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## **Master Thesis ‘Religion, Conflict and Globalization’**

“It is not Feminism if it is not Intersectional”

Examining the Feminist Identity and Activism of Intersectional  
Feminist Organizations in Relation to the Dutch Discourse on  
Secularism, Gender Equality and Islam

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## Abstract

Gendered Islamophobia is still a widespread problem in the Netherlands. Muslim women and feminists have been fighting the stereotypes and racism they encounter daily for quite some time. However, they receive very little help from other – white – feminists in this fight against racism and islamophobia. Over the last couple of years more and more self-identifying intersectional feminist organizations (IFO) have arisen in the Netherlands as part of the fourth feminist wave. These organizations adhere an intersectional form of feminism, which considers the intertwined factors in a person's life that can lead to oppression, like race, religion, sexuality, instead of only focusing on 'gender' like dominant strands of feminism. In the Netherlands, secularism discourse has an enormous influence, and there is a simultaneously the presence and denial of racism and islamophobia. This made me wonder: how do the IFO's develop their intersectional identity in this context? How do they respond to gendered islamophobia? This thesis shows that forming an intersectional feminist organization is not always an easy task. It can be hard to create a fully safe and non-hierarchical space, and to include all forms of oppression in your activism. Additionally, the relationship between intersectional feminist organizations and religion and Islam remained ambiguous. There are examples of direct engagement with secularism discourse and transformation of its own concepts to fight it. However, there are also examples that show hesitance to engage with the topic and the unquestioned adoption of secularism.

Key words: intersectional feminism, secularism, Islamophobia, new social movement, fourth feminist wave.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Literature Review .....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	7
2.2 Modernization and Secularization Theories .....	7
2.3 Secularism in Connection to Gender, Feminism, Islamophobia and Racism.....	9
2.4 Fighting the Narrative .....	13
2.5 Intersectional Feminism.....	15
2.6 Conclusion: Gaps and Relevance.....	17
<b>3. Theoretical Framework – ‘New Social Movement’ Theory and Related Concepts .....</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	19
3.2 ‘New Social Movement’ Theory .....	19
3.3 The Concepts .....	22
3.3.1 Secularism Discourse.....	22
3.3.2 Feminism and Intersectionality .....	22
3.3.3 Identity.....	23
<b>4. Methodology .....</b>	<b>24</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	24
4.2 Methods and Sources of Data Collection.....	24
4.2.1 In-depth Interviews .....	24
4.2.2 Participant Observation.....	25
4.2.3 Online Research.....	26
4.2.4 Difficulties and Reflexivity .....	26
4.4 Method of Analysis.....	27
4.4.1 Discourse Analysis.....	27
<b>5. Secularism Discourse .....</b>	<b>28</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	28
5.2 Historical Formation Dutch (Gendered) Islamic Debate .....	28
5.3.1 Modernity .....	30
5.3.2 Culture.....	32
5.3.3 Gender Equality.....	33
5.4 Current State of the Debate.....	34
5.5 Conclusion.....	37

<b>6. Intersectional Feminism and the “Fourth Wave” .....</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	39
6.2 The Feminist “Waves” .....	39
6.2.1 Criticism on the Fourth Wave and the Wave-analogy.....	39
6.2.2 The Fourth Wave .....	40
6.2.3 Connectedness to Earlier Feminist History .....	41
6.3 The Problems of White Feminism.....	43
6.4 Intersectionality in the Fourth Wave .....	44
6.5 Online Activism.....	46
6.6 Conclusion.....	47
<b>7. Developing Intersectional Feminist Identities and Activism in the Dutch Context.....</b>	<b>48</b>
7.1 Introduction.....	48
7.2 Organizational Structure, Rules and Activities .....	48
7.3 Acts of Activism .....	50
7.3.1 Intersectional Activism.....	50
7.3.2 Responding to Secularism Discourse, Racism and Islamophobia.....	53
7.3.3 Online Activism.....	56
7.4 Conclusion.....	58
<b>8. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>9. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>62</b>

## 1. Introduction

At the Dutch women's march of 2022, a hijab-wearing woman held the sign: "This is what a feminist looks like." (@SPEAK\_2019, Instagram, March 5, 2022). For many Dutch people, this image is incomprehensible. To them, Islam and feminism are antonyms: two words with an opposite meaning. Over the years, I have written many essays about Islamic feminism. Whenever I told people about my papers, their response was one of similar disbelief. "Islam and feminism? Can they go together? Isn't that religion the reason they are oppressed?" In their minds, gender equality would only exist in largely secularized countries in which religion would play a marginal – if any – role in people's private lives. These ideas are formed by the present secularism discourse, which links secularism to gender equality and feminism by claiming that it has been accomplished here, while portraying religion – or specifically Islam – as still being oppressive to women. This discourse cannot just be used to express the superiority of the west over the Islamic 'Other' but can also have a strong influence on matters like immigration policy, job opportunities for Muslims or humanitarian help. Moreover, it fosters islamophobia. The general response to my past essay topics shows the wide range and enormous staying power and acceptance of this narrative.

The woman who held the sign is part of the women's collective SPEAK. This is an intersectional feminist organization for Muslim women, founded in December 2018. Their goal is to fight the current discourse on Islam and Muslim women, and the racism, islamophobia and exclusion it produces.<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult fight, since the existence of racism in general, but also anti-Islamic racism specifically, is often ignored or denied in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> When I heard them speak at an activist event in Antwerp, they talked about how wearing a hijab deprives you of opportunities, because of the stereotypes people have in mind. Everywhere they go, they hear the same mantra: "Muslim women are oppressed, and the headscarf is proof of this oppression." These stereotypical ideas can even lead to violence.<sup>3</sup> According to *Meldpunt Islamofobie*, more than 90% of their received reports on islamophobia are coming from headscarf-wearing women.<sup>4</sup> This includes not just physical violence, but also hateful comments and threats. To the women of SPEAK, the fact that Muslim women are prohibited to wear a niqab in some public

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<sup>1</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Wekker, *Witte Onschuld: Paradoxen van kolonialisme en ras*, herziene editie (Amsterdam: AUP, 2020), 7-9.

<sup>3</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

<sup>4</sup> "Missie," SPEAK, accessed on June 3, 2022, <https://www.we-speak.nl/missie/>.

spaces or a hijab when working at institutions like the Dutch police is also violence, because they are denied self-determination, they are forced.<sup>5</sup>

The SPEAK collective creates the opportunity for Muslim women to unite and speak-up against the narrative, the violence, the inequalities, and the stereotypes. In their view, this fight is inherently linked to other forms of oppression and structural inequalities in Dutch society, like racism and sexism. Therefore, they adhere an intersectional form of feminism, which considers the intertwined factors in a person's life that can lead to oppression, like race, religion, sexuality, instead of only focusing on 'gender' like dominant strands of feminism.<sup>6</sup> In Antwerp, a representative of SPEAK stated that mainstream feminism is still too white, too focused on the problems of white, middle-class women, neglecting the needs of women of color. "We must look critically at feminism. Feminism must be more than just a fight against gender inequality. It has to be intersectional or it will have no future."<sup>7</sup>

In one of their publications from 2020 on gendered islamophobia, co-founder of SPEAK Nawal Mustafa also states that they receive very little help from other – white – feminists in their fight against racism and islamophobia.<sup>8</sup> However, over the last couple of years more and more self-identifying intersectional feminist organizations (IFO) have arisen in the Netherlands. The focus on intersectionality is even described as one of the key characteristics of the fourth feminist wave, which according to some is happening right now.<sup>9</sup> The combination of the enormous influence of secularism discourse, the simultaneous presence and denial of racism and islamophobia and the lack of help from mainstream feminism, made me curious about these new IFO's. How do they develop their intersectional identity in this context? How do they respond to gendered islamophobia? My curiosity and ponderings eventually led me to the central question of this thesis: *How do intersectional feminist organizations develop and articulate their intersectional feminist identity and activism in relation to the Dutch discourse on secularism, gender equality and Islam?*

To answer this question, I have researched three relatively new intersectional feminist organizations through interviews, participant observation and online data. Two of the organizations, Fem Group NL (FGN) and Dutch Feminists United (DFU), were founded in

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<sup>5</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

<sup>6</sup> SPEAK, "Missie."

<sup>7</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

<sup>8</sup> Nawal Mustafa, "Muslim Women Don't Need Saving: Gendered Islamophobia in Europe," Transnational Institute, December 2020, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 122.

2016, and the last one, Fem Connected (FC) started in 2020.<sup>10</sup> They were founded because people felt the need to have a place to discuss, learn and engage in activism together. They wanted to do something *with* their feminism and *against* the inequalities they encountered. Another similarity is that all IFO's are founded by young people and aimed at a young audience, mostly students and young professionals. Lastly, they are all *self-identifying* intersectional feminist organizations. The phrase they all live by – and the sentence I heard many times over the last couple of months – was: “It is not feminism, if it is not intersectional.” Like SPEAK, the IFO's were aware of the complexity and interwovenness of oppression and thus tried to engage in activism accordingly. To them, feminism meant equality for *everybody*. However, in reality this is easier said than done. Nicola Rivers argues that ‘intersectionality’ has become a buzzword or an aspirational brand, rather than a mode of activism in the fourth wave.<sup>11</sup> This thesis will thus examine how the organizations develop and articulate their intersectional feminism *and* put it to practice, in the curious context of the Netherlands.

The next chapter will consist of a literature review, discussing the relevant research done so far on secularism discourse, Muslim women, feminism and intersectionality, the controversies and existing gaps. Afterwards, the next chapter will shortly discuss the theory underlying my research, namely ‘(new) social movement theory’ and define the key concepts. Then, the methodological approach and the different methods I used to conduct this research will be explained. The fifth chapter will provide an analysis of secularism discourse and its interwovenness with gender equality, religion and racism, and how this discourse is expressed in the public debate about Islam. Afterwards, the next chapter will give an overview of intersectional feminism in the fourth wave, including its aims and beliefs, based on both literature and the research findings on the IFO's. The seventh chapter will discuss how the three IFO's put their beliefs and goals into practice by looking at their activism, particularly in relation the secular and anti-Islamic climate. Altogether, I hope this research contributes to a better understanding of intersectional feminism, helps to gain more insight in the relationship between Islam and feminism, and possibly also gives some tools on how to make feminism more inclusive.

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<sup>10</sup> The names of the organizations and their members are fictitious at request of the organizations.

<sup>11</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 123.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss already existing literature about secularism, gender, Islam and feminism in order to show the academic foundation on which my research is based and to point out the research gaps in earlier works to demonstrate the contribution of my research to the academic debate. As Joan Scott stated in her book *Sex and Secularism*, although secularism has had many meanings over time, the story of secularism relating to modernity and emancipation has had enormous staying power.<sup>12</sup> Even nowadays, it still has a big influence on the way subjects like religious freedom and migration are handled in politics and the public debate in European countries. Therefore, it is important to know about the origin of this story within the academic field. Thus, this chapter will discuss some key works on secularization theory, secularism in relation to Islam, how Muslim women fought this narrative and intersectional feminism, to end with the research gaps and academic relevance of this thesis.

### 2.2 Modernization and Secularization Theories

Although the term first appeared in the fourteenth century to distinguish different kinds of clergy, ‘secularization’ is nowadays typically understood as referring to the process of the decline of ‘religion’, whether it is used in academia, high schools or the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> What this decline entails – political or societal influence, religious beliefs, religious institutions – is much debated.<sup>14</sup> This debate shows that there is not one secularization thesis. Nevertheless, most of the early works about secularization from the 1960’s and 1970’s build on the idea of Max Weber about the disenchantment of the world.<sup>15</sup> He states that first superstition and magic, and later religion, will gradually disappear to be replaced by science and ratio through the process of modernization. Thus, religion is portrayed as pre-modern phenomenon.<sup>16</sup>

This idea was used to understand the changing role of religious institutions and beliefs, and connect these developments to modernization and related processes like industrialization, urbanization and individualization.<sup>17</sup> One of these early theories linking secularization to

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<sup>12</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Turner, *Secularization* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Erin Wilson, “Being ‘Critical’ of/about/on ‘Religion’ in International Relations,” in *Routledge Handbook of Critical International Relations*, ed. Jenny Edkins (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 144.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, “Being ‘Critical’,” 144-145.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *Secularization*, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, eds., *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 4.



modernity is written by Peter L. Berger in 1967. In *The Sacred Canopy* he states that modernization and related processes lead to pluralism, which in turn “undermine stable belief.” Therefore, modernization will eventually lead to secularization.<sup>18</sup> Another important contribution to the secularization debate was made by Jose Casanova in 1994. He identifies three main developments of secularization: “1) secularization as a differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, 2) secularization as a decline of religious beliefs and practices, and 3) secularization as a marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere.”<sup>19</sup> These developments were commonly understood to be connected to the modernization processes.<sup>20</sup>

However, these ideas about secularization and modernization have now been widely critiqued. The theses were criticized because of their linear and universalist narratives. The growing religiosity and visibility of religion in other parts of the world showed that the theories about these processes were based on a western-European history, and thus weren’t applicable to other contexts.<sup>21</sup> But empirical evidence also shows that religion kept a vital role in societies in the west.<sup>22</sup> That is why Berger revised his thesis in 1999. He stated that he still believes pluralism affects religion, but that this doesn’t necessarily lead to decline. It only changes the way how people believe and how they present themselves and those beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

Jose Casanova also revisited the secularization matter again in 2006. In the chapter “Secularization revisited”, he states that progressive secularization, although highly uneven, in Europe is “an undeniable fact.”<sup>24</sup> But this is not because processes of modernization made secularization inevitable, like what is often assumed in secularization theses. Rather, it could be that the story of secularization itself made certain regions in Europe more secular, because they believed and accepted its premise: “that secularization is a teleological process of modern social change.” In this way, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, according to Casanova it was not a triumph of modernization or secularization over religion, but of the “knowledge regime of secularism.”<sup>25</sup> Scholar Jordan Alexander Stein agrees that the history of secularism as it is told is a story, and a very powerful one. However, he disagrees with the fact that

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Woodhead, ed., *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Jose Casanova, “Secularization Revisited: A reply to Talal Asad,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors*, eds. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, “Being ‘Critical’,” 15.

<sup>21</sup> Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Matthias Middell, eds., *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Scheer et al., *Secular Bodies*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Woodhead, *Peter Berger*, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Casanova, “Secularization Revisited,” 17.

<sup>25</sup> Casanova, “Secularization Revisited,” 17-18.

secularization did happen in Europe as thoroughly as Casanova claims it did. He states that religion remains persistent and important, also in Europe, although we may perceive it differently, because the story has told us differently.<sup>26</sup>

The ideas of Talal Asad also relate to this understanding of secularization as a story, because he sees secularism as the “myth of liberalism”, an ideology and a grand narrative that is used to position the west in contrast of the ‘Other’. This is done through creating oppositions, tying the west to the connotation of ‘modern’ and the ‘Other’ to the connotation of ‘premodern’.<sup>27</sup> He states that “religion and the secular do not exist, but assumptions about them do.” Asad sees ‘religion’ and ‘secularization/secularism’ not only as constructions, but also as classificatory devices used to distinguish and differentiate.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the secular shouldn’t be seen as merely the absence of religion or as neutral, factual and rational. Asad calls secularism the “underlying grammar” which creates a distinction between religion and the secular through the continuous problematization of religion.<sup>29</sup> According to Monique Scheer et al. this perspective has had a big impact on the study of secularization, secularism, and religion.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 Secularism in Connection to Gender, Feminism, Islamophobia and Racism

Although scholars in the academic field started to critically engage with the terms ‘religion’, ‘secularization’ and ‘secularism’ and the way they were employed in certain contexts and situation in relation to power, the story of the triumph of secularism had enormous staying power. Within politics and popular discourses in the west, religion and secularism were portrayed as opposites as part of the clash of civilizations rhetoric.

In this clash of civilizations thesis of 1993, Samuel Huntington states that culture is the most important factor that distinguishes people. He sees several cultural groups in the world, which are at the broadest level called civilizations. According to Huntington, non-Western civilizations increasingly resist westernization, and instead start to focus more on their own culture, especially on their own religion. Huntington believes that clashes between these civilizations will be the main cause of global conflict after the Cold War.<sup>31</sup> It is mostly the Islam

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan Alexander Stein, “Angels in (Mexican) America,” *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 2014): 684.

<sup>27</sup> George Shulman, “Redemption, Secularization, and Politics,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors*, edited by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.

<sup>28</sup> Scheer et al., *Secular Bodies*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Scheer et al., *Secular Bodies*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Scheer et al., *Secular Bodies*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations – A Response,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 26, no. 1 (1997): 141-142.

he sees as a cause of conflict. He states that he believes western civilization has been in conflict with the Islamic civilization for over 1300 years. The main contrast between the two is about freedom and oppression, in which he implicitly links secularism to freedom, according to Joan Scott.<sup>32</sup> The theory especially gained prominence within politics and popular discourse after 9/11, and related rhetoric's can still be found nowadays.

Gender became a key aspect of this contrast between Islam and the west, as one was portrayed as being an oppressive culture, were the other became linked to freedom and gender equality. For example, Ronald Inglehart and Peppa Norris stated in 2003 that the clash was actually about gender equality and sexual liberation.<sup>33</sup> Susan Miller Okin also discusses the subject in her famous essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" (1997). Okin argues that feminism and multiculturalism are incompatible with each other, even though they are both concerned with the protection of minority groups and their rights. According to Okin, some cultures are inherently patriarchal. Religious beliefs and practices are used to create and sustain this inequality, because they are produced by people in power – men – who want to control women. Therefore, she sees the protection of the rights of cultural minorities as anti-feminist and or even a danger to women.<sup>34</sup> Three years later, the Dutch scholar Paul Scheffer wrote another essay about multiculturalism and why the integration of immigrants has failed. He states that this is mostly because of their static religion – the Islam – and its incompatibility with 'our' secular western values. This incompatibility is often linked to women's rights as the Islam is often perceived as an oppressive, conservative, and patriarchal religion.<sup>35</sup> These essays and ideas have had a big influence on the public debate about Islam.

However, in more recent years, scholars have critically engaged with the story of secularism and its relation to gender, power and Othering. In her book *Sex and Secularism*, scholar Joan Scott discusses the history of secularism discourse in relation to sex and gender equality. She builds on Asad's definition of secularism as underlying grammar and the way this grammar uses opposites, but she adds the oppositions reason/sex, masculine/feminine and men/women, because she believes "gender is at the very heart of secularism discourse."<sup>36</sup> In the debate about Islam, secularization is often portrayed as the bringer of gender equality and

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<sup>32</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Susan Moller Okin, Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2011), 9-13.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Scheffer, "Het Multiculturele Drama," *NRC Handelsblad* (January 29, 2000): <https://docplayer.nl/13085685-het-multiculturele-drama.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 6, 22.

sexual freedom, whereas in fact, through secularization the public-private distinction was created that placed women in the private sphere. Scott argues that gender equality only became linked to secularism when Islam became the 'Other', to express the superiority of western countries. By defining the Muslim 'Other' as oppressive, traditional, and patriarchal, people perceive the secular west as free and modern. This not only gives a false image of Muslim women as helpless victims, but also masks the inequalities still present in western society.<sup>37</sup>

In her work, Scott focusses mostly on the French context, but also uses examples of other countries like the Netherlands. Other scholars have placed the Netherlands at the centre of their research. Heated debates about Islam, failed multiculturalism, sex, and gender equality have taken place in several European countries over the past two decades.<sup>38</sup> However, scholars like Paul Mepschen (et al.) have argued that this is most prominently seen in the Dutch context, due to the rapid and extensive secularization that took place and the far-reaching effect of the 'long 1960's' after which 'liberal' ideas on sexual freedom, gay rights and gender equality became an essential part of Dutch self-identification.<sup>39</sup> The process of de-pillarization created a deep anti-religious sentiment and the second feminist wave and the presumed gender equality and sexual liberation it resulted in, both became crucial to the Dutch identity.<sup>40</sup> With regards to the debate, Islam came to be associated with the traditional and oppressive religious past the Dutch had presumably left behind.<sup>41</sup> The religion was seen as backwards, and Muslim women as helpless victims in need of emancipation, because of the incompatibility between Islam and feminism, while gender equality in the Netherlands was portrayed as something that was already accomplished.<sup>42</sup>

But Mepschen et al. note that the debates in the Netherlands are not just about Islamic values being incompatible with 'ours' and the protection of women and gays. People feel like the Dutch identity itself also needs protection, as feminism, gay rights and secularity are seen as essential aspects of the Dutch culture and heritage, but they are currently 'threatened' by Muslim migrants and refugees.<sup>43</sup> This nativist discourse is often articulated as a matter of

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<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Mepschen, Jan Duyvendak, and Evelien Tonkens, "Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands," *Sociology* 44, no. 5 (2010): 963.

<sup>39</sup> Mepschen et al., "Sexual Politics," 966-967.

<sup>40</sup> Mepschen et al., "Sexual Politics," 966-967.

Sarah Bracke, "From 'Saving Women' to 'Saving Gays': Rescue Narratives and their Discontinuities," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no.2 (2012): 238.

<sup>41</sup> Mepschen et al., "Sexual Politics," 966.

<sup>42</sup> Bracke, "From 'Saving Women'," 238, 242.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Mepschen, "The Nativist Triangle: Sexuality, Race and Religion in the Netherlands," in *The Culturalization of Citizenship: Belonging and Polarization in a Globalising World* by Jan Willem Duyvendak, Peter Geschiere, en Evelina Tonkens, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97-98.

‘culture’, because the Dutch generally perceive racism as something that doesn’t exist in the Netherlands, an idea that scholar Melissa Weiner calls the national denial of racism, that has become part of the Dutch identity.<sup>44</sup> However, the racist notions cannot be overlooked, as culture and racism are closely intertwined according to Mepschen et al.<sup>45</sup> Both are creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ divide, and both are used to express superiority over the ‘Other’.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, notions of whiteness and non-whiteness are closely tied to the debate. Essentially, “to be Dutch is to be white.” Religion on the other hand, especially Islam, is perceived as something non-white.<sup>47</sup> This shows that religion, race and feminism are closely tied together in the debate.

Gloria Wekker also wrote about the denial of race in the Netherlands, and its link to gender and sexuality, in her book *Witte Onschuld* (‘White innocence’). She noticed a strong paradox regarding this subject in Dutch society. Matters about race in relation to gender and sexuality evoke strong, passionate and sometimes even aggressive reactions among the Dutch, while racism is simultaneously collectively denied. Therefore, this self-representation among white Dutch people became the subject of her study. She argues that there is a subconscious reservoir of knowledge and feelings related to the 400 years of the Dutch history of imperialism that plays a crucial role in the formation of this Dutch Self, although this is not acknowledged. Through the lack of acknowledgement for that part of Dutch history, an image is created of a tolerant, righteous, innocent and colour-blind nation. This image implicitly also reflects moral superiority over non-white, non-western or Islamic ‘Others’.<sup>48</sup> Wekker also states that this self-representation played a huge role in keeping the majority of white feminists from engaging in anti-racist activism.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this self-presentation and its implication are prominently present in Dutch secularism discourse in relation to gender and sexuality when talking about the Islamic or non-white ‘Other’.

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<sup>44</sup> Melissa Weiner, “The Ideologically Colonized Metropole: Dutch Racism and Racist Denial: Dutch Racism,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 6 (2014): 731.

Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, eds., *Dutch Racism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 10.

Mepschen, “The Nativist Triangle,” 99-100.

<sup>45</sup> Mepschen, “The Nativist Triangle,” 106-110.

<sup>46</sup> Essed and Hoving, *Dutch Racism*, 24.

Mepschen, “The Nativist Triangle,” 110.

<sup>47</sup> Mepschen, “The Nativist Triangle,” 106, 110.

Weiner, “The Ideologically Colonized Metropole,” 733.

<sup>48</sup> Gloria Wekker, *Witte Onschuld: Paradoxen van kolonialisme en ras*, herziene editie (Amsterdam: AUP, 2020), 7-9.

<sup>49</sup> Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 106.

## 2.4 Fighting the Narrative

The literature discussed so far has only researched one side of the debate. However, there have also been scholars who focussed on the ‘subjects’ of the debate – Muslim women – and how they have been fighting the Dutch narrative and the stigma of being oppressed by their religion. Early research about this topic is mostly focussed on the way Muslim women adopted the narrative of modernity and its values, like feminism, to show it was possible for them to do so.<sup>50</sup> According to Nadia Fadil, there was a deep desire among researchers “to show Muslims are not that different” and to “endorse ‘our’ dominant values of emancipation.” In recent years however, the term ‘emancipation’ itself has been increasingly subjected to critical investigation, because scholars like Saba Mahmood showed that its definition was constructed through Western eyes.<sup>51</sup> It was formed in a Western context and influenced by ideas from the European Enlightenment. ‘Emancipation’ is therefore focused on “equality, self-determination, liberation and individual responsibility.” However, not all women are the same, and not all women experience the same forms of oppression. What is seen as empowering or oppressive in one society, can be perceived differently in another society.<sup>52</sup>

Margaretha van Es notes that over the past couple of years, the representations of Muslim women have become more diverse. Nevertheless, the predominant image is still that of the oppressed female.<sup>53</sup> In her article she discusses the way in which Muslim women fight this dominant stereotype through presenting themselves as ‘modern’ and ‘emancipated’ in everyday contact with non-Muslims.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Van Es writes that these women emphasize that works of the Islam like the Quran and Hadith can be interpreted in a way that empowers women, and that the Islam stimulates them to educate and develop themselves.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, she also states that this self-fashioning happens according to specific Dutch normative ideals for women, namely that they should be ‘modern’ and ‘emancipated’.<sup>56</sup> The research of Van Es shows that even though some scholars critically engage with concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘emancipation’, there is still a lot of societal and normative pressure on Muslim women in everyday life.

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<sup>50</sup> Nadia Fadil, “Islam and Feminism: A Vexed Relationship? Thinking through the ‘Muslim Question’ and Its Epistemological Conundrums,” *Digest. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 52.

<sup>51</sup> Fadil, “Islam and Feminism,” 53.

<sup>52</sup> Nella van den Brandt, “Secularity, Gender and Emancipation: Thinking through Feminist Activism and Feminist Approaches to the Secular,” *Religion* 49, no. 4 (2019): 691-692.

<sup>53</sup> Margaretha A. van Es, “Muslim Women as ‘Ambassadors’ of Islam: Breaking Stereotypes in Everyday Life,” *Identities* 26, no. 4 (July 4, 2019): 376.

<sup>54</sup> Van Es, “Muslim Women,” 389.

<sup>55</sup> Van Es, “Muslim Women,” 379.

<sup>56</sup> Van Es, “Muslim Women,” 389.

In her research about ‘talking back’, scholar Sarah Bracke shows that women have different ways of handling this pressure and responding to gendered secularism discourse about Islam and women. The first one is openly critiquing the narrative about Muslim women, for example by stating that they are not oppressed, like the women in the article of Van Es did as well. The second response was to accept the image of being ‘not-emancipated’ through which the women tried to distance themselves from the discourse, because they deemed it unimportant. The last response was to completely ignore the discourse, but instead engage in women’s empowerment on a grassroots-level.<sup>57</sup> However, Bracke does state that the responses “continued to rely on the terms of the debate” and showed that the Western definitions of ‘emancipation’ and ‘modernity’ remained important.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, ‘talking back’ is important to challenge the dominant ideas in secularism discourse.

Nella van den Brandt argues that through publicly applying the strategy of ‘talking back’, women of minority groups do not just challenge the secular narrative content-wise, but that also the act itself fights the image of Muslim women lacking agency.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, secularization is often portrayed as an essential factor for women’s emancipation, but the action of ‘talking back’ gives women the feeling they can reclaim ‘emancipation’ and give it new meanings in which the secular isn’t featured.<sup>60</sup> In her research, Van den Brandt looks at the feminist organisation BOEH! (Baas Over Eigen Hoofd / Boss Over One’s Own Head) – which was started to respond to the headscarf debates in Belgium – and their understanding of emancipation. The statements and activism of BOEH! show that the binary between religion and the secular doesn’t have to be part of the understanding of emancipation. What is most important for them is forming alliances between different groups of women, emphasizing freedom of choice and being open for these individual choices, whether they are seen as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’.<sup>61</sup>

The earlier discussed research shows that it is not just the stereotypes and ideas within the Islamic debate and the Dutch narrative these women are fighting, but also the ones that are present in white, secular feminism. What it means to be a feminist is often articulated through western eyes, because the western understandings of ‘emancipation’ and ‘agency’ and the Western context in which it was produced. This leads to the exclusion of women with a different

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<sup>57</sup> Sarah Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands.” *Feminist Review* 98, no. 1 (2011): 39-44.

<sup>58</sup> Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate,” 44.

<sup>59</sup> Van den Brandt, “‘The Muslim Question’ and Muslim Women Talking Back,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 8, no. 3 (2019): 308.

<sup>60</sup> Van den Brandt, “Secularity, Gender and Emancipation,” 693-694.

<sup>61</sup> Van den Brandt, “Secularity, Gender and Emancipation,” 709-711.

religious, ethnic, non-western or non-white background.<sup>62</sup> In response to this exclusion, different forms of feminism have developed over the last decades. Nawal Mustafa from SPEAK explains that challenging white, hegemonic feminism is important not only because of this exclusion, but also because its focus on individuality and (sexual) freedom can be used to support anti-Islamic sentiments, as mentioned earlier in the literature review as well. Feminist arguments are for example used when it comes to the regulation of the headscarf, as the headscarf is often seen as oppressive by white feminists.<sup>63</sup> Mustafa also writes that Muslim women are rarely included in political or feminist discussions and decisions about the issues related to Islam and gender equality.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, an increasing number of Muslim women and women of colour have started to organise themselves in organizations advocating a more inclusive form of feminism and challenging the mainstream secular and feminist discourse like organization like BOEH! and SPEAK show.<sup>65</sup>

## 2.5 Intersectional Feminism

These organizations often present themselves as intersectional feminists. Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and is used to describe how a person can experience disadvantage and oppression by a multitude of factors and power dynamics. Race, class, gender and religion can all cause disadvantage independently, but are often intertwined, “creating a complex convergence of oppression.”<sup>66</sup>

The use of this framework can help feminist organizations to challenge dominant feminist ideologies because they force white feminists to rethink power, entitlements and the concept of ‘sameness’, as is researched by Benita Bunjun in the USA.<sup>67</sup> Among other things, Bunjun discusses how feminist movements often have a ‘national’ agenda, which causes them to neglect the issues of women who they don’t perceive as being part of their imagined community. With regards to entitlement, hegemonic feminism often sees gender as the main reason for oppression. Therefore, they also see equality as a matter of ‘sameness’; men and women should be the same and women themselves are a homogenous group. According to Bunjun, an intersectional framework can help them realize oppression can be caused by many

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<sup>62</sup> Benita Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations and Intersectionality: Contesting Hegemonic Feminism,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 115–116.

<sup>63</sup> Mustafa, “Muslim Women Don’t Need Saving,” 14-15.

<sup>64</sup> Mustafa, “Muslim Women Don’t Need Saving,” 15.

<sup>65</sup> Mustafa, “Muslim Women Don’t Need Saving,” 15.

<sup>66</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 115.

<sup>67</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 120.



interwoven factors, not just by gender. Moreover, it shows not all women are the same, and it gives feminist organizations the opportunity to distinguish between sameness and solidarity.<sup>68</sup>

Because the term ‘intersectionality’ was introduced in 1989, it is not a new phenomenon for Dutch feminist organizations. After the term was first coined, it became very popular within the feminist movement in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, Gloria Wekker states that the intersectional framework did not cause the radical and inclusive transformation people hoped it would. She writes that knowledge about intersectionality was seen as solution, but as a result it also stopped the conversation about racism and inclusivity in feminist circles.<sup>69</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, intersectionality has regained popularity among feminists in recent years. Although having its roots in earlier feminist history, Nicola Rivers sees the use of the intersectional framework is seen as an important aspect of fourth wave feminism.<sup>70</sup> Yet she also argues that intersectional feminism has become “an aspirational ‘brand’ rather than a mode of activism.”<sup>71</sup> Khurseed Wadia also notices a recent increase in alliances between younger western feminists and religious – primarily Islamic – feminists. Nevertheless, she says that the ‘refusal to recognize that feminism may be combined with Islamic belief’ remains, which creates an absence of sure support.<sup>72</sup> Thus, it could be argued that the term is used so much that it has lost its meaning, especially when the actual activism related to it is lacking.

Alberta Giorgi has researched the stance and activism of IFO’s in Italy and the role of religion in these movements. She states that the aim of these organization is ‘to de-marginalize the voices of minority women and to articulate different forms of inequality in political claims to create solidarity.’<sup>73</sup> Giorgi concludes that within the intersectional feminist movements religion still has an ‘Othering’ effect, but due to the history of the country, it is the Catholic woman who is seen as the ‘Other’. They are seen as the “bearers of the hegemonic culture” against which the feminists have fought. Muslim women on the other hand are welcomed within these circles.<sup>74</sup> This shows that the organizations, while aiming for solidarity, still think about religious ‘Others’ to concepts of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ and that the relationship with religion remains ambivalent.

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<sup>68</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 117-118, 120.

<sup>69</sup> Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 105-106.

<sup>70</sup> Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 122.

<sup>71</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 123.

<sup>72</sup> Danièle Joly, Khurseed Wadia, eds., *Muslim Women and Power: Political and Civic Engagement in West European Societies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 262-263.

<sup>73</sup> Alberta Giorgi, “Religious Feminists and intersectional feminist movements: Insights from a Case Study.” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 2 (2021),” 246.

<sup>74</sup> Giorgi, “Religious Feminists,” 247-248, 256.

## 2.6 Conclusion: Gaps and Relevance

As mentioned throughout this chapter, the story of secularism has had enormous staying power. The first section discussed some of works on which this narrative is based. It also showed that in more recent decades, scholars have begun to engage with the terms like ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ more critically. Instead of existing ‘things’, they are now seen as constructs or classification devices. Although they are not ‘things’, assumptions about the two categories still have a big influence on policies, the public debate and feminism. More research about feminist organizations and their ideas about the role of religion could contribute to the understanding of these assumptions and their influence.

The literature in this chapter does show that there has been quite some research done about secularism discourse in the Netherlands in relation to Islam and gender. There has also been some research done about the way Muslim women respond to this discourse, and the consequences it has on their everyday lives. Although some of these women called themselves feminists, research focusing specifically on how feminist organizations in the Netherlands respond and relate to this discourse is still missing. I think it is an important topic to research since the literature shows that feminism and the public debate about Islam are closely intertwined. Also, I think this research contributes to a better understanding of secularism discourse and its influence in Dutch society by looking at the ways this discourse is challenged, because the secular identity of the Netherlands is often taken for granted.

Moreover, the number of antiracist feminist organizations has increased over the last couple of years, so it is important to examine how these movements have developed themselves and their feminist identity, and how they use their activism to battle the Islamophobic and racist tendencies within the public debate in the Netherlands. The research of Giorgi about IFO’s in Italy shows that their relation to religion remains ambivalent or maybe even difficult. Considering the Dutch secularism discourse in relation to Islam, I think the Netherlands forms a very interesting case for similar research.

Lastly, through this research, I also aim to contribute to the understanding of ‘intersectional feminism’. As pointed out in the last section, a lot of feminists nowadays claim to be intersectional, however related activism is often lacking. Therefore, I wanted to research what ‘intersectional feminism’ means to the organizations themselves, and how they translate

these ideas into activism. Just like Giorgi, the category of intersectionality will thus not be a research tool, but rather an object of analysis and a category of self-identification in practice.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 6.

### 3. Theoretical Framework – ‘New Social Movement’ Theory and Related Concepts

#### 3.1 Introduction

Nowadays, feminism seems to be everywhere. Some say that this abundant presence might downplay the general message of feminism.<sup>76</sup> Catherine Dale and Rosemary Overell however argue that the ‘everywhere-ness’ of feminism can also indicate its ongoing relevance. Moreover, it shows that analyzing feminism is all the more important.<sup>77</sup> Especially since the ‘everywhere-ness’ of feminism has also caused controversies and debates about what it actually means and entails. This has created a multiplicity of feminisms. Therefore, Dale and Overell view feminism not as a ‘thing’ or a label or a set definition, but as something that ‘moves’. In their book, these movements are examined to get a better understanding of its several meanings and the ways feminism can operate nowadays, and “to offer a glimpse of the many lively sites of feminist life.”<sup>78</sup>

In this research, one of these sites will be examined, namely ‘intersectional feminism’. Like the feminism Dale and Overell talk about, some say ‘intersectionality’ is also used so much it has lost its meaning. However, I concur with the author’s position that feminism, in this case intersectional feminism, is something that ‘moves’. To study the moves of the intersectional feminist movement in the Netherlands, I used the ‘new social movement’ theory, which will be explained in this chapter as well as related concepts.

#### 3.2 ‘New Social Movement’ Theory

According to Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, social movements are “conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means.”<sup>79</sup> The word ‘new’ implies that there are also ‘old’ social movements. The term ‘old’ social movement is used to describe the socialists and workers movements in the nineteenth century who fought for things like a better working conditions, fair payment and political representation. In short, their objectives and concerns were materialist and class related.<sup>80</sup> The ‘new’ social movements emerged in the 1960’s. Bluntly stated, their objectives

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<sup>76</sup> Catherine Dale and Rosemary Overell, *Orienting Feminism: Media, Activism and Cultural Representation* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2-3.

<sup>77</sup> Dale, *Orienting Feminism*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Dale, *Orienting Feminism*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Murphy, *Social Theory: A New Introduction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 91.

were with “issues other than class.”<sup>81</sup> Their focus was on cultural and social issues, like civil or women’s rights, the environment or LGBTQIA+ rights.<sup>82</sup> The goal of these movements was to change dominant cultural ideas and patterns and gain recognition through public activism, because they wanted to improve the life of those marginalized in and by society.

These changes and the wanted recognition are often related to a certain identity, for example being a woman or being gay.<sup>83</sup> The movements are often focused on the visibility and acceptance of the category they identify with and are therefore mostly social and cultural instead of economic and political like the ‘old’ social movements. Some scholars argue that pursuing identity politics can be counterproductive, because these politics presumably rely on essentialist notions about this identity and in doing so fail to consider the diversity of the movement or society in general and reinforce a normal-deviant dichotomy. However, Mary Bernstein argues that building a movement around a certain identity doesn’t have to be excluding or essentialist. What the collective identity entails can remain fluid, while still contesting stigma to establish social change.<sup>84</sup>

The collective identity of new social movements is formed through common interests, shared experiences and a feeling of solidarity and it articulates the movements goals and beliefs.<sup>85</sup> But the collective identity does not just show through their ideas and public activism, but also for example through the structure of their organization. Altogether, this identity shows the way “they understand themselves, their connection with one another and their political place in the world.”<sup>86</sup> But this is not an isolated and purely internal process. The identity of these movements is constructed through the constant interaction with others, both their adherents and opponents.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, this identity is formed within a certain context and therefore influenced by the culture and dominant discourse of this context.<sup>88</sup> That is why Marc Steinberg argues for a more dialogic perspective when studying social movements. He states that is important to

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<sup>81</sup> Paula Ray, “Surfing the Fourth Wave of the Feminist Movement via SNS,” in *Orienting Feminism: Media, Activism and Cultural Representation*, by eds. Catherine Dale and Rosemary Overell (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 118.

<sup>82</sup> Murphy, *Social Theory*, 91.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Bernstein, “Contradictions of Gay Ethnicity: Forging Identity in Vermont,” in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, by eds. David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 86.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Bernstein, “Contradictions of Gay Ethnicity,” 86-87, 103.

<sup>85</sup> Jo Reger, “More than One Feminism: Organizational Structure and the Construction of Collective Identity,” in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, by eds. David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172.

<sup>86</sup> David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>87</sup> David Meyer et al., *Social Movements*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> David Meyer et al., *Social Movements*, 15-16.

understand that the formation of this identity and the movements public articulations are relational. The movements are bound by the context they are in, they use the discourse of their opponents, but they are also able to transform this discourse and use it as a weapon.<sup>89</sup> Looking at these movements in relation to their context and opponents can therefore help to provide a better understanding of their identity and its construction.

This constant interaction takes place in the public sphere. This is the public space in which “topics of concern can be openly discussed among any willing participant,” a public realm in society in which people can form and express their opinions.<sup>90</sup> The participants are not just people but can also be media like newspapers. Considering technological developments, social media has also become part of this public sphere. Douglas Kellner has therefore re-defined the public sphere as “a site of information, discussion, contestation, political struggle, and organization that includes the broadcasting media and new cyberspace as well as the face-to-face interaction.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, online presence and activism has become an integral part of contemporary new social movements, some even indicate it as one of the characteristics of fourth wave feminism. Social media enables the movements to rapidly spread information to a broad audience and is thus a powerful tool gaining support and raising awareness.<sup>92</sup> With regard to intersectional feminist movements, the digital public sphere also allows marginalized people to speak for themselves, where they were formerly more dependent on more privileged and powerful people to speak for them under the guise of “giving voice to the voiceless.”<sup>93</sup>

In this research, I view the IFO’s both as part of a social movement and social movements themselves. I consider them part of the feminist movement, of the fourth feminist wave and part of intersectional feminism. However, I also consider each of the organizations as unique, as a social movement in itself. These two stances combined, I used different aspects of new social movement theory like researching the organizations’ identity, structure and activism and a dialogic perspective to in the end offer a “lively glimpse of the many lively sites of *intersectional* feminist life” in the Netherlands.

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<sup>89</sup> Marc Steinberg, “Toward a More Dialogic Analysis of Social Movement Culture,” in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, by eds. David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 208-211.

<sup>90</sup> Gianmarco Savio, “Occupying Organization: Space as Organizational Resource,” in *Protest, Social Movements, and Global Democracy Since 2011: New Perspectives*, by eds. Thomas Davies, Holly Eva Ryan, and Peña Alejandro Milciades (Bradford, West Yorkshire: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016), 72.

<sup>91</sup> Lisa Ariemma, Judith Burnside-Lawry, “Transnational Resistance Networks: New Democratic Prospects?,” in *Protest, Social Movements, and Global Democracy Since 2011: New Perspectives*, by eds. Thomas Davies, Holly Eva Ryan, and Peña Alejandro Milciades (Bradford, West Yorkshire: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016), 156.

<sup>92</sup> Ray, “Surfing the Fourth Wave,” 116-118.

<sup>93</sup> Ray, “Surfing the Fourth Wave,” 117.

### 3.3 The Concepts

#### 3.3.1 Secularism Discourse

Some people see secularism merely as an absence: a neutral, objective worldview that remains in the absence of religion. Yet, Craig Calhoun et al. argue that it is in fact a presence and that it should be treated as such.<sup>94</sup> Not only does it influence the way we perceive religion, but also for example the state, science or our national identity. Secularism is not neutral, natural or common sense.<sup>95</sup> However, it is hard to define what the term actually entails. Therefore, following Joan Scott, in this research I focus on secularism discourse. This means that I look at the discursive articulations of secularism in the public debate and the way the term is used to contrast and problematize religion, especially with regards to gender. Nowadays the term has become synonymous with gender equality and sexual liberation, while Islam is continuously linked to oppression.<sup>96</sup> Examining these articulations of secularism is important, because “like all discourses, it has a purpose and a set of effects that produce a particular vision of the world—a vision that shapes and is accepted as reality.”<sup>97</sup>

Because of its assumed opposition to Islam, secularism discourse is also used in national contexts to construct a national identity in contrast to the Islamic ‘Other’. The arguments are often linked to gender, because they make use of the dichotomy freedom versus oppression, for example with regards to women’s emancipation or gay rights. Using gender or sexuality in relation to the nation’s identity isn’t a new phenomenon. Already in colonial times, issues regarding gender were used to legitimize colonial conquests, policies or rules.<sup>98</sup> Although there are many different ways how nationalism can be gendered, in this research the focus will be on how gender and sexuality are used to create a Dutch national identity that sets itself apart from both the Islamic and the colored ‘Other’.

#### 3.3.2 Feminism and Intersectionality

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, there is a lot of discussion and controversy about what feminism actually means, both inside and outside the movement, which is why I agreed

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<sup>94</sup> Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>95</sup> Scheer et al., *Secular Bodies*, 6, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 1, 6, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> Alexandre Jaunait, Amelie Le Renard, Elisabeth Marteu, “Sexual Nationalisms?: Contemporary Reconfigurations of Sexualities and Nationalisms,” *Raisons Politiques* 49, n. 1 (2013): 7.

with the idea that you should look at how feminism ‘moves’. Nevertheless, you must have some indication of its direction. Therefore, Dale and Overell following again, I view feminism as “an orientation – a tending-towards and for a future without patriarchy.”<sup>99</sup> It is an orientation that often works through activism and is focused on equality and choice, although what these terms encompass may vary for person to person.<sup>100</sup>

However, the meaning of feminism hasn’t always been this broad, and in some cases it still isn’t. As described in the literature review, feminism has received a lot of critique because what it meant to be a feminist was articulated through western eyes, and thus was not relatable or applicable to non-western women.<sup>101</sup> That is why the term ‘intersectionality’ became an important term for the feminist movement, because it described how a person could experience disadvantage and oppression by a multitude of interwoven factors and power dynamics, while feminism used to focus solely on disadvantage caused by ‘gender’.<sup>102</sup> Intersectional feminist movements try to use this framework to challenge dominant feminist ideologies and create a more inclusive form of feminism.

### 3.3.3 Identity

The last key concept that needs to be discussed is the concept of ‘identity’. Like discussed in a previous section, a movement’s identity is formed through common interests, shared experiences and a feeling of solidarity and it articulates the movements goals and beliefs. Moreover, it is formed through continuous interaction with others. More precisely, according to Dennis Gioia, a movements identity consists of “those features that in the eyes of the members are central to the organizations character or self-image and make the organization distinctive from others.” These features can manifest as key values, practices, labels, acts of activism and are deemed essential for the movement by its members.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Dale, *Orienting Feminism*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Christina Scharff, “Disarticulating Feminism: Individualization, Neoliberalism and the Othering of ‘Muslim Women,’” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 132.

<sup>101</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 115-116.

<sup>102</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 115.

<sup>103</sup> Dennis Gioia, Majken Schultz, and Kevin G Corley, “Organizational Identity, Image, and Adaptive Instability,” *The Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 65-66.



## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

As explained in the introduction, my goal is to research what ‘intersectional feminism’ means to self-identifying intersectional feminist organizations, and how they translate these ideas into activism, specifically in relation to Dutch secularism discourse about Islam and gender equality. Thus, it is research about the meanings people give to their identity and social actions in a certain social, historical and political context, and how they relate, react and are influenced by this context. Therefore, my research fits in to the interpretive paradigm. Within this paradigm, reality is seen as something that is socially constructed. This means that the context in which people live influences the way they make sense of their reality. Consequently, their experiences are viewed as subjective, since the different backgrounds and contexts people have, create different perspectives.<sup>104</sup> I conducted qualitative research, because that allowed me to examine the IFO’s perspectives on intersectional feminism, while simultaneously identifying how this perspective relates to its context.<sup>105</sup>

I used several qualitative research methods for the data collection. The use of different methods that complement each other is called triangulation.<sup>106</sup> Triangulation can be useful to capture various layers of the research topic, because each method collects data for a different angle. According to Phillip Ayoub the use of triangulation can be especially helpful in social movement research, because of the complexity of the phenomenon. He argues that it leads to a more holistic picture of social movements, because “it reduces the distance between the methods and ontology.”<sup>107</sup> The different qualitative methods will be explained in this chapter.

### 4.2 Methods and Sources of Data Collection

#### 4.2.1 In-depth Interviews

Using in-depth interviews for data collection can be used to uncover the beliefs, perceptions and motivations of the participant. Moreover, it makes clear how they understand themselves, the meaning they attribute to certain terms and phenomena, and how they relate to their context.<sup>108</sup> Conducting in-depth interviews with representatives of activist organization is often

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<sup>104</sup> M. Hennink, I. Hutter, and A. Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 2010), 15.

<sup>105</sup> M. Hennink et al., *Qualitative Research Methods*, 10-11, 14-15.

<sup>106</sup> Phillip Ayoub, Sophia Wallace, and Chris Zepeda-Millán, “Triangulation in Social Movement Research,” in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67.

<sup>107</sup> Ayoub et al., “Triangulation,” 68-73.

<sup>108</sup> Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 117.

used in social movement studies, because it tells a lot about the way they see themselves as a movement – their collective identity – and their relation to the world they live in.<sup>109</sup> For this research, I chose to interview people from several organizations that explicitly call themselves ‘intersectional feminists.’ I chose the method of in-depth interviews, because I am interested in the way these organizations *themselves* view ‘intersectional feminism’, how this influences their collective identity, and how this intersectional framework is implemented in their activism in relation to the public debate about Islam and racism.

#### 4.2.2 Participant Observation

To get a better idea of the activism in practice, I also used the method of participant observation. This means that I observed the IFO’s and their members in their own context during their own activist events.<sup>110</sup> At these events, I looked at how their ideas on ‘intersectional feminism’ are translated into actual activist work, and how this activism reacts to Dutch secularism discourse, Islamophobia and racism.

Participant observation is not a very common method in social movement studies, however it can be very useful because it helps me to collect ‘firsthand’ data about what the organizations do and understand how they give meaning to their actions.<sup>111</sup> Through this method, you are in some way experiencing what it is like to be part of the movement. This helps to get a better view and understanding of their perspective.<sup>112</sup> Also, Philip Balsiger states that activist events aim to perform one’s collective identity. The form of activism wants to transmit the movements message and therefore is organized accordingly. Observing and analyzing these events will thus provide a better understanding of their collective identity and their activist message. Moreover, it can also show the differences between the IFO’s. Balsiger states that “apparently similar actions will be performed in very different ways depending on the organization.”<sup>113</sup> In addition, observing how their ideas are put to practice can also reveal the gaps between their ideology and their actual activism. This makes participant observation a useful method to combine with interviews, because in interviews they tell you about their ideals, goals and activism and through observation you can actually see how these work in practice.

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<sup>109</sup> Donatella della Porta, “In-depth Interviews,” in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228-229.

<sup>110</sup> Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 170-171.

<sup>111</sup> Philip Balsiger, Alexandre Lambelet, “Participant Observation,” in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144-145.

<sup>112</sup> Balsiger et al., “Participant Observation,” 145-146.

<sup>113</sup> Balsiger et al., “Participant Observation,” 148.

#### 4.2.3 Online Research

As mentioned before, online activism is an important part of the way new social movements operate. It is also seen as a key aspect of fourth wave feminism. Gathering data online is therefore very useful, maybe even essential, when studying contemporary IFO's, since social media platforms can be seen as the modern equivalents of the public square.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, I also conducted online research. I used their internet presence as a source, which means I looked at the posts, websites, Facebook and Instagram profiles of the IFO's to gather information about their organization, goals, standpoints and actions.

#### 4.2.4 Difficulties and Reflexivity

However, there were some difficulties that came across when using these methods, especially with regards to interviewing and participant observation. The first was access. Finding participants from IFO's to interview or events to participate in was difficult, because there was a lot of hesitance or reluctance to participate in research. Reasons could be that people simply did not have the time, they did not see how this could benefit their organization, or they were afraid that the presence of a researcher would influence their activities in a negative way. To increase their willingness, I talked openly about my research, my objectives, what I would do during an interview or observation, and we made agreements about their anonymity. To ensure their anonymity, the names of the organizations and their members are thus fictitious. Additionally, the methods also required rapport. This is a mutual feeling of involvement and comfort, a "click". The participants need to feel they can speak and behave freely. Building rapport could be difficult, because it can feel forced, but I tried to be open, approachable and adaptive.

With these qualitative methods, the researcher is an important factor in the data that will be collected. It not only depends on access or rapport, but also the questions that are asked, or the things that are observed. On a practical level, it is difficult to take notes and observe at the same time, and on a social level you can feel awkward in this observing role. Moreover, the body language, way of asking, and overall appearance and presence can influence the outcomes. I think some of these difficulties were resolved by a good preparation, others were a matter of practice. Additionally, reflexivity is very important. As researcher, I am influenced by my background. Therefore, the outcomes of this research are not just influenced by the views of

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<sup>114</sup> Lorenzo Mosca, "Methodological Practices in Social Movement Online Research," in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 401.

my participants, but also by my own views and the way all these views and backgrounds responded to each other.<sup>115</sup> I made sure to critically reflect on this process and my own influence and background during the entire research in order ensure its validity.

#### 4.4 Method of Analysis

##### 4.4.1 Discourse Analysis

All the methods mentioned above generate textual data. A commonly used method to analyze textual data is discourse analysis. According to Hennink, “a discourse is a frame of thinking which can be reflected in the way people talk about issues.”<sup>116</sup> The underlying assumption is that language and the way people use it, is influenced by societal and cultural ideas, values and norms, and larger structures.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, these societal influences and ideas are transmitted and reproduced through practices and institutions, but also through the use of language, through a certain discourse. These discourses form the way we see the world, ourselves, and our perceptions of the things we talk about.<sup>118</sup> Thus, discourse analysis investigates the relationship between movement’s use of language – their ‘texts’ – and their broader contexts to expose for example underlying meanings, assumptions, ideologies.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, studying the textual data through discourse analysis can reveal the social reality of the people you study and their understandings of certain matters, while simultaneously relating these ideas to their context. For that reason, it was a fitting method of analysis for new social movement research, since it fits the dialogic perspective discussed in the theoretical framework. It showed what ‘intersectional feminism’ meant to self-identifying intersectional feminist organizations, and how they relate to Dutch secularism discourse.

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<sup>115</sup> Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 19-21.

<sup>116</sup> Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 210.

<sup>117</sup> Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 210.

<sup>118</sup> John Munice, “Discourse Analysis,” in *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, ed. Victor Jupp (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 2.

<sup>119</sup> Lasse Lindekilde, “Discourse and Frame Analysis: In-Depth Analysis of Qualitative Data in Social Movement Research,” in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198.

## 5. Secularism Discourse

### 5.1 Introduction

In the public debate about Islam in the Netherlands, references are often made to the lack of gender equality, oppressive headscarves and unfree women. This shows how gender equality, religion and racism are interwoven within secularism discourse. This chapter will further explain secularism discourse and this interwovenness, and examine how this is expressed in the public debate about Islam in the Netherlands. First, a bit of historical context will be given about secularism discourse, gender equality and Islam in general and in the Netherlands. The second section consists of a more elaborate description of secularism discourse and its discursive articulations. I will examine the ways language is used to express the Otherness of Islam and the superiority of the west through the sub-headings ‘modernity’, ‘culture’ and ‘gender equality’. The final section will discuss the present-day expressions of this discourse within the public debate about Islam.

### 5.2 Historical Formation Dutch (Gendered) Islamic Debate

As discussed in the literature review, gender equality and sexual liberation are seen as essential and unquestionable consequences and characteristics of secularization. When looking at the history of secularism discourse however, it turns out that gender *inequality* was an important aspect of the secularization process, as is argued by Joan Scott. It was only when Islam became the “Other” that gender *equality* entered the debate.<sup>120</sup>

However, Scott discusses the general history of gendered secularism discourse in Europe, a similar development can be found in the Netherlands when looking at the debate about Islam. When guest workers came to the Netherlands in the 1950’s and 1960’s, their religion was not an issue, because the Dutch government was under the impression that the guest workers’ stay was only temporary. However, the realization of permanency and increased visibility of the immigrants in the 1980’s started debate about their future and place in the Netherlands.<sup>121</sup> In these debates culture and religion gained importance. Events like the Rushdie affair or speeches from politicians like Frits Bolkestein were an ‘eye-opener’ to many people about the growing tensions in the country and the possible incompatibility of Islam with Dutch values such as freedom of expression and the separation of church and state. These events

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<sup>120</sup> Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism*.

<sup>121</sup> Martijn de Koning and Thijl Sunier, “‘Page After Page I Thought, That’s the Way it is’: Academic Knowledge and the Making of the ‘Islam Debate’ in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 10, no. 1 (2021): 93.

planted the idea that the immigrant question was not only about education and civilization, but possibly also about the preservation of Dutch identity.<sup>122</sup> They created the idea that to protect the nation's identity against the influences of other cultures, outsiders must assimilate or otherwise excluded.<sup>123</sup>

One of the key figures to bring gender equality and sexual liberation into the question was Pim Fortuyn. As an openly gay man, he irreversibly entangled sexual politics with the debate about multiculturalism and Islam. One of his arguments was that the Islamic civilization had not gone through the Enlightenment, and therefore was lacking the crucial secular western values of gender equality, sexual liberation, and tolerance.<sup>124</sup> In his rhetoric, he often used the example of his 'ordinary' mother who he called an 'emancipated' woman. This aimed to show that emancipation was achieved by all Dutch women, and thus, is an essential part of Dutch identity while simultaneously placing it in the past.<sup>125</sup> Multiculturalism and Islam were perceived to threaten what had been established, because Islam was seen as a source of oppression and Muslim women as helpless victims. This created a new alliance between right-wing politicians and feminists in the Netherlands, exemplified by the support Fortuyn received from the editor-in-chief of *Opzij*, Cisca Dresselhuys, the most well-known feminist magazine in the Netherlands.<sup>126</sup>

Even after Fortuyn had been murdered in 2002, his ideas about the incompatibility of Islam with Dutch secular values like gender equality and gay rights remained, because they had become 'common sense.'<sup>127</sup> In 2003, the Dutch minister responsible for emancipation stated that "it was already fully achieved by *autochthonous* women," which meant the emancipation policies from that moment on would solely need to focus on women with an immigration background.<sup>128</sup> Another voice came up around the time of Fortuyn's murder, the voice of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch politician from Somali-origin who advocated fiercely against Islam. She argued that a secular democracy was the only way to protect the rights of its citizens.<sup>129</sup> As former Muslim, she believed that Muslims in the Netherlands needed to assimilate by ridding

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<sup>122</sup> De Koning et al., "Page After Page," 96-97.

Justus Uitermark, Paul Mepschen and Jan Willem Duyvendak, "Populism, Sexual Politics and the Exclusion of Muslims in the Netherlands," in *European States and Their Muslim Citizens: The Impact of Institutions on Perceptions and Boundaries*, ed. John Bowen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 238.

<sup>123</sup> Uitermark et al., "Populism," 235.

<sup>124</sup> Mepschen et al., "Sexual politics," 967.

<sup>125</sup> Bracke, "Subjects of the debate," 36.

<sup>126</sup> Van den Berg et al., "Women from the Catacombs," 394, 399.

<sup>127</sup> Uitermark et al., "Populism, etc.," 245.

<sup>128</sup> Bracke, "Subjects of the Debate," 34.

<sup>129</sup> Mepschen et al., "Sexual Politics," 969.

themselves of Islam, especially the women. In her eyes, this would be their only chance to emancipate.<sup>130</sup>

Hirsi Ali has often collaborated with right-wing politician Geert Wilders. Over the years, his statements about Islam have become more and more radical like calling mosques ‘hate-palaces’ and suggesting a tax on wearing headscarves.<sup>131</sup> Like Fortuyn and Hirsi Ali he also employed feminist rhetoric’s in his attempt to drive a wedge between the secular Dutch society and its Muslim citizens. Claiming that he wants to protect women and gays against Islam even got him the support of the biggest gay organization in the Netherlands, the COC, in 2010.<sup>132</sup> Although many regard his views as extreme, a statement of the left-wing politician Femke Halsema shows that the problematization of Islam in relation to safety and gender equality had become a normalized practice in politics in the 2010’s.<sup>133</sup> In 2009 she said: “I can’t wait for the moment when they fling off their headscarves in freedom, I would most prefer to see every woman in the Netherlands without a headscarf.”<sup>134</sup> In present Dutch society, statements like these are still frequently heard.

### 5.3 Secularism Discourse and its Discursive Articulations

#### 5.3.1 Modernity

The development of secularism discourse already showed some examples of the argumentation against Islam that is used within the discourse. This section will further elaborate on the different ways language is used to express the Otherness of Islam and the superiority of the west. This first paragraph will discuss the trope ‘modernity’, however it is important to note that all three categories are intertwined. The division is based on the main trope of the argument and is only created to show the different articulations of secularism language.

Like shown in the statements of politicians like Fortuyn and Hirsi Ali, the secular west is framed as ‘the avatar of freedom and modernity’, while Islam is depicted as ‘backward’, ‘traditional’ or ‘oppressive’.<sup>135</sup> The difference is explained through a narrative of progress. Enlightenment, modernization and secularization are seen as processes that brought the west gender equality and sexual liberation, processes that Islamic societies had not gone through,

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<sup>130</sup> Van den Berg et al., “Women from the Catacombs,” 400.

<sup>131</sup> Gloria Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 157.

<sup>132</sup> Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 165.

<sup>133</sup> Van den Berg et al., “Women from the Catacombs,” 100.

<sup>134</sup> Anna C. Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul, “Liberal Feminism and Postcolonial Difference: Debating Headscarves in France, the Netherlands, and Germany,” *Social Compass* 68, no. 3 (2021): 420.

<sup>135</sup> Mepschen et al., “Sexual Politics,” 963.

which meant they were ‘lagging behind’.<sup>136</sup> When talking about modernity, the differences between ‘east’ and ‘west’ are thus expressed in a *temporal* way.<sup>137</sup> In relation to the Islamic ‘Other’, being modern, secular and emancipated have become essential aspects of Europe’s self-identification, because they imply that Europe is ‘ahead’. Religion, on the other hand, represents regression and the lack of modernity, thus religious actors and societies are framed as being stuck in time.<sup>138</sup>

Judith Butler explains that in these temporal expressions it is not just ‘time’ but also ‘place’ that is important. What is seen as progressive is based on where it is happening, namely in the west. She states that ‘borders and time are linked.’ Because of this linkage, crossing a physical border does not mean that one is now part of that time or that country. Only if you are willing to shed your religious ideas and practices, and value gender equality and sexual rights, can you become part of a country. Whoever remains religious or is opposed to things like gay marriage, will be seen as pre-modern and an outsider.<sup>139</sup> The temporal-spatial expressions create the illusion of homogeneity, of a monolithic west and a monolithic ‘rest.’ This is also shown through the way women are framed. All western women are seen as liberated and emancipated, whereas all Muslim women are viewed as being oppressed.<sup>140</sup> This is exemplified in the statement of Dutch minister about autochthonous women having achieved emancipation, or the commonly heard phrase: “They are trapped in the past from which we have escaped.”<sup>141</sup>

Additionally, describing it as a road or a linear process also creates the illusion of universality. It implies that western ideas on freedom, emancipation and equality will be the outcome, the destination for all cultures. It leaves little room for different definitions of these terms, and simultaneously expresses the superiority of the west, because the west is “already there,” a haven where people can be free.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 1-9.

John R. Bowen, ed., *European States and Their Muslim Citizens: The Impact of Institutions on Perceptions and Boundaries*. Cambridge Studies in Law and Society (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>137</sup> Van den Berg et al., “Women from the Catacombs,” 407.

<sup>138</sup> Gisela Carrasco-Miro, “Encountering the Colonial: Religion and Feminism and the Coloniality of Secularism,” *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2020): 94-95.

<sup>139</sup> Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 1-4.

Karen Vintges, “Feminisme versus Neoliberalisme: Stemmen van Marokkaanse en Marokkaans-Nederlandse Vrouwen,” in *Activisme, Feminisme En Islam: Stemmen Van Marokkaanse En Marokkaans-Nederlandse Vrouwen*, eds. Marjo Buitelaar, Moha Ennaji, Fatima Sadiqi and Karen Vintges (Amsterdam: AUP, 2018), 250.

Nira Yuval-Davis, Kannabirān Kalpana, and Ulrike Vieten, *The Situated Politics of Belonging* (London: SAGE, 2006), 1-3.

<sup>140</sup> Niamh Reilly, “Recasting Secular Thinking for Emancipatory Feminist Practice,” *Social Compass* 64, no. 4 (2017): 482.

<sup>141</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 159.

<sup>142</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 176-178.



### 5.3.2 Culture

But the Otherness of Islam is not just described in temporal terms. Arguments about ‘culture’ are also an important part of secularism discourse. This means not only ‘borders’ and ‘time’ are linked, but that culture is also used to determine whether one ‘belongs’ to a nation. What is often heard in the debate in case of Islam, is that Islamic culture is ‘incompatible’ with the culture of secular, western nation states.<sup>143</sup> National identities are constructed through articulating ideal moral values, practices and master narratives. The values of the “Other” are articulated in opposite ways, because of the mirror function of the Other in the construction of the Self.<sup>144</sup> Essential aspects of Dutch culture are defined as secularity, sexual liberation, gender equality, tolerance, individuality, and freedom, whereas Islamic culture is considered to be centered around religion, tradition, community and family, and valuing things like chastity, veiling, and obedience.<sup>145</sup> This automatically makes the two cultures incompatible. Thus, complete assimilation or total exclusion are presented as only options. This is especially true for Muslim women, as this assimilation is framed as being the only solution to end their victimization.<sup>146</sup> Yet, Muslim women are described as having little agency, because of their patriarchal culture. Therefore, being ‘saved’ is seen as important in order to achieve assimilation.<sup>147</sup>

But the opposing values do not just frame Islamic culture as being incompatible with western culture, they also make Islam into a threat. Following the clash of civilizations and neo-culturalist rhetoric, the presence of Muslim citizens is articulated as endangering both western culture and security. The opposing values are portrayed as forming a danger to the Dutch national identity, as feminism, gay rights and secularity are seen as essential aspects of the nation’s culture and heritage. Moreover, Muslims have become associated with terrorism and crimes – partly gender-based or sexual crimes, like rape or violence against homosexuals – which creates a feeling of fear.<sup>148</sup> This is way politician like Wilders often use terms like ‘protection’, ‘threat’, ‘terrorists’ within the Islamic debate.

The different uses of ‘culture’ are important to describe, not only because of their frequent appearance and ‘Othering’ effect within the debate about Islam, but also because they express current forms of racism. Arguments about differences in ‘culture’ are used to express

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<sup>143</sup> Mepschen, “Sexual Politics,” 965.

<sup>144</sup> Mepschen, “Sexual Politics,” 964.

Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate,” 29.

<sup>145</sup> Mepchen, “Sexual Politics,” 694.

<sup>146</sup> Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate,” 34-35.

<sup>147</sup> Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate,” 34-35.

<sup>148</sup> Van den Berg et al., “Women from the Catacombs,” 407.

superiority over other cultures, primarily the Islamic one, which indicates that there still is a racial hierarchy. However, racism in general, but specifically this form is widely denied. Like scholar Sayyid put it: “the figure of the Muslim is vital for racism without racists. Because Muslims are not a race, any and all forms of discrimination and violence disproportionately directed at them is thinkable and doable. Because Muslims are not a race the systemic violations directed against them cannot be racially motivated.”<sup>149</sup> The expressions about culture privilege some, while severely disadvantaging and dehumanizing others, because structural problems like unemployment are explained by an essentialized idea of their culture.<sup>150</sup>

Additionally, many of these racist comments are made under the guise of ‘freedom of expression’, which is seen as important value of Dutch culture. This leaves little room for others to address this form of racism, because in the eyes of Dutch people that would only emphasize the ‘incompatibility’ with Dutch values as in the Netherlands individual expression and claiming this right are valued more than empathy and civility.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, while denying racism, notions of ‘whiteness’ remain important. Part of the “Muslim figure” of Sayyid is dark hair and an olive skin color – not a white one. When people think of someone from the Netherlands, they will think of someone white.<sup>152</sup>

### 5.3.3 Gender Equality

When people use language about ‘modernity’ or ‘culture’ within secularism discourse, the topic of ‘gender equality’ is often touched upon since the three categories are interwoven. Nevertheless, a more elaborate description of how the trope of ‘gender equality’ is present in secularism discourse is necessary to fully understand the Islamic debate.

Words and phrases that are commonly used within the discourse are the oppositions of ‘emancipated’ versus ‘non-emancipated’, ‘free’ vs. ‘unfree’, ‘uncovered’ versus ‘covered’, ‘agency’ versus ‘lacking agency’. Through this language an image is created that all western women have achieved emancipation, that they are autonomous and free, while Muslim women are considered to be oppressed, unfree, and lacking the agency to escape this oppression of their patriarchal husbands and religion.<sup>153</sup> This way of talking reproduces the idea that feminism is an essential part of Dutch identity, but it also places it in the past, making it something that is

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<sup>149</sup> S. Sayyid, “Racism and Islamophobia,” International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, 2011, 3.

<sup>150</sup> Melissa Weiner, “The Ideologically Colonized Metropole,” 731-734.

<sup>151</sup> Essed and Hoving, *Dutch racism*, 14.

<sup>152</sup> Weiner, “Ideologically Colonized Metropole,” 733.

<sup>153</sup> Bracke, “Subjects of the Debate,” 34.

Van den Berg et al., “Women from the Catacombs,” 408.

achieved and therefore, no longer needed.<sup>154</sup> Moreover, in these arguments gender equality is defined as the ability to make individual choices, to be actively in charge of one's life, and – related to the value of sexual liberation – to be free to show one's body and pursue sexual desires. What it means to be emancipated is thus defined according to certain standards, which limits the choices (Muslim) women can make. Meanwhile, inequalities like the glass ceiling and wage gap continue to exist.<sup>155</sup>

All of these expressions within secularism discourse, come together in one piece of garment: the headscarf. The headscarf has become one of the key topics of the debate, since it is often perceived as *the* symbol of women's oppression. It is assumed to represent religious traditions that deny women access to the public sphere.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, it is associated with constraint, denying covered women the opportunity to fulfil their desires.<sup>157</sup> The uncovered body becomes associated with freedom and sexual liberation, even though uncovered women are still subjected to societal norms and constraints formed by the male-gaze.<sup>158</sup>

These ideas have several important implications. First, they create normative regimes, or sometimes even actual policies like the Burqa ban, that limit women's ability to be in control of their body and the way they dress.<sup>159</sup> Secondly, the enormous symbolic meaning attributed to the headscarf makes it into a visual boundary marker that creates and emphasizes the distinction between 'Us' versus 'Them'. In this rhetoric, wearing a headscarf means you will always be the 'Other'.<sup>160</sup> Lastly, it also makes wearing a headscarf a performative and public practice, because it assumes you want to actively show your 'Otherness', while within secular rationality religion is supposed to be a private matter.<sup>161</sup>

#### 5.4 Current State of the Debate

A recent example is the response to the Russian-Ukrainian war. When the conflict escalated in February 2022 and Ukrainian people started fleeing the country, the phones at *Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland* in Ter Apel were ringing off the hook. Dutch citizens, the

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<sup>154</sup> Bracke, "Subjects of the Debate," 36.

Bracke, "From 'Saving Women'," 238.

<sup>155</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 182.

Van den Berg et al., "Women from the Catacombs," 405.

<sup>156</sup> Van den Berg et al., "Women from the Catacombs," 400.

<sup>157</sup> Giorgia Baldi, "'Burqa avenger': Law and Religious Practices in Secular Space," *Law and Critique* 29, no. 1 (2017): 35-36.

<sup>158</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 158-162.

<sup>159</sup> Baldi, "'Burqa Avenger'," 41.

<sup>160</sup> Van den Berg et al., "Women from the Catacombs," 400.

Baldi, "'Burqa Avenger'," 34.

<sup>161</sup> Baldi, "'Burqa Avenger'," 33.

government and many municipalities were eager to help the Ukrainian refugees. The solidarity was heartwarming. Nevertheless, it forms a stark contrast with what happened several months earlier when Afghan refugees needed shelter. Many municipalities were hesitant to offer help. In the village of Harskamp, the arrival of Afghan evacuees even led to an aggressive protest, including vandalism, fire and racist banners and slogans saying things like “Auschwitz back for blacks” and “We won’t make our women wear headscarves.”<sup>162</sup> In the Ukrainian case, people were eager to help because the Ukrainian people were like they said: “more like us”, they were “white, Christian people”, ‘with a very similar culture and similar values.’ Thus, they weren’t seen as a threat to ‘our’ culture, ‘our’ identity and ‘our’ women. This example shows the serious impact secularism discourse and the public debate about Islam can have on people’s opinions, on policy, and even humanitarian aid.

Another example is the installation of Kauthar Bouchallikht in the Dutch House of Representatives in March, 2021. Ever since she announced her candidacy for *Groenlinks*, the Green Party, there has been a lot of controversy. Her past and present behavior has been scrutinized, because of her Islamic background and work for Islamic youth organizations. Therefore, her loyalty to the Netherlands has been questioned, and her values have been tested, especially when it comes to her ideas about emancipation and equality.<sup>163</sup> Several people demonstrated on the day of her installation with texts like “Kauthar isn’t welcome” and anti-Islamic slurs, and the newspaper *De Telegraaf* wrote that her presence in the parliament was “a defeat for our open, western democracy.”<sup>164</sup>

Her hijab has also been a topic of controversy. Her installation made Bouchallikht the first headscarf-wearing member of the parliament. A fact that was celebrated by some, but criticized by others, among whom was the earlier discussed politician Geert Wilders. On multiple occasions, he expressed his discontent with the fact that she was wearing a hijab in the second chamber. For examples with tweets like: “No Islamic headscarves in the second chamber. No Islamic headscarves in the Netherlands. Is that clear?” (@Geertwilderspvv, February 4, 2022).

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<sup>162</sup> Marije van Beek, “In Harskamp heerst zowel trots als schaamte.” *Trouw*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/in-harskamp-heerst-zowel-trots-als-schaamte-hoezo-ons-dorp-het-is-gods-genade-dat-je-hier-woont~bf6921e4/>.

<sup>163</sup> Mark Lievisse Adriaanse, “Ik moet steeds uitleggen waar ik écht voor sta’,” *NRC*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/03/29/ik-moet-steeds-uitleggen-waar-ik-echt-voor-sta-a4037732>.

<sup>164</sup> Remko Theulings, “Al op dag één demonstraties en bedreigingen maar Kauthar Bouchallikht gaat vastberaden de tweede kamer in,” *EenVandaag*, March 31, 2021, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/al-op-dag-eeen-demonstraties-en-bedreigingen-maar-kauthar-bouchallikht-gaat-vastberaden-de-tweede-kamer-in/>. Adriaanse, “Ik moet steeds uitleggen.”

Additionally, the Dutch government also installed a law in August, 2019 which prohibits wearing ‘facial-coverings’ in some public spaces and government buildings, a law that in common parlance is called ‘the burqa-ban’. Although officially it is not aimed at Islamic veiling, this ‘nickname’ and the arguments of the proponents of the law indicate that banning the niqab was a big motivator, because the garment ‘threatens’ secular, Dutch society and would be oppressive to women.<sup>165</sup>

Veiling continues to be a hot topic within the public debate in the Netherlands. Not only because of the input of Wilders, who also tweeted things like: “– We have to prohibit wearing an Islamic headscarf as symbol of unfreedom and women’s oppression out on the street” (@Geertwilderspvv, March 25, 2022). Or even calling it a “jihad on the streets” (@Geertwilderspvv, November 12, 2021). Also among other Dutch celebrities, like Erica Meiland, who called women who wear burqa’s or niqabs “penguins” and said that they should “get lost”. She also stated that no girl would want to wear a hijab, “especially not in the summer when you’re on a bike, because feeling the wind in your hair is real freedom.” Both Bouchallikht and SPEAK responded to this statement online. Bouchallikht stated that it was an example of the structural dehumanization of Muslim women. Something she experiences every day. (@Kauthar\_, October 30, 2021). SPEAK responded with humor with an appeal to stop “penguin-hate” and replacing “my body is” with “penguins are” in their slogan: “My body is not your battleground” (@SPEAK\_2019, Instagram, November 2, 2021).

Although some of these examples might seem extreme and exceptional, research shows that the similar ideas and expressions can be found in the four biggest Dutch newspapers. Researchers have analyzed all the news coverage on Muslims for a period of three months at the end of 2018 till the beginning of 2019. The biggest segment of the articles fell within the category of ‘Muslim terrorism’, with the second and third biggest category being ‘us versus them’ and the ‘unfree Muslima’.<sup>166</sup> All three categories fit within the described articulations of secularism discourse, linking Islam to violence, difference and incompatibility, and female oppression. Also, the gendered articulations of secularism discourse are not just part of the category of the ‘unfree Muslima’. When talking about terrorism, the headscarf is seen as a sign of Islamic fanaticism, and the niqab is sometimes depicted in the images.<sup>167</sup> In the reports related to ‘us versus them’, the emphasis is repeatedly on ‘secularity,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘western

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<sup>165</sup> Bat-sheva Hass, “The Burqa Ban: Islamic Dress, Freedom and Choice in the Netherlands in Light of the 2019 Burka Ban Law,” *Religions* 2 (2020): 2-4.

<sup>166</sup> Tayfun Balçik, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten: Een onderzoek naar stereotype beeldvorming in de vier grootste kranten van Nederland,” Den Haag, 2019, 7-8.

<sup>167</sup> Balçik, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten,” 9-10.

values’, and ‘equality’.<sup>168</sup> When looking at news about Islamic women, between 61,8 (*NRC*) and 80,6 (*Telegraaf*) percent of the items talked about the ‘oppressed’ or ‘unfree’ Muslima.<sup>169</sup> The lion’s share of these articles discussed the topic of veiling, primarily questioning whether it fits Dutch, secular society, because it is seen as oppressive and outdated symbol.<sup>170</sup>

However, the report also shows the beginning of a more positive trend in reporting about Islam. The fifth most common category was called ‘pro-diverse’ by the researchers, and included items that were culturally sensitive, portraying a positive image about Islam or condemning discrimination against Muslims.<sup>171</sup> This category became the biggest when similar research was conducted on the content of the Dutch national broadcaster, the *NPO*, in the summer of 2020. A possible explanation could be the Black Lives Matter protests which also created more awareness for the exclusion of people with an Islamic background.<sup>172</sup> However, it should be stated that during this period there were relatively little items concerning Muslims, because the COVID-pandemic was dominating the television. Moreover, not all ‘pro-diverse’ items were positive. For example, the anti-discrimination protests also faced some criticism, antipathy and a lack of understanding which was shown in the tv-programs.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, there is an increasing focus on inclusivity and diversity in the media, illustrated by the portrayal of a more positive image of Islam and the emphasis on dialogue and connection. This sometimes trickles down to politics, for example the recent possibility for enforcement staff in Utrecht to wear a headscarf, because the city wants everyone “to be able to participate.”<sup>174</sup> Yet, like the women of SPEAK indicated, there is still a long way to go.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In short, this chapter showed the formation of Dutch secularism discourse and the Islamic debate in relation to gender equality. Comparable to the general history of secularism discourse, gender equality and Islam weren’t linked at first. People like Fortuyn, Hirsi Ali and Wilders played an important role in the intertwining between gender and Islam, the development of negative stereotypes and the normalization of this discourse. By using the tropes of ‘modernity’,

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<sup>168</sup> Balçık, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten,” 21.

<sup>169</sup> Balçık, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten,” 28.

<sup>170</sup> Balçık, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten,” 29.

<sup>171</sup> Balçık, “Moslims in Nederlandse kranten,” 39.

<sup>172</sup> Tayfun Balçık, “Moslims op TV: Een onderzoek naar de representatie van moslims bij nieuws-, achtergrond- en praatprogramma’s van de Nederlandse Publieke Omroep,” Den Haag, 2021, 8-9.

<sup>173</sup> Balçık, “Moslims op tv,” 5, 20-22.

<sup>174</sup> Dylan van Bekkum, “Utrecht gaat handhavers toestaan een hoofddoek of keppel te dragen,” *De Volkskrant*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/utrecht-gaat-handhavers-toestaan-een-hoofddoek-of-keppel-te-dragen~bb6623d1/>.

'culture' and 'gender equality' Islam is vilified in the Netherlands nowadays, resulting in racist Islamophobia, dehumanization and unsafe situations, especially for Muslim women.

## 6. Intersectional Feminism and the “Fourth Wave”

### 6.1 Introduction

During the 2000’s and 2010’s Dutch politicians across the political spectrum have placed feminism in the past, claiming that emancipation was achieved by all Dutch – white – women. Yet, as early as 2008, 2011 and 2013 several feminists and scholars from different countries have announced the arrival of the fourth feminist wave.<sup>175</sup> The two most important characteristics of fourth wave feminism are defined as fighting oppression through an intersectional lens and the use of the internet and social media.<sup>176</sup> This chapter will elaborate on the role of intersectional feminism in the fourth wave by discussing both literature and the stances, goals and beliefs of the IFO’s I studied. First, the fourth wave and its connection to earlier waves will be discussed. Then, the problems of white feminism that scholars and fourth wave feminists have indicated will be put forth. Afterwards, the ideas and characteristics of intersectional feminism and related online activism will be further explored.

### 6.2 The Feminist “Waves”

#### 6.2.1 Criticism on the Fourth Wave and the Wave-analogy

The term “fourth wave” is often criticized by scholars, because there is a lot of debate whether the characteristics and goals of the fourth wave are actually new. Their argument is that a lot of ideas, goals and concepts from the second and third wave are re-used, only now they are spread through the means of new technologies and the internet.<sup>177</sup> However, others argue that there is a clear increase in feminist engagement. Moreover, they state that the internet is creating a new and different kind of feminist movement.<sup>178</sup>

These arguments show that the wave analogy itself can also be seen as problematic for a few reasons. First of all, it creates the illusion of a homogenic group who share the same values and ideas, while in practice the movement is always diverse. The idea of unity can be used to silence those who think differently, or instrumentalize this imagined historical narrative for contemporary debates.<sup>179</sup> Secondly, the wave analogy creates the image of feminism as a generational conflict.<sup>180</sup> As a result, contemporary feminists can feel the need to rebel against

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<sup>175</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 22.

<sup>176</sup> Tegan Zimmerman, “#Intersectionality: The Fourth Wave Feminist Twitter Community,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice* 38, no. 1 (2017): 55.

<sup>177</sup> Negar et al., “Lack of Social Realism,” 130.

<sup>178</sup> Zimmerman, “#Intersectionality,” 56.

<sup>179</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 2, 8, 29.

<sup>180</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 5.



earlier waves. Moreover, it ignores the role of “older” feminists in contemporary feminist movements.<sup>181</sup> Lastly, using “waves” can make feminism to be viewed as linear process. However, in practice feminism is more cyclic, with overlap between the different “waves”. Yet, Nicola Rivers states that this does makes the wave analogy useful, since waves represent constant movement – rolling back and forth while being part of the same water, looking similar but also different.<sup>182</sup> In this explanation, the waves indicate an upsurge in feminist engagement, like is happening now with the fourth wave.

### 6.2.2 The Fourth Wave

Clearly, the existence of the so-called “fourth wave” is a debated topic. Nevertheless, signs can be found of a feminist revival. The visibility and presence of feminism in popular culture has increased significantly over the last decade, as did the public and political interest in feminism and gender equality. Moreover, there has been a growth in engagement in feminist activity, and feminist pride and celebration.<sup>183</sup> However, part of the increased visibility and political interest is because of the use of feminist rhetoric in debates about national identity, belonging and immigration, like is shown in the previous chapter. The renewed interest also (re)exposed inequalities, biases, and the whiteness of dominant feminism.<sup>184</sup> As a response, an evolving understanding of intersectionality has become key aspect of fourth wave feminism.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, the fourth wave aims to be receptive to everybody’s experiences, is not just those of ‘women’.<sup>186</sup> There is a lot of focus on learning and unlearning, creating awareness – also within oneself – and an anti-essentialist approach in order to create an inclusive form of activism that is not based on fixed identities.<sup>187</sup>

That the fourth wave and its ideas are also present in the Netherlands, shows through the organizations I studied. As described in the introduction, they are all relatively ‘new’ organizations with a focus on intersectional feminism led by and aimed at students and young adults. Whenever I went to an interview or activity of one of the organizations, one of the first things they did was explain the term ‘intersectionality’, which shows the importance of the term to the organizations. At a discussion meeting of FC, the term was explained using a figure in

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<sup>181</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

<sup>182</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 22.

<sup>183</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 5, 7-8.

<sup>184</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 8.

<sup>185</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 5, 22.

<sup>186</sup> Caterina Peroni and Lidia Rodak, “The Fourth Wave of Feminism: From Social Networking and Self-determination to Sisterhood,” *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 10, no. 1 (2020): 7.

<sup>187</sup> Peroni et al., “The Fourth Wave of Feminism,” 8.

which different kinds of factors that could disadvantage a person's life were intertwined. The more factors were intertwined, the more disadvantage or oppression a person would experience.<sup>188</sup> The other organizations shared a similar definition. When incorporating this principle within feminism, it means feminism shouldn't just focus on the factor of 'gender', but also take things like sexuality, race, class, or disability into account.<sup>189</sup> To clarify the relationship between intersectionality and feminism, DFU explained that they believed all forms of oppression were part of the same system, which they called the patriarchy.<sup>190</sup> Their aim is to fight this patriarchy, thus fitting the definition of feminism as "an orientation – a tending-towards and for a future without patriarchy" like described in chapter 3. Additionally, during our interview Lola (FC) explained to me: "For me, feminism means that *everybody* is equal, therefore it is inherently intersectional."<sup>191</sup>

Next to intersectionality, the internet is seen as a key characteristic of fourth wave feminism. Some even say it enabled the fourth wave.<sup>192</sup> It helps to reach a broad audience, its accessibility gives marginalized groups the space to be seen and heard, and it provides people the opportunity to read about events and problems for all over the world.<sup>193</sup> This partly explains why feminists of the fourth wave are often 'newcomers,' besides the fact that they are generally quite young. A phrase that is frequently heard is: "Two years ago I didn't know anything about feminism. But when I became aware of different forms of oppression and inequality, I started acting on it."<sup>194</sup> Funny enough, these were the exact words I heard from Lola during our interview when I asked her when and why she started Fem Connected. Through listening to podcasts and reading things online, she learned more and more about feminism. Eventually, she thought: "I still need to learn more, but I also need to *do* more," which eventually led to the foundation of FC.<sup>195</sup>

### [6.2.3 Connectedness to Earlier Feminist History](#)

The similarity between the fourth wave and earlier feminist history can be found in the themes that are and were seen as important, like the second wave-topics of gender-based violence,

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<sup>188</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.

<sup>189</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.

<sup>190</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

<sup>191</sup> March 19, 2022, Groningen, Interview Lola, FC.

<sup>192</sup> Ealasaïd Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 23.

<sup>193</sup> Shiva Negar and Zohreh Nosrat Kharazmi, "The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Lack of Social Realism in Cyberspace," *Cyberspace Studies* 3, no. 2 (2019): 130.

<sup>194</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 23.

<sup>195</sup> March 19, 2022, Groningen, Interview Lola, FC.

abortion, sisterhood and self-determination.<sup>196</sup> The second wave motto “the personal is political,” which draws attention to the impact of patriarchal oppression on women’s everyday life, has also been adopted by the fourth wave feminists. But partly due to the influence of the third wave, women or other feminist subjects are not treated as a homogenous group anymore, unlike during the second wave. Influenced by queer and black feminist theory, the third wave created more space for and drew attention to different kinds of feminisms, because they wanted to dismantle the white, heteronormative, and middle-class view of the second wave.<sup>197</sup> However, the third wave is said to have focused primarily on individual emancipation, whereas the fourth wave – like the second – is more focused on structural inequalities and fighting public battles on the streets, or the internet.<sup>198</sup>

The third wave was not the first moment the problematic biases of feminism were addressed. Rivers states that issues like race and class have always been a topic in feminism.<sup>199</sup> Already in 1851, Sojourner Truth questioned the white narrative of feminism. During the 1970’s and 1980’s of the next century, the topic got addressed by many black thinkers like bell hooks, who wrote about how feminism problematically assumed all women experienced the same, regardless of race or other axis of oppression.<sup>200</sup> In the Netherlands, anti-racist feminism also started to rise during this period. Scholar Gloria Wekker joined the movement, because she noticed that government policies were either aimed at gender (and thus white women), or ethnicity, leaving the women of color stuck in the middle.<sup>201</sup> Another feminist of color, Philomena Essed, asked Dutch white feminist whether they agreed that feminism should be anti-racist by definition in her essay “Racisme en Feminisme” (1982). These examples show that even though the term intersectionality would be introduced in 1989, there was an earlier awareness and understanding of the intersectionality of different axis of oppression.

However, the white feminists in the Netherlands remained hesitant, leaving the intersectional work to the feminist of color who started their own movement: the Black, Migrant and Refugee Women’s Movement. Even when the work of Crenshaw and others Audre Lorde did arrive in the Netherlands, it didn’t bring the change in dominant feminism people hoped it

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<sup>196</sup> Peroni et al., “The Fourth Wave of Feminism,” 43.

<sup>197</sup> Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?,” 22-23.

Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 10.

<sup>198</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 30-31.

Negar, “Lack of Social Realism,” 137.

<sup>199</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 2.

<sup>200</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 10.

<sup>201</sup> Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 80, 89.

would.<sup>202</sup> This might explain why thirty to forty years later the fourth wave felt it important to make intersectionality one of the key values of its feminism.

### 6.3 The Problems of White Feminism

Several problems with white feminism were brought to attention by feminists and scholars over the decades. As mentioned before, most difficulties arose because the movement's ideology was built on ideas about universality and sameness. White feminists saw gender as the main mode of oppression, and believed all women experienced this oppression in relatively similar ways. What it meant to be liberated for white feminists, was defined as to be placed on equal footing with white men.<sup>203</sup> To achieve this equal footing, they were focused on Western concepts like rights, equality, individualism and freedom.<sup>204</sup> However, their idea of oppression was based on their white, heterosexual, and middle-class view, thus excluding women – or people – who had different experiences because of their race, religion, class or sexuality.<sup>205</sup> It also neglects the privileges white women already have.<sup>206</sup> This is also why the concept of 'sisterhood' has been widely critiqued, because white sisterhood was rooted in the idea that women could be united because of their shared womanhood, not taking into account that womanhood would signify very different things to different women.<sup>207</sup> Promoting the image of a homogenous movement can be very harmful, because it claims to speak for all women, while simultaneously silencing marginalized groups and ignoring their needs which is why some feminist see it as a racist ideology.<sup>208</sup>

Another problem with white feminism is the unquestioned adoption of secularism. It remains unquestioned, because being secular is seen as “a natural consequence of becoming modern” instead of a conscious choice.<sup>209</sup> As a result, the secular assumptions within feminist ideology are taken for granted.<sup>210</sup> This leads to static and stereotypical ideas about Muslim women as helpless victims – like described in the previous chapter –, the exclusion of those

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<sup>202</sup> Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*.

<sup>203</sup> Bunjun, “Feminist Organizations,” 116-117.

<sup>204</sup> Margaret A. McLaren, “Decolonizing Feminism through Intersectional Praxis: On Serene Khader’s Decolonizing Universalism,” *Metaphilosophy* 52, no. 1 (2021): 94, 96.

<sup>205</sup> McLaren, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 94, 96.

<sup>206</sup> Eleonore Lepinard, *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 236.

<sup>207</sup> McLaren, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 118-119.

<sup>208</sup> Monnica Williams, “How White Feminists Oppress Black Women: When Feminism Functions as White Supremacy,” Chacruna, last modified January 16, 2019, <https://chacruna.net/how-white-feminists-oppress-black-women-when-feminism-functions-as-white-supremacy/>.

<sup>209</sup> Carrasco-Miro, “Encountering the Colonial,” 95.

<sup>210</sup> Carrasco-Miro, “Encountering the Colonial,” 92, 99.

women and a narrow view of what feminism can and cannot be, since it is perceived to be inherently secular.<sup>211</sup> The feminist arguments about Islam and Muslim women are often based on a western notion of ‘agency’. In these debates agency is defined as a form of “resistance to relations of domination,” and is based on the idea that there is a universal desire to be free.<sup>212</sup> That resistance is against men, but also cultural practices like customs or traditions. Through this definition, adhering to a religion – like Muslim women – becomes synonymous to lacking agency.<sup>213</sup>

#### 6.4 Intersectionality in the Fourth Wave

The intersectional feminism of the fourth wave tries to tackle the problems of white feminism by acknowledging that the sole focus on gender is a western bias and being mindful of the different and intertwined ways people can be oppressed or excluded.<sup>214</sup> Part of this tactic is letting go of essentialized categories like ‘women’. There is an understanding that you do not have to have this shared identity to fight oppression together. On the contrary, diverse experience are celebrated. This leads to a changed definition of ‘sisterhood,’ because for intersectional feminists this is solely centered around support and understanding which forms the basis for common action.<sup>215</sup> Relatedly, it is important for intersectional feminists to avoid speaking on behalf of others. People should be listened to on their own terms. Therefore, they try to collaborate with historically marginalized groups, create spaces in which they feel safe to talk and increase the visibility of those groups.<sup>216</sup>

The idea to let go of the need of a shared identity as social movement, was present in all three organizations. For example, on the website of DFU, they state that they “try to be inclusive of all gender identities, sexualities, skin colors, religions, ethnicities, education, cultural backgrounds, body-types, class and abilities” and that their activist events are aimed at all forms of oppression.<sup>217</sup> The organizations want to be welcome and inclusive to all, because they view everybody as equal and relatedly difference is celebrated. They recognize that they do not need shared identity to engage in activism together, as long as they have mutual respect and

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<sup>211</sup> Carrasco-Miro, “Encountering the Colonial,” 92, 104.

<sup>212</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt,” *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42, no. 1 (2006): 33, 38.

<sup>213</sup> Mahmood, “Feminist Theory,” 37-38.

<sup>214</sup> Michelle Ciurria, *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2-3.

McLaren, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 102.

<sup>215</sup> Peroni et al., “The Fourth Wave of Feminism,” 8.

<sup>216</sup> Carrasco-Miro, “Encountering the Colonial,” 105.

<sup>217</sup> “About Us,” DFU, accessed on May 27, 2022.

solidarity.<sup>218</sup> These interpretations and ideas are directly critiquing the essentialist focus on women and gender within white feminism.

Another important aim of intersectional feminism is focusing on (self-)reflection and awareness. What both white feminism and secularism discourse show is that a lot of harmful and homogenizing biases, normative ideas and stereotypes are taken for granted. Therefore, raising awareness, identifying privilege, and unlearning biases are an important parts of intersectional feminist activism, both within and outside of the movement.<sup>219</sup> However, ‘unlearning’ does not mean all insights of western feminism has to be dismissed. Like the example of ‘sisterhood’, earlier values and concepts can be transformed to be more inclusive and fit the experience of different people.<sup>220</sup> IFO’s try to create moments, spaces or messages which make people learn about different ideas, world views and be made aware of their own privileges. A related tactic is called ‘privilege-checking’, which is used to remind people not to speak for others, and to reflect on their privileged position when they say something insensitive.<sup>221</sup> This tactic is part of a larger ‘call-out-culture’ in which people publicly criticize the harmful statements or wrongdoings of others in the hopes of change.<sup>222</sup>

The IFO’s I studied shared the aim of focusing (self-)reflection and awareness. As part of their intersectional feminism, all IFO’s aimed to create an open and inclusive space in which people could discuss and learn. Lola (FC) told me their main goal is to get the conversation started, by discussing all different kinds of topics they want to plant seeds. She admits that she is still learning herself. Part of the reason she founded FC two years ago was to talk to others about intersectional feminism and hear different perspectives on contemporary issues.<sup>223</sup> For FGN it is also important to raise awareness, educate and stimulate engagement and interaction between people, as Sophia told me. Therefore, they try to make their feminism and events as accessible as possible, although they do expect people to put in some work themselves to understand the basic concepts. There is a lot of emphasis on the individual responsibility to educate yourself.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> DFU, “Detailed Guidelines for Members and Attendees,” as seen in the private Facebook Member Group, accessed on May 27, 2022.

March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

<sup>219</sup> Zimmerman, “#Intersectionality,” 60, 64.

<sup>220</sup> McLaren, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 95.

<sup>221</sup> Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?,” 24.

<sup>222</sup> Peroni et al., “The Fourth Wave of Feminism,” 5.

<sup>223</sup> March 19, 2022, Groningen, Interview Lola, FC.

<sup>224</sup> “Code of Conduct,” Fem Group NL, accessed on May 27, 2022.  
March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

Comparable to the other two organizations, DFU defined their main goal as “to create a space for activism, discussion and education, as well as a communal space for feminists and queer people.” Relatedly, their other goal is “to translate theory and education into real life action.” Yet, they did place the sidenote that being a place of discussion and activism means that it might not always be completely ‘safe’, potential problematic subjects might be discussed. Nevertheless, through strict community guidelines, they strive to create ‘safer’ spaces for everyone.<sup>225</sup> They want spaces and activism in which marginalized people are placed in the center, since they believe all struggles are connected. “Once the most marginalized are liberated, we will all be liberated.”<sup>226</sup>

### 6.5 Online Activism

Online activism is seen as a key characteristic of fourth wave feminism. One important aspect of this online activism is the earlier described ‘call-out-culture,’ which often takes place online. Nevertheless, the development is not celebrated by everyone. Some argue that it is just about accusing and trashing others about not being intersectional enough or that it is ‘toxic’ effect of online activism.<sup>227</sup> However, Zimmerman argues that calling it ‘toxic’ to point out inequalities or discriminatory structures can be seen as a form of silencing.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, it reminds people of their individual accountability, challenges them to learn and thus, can have a long-term impact.<sup>229</sup> A byproduct of this online feminist call-out-culture is the development of new terms like ‘cis’, ‘WoC’ or ‘TERF’, which were introduced to guarantee people were not spoken for. The terms had to be short because they were created for short messages on social media.<sup>230</sup>

But online activism is not just about ‘calling people out’. Like explained before, the internet helps to quickly reach a broad audience, allows historically marginalized groups to speak for themselves, creates opportunities to learn about global problems, facilitates interaction among people who otherwise wouldn’t have met, and creates a more diverse feminist movement. The IFO’s I studied use the internet to share, activate and promote.

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<sup>225</sup> DFU, “About Us.”

<sup>226</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

<sup>227</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 118-119.

Zimmerman, “#Intersectionality,” 61.

<sup>228</sup> Zimmerman, “#Intersectionality,” 62.

<sup>229</sup> Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, 121.

Darren Griffin and Carrie Boswell, “Callout Culture: How to Respond to Criticisms Online,” Planoly, last modified February 1, 2021, <https://blog.planoly.com/callout-culture>.

<sup>230</sup> Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?,” 25.

‘Cis’ (short for cisgender) describes a person whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth; ‘WoC’ stands for Women of Color; ‘TERF’ is an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

However, although online activism is one of the key characteristics of the fourth wave and closely intertwined with intersectional feminism, it is not to say that this form of activism can be separated from the real world. The internet is often used to return to the streets. It helps to mobilize people, because of its broad reach and the presence of an online community that motivates.<sup>231</sup> An example of a fourth wave and intersectional mobilization are the worldwide Women's Marches that took place in 2017 in response to the inauguration of Donald Trump. Millions of people went into the streets "to advocate for the legislation regarding women's rights, immigration reform, abortion, environment, LGBTQ rights, racial equality, freedom of religion, healthcare and worker's rights." In the United States, it became the biggest one-day protest of the country's history.<sup>232</sup>

## 6.6 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter shows that although there is some criticism on the wave-analogy, there are clear signs that indicate a fourth feminist wave, despite its connectedness to early feminist history. The two key characteristics of this wave are a renewed focus on intersectionality and the use of online activism. The intersectional feminism of this wave focusses on fighting all forms of oppression, not just oppression on the basis of gender. Their main goal is equality for everyone. They also focus on creating awareness on different issues and privileges, fighting white feminism and western biases, learning and unlearning, and creating a safe, diverse and inclusive space. These things partly happen online through the use of social media and online communities, which help broaden the reach of the feminist groups and giving voice historically marginalized people. However, online activism cannot be separated from real-life activism as the internet is also used to return to the street.

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<sup>231</sup> Zimmerman, "#Intersectionality," 56.

<sup>232</sup> Negar, "Lack of Social Realism," 137.



## 7. Developing Intersectional Feminist Identities and Activism in the Dutch Context

### 7.1 Introduction

In 2011, Flavia Dzodan wrote the now-famous essay “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!”<sup>233</sup> During my interviews and observations, similar statements were made by the intersectional feminists I met. At every event, I heard the sentence “It is not feminism if it is not intersectional” at least once. But what exactly does intersectional feminism mean to these organizations? And how do Dutch IFO’s develop their intersectional feminist identity and activism? These questions have partly been answered in the previous chapter through elaborating on the fourth wave and explaining the goals and beliefs of the IFO’s. However, it is also crucial to investigate how the ideas of the IFO’s are put into practice. Moreover, the literature of the previous chapter wasn’t based on intersectional feminism in the Netherlands. Therefore, it is important to examine how the Dutch context – as described in chapter five – influences the activism of the IFO’s considering the dialogic perspective of this research. Through the use of the interviews, observations, and online material I will elaborate on their organizational structure, their activism in relation to intersectionality, Dutch secularism and the Islamic debate, and discuss some discrepancies I noticed between the ideology of the IFO’s and their activism. Altogether, I hope to indeed offer a glimpse of the lively site of Dutch intersectional feminism, both through their eyes and my own.

### 7.2 Organizational Structure, Rules and Activities

Although the organizations have been introduced before, it can be useful to elaborate on their organizational structure. Following new social movement theory, the collective identity and organizations ideals also show through their structure. When looking at the structures, FC is the odd one out, since Lola and her companion are both the founders and only two members of this organization. Together they organize an open discussion night once a month where everyone is free to join. According to Lola, the nights can be about any subject: “Whatever subject we like, whatever we think is important, that is what we’ll do.” Because they are still learning and want

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<sup>233</sup> Flavia Dzodan, “My Feminism will be Intersectional or it will be Bullshit,” Tiger Beatdown, last modified October 10, 2011, <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/>.

to hear different perspectives, they sometimes collaborate with organizations with a different expertise to make their discussion nights more diverse and intersectional.<sup>234</sup>

DFU and FGN on the other hand are community-led networks with a lot of ‘members,’ online and in real-life. With both organization you must apply to become part of the online Facebook Groups. However, in real-life you can just visit activities regularly and this will make you a ‘member’. Puck from DFU explained to me that whoever wants to help organize an activity can do so. They do also have committees to organize activities, but everyone can volunteer. The members have a say in what will happen, but participation and communal effort is expected. In this way, “the members are the organization.”<sup>235</sup> Sophia explained that there is no hierarchy at FGN, because they have a similar form of horizontal management. They strive to be a grassroots organization where all members can play a part, if they wish. As long as you abide by the rules, everyone can organize discussion nights, book clubs or write articles. If you are very active, you can become a ‘volunteer,’ which gives you more say, but everyone can become part of this group.<sup>236</sup> What will be discussed on the discussion nights thus relies on the profiles and wishes of the members and volunteers. Comparable to FC, if the expertise on a certain topic is lacking, but they feel it is important to engage with, they will try to collaborate with other activist organizations.<sup>237</sup> A similar tactic is used by DFU, which they call ‘coalition politics.’ For them, this is a way to ensure that their activism is intersectional, because it gives them the opportunity to organize events aimed at fighting different forms of oppression with the right knowledge and insights.<sup>238</sup>

Because of their open ‘membership,’ the two organization do have strict community guidelines. The guidelines reflect the intersectional feminist identity of both organizations because they corporate rules aimed to create a harm-free experience for everyone. The focus of DFU is on respect: the use of respectful language, respecting people’s pronouns, their privacy, their feelings, their choices and their religious outlook. About the latter, the guidelines state that members should refrain from generalizing others because of their faith, regardless of owns personal opinion about religion. Another guideline states that if the discussion is becoming hurtful, the members are encouraged to speak up and stop the discussion. A related rule is to stop talking when asked to. Moreover, they recognize that intersectional feminism is a process

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<sup>234</sup> March 19, 2022, Groningen, Interview Lola, FC.

<sup>235</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.  
DFU, “About Us”.

<sup>236</sup> March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

<sup>237</sup> March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

<sup>238</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

of learning. Although members are free to call people out on their statements, DFU encourages their members to give each other the benefit of the doubt, as hurtful things are often said out of ignorance instead of harmful intentions.<sup>239</sup>

FGN on the other hand “considers impact before intent, and prioritize the safety of marginalized people over the comfort of the privileged” in order to create a safe space.<sup>240</sup> Relatedly, they state that they are “forgiving, but not lenient,” repeated mistakes will lead to removal. With regards to privilege, they expect members “to be willing to examine their privilege, language and other habits.” But similarly to DFU, FGN also focusses on respect: the respect of people’s choices – religion is part of possible choices –, their privacy and their agency.<sup>241</sup> The instatement of rules about talking in both organizations show that – in contrast to secularism discourse – empathy and respect is valued over one’s freedom of expression. They also share their stance on prohibiting arguing for “reverse” racism and sexism or things like heterophobia or white feminism. Moreover, they state that there was no place for “TERFS” within their organization.<sup>242</sup> DFU states that “for an act of utterance to be (for example) racist, the power balance must be *structurally* in favor of the persons who performs it.”<sup>243</sup> The organization FC doesn’t have a similar set of rules, because of their organizational structure. They do however engage in coalition politics.

## 7.3 Acts of Activism

### 7.3.1 Intersectional Activism

The first activity I went to was an example of such a coalition. It was a collaboration between FC and another organization, which was founded in 2021 and aimed to open up the conversation about racism and other social issues in the Netherlands. The meeting was about intersectional feminism and was visited by about fifteen people. As explained in the introduction, the afternoon started with an introduction of the term ‘intersectionality’ and both organizations. Afterwards, everyone got handed eight sticky notes for a small icebreaker called the privilege-game. Someone from the organization would name eight ‘privileges’, whenever one applied to you, you would put a sticky note down on the ground in front of you. The privileges were: male, white, well-educated, no disability, cisgendered, heterosexual, well-educated parents, no financial problems. Slightly uncomfortable we put our sticky notes down. Feeling

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<sup>239</sup> DFU, “Detailed Guidelines.”

<sup>240</sup> FGN, “Code of Conduct.”

<sup>241</sup> FGN, “Code of Conduct.”

<sup>242</sup> FGN, “Code of Conduct.”

<sup>243</sup> DFU, “Detailed Guidelines.”

uncomfortable was part of the game, because thinking about your own privileges and the disadvantage of others isn't something people do quite often. The game was meant to raise awareness and reflect on your own position.<sup>244</sup> I noticed being reminded of your own privilege or speaking about privilege in general was a reoccurring theme, since it was also discussed at the other events and featured in the guidelines.<sup>245</sup> Moreover, it fits both the theory and the goals of the IFO's discussed in chapter six.

Similarly, another reoccurring theme was discussing the flaws of white feminism. At the book club from FGN, the group of nine visitors was quite diverse, with people from several continents. We discussed *Living a Feminist Life* written by Sara Ahmed, which featured the quote "Those who fight against injustice don't always do just" referring to feminist neglecting the experiences of people with intersecting identities. This quote led us to discussing how western feminism is often the thing you learn when you first encounter feminism no matter where you live, while this form is not applicable to the situation of all women. The host spoke about how she had to *unlearn* some of these ideas, because of their exclusionary nature. There are normative ideals about what it means to be a feminist. Several women spoke about the pressure or the feelings of failure they experience when they made choices that would not fit that ideal like becoming a mother or adopting more 'traditional' gender roles. The importance of choice was emphasized. Everybody should be able to make their own choices independent of the pressures of society.<sup>246</sup> This example shows a growing awareness, reflexivity and critique on the ideas and ideals of dominant feminism, and the attempt to form a more inclusive form by focusing on choice and acknowledging difference.

I saw another example during an anti-racism event of DFU where the speaker talked about the Dutch Sister Outsider group of the 1980's, named after the book *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde. This group rejected the white and heterosexual feminism in the Netherlands and tried to create more awareness for black lesbian women. The speaker explained that present-day feminism was still too focused on 'gender', while gender issues are almost always intersected with other factors, because "like Audre Lorde said: "There is no thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue struggle lives.""<sup>247</sup> By referring to Audre Lorde and *Sister Outsider*, the connectedness with earlier feminist history is emphasized. Simultaneously, feminism and the feminist waves are framed as conflicts by critiquing the white

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<sup>244</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.

<sup>245</sup> April 12, 2022, Dutch student city, FGN.

March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

<sup>246</sup> April 12, 2022, Dutch student city, FGN.

<sup>247</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

and gender-centered focus of dominant feminism which the fourth wave feminist's want to fight. The idea of a generational conflict was also present during the event of FC, because the lack of attention for the intersecting issues of women of color during the second feminist movement was brought up several times. However, the idea that the Dutch feminist movement was completely white was contradicted by an older visitor. She noted that although they could indeed have done things differently, there were a lot of women of color within the movement, but the second feminist wave is represented differently nowadays.<sup>248</sup> These examples show that there simultaneously is the urge to connect with early feminist history and rebel against it. It also shows that the members of the IFO's do feel part of a 'new' and different wave.

For me personally, I felt how empowering it could be to be surrounded by other feminists and talk about feminism, societal issues and related subjects. However, I also felt uncomfortable sometimes. Although there was not supposed to be a hierarchy, sometimes I noticed that there was, a hierarchy based on who had the most knowledge about intersectional feminism and practiced it in the most correct and inclusive way. The first time I felt this way, was when we were discussing the statement "Feminism is not feminism if it is not intersectional" during the event of FC. Everybody raised their hand, although some more hesitant than others. Although I stand behind the ideas of intersectional feminism, it was uncomfortable that I felt obligated to agree. There was a "no-choice"-atmosphere. Also, I wondered: who am I to say that other people are not feminists if they feel that they are? Also, does this leave enough room for learning? Considering intersectional feminism is often seen as a learning process. When I told the group about my hesitation, a few others were relieved, because they shared my opinion.<sup>249</sup>

Similar moments of discomfort happened at the other events. For example, during the book club of FGN, when a woman commented that men could also be oppressed by patriarchy. The host responded fiercely that talking about the distress of men was not supposed to be part of the discussion, because men were oppressed the least or even profited from patriarchal structures, while referring to their community guidelines for a list of subjects that would not be tolerated.<sup>250</sup> At an event of DFU, present-day scholars were ridiculed for trying to engage with intersectional feminism. Someone said: "They have no clue what it entails. I am allowed to say this, because I in fact *am* an intersectional feminist."<sup>251</sup> Although the organizations aimed to

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<sup>248</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.

<sup>249</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.

<sup>250</sup> April 12, 2022, Dutch student city, FGN.

<sup>251</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

create spaces of learning, I sometimes felt afraid to speak my mind, because of the way things were said. I was afraid I would make a mistake and would be “called-out”.

To me, it seemed like there were clear both spoken and unspoken rules about what it meant to be an intersectional feminist and how an intersectional feminist should or should not behave. Philip Balsiger stated that activist events aim to perform one’s collective identity. Comparable to Judith Butler’s theory about the performance of gender, the individual activists themselves also seemed to perform their intersectional feminist identity through statements, expressions and attitudes, and by doing so create and reproduce the identity intersectional feminists are supposed to have and the rules they are supposed to follow. Like Butler said: “the identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.”<sup>252</sup> Consequently, although the organizations in theory aren’t based on a shared identity like ‘woman’ or ‘gay’ – instead difference, diversity and inclusivity are encouraged and celebrated –, being a ‘good’ intersectional feminist and following the related ‘script’ became a requisite to be part of the community. Additionally, like mentioned before, this created a noticeable form of hierarchy.

However, with the guidelines of the organizations and the goals and beliefs of the organizations in mind, I did realize that I do have a very privileged position and that being uncomfortable might be a necessary part of learning, unlearning and practicing intersectional feminism as white person, or maybe even in general. Maybe I was uncomfortable because I was confronted with the fact that I was somewhere at the starting point of this learning process. Or maybe I was uncomfortable sometimes because I was not used to being called out about things or knowledge I had taken for granted. Either way, these tactics force you to learn and reflect, which is part of the goals of the organizations.

### [7.3.2 Responding to Secularism Discourse, Racism and Islamophobia](#)

At the anti-racism event of DFU, the speaker spoke of the importance of intersectional feminism in the Netherlands, or rather *especially* in a country like this. Being black herself, she felt like Dutch people did not care about people of color, Muslims or people with another ethnic background. Due to the liberal view of society and the denial of racism, the experience of racism is seen as a mindset the affected groups need to change. She brings up the example of prime minister Rutte who downplayed the structural problems by stating: “It might hurt people’s feeling.” “The problem,” she states, “is that we see ourselves as this really tolerant country,

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<sup>252</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

while simultaneously turning a blind-eye over and over again.” It scares her that right-wing politicians like Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet can spread hate and islamophobia the way they do without interference. “The passivity is frightening,” she said, “we need to recognize that society needs to change *together*.” At this point, the speaker starts to cry, because of the unfairness of the situation and how powerless she feels sometimes due to of the lack of care in society. The audience was noticeably touched by her speech, me included.<sup>253</sup> The event shows that they are directly responding to the public debate. DFU is both aware of existing racism and its denial, and acknowledges the fact that Muslims also experience racism, that it is a racialized category. Thereby, they are not only responding to the debate but are also contradicting its dominant ideas and expressions.

A month after this moving event, I went to another activity of DFU. This time it was one of their discussion nights, an online Ramadan edition. Normally, their discussion nights start at 20:00, but this time it started at 18:00 catering to the fact that both speakers and some of the attendances needed to break their fast after sunset. Additionally, the attendances were asked not to drink or eat during the event out of respect. The theme of the evening was the experiences of queer Muslims, and it was an example of the coalition politics of DFU, since two speakers from other organizations were asked to share their experiences.<sup>254</sup> Arranging this collaboration was important to the DFU, because they felt it was necessary to pay attention to Ramadan and to discuss the complexities of the lives of queer Muslims.<sup>255</sup> At the start of the meeting, the host emphasized that there was absolutely no space for islamophobia during this event.<sup>256</sup> These rules and measures can be seen as an example of how the organizations tries to create an accessible and open space in which marginalized groups feel welcomed and appreciated.

One of the speakers was a Dutch girl who represented a Dutch queer Muslim community that helps queer Islamic youth to combine their intersecting identities. She never felt queer enough to fit in, but she also didn’t feel Muslim enough. With this organization, she didn’t have to compromise any of her identities. She told us that there is so much pressure on coming-out in the Netherlands, while that simply was not a reality for her. The host responds by stating that coming-out is actually a western concept, “sometimes we forget to look critically at our own assumptions.” Both western and Islamic societies are heteronormative, which makes coming-

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<sup>253</sup> March 15, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

<sup>254</sup> April 13, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

<sup>255</sup> Instagram of Dutch Feminists United, accessed on May 27, 2022.

<sup>256</sup> April 13, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU.

out necessary in one, but impossible in the other. They conclude: “In the end, it is society that makes things complicated.” As similar conclusion is drawn when talking about the hijab and related pressures or bans. The second speaker stated: “A woman has to decide for herself whether it is empowering to put a hijab on or off.” After which the host responds: “There is no one way. Being pushed into something either way is wrong.”<sup>257</sup> By looking at the flaws of both contexts the discussion felt balanced and fair. Moreover, it again shows how the organization is responding to secularism discourse. They are debunking the myth that Muslim women or queers are victims in need of secular intervention or a western form of emancipation by showing that being ‘queer and Muslim’ or ‘empowered and veiled’ can be combined if one has the freedom shape this combination themselves.

At the activities of the other organizations, Islam and islamophobia were less of an important topic. At the FGN bookclub, the host did tell a personal story about her sister. How she felt a lot of pressure within Turkish society to take her hijab off, but simultaneously from the Muslim community to put it on, while it should be your own choice, what in the hosts eyes defined ‘emancipation.’ Yet, besides this anecdote, religion wasn’t part of the discussion.<sup>258</sup> At the event of FC, religion was only named very casually twice. While there was a lot of talk on racism in the Netherlands, its problematic denial, and the lack of representation in education and politics, Islam wasn’t part of the equation, since Muslims weren’t recognized as racialized category.<sup>259</sup> For me, it seemed like racism was seen as something that was experienced by black people, where the discrimination Muslims experienced was considered something else, like within secularism discourse a matter of culture instead of race.

When I asked Lola during our interview why religion or islamophobia were not part of their event or activism in general, she explained that their activities were almost exclusively visited by young, white women. Although she does consider it an important topic, it does not feel right to her discussing it in such a setting. She said: “It that case, it feels like we are talking *about* them or *for* them instead of having an equal conversation *with* them, which is something you want to prevent.” She explained that this was one of the biggest struggles of their activism, because they do want to discuss the topic. “We did consider inviting someone with an Islamic background to talk about the issue, but it feels wrong to let a completely white group listen and talk with one Islamic feminist. I think that would ask a lot of emotional labor from one person.” Instead, they would like a to work together with an organization like SPEAK. Additionally,

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<sup>257</sup> April 13, 2022, Dutch student city, DFU

<sup>258</sup> April 12, 2022, Dutch student city, FGN.

<sup>259</sup> February 26, 2022, Dutch student city, Fem Connected.



they are also working on a way to attract a more diverse audience.<sup>260</sup> Lola's explanation highlights the importance to not speak for somebody else within intersectional feminism. Moreover, contradicting common secularism tropes, she doesn't view Islam and feminism as incompatible. However, her explanation does show that 'being white' is automatically associated with 'being secular,' thus linking 'non-white' to 'being religious' or 'Muslim.'

Sophia also told me that she thought it was very important to collaborate with religious feminists. Taking religion out of the discussion was a big flaw of the current feminist movement, she said. However, she also explained that they don't really discuss religion or secularism within their organization, because no one is religious. Like FC, they don't want to speak *for* people. She also admitted that it wasn't one of their priorities. Fighting racism however is one of their priorities, which again indicates that they don't see Muslims as a racialized category. Moreover, they saw it as a tricky topic to discuss. "It can illegitimate your message," she told me, "When you talk about islamophobia as organization, people can think you're in favor of political Islamic thought, or even Islamic extremists."<sup>261</sup> This explanation shows that the organization is aware of the public debate and related Islamophobia present in Dutch society, and the strong feelings this debate can evoke because some people see Islam as a threat. As a result, the organization is hesitant to discuss topics related to the debate.

### 7.3.3 Online Activism

The FGN describes themselves as a "online/offline intersectional feminist community." The integral role of online activism within the organization is confirmed by Sophia during our interview. An example is their private Facebook Member group where people can share interesting articles and start online discussions.<sup>262</sup> In order to provide a safe space, you have to answer a few entry questions, before you are admitted, like "describe intersectionality in your own words", and state that you will abide to the rules. Also, there moderators who will monitor the discussions. You are expected to comply to their word, even if you disagree.<sup>263</sup> To encourage their members to learn, their public social media channels are used to share resources, interesting facts, articles written by their volunteers, but also to promote their events.<sup>264</sup> DFU has similar use of online activism, with a private Facebook member group as

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<sup>260</sup> March 19, 2022, Groningen, Interview Lola, FC.

<sup>261</sup> March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

<sup>262</sup> March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

<sup>263</sup> FGN, "Code of Conduct."

<sup>264</sup> Instagram of Fem Group NL, accessed on May 27, 2022.  
Facebook of Fem Group NL, accessed on May 27, 2022.

space for their online community and public channels to share, activate and promote.<sup>265</sup> Since FC is only a two-member organization. Their social media posts are only used to promote upcoming events and reflect on the events that have happened.<sup>266</sup>

When looking at the Instagram ‘feed’ of the organizations and images on their websites, the difference in handling the topic of religion and islamophobia is again noticeable. The Instagram of FC is very neutral, only using their logo (which consists of two colored letters), pictures of their events and the recommendations they always collect at the end of their activities.<sup>267</sup> The feed of FGN is less neutral in a visual sense, but with regards to the topic of religion and islamophobia it is. Their last Instagram post did promote an article written by one of their volunteers in which the representations of refugee women are critiqued, but the topic is not mentioned or visualized otherwise.<sup>268</sup> However, Sophia told me in our interview that they are working hard at diversifying the content of their channels, “but again, it is very hard to do everything, because obviously we are touched by some stuff more than others, or sometimes, we just haven’t thought about it.” Yet, she also told me that they are discussing a new logo, because they want it to be clear and visible that everybody is welcome. “We are discussing every design on whether someone would feel excluded by looking at the image.”<sup>269</sup>

Several Instagram posts of DFU again show that they are already engaging with islamophobia and resisting the exclusion or neglect of Muslims within society or the feminist movement. They visualize their inclusivity through including the image of a women wearing a hijab in their posts on Islam related events, like the discussion night on queer Muslim experiences, but also with events related to other non-religious subjects. Moreover, this is an example of how the public expressions of the organization are relational. Using tropes and images of the dominant discourse can benefit their activism and broaden the reach of their message, because the image is familiar and understandable. By transforming its meaning, it can fit their message and goals. They use this familiar image and change its meaning by portraying the Muslim women as fierce activists. By letting them hold a flag or megaphone, they show that Muslim women have a voice that should be heard and thus, contradicting the idea that they are unfree, passive or lacking agency (Instagram of Dutch Feminists United, April 9, 2022; March 28, 2022). Additionally, the banner of their website also includes two Muslim women

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<sup>265</sup> Instagram of Dutch Feminists United, accessed on May 27, 2022.

Facebook: Private Facebook Member Group Dutch Feminists United.

<sup>266</sup> Instagram of Fem Connected, accessed on May 27, 2022.

<sup>267</sup> Instagram of Fem Connected, accessed on May 27, 2022.

<sup>268</sup> Instagram of Fem Group NL, accessed on May 27, 2022.

<sup>269</sup> March 14, 2022, Groningen, Interview Sophia, FGN.

hugging and taking a selfie. This image again shows a different way of portraying Muslim women other than as passive, unfree or the threatening ‘Other’. Additionally, they are among others who all have different skin colors, body types, flags or abilities. This again shows the inclusivity of the organization. Like within secularism discourse the hijab remains a marker of ‘difference’, but in this case the difference is celebrated and welcomed, because everyone on the banner is different.<sup>270</sup>

#### 7.4 Conclusion

In short, this chapter aimed to give an overview and analysis of the activism of the IFO’s in practice to see if their goals and beliefs as described in chapter six matched the reality. The non-hierarchical structure, community guidelines and activist events aligned with their intersectional feminist ideology on equality, inclusivity and diversity, and their focus on learning, fighting white feminism and privilege, and creating a safe space. However, I also noticed that there was an informal hierarchy based on unspoken ‘rules’ about what it meant to be an intersectional feminist. This made me uncomfortable sometimes, although I later realized that this discomfort might be necessary in order to create a more inclusive form of feminism and fight different forms of inequality and oppression. With regards to religion and secularism, there was only one IFO that actively and explicitly challenged secularism discourse and Islamophobia in both online and offline activism. The other two had an ambiguous relationship with the topic and religion. They did acknowledge the importance of discussing the topic, however there was a lot of hesitance to put it to practice for several reasons which sometimes indicated the unquest

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<sup>270</sup> “Home,” DFU, accessed on May 27, 2022.

## 8. Conclusion

In response to what I heard from the women of SPEAK about the lack of support from white feminists in their fight against Dutch islamophobia and their plea for a more inclusive and intersectional form of feminism, I decided to delve into the world of Dutch intersectional feminist organizations for this research. I wanted to know how they understood intersectional feminism, how they developed this identity and how they put these ideas into practice, all within the Dutch context and its anti-Islamic climate and denied racism. Thus, intersectionality was not a research tool for me. Instead, I studied it as an object of analysis and a category of self-identification. Like Alberta Giorgi, I also wanted to know how the organizations dealt with the topic of religion, or specifically Islam, and relatedly, how they responded to the racism and Islamophobia that is part of the dominant secularism discourse present in the Netherlands. Focusing not solely on the organizations themselves, but also on their context was part of the dialogic perspective I chose to research new social movements.

Chapter five showed that this context was one in which secularism discourse within the public debate Islam is producing islamophobia through focusing on the topics of ‘modernity’, ‘culture’ and ‘gender equality’. These articulations are used to emphasize the otherness of Islam and express the superiority of the west. The focus on the historical development of this discourse was aimed to show how deeply embedded this gendered anti-Islamic discourse is in Dutch politics and the public sphere, how it is normalized. It creates a racial hierarchy, even racism in general, but especially anti-Islamic racism is often denied. Although there are some recent positive developments, the discourse and the racism it produces still have a big impact on the lives of Muslims in the Netherlands, while secularism itself often remains unquestioned, because it is seen as neutral.

Another more global development the organizations are connected to is that of the fourth feminist wave. In recent years, there has been an upsurge in feminist engagement, which some scholars and feminists themselves have indicated as the fourth wave. A renewed focus on and understanding of intersectionality is seen as one of the key characteristics of this fourth wave as well as the use of online activism. Although the fourth wave is connected to earlier feminist history, because present-day feminists re-use ideas and subjects of activism and refer to past feminist thinkers, they also rebel against it. Primarily against the “whiteness” of the feminist movement, because of its exclusionary nature, false sense of universality and sole focus on gender. The intersectional feminists of the fourth wave want to create an inclusive form of feminism that strives for equality for everyone, not just white middle-class women. This means

they are aware oppression comes in multiple and complex forms in which not only gender, but also things like race, sexuality, education, abilities, religious outlook, or class are included. The young feminists also want to create a place of discussion, learning and activism. Additionally, this form of feminism is practiced both on- and offline. The online presence creates new terms and tactics, helps to reach a broad audience, mobilize support, educate oneself, and it gives marginalized groups the opportunity to speak for themselves. However, these findings were based on literature that did not focus on the Netherlands, or – when using my own research – described the goals and beliefs of the Dutch IFO's. Yet, it is also important to look at the activism in practice and its relation to the Dutch context.

Through the use of new social movement theory, I have studied the IFO's shared identity by examining the articulations of their beliefs and goals, their organizational structure, and their activism in relation to the context. My findings show that the formation of the three Dutch IFO's is a response to both white feminism and structural inequalities they witnessed or read about. For them, feminism should fight for equality for everybody and be aware of the different forms of oppression – but also privilege – that are influencing a person's position in society. Educating yourself, but also learning together, is very important to the IFO's, including the willingness to investigate your own privilege and position. They acknowledge that people are different but feel that you don't need a shared identity to engage in activism together as long as there is respect and solidarity. Relatedly, they try to be inclusive by setting rules to create a safe and open space, focusing their activism on different subjects, instating a horizontal management, and engaging in coalition politics. However, they also acknowledge that making it perfectly safe or intersectional is impossible.

This shows with regards to the topic of religion, secularism and Islamophobia. Two out of three organizations did not really engage with the topic of religion and Islam in their activism. The few times it was discussed, it was only mentioned casually. The explanation they gave was that although they see it as an important topic, Muslim women were not part of their audience or members and it didn't feel right to talk about or for them, thus, it wasn't discussed. Not speaking for someone else is an important principle for the IFO's and shows awareness of power structures and privilege. Rather, they would like to work together with Muslim feminists. This shows that they haven't adopted the image of Muslim women as helpless victims. Also, they do try to transform the meanings of concepts like 'emancipation' by focusing on 'choice' instead of 'resistance' and 'freedom'. However, the statements of the IFO's also show that they don't view Islamophobia as a priority for their activism, while racism is. They don't consider 'Muslim' to be a racial category. Moreover, the FGN is afraid that through speaking up against

Islamophobia their organization will be linked to political Islam or extremism. In this case, they relate to secularism discourse through being stopped by the assumptions people might have, whether they share those assumptions or not.

On the other hand, the other organization did frequently focus their activism on islamophobia. DFU directly speak-out against anti-Islamic racism, and politicians like Geert Wilders, directly targeting secularism discourse and islamophobia. Through coalition politics they manage to discuss these topics, even if they might be lacking expertise. They organize the events and discuss the topics in a cultural-sensitive way. For example, by being mindful of Ramadan, but also through shedding light on the topic from different perspectives. During their events they try to not just learn about the experience of other people, but also investigate their own assumptions and privilege. Visually, they also directly take concepts from secularism discourse and transform them to fit their ideology and activism of intersectionality and inclusivity.

For me, the reality and practice were also contradicting the beliefs and structure of the IFO's, when it came to 'openness', 'learning' and being a 'non-hierarchal' community. I often felt like I couldn't speak my mind. I was afraid to say something 'wrong', because of the strong reactions that would evoke. It seemed like there was a hierarchy based on being the most intersectional. However, like I said in chapter 7, I realize that I do have a privileged position and that being uncomfortable might be a necessary part of learning, unlearning, and practicing intersectional feminism as white person, or maybe even in general. Altogether, it was a very valuable experience, both academically as personally.

To conclude, the relationship between intersectional feminist organizations and religion and Islam remains ambiguous. There are examples of direct engagement with secularism discourse and transformation of its own concepts to fight it. However, there are also examples that show hesitance to engage with the topic. Moreover, in these cases the secularity of the organizations themselves is a 'given', it is unquestioned. Because fourth wave intersectional feminist organizations are relatively new, further research could delve deeper into the relationship of these organizations with religion in general or focus more on their secular assumptions. Hopefully, this will contribute to the improvement and inclusivity of intersectional feminism, because like the women of SPEAK said: "It has to be intersectional or it will have no future."<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> May 7, 2022, Antwerp, BOEH-festival.

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