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Between movement and government: «Femocrats in the Netherlands»

The institutionalization of the women's movement in a number of countries has led to the emergence of the «femocrat» phenomenon, women bureaucrats appointed by national or local government in regular civil service positions to develop women's equality policy. Generous state-funding and a tradition of group representation has led to a substantial presence of femocrats in the Netherlands in the course of the eighties. This article focuses on the women occupying these positions. Analysing femocrats within the national government's policy unit on women's policy, it discusses the way in which they see the relationship between movement and the state, the specificity of their position and their ideas about femocrat expertise. Two positions are distinguished: «allies» and «regulars», whose distinguishing characteristic is to be found in their feminist identification.

L'institutionnalisation du mouvements des femmes dans plusieurs pays a conduit à l'émergence du phénomène «fémocrates», des bureaucrates féminines nommées par un gouvernement national ou local à des positions régulières de la fonction publique afin de développer la politique de l'égalité des femmes. Au cours des année 80, une subvention étatique généreuse et une tradition de représentation de groupe ont conduit à une préscence importante de «fémocrates» aux Pays-Bas. Cet article se concentre sur les femmes occupant ces positions. En analysant les «fémocrates» à l'intérieur de l'unité de la politique nationale du gouvernement concernant la politique des femmes, il examine la façon dont elles voient la relation entre mouvement et état, la spécificité de leur position et leurs idées sur l'expertise «fémocrate». On distingue duex positions: «alliées» et «régulières», dont la caractéristique se trouve dans leur identification féministe.

Die Institutionalisierung der Frauenbewegung in zahlreichen Ländern hat zum Entstehen des «femokratischen» Phänomens, d.h. der Förderung der Gleichberechtigungspolitik durch weibliche Bürokratinnen in Beamtenpositionen, geführt. Grosszügige staatliche Finanzierung und eine Tradition von Interessenvertretung hat im Verlauf der Achtziger Jahre zu einer beträchtlichen Präsenz von Femokratinnen in den Niederlanden geführt. Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich auf die Frauen, welche diese Positionen innehaben. Mit Hilfe einer Analyse der Femokratinnen innerhalb der Politikeinheit der nationalen Regierung betreffend Frauenpolitik, diskutiert er die Art und Weise, mit welcher sie die Beziehung zwischen Bewegung und Staat, die Besonderheit ihrer Stellung und ihre Ideen über femokratische Begutachtung betrachten. Es wird zwischen zwei Positionen unterschieden: «Allianzpartnerinnen» und «Indifferenten», deren Unterscheidungsmerkmal in ihrer feministischen Identifikation zu suchen ist.

I. Introduction

In a classic article written in 1982, two Dutch civil servants working in the women's policy unit of the national government in The Hague, described their position in terms of ambiguity (Dijkstra and Swiebel 1982). On the one hand they were not trusted by a large part of the women's movement, on the other hand they had to work within an environment which was at best indifferent and at worst hostile. At the same time they were part of the problem they were trying to solve: women's inferior position vis a vis men, neatly mirrored in the civil service itself, which today still has only about 15,7% of women in higher civil service positions.[1] They wrote during a period in which civil servants working on equality policy were still a rarity. The category developed only at the end of the seventies, at a time when the women's movement in the Netherlands was deeply divided on the matter of cooperation or confrontation with the state.

Today this type of civil servant, known in Dutch as «emancipatieambtenaar», following the Dutch custom of calling women's equality policy «emancipation policy», has become a regular feature of the administrative landscape. There is now not only a substantial group of such civil servants working within the national government, but there is also similiar staff employed at the provincial and local government level. The critique of «state feminism», as the government response to the women's movement has been labelled[2], has ebbed away in the course of the eighties. Feminists have known how to profit from the many possibilities in the Dutch welfare state to get funding for their activities and have used the openings provided by the democratisation of the sixties and seventies to organise access and representation at various state levels. The process of institutionalization of the women's movement has created a wide network of feminist organizations outside of government and a substantial number of positions within.

It is on these latter positions, which form one of the most important outcomes of this process, that I shall concentrate in this article. More specifically, I shall focus on the women occupying these civil service positions. For these «feminist bureaucrats,» Australian feminists have coined the label «femocrats» (Eisenstein 1990). This was originally a derogative term, having its roots in the heated debates between «reformist» and «revolutionary» feminists. But the label has been appropriated by the women of the category itself and is now becoming a generic term to

1 This is the most recent figure, which reflects the 1992 situation (Ministry of Internal Affairs, Voorkeursbeleid bij de rijksoverheid, Den Haag, 1993). Counted are all those working in scale 10 and higher; scale 10 is the most junior policy-making position.

2 The term «state feminism» surfaced in the Nordic countries in the course of the seventies. Sometimes it refers to the whole equality policy of the state (Dahlerup 1986:24; Lucas 1990). Hernes (1988:201–202) sees it as «feminism from above in the form of gender equality and social policies as well as the feminisation of welfare-state-relevant professions», which she distinguishes from the feminism «from below» of activists in political and cultural activities. For Siim (1991:189) it refers to both the feminists employed as administrators and bureaucrats in positions of power and to the women politicians advocating gender equality policy.

denote the new positions set up within government to develop public policy on women.

This phenomenon of the «femocrats» has raised a number of interesting questions, surfacing in Australian debates on state feminism. There they have led to the first more scholarly analyses of the femocat phenomenon (Franzway 1986; Summers 1986; Calvert 1987; Eisenstein 1990; Sawer 1990; Eisenstein 1991a; Eisenstein 1991b). Under what conditions could this phenomenon develop? What sort of women are the femocrats? Are they all from the women's movement? Do they identify with feminism and what then does this mean to them? How do they try to develop women's equality policy? How do they set up a professional identity? Do they make a difference? As the Netherlands has a large contingent of «femocrats» of whom little is known, the research I have set up is intended to explore such themes.

In the context of this article I cannot tackle all of these questions, nor shall I attempt a systematic comparison with the Australian data.[3] Instead I shall focus on one central issue and one type of femocrat on the basis of my research on «femocrats» in the Netherlands. Looking at the civil servants employed as policy-makers for women's equality at the national level, the central question I shall raise is how these women perceive the relationship between civil servants and the women's movement. I have chosen to tackle this issue first as it not only has been the major bone of contention in the women's movement itself, but is also the dominant topic in the literature on femocrats and state feminism to date.

In order to do so, I shall first briefly discuss the background to the rise of the femocrat phenomenon and tackle the matter of the precise demarcation of the category of the femocrat. After a short discussion of some of the issues raised in the literature, I present the Dutch context of the process of institutionalisation of the women's movement. The results of the empirical research are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs. After a brief introduction of the femocrats themselves, I discuss their perception of the relationship between civil servant and social movement, their feminism, and their views on the specificity of the femocrat position. I shall contend that it is the feminism of the femocrats which accounts for the major differences within the group, rather than age or length of civil service career.

II. Background

The «femocrats» are one of the most interesting phenomena to come out of the process of institutionalisation of the women's movement in a number of Western nations. Especially in those countries where the movement was able to form an alliance with socialist or social-democrat parties, «state feminism» developed, a term used to denote both the new structures and positions set up to develop women's equality policy, and the policies themselves. The Nordic countries, the

3 Apart from the matter of space, this is also difficult as little of the Australian work is based on systematic interviewing, using personal experiences of femocrats and occasional interviews as sources.

Netherlands, and more recently, Germany and France are cases in point, but also in several states of Australia this process has taken off. The rise of state feminism has been hotly contested and extensively discussed in the women's movements, giving rise to much movement literature in the seventies and early eighties.[4] The opposition to the process was ineffective in the long run, although in some countries it retarded it.

Both theorists and activists have found it hard to look at this debate in an impartial way. The debate was usually framed in terms of the dichotomy between cooperation and confrontation, in which cooperation was often seen to lead to cooptation of the movement by the state. This in turn was held to lead to the deradicalisation of the movement and the «sell-out» of the feminists working within the state. Viewing the encounter between movement and state in terms of this dichotomy is not very fruitful, however. First of all, it tends to eliminate the possibility that the state can give strong positive impulses to a movement, for instance by supplying financial aid or giving a permanent platform for airing grievances. Secondly it assumes that the demands of a movement are pre-given, which are then corrupted by the state, while in fact demands are created in the process of interaction between (parts of) the state and movement. This also holds for the matter of women's interests. These also do not precede the political process; interests are also produced in interaction (Pringle and Watson 1990:229–230). Government creates these as it develops policy, intended or not. An example of this are the interests of women in welfare: these only came into existence when the category itself was created by the Welfare Law of 1963. Thirdly, the dichotomy of cooperation and confrontation hides the fact that neither «the state» nor «the movement» are homogeneous entities. The women's movement was always divided: part of the movement actively desired cooperation and sought access to government right from the beginning of the second wave of feminism. And as feminist political scientists pointed out during the debates, «the state» doesn't exist as a unified actor. Instead it is better analysed as a conglomerate of frequently warring factions and groups who do not necessarily share the same goals or adopt the same attitude towards women's demands. Fourthly, and most importantly from the point of view of the topic of this article, the cooptation thesis assumes that activists who take on government or state-subsidized positions adjust to its culture and jettison the more radical part of their ideology. Not only does this assume that these activists were «pure» feminists before entering the civil service, it also assumes that their job and the civil service context only produces negative effects on them. But is it not possible that working as a state feminist or femocrat produces its own kind of feminism? As Hester Eisenstein (1991b:38), an American feminist who became a femocrat in Australia, has suggested, how does the state construct official feminism?

More recently scholars have started to explore state response to the contemporary women's movements in a less biased and more systematic fashion, but only in

4 For the women's movement in Europe and this debate: Dahlerup 1986, Katzenstein and Mueller 1987; Kaplan 1992; for Australia: Franzway et al. 1989; Watson 1990.

Australia have femocrats been examined up till now. As yet there is no consensus on the definition of a femocrat. Eisenstein describes femocrats as «self-identified feminist bureaucrats working at the policy level» in goverment (1990:87). In her later work she is more precise, but following Calvert (1987:2), she still utilizes a broad and extensive description. A femocrat is «a public servant who is feminist and is perceived to have control over either policy or funding or both» (1991b:30). According to this view, femocrats are not only civil servants who work on women's policies, but also women elsewhere in the bureaucratic hierarchy who are feminists. This definition would serve if one would want to trace the influence of feminists in government bureaucracies. It would obviously lead to problems of operationalisation, as one would have to find a way to identify these feminists and trace them in the corridors of power. Other authors narrow down the category, limiting it to feminists who take up women's policy positions within government (Sawer, 1990:22) or to women working in women's policy units and in women's policy positions in other departments (Watson, 1990:9; Franzway, Court and Connell 1989:133). The disadvantage of Sawer's definition is that she excludes non-feminist women from the category, instead of exploring in how far women in women's policy positions are actually feminist. The demarcation of the category by Watson and Franzway et al. has as advantage that it does not take the feminism of these women for granted. In addition, it is better suited to the situation in the Netherlands. In an early stage of the development of Dutch women's equality policy, a problem-definition was adopted which maintained that all policy areas impinged on women's position. Therefore, the development of policy was not just entrusted to a specific women's policy unit, but also to civil servants working in these other policy areas which fall under the responsiblity of the other ministries. For this reason I have adopted for the following description of the category of femocrats: «those civil servants who have as task to develop equality policy within government and who control its implementation». This definition does not assume that femocrats are feminists: part of my purpose is to explore in how far that is the case. It also points to the higher echelons of the government bureaucracy.

The Australian literature raises several important issues about femocrats. It is strongly influenced by the debate about cooperation and confrontation, but attempts to go beyond this dichotomy in order to explore the significance of the new situation. The experience and the reflection of the femocrats on their role (such as Eisenstein) have provided an exciting insiders-perspective on the topic. From this literature, but also from Western European feminist debate and my own prior experience in the Dutch movement, I shall briefly discuss four points which have influenced the direction of my research on Dutch femocrats.

Firstly the question arises in how far femocrats are «malestreamed», as the English language so aptly characterized the process of adaptation which women working in regular institutions are supposed to undergo. It is suggested that they have to adapt to their new setting and say farewell to their more radical ideas. Because this assumes, as mentioned, that prior to entering the bureacracy, they were true believers, it is important to trace what their views on feminism, the position of women, and the women's movement were. In particular their percep-

tion of the relationship between civil servant and movement is an issue. In addition, it becomes important to analyse how their ideas concerning these topics have changed in the course of their femocrat career.

Secondly, the literature points to the dilemma's which femocrats encounter in their work. In the introduction to this article Dijkstra and Swiebel (1982) point out that femocrats (a term they didn't use yet) are part of the problem which they are expected to solve. As women in bureaucracy, they have to operate in a masculine culture; in the movement they are civil servants who are not to be completely trusted. How do femocrats resolve the tension arising from these two dilemma's?[5] What kinds of strategies do they develop? How do they handle dilemma's of institutional loyalty and the loyalty to their feminist convictions? And how do they handle the classical dilemma of political loyalty to their minister, who often sells out on women's policy?

Thirdly, being a femocrat touches on matters of identity. Femocrats are a new phenomenon, and a civil servant for equality policy is a new professional type. How do femocrats acquire a professional identity? Does that differ from a «normal» type of civil service professionality? Do they develop a specific type of expertise? Being a new category, there was no role-model for the pioneers. How does one «do» a femocrat, i.e. how do they construct a femocrat? How has this changed over time?

Fourthly, do femocrat positions entail or create power? Is this power comparable to other civil service positions? In how far are femocrat positions «contaminated» by the fact they are about women and occupied by women? Does being a femocrat mean one becomes stigmatised and marginalised? What sort of power do femocrats develop (Franzway et al 1989:154; Eisenstein 1990:101)?

To explore these issues, I have followed Eisenstein's suggestion to make use of a more ethnographic method (Eisenstein, cit. in Franzway, 1989:144). In addition to the analysis of relevant documents, I have interviewed at length all the femocrats falling within my definition at the national level, keeping in mind how one becomes a femocrat and how one «performs» being one.[6] In terms of questions it has meant dwelling on the background of the femocrats, on their views on feminism and their relationship to the women's movement, on their ideas about professionality, civil service culture and specific feminist expertise, on how they operate within their work and on how they judge the effects of their work.

5 The first dilemma makes the problem for woman activists different to activists from other movements entering government positions. All have to handle the tension between movement and state, but the latter do not have the additional problem of being a woman/feminist having to operate in an usually all-male environment.

6 All interviews lasted for about two to two-and-a-half hours, and were transcribed literally from the tapes. The interviews were conducted by myself.

III. Femocrats in the Netherlands

For the Netherlands, there is by now a considerable literature on equality policy itself[7], but very little about the femocrats themselves, the women in these new professional civil service positions (but see Dijkstra en Swiebel 1982). There is consensus among scholars that the process of institutionalisation of the women's movement in the Netherlands has gone further than in most other Western European nations (Lovenduski 1986:276; Kaplan 1992). The Dutch political system offers important opportunities for social movements, such as proportional representation at all electoral levels, pluralist national media, a well-developed system of subsidies and the tradition of «Verzuiling» which legitimates group representation at the decision-making level (Duijvendak, Van der Heijden, Koopmans and Wijmans, 1992). The Dutch feminist movement has managed to operate quite succesfully in this favourable climate. In the last twenty years a national machinery was set up in order to conduct equality policy. The government set up an advisory body, the Emancipation Commission, in 1975, which was succeeded in 1981 by the present Emancipation Council. Within the national government a women's policy unit was created in 1978 within the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Welfare, the Department for the Coordination of Equality policy (DCE) (Directie Coordinatie Emancipatiebeleid). It was moved to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in 1981. In the early eighties a number of women's bureau's were set up at the provincial level and in the three major cities. A substantial number of civil servants for women's policy were appointed at the local and provincial level. In addition a number of service projects got under way and were funded by the central women's policy unit DCE on topics such as sexual violence, employment, women's health and occupational training. Finally the DCE financed positions for setting up equality policy in a number of non-state organisations such as the broadcasting corporations, trade-unions and the national sports federation.[8]

7 For the literature focusing on the national level: Dijkstra and Swiebel 1982; Van Praag 1985; Prins 1987; Prins 1989; Huisman 1991; Outshoorn 1990; Keuzenkamp and Teunissen, 1990; Keuzenkamp and Outshoorn 1992. For literature in English: Swiebel 1988; Outshoorn 1991; Swiebel and Outshoorn 1992.

8 Estimates of the exact numbers are hard to compute. There are several categories of femocrats: 1. National femocrats, working as civil servants at the policy level in The Hague, not only in the women's policy unit, but also in other ministries: 25 (Haagse Kringen, 1990); 2. The policy staff of the Emancipation Council and the Equal Opportunity Commission: 9 (Haagse Kringen nagaan); 3. Civil servants for equality policy at the provincial level: 31 (information IPOEA, feb. 1991); 4. Civil servants for equality policy at the local level: an estimated 300. This is a rough estimate, based on the membership of their national association. Not all civil servants at this level have equality policy as their sole task, and many of them work part-time (information SLEA, 1992). Also, there is a high turnover in personnel; 5. Policy and staffmembers of the women's bureaus in the provinces and the major cities: 67 (Wiertsema 1991:8). These are under contract and salaried by the national government; 6. Women working as staffmember or in a senior position in the national service projects, mainly financed by national government: 24 (my estimate) There are 16 of these projects; 7. women employed as equality officer in national nonprofit organisations, financed by central government. Since 1979 there have been about 100 women

About the women working in all these positions we know very little. Only Wiertsema (1991) has provided us with some background information, on the staffmembers of the provincial women's bureau's. The group consisted of sixty-seven women, with an average age of around forty, fifteen years of working experience, and with one half university educated and the other half trained at a polytechnical school (often for social work or education) on the tertiary level. The group I interviewed in a pilot study performed prior to this research, which included both women working at the provincial and local level, and women in the bureau's and the national service projects, corresponded with Wiertsema's findings (Outshoorn 1992).

As already mentioned, for the purposes of my research, I have defined femocrats as «those who have to develop equality policy within government and monitor its implementation». This means I exclude the women working in the service projects and in the bureau's and focus on those working as civil servants. For the project I have also limited myself to the femocrats working at the national level. This choice was made for two reasons. Firstly, one can maintain that the national femocrats have most influence (in comparison with the other categories) on women's equality policy. Not only do they shape national policy, but this policy also provides the framework in which the other categories have to operate. Secondly, the national femocrats are the oldest category, which originated around 1977, which makes it possible to trace changes over time.

At the national level two categories of femocrats can be distinguished in the Netherlands. Firstly there are the femocrats working at the policy unit charged specifically with developing equality policy, the DCE, located within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Secondly, there are femocrats working within the various other ministries on equality policy, who maintain contact with the coordinating unit. For the purposes of this article I am focussing on the first group, the members of the policy unit. My definition, with its focus on the development and monitoring of policy, entails that I have selected as my informants all those civil servants working in policy-making positions, which within the Dutch Civil Service system, means all those from class 11 upwards, fifteen people in all at the time of the interviews (summer 1992).[9]

The DCE of the national government numbers about twenty-six full time equivalents, staffed by thirty-seven people (part-time work being very popular). Not all of the fifteen working at the policy level have full time jobs either. The DCE is headed by a director and a deputy, and is divided into three sections, covering legal affairs, employment and social security, and socio-cultural affairs. One senior civil

working in national organizations as equality officiers, but these jobs are temporary contracts for three years. At the end of 1992 there were 26. Four others started their work since then (information from DCE, jan. 1994).

9 The other national femocrats have proved more difficult to identify. To select these, I used a reputation method, by asking three senior staffmembers of the DCE, including the secretary ot the Interministerial Coordination Commitee for Equality Policy, with whom I should talk, again using the policy-making level as distinction.

servant covers the field of international relations. The rest of the unit consists of financial management and secretarial staff. The DCE falls directly under the permanent under-secretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Its political head is a junior minister for women's policy (called a state secretary in the Netherlands). This position ensures direct political access for the DCE, which has been part of its strength, although an undersecretary does not sit in on cabinet meetings except when his/her portfolio is discussed. The DCE is responsible for coordinating women's policy at the national level and is also supposed to monitor issues in other policy areas which have direct consequences for women. For these purposes there is an Interministerial Coordination Committee in which all ministries are represented and whose secretary is a senior from the DCE.[10]

IV: Who are the femocrats?

The first thing one notices when interviewing the «femocrats» of the policy unit is how diverse they are. There is apparently no single type of femocrat. This becomes clear when we look at age, education, and the average length of employment in the unit. The oldest civil servant to whom I spoke is sixty, the youngest twenty-six; the average age is nearly forty. They have been working for six-and-a-half years on average at the DCE, but here again the range is broad. Some of them have been there for about fourteen years, but the youngest only for one-and-a-half years at the time of the interviews. Only two of them do not have a finished university degree. All the others are university-educated, but have taken very different degrees. There are four jurists, two political scientists, two historians, two majors in adult education, one psychologist, a sociologist and one classical scholar. A number of them, mainly the younger ones, have taken womens' studies courses at university, but one of the senior ones already wrote her doctoral thesis in the seventies on women's policy. All took their degree at one of the big Dutch universities; no one university is overrepresented. Of the total group, only four people entered the Civil Service straight after university. Seven first worked in education or at an university. Three others held a subsidized women's position before entering the national civil service. One had a staff-position in an employers' organisation before switching to government. Of the total group, five women worked in another civil service job prior to working in a femocrat position. They come from different class backgrounds; some of the parents had been (higher) civil servants, belonging to the old or new middle-class, managers or self-employed, or from a working-class background.[11] The majority are not church-attenders, although sev-

10 Fore more details on the national machinery: Swiebel and Outshoorn, 1991.

11 This is probably not very different from the general background of the higher civil servants at the national level. The findings of Van der Meer and Roborgh (1993) figure on this point are hard to compare as they do not provide sharp definitions of their categories. They do report 62.2 % having a new middle class background, 20,5 an old middle class background, 15.4 % working class background, and only 1.6 % an entrepreneurial and managers' background, taking father's occupation as indicator.

eral come from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. Also, the majority votes either for the Dutch Labour or Green Left party; only four opting for a party of the centre or Right.[12] In one respect the femocrats I interviewed were alike; all of them are white and have the Dutch nationality.

One interesting research dilemma occurred which I had not encountered in the Australian literature on femocrats. In my group two respondents turned out to be men. Can men be femocrats? All definitions I came across assumed that femocrats are women. My own definition does not exclude men. Both the men have senior positions, have worked in equality policy for years and have an evident affinity to the women's movement. One of them was a member of Man-Woman-Society (Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij – MVM), the oldest group of the second wave in the Netherlands, founded in 1968. It always included men among its members. The other was a member of the major gay rights organization COC, and has been out of the closet ever since his university days.[13] Both held to the popular sociological role-theory in the early seventies which also defined men as part of the problem. One calls himself a feminist, the other maintains only women can be feminist, but he is plainly sympathetic to the cause. I have included them in my group, as their position can shed some interesting light on some of the issues I raise in the research, such as the question as to what kind of power femocrats develop, and about differences in operational style.

Of the femocrats studied, the majority (eleven of the fifteen) had had some sort of connection with the broader women's movement before they entered the civil service. Three belonged to MVM. Three others were recruted into the movement by way of women's studies' groups at the university, which in the seventies and early eighties were set up by women students (and an odd staff-member). Three were active in women's service projects. One was active on women's issues in a left-wing political party. One belonged to a traditional women's organization. Of the four persons who did not have a connection to the women's movement, three professed to have been interested in women's issues at the time. Only one was not interested or connected in any way. Of the whole group, six are still active in some sort of women's group not related to the contacts they maintain professionally. As we shall see, this does not mean that all the femocrats identify as feminists, or that they have not changed their views in the course of time.

If one examines the way femocrats have been recruted, two features stand out.

12 The group of femocrats to whom I talked are different to other higher civil servants in religion and party preference. Van der Meer and Roborgh (1993:358) report that over 50 % of higher civil servants (everybody from scale 10 upwards) profess to no religion; in my group this is the case for nearly everybody. As to political preference Van der Meer and Roborgh report for higher civil servants that only 52.6 % report voting for the centre and left (Democrats 66, Labour Party and Green Left).

13 Among the woman there were also several lesbians, all quite openly as well. In general being lesbian or gay is not much of an issue in the civil sevice, although it will receive a mixed reception in some ministries. In parliament and in the cabinet there are several gays and lesbians, which is generally known within the political elite; the Dutch press on the whole is rather discrete about it.

Firstly, some relation to the women's movement and an affinity to the movement is a criterium for recruitment. Nearly all femocrats reported that these topics had been raised and discussed extensively during their selection-interviews. One of them said she couldn't remember, as it was such a long time ago, but that she was one of the MVM-members was evident from her c.v. The top of the Department confirmed that affinity was indeed a criterion. Sometimes the interview was also used by the recruters to warn the applicants of the thorny sides of civil service life and to point out potential feminist dilemma's of loyalty and working in a hierarchy. Motivation was also considered crucial in order to survive as a femocrat; many report this was discussed during the interview. Of the group I interviewed, only four were recruted from «within», from other departments in The Hague.[14] As was the case when the Emancipation Commission was set up in 1975, the national government had no expertise on women's issues among its own personnel. Recruitment had to be done externally, and the expertise lay with the more professionalised parts of the women's movement. In that way, feminists were able to enter the civil service.

Secondly, there are no formal job requirements for a femocrat. One can become one regardless of the sort of university training one has. In this respect femocrats do not differ from many other civil servants working in policy positions.[15] For many policy positions ministries look for all-round people, what the Dutch call «generalists», with an academically-trained mind. Decentralised recruitment is also quite common at the national level, many units within ministries doing their own recruting. But there does not seem to be a very clear idea about the kinds of capacities and qualities a femocrat should have. It is not seen as a certain type of expertise and it is not unravelled into specific criteria for the job. Training is done on the job, and most femocrats report «having been thrown into the deep end» at the start of their careers.

V. How do femocrats see the relationship between movement and civil service?

To explore the views that the femocrats hold on the relationship between femocrats and the women's movement, I asked them to describe it. This caused quite a bit of laughter but also produced long expositions, as this has been one of the controversial issues within the women's policy unit for a number of years, although several of the long-standing femocrats reported that these debates have declined over the

14 Not insignificantly, two of the four are the heads of the department. The other two are younger women, who have both done women's studies at the university and worked on women's projects in two other departments before coming to the DCE.

15 Van der Meer and Roborgh (1993:327) reporet that of all higher civil servants at the national level 43 % have an university degree and another 44 % a degree at the tertiary level. Of all civil servants at the national level 22 % has a degree in law, 21 % in economics or one of the social sciences (1993:326). Unfortunately separate figures for higher civil servants were not distinguished.

years. Many of the civil servants talk about the relationship in a metaphorical way. Terms as ally, missionary, broker, dubbelspy, advocate, or «just professionals», «not the outpost of the movement in The Hague» can be noted. Looking at the answers, two groups can be discerned. One person proves difficult to categorise, as both positions were adhered to.

A large group (nine) describe the relationship in terms of an alliance between government and women's movement: there is cooperation and if things go well, both parties profit from it. Several of them denied the implicit dichotomy of my question by pointing out resolutely that they themselves were part of the movement (or by saying «you belong to both»), Not everyone sees it as a source of conflict or dilemma's either, but many tend to see it as a fertile and productive relationship, embroidering enthusiastically on the theme of cooperation.

The position of the civil servant in this alliance is described in different terms. The image of the broker emerges: in the civil service one makes demand meet supply, and one can mediate between the diverse interests of departments, movement groups and parliament. You can advise groups to talk and lobby to other civil servants and join forces with others on some issues. To some the civil servant is also a missionary or an advocate of feminism within the world of The Hague. She can propagate feminist ideas and win over other civil servants to the cause. The organising of support is seen as a major task for femocrats by all in the «alliance» group. Another image is that of teacher. Her work is aimed at two groups: at the movement or at other civil servants. One task is telling the women's movement how to translate its demands in such terms that policy makers understand them and can do something about them. Another is telling women's groups how to fill out forms for government subsidies, or where to go to for further information. As one adherent to this view comments: «it's educating activists about how government works». But a femocrat also teaches other civil servants how to integrate women's issues into various other policy areas and how to calculate the consequences of intended policies for certain categories of women. Still another position I came across is that of the facilitator: femocrats are well-placed to get things done because of their expertise, contacts and money. One femocrat described this as follows:

«strengthening the movement in general with money and advice, making change possible in that way, so that ideas which are developed can be included in policy and are diffused in the society at large».

The femocrats adhering to the position of ally are well aware that not all their colleagues share their position. Sometimes this was mentioned explicitly when they talked about other colleagues, but often it happened indirectly: «a femocrat ought to...», implying others weren't making her grade. Matters such as furthering the interests of one's constituency, informing women's groups in advance about changes, keeping them informed and networking were seen as «duties».

For the group of «allies», the alliance is not only vital to their work, but also for goal-attainment of the women's movement. Not that they are naive about the women's movement or about the way many activists regarded them. The older

ones remember the debate about «state feminism» very clearly, mentioning that handling the image of «here comes the state» when walking into a meeting with feminists, was very difficult. They recall the anger and resistance against «the fortress of the state», while it only consisted of «X and me!». But they always viewed the relationship in terms of fruitful cooperation, although they confess at having felt uncomfortable at the time. For the «allies» in the end the relationship is one of a «wise and smart division of labour.»

The second group which can be distinguished on the question of the relationship between civil servant and movement consists of four people. They do not see this relationship as different from the normal relationship between politics and the civil service. For this group, being a women's equality civil servant is just a «normal job», with its «own responsibility», a phrase used to denote the autonomy of the civil servant vis a vis the movement. Two of these state that equality policy civil servants are no «outpost of the movement» in The Hague, an opinion attributed by them to some of the «old guard», the designation for those who have worked in the unit for a long time or have a long-standing feminist reputation. As one of this group voices it:

«At first you could see civil servants for equality policy as a motor for the movement, but now it has just become a profession».

Having one's own responsibility does not mean they regard their position as unproblematic. One of the older civil servants subscribing to the «just-a-job» view denotes it as a tricky intermediary situation:

«Civil servants here are not really trusted by the women's movement. That's one side to it, and you have to be very careful that you're not being used by the movement, but also not by politics or the civil service culture, as you do have a certain power, a certain trust».

Civil servants, so she continues, should know what's going on in the movement, have their antennae tuned in, but just do their work, because otherwise it can't be done. The others in this group concur, and add that one can act as an intermediary on many occasions. One of them has a very instrumental view of the relationship, in which the movement is the support and legitimation of her work. But she too, thinks she can mediate between movement and government.

Looking at these findings, the question arises what makes some choose for the position of «ally», and others for the position of «just-a-job». Many of my respondents held that there was a generation gap[16] amongst the femocrats, and drew the line along their attitude towards the relationship between movement and state.

16 When I started the interviews I was well aware of a potential generation gap. I did not ask any questions about it myself, as I wanted to see when and how respondents themselves broached the topic. An interesting interview effect emerged during the course of my work. Some of my later interviewees mentioned at the end of the interview that they were surprised I had not asked them about it, as they held others said I had! In fact nearly everybody raised the issue more or less explicitly themselves. At several other points I became aware that they talked about the interviews among themselves. All of them reported that they had enjoyed talking about their opinions and work. Later on I learned that my questioning has caused quite an internal debate around the relationship between the movement. All respondents have read and commented on an earleir version of this paper.

However, although a number of the «old guard» do indeed subcribe to the ally position, not all do, while some of the younger civil servants also embrace it. What makes one opt for one or the other position? Two directions for an explanation I shall explore in the following paragraphs. Firstly, I shall relate the distinction to the feminist attitudes of the femocrats. Secondly, I shall look into the answers I received when questioning the femocrats about the specificity of a women's equality civil servant and about their specific expertise.

VI. Are femocrats feminist?

One of the first questions raised in the interviews was how the civil servants described their attitude towards feminism and the women's movement prior to the period in which they became a civil servant working on women's equality policy. Nine of the fifteen said they called themselves a feminist; a tenth, one of the men, stated he was not a feminist, as in his view only women can be feminists. I have included him in the group identifying as feminists, as his ideas are very much in sympathy with one of the main streams in Dutch feminism.

Interesting to note is that of the group identifying as feminists, seven of them described their position in terms of currents within the Dutch feminist movements. Sometimes they connected this to a conversion tale of how they became a feminist. It turned out that there were three MVM feminists, a socialist feminist, a liberal feminist, an equality feminist and a «reformist». The three others described their positions purely in terms of personal experience.

The three MVM feminists are the most concise in their self-description and are very direct about their identity. The MVM ideology was grounded in sociological role theory, which held both women and men to be the part of the problem. Basically it holds an optimistic view of human nature, as it sees women and men to be the product of socialisation practices. As role behaviour is learned, it can be unlearned. A reform strategy is a logical consequence of this position. MVM as an organization chose for a reformist strategy right from its founding, seeing itself as an interest-group aiming at the state to fulfill its demands. An alliance with other reformist groups, such as the Labour Party, which shared its views on human nature and the role of the state, was formed very early in its history, in the early seventies. The choice of the three MVM members for a civil service was therefore a very conscious one. The debate on cooptation and reformism in the movement, which reached its high point in the late seventies, therefore hardly bothered them. One comments on it as follows:

«I knew I stood for the right cause ... also ideologically we stood firmly in our shoes, I had mentally prepared myself for the long march in the institutions».

And another tells:

«I went to work in government because I thought: I want something with feminism, I want something with policy (...) I'd already been doing so in my leisure time for a number of years».

She goes on that she had a «social democratic view» of politics:

«I thought that in order to change things, this had to happen through the combined action of politics and the women's movement and other institutions outside government. And then government organizations ought to take on the task».

The third MVM member tells of the clash experienced between rigid role expectations and the irritation the way society was organised along these lines. Working at change through government seemed more or less logical.

The woman who describes herself as a «reformist» also chose at an early moment in her feminist development to work through the institutions:

«Then you obtain a certain power position and you can set about changing women's position. I wasn't a radical feminist, I was more of a reformist».

The socialist feminist chose to follow the same route, although she was a member of a small leftist party. She was elected as a council member in one of the larger Dutch cities and recounts she also felt herself to be a member of the women's movement, but that she had chosen to realise its aims through electoral politics. She always tried to connect her feminism to her socialism, a common position in the seventies and early eighties in the Netherlands, where socialist feminism was one of the dominant strands within the movement. The equality feminist wasn't a member of a feminist group prior to her recruitment to the civil service, but did identify with feminism. She recalls having been active in the Third World movement, but decided after a while it was better that people there should mobilise themselves, and that she shouldn't tell them what to do. She is convinced that men and women are basically the same, but have become different because of culture and tradition. To date she rejects a «difference» perspective, convinced that that always entails a conservative position. The liberal feminist, who is younger than the others, was already a self-identified feminist in high school. Joining the Liberal Party early in the eighties, she developed a liberal feminist position:

«that means for me that women should have all the opportunies to develop themselves, to be able to choose, to work outside the home, meet no barriers ... both men and women should have the liberty of organising their lives according to their own choice».

The three women who do not describe themselves in terms of currents in the movement, all came to be feminists later in the eighties. One of them finds it difficult to describe her position at that time, but according to her her consciousness was raised through the experience of her first job, providing women with legal advice in equal rights cases. She now calls herself a feminist, although «a very legal one, but a real fanatic one». The other one recounts already holding feminist views at school and says she was born a feminist. It originates from a deeply-held conviction about justice but also from the ambition to prove she's as good as any man. The third one also sees feminism as having come naturally: «it's anchored in my genes». She arrived at feminism through the radical autonomous movement of the early eighties; all of her friends subscribed to feminist ideas, at university she followed women's studies courses and she cannot imagine not being a feminist.

The five femocrats who tell they weren't feminist in the period before they entered government employment, report they did have some interest in feminist issues or the women's movement. One of them mentions:

«. . . I did help to pursue women's interests through my work (she was a local council member at the time). I wouldn't have called that feminism though».

She recalls finding all the currents in the movement rather confusing, but she was already convinced that women weren't taken seriously and that they were discouraged to live full lives and develop themselves. Another of these femocrats tells she was active in various demonstrations and actions, but it was always about others such as workers or migrants, and never about herself. A third felt related to the women's movement, saying she was aware of power differentials between men and women, but did not identify with feminism. The remaining two had little affinity with feminism. One of them became a femocrat because of her expertise in an important policy field touching on women's interests. She did read the major feminist magazine «Opzij».[17] The other tells she was an anarchist and a strong individualist, who couldn't understand the anti-men position of many feminists; she is one of the women who stresses most that being a civil servant for equality policy is just work, albeit one in which she enjoys using her expertise on the matter.

Reviewing the group's feminism prior to entering the civil service, a certain generation effect can be discerned. The older ones describe their feminism of that period in terms of currents in the women's movement, while the younger ones, grown up in a period in which the currents had become blurred, tended to describe their feminism in terms of their personal history. In the eighties feminism had become widely diffused, being present in schools, universities, and among peers and families. They tend to see their feminism as «natural» and self-evident. But it is also clear that not all femocrats have a prior commitment to feminism.

VII. How did their feminism change in the course of their career?

As mentioned, the cooptation thesis assumes that working within a state apparatus has a corrupting effect on the femocrats working there. It does not reckon with the fact that it may actually turn people into feminists. The women (and the two men) working for the women's policy unit held divergent views on feminism and the movement, and several did not identify with feminism at the time of entering the civil service. What is the current situation?

Of all my respondents, five say they haven't changed their views at all. These are four self-professed feminists and one of the group who never identified with feminism. The latter tells she has always entertained doubts about feminist articles of faith such as part-time work and that she still tries to avoid emotional debates with men about feminism. The self-professed feminists report that their experience has strengthened their feminist identity, but has not changed their ideas. New fundamental choices were not made; they just added new information on when new topics arose. An example is the feminist analysis of sexual violence or a new awareness of the international dimension of women's position. They still believe in

17 It is a monthly magazine, founded in 1972. It now has a circulation of around 70000, of which 40500 are subscribers.

«reformism», using the existing channels, but mentioning in the process they have become somewhat more cynical and ruthless.

The group which reports changes, can be split into those who have become more feminist and who have become less so (only two). The first group includes the third MVM member, who agrees with many of the others that her feminism was strengthened and also increased in scope. Because of her experience she confesses having become more skeptical about the strategy of working within government and says the hardliners against cooperation had more of a point than she granted them during the debate on state feminism. The others report the same experience of their feminism having deepened and increased in scope. One illustrates this by commenting that she used to have a very simple analysis of women's oppression, all men oppressing all women. This now has been replaced by a more refined analysis, taking into account the differences among women. Because of this she is convinced she can perform her work in a more adequate way.

Interesting, too, in the light of the cooptation thesis is that three women who first reported not being feminist, now do relate to the women's movement and feminism, and all three point to their work as a major source of inspiration. As one says:

«I became more knowledgeable all the time, becoming expert in several areas (...) it changed my outlook, but it also made it more complicated to change things».

The second says she now realises she was discriminated against as a woman in earlier stages of her career. The third is a convert:

«that's the funny thing about this job, my feminist consciousness was really raised by it, if I have to confess to some sort of feminism, I think it's a kind of DCE feminism ... before it was a personal feminism, only for my private life».

Only two women tell that their commitment to the women's movement has declined over time. For both, this has less to do with their work than with other priorities in their lives. One of them is raising a family, the other, already a council member in one the big cities, intends to build a career in politics. The mother tells she seems to get less angry after twenty years of feminist activism; the politician thinks time has come to pay attention to other issues, although she still retains her original feminist ideas.

On the basis of the questions now analysed, there is little indication that working as a femocrat corrupts one's feminist ideas. There are indications that for some the job has been a spur to developing a feminist identification and that it helped to maintain and strengthen a feminist identity in many of the others. Some did indicate that they have become more cynical but that they also have become more radical on some points. Others maintain that they knew all along that it wouldn't be easy, and are relatively unconcerned by the dilemma's of the femocrat condition. For those whose commitment has lessened, this appears to be related to other choices made in their lives.

Looking at the relationship between taking an «ally» position or positing oneself as a «regular», there is a very strong relationship between identifying as a feminist and feeling oneself an ally. How then does this relate to the matter of whether

femocrats are different to others civil servants and in how far does a femocrat expertise exist?

VIII. The specialness of the femocrat

The other point to be explored after discussing the feminism of the femocrats is their response to the matter of what a women's equality civil servant needs to do on the job. In this context I also asked them whether a specific «femocrat expertise» exists. Here again it was possible to distinguish two groups. One group was convinced that an equality civil servant has something extra which makes her/him different. Another maintained it was nothing special.

In the answers of the first group, three aspects keep cropping up: motivation, stemming from a feminist sense of connectedness to the women's movement; social skills; and cognitive expertise. The combination of the «extra's» required is best summed up in the words of one of the younger femocrats who has been working in the DCE for some years:

«you need something extra, a professional attitude, knowing one's area, to be able argue for it in an intelligible way. They can be all-rounders, but with a specific knowledge of the field. Well-prepared, flexible, open, willing to compromise ... (JO: What do you need extra?) Stamina, more expertise than the others, not just factual knowledge but also creative capacity, a good relationship with the women's movement to be able to utilise its experience, and, not everybody has it, motivation ... yes, yes, you really need that (...) (JO: and expertise?) Yeeess, (hesitates) a kind of analytic capacity to tackle any subject from the perspective of how is this going to turn out for women in comparison to men. It's a sort of knack, knowing how the position of women is in your area, facts, but also knowing how to integrate those into other policies, that's really feminist expertise.»

Motivation is seen as crucial. In order to keep up what is generally seen as a difficult and often exasperating job one needs to be persistent. As one senior observed: «you have to have endurance, otherwise you go mad, an enormous capacity to endure adversity, otherwise you're not going to make the grade». Women's affairs are no longer high on the agenda, meaning that only an extra effort can produce results. But this extra effort requires commitment. Affinity with the «problem» is a necessary condition, although, as one observes critically, not all have it:

«some do it because they have to do it, I don't think that works (JO: why?) You have to be motivated in order to fight it, this problem runs so counter to the dominant culture ...»

And as one of the juniors observes:

«You have to back the cause. You mustn't just write fine-looking papers, or argue your case, but you must stand behind it. I think that's not necessary in other departments (...) I certainly think also the compulsion and conviction and disseminate that. If you don't have it you might as well quit».

The second point which was mentioned was that femocrats need extra social skills. Although nearly everybody mentioned these as part of the professional competence of all civil servants, it was stressed that selling the feminist message asks for extra strategic and diplomatic qualities. Getting on with people, making them

enthusiastic for your ideas, convincing them of their importance, knowing your way around were regularly mentioned by this group. Being «polite and flexible, but sticking to your guns» is a good way to characterise this response. These qualities are usually seen in combination with cognitive skills:

«What ought to be is specific are certain qualifications and knowing what feminism is about. Know what goals you're aiming for in your area. That you are enthusiastic, you can't be uninterested. And you must be expert in knowledge, in knowing your way about the ministries, how you can get things going, that's really important. You can have an awful lot of expertise but if you don't know how to start things, nothing will happen».

The third point which kept cropping up is a specific expertise. This was not just defined in terms of knowing one's statistics or having a thorough knowledge of women's position in all walks of life. Knowing something about basic feminist theory was sometimes mentioned:

«you also have to be able to turn to the basic paradigma's to find answers to new issues . . .»

One also has to have a general sense of what is going on in the women's movement and be able to place women's issues into a more general social and political context, so it is argued by the members of this group. Most of them agreed, however, that it is no longer possible to know all women's issues in detail, but one has to know «the general drift».

Femocrat expertise is about knowing how to combine feminist insights with knowledge of other policy areas. The civil servants of the DCE regularly work with civil servants from other ministries and one has to know what is going on in those if one wants to integrate feminist insights in them or to ensure women's interests are taken account of in those areas.

«You have to have a certain insight in analysing documents from another perspective than from which they were written and then you have to have the social competence to, firstly, make that clear to others and, second, to explain what can be done about it. And show its importance. That's specific for this work . . .»,

in the words of one of the youngest members of the staff.

The most interesting aspect of the femocrat expertise, is the special cognitive capacity known in DCE parlance as «The Eye». This «eye», the existence of which is sometimes mentioned ironically, was described by one of the most experienced women as follows:

«It is a capacity to put on a feminist pair of spectacles, to enter a certain frame of reference, to read documents on departmental relations or social security or what have you and to make a gender analysis of it, and to do this fast. You don't have to be able to fill in the details, but you have to be able to articulate it and point out alternatives to the proposed policy. In my sense it's not only knowledge on a given topic, and the necessary background information, but also this Eye (. . .) And you can acquire that at university or in your leisure time etcetera, but you have to be able to apply it and integrate it in your work.

And as another «old hand» explained:

«Specific for a femocrat is that she/he is able to identify the problem in any policy area, and to analyse it adequately in a speedy fashion. It is the capacity to point to the problem and name

solutions . . . first and foremost not to be beguiled by the rhetoric or solemn tone of the document or a splendid tale but to say:oh, there it is!»

The second group which can be distinguished on the basis of the question of the «otherness» of the femocrat, denies this and sees it as «regular work». The existence of The Eye was the only thing deemed specific about femocrats by this group. Asked about this special competence, one of them said:

«It shouldn't be special, because I think it is just work, normal central government, like old age people or minorities. It means you have to know your specific group and know what's going on. Except perhaps having what some call the Eye here. You have to be able to read a policy paper and analyse its consequences for women, because that's not always obvious. You need this Eye, know what's specific about women in this society, otherwise you're not going to see it. That for me is the only special thing about women's equality civil servants, and for the rest I want them to be just normal civil servants (. . .) but on the whole I am not so concerned about this Eye . . .»

The others belonging to this second category do not mention The Eye; they also tend to downplay any differences. They either deny that there is such thing as a femocrat expertise or, when acknowledging its existence, are rather vague about what it entails. As one of these described her work:

«a lot of one's work is very much aimed at other people, creating a good relationship and make other civil servants enthusiastic for your ideas and to back them in their department, but that's not exclusive to women's policy civil servants (. . .) but expertise? No, I think that general notions of feminism are widely diffused . . . a lot of people can say something about it. I think I'm dissident about this in our unit, but our expertise is not different to other civil servants, it's just that we view matters from the women's point of view».

Members of this group mention one has to have some specific expertise, but that basically the systematics and the techniques required of a civil servant are the same in any policy area. It does not matter whether it is about «prisons or police or a specific category of the population». Being all-round is important as well. One has to know some facts, and one's files and policy documents, but it does not really matter what topic one does in policy. But that is what it takes to be a professional civil servant.

When one takes into account the two categories, and compares them to the two groups I found on the matter of the relationship between movement and civil servant, they coincide completely. All the «allies» maintain that femocrats are «different» and have a specific expertise. All the «just-a-job» women maintain that being a women's equality civil servant is nothing different, and they tend to deny there is a specific femocrat expertise.

IX. Conclusion

In the Netherlands, «state feminism» has been very visible during the eighties and femocrats have become firmly entrenched within the bureaucracy of the national government. The majority of these has been recruted from the outside: many of

them identify with feminism and quite a number have had experience in women's groups before entering the civil service. Working in the civil service has strengthened many in their convictions, and even produces the occasional convert. Within the unit charged with developing women's equality policy, there is, however, no consensus about the status of the femocrat or about the existence of a specific expertise. Neither do all members agree on the major question raised in this article, the matter of how femocrats see the relationship between the women's movement and the civil servants working on women's policy. Basically there are two groups: those who see the relationship in terms of an alliance, and others who see it in terms of regular work, just catering for one of the many targets of policy in the nation. The best predictor of what makes one an ally or a neutral partner, is one's feminist position, whether one identifies as a feminist or not. All femocrats who see the relationship in terms of an alliance emphasize the specialness of the women's equality civil servant, elaborating on the specific qualities she/he needs, and all of these are of the opinion that there is such a thing as femocrat expertise. They stress the necessity of a political motivation, and the need of specific knowledge. Those seeing the relationship in terms of «just a job», are inclined to deny the specialness of the femocrat position, and tend to downplay the existence of a specific expertise. The tension between the allies and the «regulars» is not a simple one of generation; it cuts across biological age and the number of years that one has spent in the service. But the basic debate is about the necessity of feminism for femocrats.

The debate is loaded, as many in government and politics feel that women's equality policy has lasted long enough and that there are now more pressing issues on the political agenda. In the face of continual cuts and reorganisation of the government bureaucracy, femocrats may become an endangered species. Stressing specific expertise, or becoming more like other civil servants, are becoming strategies for survival. It is, however, too early to say which strategy will be more effective for maintaining women's equality on the political agenda. If neither is effective, it will be the end of what the Australians have called the «femocrat» strategy, working from «within» the government to better women's positions. Whether a new confrontation will ensue, seems as yet unlikely.

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