

INTERVIEW

‘I was convinced of it – that it had to happen like this’

In conversation with Professor Berteke Waaldijk and Dr. Leni van Strien on interdisciplinary solidarity in Celtic Studies, Gender Studies and Liberal Arts at Utrecht University (Utrecht, June 2023)

Nike Stam
Utrecht University
n.stam@uu.nl

‘Those women work incredibly hard – they deserve their own section.’ A friend of mine, dr. Christien Franken, who had worked in English literature and Gender Studies, once told me that these were the words with which dr. Leni van Strien, lecturer at the department of Celtic Studies, strong-armed the Faculty of Humanities into making Gender Studies an independent department (‘vakgroep’) in 1991. I was struck by this act of interdisciplinary solidarity between small research groups at Utrecht University, and I decided to try and find out the story behind this anecdote.¹ It seemed only fitting to do so in the year that we celebrate the centenary of Celtic Studies in Utrecht,² as this story so clearly underlines the fact that no discipline is an island.

Going back to the source, I contacted Dr. Van Strien herself, as well as Professor Berteke Waaldijk, who is now professor of Liberal Arts at Utrecht University but who was, at the time, a lecturer associated with the program for Gender Studies. I asked them whether they remembered this particular episode in the history of their disciplines, and whether they would be willing to talk to me about the interdisciplinary and female solidarity that gave rise to the creation of Gender Studies and Liberal Arts as independent departments within Utrecht University. The answer was a quick and resounding yes, and we sat down with tea and cake at Dr. Van Strien’s house to discuss the matter.

The fact that Gender Studies exists at all in the Netherlands we owe to an earlier generation of students and lecturers active at different universities in the Netherlands. Waaldijk explains that she discovered the field at Groningen University in the 80s, when a group of history students went around different departments to ask lecturers whether they were interested

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in exploring women's history, so that courses could be taught in it. Being a young lecturer, she was one of the few who took up this challenge and, so she says, 'it made me utterly happy'. Some years later, when Utrecht University advertised for a lecturer with a specialisation in gender and history, it was no surprise that she took this opportunity with both hands. Soon after she started, Professor Rosi Braidotti was made professor of this new and blossoming department.

Around the same time, some Utrecht lecturers were trying to initiate the first Liberal Arts program in the Netherlands, under the inspiring guidance of Thijs Pollmann. It was called 'Algemene Letteren' and is now called Language and Culture Studies (TCS). Inspired by the American model, the aim of this program was to train students very broadly in their first and second year so that they could decide for themselves what truly captured their interest. From that basis they could then choose a further specialisation. This initiative turned out to be very popular among students from the beginning: the first years saw about 300 students applying. Women's studies (later Gender Studies) and Celtic Studies were among the more than thirty specialisations they could choose from.

While it sounds like these two new initiatives developed almost organically into independent programmes (a similar story could also be told about Celtic Studies!), this was in fact the result of hard work, some of it taking place behind the scenes. Van Strien: 'I had to explain at every audit (onderwijsvisitatie en accreditatie – NS) what exactly Liberal Arts was, usually after dessert'.³ Van Strien had been chosen to partake in the Faculty Council and was then quickly asked to join the Faculty Board. In the board, she was carrying the portfolios for finance and teaching, which allowed her to argue for an independent department of Women's Studies, or, as she put it, to 'bombard them as such', with a similar situation arising for Liberal Arts. With both subjects being so new, this was by no means an obvious argument; at the time, many people doubted whether Women's Studies could be a serious academic discipline. We both ask Van Strien what convinced her at the time that Gender Studies was a serious field of study, to which she simply replies 'I was convinced of it – that it had to happen like this'.

Throughout our conversation, it becomes clear that Van Strien has always had a sharp eye for the particular struggles women faced in Academia, and perhaps life. She calls herself a 'femina nova', a new woman, as she was the first in her family to go to university. She remembers that the head of her primary school asked her father 'can she go to grammar school (Dutch: gymnasium)?', and that her father responded with 'what kind of impractical school is that?' It worked out, however, and the head of her grammar

school turned out to be incredibly supportive – ‘we all know that, if you have a student with talent, it is wonderful to work with them’. It was this same principal who told her: ‘now you have to go to University’. Van Strien mentioned to him that her parents would not be able to afford it, after which he helped her organise student loans and small tutoring jobs. This ensured that she ended up a student in Classical Languages, and a member of one of the women-only student societies. During her time as a first-generation female student at the university, she found incredible support there. ‘I did not know how things worked at the university and nobody at home could tell me’ – the societies functioned as a collective roadmap to the unspoken rules of Academia.

At later stages in her career, Van Strien was very active in similar support networks for women in Academia: ‘you were pretty much on your own as a woman in Academia’. At the time, there were several (international) networks in place for women who had received higher education or who were working in higher education. The International Federation of University Women (IFUW, now Graduate Women International or GWI),⁴ founded in 1919, was the international umbrella for many of these. The Dutch VVAO (Vereniging van Vrouwen met een Hogere Opleiding),⁵ was founded around the same time in 1918, and its German equivalent the DAB (Deutscher Akademikerinnenbund) somewhat later in 1926.

After her graduation, Van Strien visited the DAB, where everyone called each other ‘Frau Doktor, Frau Doktor’ – she laughs. It was such an inspiring experience, however, that she joined the Dutch VVAO and became a board member there. She and some others also decided to create a similar network, or ‘club’ as she calls it, as part of IFUW, but specifically for Europe, and specifically for female lecturers, administrators and high-level managers – the University Women of Europe (UWE),⁶ founded in 1981. Van Strien was a member there on behalf of the Netherlands.⁷ ‘It was incredibly supportive in all directions. I learned a lot there about pushing back against expectations. Such clubs existed in other countries, but it was rather unique for the Netherlands.’ What was unique from a Dutch perspective was the focus on women working in Higher Education – the VVAO, for example, was there for all women who had received higher education, but not all of these were employed in Higher Education or employed at all.

The importance of networks created by women for women suddenly hits us in our conversation: when Van Strien mentions she had also been an active member of UWE, we excitedly conclude that such organisations played a role in the life of so many extraordinary women: Maartje Draak,⁸ for example, received a scholarship from IFUW. She did so when another

exceptional woman was part of the IFUW scholarship committee – Johanna Westerdijk, the Netherlands' first ever female professor.⁹ The IFUW was also the organisation that bestowed a scholarship on Rosi Braidotti, later professor of Gender Studies in Utrecht.¹⁰ Waaldijk points out that this is precisely the type of thing that she always stresses in her research on women's networks: that the infrastructures and networks created by women for women are such important propellers of change, and that they have always been there, visible or invisible.

Such support for women was still very much necessary within the university in the late 20th century in the face of ongoing discrimination. Van Strien was aware she had to be good at her work, and not just good, but better than most men. 'When I got my doctorate, it upset some people – I was married, had two children, but I thought: now this is emancipation.' She noticed that many women never made it past *lector*.¹¹ Even Maartje Draak, she says, the first female professor of Celtic Studies and the first female member of the KNAW in the department of literature, never became a full professor, but always remained an endowed professor or 'bijzonder hoogleraar'. Waaldijk: 'men often found it difficult to imagine women as full professors'. Van Strien's experience as a female lecturer in Academia may have played a part in her awareness of the importance of Gender Studies as an academic discipline, and in her awareness of her own influence in providing support for other female lecturers: 'if you make a name for yourself, you have to use this name to make things better for others', she states matter-of-factly.

Using your influence is essential, Van Strien stresses: use your position to change things, and if you do not have such a position, make sure that you get it. 'If', she says, 'you are invited to join a society or a board, it works to say "yes, I'll be there, but I'll be there as Chair". This way, you can be the change, otherwise, it's just "vechten tegen de bierkaai".'¹² Additionally, it is essential to have support networks in place, not just within your field, but also very much outside of it. Institutions such as IFUW, UWE, VVAO and DAB act as important incubators for such new networks and alliances.

The strength and coherence of such networks and infrastructures play an important part in the influence they can exert. The same very much goes for the strength and coherence that comes with being an independent department within a university. It may seem like the type of decision reflected on here, whether a subject becomes an independent department or not, is just an arbitrary and administrative one. However, it is far more important than that and can have far-reaching consequences for the subjects and lecturers involved: 'That the Faculty Board made Women's Studies [now Gender Studies] into an independent department has been very important

for the field', says Waaldijk. 'It created a space where Gender Studies was more than a hobby, where we could develop our research ideas, and where we could impart this knowledge to a new generation.' Being an independent department brings with it permanent staff as well as a solid and coherent teaching curriculum from which courses cannot easily disappear. Waaldijk: 'In the end, it really is a matter of organisational structures, whether research groups and lines of enquiry get a chance within the university'.

Celtic Studies, Gender Studies, and Liberal Arts have been given this chance thanks to interdisciplinary solidarity and Van Strien's strong-arming – and they are making the most of it. These departments are flourishing and have outstanding international reputations. The interdisciplinary solidarity and flexibility, as envisioned by Waaldijk and Van Strien from the very beginning, is engrained in the programs as students combine various courses, minors and tracks. Of course, we do not know what the future holds, and as Van Strien says: 'we're not quite there yet,' in terms of gender equality in Academia, but the new generation of students gives us hope. While Van Strien sits back with a sigh, she says, 'at least I don't have to worry about it anymore!'



Professor Berteke Waaldijk and Dr. Leni van Strien during the interview in April 2023, looking at various documents relating to the Liberal Arts and Gender Studies programs. Photo taken by Dr. Nike Stam.

Notes

1. The conversation between Berteke Waaldijk, Leni van Strien, and myself took place on the 12th of April 2023 at Dr. Van Strien's house. A recording of the full conversation is part of the research data collected for the centenary of Celtic Studies in Utrecht, which explores the role of female professors and lecturers in its history, and may be consulted upon request. I discussed the resulting piece with Dr. Van Strien on the 26th of June 2023, when she supplied some additional comments and corrections, asking me to stress her advice that two things are important for women in Academia: that you are in a position where you have something to say (i.e. can exert some influence), and that you have strong support networks in place. This additional conversation was not recorded. I would like to thank the Gilles Hondius Foundation for their financial aid in acquiring additional audio equipment.
2. For more information on the Centenary of Celtic Studies, see <https://keltisch.sites.uu.nl/publieksprogramma-100-jaar-keltisch/> and <https://www.uu.nl/en/news/the-utrecht-celtic-programme-is-celebrating-100-years-it-is-a-field-packed-with-enthusiasm-and>, accessed 10 August 2023.
3. Dutch universities have been subject to audits to test the quality of their teaching and research every six years since the 1990s. These are carried out by the NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie). More information can be found on www.nvao.net, accessed 14 September 2023. A committee of experts is invited to read reports and talk to staff. In Van Strien's anecdote, she is referring to a dinner held with this committee after their audit.
4. Website GWI, accessed 10 August 2023: <https://graduatewomen.org/>.
5. Website VVAO, accessed 9 August 2023: <https://vvaio.nl/site/index.php>.
6. Website UWE, accessed 10 August 2023: <http://www.universitywomenofeurope.org/>.
7. More information can be found on their blog, accessed 9 August 2023: <https://uweboard.wordpress.com/about/>.
8. In June 2023, the Dutch-language podcast 'Op Zoek naar de Draak', was launched, which describes the life of Maartje Draak using new archival material from her own collection; see Knoops, Rotman and Stam 2023 and Gerritsen 2019.
9. For this anecdote, see Gerritsen 2019. Research carried out for the podcast 'Op Zoek naar de Draak' revealed that Westerdijk and Draak would remain close friends during their lives (Episode 3: 'De Zegevierende Draak in een Mannenwereld'). For the biography of Westerdijk, see Faasse 2013.
10. Professor Rosi Braidotti received the International Federation of University Women Winifred Cullis Grant in support of her doctoral dissertation for the duration of one academic year in 1979–80.
11. Now Assistant or Associate Professor (UD/UHD).
12. I.e. you are fighting a losing battle. This came out of the follow-up conversation I had with Van Strien about this contribution on June 26th, 2023.

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About the author

Nike Stam is assistant professor at the department of Celtic and Classics at Utrecht University. Her research generally focuses on the sociolinguistics of medieval Ireland, but she has a strong interest in Gender Studies and the history of her field. The celebrations around the Centenary of Celtic Studies in Utrecht allowed her to investigate the lives of the women who have left their mark on Dutch Celtic Studies.