***

One of the most notable aspects I found while analyzing Yeşilgöz' political strategies is how – in opposition to Kaag – she rarely "plays the women card", as she puts it herself (Omroep PowNed, 2023, 1:06), yet she does discuss her migration background often. This is often in relation to VVD's policy on refugees, as she states that she and her family were "real refugees"

and the Netherlands does not have the space or money to take in people that are not “real refugees” (de Koning & Valk, 2023; NOS, 2023; VVD, 2023a).

When I came to the Netherlands, as an eight-year-old girl, everything was different. We were well taken care of, I got every opportunity and now I am standing here in front of you. I wish that same fate to every real refugee. (NOS, 2023, 4:18)

Additionally, Yeşilgöz discusses her background to emphasize how great of a country the Netherlands actually is, similar to her approach to women’s rights, which plays into the recurring theme of being grateful of the fact that the Netherlands does not have the struggles prevalent in other countries. I argue this is a redundant and manipulative way to shut people up, instead of finding importance in the struggles that do still exist in the Netherlands.

Moreover, she discusses how she feels left-wing politics wants to see refugees and people with migration backgrounds as “just a refugee, pitiful and needing to be saved” (de Koning & Valk, 2023, Mohunlol, 2021).

You can remain in that, but you can also choose. [...] Do you want to become what has happened to you and what is going to happen to you? Or do you move on and it becomes a part of who you are, but not what determines your identity. [Making that choice] is not difficult. It means trusting in the power of people. (de Koning & Valk, 2023)

This invalidates real concerns surrounding racism and feminism that are being raised mostly by marginalized communities. Communities that still often do not get a voice in Dutch society and whose struggles and concerns are not yet reflected in Dutch politics. A fact that Yeşilgöz does not seem to want to recognize.

During the 2023 campaign. Yeşilgöz’ identity as a refugee is mostly ‘used’ to paint her as strong and resilient, as it states in her profile: “Dilan grew up with the example of parents who did not look away and actively put in the effort to make society a little bit better.” (VVD, n.d.). Otherwise, it is used to highlight how great the Netherlands is, as she has something to compare it to (VVD, 2023a). The former once again makes her seem powerful, and thus – according to the ‘logic’ that more masculine traits are better fit for leadership (Johnson et al., 2008) – a better candidate for becoming prime minister. The latter again relates to this idea of forced gratefulness to live in a country where women and other marginalized communities have basic human rights.

### *Dilan Yeşilgöz and neoliberal 'feminism'*

To discuss how Yeşilgöz has enacted neoliberal 'feminism' in her policy approaches and political strategies, I have analyzed and summarized the recurring themes related to 'feminism' found in different types of media in which Yeşilgöz mostly self-represents. I have found Yeşilgöz is a reluctant 'feminist', as her 'feminism' seems to be an afterthought or related to women outside of the Netherlands. Moreover, the VVD is a staunchly liberal party so unsurprisingly Yeşilgöz' 'feminism' is consistently informed by neoliberal and capitalist thought.

It is a completely different kind of 'feminism' than Kaag presents, but at least Yeşilgöz is not making the 'feminist' promise Kaag made. Instead, Yeşilgöz and the VVD rarely discuss women's rights and gender equality explicitly, unless it is in the context of foreign policy, making it seem more the imperialist 'feminism' Combrink (2019) describes, that is driven by a Western superiority complex, rather than a radical, all-encompassing feminism that aims to liberate all women and marginalized people. Combine this with the VVD's belief in a free market and a neoliberal 'feminist' is born. But in this case, more so one that fits into post-feminism, as Yeşilgöz is seemingly driven by the idea that feminism is considered, but no longer needed (McRobbie, 2004) – at least in the Dutch context.

This is clear in the way Yeşilgöz discusses the possibility of her becoming the first female prime minister, which she tends to look at quite pragmatically, as she does not perceive her being a woman as adding something extra. Described as a 'pit bull in heels', Yeşilgöz plays into masculine stereotypes of what it means to be a leader; to be strong, level-headed and unbothered. This is seen in her response to questions about what it is like to be a woman in politics and in her response to the backlash she gets. While she acknowledges it is different for her than for her male colleagues, there is not a trace to be found of her feeling like this needs to be changed. She would rather save the 'feminist' work for 'real feminist' issues, the ones that are about life or death. This way, she skillfully silences the voices of those in the Netherlands that bring up feminist issues, and points to those who have it worse.

Interestingly, where Kaag often notes her being a woman as a part of her identity, Yeşilgöz does so in relation to her migration background. She mostly does so to promote VVD's policy regarding refugees by referring to herself as a "real refugee". It seems that the only way your struggle is valid to Yeşilgöz is when it comes to life or death. Moreover, her migration background is mentioned once again to emphasize her being resilient and strong, qualities of a great leader – if you think masculine traits are related to good leadership.

Overall, Yeşilgöz' 'feminism' is largely characterized by an idea of 'it being solved already', a focus on foreign policy, and an assimilation to masculine norms of politics. As the VVD and Yeşilgöz are true liberals, this most likely stems from the priority being a free market and profit rather than economic justice and liberation. In an individualized society in which 'feminism' means choice and empowerment – or in other words: commodification and consumerism – women can individually be empowered to buy stuff and work hard! Yeşilgöz' 'feminism' is anything but radical, as there is not even an inkling of wanting any real change. The only change would be in the direction of more money. Moreover, rather than being intersectional and focusing on liberation, it is formed from a Western superiority standpoint. Yeşilgöz' 'feminism' closely resembles that of Merkel which has, as Havertz (2018) describes it, a focus on and strong pursuit of neoliberalism, and in which 'feminism' is an afterthought.

I would argue Yeşilgöz' 'feminism' is symbolic for current feminist thought in the Netherlands. The idea that we are 'done already' and that feminism is saved for non-Dutch context is prevalent, and is continuously being repeated by our politicians. It also feeds into gender-blindness and makes women's rights take up less and less space in the national discourse (Combrink, 2019; Hofstede, 2018; NPO Kennis, 2018). It is a shame Yeşilgöz does not take the opportunity to make more radical feminist choices, although that would probably not go over too well with her voters.

### **Key findings**

This research followed prior research on other Western female politicians, and I aimed to add on to this by providing a critical analysis on the Dutch context specifically. After discussing both Kaag and Yeşilgöz' policy approaches and political strategies, I have found some differences and similarities between both women when it comes to neoliberal, 'feminist' themes.

A clear overlap between Kaag and Yeşilgöz lies in their strong following of neoliberalism. While their two parties give different meaning to the school of thought, it is apparent that the belief that some form of a free market would in the end be a wishful outcome, as it would promote competition and consumption, is followed. Within the hegemonic position neoliberalism holds, this comes with the belief as well that wealth is earned by merit, leading to – in differing degrees – the ignoring of privileges and disadvantages and the glorification of hustle culture and corporate structures. Kaag and D66 infuse their liberalism with a 'feminist' component, which is something Yeşilgöz and the VVD do to a smaller degree as well, by assuming that it would be a good thing for women and marginalized people to operate within

this neoliberal structure and puts a focus on how to get there, instead of rethinking the structure in itself.

Within all the other themes I analyzed, I found Kaag and Yeşilgöz had different approaches. This comes down to their policy approaches surrounding women's rights and gender equality, as well as the political strategies concerning becoming the first female prime minister, being a woman in politics, women's rights and gender equality, and misogyny. Interestingly, where Kaag discussed her being a woman explicitly, Yeşilgöz did not. However, Yeşilgöz did discuss her migration background, a topic which Kaag does not touch as a born and raised Dutch person.

In opposition to the VVD, D66 explicitly and elaborately discusses their policy approaches to women's rights. And while this is lacking in explanation and still very much fits into the category of assimilation rather than systemic change, it is certainly stronger of a case than the VVD makes, as they keep their discussion of women's rights and gender equality outside of the Dutch context. The same goes for the way Kaag and Yeşilgöz personally discuss women's rights and gender equality in interviews and debates. Where Kaag is heard multiple times referring different topics to a female context, Yeşilgöz does not do so.

When it comes to the topic of both women potentially becoming the first female prime minister, they also take different approaches. Kaag embraces it as a 'feminist' action and highly plays into it during her election campaign. Yeşilgöz is not too interested in relating her gender identity to her politics, and consistently says people should focus on her qualities instead. The same can be said for the topic of being a woman in politics, where Kaag discusses this at length, although not with an intent to change this, Yeşilgöz seems to resent the idea of even being highlighted for being a woman in politics. Lastly, the topic of misogyny, especially the hate comments and threats both women have received, is divided as well. Kaag continuously relates this to misogyny and xenophobia, whereas Yeşilgöz states it is simply a part of the job – although she does admit it is worse as a woman. It is of importance to highlight that while Kaag might acknowledge and discuss the 'feminist' themes more than Yeşilgöz, neither women seem to have the intent to change the political system.

Despite the differences between both women, I still argue that they are two sides of the same coin; two flavors of neoliberal 'feminism'. Whereas Kaag's 'feminism' is influenced by neoliberalism, Yeşilgöz' neoliberalism has some 'feminist' aspects. This makes them different, but in the end still not the radical feminists I would hope for in the Dutch political field. Kaag's 'feminism' has a focus on women's rights, gender equality and misogyny but is consistently influenced by neoliberal thought, making it individualized, shallow, and career-focused rather



than solidary, interconnected, and assuming the personal is political. It makes her ‘feminism’ feel more like a campaign tactic than a true dedication to the topic. In the same realm, but yet completely different is Yeşilgöz’ approach. As she never promises a ‘feminist’ approach, she does not come across disingenuous in that regard, but rather it seems to stem from a Western superiority complex. ‘Feminist’ issues are only ‘feminist’ when it comes to life or death, and the Netherlands does not have those problems anymore, seems to be the overall theme. Moreover, Yeşilgöz heavily plays into stereotypes of what strong leaders should be like with typically masculine traits at the forefront.

When going back to prior research on neoliberal ‘feminism’ in politics, some of the same conclusions are drawn. Thatcher, Clinton, and Merkel all enact neoliberal ‘feminism’ in different ways. I find a connection between Clinton’s enthusiastic ‘feminism’ – one filled with imperialist notions (Eisenstein, 2016; Ulus, 2018) – and Kaag’s ‘feminism’, as both women highlight feminist themes explicitly, yet leave more to be desired. Moreover, I feel Yeşilgöz’ enactment of ‘feminism’ can be related to Merkel’s approach, with both women strongly putting neoliberal logics at the forefront of their politics, and ‘feminism’ being put on the backburner and brought out when useful. Lastly, I feel both Kaag and Yeşilgöz’ campaigns can be connected to the phenomenon that Weaver (2016) discusses in regard to Thatcher being perceived as feminist, despite having anti-feminist policies, Both of Kaag and Yeşilgöz’ campaigns were perceived as inherently feminist by Dutch media (Brouwers & Hendrickx, 2020; Candan, 2023; Goudsmit, 2020; NOS Nieuws, 2020; Vanderstraeten, 2023; Wagendorp, 2020), simply because they had the potential to become the first female prime minister. This would be a feminist action within itself without having to actually enact feminism, as Weaver (2016) discusses the disconnect between policy and perception for voters.

This leads me to the conclusion that both Kaag and Yeşilgöz enact a form of neoliberal ‘feminism’. While both of them check all the boxes discussed by McRobbie (2004) and Fraser (2013) of a ‘feminism’ that is focused on individualism, choice and empowerment as well as having imperialist thought and stemming from Western superiority, Kaag seems to play more into the former, while Yeşilgöz plays into the latter. However, both women have aspects of all the mentioned themes, but Kaag recognizes there are things to work on within the Netherlands while Yeşilgöz seems to think this choice and empowerment is already achieved within that context. Seeing these two women as symbolic for ‘feminism’ in Dutch politics this conclusion is worrying, as I feel there is a real need for a more radical feminism that can actually be called feminism.

## **Radical feminism in the neoliberal ‘feminist’ Netherlands**

My analysis concludes that two prominent female politicians in recent Dutch political history both use neoliberal ‘feminist’ tactics, which in my opinion means they are missing out on a feminism that is interconnecting, intersectional, aims to liberate and does away with capitalist thought. Or: a feminism that works for the 99% (Arruzza et al., 2019). With Kaag and Yeşilgöz being symbolic for, in my opinion, the overall state of feminism in Dutch politics, it feels somewhat hopeless. However, when we consider Dutch feminism outside of the political realm, a more radical feminism can be found, there just seems to be a big gap between the neoliberal ‘feminism’ present in politics and the radical feminism present in smaller feminist organizations. Why is seemingly only neoliberal ‘feminism’ allowed in the Dutch political field and how do we turn Dutch politics into a field that is accessible and open to radical change? In this chapter I will discuss three ways in which radical feminism is being kept out from Dutch politics. Moreover, I offer how change can be brought about through these three ways.

### **Systemic change**

One thing I have found is that neither Kaag nor Yeşilgöz aim to change the Dutch political system. They are willing to operate within its spoken and unspoken rules. The political system I am referring to here is all-encompassing, but specifically the way the Dutch democracy is designed, where I feel singular political personas have to wholly represent parties and entire schools of thoughts. In my opinion, this allows for Dutch voters to quickly get tired of these personas which ends up in an endless cycle of new people promoting pretty much the same ideas, as they are afraid to scare away voters.

This system also means a more radical feminism does not get a place in the game of politics, as it would be too controversial, like I discuss in both the case of Kaag and Yeşilgöz. Their potential is squashed by a system that needs political personas to stay in line, otherwise they will get ‘punished’ in elections by losing voters. Thus, I propose a true systemic change in which politics is not as reliant on a political persona’s likeability and personality, but rather on notions of solidarity. This could mean to do away with representatives altogether, to do away with the ultimate goals being profit and power, to do away with patriarchal norms of what a society needs to look like in order for it be considered efficient, and to do away with exhausting resources and people in order to do so. Instead, the focus becomes for everyone to have their basic human rights met. Building on this, radical feminist activism can start taking its place in the political field – where, in my opinion, it belongs.

## **Different voices**

Another problem the current Dutch political field has is its severe lack of representation in comparison to Dutch society (Sjouwerman, 2023). As discussed by Mügge & Runderkamp (2023), Dutch politics is not yet a safe and accepting environment to be as a woman, person of color, queer person, disabled person, person from outside the city, person with other educations than university or in general as someone with a diverse racial, ethnic, cultural or socioeconomic background. This leads to the political conversation not focusing on topics that relate to these social identities either, while these are topics that often are represented in radical feminism.

Highlighting different voices as a way to make the political system more diverse and inclusive, could be a step in the right direction of changing the system as a whole. However, having a meaningful voice comes with obstacles, as it still has to fit a certain hegemonic narrative to be considered meaningful. Cole (2015) – who discusses feminist rhetoric – discusses how more radical voices seem to not be taken seriously or are even shut down immediately. Thus, I argue that while having different voices present and aiming for a more diverse and inclusive political field is an important goal to have, it cannot be the be-all and end-all. Especially not if this means these individuals will just have to assimilate to a field that is created for and by white, heterosexual, university-educated men. This relates back to the earlier argument of a complete systemic change to a system in which these are not considered the norm any longer.

## **Bottom-up approach**

I feel Dutch politics is currently made overly complex as this benefits the ruling conservative-liberal parties. In my opinion, these parties are better off when their voters are not too aware of their politics. The Dutch education system is lacking when it comes to teaching about the inner workings of the political system, leading politics to become an elitist environment and therefore leaving feminist topics to the ones present in this environment. As discussed, this environment is not one for radical feminism or inclusivity, meaning radical change is completely off the table. However, I strongly feel that by teaching about our political systems in schools, but also about women's history, Dutch colonial history, and current inequalities, we not only demystify politics and activism, we also strengthen it and make room for a more radical feminist thought.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I aimed to discuss the ways radical feminism in the Netherlands is being kept out of politics and offer some ideas on how more space can be made. This is in line with the

analysis I have done, in which I found that Dutch politics is filled with neoliberal ‘feminism’ that excludes and marginalizes a large amount of Dutch women and therefore lacks a feminist thought that truly works for the 99% that Arruzza et al. (2019) discuss.

I first argue that the political system itself, the lack of diversity within it and the lack of radical feminist discussion leads to a political field in which radical feminists are unable to get involved, let alone blossom. The neoliberal ‘feminism’ that I have found to prevalent through my analysis can be closely connected to this, and this therefore limits a more radical feminism from taking up space in the Dutch political field. I argue that a complete systemic change, an influx of different voices and a bottom-up approach to politics and activism can help Dutch radical feminists to implement more of their ideas in the political field, rather than remaining on its fringes.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

To answer the question of ‘How is neoliberal ‘feminism’ enacted in the Dutch political landscape and how does this limit Dutch radical feminism?’, I first provided a theoretical framework in which I discussed neoliberal ‘feminism’, specifically in the Dutch context, and a state of the art on three Western politicians who have all been researched in regard to their neoliberal ‘feminism’. After this, I did a content analysis on two of the Netherlands’ most prominent female politicians in recent Dutch history Sigrid Kaag and Dilan Yeşilgöz. Lastly, I discussed how this neoliberal ‘feminism’ limits radical feminism from taking up space in Dutch politics and how this space could potentially be made.

As this thesis was the first time the Dutch political field was explored in the context of neoliberal ‘feminism’, it had its limitations. Firstly, while I have enacted a critical perspective, I cannot say that I did not miss things or interpreted things in a certain way. My analysis is therefore not objective but analyzed through my own discursive lens, which is one critical of both politicians discussed. Moreover, I have only discussed two female politicians within Dutch politics. While I view these politicians as symbolic for the state of ‘feminism’ in Dutch politics, ideally I would have wanted to look further back in history, look at local politics, and look at other female politicians. For future research, I would incorporate the points mentioned above, as well as put more of a focus towards the future by discussing the potential of radical feminism and systemic change at length.

My research was done from a critical, feminist perspective with an intersectionality and situated knowledges approach. The content analysis was a discourse analysis in which sixteen texts from both politicians were analyzed. After a first close reading, I decided on six themes to from there more closely analyze the texts. These themes were as followed: first female prime minister, being a woman in politics, women’s rights and gender equality, misogyny, economy and race.

I discussed conceptualizations of neoliberalism, feminism and neoliberal ‘feminism’. With neoliberalism having a broad definition, as a hegemonic ideology that broadly dictates the way our society operates, but having summarized it as the belief that capitalism is the ideal way to design economy and society, with privatization, deregulation, and profit at the forefront (Thorsen, 2010; Shaikh, 2005; Venugopal, 2015). The definition of feminism is complex and contested. Therefore, I discuss what I view as an ‘ideal’ feminism, being Arruzza et al.’s (2019) feminism for the 99%, a radical feminism that concerns itself with anything going in society, with the problem at the root being capitalism and neoliberalism. This is wholly different from the neoliberal ‘feminism’ I also discussed in my thesis, which is a version of ‘feminism’ that

fits neoliberal ideas, and plays into individualism, ‘choice’, commodification, consumerism, and ‘empowerment’. Specifically for the Dutch context, I discussed how in the Netherlands the idea that feminism is not needed anymore, unless it comes to a non-Dutch context, is prevalent (Hofstede 2018; NPO Kennis, 2018).

While discussing prior research on Western female politicians in regard to neoliberal ‘feminism’, I found this has been enacted in differing ways. Thatcher was staunchly against ‘feminism’, yet profited of her image as a ‘feminist’ icon as she held a position not held by women prior (Campbell, 2003; Weaver, 2016). Clinton on the other hand enthusiastically embraced ‘feminism’, but this was filled with neoliberal, imperial logics (Eisenstein, 2016; Featherstone & Frost, 2016; Ulus, 2018). Lastly, Merkel reluctantly embraced ‘feminism’ later on in her political career while still being the epitome of contemporary European neoliberalism (Deutsche Welle, 2021; Havertz, 2018). While all women show the different approaches to neoliberal ‘feminism’, they still follow the same neoliberal logics that puts individualism and profit at the forefront. This shows how differently neoliberal ‘feminism’ can be enacted.

The key findings from my content analysis on Kaag and Yeşilgöz is that they both enact neoliberal ‘feminism’ but in different ways, similar to the findings from prior research. While both women have very different political policies and strategies, I argue they are two sides of the same neoliberal ‘feminist’ coin. When it comes to ‘feminist’ themes, the two women have drastically different approaches, as Kaag discusses women’s rights, gender equality, being the first female prime minister and misogyny at length, where Yeşilgöz does not. Kaag’s ‘feminism’ is clearly influenced by neoliberalism and Yeşilgöz’ neoliberal has some ‘feminist’ aspects. This makes them different, but in the end still quite similar. Relating this to the prior research, I have found a resemblance between Clinton’s enthusiastic ‘feminism’, that Ulus (2016) and Eisenstein discuss as influenced by imperialist and neoliberal notions, and Kaag’s. I also found Merkel’s reluctant approach to ‘feminism’ discussed by Havertz (2018) similar to that of Yeşilgöz and lastly I argue that both Kaag and Yeşilgöz fall into the phenomenon Weaver (2016) describes where they profit off of their campaigns being perceived as inherently ‘feminist’ simply because they are women, without having to have feminist policy, just like Thatcher did.

In the last chapter, I discussed how the neoliberal ‘feminism’ that Kaag and Yeşilgöz enact, limits radical feminism and how space can be made for it in the future. I argued that the political system itself, the lack of diversity and the lack of radical feminist thought can be led to the lack of radical feminism in Dutch politics. With politicians such as Kaag and Yeşilgöz taking up space with their ‘feminism’ and therefore limiting more radical feminism, I feel that

reworking these three aspects a desperately needed more radical feminism could come to fruition. In my research I have shown that there is a form of ‘feminism’ present in Dutch politics – which I would call neoliberal – that fits within differing political parties but is not interested in radical change. This makes radical feminist issues invisible, as the space is taken up by this neoliberal ‘feminism’.

All in all, I remain hopeful for the future of feminism in Dutch politics. While my research has not shown the feminism I would like to see in politics, it is present in the rest of Dutch society, and I do believe there are seeds being planted for a feminism that is radically solidary and fiercely interconnected, rather than individualized and commodified, unlike how Kaag and Yeşilgöz have enacted ‘feminism’. In the meantime, we have work to do, whether we do it in five-inch heels or not.

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## Appendix A

### List of analyzed texts

#### Sigrid Kaag

##### *Policy approaches*

- D66's election program for 2021 national elections

D66. (2021). *Een nieuw begin*.

[https://d66.nl/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/d66\\_verkiezingsprogramma\\_een\\_nieuw\\_begin\\_2021\\_2025.pdf](https://d66.nl/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/d66_verkiezingsprogramma_een_nieuw_begin_2021_2025.pdf)

- Profile by D66

D66. (n.d.). *Sigrid Kaag*. <https://d66.nl/mensen/sigrid-kaag/>

- Video about Kaag by D66

D66. (2023, July 13). *Sigrid, bedankt!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/IOfR9MSSUwk>

##### *Political strategies*

###### *Interviews*

- Interviews with newspaper Algemeen Dagblad

Hoedeman, J. (2019, August, 24). D66-minister Sigrid Kaag: Nederland moet een vrouwelijke premier krijgen. *Algemeen Dagblad*. <https://www.ad.nl/politiek/d66-minister-sigrid-kaag-nederland-moet-een-vrouwelijke-premier-krijgen-br~a640fa9c/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

Hoedeman, J. (2020, June 21). Kaag doet het: 'Ik wil D66-lijsttrekker én premier worden'.

*Algemeen Dagblad*. <https://www.ad.nl/politiek/kaag-doet-het-ik-wil-d66-lijsttrekker-en-premier-worden~a99951cb/>

- Interview with women's magazine Margriet

Margriet. (2021, July 9). *D66-partijleider Sigrid Kaag: 'Mijn grote wens is dat we niet*

*teruggaan naar het oude normaal'*. <https://www.margriet.nl/persoonlijk/interview-sigrid-kaag-oude-normaal~b7ef4bf3/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

- Podcast interview with women's organization New Female Leaders

New Female Leaders. (2021, February 19). *Tijd voor nieuw leiderschap: neem*

*verantwoordelijkheid, volg je gevoel en zet door \ Sigrid Kaag #9* [Video]. YouTube.  
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### ***Debates***

- EenVandaag election debate 2021

EenVandaag. (2021, March 16). *Terugkijken: EenVandaag Verkiezingsdebat 2021 - #1Vdebat* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMAWuFkFOKg>

- RTL election debate 2021

RTL Nieuws. (2021, March 1). *Dit waren de hoogtepunten van het RTL verkiezingsdebat* [Video]. <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/video/video/5217099/dit-waren-de-hoogtepunten-van-het-rtl-verkiezingsdebat>

- NPO election debate 2021

NPO Radio 1. (2021, February 26). *Het volledige NOS Radiodebat | NPO Radio 1* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rWdqVOw2ec>

### ***Other media***

- Documentary on Kaag's 'road' to Dutch politics

Tan, S. (2021, January 3). *Sigrid Kaag: van Beiroet tot Binnenhof* [Video]. 2Doc. <https://www.2doc.nl/documentaires/2021/01/sigrid-kaag.html>

- Kaag's appearances on talk show Op1 during her time in Dutch politics

Op1. (n.d.). *Archief: Sigrid Kaag*. NPO1. <https://op1npo.nl/tag/sigrid-kaag/>

- Kaag's appearance on talk show Buitenhof

Buitenhof. (2021, March 7). *Sigrid Kaag \ D66 \ Buitenhof* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hSkB1\\_vcx](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hSkB1_vcx)

- Kaag's appearance on talk show College Tour

College Tour. (2023a, May 28). *Sigrid Kaag* [Video]. KRO-NCRV. [https://npo.nl/npo3/college-tour/28-05-2023/KN\\_1732018](https://npo.nl/npo3/college-tour/28-05-2023/KN_1732018)

- Live Q&A with news organization NOS

NOS. (2021, March 10). *TERUGKIJKEN: Jouw vragen aan Sigrid Kaag* [Video]. YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsZZpZj0MwI>

## **Dilan Yeşilgöz**

### ***Policy approaches***

- VVD's election program for 2023 national elections

VVD. (2023d). *Keuzes voor een optimistische toekomst: Verkiezingsprogramma VVD 2023*. <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027.pdf>

- Profile by VVD

VVD. (n.d.). *Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius*. <https://www.vvd.nl/profielen/dilan-yesilgoz-zegerius/>

- Video about Yeşilgöz by VVD

VVD. (2023a, October 10). *De weg van onze lijsttrekker Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beNWyRmg2Ag&t=86s>

### ***Political strategies***

#### ***Interviews***

- Interview with newspaper NRC

De Koning, P., & Valk, G. (2023, October 20). Dilan Yesilgöz: 'Ik wil het beter gaan doen, dat is zeker'. *NRC*. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/10/20/ik-wil-het-beter-gaan-doen-dat-is-zeker-a4178020>

- Interview with news website RTL Nieuws

RTL Nieuws. (2023, November 16). *VVD-leider Yeşilgöz: 'Wordt tijd voor eerste vrouwelijke premier'*. <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/politiek/artikel/5419125/tweede-kamerverkiezingen-tweede-kamer-dilan-yesilgoz-vvd>

- Interview with women's website Feminer

Mohunlol, T. (2021, March 3). *Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius: "Ik ben niet snel geïntimideerd en dat laat ik graag zien."*. *Feminer*. <https://feminer.nl/magazine/rolmodellen/dilan-yesilgoz-zegerius-ik-ben-niet-snel-geintimideerd-en-dat-laait-ik-graag-zien/>

- Podcast interview with broadcaster Omroep PowNed

Omroep PowNed. (2023, November 19). *PowCast: De verkiezingen met Dilan Yesilgoz* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vLbvHVciKE>

### ***Debates***

- EenVandaag election debate 2023

EenVandaag. (2023, November 20). *KIJK TERUG: EenVandaag Verkiezingsdebat 2023 – #IVDebat* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJaF4UWyMJ0>

- RTL election debate 2023

RTL Nieuws. (2023, November 6). *RTL-debat gemist? Kijk het hier terug mét kijkje achter de schermen* [Video]. <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/video/video/5417239/rtl-debat-gemist-kijk-het-hier-terug-met-kijkje-achter-de-schermen>

- NOS election debate 2023

NOS. (2023, November 21). *TERUGKIJKEN \ NOS Nederland Kiest: Het Debat (deel 1)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z2qHmpgY1U>

### ***Other media***

- Q&A with news organization NOS

NOS. (2023, November 14). *TERUGKIJKEN \ Dilan Yeşilgöz (VVD) beantwoordde jullie vragen*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38UU\\_jjV5DQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38UU_jjV5DQ)

- Yeşilgöz' appearances on talk show Op1 during her time in Dutch politics

Op1. (n.d.). *Archief: Dilan Yeşilgöz*. NPO1. <https://op1npo.nl/tag/dilan-yesilgoz/>

- Statement International Women's Day 2022

Rijksoverheid. (2022, March 8). *Ik hoop voor jonge vrouwen een inspiratie te zijn*. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/ministerie-van-justitie-en-uuveiligheid/interviews-internationale-vrouwendag/interview-dilan-yesilgoz-zegerius>

- Column written by Yeşilgöz for newspaper NRC Handelsblad

Yeşilgöz, D. (2016, March 8). *We zijn al heel lang vrouwen. Maar het helpt niet (2)*. *NRC*

*Handelsblad.* <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/03/08/1598495-a1321868>

- Yeşilgöz' appearance on talk show BEAU

VVD. (2023c, November 21). *Onze lijsttrekker Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius bij BEAU* [Video].

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- Yeşilgöz' appearance on talk show College Tour

College Tour. (2023b, September 24). *Dilan Yesilgöz-Zegerius* [Video]. KRO-NCRV.

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## Appendix B

### Codes

After first reading:

- First female prime minister
- Being a woman
- Being a woman in politics
- Explicit 'feminist' themes
  - Women's rights
  - Gender equality
  - Discrimination/diversity & inclusion
  - Misogyny/hate comments
- Implicit 'feminist' themes
  - (stereotypical) femininity
- Economy
- Race/migration/discrimination

After revision:

- First female prime minister
- Being a woman
- Being a woman in politics
- Women's rights and gender equality
- Misogyny
- Economy
- Race

**Appendix C**  
**Analysis table**

**Figure 1**

*Example of analysis table*

**Excerpt ...: \*Timestamp\***

<b>Setting</b>	<b>Spoken text</b>	<b>Text on screen</b>	<b>Music</b>