

Gender, the extreme right and Flemish nationalist women's organisations in interwar Belgium

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ABSTRACT. This paper deals with the two main interwar Flemish nationalist women's organisations of the extreme right in Belgium: the *Katholieke Vlaamsche meisjesbeweging* (Catholic Flemish Girls' Movement) and the *Vlaamsch-Nationaal Vrouwenverbond* (Flemish National Women's League). Drawing on Karen Offen's distinction between 'relational' and 'individualist' feminism it is argued that they were not uniformly anti-feminist: they drew on a 'relational' tradition to justify women's public and political participation. Women were attracted to these organisations which appeared to denigrate their rights, because in neither were they treated as mere objects of discourse. They actively engaged in the production of a nationalist discourse of their own, they felt empowered and had opportunities for agency. Their public adherence to the values of motherhood and married life did not imply private ascription to them. Finally, the impact of the 'pillarisation' (*verzuijing*) of Belgian society on Flemish nationalist gender views is looked into, and compared to other European countries.

Since the middle of the 1970s the role of women and gender in nationalism has attracted increasing scholarly attention, although not in the mainstream literature (Hall, Lewis McClelland and Rendall 1993: 159). In Belgium research on this theme is still in its infancy (Bracke 1998, Van Ginderachter 2002). Untypically early studies were published in the late 1970s (Peemans-Poullet 1976 and 1979), but it was only after the 1991 electoral breakthrough of the *Vlaams Blok*, an extremist Flemish nationalist party, that the subject was really taken up because the anti-feminism of the *Blok* had become a topical theme.

The general image conveyed in the Belgian literature is that Flemish nationalism and the extreme right, especially between the wars, have always been unambiguously anti-feminist. One author typically wrote that 'extreme right nationalism cannot be but anti-feminist' (Marques-Pereira 1995: 128–29, cf. De Leeuw and Peemans-Poullet 1995). Statements like these are based on a modern ('individualist') interpretation of feminism. Typically, the women involved are left outside the analysis or are merely said to be attracted by the motherist gender views (Ben Djaffar 1998: 169).

This article presents a more nuanced opinion, focussing on the interwar Flemish nationalist extreme right and more specifically on its two main women's organisations: the *Katholieke Vlaamsche meisjesbeweging* (KVM, Catholic Flemish Girls' Movement] and the *Vlaamsch-Nationaal Vrouwenverbond* (VNVV, Flemish National Women's League). Three questions in particular will be dealt with: How do these organisations compare to similar ones elsewhere in Europe?, Why were women attracted to them?, Were these women anti-feminists? But first some introductory remarks should be made on women, gender and the extreme right, Flemish nationalism and feminism in Belgium.

Women, gender and the extreme right in the interwar period

Between the two world wars women were 'nationalised' all over Europe. Motherhood became public as the foundations were laid for the welfare state, as women were mobilised to serve the fatherland in wartime or as they were enlisted in nationalist organisations (Thébaud 1992). This latter phenomenon has raised one challenging question: 'What attracts women to far-right movements that appear to denigrate their rights?' (Passmore 2003c). The explanation that these women did not know their own interest remains unsatisfactory because it is based on a modern, anachronistic interpretation of emancipation. If we posit that women who are well aware of their self-interest can only become engaged in organisations that pursue complete gender equality, we can never fully understand these women's motivations.

To illuminate problems of this kind, Offen has suggested making a distinction between 'relational' and 'individualist' feminism. Relational feminists see the family as a non-hierarchical companionship between the spouses and as the basic cornerstone of society. Believing in the complementarity of the sexes (including a sexual division of labour based on biological differences), they defend the rights of women as *women* and *mothers*. However, this does not condemn women to the home: they have to use their feminine qualities to reform society and to be publicly active. Relationism was the dominant form of feminism in Europe before World War II, while Anglo-American feminism was more 'individualist'. Individualism stresses abstract principles such as individual human rights and personal autonomy 'while downplaying, deprecating, or dismissing as insignificant all socially defined roles and minimizing discussion of sex-linked qualities or contributions' (Offen 1988: 136, compare the distinction between 'equity feminism' and 'social feminism' by Black 1989: 1–3).

An additional problem when studying women and the extreme right is the danger of overemphasising a particular strand of anti-feminist rhetoric without taking into account how it is modified by actual behaviour. A mere description of discourse tends to result in a fascination with anti-feminist or even misogynist statements. By isolating the rhetoric, we neglect the experi-

ence of nationalist women – to what extent did they conform to the norms? As Passmore has rightly claimed: 'Patriarchal discourse might constrain women in theory, but whether it did so in practice [is] a matter for historical investigation' (Passmore 2003b: 4). Not only is the anti-feminist rhetoric sometimes modified by the behaviour of the women concerned, it might also be undercut by contradictory discourses. Durham has argued that there is 'no single view of women on the extreme right'. He sees gender as 'a site of conflict and rivalry between different forms of fascism' (Durham 1998: 49, 1992: 524). Taking all this into account, this article, by confronting competing discourses and practices, argues that the interwar Flemish nationalist women's organisations were not uniformly anti-feminist.

The Flemish movement and Flemish nationalism

When Belgium was founded in 1830 French became the sole language of state, although more than half of the population used a Flemish/Dutch dialect exclusively – on the Belgian nationalities' problem see Vos and Deprez (1998), Stengers and Gubin (2002). Against this background the Flemish movement arose as a patriotic attempt to protect Flemish culture as an integral part of the Belgian fatherland. From the middle of the nineteenth century the *flamingants*, as its members were called, began to campaign for linguistic legislation to protect Dutch in the courts, the schools and the state administration. Because the establishment did not respond as enthusiastically as expected, frustration grew. This dissatisfaction was exploited during World War I by the German *Flamenpolitik*, recruiting Flemish collaborators to destroy Belgium from within.

After the war universal male suffrage was introduced, but women only received the municipal vote and had to wait until 1948 for full enfranchisement. The anti-*flamingant* atmosphere after the war gave birth to the idea that the whole population of Flanders was being victimised. Ultimately, while in 1919 collaboration had been unanimously rejected, it became pardoned by many. Amnesty for sentenced collaborators became a central demand of the whole Flemish movement. This 'amnesty question' was one of the major catalysts of the rise of Flemish nationalism as a political anti-Belgian movement striving for an independent Flemish or 'Greater-Netherlandic' state (a union of Flanders and the Netherlands). At their peak, in 1939, these nationalists rallied fifteen per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections in the Flemish provinces and the most important Flemish nationalist political party, the *Vlaamsch-Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National League/VNV, founded in 1933), had some 30,000 members. The majority of *flamingants*, though, held on to the Belgian state.

During the interwar period many Flemish nationalists, most of whom were devout Catholics, became ever more radical, eventually supporting authoritarian organisations and collaborating with Nazi Germany. Whether they

were fascists is a matter of debate. Payne calls the VNV a conservative right form of authoritarian nationalism (Payne 1995: 15), but De Wever, the Belgian VNV specialist, labels it fascist (De Wever 1994). In any case, these nationalists' concept of nation was anti-modern: they rejected liberalism, marxism and parliamentary democracy – a widespread phenomenon in catholic public opinion in interwar Europe (Conway 1997: 41–4). Flemish nationalists despised the system of 'bad party politics' as opposed to 'a healthy form of national politics'. They subordinated the individual to the *volk*, the basic building block of which was the family. The *volk* was an organic being that grew when birth rates went up and could become ill when foreigners 'sapped' its strength. The leadership, which had to be obeyed, naturally rose to power out of the one and undivided *volk*. This hierarchy was reflected within the family: women had to stand by their husbands.

The feminist and women's movement in Belgium

The first Belgian feminists (1860–80) campaigned for an improvement of women's education – on the feminist and women's movement in Belgium see Gubin 1994 and 1997. Since only two per cent of the total Belgian population had the vote between 1830 and 1893, the absence of female suffrage was not felt to be a particular problem. At the end of the 1880s feminists realised that education would not end the gender inequalities and they founded the *Ligue du droit des femmes* (1892) (Gubin, Piette and Jacques 1997: 54). Initially its programme was centred on equal civil rights, women's right to work and the labour conditions of female industry workers. Unlike Anglo-American suffragettes, Belgian women activists were relational feminists.

It was the socialist party's campaign for universal suffrage that made the *Ligue* take up the issue of enfranchisement in the early 1900s (between 1893 and 1914 Belgium had a system of plural suffrage: an educated and well-off man could get one or two extra votes). In the meantime, the three main political families in Belgium (Catholic, liberal and socialist) had founded women's organisations to 'defuse' the politically divisive potential of feminism. Because women were generally considered to be devout Catholics, the Catholic party, which advocated the subordination of women to men, paradoxically began to support female suffrage, while the liberal and socialist parties, who were in favour of more gender equality, opposed it.

After World War I feminists all over Europe reformulated their demands 'in the shadow of renewed loud, insistent, and repetitive rearticulations of women's obligations and role' (Offen 2000: 272). Belgian women's groups had become so entrenched in the main political parties that most researchers hesitate to call the Catholic, liberal and socialist female organisations 'feminist' (e.g. Gubin 1997: 185, De Metsenaere, Huyseune and Scheys 1993: 528). Only a limited number of feminists advocated equality in small independent organisations (Devos 1996).

The incorporation of women's organisations within the different political families points to the peculiar Belgian and Dutch phenomenon of 'pillarisation' or 'compartmentalisation' (*verzuiling*). Belgian society is divided into politico-ideological 'pillars' (a Catholic, liberal, socialist and a smaller Flemish nationalist one which in contrast to the others is limited to Flanders) (on pillarisation see Conway 1996: 195). These consist of mass organisations (schools, trade unions, mutual aid societies, youth and women's groups, sports clubs, etc.) that cater to every need of their members and entertain close ties to 'their' political party. Adherence to one of the pillars is inevitable as they distribute the social benefits of the state (Verbruggen 1996).

Pillarisation gave a peculiar twist to the women's question in Belgium because, in general, it made politicisation of women more acute. Women were mobilised and drawn into the public sphere by their adherence to the women's organisations of the pillars, to a larger extent than in non-pillarised countries. In France for instance the parliamentary right did not try to mobilise women until 1935 (Koos and Sarnoff 2003: 170), while in Belgium women of all ideological persuasions were enlisted. In the equally pillarised Netherlands there was a similar evolution (Schwegman and Withuis 1993: 565–566). A side effect of pillarization was that it left virtually no room for politically independent organisations. If one wanted to be heard, one simply had to adhere to a pillar, which explains the weakness of the independent individualist feminist movement. Unlike the Netherlands where women came to set store by to the Dutch nation through their membership of pillar organisations (Schwegman and Withuis 1993), this 'straightforward nationalisation' did not occur in Flanders because Belgian and Flemish national identity competed within pillars.

The Flemish nationalist women's organisations

At the end of the nineteenth century women became an issue in the Flemish movement as the educational system for girls was extended. Catholic *flamingant* spokesmen, many of them priests, saw this as an obstacle to Flemish emancipation – in Catholic countries such as Spain (Vincent 2003: 197), Ireland (Beaumont 1997) and Poland (Kałwa 2003: 150), Catholicism and the clergy had a determining impact on nationalist gender views too. According to these, Catholic boarding schools where girls were taught in French were at the root of Flanders' problems. Sincere *flamingants* would marry French-speaking graduates and be lost for their people. Similar considerations were phrased in other national movements, e.g. in early nineteenth century Poland about francophile women (Lorence-Kot 1987) and in Czech society about German-speaking women (Maleckova 2000: 296). Only a limited number of women actually participated in this discussion, the terms and scope of which were set by anti-feminist men (Bracke 1998: 3607).

Shortly before World War I it was women themselves who took the initiative to found the first *flamingant* women's organisations. This late 'awakening' of women compared to other substate national movements in Europe (e.g. the Poles, Czechs and Ukrainians; Lorence-Kot 1987; Maleckova 2000; Bohachevsky-Chomiak 1988) is in synchrony with Hroch's appraisal of the Flemish movement as a disintegrated national movement which only became a mass affair in the early twentieth century (Hroch 2000: 107–16; Vos 1998). Societies for young female students were founded from 1906 on. In 1913 all these groups were united in one organisation, which named itself the KVM.

Before World War I twenty-eight groups joined the KVM, totalling some 250 members. Originally, it was an organisation for middle-class girls that did not cater to adult or working-class women. Its leaders, such as Gabriëlla Van Caeneghem (1887–1958), Maria Laporta (1896–1978) and Maria Brughmans (1893–1972), all came from *flamingant* middle-class families and were in contact with *flamingant* priests or members of the Catholic Flemish student movement, the breeding ground for *flamingant* frontmen. The KVM programme concentrated on creating a 'Flemish atmosphere' in school by studying Flemish language and culture as a preparation for a truly Flemish and Catholic family life later on. Flemish church authorities looked down kindly on the KVM because at that moment there were no (politically or gender-related) subversive elements in its programme.

During World War I the activities of most KVM groups simply stopped. After the German defeat the movement was brought to new life by Julia Putman (1901–59), the exponent of a new generation. As KVM president she attracted adult women and younger girls. In October 1919 the organisation launched its own periodical, *Gudrun*. Putman's innovations were successful: in 1922 the KVM's membership had jumped to 114 groups, totalling a maximum of 3000 members in the mid-1920s. To put this into perspective, the total population of Flanders was approximately four million in 1930. The Catholic women's organisations had 26,200 members in 1922 and 125,000 in 1940, and the socialists at least 17,000 in 1932.

Initially, the KVM stayed on its prewar road, steering clear of explosive political matters, much to the satisfaction of church authorities. But, in the early 1920s several members of the national KVM council (including Putman and Martha Van de Walle [1902–80] the head of *Gudrun* between 1923 and 1933) became convinced that the KVM had to become Flemish nationalist. This led to intense discussions within the organisation, but in December of 1924 Putman succeeded. The official KVM course became anti-Belgian (Greater-Netherlandic by 1930 and authoritarian by 1933), creating a gap between the leadership and the rank and file: the number of associated groups dropped to sixty-four and most of the members left (at the end of the 1930s membership was estimated to be between 150 and 500). The Catholic Church, being in favour of a unified Belgium although many individual priests were *flamingant* or outright nationalist, was also dismayed. Subsequently, articles

appeared in *Gudrum* denying the Church every right to interfere in this wordly matter. In 1926 Putman went into a convent at the age of twenty-five and was replaced as president by Angela Dوسفel-Tysmans (1890–1985), a thirty-six-year-old widow with a little daughter. This change of power was underscored by a name change: the KVM officially became the Catholic Flemish League for *Women* and Girls, but contemporaries kept referring to it by its old name.

Despite its Flemish nationalist outing the national council did not want to support Flemish nationalist political parties openly, because party politics were considered to threaten the unity of the Flemish *volk*. KVM vice president, Magda Gravez-Haegens (1900–92), who had married the Flemish nationalist politician Hillaire Gravez in 1922, wanted to open up the organisation for political women's groups. The conflict was largely theoretical because in practice the KVM had often taken the same stands as the *Frontpartij* (Front Party, founded in 1919), the most important Flemish nationalist political party of the 1920s. The discussion ended in 1930 when Haegens left with her followers to found the VNVV. From 1931, the VNVV had its own periodical *Nele*. In 1934 it joined the VNV which had succeeded the Front Party as the leading Flemish nationalist political party. Although an anti-parliamentarian organisation, the VNV participated in elections.

The official VNV party line on women was that 'the noblest and highest vocation of women' was 'wife and mother'. They 'should not compete with men in male areas [of society]'.¹ In spite of its (over)insistence on motherhood as a woman's life fulfilment, the VNV sometimes strayed from this gender discourse. These inconsistencies were partly due to the party paper's perennial lack of funds, forcing it to cater to as wide (and 'modern') an audience as possible, and to the urban mentality of its publishing town, Antwerp. Playing along with the parliamentary game also meant that the VNV had to take account of its potential electorate, which comprised childless and single working men and women (who had had municipal suffrage since 1921). Because of this, female contributors to the paper's 'Women's corner' sometimes got away with a more modern gender rhetoric. They were actors in the production of their own discourse and not mere consumers.

The VNVV followed the authoritarian course of the VNV, including wartime collaboration with the Nazis. The members of the VNVV, 2000 at the end of the 1930s, engaged in roughly the same activities as those of the KVM, but they also provided logistic support to the VNV. The main difference was that some of the higher VNVV functionaries served as legislators or administrators in (elected) government bodies. Odile van den Berghe, the wartime leader of the VNVV, was city councillor in Bruges (1921–26), deputy in the provincial council of West-Flanders (1929–36) and senator (1936–39); Maria Hamendt-Ghys was elected deputy in the provincial council of East Flanders in 1936 and Magda Gravez-Haegens was member of the executive council of the city of Aalst during World War II. In other political parties too there was a modest 'breakthrough' of women in public office. This reflected a more general evolution in Flanders. The (relatively high) labour

participation of women in industry fell back during the interwar period, but their employment in the 'soft' sectors (education and services) began to rise. Single waged women in so-called feminine jobs (teaching, nursing, etc.) were no exception, but jobs for married women came under pressure because of the increasing popularity of the 'breadwinner model' and the crisis of the 1930s (De Metsenaere et al. 1993: 540).

The VNVV had very little influence on VNV policies (a general pattern in Europe; see the *Seccion Femenina* in Spain, Nash 1994: 163, and the *fasci femminili* in Italy, De Grazia 1992: 268). In 1939, for instance, the party decided to drop Odile van den Berghe as senator in favour of a man, despite the protest of the VNVV. VNVV leader Magda Gravez-Haegens was especially bitter over the official reason the party gave, viz. that van den Berghe

was supposedly tired of parliamentary life! Where will these party political practices lead us? Women, this should be a lesson to you . . . Think twice before venturing into party political terrain. Your mission is education, civilisation of our youth and our people.²

The VNVV contested this decision and accused men of un-national behaviour by adopting the despised practices of the liberal party system. At the same time it admonished its members to keep away from party politics and to stick to their educational mission. However, this did not mean a retreat of women to the family, because many VNVV members had a broad interpretation of their civilising mission. The van den Berghe case shows that 'there were limits to both female activity and female autonomy. But the arguments which took place over women's candidacy for public office illustrate the existence of a contested space', quoting Mary Vincent's appraisal of a similar case in Spain - the CEDA, a political party which tended to the far right, and that ousted Urracca Pastor, one of its prominent female members, as a parliamentary candidate in Logroño in 1933 (Vincent 2003: 204).

The male party hierarchy did not control the VNVV as strictly as for instance the *NSDAP* in Germany, the *Movimiento* in Spain or the *Partito nazionale fascista* in Italy directly supervised every organisational level of their women's sections (Heinsohn 2003: 52; Enders 1992: 676; Willson 2003: 18). In the *fasci femminili*, for instance, pro-women's rights statements became increasingly exceptional from the middle of the 1920s, because the PNF exerted an ever stricter control in its quest to attract a female mass membership (De Grazia 1992: 247; Willson 2003: 15, 18). As the VNVV never became a mass organisation, the interest of men was shortlived and the VNVV remained relatively autonomous. Elsewhere in Europe too, the lack of interest of the male party hierarchy sometimes allowed women to stray from the official party ideology (Gehmacher 1998: 113). Consequently, the VNVV periodical *Nele* was throughout its whole existence a stronger advocate of women's rights than the male party press. It offered women to some extent a platform to voice their own concerns, rather than consigning them to a submissive role.

Mainstream Flemish nationalist gender discourse

Following Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 7–11), we can distinguish at least five roles women played in mainstream Flemish nationalist discourse. First of all, they were the 'life source of the nation',³ reproducing the people biologically. Bearing children was a national duty because the Flemish would be able to shed the Belgian yoke by their sheer numbers. Interwar Flemish nationalism was pronatalist and familialist like so many other Catholic nationalist movements (e.g. Francoism, Nash 1994). It shrank away from direct state intervention within the family because of religious and moral qualms about the private character of the family and of reproduction – Passmore has remarked upon similar views within non-fascist authoritarian conservative movements (Passmore 2003a: 238). Secondly, Flemish women reproduced the boundary between the healthy Flemish nation and 'those scandalous creatures, the Belgians'.⁴ A Flemish woman could only marry a true Fleming. In the 1930s, as both the KVM and the VNVV became authoritarian, this discourse took on a marked agonistic and racist tinge. In October 1939 Colomba Thiel (1903–87), successor to Van de Walle as head of *Gudrun* (1933–37), warned all KVM members not to marry a Walloon: 'A nation perishes if it lives in peace with its conquerer, if it cohabits with its enemy within the family.'⁵ A third task of women was to preserve the nation's cultural legacy, through the education of their children. Women personified continuity and they were the eternal, unchangeable core of the *volk* because their task as mothers and housewives was said to be natural and immutable. As one male author put it: 'The woman is a centre. She does not wander around listlessly, she does not meander with the passing of time. She is not swept by the tumult of change.'⁶ Not surprisingly, girls and women were often described as 'the quiet enduring, bearing force'.⁷ A fourth role women played was that of national symbol. The nation was often imagined as a woman in distress and statements like 'You will know a nation by its women' – by Line Lambert (b. 1907), acting president of the KVM beside Dosfel-Tysmans in the 1930s – show that they were seen as a *pars pro toto* for the whole *volk*.⁸ Finally, women were supposed to take part in the Flemish struggle; not as soldiers, but mainly as the 'quiet force' in the family behind their husbands who took the struggle to the public forum. Shortly after World War I a pamphlet from a local KVM group described the family as a 'sanctum, rooted in the ancient Flemish religion, where men come to regain strength for their honest strife in life, where children find decent guidance'.⁹

Competing male and female discourses

This difference rhetoric was not interpreted in the same way by women and men (compare the diverse interpretations of 'Latin feminism' by male and female fascists, De Grazia 1992: 17). More Flemish nationalist men resorted

to an anti-feminist or sometimes misogynist discourse. In 1922 Father Thielemans published an article in *Gudrun* on 'Love and woman's psychology', claiming that women were 'inferior to men in matters of justice, because they have no respect for the law and do not feel a clear distinction between what is right and what is wrong'.¹⁰ A young female student contradicted him: 'Psychology teaches us that women have the same abstract capacities as men: they possess reason, intellect and will power, they are capable of paying attention just like men.'¹¹ Women were not uncritical consumers of restrictive gender ideas imposed upon them by men. They engaged in the production of a discourse of their own.

Flamingant men agreed that women did not live up to the task of building a Flemish home because they were weak creatures. They, one male author remarked, drawing on Roman Catholic imagery, 'are Flanders' shame, Flanders' grief. They do not comfort their people in its "Way of the Cross", as Veronica did. No, mocking witches, they'd rather throw dirt with their little sophisticated fingers.'¹² Although the KVM gave these men the opportunity to make their ideas known to its members, several KVM women did not agree. Dösfel-Tysmans for one did not attribute women's indifference vis-à-vis Flanders to their biological nature, but to social conditions. 'Particularly the educational system for girls' was to blame.¹³ Thiel clearly thought it a lopsided critique. In 1929 she complained: 'They blame us [i.e. women] for not cooperating with the Flemish movement, but now that we exist [as a nationalist women's organisation] no one takes notice of us.'¹⁴

While more men tended to interpret the difference discourse exclusively in biological terms of marital subordination of the 'weaker' to the 'stronger sex' and of confinement to the family sphere, the KVM and VNVV gradually began to subvert these ideas. Increasingly after the 1925 fall-out with the Church, they promoted a more companionate interpretation of marriage in which women had the right and the duty to develop themselves, in order to become a moralising force within their family and the *volk*. In March 1933 a female editor of *Nele* complained about 'the limited interest of many – and even of most – women for what went on outside the walls of their house'. That created 'a certain selfishness, petty-mindedness, a certain greed which could be called family egotism'. The VNVV members had to 'widen the horizon of these women' to make their lives 'richer' and 'more fruitful not only for ... their own family, but for the whole of society'.¹⁵

The KVM's favourite motto 'I serve' (*Ik dien*) was an instance of interpretative tension between men and women. It contained a biblical allusion to the virgin Mary, who called herself the Lord's servant at the Annunciation (compare her importance as a role model in other Catholic nationalisms e.g. Poland, Kalwa 2003: 150). To many men 'I serve' could only mean one of two things: serve one's husband or serve God. In 1926 Father Honoré Maes wrote that girls had to learn 'which are the two ways in life: the usual being the union with a man and the founding of a family, or the higher, less usual being the union with God as a nun'.¹⁶ Statements like these already

contained a certain ambiguity because nuns did not only serve God in convents, but also performed community service as teachers, nurses, etc. Indeed, Catholic lay women engaged in similar activities through philanthropy and parish work. It was this state of affairs that made KVM women support a third interpretation of 'I serve', especially after 1925. They broadly interpreted it as serving their own nation in caring functions as social workers, secretaries, nurses, etc.; thus turning a religious or biological argument into a secular nationalist and not literally maternalist one:

Being a woman means being a mother, physically or mentally, not only mother of one's own child, which we cannot all become or be, but we can all participate in the motherhood of our community, of our people and that way we leave our mark on the *volksziel* [the soul of the people].¹⁷

The idea of social or spiritual motherhood was also used in other women's organisations of the extreme right. The *Seccion Femenina* of the *Falange* distinguished between 'spiritual and corporeal maternity' and Enders concedes that, while its members were on 'a very "antifeminist" campaign', this type of reasoning might have 'provided an opening for the emancipation of at least these women during the Franco years' (Enders 1992: 678). The same might be said of the Flemish nationalist women's organisations.

Politics, suffrage and waged women

While to Flemish nationalist men the difference discourse hardly implied women's civil, economic and political equality, for the KVM and certainly the VNVV difference sometimes meant equity (i.e. 'equality in difference'), and in some cases even equality. This was apparent in discussions on politics, suffrage and waged women.

The KVM insisted that only a tiny elite of women was suited for public office, but *all* women had to show interest in public life and politics if they wanted to fulfil their nationalist duty of participating in 'the entire life of their people'.¹⁸ Many nationalist men still saw public commitment and especially politics as 'unfeminine' behaviour. In 1928 Maurits Van de Walle, Martha's elder brother, admonished the KVM members to stay away from public life. 'What horrible stupidity for Mother to flee her central life-supporting place to struggle for a place in public life where she will always come second.'¹⁹ The KVM foreclosed this type of criticism by making a subtle, but vague distinction between a good form of politics women could engage in – national politics, 'the promotion of the interests of the nation' – and a bad form – 'party politics'.²⁰

The VNVV did not have to resort to this kind of sophism, since it obviously was involved in party politics, entertaining close relations with a political party, the VNV. In spite of its official authoritarian programme, the VNVV wholeheartedly supported female suffrage during electoral campaigns. In October 1932, for instance, on the eve of the municipal elections, *Nele*

condemned the 'dogma passed on from generation on generation' that women did not belong in politics.

We do not believe that men are innately suited for politics . . . there are many men who are bad at it, while certain women have shown their aptitude . . . We know that only a small group of women will actually become active in politics, but it is imperative that all women support them.

Relational and individualist arguments fused in this article, which also claimed that women had to 'campaign for more civil rights. We have to demand the vote for the provincial council and for Parliament We have to demand it as women, because we do not want to be treated as inferiors in society.'²¹ At the time of the municipal elections of 1938 Gravez-Haegens, the VNVV leader, refused to linger over

the antiquated and dull question whether a woman may engage in politics, whether she is competent for that, whether it befits her female sensitivity . . . We might as well ask: can she go to the movies, to a tea party, to a dance, engage in sports, smoke, use make-up?²²

Obviously, the answer was 'yes', which shows Gravez-Haegens' acceptance of many 'modern' modes of female behaviour. However, in between elections suffrage was not an issue, but the intermittent use of this discourse set the VNVV apart from the main current of Catholic public opinion. Most Catholics, including those from the extreme right such as the VNV and the francophone fascists of *Rex* (Ben Djaffar 1998), taking their cue from papal encyclicals, only pragmatically supported female suffrage with an exclusively motherist rhetoric. Their tactical support was a strategy to counter the liberal and socialist parties since women were believed to vote Catholic 'naturally', an opinion widely held in the French and also Spanish right (Koos and Sarnoff 2003: 174; Vincent 2003: 201).

The official VNVV view on waged women was that unmarried women could work in feminine jobs such as nursing until they found a husband. This was in fact close to the official stand of the Catholic women's movement that had always considered female industry labour to be a negative side effect of industrialisation and campaigned against female waged work, especially that of married women (Devos 1996: 102–3). Yet, within the VNVV there seemed to be a silent agreement that an elite could remain unmarried to serve their nation. Preferably, married women had to stay at home to take care of their family, but if circumstances demanded it, they could perform waged labour. Under certain circumstances this discourse could become quite progressive, for instance in the middle of the 1930s when the Belgian government, like many other European governments, e.g. in France (Offen 1994) and the Netherlands (Schwegman and Withuis 1993: 567), toyed with the idea of completely excluding women from the labour market. Between 1933 and 1934 a whole series of discriminatory measures were issued against women (Gubin 1998: 274; Peemans-Pouillet 1991: 106–8). The climax of the discriminatory wave was the bill proposed by the Catholic senator Father Rutten to limit the number of married female workers on the labour market. The Catholic

women's organisations had helped to prepare the bill and supported it. Their liberal and socialist counterparts and the independent feminists opposed it. Interestingly, so did the VNVV. In March 1935 Eleanor Devroe-Puype (1902–81), a member of the national KVM council and founding member of the VNVV, married to a Flemish nationalist politician and mother of four, formulated the following slogan: 'No general laws on the suppression of women's labour. No inferior wage for the same labour'. That would be 'unreasonable and unjust', an initiative 'of misogynists ... or men who'd rather keep women down'. Although 'a well-ordered state should raise girls for the family', Devroe-Puype defended freedom of choice: 'We can guide our girls, educate them, advise them ... but we cannot force them to think exclusively of a husband who shall work for them ... A girl should be able to provide for herself as any young man ...' And she added: 'It is necessary that women should be equal to men in this respect'. Her arguments were partly individualist: working women 'pay the same taxes, have the same obligations, so there should be no distinction as far as rights are concerned'. She even defended the right of women 'to work, also in public life, towards whatever is useful to a nation. Women should not be driven from industries and offices, and we also should have female doctors and lawyers who are useful to our public life'.²³ Deliberately or not, Devroe-Puype's text conflated the categories of girls and wives, but generally it contradicted the official Catholic teaching on married women. Presumably, the VNVV tried to reach out to working-class women with this pro-labour article.

Although the VNVV sometimes approached the views of unambiguously feminist organisations, there remained significant differences. For instance, the VNVV (like the KVM) attributed a very negative connotation to the term 'feminism' because it supposedly undermined the family as the basic building block of the *volk*. As so many of its sister organisations, the VNVV depicted feminists as foreign to the native soil, belonging to another ethnic group (a francophone liberal thing imported into Catholic Flanders) or, even worse, lacking any national roots (the despised cosmopolitan feminism). In France, individualist feminism was already in the 1890s considered to be a foreign, Anglo-American phenomenon (Offen 1988: 146). This rejection was also, in a way, a pragmatic strategy to defend women's interests without being constantly accused of giving in to anti-national feminism. Kovács for instance has argued that the Hungarian women's movement deliberately redefined itself after World War I as a truly Hungarian movement because it knew that 'a good deal of resentment against their prewar liberal predecessors' was directed against their connections with 'foreign' elements (Kovács 1996: 493).

Agency of Flemish nationalist women

During the interwar period the KVM and VNVV became ever more important sites of agency for women. In the first postwar years men still

had reasonable influence in the KVM. Its refounding after World War I had been inspired by newspaper articles written by *flamingant* men, who had urged women to fulfil their national duty. When Putman and Van de Walle decided on the Flemish nationalist change of course in the mid-1920s, they made sure *Gudrun* published some articles by influential men who supported their ideas. This gave the young women's opinion more weight to convince the doubting members, but also showed that they did not belong to the new breed of postwar women who acted independently and irresponsibly. In other words, they tried to make their own agency compatible with the dominant Flemish nationalist gender views.

Many KVM groups had a priest as moral councillor. The national council gladly accepted their help because they gave the movement a more respectable and official *cachet*. These priests had to attend the meetings of local groups to give moral guidance. Overall, the impact of the Catholic clergy seems not to have been as strong as, for instance, in the *Sección Femenina* of the *Falange*. Unlike the *Sección Femenina*, the KVM did not have a religious adviser to the organisation as a whole (Enders 1992: 675) and the actual day-to-day influence of priests should not be overestimated. Some groups complained that they received no support or co-operation whatsoever from them. If they were present, their interference was not always welcomed. In a KVM meeting in March 1920 Father Tuyarts proposed to write a letter to the Minister of the Interior to have him forbid underage girls from attending dances. All girls present protested vehemently and when Tuyarts had left, they decided to postpone the matter indefinitely; once again an indication that restrictive norms of behaviour for women were no longer uniformly accepted.²⁴ Because these priests often remained merely nominal councillors, seldom attending meetings, their 'virtual' presence acted in practice as a safeguard against interference from without. This again shows how female agency was set within the ideology of gender hierarchy.

Men became ever less involved in the KVM after 1925. Some would write articles for *Gudrun* or speak in KVM meetings, but overall the women in the KVM acted quite independently because after 1925 the leadership was made up of adult women instead of students and the interest of men was rather shortlived. The women involved did not always appreciate this male indifference and complained that 'men know nothing about our movement'²⁵ nor gave them any credit.²⁶ Conversely, though, leading KVM members were proud of their autonomy and loudly denounced rumours that nationalist frontmen managed the KVM behind the scenes. Hilda Hellemans (1895–1979), chief editor of *Gudrun* (1933–36), was disappointed 'that prominent men in the Flemish struggle still expect us to turn to Verschaeve [one of the most influential Flemish nationalist priests, MVG] each and every time there are difficulties'.²⁷

Both the KVM and VNVV helped to open up new areas of agency for women. The leaders of the KVM and VNVV were examples of an independent way of life. Thiel, for instance, had learned German, Italian and Swedish

on her own and in 1926 (she was twenty-three at the time) she went to Denmark for half a year to complete her training as a secretary. Their elitist ideas – they saw themselves as a female elite to whom conventional wisdom did not apply – turned out to be a justification of a working and/or unmarried life. This seems to be common to many similar organisations (see the *Sección Femenina*, Vincent 2003: 212; Nash 1994: 174; and the early *Fasci Femminili*, Willson 2003: 13). Public adherence to the values of motherhood and married life clearly did not imply private ascription to them (Nash 1994: 175).

Interviews with former KVM members from the 1930s suggest that the women concerned felt empowered. When asked what they thought of feminism at the time, Lambert answered: 'Oh, we didn't need it, we already were independent'.²⁸ This should not surprise us as the appeal of the *Bund deutscher Mädel* was precisely in the freedom and the opportunities for leadership the organisation offered its members (Reese 1991), who fondly remembered their BDM days 'as a time of solidarity, adventure and empowerment' (Grossman 1991: 353). Victoria Enders' interviews with leading members of the *Sección Femenina* of the *Falange* showed that they too felt 'self-realised' (Enders 1992: 677).

Conclusions

This article has tried to answer three questions: (1) Were the Flemish nationalist women's organisations of interwar Belgium anti-feminist? (2) Why were women attracted to these organisations? (3) How do these organisations compare to similar ones in Europe?

The legacy of the KVM and the VNVV for women's rights is ambiguous. We cannot call them feminist as they only fully meet the first of Offen's three criteria of feminism: (1) 'they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience'; (2) 'they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalised injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group'; (3) 'they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions or practices' (Offen 1988: 152). The efforts of both Flemish nationalist women's organisations to fight gender inequality were only intermittent and they often justified the institutions and practices on which the inequality was based. In the 1930s the VNVV's emancipatory views on suffrage and waged labour were part of a decidedly undemocratic and anti-egalitarian world-view. Yet, neither can we call them plainly anti-feminist: they drew on a 'relational' tradition to justify women's public and political participation, while anti-feminists used motherhood to deny women access to public affairs and to restrict them to the family sphere.

There may have been a fair amount of opportunism involved. Being a middle-class organisation claiming to represent women from all walks of life and supporting a party that disputed elections, the VNVV especially tried to

gain ground in working-class circles. There, so it was believed, women tended to have jobs of their own and to be in favour of the vote. But opportunism does not fully explain why the VNVV should sound so 'modern' in defending female suffrage and waged labour for women, and endorse female cinema-going, dancing, make-up, sports, etc., when traditional arguments such as 'the vote is a reward for bearing children' would suffice. This goes to show that its rhetoric was sometimes infused with more 'individualist' ideas.

Women could have several reasons for joining these organisations. Within the limits imposed upon them by the prevailing gender ideology they felt empowered and they had opportunities for agency. Passmore's description of women in the *Croix de feu/Parti Social Français* is equally true for the KVM and the VNVV: 'the unintended consequence of the contradictions in the movement's discourses was that female activists were able, within the limits represented by their own relative lack of power resources, to invest the women's sections with their own purposes' (Passmore 1999: 828). Women were not mere objects of discourse, they actively engaged in the production of a nationalist rhetoric of their own with emphases distinct from men.

Compared to other women's organisations of the extreme right in interwar Europe, the pillarisation of Belgian society gave a particular twist to the gender views of the KVM and the VNVV. It was necessary that *all* members of every political family, even women and children, had enough knowledge and background to stand their ground in ideological disputes and that they became publicly active within their own pillar organisations. Yet, neither the KVM nor the VNVV succeeded in attracting a large membership. While in non-pillarised countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain, fascists were among the first to recruit women in organisations outside the domestic sphere, in Belgium the foundations for such organisations had already been laid before World War I. Consequently, when the Flemish nationalist extreme right entered the political scene after 1918 it had a serious competitive disadvantage. The small membership figures of the KVM and the VNVV seem to reflect the weakness of the Flemish nationalist movement, rather than the unpopularity of their gender views since Catholic women's organisations with similar gender ideas had a much larger following. Because the KVM and VNVV remained tiny organisations, they inspired a strong elitist self-image and stimulated a feeling of independence among their members. This infused a certain non-conformism into their world-views. Combined with the loosening grip of the official church doctrine after 1925, this might explain some of their pro-women's rights stances.

An additional factor in Belgium as compared to Spain, Germany and Italy, was the strength of democracy. Nazism, francoism and Italian fascism were dictatorships which abolished free speech and civil liberties, and they disposed of a wide range of media to implement their gender policies. In Belgium, the political influence of the extreme right was much weaker. As Durham has observed about the British case, the Flemish interwar extreme right too 'could not escape taking on at least some of the characteristics of the polity in which

it operated' (Durham 2003: 234). It had to deal with the enfranchisement of women in municipal elections and the gender changes going on within the labour market and society at large. Consequently, there tended to be more gender controversies within the extreme right.

Notes

- 1 *De Schelde* [VNV paper], 22 February 1934: 5.
- 2 *Nele*, 8(11), May 1939: 165.
- 3 *Volk en Staat* [VNV paper], 26 September 1939, 1.
- 4 *Gudrun*, 9(10), July 1928: 327.
- 5 *Gudrun*, 20(12), Oct. 1939: 333.
- 6 *Gudrun*, 9(8), May 1928: 253.
- 7 *Volk en Staat*, 14 November 1937.
- 8 *Onze Leiding* [magazine for KVM leaders], March 1934: 1.
- 9 *Een Vlaamsche Meisjesclub*, s.l., [1918–1920] (Antwerp, Archief en Museum voor het Vlaamse Cultuurleven/AMVC M 43828/D).
- 10 *Gudrun*, 3(3), Jan. 1922: 78–9.
- 11 *Gudrun*, 3(3), Jan. 1923: 83–6.
- 12 *Gudrun*, 19(4), June 1920: 147–50.
- 13 *Roeping*, 4–5, Jan–Feb 1928: 219–24.
- 14 Colomba Thiel to the periodical *Vlaanderen*, 19 January 1929 (AMVC, V 672/B (1924–1925)).
- 15 *Nele*, 2(9), March 1933: 133–4.
- 16 *Gudrun*, 7(4), March 1926: 141.
- 17 *Gudrun*, 12(8), July 1931: 249–54.
- 18 *Gudrun*, 10(3), November 1928: 81.
- 19 *Gudrun*, 9(8), May 1928: 253.
- 20 *Gudrun*, 11(9), June 1930.
- 21 *Nele*, 2(4), Oct 1932: 55–7.
- 22 *Nele*, 7(10), April 1938: 186–7.
- 23 *Nele*, 4(9), March 1935: 130–3.
- 24 Entry 28 March 1920 in Maria Ceulemans' diary (Leuven, Katholiek Archief en documentatiecentrum, Archief Boon-Ceulemans 10.2.2.3).
- 25 Eleonora Devroe-Puype to Martha Van de Walle 29 April 1926 (Antwerp, Archief en documentatiecentrum van het Vlaams-nationalisme/ADV, archief Martha Van de Walle, L 29/2/15).
- 26 Colomba Thiel to *Vlaanderen*, 19 Jan. 1929 (AMVC, V 672/B (1924–1925)).
- 27 Hilda Hellemans to Martha Van de Walle 27 June 1933 (ADV, archief Martha Van de Walle, L 28/1/2).
- 28 Interview by Maarten Van Ginderachter with Paula Leysen, Aleide Boumans, Juliette Allard and Line Lambert, 1 July 2000.

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