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## **On the Job with Women's Studies. Opportunities and Obstacles**

This article deals with the employment ambitions and achievements of Women's Studies graduates. My focus is on the situation in the Netherlands, with a European comparison. The main issue that I will address is what knowledge students gain in Women's Studies and how they can apply that in their work. I will zoom in to the obstacles and opportunities they encounter in the labour market as well as the strategies that graduates utilise to put their knowledge to practice. After reflecting on what can be done in Women's Studies courses to prepare students for the labour market, the article will be closed by a brief look at the Bologna process and its impact on Women's Studies and employment.

The material on which this article is based is collected as part of the EU research project "Employment and Women's Studies: The Impact of Women's Studies Training on Women's Employment in Europe" (EWSI).<sup>1</sup> This was a project in the 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme that ran from 2001-2003. Apart from the Netherlands, the countries included in the research were Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The main question in this European project was how Women's Studies training impacts on employment possibilities of women<sup>2</sup>.

More specifically, my findings about Dutch Women's Studies graduates are based on 51 questionnaires filled in by students and 80 questionnaires filled in by graduates, who study or studied Women's Studies between 1980 and 2001. In addition, interesting information was gathered via 30 face-to-face interviews that I carried out with 10 of the Women's Studies students and 20 graduates about their experiences in the labour market. The Women's Studies graduates were working in various professions in settings of public policy, educational and research practice, civil society, and business organisations.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the project, the Bologna process had not started and students in the Netherlands were 'doing Women's Studies' in diverse ways. The Dutch respondents in the EWSI project reflect this variety: some organised their own lectures (in the beginning period of Women's Studies), some took or are taking one or more (optional or obligatory) modules within their own study programme, and others are following or followed comprehensive Women's Studies specialisation routes. The Dutch respondents also came from various disciplinary backgrounds: Economy,

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<sup>1</sup> FP5 research project HPSE-CT2001-00082.

<sup>2</sup> Because of this main question, the respondents in the EWSI project were all women.

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive report on these findings was published as: Sanden, Jeannette van der. The impact of Women's Studies training on women's employment in the Netherlands. In: *Employment, Equal Opportunities and Women's Studies: Women's Experiences in Seven European Countries*, ed. Gabriele Griffin, p. 139-162. Frankfurt/Main: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2004.

Law, Philosophy, Theology, General Arts, English, Dutch, History, General Social Sciences, International Relations, Sociology, Political Sciences, and Anthropology.

### § Knowledge and Insights Gained through Women's Studies

The Dutch interviewees define Women's Studies knowledge as knowledge about gender relations, women's issues, and the position of women in society. They furthermore see their expertise in understanding the complexity of gender, the relation between gender and ethnicity, having a sound grasp of social relations and power relations, insight in mechanisms of in- and exclusion, and the ability to make social inequality visible. Notably, many interviewees talked about Women's Studies knowledge as an all-pervading perspective with which they look at 'reality'. In relation to this, they often mentioned having a 'Women's Studies outlook' or 'gender glasses' through which they look at the world. In general, Women's Studies students gained gender awareness during their studies.

Students and graduates also point at more general qualities or competences that they have achieved because of Women's Studies. In the first place, this is critical thinking: a certain way of analysing, looking at something from different perspectives, distancing oneself from a problem to see it more clearly, taking things not for granted, and thinking independently. Secondly, the respondents highlighted that they gained self-confidence; they achieved self-knowledge and became more assertive. Many said that Women's Studies had enabled them to name issues of inequality or gave them the words to talk about discrimination.

In the questionnaires, 97 % of the Dutch respondents say that taking a Women's Studies course increased their gender awareness, 95 % reported an increase in critical thinking, and 68 % of the respondents said it improved their self-confidence. The increased gender awareness, critical thinking, and self-confidence were positive effects of doing Women's Studies in all countries studied in the EWSI research project. Nonetheless, this impact was reported more in countries with a relative high degree of institutionalisation of Women's Studies (Griffin 2003). Apart from the Netherlands, these countries are Finland, Germany, and the UK.

A comparative study from Dever and Day (2001) in Australia, demonstrated that the increase in self-confidence is a quality that specifically results from the training in Women's Studies and not from academic training in general. In the EWSI research project, learning to think critically too is mentioned as something that is typical for Women's Studies.

Critical thinking is one of the aspects that students find attractive in Women's Studies. Dutch respondents found Women's Studies intellectually challenging and very inspiring. In the questionnaires, 96 % of the students and 95 % of the graduates mentioned that they had enjoyed the Women's Studies courses. At the same time, many find it a difficult study in that the demands are high and requires hard work.

### § Employment Ambitions and Achievements

The majority of Dutch students have the ambition to 'do something' with gender, women, or Women's Studies. Many interviewees want to do research or continue doing research after they completed their studies or their dissertation, and some explicitly mention doing a PhD or working at the university. In general however, the Women's Studies students are not so focussed on the labour market; employment related motivations hardly play a role in choosing Women's Studies. They decide to take a Women's Studies course mostly for reasons of personal and academic interest and their awareness of gender inequalities.

Although students' ideas about future employment are not always very clear, the majority think that what they learnt from Women's Studies will be valuable to them. Due to the personal growth they experienced, the engagement it gave them and the critical outlook they gained, they expect that Women's Studies will be an asset 'actually everywhere'.

On the other hand, interviewees also mention negative aspects in relation to Women's Studies. They see that there are just a few jobs in academia and consider it to be difficult to get a job outside the higher education setting. Especially the image of Women's Studies is discussed as a possible hindrance: people are not familiar with it, do not take it serious, or connect it to stereotypical ideas about feminism.

The broad academic training and the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds results in Women's Studies graduates finding employment in a variety of jobs. A number of women end up in research, both in- and outside the university; still others end up in professions that are on the edge of research, such as advisors, teachers, journalists, policymakers and experts in NGO's. But there are also project coordinators, trainers, office managers, secretaries and social and educational workers. The majority of graduates end up as professionals in the public sector. Only some of these jobs are specific 'Women's Studies jobs' or, to a lesser extent, 'equal opportunities jobs'. Content wise, most jobs are not directly related to Women's Studies.

In their jobs, almost all graduates can apply what they have learnt. In a broad sense, this is about critically assessing certain debates, analysing complex issues, and being alert to issues relevant for women. Specific applications of Women's Studies knowledge are for instance: A project worker who uses an analysis of target groups to involve different residents in a cultural programme in a neighbourhood project; an advisor working in a research organisation on social issues who uses her knowledge in projects about sexual violence; and a policy worker who translates theoretical insights about gender and ethnicity in a policy project about the representation of gender and ethnicity in governmental policy documents. Interdisciplinarity is another aspect of Women's Studies that researchers in particular find applicable, for example, in cooperating with other researchers. One of the interviewees even stated that because of Women's Studies you become a better researcher, because you learn to look across boundaries and to think in a non-stereotypical way.

### § Obstacles and Opportunities for Women's Studies Graduates

As mentioned above, the majority of Women's Studies graduates can apply what they have learnt in their work and they deem Women's Studies relevant in many employment settings. Although this is positive in itself, it does not mean that graduates do not experience problems in practice. I will discuss in more detail some of the obstacles and opportunities that Dutch Women's Studies graduates come across in their work.

Given that Women's Studies is a relative young discipline, a lack of understanding about it is not uncommon. As a result applying knowledge gained from Women's Studies is more difficult. From the other perspective, it is easier to implement this knowledge when employers or colleagues are familiar with Women's Studies (for instance in women's organisations).

Graduates also notice the low status that is assigned to the field of Women's Studies. This is related to the misconception that Women's Studies is only about women and the undervaluation of women as a topic of study. It is not difficult to see that this low standing of Women's Studies has negative consequences for the possibilities to use knowledge from this field. My interviews with Women's Studies graduates, who were all women, made it clear that it is not self-evident that women are seen as owners of knowledge. This misperception hinders the dissemination of knowledge. Moreover, the institutional location of most Women's Studies departments within Social Sciences and Humanities also plays a role; these disciplines are devalued because of the overrepresentation of female students (Braidotti 2002a).

Next, the association of Women's Studies with feminism leads some people to dispose of Women's Studies knowledge as politics instead of perceiving it as proper scholarship. On the other hand, the heightened involvement of Women's Studies in theoretical debates since the 1990s (Griffin 2002) may also cause social organisations to question the relevance of Women's Studies for their cause<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly, the critical character of Women's Studies has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the employment setting. A feminist magazine may welcome a critical perspective, whereas a local radio broadcaster may be taken aback by a perspective that challenges established norms and meanings.

Another obstacle that I want to mention is the public opinion in the Netherlands that emancipation is completed. Combined with a decreased governmental emancipation policy, it leads people to the idea that the emancipation of women is not an issue anymore and that Women's Studies is no longer necessary. This is a myth that graduates have to deal with.

Despite the fact that graduates encounter obstacles in their work, the Dutch Women's Studies graduates that I have interviewed were keen to make a difference and they used several strategies in trying to overcome some of the obstacles that I mentioned above. One of the obvious ways is to explain the relevance of Women's

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<sup>4</sup> I thank my colleague PhD students who pointed this out to me at the PhD Reading/Writing Seminar, Utrecht, 22 February 2006.

Studies knowledge and to found arguments with facts and figures. Another strategy is to use Women's Studies knowledge, but not reveal the origin of that knowledge. For instance by hiding a gender perspective under a different theme, such as that of multiculturalism. Broadening a topic or generalising the advantages of a certain plan are also successful strategies that Women's Studies graduates make use of. An advisor explained that she was working on a project to improve the recruitment and selection procedures at the university. For her, that started with the question of how to ensure that women are assessed in an unbiased way in these procedures. In her project, she broadened this question to the general recruitment and selection procedures, while in fact it was about gender issues. The graduates thus try to create the conditions to put their knowledge to practice.<sup>5</sup>

### § Preparation for Practice

In this section, I want to reflect on what is and what can be done in Women's Studies courses to prepare students for the labour market. The most concrete way in which a practical orientation is supported is an internship. However, this is not an (obligatory) part of all Women's Studies programmes. For instance, in the MA's that are currently offered at Utrecht University, the 1-year 'professional' MA includes an internship, but the 2-year 'research' MA does not. In the EWSI research project, around one third of the Dutch respondents had done a work placement or internship as part of their Women's Studies training.

Apart from the internships, my impression is that not much specific attention is paid to employment possibilities. This is perhaps explicable, because university programmes are mostly geared to scholarship and not to other professional practices. On the other hand, with more and more emphasis on employability since the Bologna process, the issue of (preparing for) future employment cannot be neglected.

Do internships provide a solution? Or are students compelled to learn what it is like in the 'real world' on their own, learning it the hard way? Food for thought about these questions was provided at a recent seminar 'Working with Women's Studies', organised by the Dutch Women's Studies Association.<sup>6</sup> This seminar included a panel discussion in which a number of Women's Studies graduates with professional experience participated.

The discussion made clear that the graduates have a lot of gender expertise and Women's Studies knowledge, but that this does not automatically give them the tools to work in a 'strategic' manner. How do you translate your insights to colleagues that are willing to cooperate? How to position yourself in a neutral way

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<sup>5</sup> Currently, I am working on my PhD thesis about the transfer of knowledge about sex and gender in the Netherlands. One case study analyses the use of Women's Studies knowledge by graduates in the workplace in terms of knowledge transfer, understanding it as the dissemination and integration of embodied knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Seminar 'Werken met Vrouwenstudies', organised by the Dutch Women's Studies Association (NGV), 8 June 2007, Radboud University Nijmegen.

when you are a critical person? How do you defend your feminist views in a team that is predominantly white and / or male?

One of the discussants mentioned that at a theoretical level she knew all about power relations, but that she lacked the competence to make real interventions in her job. She explained this by emphasizing that in the 'Women's Studies world' you are surrounded by likeminded people, whereas in a work setting with people who do not share your perspective, it is difficult to get your message across. When you are ambitious to change something in existing power structures, conflicts can arise, especially when it concerns people that pay your salary. She further noted that, because of this focus on content, Women's Studies students have a blind spot for people that merely work for money or power.

The issues mentioned above highlight first of all that Women's Studies graduates want to make a difference in their work. The Dutch graduates that I interviewed also showed this engagement: they are on the alert for discrimination or injustice, act against sexism, and try to realise that women and ethnic minorities are represented in commissions. This is in keeping with one of the outcomes of the EWSI project, namely that Women's Studies training impacts considerably on *how* women carry out their work, making them potential change agents in the workplace.

Secondly, it is also striking that the difficulties in work situations are closely related to the core of Women's Studies, which is about power mechanisms that impact on the positions of men and women in society (Braidotti 2002b). Bearing in mind the all-pervading character of the Women's Studies perspective - the 'gender glasses' - it is evident that the feminist or political drive of Women's Studies graduates is something that they cannot let go.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, students are aware of that. One of Dutch interviewees in the EWSI project described it as always 'swimming upstream'. The opinions expressed in the panel discussion of the Dutch Women's Studies Association are comparable to those of the Dutch interviewees in the EWSI project. Several women (including some who did do an internship) mentioned that in their studies they missed concrete tools that can be used to change unequal situations, even though they had a lot of theoretical baggage. However, positive effects of doing an internship were also reported: it made some interviewees realise what their interests were and in several cases the internship even led to a subsequent job.

Rounding up, internships in Women's Studies programmes can be important in preparing students for future employment, but it seems crucial that possible clashes between the 'Women's Studies world' and the 'real world' are addressed and reflected upon. A fortunate outcome of the seminar of the Dutch Women's Studies Association is the intent to organise a practical course for Women's Studies students to prepare them for working with Women's Studies.

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<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that the Women's Studies perspective accounts for a firm professional identity of graduates in this field, also linking the personal to the professional. See: Sanden, Jeannette van der. Professionalization of Women's Studies graduates: Transfer of new knowledge. In: *Professions and Social Identity: New European Historical Research on Work, Gender and Society*, ed. Berteke Waaldijk, p. 171-199. Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006. (Available online at: [www.clioheres.net/books/xsurvey.php?book=4](http://www.clioheres.net/books/xsurvey.php?book=4))

### § Impact of the Bologna Process

The Bologna process is a key issue in discussions about Women's Studies and in discussions about Women's Studies in relation to employment. Because the implementation of the Bologna process is not finished yet, it is difficult to make decisive statements about its impact on Women's Studies.<sup>8</sup> However, it is estimated that Europe offers chances for the field, because the international and interdisciplinary profile of Women's Studies fit the aims of the Bologna process very well (van der Sanden 2003). This is all the more so because the European ministers stressed the social dimension of the process, integrated in the aim of reducing social and gender inequality at national and European level.<sup>9</sup>

In the Netherlands, the biggest change since the introduction of the Bachelors/Masters model is that there are now proper Women's Studies Master programmes that can award a degree in Women's Studies. Previously, this was not possible. Currently, two universities offer Women's Studies MA programmes in the Netherlands. At Utrecht University, students can opt for a 1-year professional MA ('Comparative Women's Studies in Culture and Politics') or a 2-year research MA ('Gender and Ethnicity'). At the Radboud University Nijmegen, students can pursue an MA in Gender History. The universities of Amsterdam, Groningen, and Maastricht, as well as Utrecht and Nijmegen, each offer one or two minors in Women's Studies. Almost all of the other universities have separate Women's Studies courses.

Regarding the Bologna process and employment in Women's Studies, I want to draw attention to the particular topic of student mobility. It is here that the European Area of Higher Education is likely to have positive consequences when it comes to employment possibilities of Women's Studies graduates. According to the Bologna Declaration (1999), 'student mobility' helps to establish a so-called 'Europe of Knowledge', which is described as "... an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ATHENA and WISE did a survey on the implementation of Bologna in Women's Studies in Europe. See: Jeannette van der Sanden. 'Survey on MA and PhD Curricula in Women's Studies in Europe. Report from ATHENA Panel 1A.' In: *The Making of European Women's Studies. A work in progress report on curriculum development and related issues in gender education and research*, Volume VI, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Annabel van Baren, p.124-130. Utrecht: ATHENA / Utrecht University, 2005.

The impact of Bologna on Women's Studies is also monitored at a national level. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Women's Association (NGV) plays a key role in this. See: [www.genootschapvrouwenstudies.nl](http://www.genootschapvrouwenstudies.nl) (in Dutch).

<sup>9</sup> Berlin Communiqué, 2003. Realising the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education. [www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf](http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Bologna Declaration, 1999. The Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education: An Explanation. [europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf)

As part of the EWSI project, together with three colleagues I have studied student mobility in relation to Women's Studies more closely (Juhász et al. 2003). Based on the questionnaires and interviews with (MA and PhD) students and graduates from all countries involved in the project, we came up with some interesting findings about women who between 1990 and 2002 studied abroad as part of their Women's Studies training.

An important finding is that studying abroad had a positive impact on employment (possibilities) of Women's Studies students and graduates. Most women were able to use the knowledge they had acquired abroad in their further studies or in their (academic) jobs. Especially the PhD students valued the theoretical and practical insights they gained during their studies abroad. Some women said that the courses they took even helped them in getting a certain job. In addition, gaining knowledge of a foreign language was seen as a means of improving one's chances of getting a job in several countries. A stay abroad could also be valuable because it shows employers that you are ambitious, competent, and flexible. Several Dutch women commented in this sense on the impact on employment, sometimes explicitly mentioning self-growth as enhancing their value on the labour market.

From an academic career point of view, studying abroad is an important time to establish contacts and become part of the international network of Women's Studies. For several students the chance to develop this 'professional identity' was a first step towards an academic career in Women's Studies. The experience of mobility also influences subsequent employment mobility. Many students said that they got a taste for working abroad, thereby enlarging their employment opportunities. For others though, their future employment lays in another country because their own country lacks job opportunities for gender experts.

Student mobility or 'educational migration' thus had an empowering impact on students. It stimulated their self-confidence, international orientation, and employability. It is strongly felt that international experience is valued by employers and will contribute to the career chances of graduates, especially in the academy.

We also found that student mobility can contribute to the strengthening of Women's Studies programmes in Europe in general. We observed that countries with a high degree of institutionalisation of Women's Studies are the countries that attract many Women's Studies students (in the EWSI project, these are Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK). Students travel abroad to take courses that are not available in their home country or to take a specific Women's Studies course they are interested in. A higher level of institutionalisation of Women's Studies is also accompanied by better academic resources, such as libraries and specialised staff. Having access to these resources was especially important for students from countries with fewer resources (in the EWSI project, these are France, Slovenia, and Spain).

There were several examples of students who first encountered Women's Studies during their study abroad. They 'discovered' Women's Studies there and returned with a whole set of information and materials that were still unknown in their country. The knowledge students gain abroad is not only beneficial for the individual



students, but also for Women's Studies as a field. Returning students created the need for gender courses when these were not available in their home country. Alternatively, they contributed to the quality of the home programme by introducing the new knowledge and broadening Women's Studies beyond the national scope. At the receiving institution, interest in courses from foreign students can result in attracting more home students, which contributes to a stronger position of Women's Studies in receiving countries (Van der Sanden 2003). Student mobility thus creates a market for Women's Studies, in sending as well in receiving countries. European student mobility can also stimulate educational cooperation between Women's Studies programmes from which the field as a whole may profit. Especially because concrete cooperation, such as creating European textbooks or joint courses in Women's Studies, requires explicit debates about educational arrangements as well as comprehensive discussions about Women's Studies in different countries and in Europe<sup>11</sup>.

In this article, I have shown that overall, doing Women's Studies is a positive experience for students, both in their home country and abroad. Women's Studies training provides graduates with general as well as gender competencies, with which they go into the labour market. Although they can encounter obstacles, they are motivated to make a difference on the job. The efforts in the Bologna process to increase the European compatibility and comparability of courses and to make student mobility easier, can contribute to more employment opportunities for Women's Studies graduates, in the national and international labour market.

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<sup>11</sup> The first reader with a focus on the European dimension of Women's Studies is *Thinking differently. A reader in European Women's Studies*, edited by Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti, London: Zed Books, 2002.

The Erasmus Mundus Master 'GEMMA' is the first European degree programme in Women's and Gender Studies, which started in 2006, see [www.ugr.es/~gemma/](http://www.ugr.es/~gemma/)

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