

Feminism on the Far-Right?  
How Female PVV Voters make sense of Gender Equality

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## Abstract

The PVV's (Party for Freedom) *verzetsspray* action is a perfect example of right-wing populist parties (RPPs) taking a progressive stance on gender to further their anti-immigration agenda. This paper looks at the mostly overlooked group of women who vote for the PVV and asks how they think about gender and gender equality. First looking at the literature on the rhetoric from RPPs in The Netherlands, the PVV and the LPF, three discourses are discerned: the *culturalisation* of gender and gender equality, the *normalisation and naturalisation* of gender and gender equality in the Netherlands, and *individualisation* of gender and gender equality. To understand how women who vote for RPPs understand gender, 10 interviews with women who support either the PVV or Leefbaar Rotterdam were conducted. The results show that the participants also participate in the *culturalization* of gender and gender equality, *normalisation and naturalisation* of gender and gender equality, and *individualisation* of gender and gender equality discourses. From the analysis a fourth discourse emerges, focused around responsibility, or *responsibilisation* of gender and gender equality.

*Key words:* gender, populism, progressivism, radical right, The Netherlands

## 1. Introduction

In January of 2016, the PVV (Party for Freedom) travelled to Spijkenisse to hand out little tubes of '*verzetsspray*' (defiance-spray). This spray was handed out to women, to enable them to defend themselves against what party leader Geert Wilders called '*Islamitische testosteronbommen*' ('Islamic testosterone bombs') (Lowie, 2016). The spray consisted of a dye that stains the attacker's face, the next best thing to pepper spray, which is illegal in The Netherlands (Nu.nl, Jan. 14, 2016). Wilders organized the event in the wake of the mass assault against hundreds of women in Cologne on New Year's Eve of 2016. The town of Spijkenisse was chosen specifically because of the rumoured arrival of a refugee centre there. As Wilders stated: "Recent events show how dangerous it is if we take in large groups of men from the barbaric, women-unfriendly culture of Islam" (AD, Jan. 14, 2016).

Although several people came to Spijkenisse to get their hands on a tube of *verzetsspray*, there was also a large group of people, mostly women, to protest the event. A group of self-proclaimed feminists even started a group called "Feminists For

Verzetsspray,” selling the spray to collect money for a non-profit refugee organisation (Lowie, 2016). The counter-protesters stated that this action had nothing to do with the protection of women, but instead was focussed only around anti-immigrant sentiments. their slogan being: “Wilders is a racist, not a feminist” This confrontation between PVV-supporters and counter-protesters lead to outrage on both sides, with one man yelling at the counter-protesters "You all want to be raped" and other profanities (Volkskrant, Jan. 23, 2016).

By handing out the verzetsspray, the PVV seems to take a progressive stance on the topic of sexual assault, which should appeal to feminists. However, as the event in Spijkenisse has shown, not all women were pleased with Wilders' ideas and some of the PVV-supporters present did not seem to be extremely concerned with the sexual assault of women either. Mostly, the event seemed to focus around anti-immigration sentiments, not women's rights. The verzetsspray case thus shows a clash between the protesters and outspoken PVV-supporters, with on the one hand feminists calling the action racist instead of feminist, and on the other hand, male PVV-supporters yelling profanities at the protesters. In this clash, we, however, barely hear the voice of female PVV-supporters.

In general, women who vote for right-wing populist parties (RPPs) like the PVV are largely overlooked, which goes for research as well. The PVV has stereotypically been seen as a party only old white men vote for, yet this is no longer a fair representation (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017, Van Outeren, 20 February, 2016). A recent study shows that the percentage of male supporters is only slightly higher than that of female supporters, leaving a still rather large group of women who vote for the PVV (I&O Research, 2019). Yet, the focus in research on right-wing voters tends to be on men, particularly when looking at the so-called 'gender voting gap', which studies why men are more likely to vote right and women left (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Hartevelde et al, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017,). This voting gap is often attributed to the increasing salience of women's rights, which are traditionally a focus for left-wing parties (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009).

However, as the verzetsspray case shows, the PVV does focus on issues related to gender, albeit not supported by 'traditional feminists.' Women's rights are thus in some way a focus for RPPs as well,, an idea that has been researched extensively. However, this research looks only on what is often called the 'supply side' (Fiers, 2018). When

looking at how the topics of gender and gender equality are discussed on the right, research primarily focuses on how parties talk about these topics, for example when it comes to policy or party documentation (Akkerman, 2015; Akkerman 2005, Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Bracke, 2012; De Lange & Mügge, 2012; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2008). These studies, however, do not look at how voters of RPPs, specifically women, look at these issues.

Existing research thus considers gender and gender equality to be important issues when it comes to women's voting behaviour, yet focuses mostly on women on the left when it comes to those issues. Research that does look at how gender is discussed on the right, look almost exclusively at how *parties* discuss it, not *voters*. This thus leaves a gap in research this paper tries to fill by asking the question: How do women who vote for the right-wing populist party PVV make sense of gender and gender equality? What meanings do they attribute to these topics? And how are their ideas on gender related to their vote for the PVV?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1 Right-Wing Progressiveness*

To best understand ideas of gender and gender equality among female PVV voters, we first have to understand how the PVV and parties like it have presented these issues. Their rhetoric shows the trend of right-wing progressiveness in the Netherlands, of which the *verzetsspray* case is a perfect example. Emancipation, women's rights, and sexual violence all have traditionally been a focus for parties on the left side of the political spectrum, not RPPs. (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). However, the history of right-wing populism, especially in the Netherlands, actually shows a strong focus by RPPs on the defence of liberal principles, including gender equality (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; De Koster et al, 2013). This focus on seemingly progressive ideals becomes visible most prominently in the political stances of Pim Fortuyn, the party leader of the Dutch right-wing populist party LPF (List Pim Fortuyn), who stressed issues of gay rights, gender equality, and separation of church and state. His famous statement in an interview with the *Volkskrant* demonstrates this perfectly, as he said: 'I do not feel like doing the emancipation of women and homosexuals over again' (*Volkskrant*, Feb. 9, 2002).

What distinguishes the progressive stances of these RPPs from those parties on the left, is the connection of liberal values with anti-immigration attitudes, something Pim Fortuyn started with the LPF and Geert Wilders has continued with the PVV<sup>1</sup> (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Houtman et al, 2012; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; de Lange & Mügge, 2015; Mepschen et al, 2010). They legitimize their anti-immigration sentiments by stating that the emancipation of women and homosexuals is endangered by the orthodox culture of Islam, which does not share those values (Akkerman, 2005; Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Houtman et al, 2012; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007). The focus in the immigration debate is almost exclusively on those immigrants with a Muslim background, mostly migrants of Moroccan or Turkish descent (Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). Muslim citizens are seen as backward, homophobic, and oppressive towards women, while the European West is framed as the epitome of freedom and modernity (Akkerman, 2015; Bracke, 2012; Mepschen et al, 2010), resembling Said's binary of the backward Orient (East) and the strong Occident (West), creating the cultural 'Other' (Said, 1978). In this binary, support for progressive migration policy is framed as ignoring the discrimination of Muslim women and supporting homophobia (Akkerman, 2015; Mepschen et al, 2010).

In the Netherlands specifically, there is a focus on the 'Dutch tradition of tolerance,' that should be accepted by everyone living there (Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). Mepschen et al (2010) argue that the Netherlands is a specific case because of its history of rampant sexualization, sexual freedom, and normalisation of gay sexuality, something not seen in other countries to the same extent. After transforming from one of the most religious societies to one of the most secular ones in the span of only one generation, Dutch citizens felt they had freed themselves of the moral strictness and frugality of the Calvinist ethos, something they are now again confronted with Islamic culture (Mepschen et al, 2010; Van der Veer, 2006). The left-wing criticism of the church in the 1960s counter-culture is strikingly similar to today's right-wing criticism of Islam. During this period of Dutch secularization, critics of the church focused on ideas of personal freedom and religious moral intrusiveness, critiques similar to the ones now presented by RPPs against Islam (Houtman et al, 2012). The Netherlands thus is a

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<sup>1</sup> Although Forum voor Democratie could also be considered as participating in this trend, given the recent negative statements of Thierry Baudet regarding women's emancipation, this party is left out of this analysis (see Hendrickx, 20 mei 2019)

unique case, in which the two RPPs that participate in this ‘progressivism,’ the PVV and the LPF, have relatively progressive stances compared to RPPs in other Western European countries (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015).

Taking a closer look at how these parties use this ‘progressivism’ when they talk about gender equality in particular, three discourses can be identified. First, the connection of gender to immigration, or the *culturalisation* of gender and gender inequality emerges, as gender issues become a focal point in reference to the cultural ‘Other’ (Said, 1978). Second is the *normalisation* of gender equality in The Netherlands, as Dutch gender relations are seen as the norm or ‘normal’, on the one hand compared to immigrants, and on the other hand by focussing on natural differences between men and women as explanations or justifications for still remaining inequalities in Dutch society. Third, an *individualised* discourse emerges, where freedom of choice and individual rights are brought up in relation to gender relations.

## 2.2 Culturalisation of Gender and Gender Inequality

The verzetsspray case provides a clear example of the *culturalisation* of gender, as Wilders’ focus on women’s rights and protection against sexual violence should be seen in the light of anti-immigration sentiments. Wilders had meant the spray for use against immigrant Muslim men specifically, or “Islamic Testosteronbombs” as he called them (Lowie, 2016). With the events of Cologne in mind, it was not difficult to paint the issue of sexual violence as an immigrant problem. On New Year’s Eve, over a thousand victims, mostly women, were assaulted and some even raped. It soon became clear the perpetrators were illegal immigrants, reportedly from Northern Africa and possibly with a Muslim background. In the aftermath of the event, Islam was brought forth as *the* explanation for the sexual violence; it was seen as a problem specific to Muslims as their culture by definition does not see men and women as equal. Even though little information was available on the perpetrators, the framing of the event as a Muslim immigrant problem thus made it even easier to present male refugees as predators, as the PVV did with its verzetsspray event (Römken, 2015).

The verzetsspray case thus perfectly shows a trend in immigration discourse in The Netherlands that has emerged over the past decade or so in which culture and gender become intertwined. Whereas immigration discourse in the 1990s was focussed

mainly on the socio-economic integration of migrants, in the 2000s it started shifting to a cultural focus, which stressed the cultural differences between Dutch citizens and migrants (Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). The LPF and the PVV both emerged in the 2000s and joined in on this cultural discourse, paying specific attention to gender inequality in migrant cultures (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015). Consequently, the discourse on immigration has increasingly focused around gender, using unequal gender relations among immigrants as an example of hindrance to integration (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007).

The *culturalisation* of gender and gender equality happens in two ways: on the one hand Muslim women are seen as victims, while on the other hand Muslim men are seen as oppressors and dangerously sexual. When focusing on immigrant women, forced marriages, the wearing of headscarves, and female genital mutilation are all provided as examples of practices that show how these women are victims of an oppressive culture, (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). They are seen as “victims that have to be saved from their men” as Van den Berg and Schinkel (2009, p. 405) put it. Immigrant men, on the other hand, are seen as having an unmanageable sex drive, making it necessary for women to cover themselves. Their ‘inappropriate’ sexuality is completely ascribed to the culture of Islam (Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). This reinforces the idea of the immigrant man as a threat to ‘our’ Dutch women who need to be protected against the sexual behaviour of the ‘Other’ (Römkens, 2015).

Ascribing or assuming gender relations and sexual behaviour plays an important role in the definition of ethnic or cultural groups; creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Nagel, 2001). Joanne Nagel (2001) states that “ethnic stereotypes contain sexual elements, and that the sexual components of ethnic construction contribute to the profane potency of ethnic slurs and prejudices” (p.129). Assumed gender relations plays a hugely important role in the anti-immigration debate, where the sexuality and sexual behaviour of Muslims are seen as problematic and backward, and that of Dutch citizens as the good and successful standard. Ascribed gender relations enforces ideas about what is respectable and normal and allows for the exclusion of groups that are not regarded as adhering to those standards (Mepschen et al, 2010). The ascription of Muslim gender relations in the immigration debate thus work to show that this culture is backward and not compatible with Western European culture.

### 2.3 Normalisation and Naturalisation of Gender Equality in The Netherlands

The *culturalisation* of gender thus plays an important role in the immigration debate, but also has consequences for the way gender equality in The Netherlands is viewed. Unlike Muslim culture, Western European culture is seen as free from cultural tradition and values rooted in the unequal treatment of men and women. Although the process of emancipation is acknowledged, it is mostly seen as a finished process (Bracke, 2012). Of course, there are definitely women and men who still look at feminism as a relevant political ideal, yet there are those on the other side who see feminism as irrelevant in today's world, as emancipation already happened during the sexual revolution of the 1970s (Römkens, 2015). This backlash against feminism, or post-feminism, sees 'achieved equality' as the hegemonic idea, discrediting more radical feminist ideals (McRobbie, 2004). Women that do still see feminism as an important movement are seen as taking the role of a victim. For example, where domestic violence used to be an important feminist topic, it is now mostly interpreted as an issue of individual morality and choice, removed from ideas of gender inequality or power relations (McRobbie, 2004; Römkens, 2015; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). The trend of post-feminist in combination with the *culturalisation* of gender lead to the *normalisation* of gender equality in The Netherlands.

The idea of finished emancipation is reinforced by ideas about gender relations of immigrant men and women. Where previously women's emancipation looked at how women's rights related to those of men, mostly in regards to their access to the labour market, now the point of reference has become the immigrant woman. Since Dutch culture does not allow such treatment of women, gender equality must have been achieved; the Dutch woman simultaneously becomes the norm for migrant women (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; Römkens, 2015; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009). Gender relations in The Netherlands thus have become *normalised*, since they are viewed as the standard immigrants need to adhere to if they want to integrate. This also means that what can be considered still unequal gender relations, such as the traditional gender roles of the male breadwinner and the female caretaker, become *normalised* as well (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007).

The *normalisation* of gender equality works alongside the idea of *naturalisation*: the focus on biological or 'natural' differences between men and women (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). *Naturalisation* manifests itself in the idea of 'equal but different,' in which



emancipation is generally praised, as long as biological differences of men and women are taken into account. The *naturalisation* of gender works in two ways: on the one hand, it justifies what may be considered still existing unequal gender relations, as these are seen as a consequence of biological differences. On the other hand, it justifies the backlash against trying to achieve further gender equality as this goes against the ‘natural order’ (Spierings, 2017).

When looking at the rhetoric of RPPs, the discourse of *normalisation* and *naturalisation* of gender illuminate the limits of their emancipatory focus as present in the immigration debate. The PVV, however, has an interesting place in this debate, as it generally has been silent on classical gender issues, only mentioning gender in relation to Islam (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). The PVV thus does not actively ‘normalise’ gender relations by stating what they should look like, but instead ‘de-normalises’ gender relations in Islamic culture, seeing those relations as not accepted in The Netherlands. Although not actively taking part in the normalisation discourse, Geert Wilders has expressed sentiments against transgenderism and gender-neutrality that show part of the *naturalisation* discourse. He, for example, tweeted, that the NS (Dutch Railway Agency), ‘has completely lost it’ when they started their announcements with ‘Dear travels’ instead of ‘Ladies and gentlemen.’

The *normalisation* and *naturalisation* thus show how RPPs view gender as something determined by nature, and gender inequality as a problem in ‘other cultures.’ Niels Spierings (2017) summarizes the view of RPPs, saying: ‘The man-woman distinction is seen as a fundamental part of the natural order, which leaves little space for the recognition that our view of gender and the importance we attach to it, is dependent on the place and time we live in’ (p. 509).

#### 2.4 Individualisation

A third discourse that emerges is the *individualisation* discourse, which focuses around ideas of personal freedom and choice. This discourse is important in the message of RPPs, including the PVV (hence Party for Freedom), in general, but regarding the subject of gender, it emerges both from the discourse of *culturalisation* of gender equality as well as the *normalisation* of gender.

First, the discourse on immigration among right-wing parties, but also in Dutch politics in general, has increasingly been focused around the individual (Van den Berg &

Schinkel, 2009) In this debate, Dutch culture is seen as valuing individual freedom and expression, whereas Muslim culture is seen as authoritarian and a threat to individual freedom (De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). The difference in the approach to individual freedom is seen as an obstacle for integration. In the discourse of *culturalisation* of gender, this manifests itself when talking about the autonomy of women. Muslim women are seen as lacking in autonomy all together, not having any individual freedom or freedom of choice. Muslim men are seen as impeding on the autonomy of Dutch women to move through spaces safely, as they are seen as possible predators (Fiers, 2018).

Second, as gender relations in the Western culture become *normalised*, the focus in the gender equality debate has shifted towards the individual. As mentioned previously, the debate around sexual violence has centred around individual choice and freedom, meaning the issue is not seen as a societal problem (Romkens, 2015). *Individualisation* thus happens in respect to women's emancipation, seeing women as autonomous individuals who can take care of themselves in this already emancipated society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). However, the focus on individualism and freedom also is used to resist further gender equality, as this is seen as impeding with the freedom of individuals. Continuing on the example of gender-neutral language from the NS, this is not only seen as taking emancipation too far without it being necessary, but also as imposing gender neutral language on people that have no desire to use it. The view here is that the 'normal' majority's freedom to 'just be' a man or a woman is impeded, and the wishes of a small minority are imposed upon this majority (Spierings, 2017).

To summarize, three discourses emerge from the debate around gender and gender equality in The Netherlands: *culturalization*, *normalisation* and *naturalisation*, and *individualisation*. These are present in the rhetoric from the PVV and Geert Wilders, but also in the immigration debate in general. The question now becomes, whether female PVV voters view gender and gender equality in a similar fashion. Do they see gender and immigration as related? Do they see emancipation as a finished process or do they still see room for improvement? And how do they value individual choice and freedom in the debate around gender? In short: How do female PVV supporters make sense of gender and gender equality?

### 3. Methods & Data

To best understand how female PVV voters view gender and gender equality, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method was chosen because it best lends itself for the aim of this research, since it allows for thoroughly understanding how these women make sense of gender and gender equality, but also politics more generally. Interviews not only lend themselves best to understand behaviour but also to learn “about representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states” (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 159). The purpose of this research is to gather in-depth data and to be able to clarify certain notions or ideas these women may have that may not directly relate to the question, but could still be relevant in answering it. This is why in-depth interviewing is the chosen method for data collection, as a qualitative method allows for providing rich insights into human behaviour (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Interviews were conducted with women who have voted or planned to vote for the PVV or Leefbaar Rotterdam<sup>2</sup> or those that were actively involved in a local branch of either party. Most women were contacted through Facebook, where those who commented on the PVV or Geert Wilders Facebook page in some way indicating their support for the PVV or Geert Wilders were contacted via a private message. Those in local politics were contacted via email. In the message to possible participants I explained the research I am conducting and how it is focussed on their perspective and understanding of political and social ideas, as that is not something that is usually focused on in academics or public discourse; they are often *talked about* rather than *listened to* (Spierings, 2017).

A total of 96 women were contacted, of which only 28 responded. Of those 28, 14 declined to participate, although some did share their feelings regarding the PVV in a private message. Of the other 14 that did want to participate, 10 were eventually interviewed. The other 4 did at first agree to an interview, but changed their mind later on or simply stopped responding. This relatively low response rate could be due to the fact that people still feel that voting for the PVV is stigmatizing and not something they wish to talk about. Moreover, distrust towards higher education, and the university as

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<sup>2</sup> This paper focusses mainly on the PVV and the LPF, but since the LPF no longer exists voters of the local party Leefbaar Rotterdam were also approached. Before starting his own party, Pim Fortuyn was part of Leefbaar. On top of that, Leefbaar supports a right-wing progressive discourse similar to that of the PVV and LPF (see Leefbaar Rotterdam: <http://www.leefbaarrotterdam.nl/index.php/lr/standpunten/men2>),

an institution, often linked to the liberal left elite likely play a role in the low response rate.<sup>3</sup> It should thus be noted that those women that did agree to be interviewed likely are less sceptical of higher education and more open about their support for the PVV than others.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set of questions, but without a specific order and remained open to follow-up and specification where needed. Examples of questions that were asked are: “Have you always voted for the PVV?”, “Do you view Geert Wilders as someone who stands up for women’s rights?”, and “What about the PVV interested you to start voting for them?” On top of that, some questions focused on the verzetspray event, to understand how these women interpreted this event as well as how they viewed the women protesting it. In the case of Leefbaar Rotterdam supporters, the questions were mainly focussed around that party, although some questions also focused on the PVV to see whether these women saw differences between the parties. The interviews were conducted in Dutch. Quotes shared in the Results section have been translated from Dutch to English.

After recording the interviews, they were transcribed and coded. To ensure the privacy of the participants, all data was anonymized and incorporated under a different name. Also for privacy reasons, no distinction is made in the analysis between those women that are only voters and those that are elected officials.

The data was coded, starting with open coding, where it was interpreted to generate general themes, creating codes that capture initial ideas. The next step was axial coding, where the codes created in open code were structured into categories and levels, finding relations among the codes. Lastly, the data was coded selectively, reviewing the organized codes created from axial coding which resulted in the creation of core categories. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The open coding was done after each interview, to give room for ideas or themes that arose that were analytically relevant, but not thought of previously. An example of this is the inclusion of a question about political correctness after one of the participants gave an example of gender neutral clothing as unnecessarily politically correct. Although there were no set expectations for this research, I did make use of a set of sensitizing concepts. These concepts guided my

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<sup>3</sup> Anti-institutionalism and institutional distrust are commonly recognised in research as features of populist parties and their voters (Kemmers, 2017). This is thus likely an important reason for the reluctance of women to participate

data analysis and provided me with a general sense of what to look for and what to pay attention to (Blumer, 1954).

#### 4. Results

Overall, the participants show a similar understanding of gender and gender equality as that portrayed by the PVV. *Culturalisation, normalisation and naturalisation*, and *individualisation* are all present in the answers from these women. However, a fourth discourse can be derived, which is focussed around personal responsibility, or *responsibilisation*. This is closely linked to the individualisation discourse, but is best explained as a stand-alone concept. All four concepts are explained in further detail below.

##### 4.1 Culturalisation of Gender and Gender inequality

Just as Geert Wilders connects gender equality to immigration, many of the participants talk about the unequal treatment of women as an important reason for their negative views towards immigrants. Two of the women even mention this unequal treatment as a motivator in their support for the PVV. Rachel mentioned the “ridiculous ideologies, also in how they look at women” and Jessica mentioned “the fact that few women have rights in the Koran” as reasons for their negative view towards Islam overall and Muslim migrants in particular. Jessica also saw Wilders’ critique of Islam as him standing up for women’s rights.

The other participants also made the connection between the cultural background of immigrants and gender inequality, stating things such as the wearing of headscarves, forced marriages, polygamy, and women not being allowed to shake another man’s hand as examples. They as well generally see Muslim women as oppressed and Muslim men as the oppressor, as can be seen in this quote from Helen:

**Helen:** “A woman does not have anything to say there, right, she walks behind her husband, totally covered, well some only in a headscarf, others completely in a burqa, I think it’s such a shame.”

Seeing gender inequality as a problem specifically among ‘Others’ seems to also come from personal experiences the participants have had in which they saw the unequal

treatment of women first-hand. Irene brought up a story about an acquaintance that got forced into marriage, Jessica told a story of a school-friend who became the victim of an honour crime, and Susan shared the story of her Moroccan friend needing to be home by 10, or else her husband would come look for her. Although these are specific examples, the women seem to interpret them as showing how gender inequality among immigrants manifests itself in general.

The examples above focus mostly on migrant women as victims, but the participants also shared examples and anecdotes of the oppressive behaviour of immigrant men. Here again, Rachel and Jessica explicitly mentioned seeing this behaviour as coming from the cultural background and upbringing of these men.

**Rachel:** “Yeah, from Islam that’s.... It’s obvious, they basically have a permit. So if I’m sunbathing somewhere in my bikini, they basically have a permit to bother me. Cause I am an infidel.”

**Jessica:** “[wearing headscarves] is nonsense, because if it’s the case that men can’t suppress their thoughts than I think the problem is with the men, not the women. And then I think... put a blindfold on those men, and problem solved. But it’s not that simple of course. It should be included in the upbringing, of like, respect women. And yeah.... It doesn’t say that in the Quran.”

Other participants shared examples of ‘predatory’ or oppressive behaviour of immigrant men. Amy for example shared her experience of going out and feeling Moroccan guys in particular did not respect her boundaries: “[...] they just didn’t leave me alone and just get angry if you don’t give them attention and actually just want to hit you.” When asked about the *verzetsspray* as well, most participants saw immigrant men specifically as possible harassers and praised Wilders’ in pointing this out.

**Helen:** “But I do think that he pretty much wants to show, guys, or girls, you can defend yourselves if you are being harassed. That he does want to make clear like, it’s always those labour migrants or those foreigners that do something like that.”

**Sharon:** “Yeah, okay, of course not every Muslim man is a potential harasser, but it does come down to the fact that they are the ones that do what they did on a night like that.”

Sharon's answer shows that, although participants were mostly positive towards Wilders' *verzetsspray*, there was also nuance in their answers. Beth, for example, pointed out there are also Dutch men "that do that as well." Participants thus do make the link between predatory or oppressive behaviour and 'the Other,' but their problem is not so much with those people in particular, but more so with the fact that they do not accept this behaviour in the context of The Netherlands (or Western Europe).

## 4.2 *"Just act normal, that's weird enough": Normalisation and Naturalisation in the Dutch Context*

### 4.2.1 *Normalisation*

As noted in the previous section, most participants seem to have a problem with gender inequality among immigrants because it does not fit into what they think of as 'normal' in Dutch culture. They see the Dutch and 'Other' cultures as substantially different and incompatible, yet they do not seem to be interested in where those differences come from, or how they can be overcome. The majority of participants do not actively seek to explain the behaviour by understanding the cultural or religious background it comes from (something only Rachel and Jessica did regularly), but instead they simply think of it as 'weird' or 'not normal.'

This *normalisation* is best visible in how some of the women talk about the wearing of headscarves, and in particular, the burqa. Although several women linked this practice to the oppression of women right away, their main problem with it seems to be that it is 'not normal.' Susan thought Muslim women wanting to take their passport picture with a headscarf on was "ridiculous" and Irene shared not going to a cash register with someone wearing a headscarf, saying "[when] four registers are open and at one of them there's someone with a headscarf and at the other, there's a normal Dutch girl, then I go to the Dutch girl."

The *normalisation* discourse thus manifests itself in how the participants talk about immigrant men and women; it influences what behaviour they see as acceptable or not, and who they see as integrated or not. Irene's statement in the previous paragraph shows how she explicitly links 'normal' to 'Dutch girl.' In doing this, she 'de-normalises' the girl wearing a headscarf. Irene also stated that, "In my country I want to

be assisted by my own people,” implicating that she sees the girl with the headscarf as ‘the Other’ by definition.

Irene’s focus on the headscarf thus explicitly links the idea of normal to being Dutch. Other participants, however, share negative feelings towards the headscarf, or more often the burqa, not because it is a sign of ‘the Other’ but simply because it just is something ‘we do not wear here.’ Sharon compared the burqa to other types of clothing she is not accepting of:

**Sharon:** “But those burqas and all that idiotic clothing from top to bottom [...] Freedom, alright. But I think that’s just like a Dutch guy shirtless in a leather thong [...]. Then I think, wear something normal. So I don’t make much of a difference there.”

Where on the one hand the *normalisation* discourse influence how the participants talk about immigrant men and women, it also influences how they view gender equality in The Netherlands. Andrea, for example, sees women having rights as the ‘normal standard.’ She used a similar line of reasoning to that of Sharon, by stating that not only in Islam, but in other religions, such as Christianity, women have few rights: “And in a lot of cultures, but also religions [...], the only place you have rights is in the kitchen<sup>4</sup>, and unfortunately also in the Netherlands in certain places that is still the case.” For her the ‘standard’ is that “It’s 2019, and as women, you should be able to participate. You want to work, go work.” In a way similar to Sharon, she thus does not see Islam specifically as ‘not normal’ but women not being able to work in whatever context.

However, Andrea’s comment shows that she sees gender inequality as a problem mostly in certain religions or cultures, implying that outside of religious context, emancipation is as a mostly finished process in The Netherlands. Other participants shared this feeling more strongly:

**Beth:** “Look, after the war it was of course not done that a woman went to get a job, so we went through something as well, the emancipation of the woman. So it’s not like we don’t know that here. But now that we’ve gotten there, that women are just emancipated, I think those women should too, right? We’re not going to do a step back.”

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<sup>4</sup> Original quotation: ‘Daar heb je een recht, dat is het aanrecht.’



Beth's comment shows how she sees emancipation as finished, that "we've gotten there." Even though she acknowledges that emancipation is a process, to her, emancipated women are now the norm. In creating this norm, she also creates a standard for immigrant women, a standard 'those women' should live up to.

Overall, the participants agreed with Beth and were mostly satisfied with gender relations in The Netherlands, although some did see room for improvement when it comes to equal pay.

**Joyce:** "I think we've got it pretty much accomplished, but there are of course still, for example, that they, that it's still with the same job, right, and then I really mean the job is the same, the hours are the same, that a man still makes more, than a woman. Yeah, that kind of stuff, that should be equalized."

**Helen:** "When I see that a woman has the same position as a man and that the woman makes less than a man, right men make more, I think that's a bit crooked."

Women's labour market participation and equal earnings seemed to be the general standard for what the participants thought of as 'emancipation.' Overall, most did not see too many problems. Amy, who is in her early 20s, clearly was not concerned "I'm like we get our jobs, we get our work, then what is the problem still?" Moreover, rather than seeing a problem with the current state of gender equality in The Netherlands, the participants actually seemed more concerned with people who take gender equality too far.

#### *4.2.2 Naturalisation*

Although generally supportive of feminism, several of the women not only think of it as unnecessary in today's world, but also see it as taking equality too far and not appreciating natural differences between men and women. Focussing on these differences, and thus naturalising gender, also works in normalising gender equality. Not only do the participants de-normalise the gender relations among immigrants, they also normalise gender relations in The Netherlands by seeing them as rooted in biological differences. This idea is best exemplified by several of the participants mentioning the idea of 'equal but different:'

**Sharon:** "Well, I think that it's important that men and women are seen as equal, but in some cases we aren't equal. And I think we shouldn't go overboard with that. A man is a man, and a woman is a woman. With some things, we're just different from a man and there we do need them. And with some things they need us. So to then start yelling that you can do the same things as a man, that's not true."

**Beth:** "I think in some respects men and women are of course are of equal worth but we're not equal. [...] And I see it too, when a baby is born and after six weeks the child is dropped off at the day-care and that really gets to me. Then I think, go and enjoy that first six months, or that first year, go enjoy that child. So of equal worth but not equal, right, we do still have different tasks in life I think."

Both Sharon and Beth not only see the differences between men and women as important but also as something to appreciate. Jessica shared a similar sentiment, stating that both genders have their strengths and weaknesses and that those compliment each other, making it not only unnecessary, but also wrong to try and eradicate those differences: "You should just acknowledge that, nothing wrong with that, it's just how it is. That's nature." Beth even mentioned natural differences as an important reason for the representation of women in politics: "Women are usually a bit nicer and more understanding. Men are more straight forward. And maybe we sometimes do approach subjects from a different side or with a different idea or... So I think women in government are very important."

With some participants, the naturalisation of gender also emerges when talking about transgender people and gender-neutrality. The participants were supportive of transgender people, who they generally saw as 'just born in the wrong body.' However, where they support transgenderism, gender neutral goes too far for most of the participants as they feel gender is not 'neutral.' As Jessica says "there are two genders, man and woman, and not a third."

Next to those that criticise gender neutral for denying natural differences, a few of the participants simply see the trend as unnecessary and 'whining.' Amy, for example, shares she no longer shops at Hema (Dutch store) since they now have gender neutral children's clothing: "Why can't you just sell a pink shirt, what does it matter? But that's not possible anymore, cause there can't be any difference between a boy and a girl." Some participants not only saw gender neutral trends as unnecessary, but also as

complicating. Susan, for example, thought leaving your gender out of your passport might get you in trouble at customs in other countries, while Jessica thought separate bathrooms provide a piece of safety in bars and clubs.

The *naturalisation* of gender thus not only normalises the idea of two biologically determined genders that naturally embody differences, but also de-normalises anyone who does not think about gender in this way. Yet, even though most participants see the idea of gender neutral as ‘not normal,’ they are still generally supportive, or at least not extremely negative towards women that do not see emancipation as finished or do support the idea of gender-neutrality. The general consensus when it comes to feminists seems to be that it is ‘their business’ and that they are free to do as they wish.

#### 4.3 Individualisation

The idea of feminism being ‘their business’ falls under the discourse of individualisation. This discourse shows up under several topics, not only when talking about feminists, but also the free choice of women and the autonomy of Muslim women. First, when talking about feminists, the participants have a general feeling that everyone should be free to do as they choose, as long as they do not bother others. Beth, for example, says she’s “not bothered with it,” ‘it’ meaning women who still strive for gender equality today, even though she does say, “what I see around me are all emancipated women.” Helen has similar feelings, saying “Everyone should be able to be who they want to be [...], so if a woman wants to react to that more, that should be possible, provided that they don’t bother other people.”

Both women make the point that they are okay with it, as long as ‘they do not bother’ others, thus seeing freedom as an important good, but with its limits. Some of the participants did feel bothered by acts from feminists, leading them to be not as supportive. Amy, for example, was not supportive of Famke Louis (a Dutch model and singer) going on the cover of *Linda Meiden* (Dutch glossy for teenage girls) with armpit hair: “What do you want with this? A man can do it, so now you can too? Yeah, go ahead, but I don’t need to see it.” Amy’s comment shows that individualisation is closely related to normalisation. She feels that women showing armpit hair is ‘not normal,’ but she finds ‘freedom’ important as well, leading her to allow it, but not wanting to see it. Susan shares a similar feeling, saying she’s not sure if “they are correct [...] but you live in a country with freedom of speech.”

This idea of 'freedom' also shows up when several of the participants talk about immigrant integration. As shown in previous sections, participants are negative towards immigrants because they feel their culture is backwards or their behaviour does not fit Dutch standards. However, some participants acknowledged immigrants having a degree of freedom and felt like certain behaviours were acceptable as long as they 'do not bother' them. Irene shared: "If you have a faith, fine, but don't convey it to the outside world" and when talking about wearing headscarves, Andrea felt that: "[...] what people do behind their front door when they are home, that's their business.'

Not everyone agreed with Andrea's point on wearing headscarves, which relates to the second topic the individualisation discourse shows up in, which is the autonomy of Muslim women. On headscarves in particular the participants are divided. Some women see the wearing of a headscarf as an act of personal freedom and choice, stating that if those women want to wear a headscarf, they have the right to do that.

**Sharon:** "Yeah and those headscarves, I don't really have any problems with those. If they feel comfortable walking around with a headscarf on. I wear extensions, I want to be free in that, so they can be free in this as well."

Susan even shared that her friend told her she wears it "from her heart" and that it is not required by the Qoran. These participants thus view Muslim women as having a certain degree of autonomy.

Other participants, however, did not think women in Islamic culture have a choice to begin with, stating that the culture is so oppressive towards women, they could never wear a headscarf out of their own free will.

**Rachel:** "It's not a free choice. Nobody does that voluntarily, walking around like that. Uncomfortable and completely covered. I don't believe that's voluntary, that's from indoctrination. A constraint, from the conviction of another, a man at that."

Rachel's point shows a line of thinking in which Muslim women do not have autonomy. The participants were thus divided on this issue, and some participants did not really know what to think at all. Helen, for example, first stated thinking Muslim women have little choice: "But alright, if such a woman agrees to that, but I don't think she has another choice." Yet, later she mentioned thinking of these women as dumb, stating:

“they don’t let themselves be emancipated by their husband, then you’re dumb, right?” Although seemingly contradictory, Helen’s point shows where the division in opinions comes from. It is the idea that perhaps in ‘their own’ country, Muslim women do not have autonomy, but women in The Netherlands do, an idea that will be further explored when talking about *responsibilisation*.

The autonomy of Dutch women is the third issues that involves individualisation. Dutch women are considered to have autonomy and freedom, that should not be taken away. Generally, the participants felt like women should be able to do whatever they want, whether that be working, or supporting feminism, but also taking on a more traditional gender role. Some participants saw the latter choice as threatened by feminists taking equality too far. Joyce makes this point, saying she feels women should still be allowed to just take care of their family, but that “that’s being brought down these days, that it’s becoming a new sort of taboo.”

Joyce uses a similar line of reasoning when it comes to the idea of ‘gender neutral.’ Here she feels her freedom to ‘just be a man or a woman’ is being infringed upon, saying: “I’m just a woman, and maybe we just feel that way, and want to be addressed that way. And not that when I say ‘he or she’ that right away it’s like ‘oh’ and it should become ‘it.’” Amy shared similar feelings as stated in the pervious section, about girls not being ‘allowed’ to wear a pink shirt.

Other participants, however, see gender neutral as an issue of ‘their business’ as well. Although maybe not agreeing, their stance is that if people feel that way, they should be able to express it. Rachel, for example, when talking about gender neutral clothing says, “But if that’s what people want to do, they should. [...] No, I don’t make a big deal of that.”

Overall the participants thus value individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, but are divided on where the limits of these concepts lie. Where on the one hand they feel like everyone has freedom, they on the other hand, do not want their own freedom impeded. This divide leads to mixed feelings when it comes to immigrant women, but also feminist movements.

#### *4.4 Responsibilisation*

As mentioned in the previous section, the idea of responsibility is tightly linked with ideas of individual freedom and autonomy. For the participants, this manifests itself in

the feeling that freedom comes with responsibility. When it comes to gender equality, this means they thus tend to look at the role an individual plays and their responsibility in how they were treated. This mostly becomes visible in how the participants talk about the autonomy of Muslim women, but also about a movement like #metoo.

As established in the previous section, the participants are divided on whether or not they believe Muslim women have autonomy. A trend among those that do believe these women have some free will is that they also believe it is the responsibility of Muslim to act upon this. Beth illustrates this idea when talking about the headscarf: "I can imagine that if you live in Iran, that you definitely say, I have to, cause I have no choice, but in The Netherlands it's not necessary." Here Beth alludes to the idea that Muslim women in Iran may not have a choice, but in The Netherlands they do. The idea that women do have freedom in The Netherlands is reinforced by the normalisation of gender equality as construed in the previous section. Since emancipation is seen as finished, women that are still in some way oppressed are seen as having a choice in their own oppression. Beth had previously noted she sees the wearing of a headscarf as oppression of women and since in her eyes, oppression is not an issue in the Netherlands, these women should not wear a headscarf. They should 'choose' not to be oppressed, since in The Netherlands they have that choice.

Helen illustrates the idea of responsabilisation in a similar fashion when she states that, "[immigrant women] don't let themselves be emancipated by their husband." Here she puts the responsibility for emancipation on the woman, seeing her as responsible for her own oppression, not her husband. Helen as well alluded to the idea that free choice is not only something women 'just have' in The Netherlands, but also as something they are responsible for using.

Several of the participants use a similar line of reasoning when they talk about the #metoo movement. Although all agree that no one should be assaulted or raped and that #metoo in that sense does shed light on the issue of sexual assault, they also believe that the movement has gone too far and has lost credibility. Here, most question the motives of women who have come forward, wondering why some have come forward years later, and what role they played in the encounter. Joyce for example says, "But yeah, then they forget to mention that they maybe as well... that they agreed to it, so... Because they wanted to get ahead in their career." Sharon shares a similar concern regarding motive:

**Sharon:** “I notice that particularly in the US if a senator gets an important function, then all at once someone was assaulted by him 40 years ago. And then I think, isn't that #youtoo? Don't you just want all the attention?”

Next to questioning motivation, several participants feel that the women who have come forward should take responsibility for their actions in their encounter. For example, Jessica feels like these women should have known, and should have done something: “You could have defended yourself then, you could have said, no I won't do that, that's not worth it to me.” Joyce shares this feeling, saying, “but at that moment you still have the choice to say ‘no way, I won't go that far.’ Then they'll leave you alone.” The participants also felt that those women that did not have ‘correct’ motivations for coming forward or did not look at their own responsibility in the encounter, which to them make the movement less credible.

**Andrea:** “Yeah, I personally think the first approach of #metoo was good, but that as well goes too far, where does it end? [...] At a certain moment it really goes too far and the victims are being ridiculed by the size of the movement and everything that comes with it. “

Rachel was the only participant who put the responsibility of sexual assault on men and saw the delay in women coming forward as a sign of the state of gender relations:

**Rachel:** “But yeah, you know, on the other hand, men could, with regards to that movement, they should confront their own gender about their behaviour towards women, like, hey this is happening. [...] But then you were really the minority and you were destroyed if you came forward with it.”

The majority of participants thus do not see the problem of sexual assault as a societal problem, but look at it as individual encounters, removed from unequal power relations or gender. They see women as having free choice, meaning they must also take responsibility for the choices they make.

## 5. Conclusion & Discussion

This study started with the question of how women who vote for the PVV makes sense of gender and gender equality. The results show that the 10 women who were

interviewed have views similar to those of the PVV and Geert Wilders, as they connect gender inequality to Muslim culture (*culturalisation*), generally see emancipation as a finished process in the Netherlands, explaining still existing inequalities through natural differences (*naturalisation* and *normalisation*), and highly value individual freedom and choice (*individualism*). These ideas or discourses all emerge from the PVV's rhetoric as well. A fourth discourse on responsabilisation was identified from the interviews, which does not show from the PVV's rhetoric as clearly.

First, the *culturalisation* of gender discourse emerges when the participants talk about Muslim women as oppressed, and Muslim men as 'dangerous,' similar to how the PVV and RPPs in general see this culture as 'backward' and oppressive (Akkerman, 2015; Bracke, 2012; Mepschen et al, 2010). Not only do the participants make this connection, they also appreciate Geert Wilders calling it out. Whereas the women protesting the verzetsspray event thought of him as 'racist,' these women saw such an event as Wilders standing up for women's rights. Viewing immigrants as having different gender relations and different 'sexuality' helps in seeing immigrants or Muslims as 'the Other.' This illuminates Joanne Nagel's (2001) point that gender and gender roles play an important role in creating stereotypes and prejudice and ultimately leading to 'us' versus 'them.'

Connecting culture and gender also shows *when* the participants think of gender equality as important. They participate in the *normalisation* and *naturalisation* discourse, by viewing gender equality as an issue in immigrant culture, but not in Dutch culture.. The participants, however, much more obviously state ideas related to post-feminism, as they see emancipation as a finished process and further emancipatory movements as unnecessary (McRobbie, 2004). In doing so, 'Dutch' gender equality becomes the standard for immigrants, while any existing gender inequalities in The Netherlands become normalised, reasoning similar to that present in the immigration debate in The Netherlands (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; Römken, 2015; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009) .

The *normalisation* discourse further continues as the participants see the natural differences between men and women as important and complimentary. Where the PVV does not have a clear stance on classical gender issues (De Lange & Mügge, 2015), the participants do feel that traditional gender roles should be appreciated, or at least not eradicated. Naturalising gender also influences how the participants think



about transgenderism and gender-neutrality. Although accepting of the first, the latter is seen as feminism 'going too far.' The analysis thus shows that where the PVV focuses mainly on de-normalising immigrant gender relations, the participants normalise existing gender relations, by de-normalising both immigrant gender relations, but also feminism and feminists (Spierings, 2017).

The participants also actively participate in the individualisation discourse, as they view individual freedom and choice as important values in society. This influences their opinion on the autonomy of Muslim women, gender equality, and feminists. Where the PVV sees Muslim culture as authoritarian and impeding on free choice (De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015), the participants are overall less extreme, also seeing it as 'their business, seeming accepting of things as long as it does not bother them. The same goes for feminists and feminism.. The analysis thus shows an important nuance in the individualist discourse, which is that the participants on the one hand think of freedom as an important good everyone has and should be able to act upon, yet on the other hand that their own freedom should not be infringed upon.

The last discourse that emerges, which does not become so clear from the PVV's rhetoric, is the discourse of *responsibilisation*. The participants not only view individual choice and freedom as important, but also the responsibility that comes with it. They see most women, particular women in The Netherlands, as autonomous individuals that are responsible for their own choices. This manifests itself in how they talk about the autonomy of Muslim women, but also why they believe the #metoo movement has lost credibility.

Although the participants definitely have ideas about gender and gender equality, to most it is a more complicated and nuanced issue, much less so than issues like 'Zwarte Piet' or celebrating Christmas in school. When it comes to gender equality, the participants seem to be at the centre of two extremes, with on the one hand the perceived extreme gender inequality in Islamic culture, and on the other hand, extreme gender equality, no longer leaving room for natural differences between men and women. As in line with the right-wing progressive stance of the PVV, these women too, want to protect the Dutch values of gender equality *as they know it*, protected from extremes, and rooted in individualism and freedom.

This study thus sheds light on how a largely overlooked group of women make sense of gender and gender equality. It fills the gap on the 'demand side,' looking how

voters think about these issues, not parties. The analysis shows that the participants, although generally in line with the PVV party, have broader and more nuanced views on gender and gender equality. This thus shows that by looking solely at the rhetoric from the party, the understanding of certain issues from voters is lost. By conducting interviews, this study was able to catch this nuance and thoroughly understand how the participants make sense of gender and gender equality, something not done in previous studies.

Although the method of interviewing best allowed itself for understanding the ideas of the participants, it also presents its limitations, since it does not allow for generalisations (Bryman, 2012). This study in particular has a low response rate, which also should be kept in mind when looking at the results. Future research could look into gathering more respondents over a broader scope of RRP's throughout Europe, comparing the female voters of parties in their ideas about gender and gender equality, continuing to shed light on the overlooked group of female right-wing voters.

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