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## In the spotlight

### *A blessing and a curse for immigrant women in the Netherlands*

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**ABSTRACT** Within a short period of time, the Netherlands transformed itself from a relatively tolerant country to a nation that called for cultural assimilation, tough measures and neo-patriotism. The discursive genre of ‘new realism’ played a crucial role in this retreat from multiculturalism, and that had a dual effect for immigrant women. Whereas formerly they were virtually ignored by both the integration and the emancipation policy, since the triumph of new realism they are in the centre of both policy lines and there is now more policy attention for their needs and interests. Yet in the public debate the culture card is drawn frequently and immigrant women are portrayed as either victims or accomplices of their oppressive cultures. Policy makers and practitioners in the field, however, succeeded in avoiding cultural stereotyping by developing cultural-sensitive measures, while naming them in culture-blind terms.

**KEYWORDS** discourse ● emancipation ● integration ● new realism ● policy

## INTRODUCTION

‘The integration of ethnic minorities into Dutch society has grown into . . . the “social question” of the 21st century, comparable to the problems that accompanied the transformation of the rural population into urban labourers at the beginning of the 20th century.’ So read one of the first sentences of the document with which in 2004 the Dutch cabinet reacted to the report

of the commission that had examined the results of Dutch policies of integration since its beginning in the 1980s (TK, 2003–04a: 2). The political party that had requested this evaluation, the Socialist Party, had actually asked the commission to investigate why the integration policy had failed, though this was subsequently reformulated in a more neutral vein. When the commission presented its findings, concluding that in some parts the policy had succeeded and in others had failed to reach its objectives, this met with great scepticism. The general Dutch opinion is that the integration of immigrants has failed because of a policy that was based on wrong – that is *multicultural* – assumptions (see Entzinger, 2006).

In this article, we will argue that in the public debate on integration in the Netherlands the genre of new realism gained the upper hand and we will lay out the argumentative structure of this new realist discourse. New realism not only revolves around the importance of ‘culture’, it is also a highly gendered discourse. We will first assess the impact of this shift in public discourse on the policy lines of integration and emancipation, and then discuss the effects of these general developments on policies regarding immigrant women. We will not only focus on formal policy documents, but on one specific issue, violence against women, to see how official policy plans are implemented by practitioners in the field. In a remarkably short period, issues concerning immigrant women in the Netherlands have shifted from the margins to the centre of public concern, which is, we conclude, both a curse and a blessing.<sup>1</sup>

## THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON INTEGRATION

At least until well into the 1990s, the Dutch took pride in the way they had traditionally been able to manage sources of social, economic and religious conflict through policies of toleration and pacification – the consociational system of (religious) ‘pillarization’ and the much praised (socioeconomic) ‘poldermodel’ being among the more sympathetic peculiarities of Dutch political culture. Combined with ongoing attempts to fight racism and discrimination, these were assumed to be the reasons why the Netherlands had seen little to no racial riots, why the extreme-right had never gathered a large following, and why it was assumed that immigrants were doing relatively well (Vermeulen and Penninx, 2000).

However, long before ‘September 11’, issues of integration and immigration had become the subject of ever more heated public debates. In September 1991, the then leader of the Conservative Liberals (VVD) initiated what was called the ‘national minorities debate’ (Bolkestein, 1991). European civilization, Bolkestein argued, is sustained by the values of rationality, humanism and Christianity, bringing with them a number of

fundamental political principles, such as secularization, freedom of speech, tolerance and the principle of non-discrimination. Value pluralism was to be embraced, but cultural relativism should be rejected. Bolkestein's intervention marked the beginning of what we will call a 'new-realist' approach to immigration in the Netherlands. Almost a decade later, new realism received further support by an essay written by the Social Democrat Paul Scheffer (Scheffer, 2000). Scheffer castigated the Dutch elite for closing their eyes to 'The Multicultural Drama' developing right before their eyes. Although rates of unemployment, criminality and school drop-out among children of immigrants were extremely high, the Dutch mistakenly held on to their good old strategies of peaceful coexistence through deliberation and compromise. However, Islam, with its refusal to accept the separation of church and state, could not be compared to modernized Christianity, and 'allochthone' youngsters were accumulating feelings of frustration and resentment. Teaching Dutch language, culture and history should be taken much more seriously.

In autumn 2001, in the atmosphere of crisis following September 11, the former Marxist sociologist Pim Fortuyn entered the political scene. Fortuyn's explicit aversion to Islam, the policy of toleration, the 'left-wing church' and the continual influx of immigrants and asylum seekers, combined with his charismatic presence, soon gave him a large following. In one of his notorious interviews, he claimed that Holland was a 'full country' (i.e. already too densely populated), and Islam 'a backward culture'. In the weeks following his assassination by an animal rights activist on 6 May 2002 many mourners indicated that Pim had 'said what we were not allowed to say' – a view that referred to white Dutch people's fear of foreigners 'invading' the country and their anger at the ruling elite for not taking their concerns seriously. The ideal of multiculturalism had fallen into discredit, while the new realist discourse gained the upper hand.

The Dutch genre of *new realism* can be identified by five distinctive features. First, new realism emphasizes the need to listen to the ordinary people, i.e. the 'autochthonous' lower classes in urban neighbourhoods. The ordinary people deserve to be represented because they know from daily experience what is 'really' going on in society, and because they are not blinded by 'politically correct' ideas. Moreover, one should take their complaints seriously in order to keep their emotions under control and channel them in the right direction.

Second, a new realist presents him- or herself as someone who dares face the facts, who has the courage to break taboos and speak frankly about truths that the dominant discourse has supposedly covered up.

Third, new realists argue that it is high time to break the power of the progressive elite, which has dominated the public realm for too long with its 'politically correct' sensibilities, its relativistic approach to the values of

different cultures and its lax policies of toleration. New realists instead call for an affirmation of the values of western civilization over and against Islam, such as the separation of state and church, freedom of speech and the equality of men and women.

A fourth feature of new realism is its insistence on the (re)affirmation of national identity. It promotes a revival of Dutch patriotism and the reinvention of a Dutch *Leitkultur*.

Finally, the Dutch discourse of new realism is highly gendered. From the very beginning, when participants in the debate on multiculturalism wanted to prove the relevance of the issue at hand, they referred to issues of gender and sexuality, such as the headscarf, arranged or forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killing, the cultus of virginity, domestic violence and homophobia.

Gender seeped into the new realist discourse in more subtle ways too. Thus, in cases where immigrants were called on to leave behind their cultural and religious inheritance and submit to the laws and customs of Dutch society, implicitly it was only male immigrants who were addressed. The assumption was that Dutch laws and customs particularly conflict with the privileges of immigrant (i.e. Muslim) *men*. Immigrant (i.e. Muslim) *women*, on the other hand, were depicted as 'victims' of their own culture, and as having a self-evident interest in their integration into Dutch society (see also Prins, 2002, 2004).

One of the most outspoken representatives of new realism was the Dutch-Somali politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Since January 2003, when she was elected as a member of parliament for the VVD, Hirsi Ali regularly created a stir by controversial statements against (any kind of) religion. She castigated Islam for its authoritative stance and deemed it especially backward when it came to the position of women. Thus, she suggested that Islam was accountable for practices such as female genital cutting, forced marriage and honour killing.

In the summer of 2004, together with filmmaker Theo van Gogh, Hirsi Ali made a short film, *Submission I*, which denounced the (sexual) violence against Muslim women, suggesting that this was legitimized by Islam.<sup>2</sup> The movie was considered extremely blasphemous by pious Muslims. A couple of months later, Van Gogh was assassinated by a young Dutch-Moroccan man, who appeared to be a member of a network of radical fundamentalist Muslims. Hirsi Ali went into hiding; the Dutch government responded with a series of arrests and stricter measures to fight Muslim terrorism. Opinion polls pointed to a further hardening of Dutch public opinion towards Muslims, especially towards Moroccans. The murder of Van Gogh put Hirsi Ali in the spotlight of the international media. After a dramatic clash over her right to Dutch citizenship, in May 2006 Hirsi Ali left the Netherlands to take up a position at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington DC think-tank.<sup>3</sup>

Hirsi Ali's interventions in the Dutch public debate left Dutch feminists (Muslim and non-Muslim) severely divided. Her fierce attacks on Islam gave her a huge following among conservative and liberal white Dutch, but simultaneously alienated her from many of the Muslim women for whom she claimed to speak. Some feminists celebrated her as a brave woman who, in the best tradition of feminist activism, dared to be controversial and speak up against patriarchal traditions. Others criticized her for stirring up the latent racism and xenophobia among the Dutch population, and for wanting to 'liberate' Muslim women without taking account of their own ideas on liberation. Whereas Hirsi Ali suggested that women's emancipation could only be achieved through the adoption of secular liberal values, hence a rejection of Islam, many Muslim women insisted on the viability of their attempt to combine Islamic faith with their struggle for emancipation.

Without a doubt, the charismatic person of Hirsi Ali and her 'un-Dutch' tendency to raise controversy and seek confrontation was an important reason why the position of immigrants, and especially Muslim women, became the focus of debate in the Netherlands from 2003. The question is: to what extent did this shift in the public discourse reflect itself in the Dutch policy plans regarding the integration of immigrants?

## THE INTEGRATION POLICY

In the integration policy we discern three phases. In the first phase (1982–94),<sup>4</sup> under a coalition of first Liberals and Christian Democrats and later Christian and Social Democrats, the analysis was that the maintenance of minority cultures would facilitate immigrants' integration into Dutch society. This was fully in line with the Dutch tradition of 'pillarization' (*verzuiling*), the segmentation of Dutch society along confessional lines. This tradition was closely connected to the emancipation movements of Dutch religious minorities, such as the Catholics and the Dutch Reformed Church in the 19th century, who wrested themselves from their subordinate position by developing their own institutions (see Lijphart, 1975). The Minorities Policy (Minderhedennota, 1983) hence targeted not individual immigrants, but specific immigrant groups, literally named 'ethnic minority groups' and their emancipation was believed to be executed via their organizations.

In the 1994 Dutch parliamentary elections, the Christian Democrats (CDA) were defeated and remained outside the government for the first time in almost a century. Traditionally, it was the Christian Democrats who cherished pillarization. This explains why the incoming so-called 'purple' coalition of Labour, Conservative Liberals and Social Liberals was able to shift the focus of its policies. The bulk of policy measures were aimed at

improving the school achievements of immigrant children and at promoting immigrants' labour participation. The preservation of minority cultures was no longer considered a public responsibility (see TK, 1993–94). The Minorities' Policy was renamed 'Integration Policy' and no longer targeted groups, but individual immigrants. The title of the memorandum, 'Kansen krijgen, kansen pakken' (Getting opportunities, taking opportunities) (TK, 1998–99), said it all: immigrants were to be encouraged to seize the opportunities given to them by Dutch society. Another important shift involved a growing feeling that the lack of socioeconomic integration of immigrants was also due to their insufficient familiarity with Dutch language and society. As a consequence, since 1998, every newly arrived immigrant from outside the European Union was obliged to attend a newly launched programme of language and civic integration (*inburgering*) courses. Although the introduction of integration courses indicates a nascent sense of the importance of culture for societal integration, in this second phase (1994–2002) policy measures remained focused on the promotion of socioeconomic integration, from which cultural integration was thought to follow.

Since the Fortuyn-revolt of May 2002 until February 2007 (the third phase) the Netherlands were ruled by conservative-neoliberal governments.<sup>5</sup> Instead of a precondition for socioeconomic integration, culture now came to be considered as a problem in its own right. Cultural differences were associated with Islamic terrorism and with the undermining of social cohesion and national identity. The quote with which we opened this article continued, referring to (inter)national terrorism, 'these events have raised doubts about the loyalty of parts of the minority population to the central values of Dutch society' (TK, 2003–04a: 2).<sup>6</sup> Former integration policies were criticized for putting too much emphasis on the acceptance of differences. 'There is nothing wrong with that, but [often] this was interpreted as if the presence of allochthone ethnic groups in society would constitute a value in itself, an enrichment *tout court*. One then loses sight of the fact that not everything different is therefore valuable' (TK, 2003–04b: 8). The solution according to the government was 'shared citizenship', meaning that every inhabitant keeps to the same basic (Dutch) norms. These include 'doing one's best to be able to support oneself . . . , caring for one's environment, respecting the physical integrity of others, also in marriage, acceptance of every person's right to express his opinion, acceptance of the sexual preferences of others, the equality of women and men' (TK, 2003–04b: 8–9). Second, the Dutch cabinets in this period maintained that it was not the government but immigrants themselves who were responsible for their successful integration (TK, 2003–04b: 9). Thus, although integration exams were compulsory, individual immigrants carried the responsibility for organizing and financing their preparation for the exam.

Concern about the lack of social cohesion led the Dutch cabinet to launch the so-called 'Breed Initiatief Maatschappelijke Binding' (Broad initiative social ties) (TK, 2004–05b), a series of debates with civil society. The integration courses and the introduction of a Dutch canon and civic education in schools in 2006 were supposed to ensure citizens' loyalty to central Dutch values (CFI, 2006)). Civic education should explicitly address the equal treatment of men and women as one of these values, as it was recognized that the above mentioned 'parts of the minority population' urgently needed to be educated on this point (TK, 2003–04c).

If we ask ourselves whether there is any correspondence between the shifts in the public debate and policy plans, the answer is clearly 'yes'. New realism's insistence on Dutch culture as *Leitkultur* and the reaffirmation of Dutch national identity and values thus achieved a clear translation in public policy.

In November 2006, new elections brought a progressive majority into Parliament and a government consisting of Christian Democrats, Labour Party and Christian Union was installed in February 2007. The new government announced the replacement of the individualistic approach of neo-liberalism with a more communitarian outlook emphasizing the importance of family values, civic duties and social cohesion. At the moment of writing (June 2007), it is too early to say much about the course this new cabinet will take regarding the emancipation and integration of immigrant women. But a remarkable feature of its first Policy Programme (*Samen Werken, Samen Leven 2007* (Working together, living together 2007)) is that the notions of 'autochthone', 'allochthonous' or 'ethnic minority' are rarely used, while there is not a single reference made to Islam. Instead, when addressing immigrant issues, the programme uses ethnically neutral terms such as persons, citizens or *inburgeraars* (literally: someone who is becoming a citizen).

## THE EMANCIPATION POLICY

In the mid 1970s, pressurized by the women's movement, the Dutch government started developing official policies to foster the emancipation of women. In this first period (between 1977 and 1981), the main goal was to change the mentality of men and women alike (Keuzenkamp, 1995). This was expected to lead to the transformation of existing gender roles. Government, moreover, committed itself to the promotion of 'characteristics and activities traditionally associated with being a woman' (quoted in TK, 2003–04e: 434).

During the second stage of the emancipation policy (1982–94), the policy documents strike a more militant tone. Emancipation also involved the



redistribution of power between the sexes. A more equal distribution of paid and unpaid labour was needed, more women should be appointed in decision-making positions and women should be actively encouraged to become economically independent.<sup>7</sup> Society would be transformed into a truly pluriform society, in which there was room for each individual, men and women alike, to live according to one's desires. These transformative intentions were again expressed in 1992, when a new policy programme identified three spearheads: more participation of women in political and social decision making, a redistribution of unpaid (i.e. care) labour and a break with traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity (Keuzenkamp, 1995: 9).

When in 1994 the first 'purple' cabinet came into office, on paper, government remained committed to the ideal of a pluriform society. But at the same time, during this third period of the emancipation policy (1994–2003), economic concerns were put to the forefront more clearly. Thus in the policy plan issued in 1996, the focus was on women's participation in the labour market, and on economic independence and the accessibility of higher positions in governance and industry. It was a period of moderate optimism. The title of the emancipation memorandum of 2000 was telling in this respect: *Van Vrouwenstrijd naar Vanzelfsprekendheid* (From women's struggle to self-evidence) (Ministerie van SZW, 2000). In line with this optimism, and to celebrate 25 years of emancipation policy, the Minister then responsible for emancipation, De Geus, declared that for most people it had become entirely obvious that women were present in almost all domains of society. There was little need for extra policy efforts, as women's emancipation in the Netherlands was deemed to be right on track (Geus, 2003).

De Geus's self-confidence met with indignation from many feminists, and their scepticism was rapidly confirmed by the results of the *Emancipatiemonitor* (Emancipation monitor) published in 2006 (Portegijs et al., 2006). The monitor showed that between 2002 and 2005, the process of emancipation in the Netherlands had stagnated. The portion of working women and the amount of hours that women worked per week had barely increased. Likewise, there had been no significant growth of the portion of economically independent women. The move of women into higher positions also fell short of expectations. The authors of the *Emancipatiemonitor 2006* expressed concern that the initial policy targets would not be achieved.

During this fourth period (2003 to the present) there is a resurgent sense of urgency about the emancipation of Dutch women. Hence the less optimistic tone of the new long-term policy plan published in 2005. Its subtitle can even be read as a direct comment on its predecessor: 'Emancipatie: Vanzelfsprekend, maar het gaat niet vanzelf!' (Emancipation: Self-evident, but it does not take care of itself!) (TK, 2005–06b). The general policy

programme of the now ruling Balkende IV government likewise acknowledges that women's emancipation has not been completed. The new government seems predisposed to adopt the main goals of the long-term emancipation policy plan of 2005, i.e. (1) prevention and combat of violence against women and girls (such as domestic violence, traffic in women and female genital mutilation); (2) furthering the economic independence of women; (3) prevention of the social exclusion of vulnerable and deprived women; (4) and a more proportional representation of women in positions of power and decision-making (see TK, 2005–06b).

Reconstructing the overall picture of some 30 years of active Dutch government interference in women's emancipation, two developments are striking. First, we see that the initial aim of the general transformation of Dutch culture into a truly pluriform society in which so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' virtues would be equally appreciated, was supplanted quite swiftly by more narrow economic goals. But over the years it appeared not so easy to achieve this socioeconomic gender equality. Currently, the average Dutch family has a full-time working husband while the wife combines a small part-time job with the care for the children and household (Portegijs et al., 2006).

How come, despite the insistence of new realists that gender equality is one of the main values of Dutch society, this very same society seems to resist the pressures of both government and the market economy when it comes to increasing the socioeconomic participation of women? To begin with, Dutch political and policy culture have for a long time been dominated by the Christian parties, which have always put an emphasis on family values and supported the idea that the first task of a mother is to be available for her children. Second, because of the reasonable level of salaries, good labour conditions and welfare state provisions, in many families there is no economic necessity for both partners to have a full-time job. Third, Dutch culture in general is known to be not very competitive, and recent surveys show that many, including young Dutch men and women, are inclined to prefer lifestyles that are not merely focused on individual success, career and money (see for instance Hofstede, 2004: 108–26). Finally, the heritage of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, with its critique of the 'bourgeois' family and its emphasis on individual autonomy, has been and still is interpreted by many Dutch women in broader terms than just exchanging the conventional role of the stay-at-home mother for the role of the ambitious career-woman (Brinkgreve and Te Velde, 2006; Duindam and Spruijt, 2007; Pessers, 1994).

A second remarkable development within the Dutch policies of emancipation is that, since about 2003, the official policy documents contain a more or less explicit subtext in which a distinction is made between policies aimed at native Dutch women on the one hand, and policies aimed at non-western immigrant women on the other. The aforementioned long-term

emancipation plan 2006–10, which is expected to be adopted by the new Balkenende IV government, illustrates this bifurcation along ethnic lines quite well. Whereas the second and fourth aim, i.e. furthering the economic independence of women and a more proportional representation of women in the top echelons of Dutch society, are geared to native women in the first place, the other two aims, i.e. combating violence against women (FGM, honour killing) and preventing the social exclusion of ‘vulnerable and deprived women’ (e.g. women from ethnic minority groups) are geared to non-western immigrants.

The most significant change compared to previous policy plans on emancipation is the addition of this latter goal, the prevention of social exclusion. In the explanatory notes, it is acknowledged that for some groups it is not realistic to expect them to acquire paid labour. Hence, while ‘autochthonous’ women are encouraged to acquire paid work and go ‘for the top’, for immigrant women the set aim is that they will at least do unpaid, volunteer work. As the labour participation of Surinamese and Antillean women is above average, this can only refer to especially Turkish, Moroccan, Somali, Iranian, Iraqi, and Bosnian women – most of whom are Muslim.

Thus, the recent Dutch documents on emancipation make a tacit distinction between immigrant and non-immigrant, or better: between non-Muslim and Muslim women, where the first are captured under the generic heading of ‘women’ who are to be encouraged to become economically independent and break through the glass ceiling, while the latter fall under the heading of ‘vulnerable and deprived women’ for whom paid work or positions of power are mostly out of reach, and who instead are simply encouraged to participate in society by volunteering in care activities (*mantelzorg*) and other kinds of social work.

## **POLICIES REGARDING IMMIGRANT WOMEN: EMANCIPATE IN ORDER TO INTEGRATE?**

The question poses itself: which developments have led to this bifurcation along ethnic lines? If we look at the history of the Dutch approach of immigrant women, we see that it runs parallel to the history of emancipation policies in general, but that it takes a separate course from the very beginning.

In January 1977, a report by the *Werkgroep Buitenlandse Vrouwen* (Foreign Women Study Group) was published. The report found that ‘foreign women’ (see TK, 2003–04a: 434) lagged behind ‘autochthonous’ women in many respects.<sup>8</sup> Although the 1977 white paper on emancipation mentioned the need to develop special policies geared to immigrant women because of their cultural differences, the pillarization motto of integration

with the maintenance of cultural identity made it difficult to develop such policies. As a consequence, during this first period (1977–81), a governmental policy on immigrant women was virtually non-existent.

In 1982 the Emancipation Council called for specific policies for women within the Minority Policy that was just being developed. The 1985 Emancipation Nota also dedicated attention to the specific situation of immigrant women. Their problems were perceived as caused by a lack of education and of relevant work experience, and by different cultural norms and values. The suggested aims of emancipation policies geared to immigrant women were threefold: (1) to further equal rights, on condition that their own cultural values were respected; (2) to improve their position in the domains of education and work and to increase the accessibility of social welfare institutions; and (3) to challenge traditional representations of gender relationships (TK, 2003–04a: 439). Although again this set of goals saddled policy makers with a paradoxical task, during this second phase (1982–94), a number of emancipatory projects, the so-called VEM (women and minorities) projects, were initiated by the ministries responsible for minority and emancipation policies. These small-scale projects were geared to improving the level of education and the labour market participation of immigrant women while, in line with the tradition of pillarization, they also supported self-organizations, and developed aid projects focused at women from specific ethnic groups.

When the VEM projects were finished, a third phase started, covering the period between 1994 and 2003, during which problems of immigrant women were alternately addressed as part of the agendas of immigrant integration and women's emancipation. Thus, while between 1997 and 1999 reports on ethnic minorities contained separate chapters addressing the position of 'black, migrant and refugee women', between 2001 and 2003, emancipation programmes contained separate sections on immigrant women. There is no need to say that such fragmentation did not lead to very effective policy measures.

All in all, in the first decades of Dutch integration and emancipation policies, immigrant women occupied a marginal position. While integration policies focused mainly on the male migrant, emancipation policies took the situation of 'autochthonous' women as their starting point (Roggeband and Verloo, 2007). This changed from 2003 onwards. Right after the start of the second Balkenende government and the installation of Ayaan Hirsi Ali as a member of parliament, the Ministries of Justice (taking over the integration of ethnic minorities from the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and Social Affairs joined forces by setting up the so-called Participatie van Vrouwen uit Etnische Minderheidsgroepen (PaVEM) commission. With the installation of this high-profile commission, a fourth period seems to have started during which immigrant women moved from the margins to the very centre of both emancipation and integration policies (2003–07). In 2005, the

commission published its plans, according to which before 2010, immigrant women should have made up their arrears in Dutch language, paid work and social participation. These plans are currently implemented under supervision of a direction group 'labour participation ethnic minorities' (TK, 2005–06b: 29) and have also been included in the so-called Deltaplan inburgering (Deltaplan integration) of the Balkenende IV government.

It is worth noting that, contrary to the aims set by general policies of emancipation, immigrant women are not assumed to catch up with men, but with native Dutch women – who, however, as we have indicated, in many respects still lag behind women in other western countries. The PaVEM plans for immigrant women were inspired by the motto (presumably an African saying): 'If you educate a women, you educate a family' (see PaVEM, 2005). Within the context of the international development organizations from which it is adopted, this saying captures the idea that the empowerment of women is essential to the transformation of the traditional patriarchal societies they live in. Likewise, in the Netherlands, immigrant women's education and participation are not just meant to stimulate their personal development, it is also expected that as wives and mothers they will pass on Dutch values and norms to their husbands and children, and thus have a 'civilizing' influence on their own community.

Next to stimulating the social participation of immigrant women, the 2005 long-term emancipation document also aimed to prevent and combat violence against women and girls. Although phrased in a general way, the examples of the kinds of violence to be combated (honour-related violence, female genital cutting – or 'female genital mutilation' as it is named in the document – and traffic in women) indicate that, similar to the policies geared to social participation, the actual focus was on immigrant women. Hence, immigrant women were simultaneously seen as important cultural brokers upon whom the integration of their community is dependent, as well as victims of their patriarchal cultures who are in need of support in order to free themselves from oppressive practices (see also Roggeband and Verloo, 2007).

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

In 2002, the policy document 'Privé geweld – publieke zaak' (Private violence – public cause) (TK, 2001–02) appeared, in which a coordinated approach to this issue was formulated. Family violence now has a structural place in the national security programme and the Big Cities policy. The measures include the formation of a network of support and advice centres on family violence in 35 local councils (TK, 2001–02: 17–18). Citizenship education, already mentioned in the paragraph on integration, also returns

as emancipation activity in as far as its subjects include arranged marriage, gang rapes and so-called 'loverboys' (men who lure girls into prostitution by first posing as their generous lover). On FGM, a policy plan was developed in 2005<sup>9</sup> and a broad programme of measures ranging from prevention to prosecution is now being implemented. Honour related violence has also been designated in 2005 by the Lower Chamber as a so-called 'large project' (TK, 2005–06a). Measures concerning honour-related violence are aimed at securing more safety for the victims, prevention and raising professionalism among the police and staff members of women's shelters. The Dutch cabinet is bound to report periodically to the Chamber about progress made in combating honour-related violence, genital mutilation and family violence, which are seen as related to each other (TK, 2005–06a: 18–20).

The issue of FGM has been put on the Dutch political agenda by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. It is estimated that in the Netherlands yearly around 50 girls are being 'circumcised' (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006: 256). The Dutch approach consists of a combined strategy of legal prosecution and information, education and communication (IEC). In the Netherlands, FGM counts as a penal offence. So far, however, there has not been a single case in which perpetrators of FGM have been brought to court, basically because of lack of evidence. To make prosecution more effective, the law has therefore been changed so that FGM now counts as an offence before the Dutch law, even if it has been performed in a country where it is not an offence. Another measure proposed by Hirsi Ali in order to make prosecution more effective was a compulsory yearly medical check of all girls from high-risk groups (i.e. girls from Somalia, Sudan and Egypt). This suggestion was rejected by the Dutch cabinet, as it was considered to be discriminating, and because an extensive genital examination without medical necessity and without the consent of the person involved, would infringe on her right to physical integrity. Pharos, the Dutch refugee and health knowledge centre, designated by the government as the focal point for girls 'circumcision' (Pharos's terminology, BP/SS), has been given the task of developing the IEC approach. It does so in close collaboration with the communities concerned (Pharos, 2006–09).

Until recently, honour-related violence was not well recorded in the Netherlands. According to a recent pilot study, in a period of six months in one police region, 79 cases were reported, of which 11 had a fatal ending (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006: 254). The analysis of the policy document on honour-related violence (TK, 2005–06a) is that family violence and honour-related violence do not need a separate approach. At the same time, the document recognizes that 'because of the nature of the phenomenon, honour related violence demands specific knowledge on intervention methods for an effective approach' (TK, 2005–06a: 2). Clarifying the nature of this 'specific knowledge', the document refers to family and migration

patterns and relevant social and economic factors. It thus bespeaks an awareness that 'culture' is not the all explaining factor (TK, 2005–06a: 5). The policy document also stresses that sustained contacts between the communities and institutions are indispensable. Reference is made to more than 50 meetings, organized by minority organizations and financed by the Ministry, in order to initiate activities to be undertaken from within the communities.

To add some flesh and blood to the gist of these official documents, on 8 May 2006 we had an interview with Sezai Aydogan, senior staff member of Transact (now Movisie), the national expertise centre for combating family violence and sexual violence. Mr Aydogan confirmed that the sensitizing activities are being conducted in collaboration with a wide range of self-organizations of immigrant groups.

Critics often warned that Hirsi Ali's fierce attacks on Islam would disable Muslim and immigrant organizations from recognizing family violence as a problem in their communities. It seems, however, that their effect was precisely the opposite: they created the opportunity and the financial means (as government was prepared to invest in the issue) for these organizations to act against it. Likewise, while the dominant public discourse insisted on legal prosecution, we were surprised to learn that practitioners in the field have opted for the soft approach of information and persuasion. And while the official policy line is to target the individual immigrant, practitioners chose close collaboration with immigrant organizations. The entire approach, as well as its explanation and justification, are very much phrased in terms of the practices that are to be combated; the cultural background of some of these practices is only alluded to between the lines, as it were. In a so-called masculinity project, for instance, the working groups often are all Turkish or all Moroccan, but the participants are asked to reflect on what masculinity means for them as a person, not on masculinity in Turkish or Moroccan culture. When asked, Mr Aydogan confirmed that in the field, family violence is indeed conceptualized as a general problem of the violence of men against women. This perception of the issue stands in stark contrast to the public debate in which violence against women is culturalized and Islam in particular is portrayed as oppressive to women.

Policies that address family violence in immigrant families inevitably have to address the tension between gender equality and respecting cultural diversity. The practitioners engaged with family violence seem to have found a way to negotiate this tension by developing culturally sensitive measures, but naming them in culture blind terms.<sup>10</sup> While some may understand this negatively as proof of a multiculturalist sitting on the fence in the field of welfare, it may also be understood as a pragmatic way to deal with differences, a strategy entirely in line with the Dutch tradition of the pacification of conflicts through deliberation and compromise.

## BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Within a very short period of time, the so-called Fortuyn-revolt of 2002 transformed the Netherlands from a relatively tolerant and relaxed country to a nation that called for repression, tough measures and neo-patriotism. Where before it was claimed that the Dutch cherished no nationalistic sentiments, afterwards a majority of the population said 'no' to the European Constitution, and supported the harsh implementation of asylum rules, while intellectuals emphasized the need for the reinvention of a Dutch canon, and also questioned the value of cultural diversity and the loyalty of the Muslim population to Dutch society (see for instance Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007).

How was the fate of immigrant women affected by this remarkable reversal in the Dutch mood? If we recapitulate the developments in the public and policy discourse over the last 30 years, the following picture emerges. Between 1977 and 1982, both policies of integration and emancipation were still under construction. (White) women's emancipation, it was thought, necessitated a change in mentality concerning traditional gender roles, hence a radical transformation of Dutch culture, while the integration of immigrants presumably necessitated the preservation of their own cultural background. The combination of these views made any attempt to develop an approach to immigrant women virtually impossible.

During the second phase (1982–94), the minority policies held on to the pillarization motto of the maintenance of cultural group identities, while within the policies of emancipation, the focus was gradually shifting from cultural change to the need for women to catch up with men regarding economic independence and social and political empowerment. This made it difficult to develop unambiguous policy guidelines for immigrant women, as the preservation of their own cultural identity was squarely at odds with the policies of emancipation that would require them to assimilate to the lifestyle norms of (native Dutch) men.

During the following period (1994–2002), while policies of emancipation were straightforwardly aimed at further socioeconomic empowerment, and there was an optimistic belief that (native Dutch) women were firmly on track and needed little extra help, the policies of integration likewise were more and more inclined to shift the responsibility of integration from governmental institutions and self-organizations to individuals themselves. Immigrant women thus again ended up between the devil and the deep blue sea, in a no man's land in-between the policy frameworks of women's emancipation and immigrants' integration.

It was only during the fourth period, between 2003 and 2006, that immigrant (in particular, Muslim) women moved from the margin to the centre of Dutch public debate and policy making.



It is worth noting that at the beginning of this period, at the time of the Fortuyn-revolt, although the new realist critics of immigration and Islam frequently referred to issues of gender and sexuality, they did so only to illustrate their cultural 'backwardness', hence the dangerous 'otherness' of Muslim immigrants, not to express any real concern for the problems of Muslim women.

It was the feminist political entrepreneurship of Ayaan Hirsi Ali that managed to make a fruitful connection between the Dutch populist discontent about the (implicitly male) Islamic immigrant population and the difficult position of Muslim women. In this respect, Hirsi Ali succeeded where other feminist politicians (who for years had attempted to get problems of immigrant women on the agenda) failed: the larger Dutch audience has become more aware of the problematic situation of many immigrant women and girls, and both Dutch policy makers and Islamic self-organizations are now encouraging projects to break taboos and discuss problems, such as the problem of sexual and family violence.

In our view, for immigrant (Muslim) women this development has proven itself to be both a curse and a blessing. The curse is that, since the triumph of new realism, in the public discourse especially Muslim women figure as either the victims of their own culture and religion or, in the case of women who actively identify themselves as Muslim (for instance by wearing a hijab), as accomplices to a culture which is oppressive to women and a threat to the cohesion of Dutch society and to the values underlying the Netherlands as a liberal-democratic state.

The blessing, however, albeit to many a blessing in disguise, is that by putting Muslim women in the spotlight, they were challenged to take a standpoint and speak up in public. Although many did so in order to lash out against Hirsi Ali and to make it clear that she did not speak for them, they were still not only enabled to defend (their interpretation of) Islam, but also to express their own views of and desires for emancipation.

Another blessing in disguise is the considerable discrepancy between the polarization and radicalization of positions in the public debate on the one hand, with gender relations as the paradigmatic example of the gap between Dutch majority and minority cultures, and the pragmatic policy measures taken to stimulate the emancipation of immigrant women on the other. Whereas in the debate the culture card is drawn frequently, policy makers and practitioners in the field are careful not to link up certain problematics (such as family violence) too quickly with a particular cultural or religious background. As we indicated already, practitioners engaged with family violence seem to have found a fruitful and effective way to negotiate the tension between the value of gender equality and the value of respecting cultural diversity, by developing culture-sensitive measures, but naming them in culture-blind terms.

## Notes

- 1 In Dutch discourse, the terms most often used are ‘ethnic (or cultural) minorities’, and ‘allochthone’ (*allochtoon*) versus ‘autochthonous’ (*autochtoon*). In official documents, the term ‘allochthone’ refers to those residents who are either themselves born outside the Netherlands, or of whom at least one of their parents is born outside the Netherlands, while ‘autochthonous’ refers to native citizens. The terms ‘cultural’ and ‘ethnic minority’ were introduced in the 1970s to select target groups for policy measures, as it was observed that members of certain immigrant groups, recognized by their ethnicity, occupied a position of socioeconomic deprivation. In everyday usage, ‘allochthone’ as well as the term ‘ethnic minority’, are reserved for people of colour and/or of non-western origin. In this article, we will speak of ‘immigrants’ and ‘immigrant women’ in order to hold some distance from the Dutch terminology, which suggests that people ‘from there’ can never become ‘from here’.
- 2 For both the original script of *Submission, Part I*, and the movie itself, see Hirsi Ali (n.d.).
- 3 In her autobiography, Hirsi Ali gives an extensive report of the (melo)dramatic conditions under which she saw herself forced to give up her seat in Dutch parliament and leave the country (Hirsi Ali, 2007). For more information about Hirsi Ali’s ideas, see Hirsi Ali, 2006.
- 4 Between 1981 and 1982, a progressive coalition of Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Social Liberals ruled, followed by two conservative–neoliberal coalitions between 1982 and 1990, and a coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats between 1990 and 1994.
- 5 May 2002, after the parliamentary elections and only nine days after the murder of Fortuyn, a cabinet was formed by the Christian Democrats, the Conservative Liberals and the List Pim Fortuyn, headed by the Christian Democrat Jan Peter Balkenende (Balkenende I). This government fell within nine months, after which a new coalition was formed of Christian Democrats, Conservative Liberals and Social Liberals (Balkenende II), which after its fall in June 2006 (because of the controversy about Hirsi Ali’s Dutch nationality), continued to rule as an outgoing cabinet until the next elections of November 2006 (Balkenende III).
- 6 Numerous other policy documents express this doubt about the loyalty of immigrants to Dutch society, e.g. the policy document ‘Grondrechten in een pluriforme samenleving’ (Basic rights in a pluriform society), TK, 2003–04d.
- 7 The militant tone of the emancipation documents in this period was set by the first Minister of Emancipation Hedy D’Ancona, one of the leading feminists of the Dutch women’s movement, who was in office between 1981 and 1982.
- 8 At the time, the labour market participation of immigrant women was actually higher than that of native Dutch women, although there were significant differences between the different ethnic groups. In 1981, for instance, 32.9 percent of the Dutch, 42.1 percent of the Turkish and 16.3 percent of Moroccan women had a paid job (see TK, 2003–04d: 435).
- 9 FGM is the official policy term (see TK, 2004–05a).
- 10 This seems to be symptomatic for a larger trend among the practitioners working with immigrant women. See also Saharso (2003) on surgical hymen repair or Saharso (2005) on sex-selective abortion.

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