The Female Gaze

An autoethnographic research on how patriarchy affects the sense of being a woman.

The Female Gaze

A master's thesis by Loes Mookhoek

Abstract

This thesis entails an autoethnographic research into what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated society. A total of 20 women, including my mother, participated in this study. They answered questions about different aspects of being a woman through Whatsapp messages, voice memos or photos of their handwritten answers. In addition, 6 of my mother's diaries have been analyzed, to also view intergenerational transmission of gender roles. The data is connected and analyzed through repetitive themes and theory. All data has been used to make sense of being a woman, what contributes to it and how it is affected. Theory regarding gender performativity, bodily appropriation, normalization of sexual objectification and rape culture are central. It is concluded from this research that being a woman is a process consisting of many contrasting characteristics. On the one hand, being a woman consists of dealing with obstacles that stem from male dominance such as sexual objectification and harassment. On the other hand, being a woman shows strength to deal with all these obstacles, and to find freedom in overcoming those struggles.

Keywords: sexual objectification – bodily appropriation – sense of womanhood – gender performativity – rape culture

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Index

An introduction

This thesis is a result of my struggle with being. However simple 'being' may seem, there is a lot to be. I experienced being sexualized, being objectified, being harassed, being oppressed, up to a point in life that being is not that simple anymore. Or desirable, for that matter. My sense of self has been shaped, pushed and pulled into multiple directions. All related to me, being, a woman.

Throughout the years I documented my experiences with harassment, my thoughts on patriarchal culture, the sexualization of my body, and so on. Whenever I read my journals, my poems, or see my drawings and preferences of art, they appear to be ever so strongly related to womanhood; the state of being a woman. In all of its beauty, and in all of its ugliness. The presence of male dominance in my documentation is notable and multiple. Think of journal paragraphs about how I was followed by a drunk man, or how I was referred to as a blonde doll and how experiences like this lead to feelings of fear, frustration and oppression. During this thesis project I dive into the question of *what it means to be a woman and to explore the effects of male dominance and patriarchal structures on the sense of self, being a woman*. I wish to put my experiences, thoughts and frustrations into perspective with regard to theory. Hoping to find a way of understanding some connections between the many aspects of patriarchy and its seemingly powerful influence on making sense of the self, as a woman.

To explore what womanhood encompasses, this research consists of not only analyzing personal experiences, but those of all women in my direct environment. A total of twenty women, including my mother, participated in this study. For this research, I sent a number of questions to nineteen female friends via WhatsApp. They were given the option to answer this via a WhatsApp message, voice memo, video or by writing down their answer and sending a photo of it to me. To approach the role of mothers in developing womanhood, I read and analyzed six of my mother's journals, which she wrote between 1989 and 2003. To see not only how she experienced being a mother with a career, but also to see if there were any differences between how she raised me and my brothers.

Different aspects of being a woman will be discussed. First, I discuss how women experience moving around in public space, in which experiences with harassment appear to play a big part. Theory about the man-made mode and the male gaze of desire, sexual objectification and bodily appropriation is involved (Bourdieu, 2001; Chubin, 2014; Hughes & Witz, 1997; Warner, 2002), as well as theory about the normalization of these mechanisms

resulting into rape culture (Burt, 1980; Hartley, 2015; Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018; Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Mellgren, Andersson, Ivert, 2017). Subsequently, diving into the professional space, attention is paid to being a woman in the professional space in which theory of objectification of women is discussed in more detail (Connor, 2015; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler & Tolman, 2011;   Willness, Steel & Lee, 2007). Thirdly, the body appropriation theory is extended by means of an example of the outward physical expectations of the female body, such as having a size zero figure. It will also be discussed how beauty ideals are becoming internalized and therefor part of the sense of being a woman (Xiao & Wang, 2020). After this, the research takes a turn to the role of motherhood in the sense of being a woman. Theory regarding intergenerational transmission of (gender) norms and values (Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen & Johnson, 2003; Min, Silverstein & Lendon, 2012; Schönpflug, 2001) is central and I will discuss gender roles and performativity (Butler, 2002). Here I give examples from my mother's diaries that show how differences between boys and girls are made, and how gender roles are developed. Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to the views of all twenty women, who participated in this study, on what it means to be a woman. Here some of the contradictions that are part of, or contribute to, womanhood become apparent. This thesis concludes with an endnote and of course a word of thanks to all the women who helped me put this piece together.

An inventive method

This research is based on an inventive method, which developed throughout the project. Initially this research would be of autoethnographic nature, with an added focus on my mother's journals. However, during the process I realized that all the women around me influenced and still influence my perception on womanhood. That is why I decided to not only include the experiences of my mother and myself, but to also include those of my closest female friends. The autoethnographic element can mostly be found in the set-up of the questions, which have their origin in my own experiences. Likewise, the thesis section discussing my mother's diaries will also include personal elements from my childhood.

Data gathering

To gather the data from my friends I first created a list on WhatsApp so that I could send questions to my friends individually, without having to text them one by one. It is important to me to respect the privacy and consent of all the women involved in this project, whereas they share personal stories that have emotional value to them. Therefor I invited them all to answer only when they felt comfortable and had them sign a consent form regarding the gathered data near the end of the process. In total there were twenty women, including my mother, who I interacted with during this process. The questions that I sent them were based on my own experiences with and ideas about womanhood, curious to learn more about their thoughts and experiences. The first question relates to how women experience public space in the context of street intimidation. The second question relates to how women are approached and treated in professional settings. The third question was about the size zero fashion industry and what it does to women's body image. Finally, I asked the overarching question I ask myself as a final question to all participating women: what does it mean to you to be a woman?

I chose this form of research because I believe that traditional interviewing can sometimes get in the way of a personal conversation, especially when talking to friends. It can feel a little bit forced. Also, the digital way of communicating offers some emotional anonymity and freedom to express personal stories. WhatsApp to me, and probably a large part of my generation, became a regular way of communicating about experiences or feelings. It fits into our fast lifestyle in which we sometimes just want to share experiences through a two minute voice-memo. My friends replied whenever it suit them and their busy schedules.

Some preferred to answer right away, some saved up all questions to answer them in one sitting, or in the middle of the night when they could not sleep. Additionally, they were free to share their answers in the form they preferred. Because of that I received voice-memo's, video's, texts, e-mails, pictures and journal pages. This invited me to use multiple senses while doing this research. This resulted not only in a more active way of researching, but also created a natural emotional engagement with it. By giving the women access to the time and forms they needed to answer I feel like I got the most fruitful data, even though not every question has been answered by every respondent. Because I was not bound by a fixed interview time, this method also gave me the freedom to ask questions that arose during the process.

Analyzing and writing

The answers to all of the questions were saved in a datafile to which only I have access. To analyze the data I sorted all of the question and answers into overlapping themes. I did the same with my mother's journals. Eventually I had a couple of big files containing all of the stories and images that were usable for this end product. Halfway through this process of gathering, the need to organize dawned upon me. Therefore I printed what I had up till that point regarding data and theory and physically laid out my ideas (image 1). Going into the last month of the thesis process I started rewriting all the gathered and analyzed pieces of data. While writing I added notes where I thought I needed to elaborate or that needed real-life examples. During the process I engaged in many conversations with friends and family members. The conversations with, but also the answers of, my mother and friends invited me to explore the many perceptions on womanhood.

Image 1. The process

You see, man made the cars to take us over the road. Man made the train to carry the heavy load. Man made electric light to take us out of the dark. Man made the boat for the water, like Noah made the ark.
- James Brown

This first chapter examines how the public space is organized on the basis of male dominance and how this relates to being a woman. How the public space is man-made and made for men. First of all, it is discussed how being a woman is influenced by a male gaze, after which this is explained in detail through examples of harassment. The normalization of harassment, bodily appropriation and objectification of women is also discussed. Finally, I will discuss the consequences which this normalization of rape culture has for the sense of being a woman.

Man-made woman

Being a woman or a man is not a matter of biology, but rather a matter of becoming, said Simone de Beauvoir. By this she describes gender as a productive social process, a process of being (Hughes & Witz, 1997). Butler (2002) also discusses the notion of gender as a process, approaching it as performativity of gender. Gender, Butler says, is a construct that is internalized in our culture through repeated (social) routines, and is therefore not a direct result of our biological sex. Gendered routines slumber through aspects of culture in language use, symbolism and interaction and become part of our daily lives (Butler, 2002). Being a woman, in the light of these theories, is therefore a socio-cultural process and not by definition a biological fact. Because gender roles arise from and are influenced by cultural – and therefore social interactions – womanhood appears to be an ongoing process.

For women, says Beauvoir, this productive social process of being entails that women's being and social position are socially constructed by patriarchal culture (Hughes & Witz, 1997). This happens through a mechanism that she calls the man-made mode of living. De Beauvoir theorizes this as that the way women are thinking, behaving and perceiving themselves is shaped by men, established in a hierarchy of sexes (Hughes & Witz, 1997). Meaning that women are developed through the gaze and expectations of men. Male expectations thus become an intrinsic part of being a woman, making womanhood depending on men.

This man-made mode of living can be placed in a bigger theoretical structure with regard to the male gaze. The male gaze is a theoretical term for the sexualized way of looking

at women, also referred to as the (male) gaze of desire (Bourdieu, 2001). Bourdieu (2001) writes about the male gaze as a mechanism in which women are approached as sexual objects by men, resulting in women adjusting their behavior and their selves. An example of this came forward in the answers of one of my friends: *"I found that every time I went to work I was thinking a lot about what the right attitude was and how I could be myself without being "seductive" or something."* After an uncomfortable encounter with some male guards at her work, this woman felt a need to be aware of her attitude and the way she dressed. By feeling that awareness she adjusted her behavior as a result of an encounter with men, or with their male gaze so to say. This sexualized gaze transforms not only professional working spaces, but also public space into a vulnerable place to women, whereas the negative association with sexual objectification makes that they cannot move as freely as men (Warner, 2002). Perhaps an obvious, but rather important example of such gendered restrictions in public space is (street) harassment.

Being a young woman, moving within the public space of Rotterdam, I experience this vulnerability on a daily basis. Street harassment - consisting of being (sexually) intimidated, being followed, catcalled, touched without consent and so on - is a recurring experience for me. Men regularly stand in the way, both literally and figuratively, in everyday life in public space. Examples of this are experiences with men who followed me from the tram to my house, blocked my way or grabbed my ass. These kinds of experiences have given me a mix of feelings, from fear and frustration to a feeling of powerlessness. The physical and mental power that men took over me in public space has resulted in me adapting to them. I pay attention to what I wear and that I don't smile too kindly at strange men, it has become part of my daily movements; my being. So, perhaps I am indeed living by the man-made mode, by experiencing my womanhood through the domination of men. I knew also about many experiences of my friends of being touched without consent or being approached unwantedly by men. However, I wondered which of these experiences stood out to them most, stayed with them, perhaps even changed them. Therefor the question arose: *What experience(s) do you have with [male dominance] and which is/are engraved in your memory? What did it do with you and does is still do something with you?*

Normalization of rape culture

Day by day the answers came rolling in; voice memo's, diary paragraphs, WhatsApp messages, emails, video's. A large part of the experiences had to do with abuse, harassment, stalking or rape. Some were 'just the regular or daily stuff', as the women referred to it themselves, emphasizing the normalization of sexism nowadays. The normalization of sexual objectification, as well as the male gaze, are to be approached as aspects of rape culture (Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018; Johnson & Johnson, 2021). Rape culture is defined as a cultural way of excusing or dismissing sexual assault on a large scale (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). By dismissing harassment, there is a certain dismissing of the male gaze and sexual objectification of women in general allowed. This leads to the social acceptation of sexual objectification and harassment. Normalization of rape culture becomes clear through our language, for example, when we call catcalling and other verbal forms of harassment, 'just the regular harassment'. The many cases of 'regular harassment', resulted in my friends having a hard time choosing which experiences to share with me: *"there are so many examples from my own experience that I could hardly choose."* It is said that the normalization of catcalling is frustrating, but that it has become part of everyday life and therefore does not make much of an impression (anymore). It is the more intense experiences with harassment, often in which the women have been touched unwantedly or felt the danger of assault, that have left a deep imprint.

Image 2. #stopstreetharassment

(sent to me by a friend)

An example of an experience with assault that left its mark and shows the normalization of rape culture, is the story of one of my friends. She shares a memory of how her and her niece were blocked by a car on the sidewalk, while walking home after going out in Athens. As two men got out of the car and approached the girls, a third man stood up for them: *"leave the girls alone"*, to which the assaulters responded *"why, do you maybe want to fuck them instead?"*. The assaulters shifted their focus to the helping man and beat him up, the girls' only chance to flee:

> *"I still feel so guilty to this very day that we left this man and ran, while in fact, if it wouldn't be for him we could've been kidnapped? Raped? Attacked? God knows what? But we were so young and we literally didn't know what to do and there was not a single soul around to help."*

This experience left its mark, not only because of feeling unsafe, but also because of the haunting feeling of guilt that my friend describes. After sharing her story, she sends me a photo of the exact spot where this event occurred (image 3). She explains how narrow the streets are and I realize how trapped she and her cousin must have felt. Additionally, a striking statement has been made in this story, namely the question that one of the attackers asks the man who comes to the rescue: *"do you want to fuck them instead?"* This makes clear, not only that the men intended to rape the girls, but that they expect every other man to have the same intention. This expectation that every man sexualizes and wants to assault women indicates normalization of rape culture.

Image 3. The streets of Athens (source: sent to me by a friend)

Bodily appropriation

In some of the other stories that I received, there was a man without consent touching a woman. These experiences are strongly linked to appropriation of women. The appropriation of women's bodies is a mechanism that works through the sexualized objectification of women and entails taking power or authority over someone else's body (Bourdieu, 2001; Warner, 2002). One of my friends takes me into her story of when she was assaulted by a group of boys in a crowded tram at the age of fourteen. She was able to escape the situation, but it has always stayed with her:

> "It doesn't do anything to me anymore, only that it can still make me angry. But it is something I will always carry with me. I think this moment also changed me. That I've become hardened because I was like; I don't ever want to feel that way again. A man is never going to do this to me again.".

She also mentions her aversion to the realization *"that men think that it is normal, that it is a right to touch you".* A comment that comes back often and a shock that I recognize myself being in. This appropriation of the body, by being touched unwantedly, brings with it a feeling of powerlessness, which we can see reflected in the quote above. The authority a woman has over her body is being disregarded by cases of sexual objectification and harassment such as these, exposing a patriarchal power structure in which women have a vulnerable position (Bourdieu, 2001). Another friend encountered a situation in which a man very explicitly claimed this 'right' of physical authority over a woman, his wife:

> *"I was biking back from school and there was this guy who was beating up his wife. […] I started yelling at him: "Leave her alone!" And he said: "she's my wife". Looking at me like, 'she's my object'. And I was like: "she's your wife, not your property." To which he said: "she is my property, she is my wife"."*

The authority over the body and being of this woman is taken over by her husband who physically hurts her. This experience shows very strongly how a woman is treated as an object, even as a possession, and reflects the supposed normality with which the man takes power over her. As if it's his right to do so.

The aftermath

The normalization of harassment also seems to mean that assistance to victims falls short, both from aid agencies and bystanders. A number of the conversations showed that help is often refused, for example by the police, or that bystanders look the other way during an incident. For example, two of my friends told me that after a harassment situation they went to the police to file a report. One of them was asked what she was wearing when harassed, while the other was told that 'it cannot be considered harassment if you have been touched 10 centimeters below your buttocks'. Under the guise of, 'we can't help it anyway', both women were neither helped nor taken seriously. This lack of support, and the dismissal of the seriousness, seems to result in insecurity and doubt amongst women who encounter these situations, also to share their stories (Mellgren, Andersson, Ivert, 2017). This is evident in the following example of a friend who has been stalked in her residential area for some time. An unknown man follows her everywhere she goes and when she indicates that she feels unsafe, he laughs it off. She says: *"My boyfriend says of course; file a report. But I have the feeling that as soon as I do that, it will only get worse. So what do you do?".* Here she expresses her feelings of impotence and how she does not trust that filing a report will improve the situation. A realistic doubt when we think back to the other two women who reported the crime of harassment, but were not helped.

The lack of being able to call on others such as the police, or bystanders, leads to a feeling of powerlessness, one of my friends explains. In addition, it also results in attempts to prevent similar harassment situations, by adjusting behavior or clothing. A friend says:

> *"To this day I have not worn the dress I was wearing that day. To this day I am angry at myself for not hitting the man or at least yelling at him. To this day I don't dare to get on the train alone with bare legs."*

This quote shows frustration, regret that she didn't do more herself and an attempt at self-adjustment for fear of ending up in another harassment situation. The dominance of men, as well as the effects of the male gaze, are reflected in this example. Adjusting yourself as a woman in your entire appearance is a response to how you have been approached by men before. You try to avoid the male gaze of desire, the visual (sexual) expectations that men have of women (Bourdieu, 2001), by not wearing a dress that reveals your legs.

In addition, a feeling of shame and regret emerges, the feeling that you could have done something to prevent the situation (Chubin, 2014). This is a common reaction among women who experience negative situations with men (Mellgren, Andersson & Ivert, 2017). Thoughts like I should have shouted louder, should have said 'no' one more time, should have dressed less 'provocatively', should have drunk less, are regularly reflected in the conversations: *"Maybe I just attract these kinds of situations, so I better not tell anyone"*. These feelings also show another adaptation to male domination, which is putting the blame on yourself. This seems to be a consequence of the socially accepted rape culture, in which the normalization of harassing women leads to the dismissal of blame for this behavior by men.

This first part has shown examples of rape culture, originated from the normalization of sexual objectification and harassment. As a result, women seem to have a more vulnerable position than men when it comes to public space. One of my friends sums it up as: *"I would say that the space that a woman can occupy in a public space already has a certain shape. It is smaller, so that as women we always have to think about how we profile ourselves.".* Here she clearly summarizes what has been discussed earlier, how women should adapt to a space that has already been classified and filled in by men. As a woman you have to squeeze yourself into this world and adapt to the male expectation.

Workin' woman

I ain't fit to be no mother, I ain't fit to be no wife yet. I been workin' like a man, I been workin' all my life.
 - Valerie June

As a follow-up to the previous chapter on public space, this chapter examines the sense of being a woman in the professional space. Experiences with objectification, being underestimated as a woman and, again, harassment will be discussed.

You are such a doll!

Harassment is a negative physical as well as a mental aspect of being a woman, often taking place in public space. But what happens outside the public, when women enter their study or working environments? For me, my professional environments felt relatively safe, compared to public space. However, there were occasions in which I felt treated different than my male fellow students, by being put 'back in place', when I had – in their eyes – controversial thoughts about the roles of women. When it comes to work I was often confronted with remarks about my appearance, rather than my knowledge or skills. Being referred to as a "blonde little doll" at work by a safety guard, was one of the most degrading moments that I will never forget. In frustration the guard told a story to my manager about how his 14-year-old daughter was being harassed on the street. My manager nodded at me and said that a story like this was really for me, because she knew I was interested in the subject as a sociologist. The guard didn't know that, and he said: *"Oh yes, such a blonde little doll experiences that every day, of course"*. I remember being so angry that he made such a sexist remark to me while he was complaining about how difficult it was for his daughter to be sexually objectified. Even though there might not always bad intentions involved, sexism such as this occurs often in the professional space. Thinking back on this incident, I wondered what my friends have been through regarding this. Therefor I asked them: *Do you feel like you were ever treated different or in a specific way in your study and/or work environment, because you are a woman?*

One of my friends, who is a musician, encountered a similar situation to mine. She explained that her feminine looks often lead to her being treated differently than her male co-workers or students. However, in her own words, she 'uses' that she is a woman in a positive way: *"My long blonde hair helped me get my way in the catering as well as the music industry."*

She gives the example of a famous musician asking her to make music together, which she says would have never happened if she would not have been attractive or if she were a boy. Despite the occasional positive outcomes, she realizes that they are originated in "something sick": *"If you are a beautiful, sweet, blonde girl who can laugh sweetly, then those men will remember you."*. The use of words in situations like these, as well as my earlier example of being called a blonde doll, are crucial. Using language that focuses only on the physical body, or even words that specifically refer to a *thing*, such as a doll, reduces one from human to object (Connor, 2015).

The sexualized male gaze discussed before is in its definition connected to the objectification of women, which can also become part of women's sense of self. The objectification theory says that as a result of being sexually objectified by men, women start treating and experiencing themselves as objects (Hill & Fischer, 2008). A research from Hill and Fischer (2008) shows that this self-objectification and sexualized gaze (and therefor harassment) are significantly related. They, as well as Garcia, Earnshaw and Quinn (2015), discuss how women started internalizing to be sexually objectified. Meaning that they have been socialized into, unconsciously, approaching themselves as objects. This can be recognized in the example of the female musician, who is aware of the use of her appearance and states that she is remembered by men only through her looks. The objectification by others resulting into self-objectification, can lead to mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Hill & Fischer, 2008). Additionally, Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler and Tolman (2011) showed that (self)objectification among teenage girls is not only related to symptoms of depression but is also significantly related to lower levels of self-esteem. In the example of the young musician, being reduced to a 'beautiful blonde girl' might not lead to direct anxiety or depression and seemingly can even work in her advantage. However, as she herself adds, this way of experiencing advantages because of your looks still finds its origin in a 'nasty' form of oppression.

From waitress till porn actress
Following up to the objectification of women, the issue of harassment returns when discussing womanhood in relation to the study and working environment. An example is the case of a woman working in a restaurant, where a male customer was trying to scout her as a porn star. After politely declining – because that is what women are taught to do – the man kept insisting

on scouting her and grabbed her arm. When turning to her manager, she was told not to respond to it, to just keep being nice and serve him. The woman in this story explains how experiences such as these shaped her as a working woman in general. That she feels more aware of her vulnerability in being a woman when entering a professional environment. The way that the female body is touched, and not stood up for in situations such as these, shape the way that women can feel about themselves in professional environments (Willness, Steel & Lee, 2007).

A different approach

Lastly, appearance appeared to be a very present aspect in the experiences of my friends, whereas another friend told me she always feels approached as 'dumb', because she cares about her looks. Her most vivid memory is when a teacher told her to *'work on [her] personality instead of caring so much about [her] appearance'*. Continually being underestimated (because of looks) in the working and study environment is something that comes back in the answers of multiple women. However, a significant number of women indicated that they have never experienced discrimination in the workplace because they 'were lucky enough to work with only women'. It appears as if working exclusively with women, brought a certain feeling of safety into the professional space. Remarkably, one of the women experienced the complete opposite and explains that she often feels disadvantaged by the women in her work environment and not the men: *"I do not know if it is in our nature or that we women are taught for centuries, but we rather don't stand out. You don't belong to the [female] group anymore if you do."* There appears to be a certain correlation between feelings of equality and working with either men or women. It has been found that women are more likely to feel treated equally when they are surrounded exclusively by women in the workplace.

In this chapter I have considered some aspects of what it means to be a woman in a professional environment. It has been found that objectification and underestimation by men as a result regularly occurs, as well as harassment. It is also discussed, which may go hand-in-hand, that working with only women gives a greater sense of security and limits discrimination in the workplace.

The other woman

The other woman finds time to manicure her nails. The other woman is perfect where her rival fails. And she's never seen with pin curls in her hair.

- Nina Simone

In this third chapter I will discuss another part of womanhood, which has always played a major role for me personally. It is also connected to the previously discussed subjects of being objectified and how the female body is appropriated. I discuss here how beauty standards are part of female objectification and can become an internalized part of womanhood.

Body diversity and womanhood

Bodily appropriation or taking authority over what the female body should be or who is in charge over it, takes many forms. Before I discussed bodily appropriation in the sense of being harassed, when someone takes physical authority over a women's body. However, there are also societal expectations of the female body that can feel appropriating. Beauty ideals that are displayed through, for example, fashion appear to be related to objectification of the female body (Xiao & Wang, 2020). Research shows that beauty standards that are consistently exposed to women, can become internalized and therefor part of the sense of being a woman (Xiao & Wang, 2020). This theory connects to the previously discussed 'blonde doll' example, but also to an experience I had during this project. I got tattooed on my ribs and turned to online shopping to find myself a short enough crop top to show it off. My online shopping adventure, however, turned into a somewhat disappointing realization; I do not see my body type reflected on these websites. As I struggled with my body- and self-image, I wonder how my friends feel when looking at the commercial size zero standard. Thus arose the question; *what do you feel when you look at size zero models?* On a side note, I would like to emphasize that this question means nothing against the models or their bodies or to target them or their body size. The question came to me because it seems as if somewhere along the way it is decided that size zero is the standard, which personally affects me from time to time.

My friends made multiple remarks of appreciation for the diversity in skin colors, facial features and hair types on the websites, but when it comes to body size they do not see diversity at all. A very practical first objection to that is that selling clothes on size zero models does not work for most of my friends: *"I don't know how it would look on me"* or *"I still find it*

exaggerated that clothing is found most salable on these bodies". In addition to the apparent marketing mistake, comments are made about what this size standard does to women's self-image. Each of the women who answered the question emphasizes the importance of increasing body type diversity in the fashion industry. In the journal paragraph below (image 4), a friend shows not only concerns for herself, but also about the emerging generations who spend even more time in the online world and thus might be more confronted with these beauty standards. Another friend adds that she thinks diversity in fashion is so important, because her daughter will be influenced by the fashion industry about what is seen as beautiful.
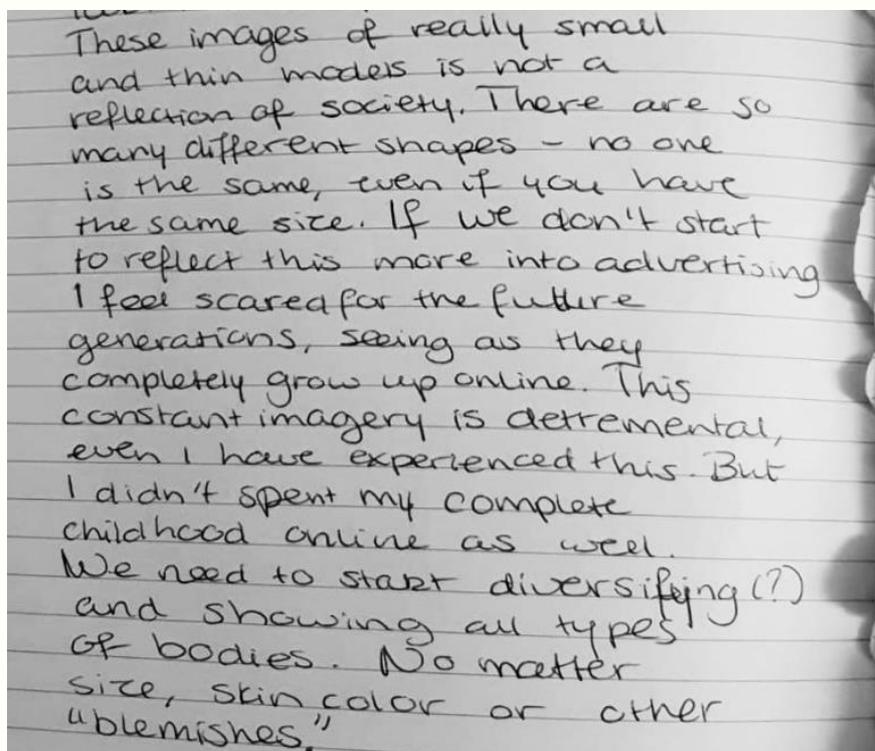

Image 4: Journal paragraph of a friend (sent to me by her)

Size zero standard

Some of the women indicate that they do not relate the images to themselves because they are used to it, but that they can understand their negative influence. The other part experiences that negative influence: *"I do notice that it still makes me a bit insecure, that I would also like to be so beautiful and thin."* Another friend sent me a voice memo on how women should support each other's body diversity and how we should appreciate our bellies and cellulite. But her endnote shows that this is still a long way to go, also for her personally:

"I think after leaving this message that I should start with myself, because I don't even believe that when it comes to myself." She explains that she grew up and got 'brainwashed' in a society that strives for size zero women, and has difficulty letting go of that pursuit for the 'ideal body'. Society has a very high standard of what the female body should look like, one that might not even be reachable for most, but pursuit by many. This utopic idea of body shapes seems to hold many women in a grip, it influences their relationship to their bodies into a more insecure one (Xiao & Wang, 2020). Or perhaps even a less loving one.

In this chapter an addition has been made to a previously introduced topic, namely the appropriation of the female body, but in the form of beauty ideals. It has been found that beauty standards can not only have negative mental consequences, but can even become an intrinsic part of the sense of being a woman.

I am my mother's daughter

She sits alone, rewinding her life story, wondering did she do enough.
Does she know I am all I am because of her?
- Barbara Tremblay Cipak

In this fourth chapter, I zoom in on the role of family in transmitting or contributing to the sense of being a woman. I use the example of my mother and myself, through her historical documents. I will discuss the intergenerational transfer of gendered norms and values and the struggles with fulfilling multiple roles that are expected of women.

Passing on womanhood

Next to the influence of society on women's sense of self, family influences the self through intergenerational transmission of norms and values. Gendered ideas, norms and values are transmitted through generations, mostly from parents to children of a young age (Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen & Johnson, 2003; Min, Silverstein & Lendon, 2012; Schönpflug, 2001). Here lies a connection between the gender performativity discussed before and the norms parents teach their children and the expectations that they have of them. By teaching children certain ways of expressing their gender in a normative way, the bigger culture of gendered norms and symbols are reinforced through generations. One way to transmit norms is through imitation behavior, which means that children imitate the gendered behavior of their parents and parents stimulating this (Schönpflug, 2001). This is often an unconscious way of teaching children gendered behavior. Another way of transmitting normative gendered behavior is through vocabulary parents use towards their children. An example of this is the Dutch saying: *'meisjes plagen, zoentjes vragen'*, which translates roughly into *teasing girls means asking for kisses,* and is aimed at boys when teasing a girl. Another way of how gendered roles are transmitted through parent-child interaction, is the way that certain symbols are attached to gender roles. Think of the division in toy stores: pink for girls, blue for boys. I was curious to see if being taught these gendered roles would also be present in my upbringing, and therefor in my mother's journals.

Introducing my mother's documents

A part of my thesis journey existed of reliving the past through my mother's journals. In 1989 – two years before my eldest brother was born – she started her first diary and writes her last pages in the summer of 2003 in her sixth diary. Around the third book, in 1995, the middle brother was born and in the fourth, in 1997, I surfaced the earth. In over a decade of written documents she discusses her day-to-day life as a woman, a wife and a mother. The journals of my mother do not only come alive through the lively and detailed storytelling, but also due to the fact that she added materials such as pictures, post-cards and even a curl or two from me or one of my brothers. Adding materials such as these add a different sensation to the albums. The materiality of for example hair, taped into the book, has a certain feeling to it. A touchable connection to the past.

A couple of themes became clear during my reading sessions, while focusing on relevant information with regard to this thesis subject. I photographed and wrote down paragraphs that were most relevant to discuss and sorted them into themes. While discussing examples from her diaries I will refer to some people by using he/she in brackets, for their anonymity.

Trucks for boys, dolls for girls

The main theme that stands out during all six of the journals is gender. Gendered roles, gendered behavior, gendered gifts and materials. It is interesting that my mother seemed to reflect quite actively of how gendered behavior seeps into the being of her children. In some examples she even explicitly adds how gender role-affirming some anecdotes are: *"[She] and [he] can play wonderfully together. They come up with whole role-plays, [she] with my hat on, [he] with [his father's] bow tie. How role-affirming!".* This is a textbook example of gendered norms being transmitted through imitation behavior (Schönpflug, 2001), where the two kids play out scenario's that they recognized from their parents. Or, take a look at image 5, glued into the first journal, which shows a display of all the blue materials my mother got or gathered when having her first son. Here, through materiality we see how the color blue is related to being a boy.

Image 5: It's a boy! (source: mom's journals)

Ja hoor, ze speelt met poppen!!
(Toch merk ik (tot m'n schrik) dat ik Loes niét attendeer op
grote geaafmachines of zo, terwijl ik dat bij Bram wél deed!
En ik maar denken dat ik geen onderscheid maak!)
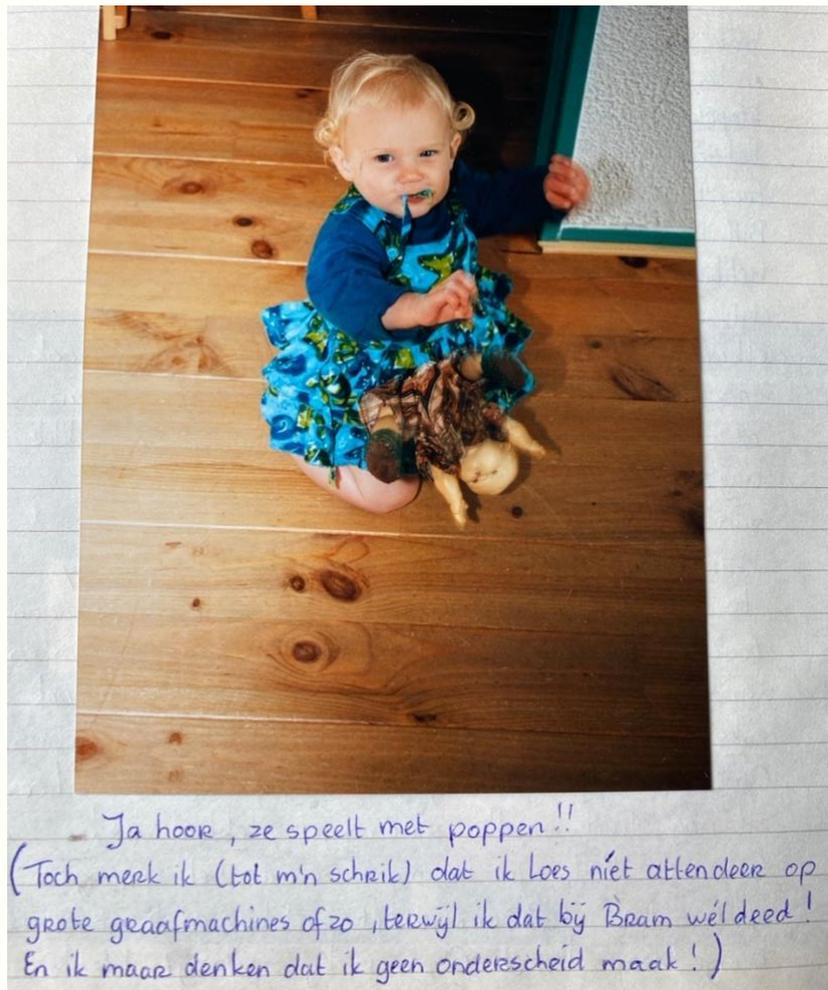
Image 6: Playing with dolls (source: mom's journals)

Image 6 is a picture from one of the later journals, of me playing with a doll. The caption reads:

> *"Yes, she plays with dolls!! Yet I notice (to my horror) that I do not draw Loes's attention to large excavators or something, while I did do so with [her brother]. And here am I, thinking that I make no distinction!".*

In these two pictures (and especially when taking the caption into account) show certain distinctions that were made between me and my brothers. There were certain materials, roles, assigned to me because I am a girl. It is interesting to see how my mother realizes that she, in all her awareness, still conformed to the societal gendered roles that boys and girls are put into; dolls are for girls, trucks are for boys (Butler, 2002). It emerges here that the social gendered scripts are not necessarily superimposed on purpose. It escapes us, the gender roles and performances lie dormant in our daily lives and we often seem to notice them only when they have already been performed.

Being a working mom

A second theme that is very present throughout all six diaries consists of paragraphs about reconciling motherhood and work. In the first book, my mother mainly discusses her insecurities about being a new mother. Is she doing it all right? Will her body return to the way it was before pregnancy? An example of this is when she goes to a mom group, where young mothers get together to discuss aspects of motherhood. She describes how she did not conform to what the group thought about breastfeeding and how it made her feel like a bad mother. Sections such as these reveal the uncertainties associated with becoming a mother and the pressure that this puts on women. Another thought that returns throughout the book is whether her body will still look attractive enough after the pregnancy: *"Will all of this spring back? Or will I have a hanging belly?!".* Concerns that indicate a certain (social) expectation, of wanting to meet all feminine standards and ideal image, which can be related to the previously discussed size zero beauty ideal (Xiao & Wang, 2020). The high expectations of oneself as a woman in her many roles becomes also clear through the next quote: *"Yesterday [my husband] said," You are now a married woman with a child. " Well, that sounds different from the ordinary [me]!".* Here, it becomes very explicit that certain roles that women might get, such as becoming a wife, becoming a mother, changes the sense of self as a woman.

In addition to the concerns about motherhood in itself, the concerns about the combination of motherhood with work are discussed with great regularity. In the first album it starts with doubts about if it is okay to be a working mom:

"Last week I suddenly started to doubt whether I did it right and that I do it like that with a babysitter and keep working… Would [my son] experience any "damage" from that? Actually, it's going a bit better, but when I see him I sometimes suddenly find that I should be there every minute and enjoy it.".

This paragraph shows the uncertainty of the mom, working while she has a young kid. She wants to enjoy and spend every second with him and doubts her decision of continuing her career.

My mother's generation was supposedly the first generation of women from whom it was expected to work and to not only be a housewife. We read the struggle here between wanting to work but also wanting to be a present mom. While reading this, I wonder if my father had the same inner struggle while working full-time. Later, in the very last book, my mother writes a letter to her mother, my grandmother. My grandmother passed away when my mother was about my age, twenty-three years old. In the letter she describes her doubts about being a working mother, relating this also to the difference in generations. Image 7 below, shows part of the letter that my mother wrote to hers, which translates as:

"It's quite busy this way. And sometimes it grabs my throat when I think about how they should grow up. How they should become fully-fledged people and whether I can give them enough. Me, with all my own shortcomings and imperfections. It is different than back in the days. Sometimes I'm jealous of how things went back then. There was nothing to choose between, work or no work, children or no children. Nice and easy! But I know that wasn't the case. Not much has changed, I guess. Because making choices can also lead to feelings of guilt. That eternal doubt: am I doing it right? Good enough? I'm going to shower and get dressed now. I look awful! Goodbye mom.".

Image 7: A letter from mother to mother (source: mom's journals)

I find this letter relevant to include in this thesis, because it shows the frustration of my mother with the fact that she has to make choices that society puts before her. A choice that her mother never had to make, because her generation made it for her. A choice with a never perfect outcome, because everyone will always have comments from a different angle. These examples together to me sum up the struggle of feeling the need, or perhaps even the pressure, to be the perfect mother, the perfect wife, with the perfect body and the perfect career.

This chapter discussed how a mother influences the gender roles of her children, what differences are made between sons and daughters. I also discussed how being a woman seems to take on another dimension when multiple roles are included, such as being a wife or mother. And how all the expectations associated with these different roles influence the sense of being a woman.

I am woman

I am wise, but it's wisdom born of pain. I've paid the price, but look how much I gained. If I have to, I can do anything. I am strong. I am invincible. I am woman.

- Helen Reddy

In this final chapter, I discuss my friends and mother's answers to the main question of this study. As a final question, I asked them: *What does it mean to you to be a woman?* To this I got a variety of questions, with one clear thread; contradictions.

The duality of womanhood

When the answers to the big question popped up in my WhatsApp, they all seemed rather different at first glance, until the common thread was revealed with the answer: *"I experience being a woman as empowering, with a shadow side.".* Every answer appeared to be consisting of contradictions, of contrasts. The freedom versus the restrictions. The use of beauty versus its abuse. And the oppression against the endless fighting spirit.

Despite the many negative aspects that are mentioned and discussed during the previous questions, it is noted that there is freedom in the choices to wear make-up or not, or to wear both 'feminine' and 'masculine' clothing. This greater freedom of choice in the literal bearing of identity is a freedom that unfortunately men do not always have. By that it is discussed how being a woman entails a certain emotional freedom, an 'advantage' that men are not granted when it comes to societal norms and values (Burt, 1980). The topic of toxic masculinity is brought to the table, directly related to womanhood: *"Toxic masculinity is still extremely present in our society and I think that this also goes hand in hand to a large extent with the negative experiences women go through. ".* Toxic masculinity is also a by society assigned gender performance, of which not only women become victim, but also negatively affects men (Burt, 1980; Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018). In these quotes the female freedom of emotions and being able to dress more freely, is directly contrasted with the restrictions that women face regarding other aspects of life.

The other women that I asked the same question, seem to be in a midfield in which they describe the contradictory nature of being a woman. That there is no positive or negative, but a mixture of aspects where there is a counterpart for all of those: *"[Being a woman] is very often feeling – unfortunately, but perhaps also fortunately – that you have to fight. That you*

have to take on the battle or that you must speak up to get what you are entitled to." This contradiction, of the happiness and unhappiness that comes with the fights that women fought over generations, is reflected in most of the answers:

> *"[Being a woman] means being part of a sisterhood with both the women of the now but also with the women before us and after us. Carrying a collective history. Having inherited the pain of generations over thousands of years.".*

This connection with generations of women before us, I also recognize in my mother's answer to the same question: *"As a woman, I also suffered from being a woman in a man's world. Together with other female colleagues, I fought and won the inequality in salary in relation to my male colleagues".* In all these answers, the combativeness of women comes to the fore. There is always a trade-off between the good and the bad sides of womanhood. The connection with it through generations shows a nice addition to the previous chapter. That not only gender roles are passed on, but also a certain feminine power.

To be powerfully vulnerable

I discover in myself an automatic tendency to divide the answers into a positive, a negative and anything in between. But it might not be a spectrum from positivity to negativity, but a spectrum of varied experiences, some of which outweigh others. As one of my friends said:

> *"I think that as a woman you experience the world differently, not worse or better, but just so different. I think that you are very versatile as a woman. You can really use your femininity on some things, and on some things it really gets in the way."*

The way I posed the question also elicited, to me, an unforeseen response. Two of my friends experienced it as a confronting question, one with which they had to connect their identity directly to 'being a woman'. One of them explains:

> *"I wish you could have asked the question, what does it mean to you to be human? But that is of course also one of the reasons that you are doing this research. [...] Male and female roles, gender, sex, are still determining factors for who, what and how you*

should be. I am a woman according to society, but I feel like a human being, not necessarily a woman.".

Lovingly I read the reactions of the attentive women around me, who are ready to speak up about what my questions do to them. The strings they can hit that I wasn't aware of. As described here, we as society, and I in my investigative role, label women. I knew of all these women that they did identify as female, but that does not mean that they identify by definition through womanhood. This reflection on question framing aside, the answers to my question were overall quite consistent. This chapter therefore showed a somewhat collective voice, stating that to be a woman is wonderful, with a raw edge: *"To be a woman is to be powerfully vulnerable."*

An end note

After months of reading, engaging in conversations and writing, this project has come to an end. With great appreciation towards all of the women that supported and encouraged me, I look back with a smile at the past months. This project has been inspiring, eye-opening and – as all thesis projects must be, especially in Coronatimes – sometimes a little frustrating. During this research I delved into the question of what it means to be a woman and to explore the effects of male dominance and patriarchal structures on the sense of self, of a woman. To make sense of what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated society, I've discussed some aspects of womanhood, revealing a number of trends.

The male gaze

A predominant trend during this research is male dominance, which manifests itself in several ways. Through theory of Bourdieu (2001) and Warner (2002), it is discussed how the public space is dominated by men via sexual objectification of women. Returning in the conversations with my friends, this construct turned out to be mainly expressed in forms of harassment. The regularity of bodily appropriation and its social acceptation, has led to a rape culture and creates a vulnerable position for women in society. The vulnerability of women in public space leads – according to theory – to adjustment behavior (Warner, 2002), which is indeed reflected throughout this research. It shows how women internalize the male gaze, which additionally points in the direction of De Beauvoir's construct of the man-made women (Hughes & Witz, 1997).

In the professional space male dominance occurs in, again, the form of physical harassment, but also in the form of objectifying women through language. Objectification is a term that stands out while discussing womanhood in relation to the work place, which mostly comes forward through the use of words. Through language, women are often reduced to merely a thing, an object, as discussed by Connor (2015). This relates to not only the sexualized male gaze as discussed in the first and second chapter, but also to the gendered roles constructed through repetition of gendered performances, as discussed by Butler (2002). Being treated as an object over time can result in self-objectification, which we saw reflected in this research as well (Hill & Fischer, 2008). (Self-)objectification seemed to have influence on the sense of being a woman, whereas there turned out to be signs of adjustment behavior. Women being reduced to an object appeared to be a repetitive pattern throughout this

research, which also became visible in the third chapter on body ideals. The size zero standard and the consequences for women of regular exposure to this ideal is discussed. By research of Xiao and Wang (2020) was shown how beauty standards become internalized aspects of womanhood and are related to (self) objectification. This research reflects these findings, while it affects some women more than others. Male dominance thus influences the sense of being a woman through physical, as well as more mental forms of (sexual) objectification.

The female gaze

Next to the male gaze influencing the sense of womanhood, there is also a strong female gaze that I would like to address. Throughout the fourth chapter, regarding intergenerational transmission of gender roles, another important trend within the sense of womanhood shows. Theory suggested that gendered roles are passed on to children through imitation behavior and language use, which does not neccesarilly happen on a conscious basis (Schönpflug, 2001). Analyzing my mother's journals reflects that gendered roles are indeed often taught in unconscious ways. Besides that the sense of being a woman is influenced from an early age by mothers (and fathers), being a woman is also influenced by becoming a mother.

There appear to be many female roles to fulfill. To be a career woman, to be a wife, to be a mother, and to always look good according to the social (male) eye. Balancing all these roles appears to be part of being a woman. Which may also be appropriate for the contrasting nature of being a woman, as described by all of the participants. The vulnerable power, the sacrifice to gain more, the rights fought for. The process of being a woman includes many gazes, many struggles, but also advantages and therefore has no unambiguous conceptualization. The single, clear, common thread is that being a woman consists of contrasts. Perhaps Helen Reddy already captured it all in her song *I am a woman* in 1972, as well as one of my beloved friends captured it all in a single voice memo: *"I am everything. I am woman. Fuck yeah!"*

Acknowledgment

An end note cannot come to an end without a word of thanks to all the women who were part of this project, including my friends, mother and thesis supervisor. I hope I did justice to all of their stories and that in turn I provided them with food for thought. These women all have a very special place in my heart and role in my life and I am forever grateful for their openness, support and cooperation to not only this project, but in life in general. Thank you, my loves, for always having my back. Also, a note of appreciation towards my mother, whom without I would not even had the chance to be. Thank you, my dear mom, for your willingness to share your most personal thoughts with me through your diaries and for supporting me throughout my studies, until the utmost end.

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Ethic and privacy checklist

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: *The female gaze*

Name, email of student: *Loes Mookhoek, 483499lm@student.eur.nl*

Name, email of supervisor: *Maja Hertoghs, hertoghs@essb.eur.nl*

Start date and duration: *April 2021 – June 2021*

Is the research study conducted within DPAS   **YES** - ~~NO~~

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants.   **YES** - ~~NO~~

    If 'NO': skip to part V.

    If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research?   ~~YES~~ - **NO**
    *Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO)
    must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central
    Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).*

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations
    that will not involve identification of participants.   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

    If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary
    data that has been anonymized by someone else).   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

    If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what
   participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed
   consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation
   at any time be withheld from participants?   ~~YES~~ – **NO**

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative
   emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?   ~~YES~~ - **NO**

6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by
   the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or
   philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric
   data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning
   mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life
   or sexual orientation)?   **YES** ~~NO~~

7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or
   other groups that cannot give consent?   ~~YES~~ -**NO**

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?   ~~YES~~ -**NO**

9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the
   confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?   **YES** ~~NO~~

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?   ~~YES~~ -**NO**

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this
issue is unavoidable in this study.

> *There is made use of personal documents (journals) of my mother, in which she
> discusses her mental health or issues regarding gender inequality. She gave consent
> for using everything that is in these documents. Her identity is not possible to keep
> anonymous, whereas I will refer to her as 'my mother' which is necessary for the
> research (in terms of intergenerational transmission). I also refer to of friends. They
> signed a form of consent and I kept their identity anonymous by referring to them
> without names.*

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g.,
informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

> *All of the participants have signed a consent form and agreed to me using their data.*

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

The study has caused no harm or had negative consequences for any of the participants involved.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

I collected my data through journals and writings of myself and my mother. And through asking questions to my mother and friends.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

20 women including my mother have participated in this study.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Dutch population, but this is not relevant for my study.

PART V: DATA STORAGE AND BACKUP

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?
Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

I store the data on my laptop and my back-up hard drive.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I am.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

I store the data on my laptop, of which I make a back-up on a weekly basis.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?
Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

I refer to my friends as "my friend(s)", and to my mother as "my mother" so I will not use their names of visual description. However, the identity of my mom is easy to track, but she has given consent to not be anonymous in my study.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: *Loes Mookhoek*   Name (EUR) supervisor: *Maja Hertoghs*

Date: *14-03-2021*   Date: 18-06-2021
Updated: *15-06-2021*