Gender and geography in the Netherlands: from separation to integration

Joos Droogleever Fortuijn

Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This article reports on the development of feminist geography in the Netherlands in the past forty years. In response to critical feminist students, feminist geography originally developed in a strategy of separation with the appointment of university lecturers specialized in 'women's studies', the introduction of elective courses and research projects, and the creation of national networks. Gender is currently more and more integrated in core geography teaching and mainstream geographical research and separate networks are dissolved. Although feminist geographers in the Netherlands are successful in teaching, publishing and acquisition of research funding, gender issues and perspectives are still not firmly rooted in geography curricula and research programs. Integration is highly dependent on the feminist commitment of individual lecturers and researchers and gender perspectives are at risk of marginalisation or disappearance. Feminist geographers in the Netherlands must still be vigilant to preserve the achievements of forty years of Dutch feminist geography.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 May 2018
Accepted 31 July 2018

KEY WORDS
Feminist geography teaching; feminist geography research; feminist geography publications; The Netherlands; separation and integration strategies

Introduction
In their seminal article ‘On not excluding half of the human in human geography’, Janice Monk and Susan Hanson (1982) outline two different strategies to incorporate feminist perspectives into the discipline of geography: a strategy in which feminist geography develops as a specialization with separate feminist geography elective courses and research programs, and a strategy in which feminist perspectives are integrated in core geography teaching and mainstream geographical research. They argue that the first – separation – strategy is ‘necessary but not sufficient’. They favour the second – integration – strategy. ‘Only in this way, we believe, can geography realize the promise of the
profound social change that would be wrought by eliminating sexism’ (Monk and Hanson 1982, 11).

Seven years later, Linda Peake initiated a collection of articles about feminist geography in 21 countries across the world, published in a special section of the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. In her contribution to this section, Lia Karsten (1989) reports on the developing feminist geography in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was an early adapter of feminist geography. Similar to the origin of feminist geography in other countries, critical feminist students organized in the late 1970s informal reading groups and struggled for the incorporation of feminist geography in the teaching programs. This resulted in the appointment of university lecturers with the specific task of teaching elective courses and developing research programs on feminist geography, or ‘women’s studies in geography’ as it was called at that time, in Amsterdam and Nijmegen in the early 1980s and somewhat later at Utrecht University.

Karsten’s report demonstrates an emerging feminist geography with highly valued courses, an increasing number of master theses and a growing research program in collaboration with the professional field in spatial planning and housing. Feminist geography at that time was founded in the emerging time geography approach and focused on daily activities, housing and mobility issues, in particular of mothers who combined paid and unpaid work. Research projects and seminars were organized in collaboration with planners and architects from national, provincial and municipal organisations (Ottens et al. 1995). Specific national ‘women’s studies’ networks were created within the Royal Dutch Geographical Society (KNAG) and the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Planning and Housing (NIROV). A strong policy orientation in feminist geography was in line with the policy-oriented tradition in Dutch geography in general (Van Hoven et al. 2010).

What is the situation 30 years later? Is feminist geography mainstreamed or is it still the work of critical geographers in marginalized positions or has it even disappeared? Is there still a strategy of separation or are gender issues and perspectives integrated in mainstream geography?

**Teaching gender and geography**

The four geography departments in the Netherlands with full human geography bachelor and master programs had separate feminist geography elective courses in the past. The University of Amsterdam, Radboud University in Nijmegen and Utrecht University started with ‘women’s studies in geography’ in the 1980s in response to students demands. Several female and a few male students deplored the lack of gender perspectives in the geography curriculum and the new gender course was the first opportunity to become familiar with critical approaches in geography. The University of Amsterdam
was the only place where a gender and geography course existed without interruption between 1983 and 2000. From 1990 to 1998 the course was an international intensive course funded by the ERASMUS program of the European Union, in a network of European universities, in which staff and students of the University of Amsterdam, National Technical University of Athens, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Durham University, Newcastle University and Roskilde University participated.

The University of Groningen rejuvenated the feminist geography teaching initiative with a Gender, Culture and Space course in 2004, in 2006–2008 taught as a joint course of the Universities of Groningen and Amsterdam. Decreasing numbers of students and curriculum reorganizations resulted in the dissolution of the gender and geography courses and no such courses have been taught in the Netherlands after 2008 (Van Hoven et al. 2010). Budget cuts in higher education resulted in new curricula with less elective courses. Students opt for courses that prepares them for a highly competitive labour market, in the field of economics and GIS rather than gender. This does not mean that gender perspectives disappeared from the geography curriculum. Several students write bachelor and master theses on gender topics. Thirty years ago writing a feminist geography thesis was making a statement by someone belonging to a marginalized group. Nowadays gender themes are normalized and theses on gender topics are accepted by mainstream geographers, although more in interdisciplinary programs than in monodisciplinary geography programs. Theses on gender are written by female as well as male students and both heterosexual and homosexual students write theses on LGBT topics. Migration, livelihoods, sexuality, LGBT and environmental issues are the main themes in the list of master theses on gender.

Gender perspectives are nowadays integrated in core courses of the geography curriculum, for example in the core courses Theory and History of Human Geography at Utrecht University, Introduction to Human Geography at University of Amsterdam and Qualitative Research Methods at University of Groningen, and in broader diversity related courses such as the Multiculturalism, Diversity and Space course at Radboud University Nijmegen. Furthermore, Amsterdam, Groningen, Nijmegen and Utrecht have specialized broad social sciences and humanities based schools for Gender Studies. Spatial perspectives are part of the teaching programs of these schools. Gender perspectives, however, form no more than a small part of the core content of human geography teaching and the incorporation of gender perspectives is dependent on the initiative of a few individual lecturers. In the – former – separation strategy, a few students learned a lot about feminist geography, in the - current – integration strategy all geography students learn a little bit.
Gender and geography in research

As reported by Karsten (1989), feminist geography research in the Netherlands originated about 40 years ago with policy oriented research projects of a few geographers specialized in ‘women’s studies’. Nowadays many Dutch geographers incorporate gender issues and perspectives into their research as part of a broader profile. In 2014–2017 a total of 68 articles, books, book chapters and reports on gender issues are published by geographers based at one of the universities in the Netherlands (about one percent of the total research output), written by more than 100 geographers (including non-Dutch co-authors). The list of publications includes all publications with gender, feminism, women, men, girls, boys, mothers, fathers, femininity, masculinity, LGBT or sexuality in the title or published in specific gender journals, as reported in October 2017 under publications or research output at the websites of the Dutch universities or mentioned by human geography colleagues from University of Groningen, Radboud University Nijmegen and Utrecht University (see acknowledgements). Some articles appeared in specific journals on gender, such as Gender, Place & Culture or book series such as Routledge Series Studies in Gender and Development. The majority of the publications is published in mainstream social science journals such as Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies or high impact geographical journals like Geoforum.

Only a few of these authors refer explicitly to gender in their research profile: Irene Dankelman (specialized in gender issues of environmental change), Nicky Pouw (specialized in gender and economics) and Roos Pijpers (awarded with a grant of the National Organisation for Scientific Research for a project on migrant and LGBT elderly). Other authors publish now and then on gender issues as part of a non-gendered research profile in the field of migration, gentrification, rural development, family life, children’s geographies, youth, ageing, land reform, nightlife, health or delinquency. They deal with gender as one of the many other dimensions of inequality such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age and ability. An integration strategy seems to be more successful than a strategy of separation due to a strong competition for research funding and publications in scientific journals.

The themes in the 68 publications still reflect major issues in policy and public debates in the Netherlands: migration, health and demography (youth, ageing), work and income, and sexuality and LGBT. Researchers from Utrecht University published qualitative studies on gender and migration and quantitative studies on gender and health. Work, income and livelihoods (qualitative and quantitative) are the main themes in the publications on gender at the University of Amsterdam. Researchers from University of Groningen published qualitative and quantitative studies on gender and migration and demography (youth, ageing, pregnancies and mortality).
Qualitative studies on gender and migration and on sexuality and LGBT are the main themes at Radboud University Nijmegen.

In many cases gender perspectives are integrated in studies that are not focusing on gender, written by authors without a specific gender profile. For example, in a study of the University of Amsterdam on everyday hygiene practices in Lilongwe, Malawi, the authors conclude: ‘That hygiene needs, practices and responsibilities are highly gendered, is widely acknowledged. This study foregrounds the decisive importance of women in shaping what is valued, practiced and prioritized in creating daily hygiene practices (Rusca et al. 2017, 548). In another example, a study of Utrecht University on night time surveillance, the authors conclude: ‘Our analysis shows that differences along the lines of both gender and ethnicity in CCTV awareness and evaluations of CCTV in the context of perceived safety are generally small in Utrecht and Rotterdam. This certainly does not invalidate more general claims that the relations between CCTV surveillance and safety, fear and violence in public space are differentiated in terms of gender and ethnicity, but might reflect the fact that, at the specific times of night and in the particular places where our short on-site interviews have been conducted, levels of perceived safety tended to be high irrespective of gender and ethnicity’ (Brands, Schwanen and Van Aalst 2016, 36/7).

**Conclusion: from separation to integration**

Forty years ago feminist geography was introduced in the Netherlands in a strategy of separation with the appointment of university lecturers specialized in feminist geography, the introduction of elective courses and research projects and the creation of national networks. In the past forty years gender issues and perspectives are more and more integrated in mainstream geography. Separate feminist geography networks are dissolved. Feminist perspectives are nowadays part of core course and handbook content in undergraduate teaching so that all students learn at least a little bit of feminist geography. Students are free and feel free to write theses about gender issues. Many researchers, junior as well as senior tenured staff, integrate gender perspectives into their work. It seems to be fashionable or acceptable in mainstream geography to refer to gender as one of the many dimensions of social inequality. Mieke Verloo, however, argues that this ‘assumes an unquestioned similarity of inequalities, to fail to address the structural level and to fuel political competition between inequalities’ (Verloo 2006, 211), resulting in marginalisation of gender.

Gender issues and perspectives are not a structural part of curricula and research programs. Integration is highly dependent on the feminist commitment of individual lecturers and researchers. The danger is lurking that
gender perspectives disappear from the teaching and research programs. Two years ago, Ilse Van Liempt initiated a new informal reading group on ‘gender and geography’ of staff and students at Utrecht University in response to a perceived lack of gender issues and perspectives in the teaching and research programs. Feminist geographers in the Netherlands must still be vigilant to preserve the achievements of forty years of Dutch feminist geography.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the input and comments of Lia Karsten (University of Amsterdam), Bettina van Hoven (University of Groningen), Ilse van Liempt and Ben de Pater (Utrecht University) and Huib Ernste and Roos Pijpers (Radboud University Nijmegen).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Joos Droogleever Fortuijn retired in 2016 as associate professor in human geography and served from 2008-2015 as Chair of the Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies of the University of Amsterdam. She published in urban and rural geography, gender and ageing. She is First Vice-President of the International Geographical Union and was Chair of the IGU Commission on Gender and Geography from 2000-2004. From 1990-1998 she coordinated a teaching network on Geography and Gender, a network of six universities funded by the ERASMUS/SOCRATES programme of the European Commission.

References

Brands, Jelle, Tim Schwanen, and Irina Van Aalst. 2016. “What Are You Looking At? Visitors Perspectives on CCTV in the Night Time Economy.” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23 (1): 23–39. doi:10.1177/0969776413481369.

Karsten, Lia. 1989. “Feminist Geography in The Netherlands.” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 13 (1): 104–106. doi:10.1080/03098268908709071.

Monk, Janice, and Susan Hanson. 1982. “On Not Excluding Half of the Human in Human Geography.” *The Professional Geographer* 34 (1): 11–23. doi:10.1111/j.0033-0124.1982.00011.x.

Ottens, Liesbeth, Erica Poventud, Marijke Van Schendelen, and Gertje Segond Von Banchet (eds.). 1995. *Gender and the Built Environment. Emancipation in Planning, Housing and Mobility in Europe*. Assen: Van Gorcum.

Rusca, Maria, Cecilia Alda-Vidal, Michaela Hordijk, and Nienke Kral. 2017. “Bathing Without Water, and Other Stories of Everyday Hygiene Practices and Risk Perception in Urban Low-income Areas: The Case of Lilongwe, Malawi.” *Environment and Urbanization* 29 (2): 533–550. doi:10.1177/0956247817700291.
Van Hoven, Bettina, Been Wieke, Joos Droogleever Fortuijn, and Virginie Mamadouh. 2010. “Teaching Feminist Geographies in the Netherlands: Learning from Student-led Fieldtrips.” Documents d’Anàlisi de geogràfica 56: 305–321.

Verloo, Mieke. 2006. “Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality and the European Union”. European Journal of Women’s Studies 13 (3): 211–228. doi:10.1177/1350506806065753.