

**The Management of Gender Difference and Immigrant Integration  
Policy in the Netherlands**

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**DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

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## **Abstract**

Earlier research on immigrant integration policies in the Netherlands shows a movement towards cultural assimilation. A general sense that the integration of immigrants has failed has led recent cabinets to develop demands that immigrants, both new and old, learn not only the Dutch language but also assimilate into Dutch culture. I have argued that this movement towards assimilation in policy making is in part inspired by a fear of gender difference particularly between non-immigrant Dutch and immigrants of Muslim background. In this paper, I assess how gender differences have been managed both in emancipation and immigrant integration policies by analyzing a recent government report on the trajectory of immigrant integration in the last 30 years, supplemented with other recent policy proposals and debates. I argue that the way gender differences are currently managed by the highest level of policy makers seems to reinforce perceptions of the gendered practices of minority women and girls (as well as men and boys) that have given rise to calls for strong forms of assimilation. A counter current to this trend takes place at the local level where more complex pathways towards gender equality are being developed.

There has been a dramatic change in policy towards immigrants in the Netherlands over the past decade and a half. Others have documented how policy moved from emphasizing the maintenance of group difference, or multi-culturalism, from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, towards emphasizing individual integration into Dutch society (Entzinger 2003, forthcoming). More recently, various scholars have been raising the alarm that current integration policies are rapidly starting to look like calls for strong forms of assimilation or forms of assimilation that demand that immigrants adopt not only the practices necessary to function within the Dutch economy and polity but also adopt cultural practices associated with “being Dutch” (Entzinger, forthcoming, de Hart 2005, Korteweg forthcoming, see also Brubaker 2003). A continuing lag in immigrants’ economic integration as well as concerns about the rise of fundamentalist forms of Islam and continued cultural differences are at the root of this recent shift both in policy and in public opinion.

That this policy shift reflects public concerns about the integration of immigrants is evident in the public discussion that ensued after the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh. My reading of this debate shows that gender plays a key role in the perceived cultural clash between Muslim immigrants to the Netherlands and non-immigrant Dutch (Korteweg, forthcoming). Van Gogh became a target after making a movie based on a script by Dutch liberal parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The movie focused on the treatment of women within Islam and that showed texts from the Koran written on the naked bodies of women. Van Gogh’s work, including his writing on the purported backwardness of Islam, resonates with Dutch popular opinion. In a recent survey on popular attitudes towards Islam that was administered by one of the major Dutch

newspapers 43% of respondents agreed with the statement “I am afraid that Dutch women won’t be able to behave in public the way they want to” (*De Volkskrant* 1/22/05). New language and cultural competency requirements for new immigrants are informed by a similar belief that gender differences are a major obstacle to immigrant’s ability to integrate into Dutch society. Current proposals require that non-Western immigrants (predominantly from Morocco and Turkey) pass an exam testing Dutch language skills and knowledge of Dutch culture before obtaining an entry permit to the Netherlands. The video provided by the Dutch government to acquaint these prospective immigrants with Dutch culture includes pictures of topless women sunbathing as an example of Dutch gender practices. These trends in public opinion and public policy lead me to argue that perceived differences in gendered practices between Muslim immigrants and non-immigrant Dutch are at the core of the battle over integration that is currently playing out in the Netherlands.

In light of these developments, the question arises how gender differences have been managed in the Dutch policy arena over the past decade, the period during which calls for integration and assimilation intensified. Do these assessments of gender inequality lead to the development of policies to redress that inequality or do these assessments only justify calls for assimilation? In what follows, I begin to answer these questions by doing two things. First, I discuss the intersecting trajectory of emancipation policy and ethnic minority/immigrant integration policy in the Netherlands. In accordance with distinctions made in Dutch policy, this discussion focuses on three arenas: women’s labor market participation, familial relations, including marriage practices and domestic and sexual violence, and immigrant women’s residency rights

(this latter arena will not be discussed in this paper). Second, I begin to analyze how these policies fit with the calls for assimilation reflected in current policy proposals aimed at immigrants in Dutch society. I conclude that since their inception in the late 1970s, the emancipation of women and girls of ethnic minority as well as of the ethnic majority groups has been addressed in general and specifically targeted emancipation policies. Current policy efforts, however, come dangerously close to reinforcing stereotypical interpretations of gender difference that bolster strong assimilationist integration policies.

A note on terminology. The target group of integration and emancipation policies are alternatively labeled “allochtone women and girls,” “black, migrant, and refugee women”, and “women and girls from ethnic minorities” and, more recently, “non-western immigrant women.” These labels themselves reflect particular vantage points on the issues at hand. The term “allochtone [foreign descent] women and girls” bifurcates the complexities of multiple group differences into the categories foreign and Dutch which I find problematic. At the same time, the more precise black, migrant, and refugee women separates black women out from migrant and refugee women even though those latter two categories contain black women. Women from ethnic minorities downplays the migratory history of these women but accurately captures one of the important distinctions that this paper focuses on, namely ethnic difference, and places women within communities rather than treating them solely as individuals. It also clarifies that many women who are defined as of foreign descent are second or even third generation and often have Dutch citizenship. Therefore, I will use the term women from ethnic minorities alternating with immigrant women to highlight these women’s migration

history. While most sources define the comparison group as “autochthonous” or “native”, I use the somewhat awkward term, non-immigrant Dutch population. Finally, I directly translate the term “emancipation” rather than using women’s liberation which might more closely reflect how Americans might label the main policy domain discussed in this paper.

### **Background and Methods**

Analyses of social policies towards immigrants show how states try to shape the meanings of belonging to that state. Interpretations of gender differences are one aspect of such a sense of belonging. The close ties between government, academia, publicly funded think tanks, and public debate in the Netherlands make it a particularly interesting case for studying this process. The interaction between these domains of knowledge production reveals a belief that rational policy, informed by good social research, can effect desired social change. Academics identify social problems, which they bring to the public attention via publications in popular news media (a large number of social scientists either write for newspapers and magazines or have ties to the journalists who write for them). Resulting public debate then can lead to action on behalf of government. Government itself also commissions research to define the contours of specific social problems. This research then informs, to some extent, the policies developed to remedy these social problems. Furthermore, evaluation research, often mandated within policies, tracks policy impact. This process of interactive knowledge production takes place at all levels of government. In particular, the notion that social policy can effect social change

has over the past decades led to a focus on local level policy as the arena in which such change is most easily effected (see also Korteweg 2004).

To analyze how perceived gender differences among immigrant groups and between non-immigrants and immigrants are managed, I turn to four primary sources that reflect particular linkages between social science research and government policy making:

- the 2004 report by the *Commissie Blok*, particularly chapters 2 and 7,<sup>1</sup> supplemented with,
- the Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment's 2003 *Inventory of Cabinet Policy for Allochtone Women in the Netherlands* (Inventarisatie van het Kabinetsbeleid voor Allochtone Vrouwen in Nederland),
- the *Plan to Address the Emancipation of Women and Girls from Ethnic Minorities* (Plan van Aanpak voor de Emancipatie van Vrouwen en Meisjes uit Etnische Minderheden) bij Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, de Geus, and Minister of Foreigners' Affairs and Intergration, Verdonk, and,
- the official government report of the April 2005 debate in Parliament's Second Chamber regarding emancipation and integration.

The *Commissie Blok*'s report that was presented to parliament in January 2004 documents Dutch integration policy from the 1970s to the present. The Committee was composed of members of parliament from a wide spectrum of political parties. In addition, the committee hired the Verweij Jonker Instituut, a policy research institute

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<sup>1</sup> All translation from the Dutch are my own.

partially funded by the Ministry of Public Health, Science, and Sport, to conduct focus groups and in-depth interviews with key actors in the integration process, and to provide general research support. The *Commissie Blok*'s report became known by the last name of Stef Blok, the liberal backbencher charged with answering a question that had been raised in parliamentary debate in 2002 by Socialist Party (SP) leader, Jan Marijnissen, namely, why immigrant integration in the Netherlands had failed. This question by itself revealed a deep disappointment in immigrants' abilities and opportunities to integrate into the Netherlands. When the committee presented its findings and suggested that immigrant integration had been a modest success, the authors met with sharp criticism both from within parliament and from the press and assorted pundits. More recently, this criticism lessened as various members of parliament used the report to make policy recommendations (de Volkskrant, April 9 2004).

The *Commissie Blok* started its research by asking: "What was Dutch integration policy over the last 30 years; was that policy coherent, consistent and successful?" (CB 2003, 27). The Committee then added three more specific questions, the first focusing on the "emancipation of 'allochtone' women and girls" (ibid.). The analysis of immigrant integration policies and the recommendations forwarded by the committee consistently emphasize gender. Hence, the report offers a good starting point for an analysis of the management of gender difference both in immigrant integration and emancipation policies in the Netherlands.

Dutch emancipation policy over the last decade has focused on integrating that policy into all appropriate ministries. Rather than separating out concerns with gender equality and dealing with them only through a separate sub-ministry of Social Affairs and

Employment where emancipation policy has had its home since the early 1980s, emancipation policy is now a mandatory component of all policy making with a supervisory and guiding role for the Secretary of Emancipation. The *Inventory of Cabinet Policy* investigates the extent to which Dutch emancipation policy towards women from ethnic minorities has been addressed by various ministries.<sup>2</sup> Much of the emancipation policy aimed at immigrant women is now being developed by the Minister of Foreigners' Affairs and Integration, often in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment that has been the home of the Secretary of Emancipation Policy for decades.

The last two sources discussed in this paper, the *Plan to Address the Emancipation of Women and Girls from Ethnic Minorities* and the report of parliamentary debate regarding that plan, reflect this shift towards linking the emancipation of women from ethnic minorities explicitly to their integration into Dutch society. Showing the close ties of Cabinet Ministers and academic research, part of the debate focuses on a report commissioned by the Ministers dealing with the integration of women from ethnic minorities and on proposals for further research (SCP – *The Relay Race of Emancipation*, February 2004).

I supplement my analysis of these documents with other sources such as the fact-sheets produced by E-Quality, the government sponsored independent think tank that aims to advance the position of women in the Netherlands, and reports of various, often

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<sup>2</sup> The relevant Ministries at this point were: the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare, and Sport, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and the Sciences.

government-sponsored research institutes such as the Social Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP) and academic institutes housed in various Dutch universities. My analysis of these materials is based on preliminary coding of these sources, using both NVivo 6 and thematic coding done by hand.

### **Analysis of Findings**

Social policy can be read as a site in which the state defines social problems. Such definitional projects give meaning to community, (national) identity, ethnicity, and citizenship. These definitional projects are informed by particular understandings of gender and gender difference (see also Fraser 1989a, 1989b). As I have argued elsewhere, current concerns about the perceived failure of immigrant integration have coalesced around perceptions of fundamental differences in gender relations between non-immigrant Dutch, and people of non-Western, particularly Muslim, immigrant descent (Korteweg, forthcoming). The question that guides my analysis is how gender differences have been managed through Dutch emancipation and immigrant integration policies.

Gender inequality at work and at home was identified as a major social problem in the mid-1970s. Since then, women have been the main targets of Dutch policies aimed at reducing gender inequality particularly in terms of women's labor force participation. Only recently has the idea that men need to change as well if gender inequality is to lessen gained a foothold in this policy domain (see for example the Combinatie Scenario's of the 1990s which envisioned part-time work and part-time unpaid care for women and men with families, and the recent public awareness campaign "Men in the

Starring Role” which shows men participating in domestic labor). As a result, much of this paper’s analysis focuses on women, including women of ethnic minorities.

According to the *Commissie Blok’s* description, the goal of general emancipation policy has been fairly consistent since such policy was first formulated in the late 1970s. The overall goal of emancipation policy was defined in 1985 and continues to guide this policy to this day:

The creation of the preconditions for a pluralist society in which everybody, regardless of sex or marital status has the opportunity to achieve an independent existence and in which men and women can realize equal rights, opportunities, and freedoms and responsibilities (CB 449).

Realizing women’s economic independence through labor market participation has been (and still is) the primary goal of Dutch emancipation policy. Showing what were then perceived to be the major obstacles to this kind of independence, emancipation policy in the mid-1990s identified three goals for future policy: 1) a need to “increase women’s participation in political and social decision making,” 2) a need to “adjust the division of unpaid labor and, in connection with this, the care responsibilities of men,” and 3) a need to “break through the formation of images in terms of masculinity and femininity” (CB, p. 445).

According to the *Commissie Blok*, the goals identified in government policy towards immigrant women are slightly different though they, too, fit under the general description of gender equality defined in 1985. For immigrant women, the issues were defined as a lack of “visibility in policy and in data,” a lack of “social and political

participation,” and a need for “support for emancipation” within women’s organizations, including organizations of immigrant women (CB, p.447). Overall, the Committee Blok concludes that as of 1994, immigrant women receive more attention within (immigrant) integration policy than within emancipation policy. Indeed, current policy seems mostly guided by the Minister of Foreigners’ Affairs and Integration, though in conjunction with the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment that houses the Secretary of Emancipation.

Both in policy itself and in the identification of social problems that ought to be addressed through policy, these goals have been translated into three relatively distinct policy arenas when it comes to women from ethnic minorities:

- the public realm of women’s labor market participation,
- the private realm of family, sexuality, bodies, and violence against women,  
and
- women’s independent residency rights.

In what follows, I turn to the first two of these arenas to discuss how we can understand the way gender differences are managed by Dutch policy. In each of these sections, I will first describe the situation of women and girls from ethnic minorities as presented in the *Commissie Blok*’s report and then turn to policy approaches to the issues the Committee identifies. But before turning to these two arenas, I first discuss the way the targets of emancipation policy are defined in the documents analyzed in this paper.

### *The Targets of Policy: Defining Immigrant or Ethnic Minority Women*

There is a lot of tension in how women as a group are defined. Dutch emancipation policy has struggled with the assumption of an internally coherent category “woman,” which runs the risk of overlooking the vast differences among women or identifying problems faced by some as problems faced by all who fit in the category. Similarly, women from ethnic minorities and/or non-Western immigrant women run the risk of being identified as an internally coherent group, despite vast differences within this group as well.

This tension runs through the *Commissie Blok*’s discussion of the emancipation of women and girls (see CB chapter 7). In its discussion, the report identifies four major categories of immigrant women by country of origin or by descent: Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish and Moroccan women. Table 1 shows that these have become the four largest immigrant groups in the Netherlands (please note that this table does not include those who are Dutch citizens but who are also classified as belonging to an ethnic minority). It then attributes distinct sets of gender practices to each of these groups. It does so by first outlining the situation of women and girls, looking at “private” practices of family, home, childbearing and rearing, before turning to education and access to the labor market. The report then focuses on emancipation policy development from the 1970s through 2003. In the *Plan to Address the Emancipation of Women and Girls from Ethnic Minorities*, the Ministers of Foreigners’ Affairs and Integration and of Social Affairs and Employment use a different definition of the target categories of policy. Instead of looking at country of origin, they focus on length of stay in the Netherlands, reflecting that emancipation policy is now tied to the goal of integration. Interestingly,

the report commissioned by the Ministers uses the descent categories also employed by the *Commissie Blok*.

**Table 1 Population by sex, nationality or country of origin**

Subjects		Periods		1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2003	
Population on January 1	Population by sex	<b>Total Population</b>	<i>x 1000</i>	11 417	12 958	14 091	14 893	15 864	16193	
		<b>Men</b>		5 686	6 465	6 994	7 358	7 846	8 015	
<b>Women</b>			5 731	6 493	7 097	7 534	8 018	8 177		
Population by nationality		<b>Total non-Dutch nationality</b>	<i>x 1000</i>	107,0	212,1	473,4	641,9	651,5	700,0	
		<b>Belgian</b>		20,2	20,2	23,0	23,3	25,4	26,3	
		<b>German</b>		25,4	31,3	42,7	41,8	54,3	56,1	
		<b>Italian</b>		5,2	16,3	20,9	16,7	17,9	18,7	
		<b>Former Yugoslavia</b>		0,9	4,3	13,7	12,8	15,6	11,8	
		<b>Moroccan</b>		0,1	17,4	71,8	148,0	119,7	97,8	
		<b>Spanish</b>		0,3	22,6	23,5	17,4	16,9	17,5	
		<b>Turkish</b>		0,1	23,6	119,6	191,5	100,7	100,3	
		<b>British</b>		5,7	9,8	35,4	37,5	39,5	44,1	
		<b>American</b>		4,2	7,4	10,7	10,5	14,1	15,4	
		<i>Group by origin:</i>								
		<b>Surinamers</b>					145,7	219,0	302,5	320,7
		<i>Group by origin:</i>								
<b>Antillianen</b>					36,2	71,2	107,2	129,3		

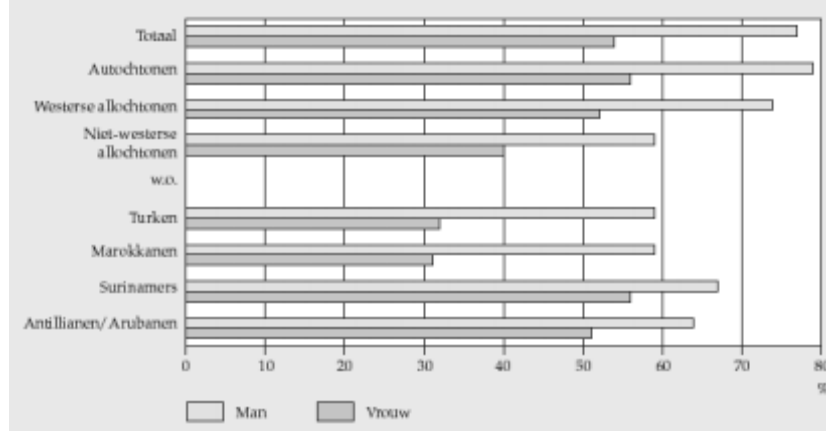
Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Voorburg/Heerlen 2003-11-20 in *Commissie Blok* p. 61.

In what follows, I will show that these groups overlap and differ in interesting configurations. At the same time, it will become clear that none of categorical definitions allow for an analysis of within group differences.

### *Women's Labor Market Participation*

Increasing women's labor force participation has been a primary goal of Dutch emancipation policy. Tables 2 and 3 show how the *Committee Blok* presents the labor market position of women and men from ethnic minorities and how they compare that participation to that of the non-immigrant Dutch population. The report highlights continuing discrepancies between men and women among all groups as well as their

**Table 2. Netto arbeidsparticipatie van personen van 15–64 jaar naar herkomstgroepering en geslacht, 2002.**



Source: CBS, 2003 in Commissie Blok rapport p. 418

**Table 2. Net labor for participation by ethnicity and sex, 1994–2002 (in %)**

	1994	1998	2002
<b>Non-western total</b>			
Men	45	53	59
Women	28	35	40
<b>Turks</b>			
Men	41	50	59
Women	16	21	32
<b>Moroccans</b>			
Men	36	49	59
Women	20	22	30
<b>Surinamese</b>			
Men	54	63	67
Women	40	54	56
<b>Antilians</b>			
Men	53	60	64
Women	34	39	50
<b>Other non-western</b>			
Men	42	46	54
Women	25	31	35
<b>Autochthonous</b>			
Men	73	78	79
Women	43	50	56

Source: Verwey Jonker Instituut, TK 2003–2004, 28 689, nr. 12, p. 6/p. 41/ p. 177 e.v. in Commissie Blok Rapport, p. 418-9

steady increase of labor force participation. In addition, it focuses on the fact that the gap between Turkish and Moroccan men and women seems to have increased, however, without noting the doubling of Turkish women’s labor force participation rates in less than a decade (CB 418). In addition, the report text gives important information not

shown in the tables, namely that “the labor participation of second generation non-western women is as high as that of non-western men” (CB 419). The other thing to emphasize is that by 2002, Surinamese women’s labor force participation rates are as high as those of non-immigrant Dutch women’s with women from the Antilles not far behind. The major difference here then does not settle on immigrant/ethnic minority versus immigrant/ethnic majority but on women of Muslim descent versus women from non-Muslim descent (but note that there are women of Surinamese descent who are Muslim, though the percentage is small). At the same time, the data on the second generation shows that the importance of religious background might be lessening.

According to the *Commissie Blok* report, educational achievement is the main determinant of all immigrant women’s labor force participation rates (CB 421). The influence of other factors, such as having children, is high for women of Turkish and Moroccan descent, as well as for non-immigrant Dutch women, but low for women of Surinamese and Antillian descent (CB 421). The experience of migration itself is only an influence for “those who have not been in the Netherlands that long” (CB 421).

The *Commissie Blok*’s focus groups show that women from all four groups experience race, ethnicity, and religious discrimination as the main reason why they do not get ahead on the Dutch labor market. The women interviewed all seem to have high levels of education and they are frustrated at the obstacles they have encountered finding employment commensurate with their education. For example, one woman of Surinamese descent who was a lawyer in Surinam before moving to the Netherlands is quoted as saying,

... I can remember an interview. My name sounds a bit Dutch. I was invited and all of a sudden I saw their faces stiffen when I walked in. I felt it was a good interview but they told me “no” anyway. When you ask why, there’s all kind of reasons, kind of vague.

This woman now helps other women with similar background negotiate the Dutch labor market. Similarly, a Moroccan descent told the *Commissie* at a public hearing on the integration of immigrants that

I want to talk about discrimination on the labor market. I’ll give you an example. I have a good education, just like many of the people here. I have been discriminated against and am still discriminated against, with every new job. They don’t look at my CV. If they do, they are stunned, because how can a woman who wears a headscarf and who dresses like that have achieved so much? I have had to work twice as hard to be accepted on the labor market.

These individual women, as well as the statistics on labor market participation, indicate that once women from ethnic minorities enter the labor market, it is their experience of being ethnically, racially, and religiously different that shapes their trajectories, not their gender.

How is this reflected in Dutch policy towards improving women’s labor force participation? Minority or immigrant women became an explicit concern of emancipation policy in the early 1980s. Between 1982 and 2001, policy to improve women’s labor force participation was shuttled between various Ministries and sub-ministries. Between 1984 and 1992, a series of projects to improve ethnic minority

women's labor force participation rates operated under the umbrella of the *Women and Minorities Projects* (Vrouwen en Minderheden projecten or VEM projects), a coordinated effort by the Ministry responsible for emancipation and that responsible for minority policy. From the brief description in the report, it seems that an array of VEM projects attempted to address the intersections of these women's multiple axes of oppression (see also Glenn 2002, Collins 2000). Between 1992 and 1994, the VEM projects were turned into the VEM Bureau Employment for women and girls from ethnic minorities, which had the goal of finding employment for 900 women from ethnic minorities. By 1997, they had succeeded in placing 1,000 women.

Between the early 1990s and 2001, the emancipation of women from ethnic minorities was not coordinated by a special committee or project, instead it fell under general emancipation and general integration policy. In 2001, the cabinet again identifying the lagging labor force participation of women from ethnic minorities as a problem, this time not from the perspective of women's emancipation but from that of the importance of the labor market participation of ethnic minorities for the project of immigrants' integration into Dutch society. It instituted a committee (AVEM) to study the issue of the labor participation of women from ethnic minority groups and to develop policy initiatives. The committee developed a few initiatives, mostly local ones, but in the end, the primary product of this committee was the formation of another a committee, a "national working group" with the acronym PAVEM, charged with gathering information and developing programs to improve not only the labor market participation of women from ethnic minorities, but also their social participation and their integration into Dutch society (CB 450, 452; *Plan van Aanpak*). Examples of projects started under

PAVEM's guidance that are mentioned in the *Commissie Blok's* report are: food service worker courses, training to work in child care and after-school programs, hairdressing and seamstress courses (CB 452). All these projects reinforce a gender-segregated labor market and focus on the lower segments of that labor market. They do not address glass ceiling issues or the structural problems regarding minority women's educational achievement.

Emancipation policy's goal of improving women's labor market participation was always easily tied to immigrant integration. This is reflected in the mandate of PAVEM, as well as in the *Plan to Address the Emancipation of Women and Girls from Ethnic Minorities* developed by Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, de Geus, and Minister of Foreigners' Affairs and Intergration, Verdonk. However, in the latter Plan, integration seems increasingly to refer to cultural issues. Only one of the seven goals of this plan addresses women's labor market participation, with a second goal addressing girls' educational achievement. Other aspects of the plan focus on integration of women in isolation (a reference to Muslim women who are not or rarely allowed out of the house), the need for face-to-face dialogues between different ethnic minority groups and between ethnic minorities and the majority, and the emancipation of men from ethnic minorities. What is striking is that the plan seems implicitly aimed at Muslim immigrants, while immigrants of Surinamese and Antillean descent seem to disappear. The lack of concrete proposals to address the emancipation of both women and men is one of the major critiques in the Parliamentary debate on the Ministers' Plan. A proposal to establish a committee similar to PAVEM to address the emancipation of men and boys

made it to the floor of parliament in the spring of 2005 but was defeated in the end (Vote on Motion by Azough/Stuurman).

*The Private Realm of Family, Sexuality, Bodies, and Violence Against Women*

While it has been its primary goal, Dutch emancipation policy focuses not only on women's labor force participation. Concerns with family, sexuality, bodies, and violence against women have informed emancipation policy making since its inception. Labor market policy towards women in the Netherlands has always focused on how to manage paid employment and direct care responsibilities for family. Non-immigrant Dutch women's labor force participation rates have historically been low (Plantenga 1998). Even though they reached parity with their European counterparts by the early 1990s, these women still disproportionately work in part-time employment in order to accommodate the continuing skewed division of household labor and the limited availability of child care, particularly after-school care, an issue successive governments have promised, but failed to address (see also Bussemaker 1998). These issues have shown that the family is a major force in continuing gender inequality.

Indeed, the *Commissie Blok* starts its discussion of the position of ethnic minority women in the Netherlands with a discussion of marital and fertility practices. Again, this discussion shows that the distinction between ethnic minority and ethnic majority is relatively meaningless if we want to discern patterns in marriage and childrearing practices. For example, with respect to single motherhood and Turkish and Moroccan women are more like non-immigrant Dutch women, with between 5 and 6% of their

families headed by single women, than like women from Surinam or the Antilles whose rates of single motherhood hover just below 20% (CB 413).

When it comes to intimacy, family, and sexuality, the *Commissie Blok* identifies two major issues. The first one is the fact that differences in a desire for egalitarian division of labor is larger between Moroccan and Turkish women and men (girls and boys) than between either non-immigrant Dutch or Surinamese or Antillean women and men. The Committee implies that desire for gender equality among, particularly second generation, Turkish and Moroccan girls and boys is seen as one of the major reason why an estimated 75% of these boys and girls eventually marry a partner from Turkey or Morocco (CB 424). The implication is that young women find that these partners are more liberal than their Dutch counterparts, while young men see a higher likelihood of finding a wife who adheres to a traditional, gender unequal, division of labor and power within marriage (see also E-Quality Fact Sheet Huwelijksmigratie nr. 2 p. 3).

The second issue the report identifies focuses on violence against women. The *Commissie Blok* frames the issue as one of honor within the Moroccan and Turkish communities even though it acknowledges that domestic violence is also a large problem for Surinamese women, and at a lesser rate, for non-immigrant Dutch women (CB 425). For the latter groups, though, this form of violence is not seen as culturally based even though the current estimate cited by the Committee is that 25% of all women in the Netherlands face such violence at any given point in time would indicate that such violence is a systemic, cultural practice (CB p. 425).

A third theme, the headscarf and, by extension, the interpretation of (women's) bodies, is not addressed in any one place within the report instead appears briefly in a

number of places. Within the report, the meaning of the headscarf alternates between being a religious symbol and a tool to facilitate the public participation of Muslim women. In addition, the report identifies the headscarf as a potential “symbol of emancipation” (CB 425). The *Commissie* includes comments from various women and men themselves to legitimate a wide range of interpretations of the headscarf.

The discussion of these family and body practices ultimately functions to segregate women from Moroccan and Turkish descent as the group with the most significant issues in the area of women’s emancipation. The report tries to avoid labeling this group as backwards by giving a relatively complex account of interpretations of the veil and by recognizing changes that are taking place within this group – mostly in the comparison of second to first generation and in the positive development in terms of girls’ education and women’s labor force participation. However, interpreting domestic violence within these communities solely in terms of family honor undermines such attempts.

Ultimately, I believe that the issue is whether government policy can support a different emancipation trajectory for different groups of women and men. The retreat of Surinamese and Antillean women from view in the discussion of family, bodies, and domestic violence indicates a failure to do so. Taking the trajectory of non-immigrant Dutch women as a baseline, this latter group seems to be doing relatively well. However, this kind of base-lining runs the risk of ignoring the way race and ethnicity, as well as religion, intersect with gender to shape women (and men’s) lives.

This tendency in the identification of problems is also reflected in current policy development in these areas. In terms of marriage with a partner from the country of origin, a dominant practice among second and even third generation immigrants from

Morocco and Turkey, the assumption is that such marriages retard the integration of immigrants. The popular debate inspired by the proposed law that requires passing an exam in Dutch language and culture as a precondition for entry into the Netherlands frames the problem as one of ignorant village women who will not be able to teach their children Dutch language and customs. However, the argument presented by the *Commissie Blok* that data shows that as many women as men marry partners from the home country and that at least some of the women do so because a desire for gender equality is greater among men from the home country than among second generation Dutch citizens of Turkish or Moroccan descent (see also E-Quality Fact sheet Huwelijksmigratie nr. 2).

Second, the issue of violence against women has inspired some members of parliament, Ayaan Hirsi Ali prominent among them, of not truly caring about the goal of gender equality. The statistic that at any point in time 100 ethnic minority women are at risk of being murdered to protect family honor led Hirsi Ali to observe that the killing of one Dutch filmmaker, her friend and collaborator Theo van Gogh, led to the development of anti-terrorism measures while the death of numerous women does not lead to a concerted policy effort (*De Volkskrant* 2/11/05). This debate on domestic violence needs to be placed in the context of a similar debate about the impact of that violence on non-immigrant Dutch women.

Finally, there does not seem to be a uniform policy on the issue of the headscarf and other religious practices. Over the past year, women have been denied training places in daycare centers because they wore a headscarf and would not shake hands with male parents, and in local government jobs because they were wearing the scarf. While

discrimination based on religious expression is unconstitutional, such practices seem to be condoned.

Overall, the focus of emancipation policy in this arena seems to be on women of Muslim descent. The linkage of emancipation to integration policy reinforces a sense that gender inequality is an obstacle to their integration in Dutch society.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There is a tension that runs through this brief assessment of the emancipation of women and girls from ethnic minority groups. On the one hand, we see interesting projects developed under VEM with clear, complex understandings of the causes of gender inequality. On the other hand, currently the Ministers most responsible for emancipation of women and girls from ethnic minorities seem to focus primarily on cultural difference, isolating women of Muslim descent as in particular need of emancipation. This reinforces an image of Muslim women and men as backwards. In addition, the focus on Muslim women (and men) leaves women from other minority groups in the cold. The effect of this is that the intersecting forces of race, ethnicity, and religion in shaping the lives of women and men are currently not addressed in emancipation policy. The observation that to effect change, men need to be included in policy making efforts receives lip service (and a fairly silly public awareness campaign), but there seems to be limited desire to develop policies that deal with changing immigrant and non-immigrant men.

In the end, the way gender differences are currently managed by the highest level of policy makers seems to reinforce perceptions of the gendered practices of minority

women and girls (as well as men and boys) that have given rise to calls for strong forms of assimilation. A counter current to this trend takes place at the local level where more complex pathways towards gender equality are being developed.

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### **Primary Source Material**

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Presented to the Second Chamber of Parliament on January 19, 2004

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[http://www.tweedekamer.nl/organisatie/voorlichting/commissies/eindrapport\\_integratiebeleid.jsp](http://www.tweedekamer.nl/organisatie/voorlichting/commissies/eindrapport_integratiebeleid.jsp)

*Plan to Address the Emancipation of Women and Girls from Ethnic Minorities* (Plan van Aanpak voor de Emancipatie van Vrouwen en Meisjes uit Etnische Minderheden)

Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid kenmerk:DCE/03/81814

October 28, 2003

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E-Quality Fact Sheet Huwelijksmigratie nr. 2

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