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# Gender and Activism: Women's Voices in Political Debate



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Bookcover: Detail of mural on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, just off Ahrir Square, depicting the Blue Bra Incident, when security forces attacked and tore the clothes off a female protester on 17 December 2011. The mural is now removed. Photo author

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# Editorial

The 35<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Yearbook of Women's History* is dedicated to the theme of *Gender and Activism: Women's Voices in Political Debate*. It examines the varying ways in which women are active in the political arena across times, cultures and places. The guest editor for this volume is Mieke Aerts, professor of Modern Dutch Political History at the University of Amsterdam.

Over time, women have used many different strategies and activities to organize themselves and reach their goals. This yearbook compiles a sample of such strategies and activities covering a period starting in 1898 and ending in the present day with examples from Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. The articles in this volume deal with activism that had the purpose of influencing the position of women in different areas such as religion, politics and marriage.

This issue focuses on various kinds of political activities and strategies. Katrine Smiet examines secular feminism as a feminist norm through comparing the actions of Femen against the Orthodox Church in Ukraine with those targeted at Islam. In Turkey, as Senem Yildirim shows, female *mukhtars* – intermediaries between local municipalities and citizens – find ways to empower women in local politics. At the same time, however, these officials sometimes also have an ambiguous attitude toward feminism and hit a glass ceiling at the local level. Elena Borghi describes how women in India rode on the tide of wounded nationalist pride in the late colonial period. In doing so, they succeeded in getting a law passed that raised the minimum age for marriage, which, they argued, improved women's condition.

Feminists do not always agree on which goals to pursue and how to pursue them. This issue is addressed by Manon Parry who examines opposing and controversial representations of the history of the birth control movement in the United States of America. Ulla Jansz investigates the ideas of the Dutch Social Democratic Labour Party (SDAP) in the year 1898. While the SDAP criticized the women's movement for its 'bourgeois feminism', in practice, the party's criticism was based on a disdain for women labourers. As Jansz shows, at the end of the nineteenth century radical egalitarian feminists were much closer to working women than the socialists.

During the revolution in Egypt, Nihal Saad Zaghloul started an organization to combat the sexual harassment of women attending the meetings at Tahrir Square. In an interview with Josephine van den Bent she recounts how their strategies and ideas changed over time and how difficult it was for women to get their voice heard both during and after the revolution.

Having a voice and being heard is one part of women's activism. Another im-

portant aspect is visibility. Karlijn Olijslager's analysis of the visual strategies used at the mid-century exhibition 'The Dutch Woman 1898-1948' shows how the exhibition supported the postwar need for stable politics and gender relations. In her contribution, Olijslager questions whether the women's movement had really come to a halt in this period, as is often assumed by historians. Triggered by a portrait of Dutch feminist Rosa Manus, Myriam Everard re-evaluates Manus' activism and work. Adding a visual component by way of a poster essay, Marjan Groot analyses the design of political campaign posters representing women who have made it to the political arena in various countries in the world.

We would like to thank Saskia Bultman for the English editing.

*Eveline Buchheim, Saskia Bultman, Adriana Churampi Ramírez, Marjan Groot, Claartje Rasterhoff, Aulien Schuurmans, Evelien Walhout, Ingrid de Zwarte*

# Contesting Representations: Towards New Histories of Women's Activism

MIEKE AERTS

In 2011, in the heyday of the Arab Spring, UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon remarked in his opening address to a UN Roundtable on Gender Equality and Democracy:

It is no coincidence that the revolutionary fervour sweeping North Africa and the Middle East began in Tunisia – and that women played such a role. Tunisia was among the first Arab countries to grant women the right to vote, in the late 1950s. Tunisian women have also made important gains in the professions and parliament. Girls growing up with such role models quite naturally expect to follow suit. (...) While women's political participation improves democracy, the reverse is also true: democracy is an incubator for gender equality.<sup>1</sup>

Such a strong public statement suggesting a self-evident connection between women's empowerment and democratic politics may be read as an indication of ways in which feminist aspirations have become acknowledged in high places. However, it also raises uncomfortable questions. Does women's political participation really automatically improve democracy? Doesn't the ongoing struggle for women's rights in the established democracies of Western Europe and Northern America cast some doubt on the connection between democracy and gender equality? Could there be more to gender equality than suffrage and equal representation in Parliament? Is women's political participation all over the world always about gender equality? Should it be? Can all women's activism properly be called political? These are the kind of questions taken up in the contributions to this issue of the Yearbook of Women's History.

Women's activism is arguably one of the most exhaustively researched subjects within gender history. This is not at all surprising. Gender history is indebted above all to feminism as a social movement, and a keen interest in all varieties of women's activism has been part and parcel of feminist memory cultures right from the start. A classic example is Theodore Stanton's 1884 edited volume *The Woman Question in Europe*. This is probably the first attempt to present an inclusive overview of European feminism,

and it comprises histories of feminist movements in seventeen countries.<sup>2</sup> Although many of the essays in Stanton's overview do not conform to modern standards of professional history writing, they nevertheless offer a template for writing about women's activism that is all too familiar, even today. Within this template, collective action and social organizing by women is embedded in a linear narrative of development towards organized feminism. In its turn, organized feminism is depicted as gradually maturing towards political participation, culminating in women's suffrage, and, after that, in the equal representation of women at the national political level. Many biographical and autobiographical writings of activist women hold to this teleological model of what activism should be about.<sup>3</sup> So do many professional or semi-professional histories of feminism as a movement.<sup>4</sup> After the Second World War, when political scientists joined historians in this field, the pattern became even more pronounced.<sup>5</sup> It is a notable feature of these histories that they situate women's activism mainly within national frameworks, even if those are presented comparatively.

Two other important characteristics of these older narratives of women's activism should be noted. First, there is a marked tendency to focus on organizations and institutions. This has partly to do with sources, of course, for long-lasting associations, preferably with a large membership, leave easily identifiable archives. Mainly, however, there is the unspoken and unquestioned assumption at work that establishing a well-organized pressure group is the aim of all activism, and a prerequisite for what counts as the ultimate success: equal political representation. Second, there is a marked tendency to study only those activisms that are more or less synonymous with feminism or, more broadly, with progressive or 'left' politics. Here the unwarranted assumption is, that only opposing and changing the dominant social order counts as collective action, or, which is even more unwarranted, that women are basically inclined to combat gender inequality. This last assumption rests on a vaguely marxist-inspired notion, namely that political action can be understood as people discovering their 'real interests'.

As has become clear by now, Ban Ki-moon's equation of women's activism, democracy and equal parliamentary representation is not at all unusual, but fits into a long tradition. Yet, it is exactly this equivalence that has come under scrutiny by many gender historians. They have tried to break out of the traditional national framework, they have broadened the scope of studying women's activism, and in the process they have also worked to expand the concepts of the political and of representation.

Going beyond a national framework has been less clear-cut than might have been expected, given the conspicuous professed internationalism of feminist movements, a trait they share with many other social movements, for example socialists or environmentalists. The rhetoric of 'international sisterhood' battling 'the world-wide oppression of women' was as common in the nineteenth century as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Many studies have taken issue with this idyllic view of sisterhood and the corresponding homogeneous view of gender inequalities. Still, as gender history has attempted to go beyond the national framework, it has often tended to hold on to the older focus on organizations and institutions, in this case international organizations

and institutions.<sup>6</sup> Other perspectives have emerged as well, however. Most promising among them are studies centred on the transnational transfer of action repertoires and the 'entangled history' of grass-roots activism across national and other borders.<sup>7</sup> Yet another approach was pioneered by sociologist Kathy Davis in her award-winning book *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves* of 2007, a reconstruction of the different national framings of feminist health politics resulting from the transnational migration of one classic feminist reference text.<sup>8</sup> In this *Yearbook* Katrine Smiet develops a slightly different take on Davis' approach by pinpointing the activists themselves, and reconstructing the changes in both the repertoire and image of Femen, as they migrated from Ukraine to France.

What these newer approaches have in common is the insight that investigating the international and the transnational does not necessarily imply looking at politics 'above' the level of the nation-state. It can also mean studying activism 'beneath' the level of the nation-state, not as the anteroom for really important or mature national political action, but as one of the many forms of the 'local' within the 'global'. That is what both Senem Yildirim and Josephine van den Bent try to do in their contributions. They come from different, ostensibly even opposite directions, as one is studying the dilemmas of women's agency in Turkish local administration and the other is portraying grass-roots activism in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Their aim is comparable, however: to show how the political, even if it has to do with regime-change, does always follow a local, but not always a national logic.

Opening up the political in that way fits right into other efforts towards broadening the scope of studying women's activism. It has been particularly hard to abandon the habit of equating women's activism with feminism, but in that respect gender history has come a long way. In the late 1980s Claudia Koonz caused a heated debate with her provocative depiction of organized German women in Nazi-Germany as rebels against emancipation.<sup>9</sup> For many students of women's history it was almost unthinkable to grant women who rejected feminism any agency. By the late 1990s, however, Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan had come up with the suggestion, still relevant today, to study female agency more inclusively by distinguishing between women's activism, women's organizations and feminism.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, awareness of the cross-connections between gender and other social categories, most prominent among them ethnicity, resulted in many studies of 'intersectionality'.<sup>11</sup> While the older literature on the historical tensions between feminism and socialism already insisted on class as a useful category in analysing gender, political developments in Europe after 1989 produced renewed interest in this topic. This has mostly generated new approaches to post-Second World War issues, which mostly bypass thorny issues of 'real interests', and portray political action as formative of actors and their perceived interests.<sup>12</sup> But as Ulla Jansz shows in her contribution to this *Yearbook*, the infamous nineteenth-century opposition of 'bourgeois' versus 'socialist' feminism, too, can benefit from these newer insights. In the same vein, Elena Borghi's contribution takes the modern-day appreciation of intersectionality to the complexities of debates on women's rights in nineteenth-century colonial India.

Probably one of the most exciting developments in the study of women's activism comes from a more sophisticated treatment of political representation. Whereas in older histories of feminism political representation is almost always understood as participation in parliamentary politics, many recent studies have turned to a more comprehensive view of representation and politics. From this perspective, claiming a political presence is seen as taking many forms that are important in their own right, besides winning a seat in parliament. In as far as any politics is representational, it means that political claim-making is always as much about aims and demands as it is about bringing the political actor as such into existence. This broader view of politics has thus meant a return to the original meaning of representation, as both delegation and rendition (as in imaging or picturing).<sup>13</sup> It has also resulted in the use of more varied sources, not coincidentally many of them visual ones. In that manner, Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk have already analysed the Dutch Exhibition of Women's Labour of 1898 as a combination of visual and political representation.<sup>14</sup> In this *Yearbook* quite a few authors pursue this path further. Karlijn Olijslager looks at the hidden political agenda of another Dutch feminist exhibition in 1948, Manon Parry analyses oppositional views on the history of feminism at work in the proposals for a National Women's History Museum in the USA, and Marjan Groot explores the ways women are portrayed in official campaign posters. In a slightly different vein, Myriam Everard uses the Showcase section to track down what we can learn from a unique portrait of eminent Dutch feminist Rosa Manus kept in the collection of the International Archives for the Women's Movement in Amsterdam.

All in all, the examples of research on women's activism brought together in this issue of the *Yearbook* cannot pretend to represent all that is happening in the field. However, they can and do show the formative value of 'contesting representations' as both a subject choice and a frame of analysis. Instead of presupposing a self-evident equation of women's activism and feminist politics, modern-day scholars bring more reflexivity and more complexity to the field. The resulting research agenda is far from straightforward, but it is likely to bring fresh insights to the study of women's activism for quite some time yet.

### Notes

- 1 [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=1164#.Vl15ycrjms0](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1164#.Vl15ycrjms0) (Accessed 15 July 2015).
- 2 Theodore Stanton (ed.), *The Woman Question in Europe: A Series of Original Essays* (New York: Putnam, 1884).
- 3 To name but a few: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years And More: Reminiscences 1815-1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898); Aletta H. Jacobs, *Herinneringen* (Amsterdam: Van Holkema en Warendorf, 1924 transl. *Memories: My Life as an International Leader in Health, Suffrage and Peace* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996); Huda Shaarawi (Margo Badran ed.), *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)* (London: Virago, 1986).

- 4 Among many: W. H. Posthumus-Van der Goot et al., *Van moeder op dochter. Het aandeel van de vrouw in een veranderende wereld* (Leiden: Brill, 1948); Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- 5 Monique Leijenaar, *Political Empowerment of Women: The Netherlands and Other Countries* (Leiden/ Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2004); Vicky Randall, *Gender and Democracy* (Essex: IDCR, 2011).
- 6 Influential early examples include Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman (eds.), *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990 [orig. Amsterdam 1985]; Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). More recent: Francisca de Haan, 'Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones. Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics', *Journal of Women's History* 25 (2013) 4, 174-189; Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal (eds.), *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 7 Julie Carlier, 'Forgotten Transnational Connections and National Contexts: An 'Entangled History' of the Political Transfers that Shaped Belgian Feminism, 1890-1914', *Women's History Review* 19 (2010) 4, 503-522.
- 8 Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 9 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987).
- 10 Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).
- 11 For a recent overview of the literature see Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar, Linda Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013 [2011]).
- 12 For instance Eva Kolinsky and Hildegard Maria Nickel (eds.), *Reinventing Gender: Women in Eastern Germany since Unificatio* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003).
- 13 Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1967).
- 14 Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk, *Transforming the Public Sphere: The Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor in 1898* (Durham and Londen: Duke University Press, 2004).

