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The timelessness of sexist garbage

Jasmijn Rana and Loes Oudenhuijsen

Sexist garbage comes in all forms and shapes, and is of all times. The idea for this special issue of Lova Journal came into being during a reunion of some of the founding members of Lova network, during a communal dinner at a restaurant in Utrecht in September 2023. In September 2024, we decided to meet again to follow up on what our conversation in 2023 had led to. We invited five Lova members from a variety of generations for another dinner date, during which we all shared our stories and experiences and reflected on continuity and change with regards to experiencing sexist garbage in the academy. This article is a report of that conversation, supplemented with written experiences from three others who were not able to join in person. What are the pasts, presents and futures of sexist garbage in academia?

'WOMANISERS' AND THEIR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

I remember it so vividly. I was wearing a blue tight short skirt, it was lovely, when I headed to the library. At that time, the anthropology library was still based at our own institute, so colleagues were walking in and out. I had to bend down to get a book from the lowest shelf. An associate professor walked by at that exact moment, and he slapped my butt! I was flabbergasted. I was enraged and felt degraded! But I wasn't able to say anything. I was too stupefied. And he probably thought he was just being his jovial self...

When this retired university professor shared her experience, we could all see from her body language and tone of voice how vividly she remembered the incident, and how angry she still was at what happened. We soon established that these incidents were all too common in the experiences of the women at the dinner table. Both in the past and presently, senior colleagues in positions of authority have been wrapping arms around shoulders ('as if we were a couple!'), grabbing arms and whispering that they are so lonely, putting hands on thighs, and even kissing lips. Experiences were shared about how the women were creating physical distance, verbally explaining boundaries, and also brushing things off and quickly forgetting about what happened.

In all institutes, everyone knew who the biggest 'womaniser' was. Every institute seemed to have at least one professor who was sleeping with his students. Everyone knew at least one male professor who ended up marrying one of his students: 'we discussed this among ourselves, of course. But at the same time, there was not much we could do, except warn each other for certain male professors'. And still today, it is difficult to speak out against such behaviour, and people are afraid of the repercussions for their academic careers. The anonymous contributions in the Journal issue attest to this.

At least three of the women in our conversations were approached for sexual intercourse by a senior male colleague themselves. Inappropriately, not only because in the eyes of the women nothing in their behaviour should have given the men the idea that sexual advances would be appropriate, but also because in every single instance it concerned a hierarchical power relation in which sexual advances are inherently problematic. In one case, the scholar is still haunted by insecurity that resulted from such interactions:

My promotor really fancied me. He never did anything to me physically, but mentally it absolutely left a mark. At one point he even wrote me a letter, in which said he was so sad that

I was together with my now-husband, because he still had hopes that one day he and I would end up together. This made me so insecure. I constantly asked myself: am I in this position because I am a good scholar, or only because he liked me and wanted something else from me?

‘Nothing happened physically’, but the tension of a man who clearly wanted something to happen takes its toll on women. Another scholar narrated how one night, home alone, the doorbell rang, and her male colleague was in the doorway and invited himself in. ‘He thought that, since I was living all by myself, I would surely feel the need for male companionship’. Again, nothing happened physically, but the fear that these ‘incidents’ entice are profound. The name of this man rings a bell with some other interlocutors as well. Apparently, more stories were circulating about his behaviour. Male colleagues, too, noticed that ‘we should keep an eye on him’. Although the person in question left the department before his retirement, no one knows why he left. This incident sparked a discussion on a wider issue during our discussion at the dinner table: when is behaviour inappropriate? And how do we discuss what is appropriate or not?

‘A WOMAN HAS TO GROVEL FOR ME’

The experiences that the women in this conversation shared, all happened before the #MeToo movement, and before the emergence of so-called emancipation committees in the 1990s. But even now that every university has a complaints committee and an ombuds-person, inappropriate behaviour is sometimes hard to distinguish:

Every woman knows what it feels like if a man ‘undresses you with his eyes’. We all experienced this. We had one professor who was known for this behaviour and so many women dreaded going to his lectures. But there was so little we could do about this. We didn’t have a language for this, let alone a structure to deal with it. It was almost a non-issue.

For many people, including many women too, such inappropriate behaviour was considered a non-issue, and the common agreement was that addressing these supposedly minor incidents would take away space from more serious issues like assault and rape. If there is assault and rape, who are we to complain about being looked at awkwardly? Nowadays, our interlocutors agreed, we are all more aware of how rape, femicide and sexual assault represent only the tip of the iceberg. Heteronormative and gendered expectations, sexualised behaviour and 'jokes' are a less visible part of the same dynamics that enable rape culture. One male professor was caught saying that 'a woman needs to grovel for me' (in Dutch *'een vrouw moet voor mij door het stof gaan'*), which was a clear indication that he regarded women as inferior, but this was not out of the ordinary:

When I announced that I would be researching elite society, the men in the office asked if I had enough pearl necklaces and skirt-suits for this research! I was sharp enough at that moment to respond with a counter question: did they also ask male researchers if they had enough suits and ties for their research? And even thirty years later, he would still make a stupid remark such as suggesting we young girls (in Dutch *'meisjes'*) probably want to go to the hairdresser when we were invited for a keynote lecture.

These very gendered remarks about women colleagues in no way were appreciated by women scholars in the eighties and nineties. At the same time, it was normalised in everyday language. A language that belittled women was almost standard. It is important to note that the degradation of women did not only address women colleagues, but also concerned women at the field sites of the male scholars. As one scholar recounted: 'he described South America as a place where he could walk around 'sperm-squirting (in Dutch *'zaad-spuited'*), because there were so many beautiful women there'. These horrific remarks show not only the ingrained misogyny, but also the hierarchical structures of academia.

DISADVANTAGES IN PURSUING AN ACADEMIC CAREER

Another common thread in our conversations with these women, most of whom retired already, was how being a woman has not been beneficial for their careers. One of them, a Lova member for several decades now, reminisced how she never pursued a PhD. In the late 1970s, she was offered a PhD position. She had just finished her *doctoraalscriptie* (now comparable to a master's degree) on a topic and area a professor was working on as well. He thought she was a good candidate for doctoral research, but suggested she could do this without receiving any pay. 'He assumed that I would, as a woman, have a husband who could take care of the household income. And then I could focus on doing research. But I rejected it indignantly because I wanted to earn my own income!' Later, she applied for funding with the help of someone else, but without success. Instead, she had multiple temporary teaching and research jobs until receiving a part time permanent contract. But also after obtaining a PhD degree, women experienced disadvantages when it concerned promotions:

When the university made the institutional shift from '*medewerkers*' (employees) and '*hoofdmedewerkers*' (principal employees) to '*universitair docent*' (assistant professor) and '*universitair hoofddocent*' (associate professor), there was not enough money to make every '*hoofdmedewerker*' a '*hoofddocent*'. So they evaluated everyone's files, to decide who was worthy of this title. I was basically demoted to assistant professor. Their explanation was that I did not publish as much as my peers. But they didn't take into account that I only had a part time job. They expected me to publish as much as people with a full-time job, while I was only paid, and worked, fifty percent.

This woman complained to several layers of the university, but without success. Luckily, she applied for a position at another university where her work was valued, and she eventually was promoted to full professor. Three others shared similar experiences of the walls they hit every

time they should be up for promotion. One common theme in climbing the academic ladder was the difficulties they encountered when pregnancies were discussed. One retired woman reminisced how after years of juggling temporary contracts, she was promised a part time job (of 50%), but only after her pregnancy. She lost her job, without having any pregnancy or maternity leave benefits. She found out that during all this time she had been offered temporary contracts, this had only been to keep the position open for a white male professor to return after fieldwork and missionary work. After three weeks of giving birth, she was lecturing again, while her institute tried to diminish her contract to only 20%. Luckily, she found the union to be helpful in negotiating the 50% contract retroactively from the moment she left the institute while pregnant.

While these examples stem from the 1980s, we know that still in the 2020s, motherhood does not come easy to scholars, as other contributions in this journal issue also demonstrate. Research shows that international mobility in academia takes a toll on romantic relationships for women in particular (Shevtsova 2023; Utoft, Vertelyte and Gao 2024). How women are disadvantaged time and time again often becomes clear in times of crisis. Research on publication rates during the COVID-19 pandemic show that across academic disciplines, men found more time to submit manuscripts during lockdowns, whereas women submitted fewer manuscripts (Cui, Ding and Zhu 2022; Viglione 2020), yet continued to perform proportionally more peer review tasks (Squazzoni et al. 2021). During our conversation, we shared instances of women taking up caring roles within the institute, to make sure the institutes survived and the students were supported. This kind of work, however, is never valued in the same way as publications are.

BEING TOO OUTSPOKEN

In a performance review, my supervisor commented that I spoke a lot during the meetings he chaired. I asked him what he meant: 'do you think I speak often or long, which one is it?' He answered 'both', and I said I was surprised because there are colleagues who clearly speak as often and much longer than I do. He asked me 'who then?' When I gave examples of two male colleagues, he reacted by standing up for them. 'Yeah', he said, 'but when [Man A] is angry he gets carried away. And [Man B], he explained, is a philosopher, and you know what that means'. I think that my supervisor was using different standards for my male colleagues and me. For me, as a woman, there was no such 'logical' reason to take up space.

Taking up space and speaking up – it seems like a hard pill to swallow for men who are used to this being only assigned to men. Women taking space by speaking up seems to remain problematic. This, too, comes back in the contributions for this issue of our Journal. Another woman remembered how, when as a PhD student she had asked a question during a seminar in which she compared the work of Marx and Foucault, the lecturer had responded that this matter was way too complicated for her. But when a male colleague amplified her question, the issue was eventually discussed.

It appeared to be a common experience that only when a point is repeated by a man, it is considered worthy of discussion; without acknowledging the woman who first raised the issue. A similar dynamic appears with regards to women's research contributions. Where women focus on topics that are considered women's topics, including motherhood, family, care, these topics are not granted the same time and space as topics that are deemed more masculine. While this has been a fight since Margaret Mead entered the field of anthropology, it seems forever ongoing.

There is clear fear that the status quo is disrupted, and women embody that disruption, and queer women even more so. One woman shared how her male colleague, someone who bragged about ‘only having women in his stable’, was afraid she would ‘convert’ all women. Her queerness takes up space that approached his masculinity too much, and with it the status quo of the taken-for-granted hierarchy.

One of the not-so-old and not-retired-yet interlocutors also shared how her outspokenness could cost her the continuation of her job. She was invited once as an expert witness in case of sexual harassment, but the lawyers of her institution did not call her to the stand, because she was considered too much as a ‘woke feminist activist’. Ironically, being hired for one’s expertise in social justice and diversity, can backfire when that same expertise is used against you. But her involvement in this case, combined with her contributions on social media were not appreciated by her institute either. Colleagues higher up started warning her about being too outspoken on social media: it might impact the continuation of her job. She has not stopped her engagement on social media, but is now more careful in explaining everything when she shares a post.

WOMEN’S COMPLICITY

When women’s studies emerged in the Netherlands in the 1970s, discussions about the need to have women’s studies were abundant, both in academia and in broader public debate. It was a constant struggle to argue for the need to have women’s studies and feminist studies at universities. Many scholars found the introduction of women’s studies redundant. Among them were also women. In this way, some women have been complicit in not striving for equality in Dutch academia, and anthropology more specifically.

The same is true for sexually inappropriate behaviour, which some women would trivialise, or simply brush off. What does it say if a female full professor doesn’t speak up when she is slapped on the butt by

a male colleague (albeit on a bike ride, as one woman shared)? Do women still fear being the 'killjoy', or not being 'one of the guys', or the 'feminazi'? Or if women argue that 'men are just being men', downplaying their abuse. Women have also been complicit in arguing that scholars should not have children. One scholar shared how a woman professor in the 1990s also argued how motherhood and academia clash. If women would become mothers, then one child should be a maximum (the amount this particular scholar herself had).

But the women in this conversation also know of women professors who would have sexual relations with women lower in the university hierarchy, or with students; and of women in high positions who would abuse their position of power. More so than mere sexism, hierarchy and competition are also important factors that shape these dynamics. This is not a thing of the past - and a fear that came up during our conversation was that the future might be more bleak than the present. Especially in this day and age, where right-wing politics are gaining ground, toxic masculinity is celebrated by some famous influencers, 'gender criticism' is becoming mainstream and young women aspire to become 'trad-wives', this is an urgent matter that we as feminist anthropologists need to discuss and tackle.

CONCLUSION: WHAT HAS BEEN DONE AND WHAT TO DO?

It is clearly still an issue: how do we discuss and deal with inappropriate behaviour that is hard to explain, such as the feeling of 'undressing someone with his eyes'? The more recent cases at Dutch universities where complaint committees have found male professors guilty of sexual harassment or bullying, show how difficult this process is. Very often, it takes years to build up a file. Years in which women are silently leaving the workplace, and men continue their behaviour. And even when these scholars are found guilty, they are often not fired, but they leave with a special arrangement in which they still keep their salaries or their pensions, but not the teaching and administrative obligations. Instead, they end up with more time to write their publications.

Many of the instances in this article might not be common in this time and age: sexual advances of senior colleagues in positions of power, a slap on the butt and denigrating talk is absolutely not as common as it was 40 years ago. Having more women and queer scholars in academia might have certainly helped in changing the tides, but for a gender equal future in academia, the work is not over. Sexist garbage might be more subtle and under the surface, but therefore harder to detect and tackle. A more right-wing future is on the horizon which asks for even more vigilance and activism. One thing that all women agreed on, is how having a language for more subtle instances of sexism is important. Let's call it what it is: sexist garbage.



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