

# **94 | from absolute invisibility to extreme visibility: emancipation trajectory of migrant women in the Netherlands**

Halleh Ghorashi

## **abstract**

After years of invisibility, the position of migrant women from Islamic countries now forms the core of the Dutch discourse on integration and emancipation. This article presents the downside of this visibility by showing that it is situated within a growing culturalist discourse. In addition to being culturalist, this discourse focuses on the shortcomings of migrants and is flavoured with a touch of new realism in its argument that it is a right to break the taboos of migrants. More visibility for migrant women will not help their empowerment if the basic assumptions of the dominant discourse are not challenged. Through presenting a case study, this article shows how this visibility can even strengthen the border between the Dutch as 'emancipated self' and Islamic migrants as the 'unemancipated other'. In so doing it reinforces boundaries instead of alliances, isolation instead of empowerment, and suppression instead of emancipation.

## **keywords**

migrant women; emancipation; culturalist discourse; pillarization; welfare state; safe space

The urgency of integration issues in the Netherlands is not simply a national issue: the international press has focused on events in the Netherlands as well. A recent example of a national issue that made it into the international press concerned the dispute over the Dutch nationality of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, which resulted in the fall of the Dutch Cabinet in June 2006. Hirsi Ali is one of the most visible politicians at the start of this century, making headlines all over the world with her challenge to Islam. Her main contribution in the public debate on migration concerned the dire position of migrant women with Islamic backgrounds in the Netherlands, thus bringing a gender perspective to the dominant discourse on migration and integration. Both her supporters and opponents agree on one point: Hirsi Ali made the issue of the emancipation of migrant women visible in the Netherlands. Raising the visibility of gender has been on the agenda of many Black, Migrant, and Refugee (BMR) feminist activists and scholars for years. It was certainly an achievement to create visibility for the problems that many migrant women face in their emancipation struggle. Yet in this article, I present the down side of this visibility. I show the situatedness of this extreme attention on migrant women within the Dutch dominant discourse on migration and Islam. Through presenting some empirical material based on interviews with migrant and refugee women with an Islamic background, I show the implications of this visibility in the field of practice. I argue that extreme attention on the position of migrant women in the Netherlands is part of a growing rightist discourse. This Dutch focus combines three approaches: culturalist and deficit, with a touch of 'new realism'. I explain all three extensively in the following sections (see also Ghorashi, 2006). I pose that this combination harms the diversity and emancipation process and deepens the already existing divide between the Dutch as 'emancipated self' and Islamic migrants as 'unemancipated other'.

## **culturalist approach**

Until recently, migrant women were invisible within the Dutch dominant discourse. They fell outside the constructed dichotomies: emancipation policies focused on white women and integration policies on non-white men (Wekker and Lutz, 2001). Influenced by the Black feminist movement in the United States and inspired by the work of Audre Lorde and other writers, many activists and scholars started a struggle in the Netherlands – particularly in the 1980s and 1990s – to make the situation of black and, later, migrant and refugee women visible (Captain and Ghorashi, 2001). In spite of various initiatives in those years, the focus of integration and emancipation policies remained the same. Since the start of this century, this invisibility has changed into extreme visibility. For the previous Dutch cabinet (2002–2007), migrant women were considered as mainly responsible for cultural change within the family (Roggeband and Verloo, 2007).

This shift towards an extensive and explicit focus on the emancipation of migrant women, in particular Islamic women, has been remarkable. The assumption became that, on the one hand, Dutch women were already emancipated and did not need any explicit attention policy-wise and that, on the other hand, migrant women were in need of explicit help in order to gain emancipation. At the end of 2005, findings were presented concerning women's emancipation within several European countries (<http://www.maqeeq.net>). One of the conclusions of this comparative study was that the Netherlands was the only country in which they observed the culturalization of emancipation. This means that in the Netherlands, emancipation matters are often related to cultural/ethnic groups. Although the present cabinet has distanced itself from this exclusive attention on the emancipation of migrant women, the basic assumptions remain the same. This assumption is that migrant women are in a position of social isolation and that they need help to get out of this marginal position. This specific intersection of culture and gender proposes an image of migrant women as passive victims. Migrant women are seen as oppressed by their culture and especially by the men in their lives. This idea leads to the notion that men are aggressors and women are passive and suppressed (Lutz and Moors, 1989; Spijkerboer, 1994). It is believed that these women are 'trapped' either within their culture or within their home, and that it is high time for them to be freed from their isolation.

To understand this culturalization of emancipation in the Netherlands, we need to go back a few years and identify the ways that culture has been defined and discussed in the public sphere. It was one of the previous leaders of the Liberal Party, Frits Bolkestein, who, for the first time, openly introduced the Dutch version of the 'clash of civilizations'. In the 1990s he stated that Western and Islamic cultures are incompatible. This notion assumes an essentialist view of culture, in which cultures are seen as static, homogeneous, and, most importantly, closed entities. This line of thinking presumes that what is true of a culture is also true for all individual members of that culture. This reduction of all individuals to their cultures leaves little space for personal agency.

To understand the dominant culturalist discourse in Dutch society, it is necessary to situate it within the context of 'pillarization'. After the Second World War, the construction of pillars – 'own worlds' – along lines of religious denomination and political ideology had been the dominant framework for thinking about differences in the Netherlands. Pillars were social organizations based on religious and ideological affiliations. In the period of pillarization, children were raised exclusively within the boundaries of their own, somewhat 'closed', communities. The membership in a pillar determined the choice of schools, playgrounds, and social contacts. During that period, pillars functioned as an intermediary between individuals and the state, particularly in the areas of health care and education, which were either self-financed or based on state subsidies. Before the development of a strong welfare state in the Netherlands in

the 1960s, pillars served as safety nets and, as such, were believed by some to be emancipatory for their members. Eventually, the increasing role of the state in social affairs led to the secularization and individualization of society and made the existence of pillars not only unnecessary, but unwanted as well. The contemporary spirit of de-pillarization is averse to the religion-based group formations of the pillarization period. Yet, some aspects of the pillarization model are still present within society, especially in dealing with integration issues (see also Koopmans, 2003). Most importantly the strength of the boundaries of the old pillars has latently shaped the ways in which cultural difference – particularly in terms of new migrants – has been approached. It is often believed that the culture of migrants is totally different than the culture of the Dutch. This essentialist approach to culture is, in a way, embedded in the pillarization habitus, with its assumption that difference is surrounded by ‘thick’ boundaries. This has led to the creation of cultural contrasts, which make it virtually impossible to consider the individual migrant as separate from his or her cultural or ethnic category. Yet there was also another development that contributed to this construction of dichotomy of otherness when it came to the migrants: the deficit approach.

## **deficit approach**

Jan Rath (1991) makes use of the concept of ‘ethnic minorization’, or ‘minorization’ for short, to explain how, from the very beginning, the dominant discourse regarding migrants has been defined by assumed socio-cultural differences or supposed non-conformity (Rath, 1991: 108). He shows that, in addition to assumed cultural otherness, there has been a strong belief that the socio-economic position of migrants makes it difficult for them to facilitate their own integration into Dutch society. Within this so-called deficit approach, the disadvantaged position of migrants in terms of education and language skills is seen as the main factor explaining the limited access of migrants to the labour market or to other forms of societal participation (Glastra, 1999). Therefore, in practice the focus has been mainly on helping people out of this disadvantaged position. In this view, migrants were seen as a target group that required special attention in the form of education or guidance. This approach leads to the belief that migrants in general and migrant women in particular do not have the required skills to become active participants in Dutch society. In the case of migrant women there is an extra emphasis on their inability to participate in society because they are culturally suppressed and need to be freed from this marginalized position in order to become active participants in the society. This attention to deprived and marginalized groups is not new in the Netherlands.

The Dutch welfare state has always been engaged in decreasing the deprivation of once-called ‘unsociables’ (Rath, 1991). This goes hand in hand with a

tendency to isolate these groups in order to restyle them into decent citizens (Lucassen, 2006). As a result of the welfare state, all citizens are entitled to equal opportunities, but in some cases it has proved important to first liberate them from a socially disadvantaged position. The essence of the welfare state has been its concern for disadvantaged groups and its efforts to free them from their disadvantaged position. Addressing this concern has caused an increase in the number of welfare organizations in the Netherlands. In addition, the rise of the welfare state in the Netherlands has reduced the need of individuals to become part of groups in order to survive. This has resulted in more space for the individual to develop and demand his/her own autonomy. Simultaneously, these developments have contributed to the creation of government-dependant categories of groups that need help to overcome a disadvantaged position. The regulating effect of this urge for equality has been a growing uneasiness towards those who are considered as social anomalies or as a kind of lower class, as well as a fixation on reshaping this disadvantaged category (Lucassen, 2006). The often-unintended result of this urge for equality, combined with the routine-like character of the entire system of welfare organizations, has been that even active and capable people have often been too easily reduced to helpless creatures (Ghorashi, 2005). Moreover, the urge for equality has sometimes changed into uneasiness, not only about inequality, but also about differences. That which is different is looked upon with distrust and is sometimes too easily placed into the 'disadvantaged' category. This implies that despite the positive effects of the welfare state on personal space and the struggle against the social divide, it has also been an important breeding ground for thinking about migrants as groups that are in a socially disadvantaged position. By elaborating on these two components of the dominant discourse on migration in the Netherlands (culturalist and deficit) I have tried to show the historical embeddedness of categorical thinking on migration.

## **the migrant as absolute other**

The dominant discourse on migration has shifted several times in recent decades. In the 1970s, it focused on the preservation of migrants' cultures as separate elements tolerated within Dutch society. The idea was that the so-called 'guest labour' migrants would eventually return to their homelands, so there was no need for them to integrate into Dutch society. Post-war economic growth and the need for unskilled labour forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labour contracts first with Italy and Spain in the late 1950s and later with Turkey and Morocco (Wilterdink, 1998: 58). In the 1980s, the Dutch government shifted its policy regarding guest workers when it realized that this 'temporary' migration had gained a more permanent character (Entzinger, 1998: 68). The status of this group changed to '(im)migrant' (Lutz, 1997: 99). With this

realization, policies shifted towards integration into Dutch society while simultaneously preserving the migrants' own cultures. This meant much more attention to policies for developing language skills and encouraging the equal participation of migrants in the society. At present, the central idea is that attacking so-called 'culture-based crime' and making civic integration mandatory will improve integration of migrants in the society. The prevailing, yet implicit position is that in order to become 'Dutch' one needs to distance oneself from one's own cultural background. This remains an impossible task in the framework in which migrants are constantly referred to as 'absolute others'. This new shift is situated within a rhetoric claiming that the integration policies of the 1980s were not effective enough because migrants were never forced to integrate. The claim of 'indifference' regarding the policies of those years was related to a 'politically correct' attitude, which supposedly made it impossible to expect anything from migrants. It would seem, therefore, as if the discourse has had a complete makeover in terms of content. It is widely believed that the much-criticised approach of 'indifference' has been abandoned and that a shift has taken place towards the 'real' integration of the migrants – that the years of 'soft policies' are over. However, despite all the shifts within the discourse relating to migrant issues, its aim has barely changed at all. This is because categorical thinking, in particular with a culturalist and deficit approach, has remained a crucial feature of thinking about migrant issues in the Netherlands. The fixation of the Dutch discourse on migrants as absolute others based on the abovementioned components has been a constant factor in all the integration policies from the 1970s.

This process of othering is partly due to the fact that migration is generally perceived as temporary rather than permanent (see also Ghorashi, 2003). The discourse on migration in the Netherlands is dominated by a temporary understanding of migration. In spite of the legal shift in the policy from 'guest labour' migrants to more permanent immigrants that took place in the 1980s, the general image of temporary migration did not change. The temporary image of migration persists and continues to inform the notion that the most 'natural' link for migrants is the one they have with their country of origin. Within this essentialist view of the concept of 'home', it is self-evident that the loyalty and connectedness of migrants remain with their home country. This is seen as evident even when they were born in the Netherlands. One's identity, therefore, becomes fixed: a clearly demarcated boundary that remains firm from one generation to the next, regardless of place or situation. This view leads to the idea that migrants will always feel out of place in their new country, because they *in fact* belong somewhere else and therefore can never be considered 'real Dutch'. Hence, it is no coincidence that the recent debates concerning migrants concentrate either on their return or on mandatory integration. In both cases the starting point is that migrants feel strongly connected to their country of origin.

The underlying message is that they should either return to their 'home land', or, if they want to stay here, adapt. This process of othering within the Dutch context, considering migrants as guests, means that they do not belong in the society. The construction of otherness is embedded in a set of images and practices that define 'who belongs' and 'who does not belong' along with the construction of particular images of nationhood that exclude migrants. The migrant as 'other' is 'constructed as not belonging to the nation and yet living inside it' (Räthzel, 1995: 165).

This essentialist view on the position of migrants as 'absolute others' (shaped by both culturalist and deficit components) is, as shown above, historically rooted within the particular history of pillarization and the welfare state. Yet the existence of processes of exclusion of migrants, informed by essentialist assumptions, is neither new to the Netherlands nor unique to the Dutch situation. According to Verena Stolcke cultural exclusion is the new exclusionary rhetoric in Europe. Stolcke states that it is based on a homogeneous, static, coherent, and rooted notion of culture. She calls this new rhetoric 'cultural fundamentalism' (1995: 4). Now, she argues, it is not the race that needs to be protected but a historically rooted, homogenous national culture: 'racism without race' (*ibid.*). The essentialist discourse on the culture and position of migrants has, thus, both historical roots in the Netherlands and is embedded within the broader tendencies of Europe. Yet, what makes the current-day Netherlands unique compared to other European countries and to its own past practices, is a new shift in the debates towards what Baukje Prins (2002) calls the 'new realist' discourse.

## **new realism**

Since 2000, we have observed a shift in tone in the Netherlands, a demand that 'we must be allowed to say what we think'. Baukje Prins (2002) calls this period the era of 'the new realism'. The new realist is someone with guts; someone who dares to call a spade a spade; someone who sets himself up as the mouthpiece of the common people and then puts up a vigorous fight against so-called cultural relativism. In retrospect, the statements made by Frits Bolkestein in the early 1990s can be seen as the start of the period of new realism. Pim Fortuyn took it to the next level by radicalizing the new realism into a kind of hyperrealism. 'Frankness was no longer in the service of a higher purpose, namely the truth, but became an objective in itself. Referring to facts or to reality merely served as illustrations of the guts of the speaker, as proof that a "real leader" had appeared on the stage' (Prins, 2004: 43 – my translation).

The result of this new era – strengthened by the 09/11 attacks and the assassinations of politician Pim Fortuyn (in 2002) and film director Theo van Gogh (in 2004) – has been that the atmosphere in the Netherlands has hardened

considerably. Any statement is allowed, irrespective of the consequences. Moreover, voicing discontent by means of an attack on political 'cowardice' or 'arrogance' of earlier policies has led to an extreme reversal of the attitude towards migrants. Guts and decisiveness have become the new show-qualities of political leaders. As a reaction to the so-called 'soft approach' of the 1980s and the 1990s, a 'tough approach' towards migrants was decided upon. This 'tough approach' came with rampant obligations. They (with an emphasis on 'they', meaning 'entirely different') should learn the language, study Dutch history, adapt to Dutch customs, and wholly embrace Dutch identity by giving up their original identity. In today's Dutch society, assimilation – although not always formulated in this way – is seen as the solution for all social problems. This idea is strongly rooted in the assumed superiority of European culture, which rates migrant cultures as lower (Gowricharn, 2002: 6). The difference of the present time compared to the past, is that it is perfectly acceptable nowadays to publicly express the idea that migrant culture is not only different, but also inferior.

The Dutch context is thus unique in the way that the culturalist and deficit approach to integration and emancipation are combined with this 'new realist' discourse. Not only is there a strong essentialist conviction in the ways that migrant's cultures and positions are defined as completely different from that of the Dutch, it is now permitted to state that their culture is also 'backward' compared to Dutch culture. It is this combination of essentialism, superiority, and bluntness that underlies the public debates on integration in the Netherlands. In recent years, the deficit and culturalist approaches have been interwoven in such a way that the reason for the isolation of migrant women is linked to their cultural backgrounds. The new realist thread in the debates has justified a blunt way of blaming culture and religion for violence against and isolation of women from Islamic countries. Hirsi Ali, for example, has openly attributed Islam as the cause of women's suppression. By doing this she positioned herself in the middle of the dominant rightist discourse in the Netherlands. Many feminists and scholars in the Netherlands had fought for years to differentiate emancipation policies and gain attention for the specific problems of BMR women (Wekker and Lutz, 2001). Because of that, many welcomed this visibility, although some with mixed feelings.

## **othering, positioning, and emancipation**

This overwhelming visibility, embedded in certain assumptions, has had (un)intended implications for social interactions within Dutch society. Reducing migrant women to groups with particular societal and cultural 'shortcomings' can have enormously stigmatizing consequences. Migrant (women) are too easily considered social problems and in need of help. Logically, 'active and emancipated' Dutch people feel summoned to help this group, which has a number of



(un)intended consequences. The first consequence is that supposedly deprived groups, which are seen as problematic and passive, are not recognized for their possible competencies. As a result, these groups are not included in decision-making processes that have a direct effect on their own lives. The groups, in this case migrant women, are not deemed capable of designing solutions for their own problems. Consequently, there is not much room for the many initiatives that these groups are, in fact, taking to expand their own space. Decisions are frequently based on the frames of reference of 'the emancipated people', which are often poorly connected to the social environment of the migrant women. As it will be shown below, the negative image towards migrant women is often so strong that they are not taken seriously during the training and courses that are offered to them and that they participate in. The second consequence is that the political and societal urgency to help migrant women with their emancipation brings with it an associated pressure to get a lot done within a short period of time. All organizations compete for the available means. Groups design one rushed project after another. Most of these projects start by assuming that when the shortcomings of the targeted migrant women are solved, and they have become 'emancipated', they will have no problem participating fully in society. This approach ignores different causes of isolation, such as societal exclusion. For example, many highly educated women cannot gain access to the job market or have no opportunities to grow in their jobs. This is often brushed aside as a luxury problem. A common reaction is: 'Look at all those women who cannot even leave their homes! They need help'. The consequence of this kind of visibility is that the only group that is considered to be worthy of attention is the most 'isolated' and 'suppressed'. In this way, the construction of the absolute other remains intact through which the superior position of the 'emancipated Dutch' as the saviours and the solvers of the problem is guaranteed. By presenting some results from empirical research, in the next section I will show how this process of othering and exclusion works for two different groups of women: low-educated migrant women and high-educated refugee women both with an Islamic background.

## **migrant and refugee women**

The visibility of migrant women in Dutch society has resulted in several projects in different cities to empower low-educated women in order to improve their participation in the society. One of the projects targeted Turkish and Moroccan women living in the western areas of Amsterdam. The initial idea was to train and empower migrant women so that they would be able to participate in neighbourhood organizations with various levels of decision-making power. In this project, a combination of diversity and empowerment courses for migrant women were coupled with academic research throughout. The project could be considered as innovative because of its bottom-up approach and the space it

claimed to create for the often-unheard voices of migrant women as related to their living conditions. The project was also daring because of its inclusion of academic research to monitor and evaluate the project from the start.<sup>1</sup> Approximately thirty interviews were conducted with the women who participated in the different phases of this project. The women were approached to participate in the course through migrant organizations located in the west of Amsterdam. A noticeable result of the first phase of the study was that the project-coordinator did not consult the migrant organizations properly about the content of the course. The organizations were only asked to help find the required number of women to participate (Choi, 2006). This resulted in little awareness of what the course was about and little interest in investing time to recruit participants. A further consequence was that the women who were approached did not receive thorough and motivating information concerning the course they were asked to follow, resulting in low attendance (*ibid.*).

It is remarkable that this project, with its initial ambition of making women's voices heard in the public sphere, treated the migrant organizations as mere instruments to reach the migrant women. Because of this, the contribution of both the migrant women and the migrant organizations remained negligible in the first phase. This is only one example of the ways in which migrant women become visible when it comes to serving as background figures and invisible when it comes to serving as experts and specialists in various societal fields. Many of the formal and informal interviews, both inside and outside this project, showed that this combination of excess attention and ignorance of the qualities and voices can trigger emancipation/integration exhaustion.

The same blind spots that marked the first phase resurfaced further into the project. The added value brought to the project by the researchers who interviewed participants throughout the process meant that the participants could voice their uneasiness and concerns. This additional information allowed the organizers to find a better match between the aim of the project and the wishes of the migrant women themselves. As opposed to the initial aim of the project (becoming involved in neighbourhood organizations in order to participate in decisions related to living conditions in the city), the participants voiced their wish to learn how to better access the job market. Most of the participants were Moroccan women with a low (primary school) to middle (vocational training) degree of schooling. Most of the women involved did not have a paid job. They were aware of possible barriers to finding work because of their insufficient education, their lack of recent work experience, responsibilities for their families (especially towards their young children), and, to some extent, their command of the Dutch language (Balker, 2006). In addition to the training sessions for these women, organizations such as social housing offices, local government offices, political parties, primary schools, foundations, and other social organizations were approached to provide internships. Getting access to

**1** The first two phases of the project were presented as master's theses by Tineke Choi and Bianca Balker, respectively. Waldring is the main author of the final report on the project, which includes all three phases (Waldring and Ghorashi, 2007).

these organizations for the purpose of the project proved to be quite difficult (*ibid.*). The unwillingness of organizations to take on migrant women, even temporarily and on an internship-basis, lays bare the multi-layered causes of isolation and lack of participation of these women. Within public debates and societal practices, the assumed cause for the lack of participation and isolation of migrant women is often identified as the fault of the women themselves. Their own possible shortcomings or lack of motivation are blamed. This means that the power of the dominant discourses and other societal factors are not well examined in order to understand the processes of exclusion of different groups within Dutch society. The unexpected unwillingness of organizations to provide internships did not diminish the enthusiasm of the trainers or the feeling of empowerment gained by these women in their efforts to find jobs. The insistence and enthusiasm of all parties involved in this project resulted in creating a number of traineeships with organizations by the end of the project.

Based on the interviews it became obvious that the flexibility and open-mindedness of two of the trainers was of essential importance for the partial success of the project. The two female trainers, who were sensitive to the wishes of the migrant women enrolled in the course and took those voices seriously, were able to involve them in the process of their empowerment. This in contrast to one of the trainers who stuck to her fixed programme and fixed schedule, thereby ignoring the specific wishes of the women she was training (Balke, 2006). The trainer in question was intent on following the schedule from A to Z, even if this meant that it would not entirely meet the needs of the women involved and would neglect critical voices. This led to a course that failed to attract and involve the participants. In addition to the significant role of the trainers, this comparison showed that the partial success of this project was only possible because the voices of the participants were included after they were interviewed. Thus, the research-component of this project not only served to register the process, it actually provided opportunities for reflection and revision.

In spite of the achievements in the project, the fact remains that only a few of the participants were able to obtain paid work. Four participants completed the course with internships and six migrant women found jobs.<sup>2</sup> How long these women can stay in the organizations that did not want them in the first place, because of the negative connotations associated with migrants in general and with migrant women in particular, remains an open question. The basis for this scepticism comes from another study on the experiences of highly educated women refugees within organizations. Even though this group of women are less visible in the policies and debates because they are not considered as an isolated and suppressed group in society, the impact of dominant discourse on their exclusion seems to work more or less the same way.

In our study on the experiences of highly educated refugee women in the Netherlands (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg, 2006), the conclusion was that

**2** This information is provided by the project coordinator later on.

combinations of different identities (being a refugee, being a woman, having higher education) provided new answers to the often taken-for-granted aspects of the integration discourse in the Netherlands. This combination made it possible to see that the assumed deficit approach (lack of facility with the Dutch language and/or a good education) was still used as a basis for the exclusion of these women even though they had completed their higher education in the Netherlands. It seemed that the identity as a migrant (with its negative connotations, such as lacking competencies), the intersection of ethnicity and gender as refugee women from Islamic countries (being suppressed, thus not emancipated or assertive enough), combined with their age (as being too old for the organization) completely overruled the achievements of these first generation refugee women who were forced to start their lives all over again in a new country and who had achieved a degree from a Dutch university. It showed that the dominant discourse in the Netherlands, in which migrants are predominantly seen as people who lack competencies, is so powerful that even in cases that prove otherwise, migrants face a wall of exclusion. There has been no attention whatsoever to the achievements of these women during their short stay in their new country, but only to their imperfection in Dutch, or other observed imperfections in behaviour and age (the latter referring to the fact that only linear, fast careers contribute to desired performance, as is also the problem in terms of gender and family policies). Including all these identity categories in this study shows how certain interplays of these components strengthen and reinforce some forms of exclusion.

Contrasting these two studies on low-educated migrant women and high-educated refugee women shows that the extreme process of othering within the Dutch context does not leave any space for appreciation of the qualities and achievements of migrants. In particular, the negative images of migrants from Islamic countries have created a blind spot in society, which makes their hard work in creating a space for themselves invisible. Whether highly visible or less visible, the capabilities and voices of these women are unnoticed and unheard. This shows that the visibility for migrant women in the present public sphere in the Netherlands is contributing to stricter boundaries of otherness in its absolute form rather than leading to inclusion. The historically embedded construction of 'helpless' categories emphasizes the fixation on what people lack, instead of what they have to offer. The visibility of these 'helpless' categories serves the growing rightist discourse in which the other is seen as a problem, rather than as a contributor to the society.

It is in this framework that we can understand how the position of Ayaan Hirsi Ali is to be analysed. The combination of her Islamic background and her criticism of Islamic culture and practice, has made Hirsi Ali a model for the rightist dominant discourse in its strengthening of pre-existing categories of otherness. She is often heralded as an important voice for migrant women and, as such, has brought

visibility to their situation. The visibility that came as a result of this discourse, however, does not seem to have contributed much to the emancipation and participation of women in the society because it has gone hand in hand with growing negative connotations related to the Islamic background of these women. As a result, it is no surprise that the most eager supporters of Ayaan Hirsi Ali have been white Dutch (male) dominant figures instead of migrant women themselves.

Taking all that into consideration, it becomes clear that the visibility of migrant women within the dominant discourse in the Netherlands serves the othering component of the discourse rather than creating space for their voices and experiences. A common theme heard during interviews with various groups of migrant women was: 'After all the courses we completed, we have become truly empowered. Now, we need a job but we can't get one'. In spite of these voices, the focus seems to be on empowering migrant women, with the assumption that they are the sole problem, instead of placing their problems within the broader societal processes of exclusion. In almost every interview the group of researchers completed, women (both participants in the courses and members of migrant organizations) complained that they were overloaded with courses that produced no long-term results. In spite of the great visibility in the public sphere for these women, their own emancipation trajectory and their demands concerning participation in society are absolutely invisible.

In the case of highly educated women refugees, we see a similar pattern of exclusion albeit from a position of extreme invisibility. These women, who do not fit the image of 'absolute victim' and could be considered the 'same' based on their achievements, challenge the dominant discourse so far that they become absolutely invisible within the public domain. Because of this invisibility, the source of their exclusion is not seen as urgent enough to address.

### **no space for alliances across ethnicities**

Drawing a picture of women from Islamic countries as merely suppressed or isolated is quite stigmatizing. In this construction of absolute otherness, Islamic identity serves as one of the main aspects strengthening the boundaries between Us and Them. As a result, Islamic identity is seen as a coherent and exclusive identity imposed on all the migrants from Islamic countries. In addition, the present attention in the public debates and in the policies on migrant women from Islamic countries (mainly from Turkey and Morocco) excludes other groups of women such as black and refugee women who also constitute a large group within Dutch society. Migrant groups from non-Islamic regions, refugees, and native Dutch women are groups that receive barely any attention. In the case of Dutch women, it is often assumed that emancipation has already been completed. This excessive attention on migrant women with Islamic backgrounds

is unpleasant for the other groups of women who feel that their problems are misunderstood. It also creates unnecessary rivalry instead of helping to shape alliances around common problems. Having said that, my plea for finding common ground for interaction does not imply colour or culture blindness. Nor does it mean that I assume that feminist alliances and state policies on emancipation should be coherent. Instead, it is both to discover and create common grounds of interaction and communication through which a balance between commonality and difference can be facilitated. This, of course, without ignoring that some rivalry and tension would remain part and parcel of any kind of alliance or cooperation and could, in fact, be considered a necessary and vital component of the process.

The intersection of triple layers of the dominant discourse (culturalist, deficit, and new realism) strengthens negative images of migrants. They are characterized as incompetent and as having a 'backward or violent' culture and religion. More visibility for migrant women will not help their empowerment if the basic assumptions of the dominant discourse remain unchallenged. The paradox here is that this sense of urgency to free migrant women from their suppression and isolation is embedded within a dominant discourse that excludes them as 'absolute others'. When the basic assumptions are challenged, the need for this extreme visibility decreases, as shown by the example of highly educated refugee women whose efforts to join the work force are limited by organizations unwilling to include them. It is no surprise then that this multi-layered discourse provides little space for a differentiated and broad approach to emancipation in the Netherlands. Yet, the complex causes of social isolation calls for a broad approach beginning with a policy that acknowledges this diversity instead of reducing everything to culture. Such a diversity-sensitive policy would draw mainly from the positive forces that are already present in the field, thus stimulating different forms of alliances.

The findings presented in this piece showed how a flexible attitude towards the initiatives and views of the migrant women who participated in the project made it possible to take partial distance – even if in a marginal way – from the influence of the dominant discourse and create room for those voices within the project. In a diversity or culture-sensitive approach to emancipation, there ought to be much more room for the strategies of women themselves. Space should be made for people's stories and perceptions instead of the imposition of emancipation models. What I plea for here is part of the ongoing discussion among feminists and scholars in the field. One of these (inter)national discussions questioning whether multiculturalism and the maintenance of one's own identity forms barriers to women's emancipation began with the 1999 publication of Susan Okin's famous article 'Is Multiculturalism bad for women?'. Following Okin, Saharso (2002) justly argues that it is legitimate to denounce female-unfriendly aspects of a culture. However, the first precondition for

emancipation – as Lutz (2002) phrases it in a critique on Okin – is a ‘culture of recognition’. If, as is the present case within the dominant discourse, we construct an ‘emancipated us’ as opposed to a ‘suppressed them’, there can be little opportunity for creating an intersection in which connections can be made between experiences and possibilities.

The convincing power of emancipation should be shaped from the inside out. This only happens when people feel safe enough within their own cultural space to criticize their culture and to distance themselves from certain aspects of it. If a culture is under fire, the obvious reaction to this is reticence, as well as the urge to protect one’s own culture against change. People need to have the feeling they are valued for what they are before they will be prepared or able to break out of unwanted cultural patterns. It is important, therefore, to make space for the ways in which diverse groups of women shape their own emancipation processes starting from their own cultural backgrounds. A lesson that can be drawn from postcolonial criticism of the second feminist movement (liberal as well as leftist feminists) is that emancipation is the goal, but that the roads towards emancipation and the meanings attached to it, can be manifold.

### **emancipation from the dominant discourse**

As shown above, the Dutch discourse and policy on (migrant) women has a paradoxical character. The policy is directed at dissolving the isolation and deprivation of migrant women. The paradox is that through its deficit approach, societal focus has been on the culture-based and socio-economic deprivation of these women for too long, creating a perception that disqualifies them from social participation. A policy that aims to help women overcome their isolation unintentionally contributes to their marginalization. The success of any societal participation depends on institutional trust and acceptance of the qualities of the participants. Yet the culturalist deficit focus of the policies contributes to the construction of images in which institutional favours are needed in order to include certain groups of people in society. The policies do not trigger the inclusion of migrant women based on appreciation and need. Instead, they emphasize their cultural differences and shortcomings. As a result, these women are seen as risk factors for society as a whole, as well as for any institution that would include them. The effect of this is that migrant women are seen as deviating from the national culture, therefore giving any inclusion a sense of favour or moral obligation.

Two essential ways to tackle the dominance of the present discourse in the Netherlands are through protecting the right to be different and the claim to produce one’s own identity. In both strategies, it seems that making space is essential. As the 2004 UNDP *Human Development* report shows, when individuals have the space and the right to their cultural identity, they feel safe enough to

change and reshape that culture. In other words the space for cultural recognition seems to be an essential precondition for individuals to feel secure enough to experiment with their culture and to initiate new connections with the diversity of cultures within them or with other cultures. In addition to the right to cultural difference, it is essential to create space for producing cultural identity in the margins as a precondition of emancipation from the dominant discourse. Within this created safe space, self-narratives and self-appreciation seem to be crucial to resist the negative images produced by the dominant discourse. The experience of African–American third-wave feminists could serve here as an inspiring example. These feminists have used a variety of means to create a safe space, including through oral self-narration of the past, literature and music, particularly Jazz and Blues (Collins, 1991; Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). In order to enable emancipation both from traditional patterns within one’s culture and from the essentializing impact of the dominant discourse, we need more recognition of otherness and differentiated forms of empowerment. This can be done by creating safe spaces and by forming alliances across ethnic boundaries. To make this possible, creation of common interspaces for communication and interaction is as necessary as raising sensitivity of cultural difference. We need a balance between difference and sameness in order to reach our goals of empowerment and emancipation across cultures, races, and ethnicities.

## author biography

Halleh Ghorashi is Professor of Management of Diversity and Integration in the Department of Culture, Organization and Management at the VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She is the author of *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (Nova Science Publishers, 2003). One of her most recent publications is the co-edited book (with Sharam Alghasi and Thomas Hylland Eriksen) *Paradoxes of Cultural Recognition: Perspectives from Northern Europe* (Surrey, Ashgate, 2009). She has published several articles on topics such as identity, diasporic positioning, cultural diversity and emancipation issues both inside and outside organizations. As an active participant in the Dutch public debates on diversity and integration issues, she has received several awards. Her present research focus is on the narratives of identity and belonging of migrants, along with the processes of exclusion and inclusion in the context of growing culturalism.

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