



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Introduction: sexist garbage

Zurné, L.; Rana, J.; Oudenhuijsen, L.W.

Citation

Zurné, L., Rana, J., & Oudenhuijsen, L. W. (2024). Introduction: sexist garbage. *Lova Journal Of Feminist Anthropology And Gender Studies*, 45, 7-14. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4178465>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4178465>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction

Lise Zurné, Loes Oudenhuijsen and Jasmijn Rana

The second wave of feminism in the Netherlands over forty years ago has often been characterised as the *'praatgroepenbeweging'* (discussion group movement) referring to the rise of solidarity groups and spaces dedicated to discussing and advancing women's rights. Among these initiatives was the formal establishment of Lova in 1979, our network of feminist anthropologists. In the same period, one of the Netherlands' first feminist journals, *Socialisties Feministische Teksten* was published. For this 45th edition of our annual journal, we draw inspiration from one of its recurring rubrics that ran from 1978 until 1981 titled *'Seksisties Huisvuil'* ('Sexist Garbage'), which highlighted instances of sexism encountered by its editors in their work. Selma Sevenhuijsen, Joyce Outshoorn and Anja Meulenbelt frequently cited examples from literature, quoting well-known Dutch writers such as Jan Wolkers, who expressed fears of being 'overtaken' by women. 'Soon I will be a little writer walking down the street next to a professor. As long as [her education] doesn't shrink her breasts', Wolkers wrote – a telling example of the anxiety some men felt about losing status or being emasculated due to women's societal advancement.

Like Wolkers feared, women's levels of education have indeed risen considerably: for 23 consecutive years, more Dutch women than men have enrolled in higher education (CBS 2023). This increase, however, has not translated into a proportional representation in academic positions. While women make up 46% of PhD candidates and 47% of university lecturers (UD), only 29% of full professors and 35% of associate professors (UHD) in the Netherlands are women (Rathenau Instituut 2023). Although the percentage of women in academia is slowly rising, harassment and intimidation continue to prevent an

equal and inclusive environment for academics who are not men (LNVH 2019). A survey conducted by Argos at all Dutch universities revealed a sharp increase in reported incidents of sexual harassment, from 141 cases in 2019 to 300 in 2022, along with a similar rise in reports of other types of unwanted behaviour, from 1,007 incidents in 2019 to 1,700 in 2022. While the Netherlands often prides itself on its supposed 'progressiveness', report after report highlights the persistence of sexism, misogyny and gender inequality. Unsurprisingly, many Lova meetings have included extensive discussions about the inequalities faced within these patriarchal spaces. 45 years after the rubric *Seksisties Huisvuil*, many of us still encounter our fair share of 'sexist garbage' on a daily basis. While patriarchal tendencies remain deeply embedded in popular culture and society at large, this demonstrates how our classrooms, university hallways, and academic texts are by no means exceptions.

Yet, most instances of sexism we encounter remain unspoken for various reasons. With fierce competition for the few paid academic positions – expected to intensify with proposed budget cuts for higher education (NWO 2024) – many women feel pressured to downplay or withhold the difficulties they encounter. Moreover, they often seem so common or mundane that they barely seem worth mentioning, or we simply laugh them off. While indeed, we can vent and joke about these incidents in informal settings with friends, colleagues or at Lova dinners, they nonetheless reveal an underlying and persistent frustration. It is these conversations that inspired us to compile this Special Issue for the 45th edition of this journal, with the aim of bringing personal stories to the forefront and making the often hidden experiences of sexism more visible. As such, we invited our members and contributors to share their daily encounters with 'sexist garbage' anonymously, keeping in mind the precarity of some contributors' academic positions. Some of them expressed the hope to speak out in the future, when they would feel more respected and their jobs are secured, others just felt more free in their writing when it would be published anonymously. Out of solidarity and equity, we have decided

to anonymise all contributions. This doesn't mean that the contributors are not proud of their texts, and some might choose to share their work as theirs on their CVs.

The result is this booklet you are holding now in your hands – or perhaps viewing on your screen, thanks to the new digital format we now offer. It starts off with a short poem titled 'With a men and then men'. In it, the author reflects on feeling marginalised and under-valued in an academic setting, despite being an established scholar. It addresses themes of gender dynamics, personal struggles, and the challenges of navigating a professional environment filled with barriers and power imbalances.

The second feature, 'Choice', presents a personal narrative from a relatively new assistant professor at a Dutch university. The author recounts a departmental discussion regarding budget allocations, specifically focusing on funding for research-related field trips. During the conversation, a colleague asserts that he has 'no issues' covering the expenses of these trips from his own salary. In response, the author highlights the additional costs associated with bringing family members along, which are quickly dismissed as a personal choice. This narrative illuminates the diverse challenges and considerations that women encounter in contemporary society as they balance motherhood with professional aspirations.

The third submission focuses on the 'silent modesty' many of us employ when faced with everyday sexism: inappropriate hugs, flirtatious comments, 'accidental' physical touch. The author discusses how women in particular are socialised from a young age to refrain from speaking up, noting that this silence is frequently interpreted as shyness or modesty – traits that are often devalued in the context of academic performance. Consequently, the author argues that this expectation reflects a patriarchal construct. Moreover, the capacity to voice one's thoughts is intrinsically linked to others' willingness to listen, a skill that is similarly imperative for educators. Silence is also a form of communication, after all.

In 'A tale of survival in grad school', the author shares her difficult experience as the only woman in her research team during the pandemic. Faced with gaslighting from her PhD advisor and over-whelming pressure to constantly communicate, even during personal time, she struggled with anxiety and considered quitting her programme. The author describes feeling manipulated and diminished by a male colleague who claimed to understand women based on his past experiences, reducing her accomplishments to stereotypes. Despite the emotional turmoil and isolation, the author eventually sought support from other women in academia, who validated her experiences and encouraged her to change advisors. This pivotal decision allowed her to reclaim her agency and address the trauma she had endured. The contribution therefore reiterates the importance of community while advocating for a culture that acknowledges the challenges faced by marginalised individuals in academia.

Our fifth feature, 'Poetry and pleasure', discusses the challenges the author encountered while researching a forum dedicated to combating self-diagnosed porn addiction. They describe not being surprised by the sexist discourse encountered online, including evolutionary narratives on gender and sexuality, men's sexual entitlement to women, and the heteronormative coital as an imperative. Yet, it is stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation by fellow academics which results in the burden of emotional labour. The author describes being faced with dismissal, allusive jokes, and assumptions regarding their sexual availability: researching male masturbation was interpreted as more than an academic interest, it was considered 'dirty'. The author highlights the complexities of navigating the intersections of personal and academic identities in a field marked by stigma. The essay also emphasises the significance of pleasure and poetry as tools of resistance against stigma, by allowing them to reclaim their voice and assert the legitimacy of their research.

This 45th edition also features a comic for the first time in the journal's history. In it, the author graphically represents the 'garbage' women

instructors are faced with after the end of each term: the comments found in the anonymised, quantitative surveys that students are asked to fill in after completing a course. Indeed, studies demonstrate a persistent gender bias where male instructors receive significantly higher ratings as compared to their female counterparts (Khokhlova, Nishtha and Kishore 2023; Utoft and Pradhan 2024). Indeed, the author refers to some of the ways women have been described by students: as bossy, strict, or mean. Moreover, women receive much more comments on their physical appearance, such as their clothing, body type, voice or posture. The result: an overflowing bin of heavy and stinky ‘sexist garbage’.

The comic is followed by a short poem that reiterates how staff of colour tend to be made responsible for the ‘diversity’ within an academic department. They are handed the task to make courses more inclusive and intersectional, while their expertise is simultaneously reduced to a single trope. While initially not deemed good enough for a guest lecture, the author described how their main idea is subsequently hijacked by a male colleague, taking all the credits.

In ‘Transphobic trash: A complaint biography of institutional violence’, the author recounts their experience with institutional transphobia during their PhD. After co-authoring an open letter against a transphobic event, they faced a formal complaint from a member of a hate group, leading to a prolonged disciplinary process marked by trauma and a lack of institutional support. Despite facing multiple charges and potential expulsion, the author garnered support from the trans community, ultimately resulting in the dismissal of the proceedings due to the psychological harm caused. They emphasise the lasting impact of this experience on their mental health while highlighting the importance of solidarity and collective action, which sparked protests against transphobia at their university.

In the subsequent contribution, ‘Taking turns: The effects of everyday sexism on the pursuit of transnational academic belonging’, the author

shares their experiences with sexism while pursuing a PhD in the UK after moving from the Netherlands, and similarly highlights the need for a broader understanding of sexism in academia that includes all genders. While discussions typically focus on men's violence toward women, the author points out that female peers can also perpetuate harmful behaviour, often rooted in insecurity and imposter syndrome. Drawing upon personal experiences, the author observed that female colleagues downplayed their ambitions, leading to an environment where confidence felt threatening. As an immigrant and first-generation student, they struggled with feelings of inadequacy, which worsened due to the unwelcoming academic culture. This contribution illustrates how sexism can manifest subtly among women, creating a culture of insecurity rather than solidarity. Hence, our understanding of sexism should be broadened, by recognising the transnational tendencies and diverse experiences in order to create a more supportive academic environment.

Approaching the same topic from a different angle, 'The TERF in the house: A conversation with Virginia Woolf' is a reflection on the struggle against internalised transphobia and the pain caused by trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF). They draw on Virginia Woolf's idea of 'The angel in the house' to describe the pressures that limit self-expression and express disappointment that some influential feminists have embraced harmful views, resulting in a feeling of betrayal. They acknowledge that while they share critiques of gender concepts with TERFs, these feminists ultimately oversimplify complex issues and unfairly target marginalised groups. This conflict subsequently results in feelings of confusion and alienation within the feminist movement, as the author grapples with the toxic rhetoric that permeates feminist spaces. Ultimately, the author reveals their fears of being seen as an outsider in a community that should be supportive, highlighting the emotional toll of navigating these challenges.

For our last contribution, we circle back to the past, as we present you an essay recounting the sexist experience of some of Lova's most

senior members. This conversation was recorded during a dinner in which experiences of 'everyday sexism' from the 1970s until today were shared and reflected on. What has changed with regards to the sexist garbage scholars encounter and how do we keep fighting it? The conversation revealed that although certain forms of inappropriate behaviour like physical harassment, sexual remarks, and denigrating comments from senior colleagues is less accepted today, speaking out against unwanted behaviour remains difficult – the fact that the contributions are published anonymously attests to this. What's more, sexist garbage today might be more subtle and under the surface, and therefore difficult to pinpoint as part of a persistent patriarchal culture.

In summary, this collection of contributions, with its diversity of form and content, underscores the persistent reality of (everyday) sexism within higher education. While overt sexism is increasingly criticised by society at large, the continuation of these experiences shared here reveal a paradox: many of those who openly denounce sexism in others, still struggle to apply this same critical lens to their own actions and environments. For example, colleagues who acknowledge the power imbalances and patriarchal structures present in academia may nevertheless perpetuate these very same dynamics, although often in a more subtle manner. By compiling these stories, this issue not only highlights the complexity of confronting sexism but also creates a record beyond the informal conversations in small groups, as an archive of shared experiences.

References

- Argos, VPRO. 2022. 'Stijging ook bij andere vormen van grensoverschrijdend gedrag.' Accessed November 1, 2024. <https://www.vpro.nl/argos/leesonderwerpen/artikelen/2023/meldingen-seksueel-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-op-universiteiten-in-vier-jaar-tijd-meer-dan-verdubbeld.html#:~:text=Het%20is%20een%20ernstig%20probleem,%2C%20een%20stijging%20van%2069%25>.
- CBS. 2023. 'Al 23 jaar op rij meer vrouwen dan mannen in hoger onderwijs.' Accessed November 13, 2024. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/10/al-23-jaar-op-rij-meer-vrouwen-dan-mannen-in-hoger-onderwijs>
- Khokhlova, Olga, Nishtha Lamba, and Sameer Kishore. 2023. 'Evaluating Student Evaluations: Evidence of Gender Bias against Women in Higher Education Based on Perceived Learning and Instructor Personality.' *Frontiers in Education* 8 (July). <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1158132>.
- LNVH. 2019. 'Monitor Vrouwelijke Hoogleraren.' Accessed November 1, 2024. <https://www.lnvh.nl/monitor2019/>
- NWO. 2024. Budget cuts hit the Netherlands as a country of knowledge. Effective September 17, 2024. <https://www.nwo.nl/en/news/nwo-budget-cuts-hit-the-netherlands-as-a-country-of-knowledge>
- Utoft, Ea Høg, and Anuja Anil Pradhan. 2024. 'Dehumanised and Objectified: How Student Evaluations of Teaching Become Neoliberal Technologies to Control Lecturers.' *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 27 (2/3): 151-70.
- Rathenau Instituut. 2023. 'Women in Academia.' Accessed November 1, 2024. <https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/personnel/women-science/women-academia>

