



Dutch Transnational Feminist Solidarity Activism across North-South Divides 1975-2018

Ireen Dubel

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IREEN DUBEL



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Dedication

To my parents who passed on the passion for reading
To Engelien who accompanied me during the first steps in the second feminist wave
To Mia, Maria and Kumari who passed on the skill to think, question and reflect
To Geertje who shared the agility of political advocacy
To Yvonne and Chenjerai who passed on the passion for and art of playing with words
To Jaap for providing room to take risks
To Leontine for your continued trust, support and belief in my ability to write

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Prelude

Artists are like cockroaches – besides flat-bellied and creepy, they hang upside down on walls and ceilings. From there their vision is constantly swirling: their knowledge based on eavesdropping upon half sentences and hearsay. However this kind of visual artist insists on a double antenna held firmly to the ground.¹

With this metaphor, Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera challenged the Dutch arts establishment gathered at the Royal Palace on Dam Square in Amsterdam on 19 December 1997. It was the first time the Prince Claus Fund awards were presented. She had been asked to deliver the keynote address because the Zimbabwe International Book Fair was to receive the principal award. At the time, the annual book fair, well-known in Southern Africa, attracted readers, emerging and eminent writers, and publishers from across the continent and beyond. It was where Vera and I met for the first time in 1995. We became friends through our shared passion for books and words. The circle of friends included Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove, who, like Vera, was an award-winning author. Both were firm believers in the power of story-telling and the arts and saw them as indispensable for development. They taught me the joy of writing and capturing stories. By the time I started writing this book, I could no longer ask them for guidance because both had died too young. Still, I felt encouraged by their legacy. Speaking to an audience of young emerging writers, Hove said:

Writing means searching for truths: my experience is that there is not a single truth about anything. Thus, the job of a writer also means continuous dreaming, searching for all sides to life. But as we know, life is a mirage, always shifting its distance the nearer we think we are. ... To write is to doubt. A good writer is never too sure about anything. Continue doubting, for it is in doubting the validity of issues that we grow.²

While exploring the history of transnational feminist solidarity activism and advocacy, I aspired to 'look back to the future', taking guidance from the Aymara people's understanding of life in the Andes as an experience and valuation of 'walking backwards into the future'. During my journey, I looked at what we have done in the past and are doing in the present. As Hove said, my doubts increased as I tried to understand the recent past and present, which were constantly shifting as the writing journey progressed. In this book, I have tried to use Vera's double antenna of the cockroach, held firmly to the ground for eavesdropping, and doubted the validity of what I've heard and read, including my own notes over the years. The validity of what I have collected and written is ultimately for the reader to judge.

1 Introduction

Money matters

It was February 2008. In one of the large conference rooms in the basement of the headquarters of the United Nations (UN) in New York City, I struggled to keep focused on what seemed to be an endless number of formal, sleep-inducing speeches about national efforts or intentions. I was attending a three-hour high-level round table on 'Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women' on the opening day of the 52nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).¹ According to UN pecking order, ministers spoke first, followed by heads of national delegations, UN diplomats and civil servants flown in from national capitals. At last, the chair turned to representatives from three pre-selected non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and it was my turn.

I spoke on behalf of the Dutch development agency Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries (Hivos).² My statement was short. I pointed to a negative trend of divesting in gender equality and empowerment of women and girls and the persistent gap between policy intentions and implementation. I argued that the human and financial resources required were inadequate and fell short of what was promised in the rhetoric of governments' and development agencies' gender equality policies. I ended with a demand to scale up resources, especially for women's rights organisations, which are prime drivers of the women's rights and gender equality agendas.³



Ireen Dubel at CSW 2008

Peggy Antrobus from Barbados spoke next on behalf of the international feminist network Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), a Hivos partner organisation at the time.⁴ Her speech emphasised some of the global macro-economic and geopolitical trends that impacted financing for gender equality such as trade liberalisation, the international security agenda, and debt repayment requirements. Of all the session speakers, only the two of us received warm applause. We were sitting behind



Peggy Antrobus at CSW 2008

the South African delegation. Zanele Mbeki, South Africa's first lady at the time, turned around and thanked us for our speeches.⁵ She asked why she had to wait for more than two and a half hours to finally hear something sensible.⁶ My thoughts were somewhat different. I was reflecting on the extremely disappointing speeches I had just heard with hardly any new commitments or fresh ambitions for the women's rights agenda. No progress seemed to have been made in implementing the *Beijing Platform for Action*, the global framework for women's rights that had been agreed upon by all governments in the world with great enthusiasm and zeal thirteen years before, in 1995.

A rich feminist heritage

How I ended up with an invitation to speak at the UN is a long story, which intertwines with stories of other feminists whose travels are interwoven and connected to mine. This book is about feminists who, like me, engaged with Global South-focused and international solidarity and policy advocacy from 1975 to the end of the 2010s. Feminists in the Netherlands who engage with transnational solidarity constitute an important segment of the Dutch women's movement. I call this segment the transnational feminist solidarity movement. I use the term transnational in this book for Dutch activism targeting transnational spaces and policies. Therefore, the transnational solidarity movement is not transnational in an organisational sense, in terms of structure and membership. In targeting venues and forums at multiple levels – local-national-regional-international-global – the transnational feminist solidarity movement distinguishes itself from the part of the Dutch women's movement that mobilises on domestic gender equality issues and that engages at transnational levels to advance domestic gender equality issues. The movement of black, migrant and refugee women in the Netherlands – as part of the Dutch women's movement – is also active at multiple levels and engages with domestic, transna-

tional and international women's issues. There are no clear dividing lines. Individuals and organisations can simultaneously engage with domestic and transnational/international gender equality issues and be part of different segments of the Dutch women's movement.

The origin of the contemporary transnational feminist solidarity movement can be traced back to 1975, the International Women's Year (IWY), which catalysed Dutch feminists' interests in the position of women in the Global South and transnational feminist solidarity in a context of decolonisation and post-colonial North-South struggles. The transnational engagement of Dutch women with women's issues in the South was not new. Dutch women and (women's) organisations have historically engaged with the position of women in the Dutch colonies. This engagement traditionally took the form of missionary and philanthropic work with a moral appeal to superior Christian values and Western civilisation.⁷ In the late 19th and early 20th century, Dutch feminists and women's organisations have organised transnationally around issues of peace, women's suffrage and women's leadership. Therefore, an analysis of Dutch women's contemporary engagement with women's issues and gender relations in the South must take note of possible continuities between colonial civilisation efforts and more recent development efforts. The contemporary Dutch transnational feminist solidarity movement has often worked in tandem with feminists from other countries in pursuit of the shared ambition to advance equal rights, opportunities and outcomes for women and girls around the world. Resource mobilisation for women's and feminist movements has been both an important strategy and objective of Dutch transnational feminist solidarity.

So far, the solidarity and advocacy efforts of this group of Dutch activists have gone largely unnoticed. Publications on the history of the 'Third World' solidarity movement and Dutch development cooperation either contain a single chapter on women and gender equality issues or none at all.⁸ Literature discussing the emergence of various social movements in the Netherlands from the mid-1960s onwards has not paid much attention to feminist solidarity activism focused beyond the Netherlands.⁹ The same is true for most accounts of what became known as 'second wave' feminist activism in the Netherlands.¹⁰

My activism and work have taken me to numerous venues, meetings and countries. I have travelled between organisations, networks and spaces of activism with different roles and responsibilities. My most formative years were as a student at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague in the company of a majority of fellow students from the Global South and our inspirational lecturers Maria Mies, Kumari Jayawardena and Mia Berden.¹¹ I have had the privilege and joy to meet, engage, and develop friendships with fellow feminist activists in landscapes of women's movements throughout the world, transnational solidarity activism, and Dutch and international development cooperation. My privilege has been manifold. I have been exposed to and challenged by ideas and practices of feminists from around the world, forcing me to revise my feminist priorities and understanding of feminist sol-

idity. Access to financial resources provided me with the opportunity to support women's rights organisations and networks and to collaborate with incredibly brave, bold and bright feminists throughout the world. That said, my privileged position as a feminist donor has also implied that dynamics of power inequality have been part of these collaborations, which are themselves embedded in structural North-South and East-West divides they seek to address.¹²

The silence about our advocacy efforts is one of the reasons I decided to write this book. My aim was to develop a participant history of Dutch Global South-oriented advocacy and transnational feminist solidarity, partly drawing on accounts of lived experiences, including my own. It is a partial history as I have selected narratives on key events and moments of significance that occurred during the period covered in the book, most of which I participated myself or became part of at a later stage. Writing the book made me aware of the importance of a triple reflexivity regarding my position, as a person from the North and embedded in North-South divides, as a researcher and as a subject of research. In the process of writing, the book became another kind of journey for me. While documenting exemplary events, specific policy claims, successes and failures of feminist advocacy, and contestations over policy demands and implementation, I became interested in more than telling an overlooked story. I was struck by the contrast between the timeline, dynamics and sustainability of transnational feminist solidarity engagement with women's rights and gender equality issues in Dutch foreign and development cooperation policy over time and those of feminist engagement with gender equality issues in domestic policy. I have looked at transnational feminist solidarity actors and their engagement from the perspective of a social movement. For this, I have used Srilatha Batliwala's definition of social movements. Batliwala has drawn on many scholarly definitions and defined social movements as 'an organized set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action.'¹³ With this book, I hope to contribute to an understanding of how Dutch women's rights and gender equality activists have organised for transnational feminist solidarity and advocated feminist goals in Dutch development cooperation and foreign policy, since 1975.

Before discussing this question and the concepts that I have used to analyse specific cases of transnational feminist solidarity and North-South policy advocacy, I briefly reflect on the origins of the idea of 'development' and 'development assistance' that led to the emergence of development cooperation as a policy area, a community of practitioners, and development studies scholarship. The interaction between feminism and development has contributed to the emergence of Dutch transnational feminist solidarity engagement aimed at the Global South. In addition, I briefly discuss the emergence of new social movements in the Netherlands in the late 1960s and 1970s, because two of these movements have contributed to the emergence of Dutch transnational feminist solidarity activism. They have inspired and, in part, shaped the politics of several actors that feature in the book.

In this book, Ireen Dubel analyses the so far unnoticed history of nearly five decades of Dutch transnational feminist solidarity with women's rights in the Global South in particular.

This history begins in 1975, the International Women's Year, which ignited contemporary Dutch transnational feminist solidarity engagement. Archival research, interviews with key actors and first-hand documentation of events and policy claims form the rich empirical grounding of the book's case studies. These include a variety of solidarity initiatives, ranging from safeguarding reproductive rights and access to safe abortion, to supporting women under apartheid, recognising women's rights at the UN, promoting sexual rights and diversity, and mobilising political and financial support for women's movements around the world.

By discussing specific case studies of solidarity activism and policy advocacy, Dubel offers compelling evidence and an explanation for the sustainability and outcomes of Dutch transnational feminist solidarity activism. This history has the power to inspire contemporary and future transnational feminist solidarity engagement.

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