

The second wave of feminism in Flanders.

The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women's studies.

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Introduction

The following is an overview of the most important organizations created during the second feminist wave in Flanders. Much is related to the structure of the feminist movement, and therefore some attention will also be paid to organizations that already existed, as a consequence of the first wave of feminism. Moreover, the article retraces the most important dates in the history of women in that period, although not necessarily in chronological order.

Before 1960:

The consequences of the first wave of feminism

The National Council of Women and "Pillarized" Organisations

Before 1960, a number of women's committees already existed, most of which had been founded at the turn of the last century (1900). Thus, the creation of the National Council of Women was a direct consequence of the first feminist wave. Within the country's two main "pillars", women started to organize themselves.

After the creation of catholic women's committees around the country, the first of which was founded in Ghent in 1873, the "Katholieke Arbeiders Vrouwengilde" (Catholic Workers Women's Guild), later to be named "Katholieke Arbeidersvrouwen" (Catholic Workers Women), started to get organized at a national level, the "Katholiek Vormingswerk voor Landelijke Vrouwen" (Catholic Forming for Rural Women) was set up in the same way. As from 1907, agricultural women's guilds were created, the first one in Leuven. In 1911, they united in the "Boerinnenbond" (Farmer's Wives Union).

In 1901, local socialist women's committees united in the "Nationale Federatie der Socialistische Vrouwen" (National Federation of Socialist Women). In 1922, political activities were reduced, and the "Socialistische Vooruitziende Vrouwen" (Socialist Foreseeing Women) were founded, focusing more on mutual insurance. This would remain the most important socialist organization until the creation of a political women's committee. Furthermore, the trade union also had its women's committees.

Other related women's organizations would only be created much later, like the "Christelijke Beweging voor Vrouwen uit de Middengroepen" (Christian Movement for Women from the Middle Classes) in 1951, and the "Vlaamse Liberale Vrouwen" (Flemish Liberal Women) in the seventies.

The National Council of Women, founded in 1905, first known only in French as the "Conseil National des Femmes Belges", originally represented merely the autonomous organizations. The "pillars" reacted very quickly, and their women's groups joined in. The Council has always stressed the role of international connections, for example through its co-operation with the International Council of Women. The Dutch and French-speaking sections obtained autonomy in 1974, and became independent in 1979.

Voting Rights for Women

Belgian women were allowed to vote for the first time on 26 June 1949 when, in the first post-war general elections, they were able to choose parliamentary and provincial representatives. Until then, women only had the right to vote in local elections, and could themselves be elected at all levels since the 1920ies.

Also in 1949, an allowance for housewives was introduced. All women who had at least one child could benefit from a (moderate) allowance, calculated on the number of children, given they did not have an income. This measure was abolished eight years later, following a reform in child care allowances. The housewives allowance was important, however, because it was to reappear, as a "Sociaal Pedagogische Toelage", a social pedagogic allowance, but it would be ideologically totally unacceptable for the second feminist wave, since it indirectly stimulated women to stay at home. They preferred more collective facilities for child care. Although the "SPT" became legalized, it has never been put into effect.

1960 - 1970

Equal Civil Rights

The first women's organizations reacted differently to the new feminist wave of the seventies. Some of them, like the KAV, decided to modernize their structure, but other organizations reacted in a negative way. Until 1970, the "pillarized" organizations remained rather silent, focusing on traditional themes such as family and child care. But in 1968, the KAV published a charter entitled "Women now: a new status", focusing on the redistribution of tasks rather than on the traditional role models, and on the need for a new legal status for married women. So far, this status had never been adapted to the changes in society, and civil law had not been changed since the introduction of the Code Napoleon. In 1958, the legal incompetence of married women was abolished. But some important elements of discrimination remained. The law on marital goods stated that husbands were supposed to control the use of common goods and the properties of women. In cases of parental authority, fathers obtained most of the rights. The claim to reform the law on marital goods became important in the seventies, and legislation would be adapted in 1976.

Equal Pay for Equal Work

In 1952, Belgium signed Convention 100 of the International Labor Organization on the equality of wages, but this had no effect on national legislation. And although the Treaty of Rome, which founded the European Economic Community - now the European Union - in 1957, stated the equality of wages for men and women, compulsory for Member

States, Belgian legislation still underwent no changes. On 16 February 1966, women organized a strike at the “Fabrique Nationale d’Armes de Guerre”, the National War Arms Factory, at Herstal, claiming the application of the ILO and EEC agreements. After three months of strike, they got equal pay, but the law remained unchanged. However, as a consequence of their action an action committee “equal pay for equal work” was created, which remained active during the following years, closely watching any changes in legislation.

In 1968, Belgian legislation was put on trial again. Gabrielle Defrenne, an air hostess at Belgian airline company Sabena, introduced a complaint against her employer to the court of justice, claiming gender discrimination. As a matter of fact, she had been forced to retire because she was 40, whereas men fulfilling the same job were allowed to work until they were 50. She finally took her case to the European Court of Justice in Luxemburg, which stated that she actually suffered gender discrimination, and that article 119 of the Treaty of Rome had an immediate effect on Belgian legislation, and thus had to be applied by Belgian courts. Finally, a collective agreement on equal pay for equal work was signed in 1975.

From 1965 until 1968, Belgium also had its first female member of government, Marguerite De Riemaecker-Legot, a member of the catholic movement, who was responsible for family and housing. The first general elections allowing women to vote, in 1949, did not have a positive influence on the number of women in parliament. The first woman to enter a government did not bring any more changes, since not a single woman entered government between 1968 and 1974.

1970 - 1980

The pioneers: the first half of the seventies

The new protest movement of the seventies was launched by a number of new autonomous groups.

“PAG”

During local elections in 1970, a number of PAG, or “Pluralistische Actiegroepen voor Gelijke Rechten van Man en Vrouw” (Pluralistic Action Groups for Equal Rights of Men and Women) are created in several Flemish towns. A first convention was held on January 10th 1970 in Bruges. The movement clearly followed the example of the Dutch group “Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij” (Man-Woman-Society) founded in 1968, and was also pluralistic. PAG was meant to be a pragmatic action movement, pointing at discriminatory situations, and trying to abolish them. Thus, they campaigned for equal wages, political participation en, most of all, for a reform of the law on marital goods. Contrary to the “Dolle Mina’s”, they had a rather polite image, following the style of their activities: they organized discussion meetings instead of the sensational and media oriented action programme of their adversaries.

One of these activities was organized by the “PAG” in Bruges, on the night before the local elections of October 11th 1970. “Be confident – vote for women” they said. This brought the number of local representatives from two to seven, with one woman represented in the local council.

The example of Bruges was soon to be followed. In 1973, there were activities in Bruges, Ghent, Roeselare, Mechelen, Antwerp, Tervuren and Ypres. In 1974, the “PAG” in Ghent

held its third Women's Day. The "PAG" in Bruges and Antwerp were to become important for the creation of Women's Houses. From within the "PAG" several women decided to launch discussion groups, which would also lead to the Women's Houses towards the end of the seventies. In 1972, the different groups forming the "PAG" started their own newsletter : "PAG-News". This was published until 1977. Not all groups were active that long. Although the "PAG" never officially stopped their activities, they became silent at the end of the seventies. Many women who joined the "PAG" later became active in the women's committees of the traditional political parties, joining those organizations that were already involved.

"Dolle Mina"

In 1970, "Dolle Mina" was founded, following an earlier Dutch example. The name was referring to Wilhelmina Drucker, a socialist feminist from the first wave. It had five clusters: Antwerp, Ostend, Leuven, Brussels, and Ghent. The Ghent group would survive the other ones and publish a magazine : "De Grote Kuis".

By using the media in their campaigns, "Dolle Mina" obtained a bigger audience than the "PAG". One of the first events was held against an insurance company from Antwerp, which allowed men to smoke, but not women, and said : "Women also have the right to have lung cancer". Activities were mostly focused on family problems : a better child care, more playing grounds. At the inauguration of the E3 highway, members of "Dolle Mina" put a sign to the nearest nursery, saying "Stockholm : 1500 km". Contrary to the "PAG" they had a clear political image, defining themselves as leftist, without at first having any links with other left-wing movements. At the end of the seventies, the last remaining cluster in Ghent joined the "Fem-Soc-Coördinatie" (Feminist-Socialist-Coördination) both feminist and socialist.

"VOK"

The "Vrouwenoverlegkomitee" (Women's Consultation Committee) was founded in 1972 during a training session in Ypres. A number of female editors of "De Nieuwe Maand" (The New Month) were dissatisfied with the attention that was being paid to women. An informal encounter thus lead to "VOK". It officially represented "progressive women's groups from Flanders", but it actually was a women's network. Together with organizations, individuals also joined "VOK", some of whom did not always agree with the organization's point of view. Although "VOK" also joined the left wing of society, there were some differences with "Dolle Mina". It did not adopt the ideological statements of socialism, but was rather generally progressive, representing socialists, progressive catholics, the extreme left, and politically independent people.

Shortly after the creation of the organization, those involved decided to attend a Women's Day in Paris, organized by the MLF, the "Mouvement de la Libération de la Femme" (Movement for the Liberation of Women), where they got convinced of the need to organize such a day themselves. That very moment, they decided to fix a date and to get in touch with a speaker : Simone de Beauvoir.

The first Women's Day, organized in Brussels on November 11th 1972, was a huge success: the number of visitors was estimated between ten and twelve thousand. From that moment, Flemish and Walloon organizations had each their own day. In 1973, a second Women's Day was organized by the Antwerp "PAG", followed by similar events in towns throughout the region. Until today, the "VOK" organizes a Women's Day every year on November

11th. Each time, an emergency mission statement is established, to attract people's attention to problems women are faced with. The themes set up for each Women's Day indicate the nature of these problems during the seventies:

- 1972** • Brussels: not yet a real theme
- 1973** • Antwerp: "Year of Justice, also for Women?"
- 1974** • Ghent: "International Year of the Woman"
- 1975** • Hasselt: "International Year of the Woman"
- 1976** • Brussels: "Abortion, a woman's decision"
- 1977** • Ypres: "Shorter working hours for women"
- 1978** • Mechelen: "The hand that moves the cradle, does not move the world"
- 1979** • Turnhout: "Equal access to education"
- 1980** • Leuven: "Women against violence"

"VFP"

For the general elections held in March 1974, a feminist party appeared, called the "Verenigde Feministische Partij" (United Feminist Party). This party, founded in 1972, and originally rather French-speaking, soon developed a strong Flemish wing. The party was pluralistic, and the action programme joined a number of arguments which were supposed to be supported by women: equal wages, equal access to education, equal justice, and "social and economic justice for all people".

At the 1974 general election, candidates were selected for Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, Ostend, Antwerp, Liège, and Nivelles. The party gathered 18.551 votes for the House of Representatives (0.35%), and 14.282 votes for the Senate (0.28%). Some considered this as a failure, but others said that, since the Second World War, and apart from the Flemish nationalist movement "Volksunie" (People's Union), no other movement had obtained any electoral successes. The problem with the "VFP" was that it got no support from a large part of the feminist movement. Most of their members came from outside the traditional feminist movement's network, and had almost no experience with working for associations. The relationship between the feminist movement and the "VFP" was bad. Traditional women's organizations supported their respective parties – Christian Democrat and Socialist – but the "PAG" and "Dolle Mina" too were reluctant to give them any support. Nevertheless, the "Vote for Women" action, made possible by a joint effort from the "VOK" and the National Council of Women, was a success. The number of women in Parliament doubled from 13 to 26 (for 365 men).

The Rise of Feminist Organizations in Politics

Within the framework of existing political parties, women started to organize themselves. At the end of 1973, the first political feminist group was created inside the "Christelijke Volkspartij" (Christian People's Party), called "Vrouw en Maatschappij" (Woman and Society). In 1974, the "Volksunie" also created its "Federatie Vlaamse Vrouwen" (Federation of Flemish Women). The liberal women of the "Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang" (Party for Freedom and Progress) did the same in 1978. The same year, the socialist women of the "Belgische Socialistische Partij" (Belgian Socialist Party) started their own movement, called "Socialistische Vrouwen" (Socialist Women) since 1980. The Communist Party had already a woman's committee since 1921.

Abortion

Abortion has always been a very important and controversial theme for the feminist movement. The arrest of doctor Peers in 1973 caused a lot of disarray and protest. Willy Peers was accused of having committed hundreds of abortions. All around the country, demonstrations were held for his release and for legalizing abortion, and "Peers Committees" were created. Women's organizations felt obliged to strengthen their position. Socialist women asked for abortion to be legalized, while catholic organizations condemned it. Abortion would become a controversial issue. When it was put on the agenda of a Women's Day, catholic movements remained absent. Although abortion was only legalized in Belgium in 1990, the many demonstrations held in 1973 led to the freedom of information on contraception.

1975: the UN Year of the Woman

In 1975, a lot of attention was given to the themes that were put forward by women's organizations, even among traditional political parties. But Belgium was not well prepared for the international Women's Conference that was held in Mexico that year, and for the following Women's Decennium (1975-1985). Some committees were created, but most of them did not last very long. There was the National committee "International Year of the Woman", the working group on education, and the committee for ethical problems. The commission on women's labor remained, and became a permanent advisory committee at the Ministry of Labor and Employment, that was created in 1974. The mission statement of the committee was "to give advise and to do research as well as to propose legal and regulatory measures related to any matter that touches directly or indirectly women's labor". The commission started in 1975, and was formed by people from the different ministries, from workers' and employers' organizations, and by experts. An advisory commission on the status of women was only created after the Mexico conference, and was charged with the supervision of Belgium's attitude towards international agreements concerning the emancipation of women.

The Personal is political: the second half of the seventies

In the second half of the seventies, the mood changed within the feminist movement. The awareness grew that legal measures were not enough, and that there was a need for change in behavior. In March 1976, an International Tribunal for crimes against women was created in Brussels, hearing witnesses from abused women. Rape became an important matter for the feminist movement. More specific caring measures were established, for example by opening rescue places for abused women. After the inauguration of a rescue house in 1977 in Brussels, other cities followed the example in 1978 : Ghent, Leuven, and Antwerp. The second batch of the second wave of feminism gave more attention to small scale elements, the "personal is political" idea. Sexual self determination became important. This gave birth to the creation of lesbian women's groups.

Women's houses opened everywhere in these years. The first Women's House was inaugurated in Antwerp in November 1974. In Brussels, a more French-speaking house opened as well, and most of the other houses opened during the second half of the seventies. The Antwerp Women's House started as a discussion group of housewives suffering a lack of space. Other Women's Houses were created by the "PAG", like in Bruges, or by the "Fem-Soc-groups", like in Kortrijk, or else by already existing Women's Houses. In these houses, women got a place to stay, they got emergency aid, they could get distraction as well as education. But in order to be able to provide education, people needed information, and the awareness grew that this information was too widely spread

and often inaccessible. To this demand, a pluralistic documentation centre called “RoSa” was founded. Part of the cultural centre of Vorst (Brussels) was made available, and the Ministry of Dutch culture decided to give financial support. The documentation centre was inaugurated on 26 October 1978.

The Lesbian Movement

The attention given to the private life and sexuality that was characteristic for the second generation of feminists of the seventies also had its effect on the visibility of lesbian women. The first autonomous lesbian group “Sappho”, was created in 1974 in Ghent. Other cities followed from 1978 onwards. The relationship between the lesbian movement and the (autonomous) feminist movement is complex. Of all lesbian groups founded in the second half of the seventies, six were created and operated inside a Women’s House. Some were created autonomously, but existed mostly through the Women’s Houses. In a number of Women’s Houses conflicts grew between lesbian and heterosexual women, but elsewhere there was little or no trouble. Some heterosexual feminists were afraid to be identified with this group of women : part of the anti-feminist policy was to make lesbian and feminists look like one single bunch of people. Some feared therefore not to be taken seriously any longer.

The presence of lesbian women on Women’s Day was not always guaranteed. From 1978 to 1983, the negotiating committee “Coördinatie Comité Lesbische Vrouwen” held a joint statement at Women’s Day. But the end of the committee in 1981 also meant the end of the presence as such of lesbian women, with the exception of a lesbian workshop in Hasselt in 1983, which could be explained by the large number of lesbian women participating in the organising Women’s House.

“Fem-Soc groups”

In 1978, “Schoppenvrouw” was published, a magazine edited by the “Fem-Soc” movement. This movement regrouped a number of leftist feminist groups that took the decision to get together, and to present themselves as an organized movement on Women’s Day in 1977. Their members were the then still existing “Dolle Mina” group from Ghent, “Emancipatie door Raad en Actie” (Emancipation Through Counselling and Action), “Rode Marianne” from Hasselt, “Groep Rode Vrouwen” (Group of Red Women), the “Linkse Oostendse Vrouwen” (Leftist Ostend Women), and the “Linkse Vrouwen” (Leftist Women) from Bruges. This alliance led to the creation of other left-wing feminist groups, in Kortrijk, Aalst, St-Niklaas, Leuven, and Lokeren. In 1988, “Schoppenvrouw” (Queen of Spades) was relaunched without having any links with the former movement. In 1999, having run out of money, it disappeared again.

Conclusion

The second wave of feminism was due to a large part to autonomous groups. After 1980, a period of integration started : autonomy was largely given up and the feminist movement got integrated in bigger institutions. There were, for example, women’s groups in political parties and trade unions. But the contribution of the autonomous groups from the beginning was significant. In Belgium, equal opportunities policy has been institutionalised rather late. In 1985, a secretary of state for social emancipation was added to the government. In the seventies, there was a lack of interest for women in politics. The autonomous organizations were needed to jolt people awake.