Uw sekse en de onze : vrouwen en genootschappen in Nederland en in de ons omringende landen (1750-ca. 1810)
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From the middle of the 18th century a network of voluntary societies dominated the social and cultural life of upper and middle class men in the Netherlands. These societies were situated throughout most of the major towns and cities and could be compared to informal academies and deletante societies in other West-European countries. Well-educated amateur men of letters and science gathered there. The aim of the Dutch societies was – besides practising arts and sciences – to restore the economic prosperity and the political and social stability of the Golden Age. The members were convinced that a better upbringing and education in the sciences, especially the natural sciences, would contribute to virtuous citizenship in the Dutch Republic. In order to become a member one had to receive the approval of a balloting committee. Other possibilities for participation in societal life were to obtain an honourable membership, or to become a financial supporter. The honourable members were selected because of their merit in society or for their special talent in and knowledge of specific arts or sciences. The financial supporters furnished the societies with the necessary means to carry out various activities.

In general Dutch studies of certain kinds of societies hardly mention the participation of women. However, during the years 1750–1810 women served as members and financial supporters and in other ways participated in the activities of some societies. Women visited annual meetings, banquets and concerts and last but not least took part in competitions of, for example literary societies. Indications of the presence of women in these societies raise many questions. To what extent was membership for women possible? Were there societies that excluded the female sex from participation in their activities? When women did participate, did their roles differ from those of the male members? Who were these females and to which social classes did they belong? The first part of this study will focus on these questions.

There is one essential difference in the entry of male and female members into the societies. Discussions about the entry of female members were always about admitting women as part of a group, not as individuals. Men who would like to obtain a membership were personally balloted. The only exception were those societies where the individual talent of a person was at stake, for example in the poetic societies.

For every woman, interest, spare time, wealth and education were necessary conditions to participate in Eighteenth-century societies. Thus interested and educated women of the Dutch elite were found among the members of poetic societies and the Natuurkundig Genootschap der Dames (Natural Science Society of Ladies) at Middelburg. Because of their social class these women had the opportunity to read, study and write about subjects of interest to them. The women joining the poetic societies did not limit their writings to female topics as some literary critics suggested. Instead they wrote about religion, philosophy, politics and national and moral standards. However, women were discouraged from speaking in public with men they were not familiar with. This made it difficult for them to attend the society meetings. Beginning in the 1780s there was a change in social attitude, and some female members, when chaperoned by a male relative, could visit an annual meeting.
Societies of public welfare welcomed women as benefactors, especially the military societies of the ‘Patriotten’. These societies were open to people from all walks of life because of the society's low subscription rates. Women of all classes could contribute, the higher their social rank, the more they donated. Their support did not stop with providing money, the women also embroidered banners and costumes handed over to the regiments of the military societies. During these special ceremonies they occasionally recited poems or spoke to the regiments in front of an assembled audience. By supporting the military societies women were also supporting the Patriotic idea of citizenship, in this way their contributions could be considered a political statement.

In the same way women supported the purposes of the Maatschappij tot Nut van ‘t Algemeen (Society of Public Welfare) in order to improve the living standards of the lower classes. From its founding in 1784, ‘t Nut, as this society was called, also welcomed a female audience at the annual opening of its season. The audience consisted of financial supporters, both male and female, and women related to members. The contents of the lectures held were sometimes especially addressed to the female visitors. Apart from the social impact of the inclusion of women, the members of ‘t Nut underlined with this policy also the importance of education of women of their own class. They belonged to the well-to-do middle class consisting of small merchants and tradesmen, large shopkeepers and university graduates. Among them was a large group of dissenters, belonging to a religious body not in conformity with the established church of the Dutch Republic. Most of these members were Mennonites, and although they were well-known and well-to-do citizen, they were not allowed to participate in local, provincial or state government until the political reforms of 1795.

The greater part of the well-to-do members of Felix Meritis did not participate in the local, provincial or state government either. This Amsterdam society consisted of five departments: Music, Literature, Drawing, Commerce & Industry and Natural Sciences & Mathematics. Felix Meritis was the only society that spelled out specifically that membership was exclusively for well behaving Christian men. However, there were some opportunities for women to attend special meetings. From the very start of Felix Meritis women were able to visit concerts sponsored by the Music Department. They were not only included as audience but also as participants in the choir or as soloists. During the winter-season of 1794/1795 this more progressive attitude towards women stimulated directors of other departments to negotiate about the admission of a limited number of women to lectures on history, scientific experiments and the arts. Unfortunately they did not succeed. However, in 1806, after ten years of debate in board meetings of several departments, women were allowed to attend three lectures per season in the Drawing Department. However, the other sections remained closed to interested female audiences, echoing the situation at the scientific societies.

During the 1790s more and more amateur societies allowed the female relatives of their members to attend the annual meeting at the opening of the season and special events. This gesture of courtesy towards women was intended to tell them their presence was appreciated at social meetings. Women were not welcome at the regular gatherings, as their presence – it was believed – could distract the attention of the male listeners. Another argument for excluding women was that the contents of the lectures were to prepare members for their future public duties. There were no such public duties for women. A woman’s main duties were to educate her children and to take good care of her family and household. In other words it was not necessary for women to sharpen their wits.

The only opportunity for women to measure their knowledge and skills against their male colleagues lay in competitions. The entries to the competitions had to be sent anonymously. This enabled women to compete and to be freed from male prejudices. It is difficult however, to get a complete survey of women’s participation, since competitors remained anonymous unless they won a price. From 1750-1810 women won prizes for poetry and essays and in 1816, for the first time in the Republic, a woman won a palm of honour for her painting. For female winners a price meant true recognition of their talent, knowledge and skill. Sometimes this led to the start of a literary career.
The number of women involved in Dutch societies was small, but male participants also formed a small group. In general society members, male or female, belonged to the upper-classes and well-to-do ‘burgers’. The female members of literary societies and the women of the Natuurkundig Genootschap der Dames were from the upper classes. In the Dutch Republic this meant that their fathers, brothers and/or husbands served in the local, provincial or state government. Most of them were wealthy merchants, bankers, retired persons or university graduates. Only a few women were of noble birth. The women that supported ‘t Nut and visited Felix Meritis were from the wealthy burgher classes. The growing participation of Dutch women from the well-to-do middle class was due to improvement in education of its girls and young women, as female tasks were extended with the responsibility for the upbringing of future virtuous citizens. So a good education for girls as future wives and educators became more and more common and extended from the upper classes to the middle class. The improved economic circumstances of the middle class in cities and the renovation of the local schools such as the boarding-schools and the ‘Franse school’ (French school) in the Netherlands, played an important role in this respect. Wealthy middle-class girls were able to become ‘virtuous young women’ by following a curriculum consisting of natural history, history, religion, geography, literature and French. This secondary education provided them with enough basic knowledge to expand their social opportunities. However, there were limits to the education of young women. Influential philosophers like Rousseau and Kant were convinced that women had to use their mind and spirit for the benefit of their families, therefore only knowledge of the ‘useful’ sciences was necessary. Women who were interested in subjects such as mathematics, philosophy or natural sciences had to create their own route, as a classical education for girls was unthinkable. They had to teach themselves, primary through reading.

The financial situation of the women, their education and their spare time, were important factors in women’s participation in the different kinds of societies in the Dutch Republic. Remarkable is the number of middle class women involved in the societies. It appears that these Dutch women had more freedom to spend their money in comparison with those in France, Great Britain and Germany. Spending money enabled them to become member or beneficiary of a society. During the last decade of the 18th century, more and more women joined their male relatives visiting the events of the societies. Membership in overlapping social circles often facilitated women’s participation: most of the members of these societies were related to each other, visited the same church and had the same friends. Their visits to these societies were a kind of extension of the private sphere of relatives, friends and their parish.

The second part of this study discusses the position of Dutch women in contrast to the position of women in Great Britain, France and Germany. In these countries interest in art and sciences, a good education, wealth and spare time together also were essential factors in educational and social opportunities for women. At the same time different political, social and religious circumstances affected their participation in the cultural sociability. One remarkable difference was the role women played in the salons, an unknown phenomenon in the Dutch Republic. The saloniers and their visitors had the opportunity to participate in an intellectual domain conducive to improved education. The mixed company positively influenced opportunities for those women who participated in this semi-public sphere. The gatherings at the homes of the saloniers, as well as at the English Bluestocking Circle where a friendly, respectful and polite sphere dominated, were open for a select public. It is worth noting that the well known saloniers in Paris and in Berlin were from the well-to-do bourgeoisie and not from the aristocracy as one may expect.

At the same time – in the late 1780s – middle class men in France and Germany became more interested in the study of literature, philosophy and natural sciences. They founded the ‘musée’ or ‘Museum’, a kind of society where the members had to pay a membership fee in exchange for access to lectures, library use and experimentation with physical instruments. Because of an improved education these members gained the kind of access to arts and sciences that formerly had been a prerogative of the upper classes. They did not want to share their newly acquired knowledge with
women of their own social rank, and therefore these institutions were closed to women. Furthermore the literacy level of the catholic women in France and Germany was behind that of comparable Dutch and English protestant females. From the Reformation on, protestant girls and young women learned to read from the Bible during their primary schooling. This significantly helped eliminate illiteracy among them. There was another parallel between Great Britain and the Dutch Republic. Since the middle of the 17th century in cities, the so called nuclear family – consisting of mother, father and their children – became more and more common. In those smaller families women had time to explore things outside household. In France this development occurred in the 1750s but in Germany the extended family lasted until the latter part of the 18th century.

In all countries, including the Dutch Republic, women were generally excluded from academies and learned societies. In France and Germany women occasionally received medals in the competitions of scientific or literary academies. However, this rarely resulted in an honorary membership of one of these academies. Some female scientists worked with male family members who were academicians, but they were always considered assistants of the scientist and seldom credited if the results were published. Furthermore upper-class women in Great Britain and France were more interested in scientific and industrial innovation than their Dutch or German counterparts. The reason behind this could be the advancing industrialization of these countries. For example, from 1766 onwards, in Birmingham and the Midlands – centre of industry – members of the Lunar Society and their female relatives met regularly at their homes to discuss the scientific and industrial innovations. This informal, private society consisted of men of industry.

Generally, societies and clubs in Great Britain did not admit women to participate in their activities. An exception was the music-academy consisting of men and women, boys and girls, who traditionally formed the parish-choirs. Debating clubs were typically British and were seen as a place where prospective politicians could practise their debating techniques. Some debating clubs allowed women to attend their meetings, probably because the women of the upper classes played an important role in the election activities of their male relatives for the House of Parliament. This was the only political activity women participated in beside their gifts of clothes and bandages to British troops during the war against France after the French Revolution. Women of the upper and middle classes busied themselves with making flags for the volunteer and militia units. Comparable to the Dutch Republic during the Patriotic period, women presented these items to the soldiers in open-air ceremonies, sometimes making speeches to the assembled troops and spectators. Where patriotism was genuine and profound, women succeeded to win for themselves a real but precarious place in the public sphere.

In the revolutionary years in France we also see women enter the public sphere. Upper class women like Mme. Roland openly shared the political ideas of the Girondists. Olympe de Gouges and Etta Palm d’Aelders also participated in the discussions at political clubs like the Cercle Social and the revolutionary committees, generally to better the position of women. Unfortunately De Gouges and Roland had their lives ended under the guillotine. From the start of the French Revolution middle-class women had the opportunity to mention their wishes with regard to education, marriage and labour circumstances in the ‘Cahiers de doléances’, notebooks containing grievances against the regime. This however did not result in equal rights for women in France.

The position of women in Germany, especially of the middle-class was behind the French, British and Dutch. The economic, political and social situation of the middle class in the cities changed in the German-speaking countries during the last decade of the 18th century. Rural structures that dominated life in the cities were relaxed and therefore created an opportunity for middle class men to develop themselves in the same way as middle class men in neighbouring countries to the West had, earlier in the eighteenth century. The German cultural and scientific societies were especially meant for these ‘Bildungsbürgers’ and were closed to their women. These women, however, organized reading clubs especially for women. Although they stayed behind in education, recognition as educators of their children satisfied them for the time being. Therefore, you will not find German
women fighting for their rights in public as French and British women like Mary Wolstonecraft had done during these years.

Wolstonecraft made an effort with her essay *Vindication of the rights of woman* to bring the rights of women to the attention of the reading public. She accepted the different social classes and the fact that education of women was dependent on their social standing. It is obvious that for the mass of working-class women, life was not about philosophy. They were more limited by lack of education than their better-off sisters. As working wives, working alongside their men folk or in semi-skilled jobs in the new factories of the industrial towns, their life was hard.

Many women from higher up the social scale, however, were also denied the chance to make any meaningful contribution to society. This changed at the end of the 18th century when acceptance of the notion that women played an important role in the education of children gave them a respectful place in many West European countries. It stimulated them to look for equal rights within their married life, in education and in their economic circumstances. Women realised that they all were faced with similar problems but this did not lead to solidarity between women of all classes. Finally, men’s fears for too much freedom for females curtailed women’s efforts at the turn of the century to be set free from legal, moral and social restraints.