

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7552>



Feminist movement in the Netherlands

The Startupification of Feminism in the Netherlands: Looking for Business Leaders and Event Producers

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Tuesday 8 March 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights

reserved

Inclusivity and efficiency are often taken to be in contradiction in our current times. That's why professionalization seems like a good way out for many groups who want to have a societal impact. After all if you have experts deciding about your outreach policies, design material, and find money you might reach to more people and make the cause more visible, which would bring the change you aim for, right? Not if what you hope to contribute to is a transformative, grassroots societal change that aims to topple down the power dynamics that provide the blue print of what that professionalization entails. When immediate public visibility is seen as an end, it can marginalize the majority of the people who are the very subjects of the cause and the possibility of transformative change through collective learning can be lost.

The current "activism scene" in comparatively liberal societies, where the risk of being visible is less and resources are available, is often challenged by this dilemma. While being visible as a political activist can involve life threat for many in some countries in the Global South, the title "public speaker" is a badge many like to carry in the Global North. Combined with the availability of resources at local, national, and even European level, startupification of social movements is a trend in liberal societies. With the best of intentions or not, this involves seeing a gap in the social justice movements and instead of strengthening the already existing parts of the movement, substituting yourself for it.

The groups who are endowed with the know-how that funding agencies, municipalities and social media outlets value, get an augmented place in the social movements, which is most of the time not proportional to their actual strength. This can also work in marginalizing other participants of the very same social movement, who do not or cannot play with the rules of this game. Education, being tech-savvy, speaking the language of fundraisers, generational differences are just some of the attributes that make some activists more privileged than the others to be entrepreneurs in these start-up movements.

A good example of this trend is Women's March NL (WMNL), which appeared in the Dutch political scene after Trump's election, in 2017. Following the movement in the USA, on 21st January 2017, the day after Trump's inauguration, millions of women all around the world joined protests to grab Trump back with their pink "pussy hats," a symbolic action, which by a significant part of women's movement, ceased to be seen as an inclusive one later on. The main demonstration was organized by an organization called Women's March staging a rally in Washington DC with hundreds of thousands of people and reaching to millions of protestors across the USA.

We in the Netherlands, also joined these protests staged in front of the USA embassy in Amsterdam, called by WMNL. Interviews scattered in the Dutch media with organizers of WMNL suggest that the initiators, personally, were inspired and in connection with the USA group and distanced themselves later on, due to unannounced reasons, keeping the name. Following a big march in 2019, the group established itself as the main organizer of the women's rally around 8th March, the International Women's Day. While organizing a rally around women's day should deserve appreciation per se, the way it is done and its political strategy needs in-depth criticism. Women's March NL, by claiming a name that appropriates the whole cause, using the limited resources available for the movement, and deciding on behalf of it instead of through open, inclusive democratic processes requires an intervention.

By 2022, WMNL is officially an association organizing a yearly rally the weekend before the International Women's Day. Since its early days in 2017, WMNL has not conducted any open meetings and had ignored the call many times. They preferred to communicate with their "followers" with online surveys and [evaluations](#) asking information about participants, including which demonstrations they have attended, how they felt about participants and the

themes involved, and whether they would like to volunteer. Until 2021, when they founded an association, they had no public address, no board, and no communication device apart from [Twitter](#), [FB](#), and [IG](#) accounts. While they have been able to raise funds from various sources, including the largest trade union federation in the Netherlands (FNV), no channels have been made available for open debate and evaluation. Their current donors include organizations such as Amnesty International, Mama Cash, and Oxfam Novib. However, there are no published financial accounts up until February 2022. Almost one month before 8 March 2022, there are only advertisements for long-term volunteer work as business leader, communication manager, designer, event producer, programme compiler, and volunteer coordinator on WMNL website. For WMNL professionalization means giving ads on women's magazines and using social media to mobilize people to a once a year event with a big stage, good sound system and huge monitors on the weekend before 8th March. They are proud to work with "select groups" and announce speakers few days before the event.

The more visible they become, the more volunteers and the more funding they get. With more funding and more volunteers a bigger event will be organized. Will that help build a movement? Partially. Public visibility is an important tool for social and political movements. At what cost though? When public visibility and efficiency overshadows dynamics that bring together a democratic and inclusive movement, it is the latter that should be prioritized. This is even more important when the social movement at stake is particularly about a segment of population that is marginalized by the very norms of the capitalist, sexist society that prioritizes individual entrepreneurship, omnipotent leaders, and rhetoric of efficiency over process. Is it possible to help build a women's movement by playing with the same cards of the system that marginalizes women, non-binary people, differently abled bodies and racialized people?

This is a discussion about priorities of a movement. Building democratic, inclusive movements that give the right decisions for the movement and is empowering for each member of the group takes time. Deciding for the movement takes less time and is often more efficient but it refutes the whole reason of the movement's existence. If the subjects of a movement cannot do more than being invited to a rally every year, how empowering can that process be?

The efficiency of this kind of organization is questionable as well. The discussion about inclusivity and transparency is not only one of principles but also of strategies for building a strong women's movement, which not only flourishes from but necessitates open, critical, engaged discussions rather than alienating online questionnaires and filling in applications for [volunteering](#) or [soliciting](#) for positions. By not holding open meetings, or other channels that provide for a democratic, inclusive participation, WMNL does not only lose the opportunity to help build a bigger movement rather than once a year event, but also loses the opportunity to get enriched by the experiences accumulated by the social movements so far. Thus it strives to build things from scratch where it does not need to. A good example of this is last years' (2021) gathering, where the group chose to limit the number of participants by putting an online warning on their site that if you were not preregistered, you should not come to the gathering (due to Covid restrictions). They further pursued the policy by [monitoring](#) people who attended the rally, which ended up not being able to gather even the legally allowed 500 people.

However, many other groups, including the [Comite 21 maart](#) which used to function as a horizontal network of social movements gathered around anti racist activism, were able to organize bigger rallies within the framework of the same restrictions. Lately, [Comite 21 maart](#) also is having similar problems, which is a subject for another article. If the choice of preregistering participants and monitoring them upon arrival was discussed openly with a bigger group, there is no doubt that the decision would have been challenged. The less visible [8 March Committee](#), mainly composed of women from migrant background, was able to gather more people the same year, at a more central location, under pandemic conditions working with organizations and holding frequent meetings through out the year, without any funding.

Professionalization does not guarantee efficiency. Neither does it mobilize masses by itself. The 2019 March that has given WMNL the confidence that they brought 15,000 people on the streets was a product of its time as well.

March 2019 was a month of marches. The biggest demonstration that took place in the Netherlands in the recent years, the [Climate March](#), took place one day after the Women's March, on 10th March. Despite heavy rain, 40,000 people marched in Amsterdam for climate. Later in the same month 10,000 people marched against racism organized by Comite 21 Maart. Apart from the Womens' March, the other two rallies were organized by platforms and not just one organization. It was mainly the dynamics of the climate movement that gave energy to all social justice movements in 2019 in the Netherlands. Movements strengthened each other. Among other things, this visibility in 2019 gave the opportunity to WMNL to gather resources.

This attitude of "inventing the wheel" is particularly disorienting when it comes to women's movements. Women's movements are the richest movements in terms of the experiences accumulated both due to their long history and the particularity of the way they have been organized by women, through hours of meticulous discussion, "consciousness raising" sessions, reading groups, mutual aid groups, and other forms of solidarity that have focused on empowering the women involved by themselves and for themselves. WMNL seems to be blind to this history. Grassroots, emancipatory political movements, even if coming from a spectrum of differing analysis and tactics, all in all should work for strengthening the already existing movements and build up rather than substituting themselves in their place.

For years the main groups celebrating the 8th March and 1st May in Amsterdam have been migrants and refugees with socialist background coming from the Global South. For more than 10 years, the previously mentioned 8 March Committee, has been holding marches on 8th March in Amsterdam. It is not a coincidence but a reflection of women's movements in the countries where these women come from: Turkey, Kurdistan, Iran, Argentina, Brazil, to name a few, where women's movements constitute the most militant part of social and political movements. These are women who have been politicized in an environment where 8th March has been claimed as a day of struggle for women's solidarity and fight against male dominated capitalism. Before diversity politics was fun and funded, these women have been holding open meetings regularly to maintain a yearly activity. However, it was not easy for them to get in touch with WMNL and the only dialogue they could have was a phone conversation with someone based in the USA and over long negotiations they were "granted" stage time in 2020.

What's new in the west?

People speaking on behalf of WMNL tend to overstate their novelty. "We started after Trump was elected president, which was a breaking point for many people. Suddenly a lot of white women also realized how serious it was, haha! Oh shit, now even our privilege is in jeopardy" one of their [spokespersons states](#). [Elsewhere](#), they claim that history was made in 2017. Their claim to novelty focuses on two issues: anti-racism and intersectionality.

However, while the term intersectionality might have been confined to academic debates until a few years ago, what it entailed, namely the heterogeneity of women's movement, and the need to take into account the impact of multiple oppressions on women's lives, have not been foreign to women engaged in women's movements, at least not in last couple of decades. To argue that intersectional feminism is a rather new phenomenon is to be blind to the history of feminist movements around the world, many of which has been inclusive, tentative to differences among women in terms of class, ethnicity, and other factors.

Many years before the term intersectionality was popularized, women's movements cared for inclusivity and intersectionality problematizing the assumptions around an organic sisterhood. Grassroots women's organizations, mutual aid groups, neighbourhood associations have traditionally been the most inclusive places when compared to other, mixed, groups and movements. For example the women's movement in Turkey, has been unapologetically transinclusive, anti-nationalist, anti-racist and anti ableist since its initial years in the 1980s and they are not an exception particularly in the Global South. New [research](#) conducted by Atria, a Dutch institute on gender equality and

women's history also focuses on the leading role of Black, migrant and refugee women in anti-racist struggle in the Netherlands in 1980s and 1990s.

However, WMNL has a different understanding of intersectional feminism. For them Women's day is not about women, it is about all of us. In its 2019 call, WMNL started its communiqué as such: "2019 is not just about women. It is about all of us (f/m/x). In every way. Because all oppression is connected." Let me remind you another chant that, even though comes from a politically opposite pole, conveys the same idea: all lives matter. What is striking though is that a group which identifies with the political stance of BLM does not see how "it is not about women, it is all about us" undermines the struggle against the specific oppression that women (cis and trans) have fought for ages. When things are seen to be about "all of us" the structural inequality and violence becomes invisible.

Dutch feminist Anja Meulenbelt has articulated the criticism to this discourse of "togetherness" pretty strongly in her well known work [Shame is Over](#), already in 1976: "Yes, but we should work together, calls another man. What do you mean together? I ask. Where were you at the establishment of first liberation groups, which were still open to men. Were you there? Did you march in the abortion demonstration, do you do half of the housework? What do you mean by together? Is it chance that men are interested in feminism now, when we no longer wait for them, don't try to remain reasonable, to convince them, to take them with us?"

Having an intersectional approach brings awareness to the women's movement not to be blind to power dynamics beyond gender, such as class, ethnicity, skin color, age, etc. However, when it is used to equalize all oppressions and/or claim to fight all with one bullet, it falls into obliterating the cause once more. Women's day is about women. It is a day established to give visibility to women's oppression with all the axes it involves. It is a day organized by and for women, where women speak, where women lead. Men's position in women's movement has been an issue of debate in the women's movement and socialist movements. Different approaches exist, however, the point that the main subject of women's movement are women is hardly questioned. As is the case for many other movements, it is the people who are the main target of oppression that should be the leading forces of the movement. Being intersectional does not necessarily mean that a racialized man can pass as a speaker in Women's Day, because he is oppressed as well. In a day organized by WMNL, that can, without the need of any discussion and indeed ignoring many years of already existing discussion on women's autonomous movements.

The recent visibility of TERFs and the discussions they have evoked might be seen as a reason for underlining the intersectionality of the movement. Of course, there has always been a part of women's movement, which focused on breaking the glass ceiling for themselves instead of abolishing it for all. However, these orientations do not represent the whole women's movement and they should be marginalized instead of getting even more visibility. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler also underlined the marginality of this exclusionary view in one of their [interviews](#) when asked about the TERF question. Butler stated that it is worrisome to take trans-exclusionary radical feminist position as commonly accepted or even mainstream: "It is actually a fringe movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen.". WMNL claims a novelty by misrepresenting the movements that existed before itself. Having Queer, differently abled and Black people on stage or as "business leaders" and "communication advisers" does not automatically make an event inclusive.

International Solidarity and Collective Work

Despite the easily made connotation of the WMNL's name and the women's march they organize around 8th March and the International Women's Day, 8th March, they rarely reference to the International women's day. This is problematic at least in two ways. First, it breaks their ties with the women's movement for which 8th March has been a historical reference and a day for the visibility of the power of the women's movement worldwide and the possibilities of international solidarity. Therefore, it is a break with feminist internationalism.

8th of March is not just another day in the calendar of national holidays. As stated by Susan Pashkoff in "[In Honour of International Women's Day](#)", International Women's Day "was the culmination of a century of women working in the labour, feminist, socialist, and anti-slavery and segregation movements to bring together the common interests of the working class and women's rights advocates." Brought into the agenda of the Socialist International in 1911 by German socialists Clara Zetkin and Louise Ziet following the discussions at the preceding International Socialist Women's meeting, and taken up by many women activists around the world from USA to France, Austria and Russia, gathering around one specific day was established in the militant women's repertoires of action in early 20th century. While in the beginning, the women's day was not a definitive day, ranging between last weekend of February and 18th March; 1914 onwards, mobilizations on 8th March became a world wide practice (See also "[The Socialist Origins of International Women's Day](#)"). Temma Kaplan, in a similarly titled [article](#) written three decades ago, underlines the practice of formation of "the day" as a part of establishing secular communal traditions by 19th century socialists and anarchists, similar to the way 1st May Labour Day was established.

Breaking up with this legacy of internationalist solidarity and gains that extend to a century ago, should be seen as reactionary rather than novelty. The strife for a feminist internationalism is not a matter for the past, either. Neither it is an isolated phenomenon. In addition to its historical match, labour day, our generation has also witnessed the formation of global days of actions, when activists organize actions transnationally around one topic to augment the impact of their action and give visibility to the case at stake. This tactic has been actively used particularly since the beginning of the alter globalisation movement in early 2000s, where days of actions would be coordinated in Social Forums. To name some, activists' agendas would be marked around international peace day, day against racism, day against violence against women, and the most recent and visible addition to this list, day for climate action, etc. These days give a possibility for different segments of social movements to come together and organize actions at national and international level. None of the actions in these days are organized only by one group claiming the day. They provide the possibility of different segments of the social movements, groups having different perspectives on a matter and a variety of tactics, to come together and bring forward an action that fits to the agenda of all the components. That does not necessarily mean that all components agree on everything from then on, but discussion makes it possible to agree on a set of principles that make it possible for groups who have their own political line to work together and also to speak to more people who would feel a part of the movement.

Many times when confronted with the question of why not organizing on 8th but on the weekend before it, the answer from WMNL's would be that it is more convenient to meet on the weekends. This argument exposes the isolation of the group from the history of the women's movement worldwide and also the lack of connections with the current women's movement all around the world. Last year in the conditions of a worldwide pandemic, women in Turkey, Poland, France, Germany, Argentina, Belgium, Germany, Tokyo to name a few, were on streets on Monday 8th March claiming streets, claiming nights, their campuses, and work spaces. Moreover since 2016 not only celebrations and rallies but also a women's strike has been on the agenda of many women's movements around the world. Starting from 2016 [Polish women's protests](#) for abortion rights, the movement is discussing women's strikes in the world and not whether weekends are more convenient to march. As [Oksana Shine reported](#), on 8th March 2017, women's strikes were held in more than fifty countries around the world. In Spain, on [8th March 2018](#), more than 5 million women participated the strike. Women's strike has not only given a fresh breath to mobilizations around 8th of March but also inspired other movements, such as "[a day without immigrants](#)" in the USA in 2017. It is this international and cross movements dynamic that WMNL and organizations like them miss being a part of and contributor to.

The history of our movements, be it women's movements, LGBTIQ movements or other emancipatory movements, are full of examples where professionalization and discourse of efficiency damages the real cause: emancipation and empowerment of the very subjects of the movement. This is a discussion over whether a process of building a democratic and inclusive movement or having more space in the mainstream venues should be prioritized for a greater societal impact. This is not a new discussion. But one that we have to get involved in.

The Startupification of Feminism in the Netherlands: Looking for Business Leaders and Event Producers

Invoking the movement's inclusive and bottom-up memory, Dutch activist Tienieke Sumter talked about her years in Flamboyant, het Landelijk Zwarte en Migranten Vrouwen Centrum, in the mid 1980s at a recent gathering in Atria in Amsterdam, after watching the documentary on Audre Lorde's Berlin years. What happened to those discussions she was asking. "We are not getting together and talking anymore."

Building a movement requires getting together and talking, not being invited to a rally once a year.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.