Gendering the ‘greying’ of society. A discourse analysis of the care-gap

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“Once we begin to theorize gender – to define gender as an analytic category within which humans think about and organize their social activity rather than as a natural consequence of sex difference, or even merely as a social variable assigned to individual people in different ways from culture to culture – we can begin to appreciate the extent to which gender meanings have suffused our belief systems, institutions, and even such apparently gender-free phenomena as our architecture and urban planning.”

-Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism, p. 17

I Introduction

The ‘second demographic’ transition in Western Europe has led to a ‘greying’ and a ‘de-greening’ of the population: an increasing number of old people as the baby boomers approach old age and a decreasing number of younger people due to the fall of the birth rate. Both trends will in due course lead to a general decline in population. The issue is on the political agenda at both the supra- and national level of a number of European states in varying frames. It may be perceived as a problem of financing pensions, the increase of the costs of health care, the growing demand for care provision, or the consequences for the labour market. There are also cultural definitions circulating linking old age to lesser creativity and innovation, or fears of the decline of European influence in the world. Just recently immigration was linked to demographic decline by EU officials, suggesting it could offset the negative effects of the decrease in population.1

The Netherlands are no exception to these developments. The birth rate has declined sharply since the mid sixties, when it was still around 3.2 per woman to 1.6 per women in the 1990s, a figure below the replacement level of 2.1. Life expectancy has increased from 60 years (men) and 62 (women) in 1900 to respectively 75 and 81 years in 2000 (Van Ewijk c.s. 2000:14). Although the Netherlands are relatively better off than many other EU countries in having a lower elderly dependency ratio2 (Van Ewijk et al, 2000:16-17), there is wide-spread public debate about ageing. Politicians and specialists wrangle over the technicalities of pension provision, the public-private mix in health insurance and the consequences for the national debt in various arenas. Politicians and policy-makers within government have been tackling the issue from diverse angles and debate various policy measures to counteract the consequences of the demographic shift. The shift has generated a stream of literature since the early eighties; much of it written in a
new technical-economic discourse focusing on the costs of collective provision of health care and old age pension systems. Before that period, economists and demographers had been more interested in population growth than in population decline, and when the consequences of ageing dawned upon them, some experts seriously considered pro-natalist policies to offset the effects (Outshoorn, 1987). 3

Earlier policy discourses on the elderly in the Netherlands have shifted over time. Bijsterveld (1996:67-68) has noted that in the 1940s the ‘urgent needs’ of the elderly provided the dominant definition of policy; in the 1950s it was their proneness to psychiatric disorders; in the 1960s their loneliness and isolation; in the 1970s their marginalization in society. These definitions had in common that they set the needs of the elderly centre-stage. This is not to say financial considerations never entered into the frame. Concern among policy-makers about the costs of the facilities of care-provision was already in evidence during the 1960s, which led to reductions in intra-mural care and the propagation of home care in the 1970s. As Bijsterveld has observed, the discourse shifted in the 1980s from “needs to numbers” (1996:68-69). A new demographic discourse about ‘greying’ and the burden this would present to future generations came into being: the collective costs of ageing are currently the dominant definition of the issue on the political agenda. An early 1990s major policy paper on the elderly, “Ouderen in Tel” (1990) (the title denoting both the ‘numbers’ aspect and the idea that the elderly should matter), attempted to amend the definition of the problem from the purely financial towards the need for the elderly in society to participate more fully in all walks of life, but a careful analysis shows that this policy goal was also informed by anxieties about the costs and organization of care provision, including the matter of the supply of carers (Mossink and Nederland, 1994:46). A hidden agenda was to activate middle-aged women active to take on more informal care.

Ageing has therefore been part of the political agenda since WW II, but the issues that were linked to ageing have shifted over time. Constant factor has been the matter of costs, as well as continual negotiation of the boundaries demarcating the old and internally categorizing them (Bijsterveld 1996). The most recent expression of this latter mechanism can be found in the policy documents of the 1990s that started to distinguish the elderly from the super-elderly, the still fit and healthy senior in her/his ‘third stage of life’ who is contrasted with the ‘80+’ category in the final stage of life, when people ‘consume’ almost of the (medical) care people need in the whole of her/his lives.

This paper will concentrate on one aspect of the demographic shift: the provision of care for the increasing number of elderly people. I shall not focus on medical care, which receives the bulk of attention in political debate, but on the day-to-day care that people need when they are no
longer able to look after themselves. In the early nineties, (feminist) scholars already pointed to a threatening care-gap or ‘deficit’. (De Jong-Gierveld, 19..; Oldersma and Morée 199.) Policy-makers assumed (and assume) that housewives (traditionally very numerous in a country where labour market participation of married women was long actively discouraged) would continue to provide informal care for their elderly relatives and neighbours, or take on part-time work in the home care sector. But as these authors pointed out, the generation of available housewives is already in its fifties itself, meaning that relatively old daughters will have to look after even older mothers (the majority of those beyond eighty are women – and their numbers are increasing). This will lead to an increasing demand for care, but for many women taking on this care will be too demanding a task. The shortage will not be easily made up by younger generations of women, as these have taken to the labour market in unprecedented numbers since the 1970, and will no longer be available for informal care work, even if the majority of them are working in part-time jobs. Moreover, many women do not opt for paid care-work because of poor pay, demanding work and intractable working hours. Their vastly improved level of education has also opened other opportunities on the labour market, with better career options, friendlier work settings and higher pay. The time that women chose care-work out of traditional obligation, a sense of calling or vocation, is moving fast behind us.

These notions are beginning to inform policy debates on the demographic shift, and with the shortages in labour supply on the care-market (extra under pressure by current Dutch economic prosperity with low unemployment), the idea of a care-gap has become part of the debate in the political arena. However, the question is in how far the debate still assumes a gender order in which women are first and foremost carers and men breadwinners. What notions about the gender order circulate, what notions of gender are used in debate and in how far debate challenges the gender order with attendant norms and values about gender, is less clear. As a start to answering such questions, I shall analyse a recent important policy document on the demographic shift, a report of the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy), Generatiebewust beleid (1999) (Generationally aware policy), in this paper. The research on the issue is part of a larger cross-comparative project of the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS), that aims at establishing the role of women’s movements and women’s policy agencies in a number of advanced industrial democracies. To assess this, a number of issues have been selected across nations, and policy debates on these issues analysed from the point of view of the gendering and degendering of policy debates (RNGS, 2000). In the following I shall first explain the theoretical background to the gender policy discourse analysis. Then I shall introduce the WRR report, after which I turn to the
analysis of the report. In the final paragraphs I shall discuss the findings and draw some conclusions, both substantive and methodological.

II Gender in discourse

One of the routes the RNGS project has developed to trace the role of women’s movements and women’s policy agencies, is to examinw the clash between frames developed by the new women’s movements since these seventies and other existing frames about ‘women’s position’. The underlying idea is that the dominant frame, or the ‘mobilization of bias’ as Schattschneider (1960) called it, is likely to determine who is granted access into the political arena where the policy debate is conducted and what gets done. The major question in examining the policy debates is whether women’s groups and organisations have been able to gender the policy debate: whether or not they are able to insert ideas of gender into the debate or change ideas about gender in the definition of policy problems. The background to this research builds on two research traditions, one focusing on problem definition, and one focusing on gender as an analytical category.

The centrality of problem definition for determining what gets done has been elaborated theoretically by both political scientists (e.g. Cobb and Elder, 1972) and policy analysts (e.g. Dery, 1984; Bacchi, 1999) and backed by much substantial empirical work. Drawing on the work of constructivist sociologists as Spector and Kitsuse (1977) and Gusfield (1981), later social movement theorists have developed the concept of framing, referring to structures of organised meaning (Snow and Benson, 1992; Gamson, 1988). Debates over policy problems take place in a context of a particular frame, or issue culture or relevant discourse; these determine ground contested by social movements who bring in rival discourses or new ways of framing the problem. The way policies are framed favours some interests over others; a change in framing constitutes opportunities for access of new interests, increasing their representation. From the point of view of women’s movements, changes in framing enable bringing interests of (groups of) women into policy-making arena’s. Policy debates that ignore gender aspects deny women both substantive representation (in the sense of not addressing their concerns) and the basis for increased descriptive representation (in the sense of presence). Relevant questions for analysing policy debates derived from this literature are: what are the ways in which the policy problem is defined by actors? What is the wrong, injustice, threat or situation that needs corrective action? Who is to blame for the problem, in the view of the participants to the debate? What should be done? What corrective action should be taken? (RNGS, 7-8).
The concept of gender itself is a product of a new discourse developed by the second wave of feminism in the Western world during the 1960s and 1970s, and was theorised by scholars in the interdisciplinary field of women’s studies, itself a product of the new women’s movements. Originally employed to distinguish between biological sex differences and the cultural and social meanings attached to those differences (the latter denoting gender constructions), the concept has by now become the – not uncontested - centre of theory in the field, giving rise to a huge literature. For the purpose of analysing gender in discourse, however, the work of Sandra Harding (1986) and Joan Scott (1986), in which they outline layers of gender is still the most suitable starting point. Usually four layers of gender are distinguished, which should not be seen as separate, each layer informing the other. For my framework of analysis I elaborate on their earlier categorisation.

The **first layer of gender** refers to the classification of people into male or female on the basis of physical sex. It is the category forming the sex-as-variable in statistics and empirical research. The basic question it leads to when analyzing a policy or policy document is whether these distinguish between men and women or not, and in what terms this is done. The **second layer of gender** refers to gender as an organising principle of social life at the level of a society: it forms the fundament of the division of labour between the sexes and of the kinship system. In this sense gender structures and constitutes a gender order, which also incorporates cultural and symbolic assumptions about gender. Gender orders differ per society and over time, but all are hierarchical in the sense they allocate major positions of power to men. Identifying gender at this level involved examining social institutions such as the state, organisations, labour markets etc and unearth the gender order and assumptions on gender built into these structures. It also entails looking into the tasks, roles, behaviours, attitudes and qualities allocated to and required of men and women in these institutions.

The third layer, which cannot be isolated from the second as it is also a part of the gender order, refers to the symbolic system: the realm of cultural meanings. Gender gives cultural and social meaning to symbolic categories by way of binary oppositions and dichotomies. People, behaviour, activities, matter, concepts, ideals, can all be given meaning along gender lines, and in turn these give meaning to gender. One can thus speak of gendered meanings, or of concepts as ‘gender loaded’. The meanings become organised as ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, cultural constructions not denoting any fixed essence, but which have to be examined in their specific forms. Here again, the binary oppositions are not just constituted as oppositions to each other, but are ordered in a hierarchical manner. Masculinity emerges as the norm or standard or for humans in general, and man comes to stand for the universal human, with femininity (and women)
emerging as the specific, the deviant or the deficient. Constructions of masculinity and femininity can be identified by looking into what is being attributed to men and women and what is expected of them. Identifying links between key concepts and goals in a policy documents to notions of femininity and masculinity brings their gender loading to the fore.

The fourth layer of gender refers to identities: gender is also what men and women are. People acquire a gender identity at a very early age, and it sets the stage for the acquisition of other identities such as ethnicity or class. Policy continually ascribes identity to people via the mechanisms of classification and categorisation, and assumes certain characteristics of these identities. A gender discourse analysis also aims at uncovering these assumptions.

To examine policy debates, researchers of the RNGS (RNGS, 2000:8), incorporated gender into the questions normally raised in the tradition of problem definition analysis. The framework that RNGS developed, encompasses the following questions about policy debates:

1. what are the ways the policy problem is defined by actors? What is the wrong, injustice, threat or situation that needs corrective action? (To what extent is it described as a harm to women in their gender roles? Are women or groups of women identified as interested parties with stakes in the possible policy outcomes?)
2. Who is to blame for the problem, in the view of the participants to the debate? (Are gender-identified groups or entities considered to be responsible for the wrongs, injustices or threat?)
3. What should be done? What corrective actions should be taken? How do proposals for corrective action take gender questions into account? Are there expressions of concern about the effects on women in comparison with men?

To make these concerns amenable to research, they have condensed to the following concise points:

1. What is the problem that needs fixing?
2. Who is to blame for the problem?
3. What should be done (what corrective action is needed)?
4. The content of the gendered debate:
   a. images of women and what they are like
   b. how do men and women differ from each other and how do they not differ?
   c. What way does the gender system shape situation and identities?
   d. How to correct this? Do proposals constitute challenges to male domination?

To improve its heuristic value for analysing policy documents, I have drawn on gender as an analytical category to specify a number of questions; adapting an earlier study on gender in policy
discourse, where the central issue was to look into the qualities/behaviour ascribed to men and women in a number of policy documents and on what grounds this was done (Mossink and Nederland, 1994:1). In the framework (see the appendix) developed in this paper, I proceed from the layers of gender and ask three sets of questions. The first layer of gender involves checking the social category of men and women, looking in how far this ‘fact’ is deemed relevant in the policy document analysed and how this is argued. The second layer entails identifying the implicit or explicit gender order in the policy document and looking how it uses gender to structure institutions and practices. The third layer means asking what and how conceptions of masculinity and femininity are linked to the concepts used in the policy and what values and norms can be identified in these. The fourth layer means unearthing the assumed characteristics of women and men. These questions are then posed to three essential parts of a policy document: its problem definition, its policy goal(s) and choice of means (recommendations).

III The WRR

The WRR is the official advisory body of the government reporting on long term trends affecting Dutch society. It was established in 1976, and with the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS - Central Bureau for Statistics), the Centraal Planbureau (CPB) (Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis) and the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) (Social and Cultural Bureau), is one of the typical institutions of the modern welfare state which aims to ground its policies in scientific knowledge. The WRR provides regular reports on long term developments, identifying problems, contradictions, problem definitions of major policy questions and suggesting policy alternatives. It is also allocated the task of developing scientific frameworks to enable the government to choose priorities and pursue consistent policies. It can propose research concerning future developments and planning. The members of the WRR are appointed by the government and has its own staff; its programme is drawn up after consultation with the Prime Minister and the cabinet, but can also draw up studies on its own initiative. The members typically are well-known scholars with a leaning towards policy analysis; most of them have a legal, social science or economics background. They are appointed for five years and can be re-appointed for another term. The permanent staff are high-level researchers with the same kind of background. Its output is published in the form of Reports to the Government; these are typically preceded by preliminary studies and background reports.

The demographic shift was first addressed by the WRR in 1993 in a report Ouderen voor Ouderen (Seniors for Seniors). In 1997 it published one report on national health
(Volksgezondheid, 1997) and another on the future of health care, concentrating on medical provision (Gunning-Schepers et al, 1997). These were preceded by a background study on the affordability of old age pensions and insurance and its income effects in 1996 (Jansweijer, 1996).

IV The report Generationally aware policy

The report Generatiebewust beleid (December 1999) is the most recent product of the WRR on the theme of the demographic shift. It consists of two major parts, comprising nearly 400 pages. After the summary, presented at the beginning of the report, the first part is devoted to the scientific literature on generation problems from a sociological and economic perspective. The second part has chapters covering five different policy areas: the financing of old age pensions and health care for the period of 2010-2035; the role of intergenerational solidarity in supplementary pensions; the care for the young and the elderly, with attention to life course changes; the transfer of knowledge in education; and the transfer of technology and environmental capital. A final chapter contains an overall discussion of the problem and provides policy recommendations – I paraphrase -to maintain intergenerational solidarity in a sustainable and just way. I shall analyse the three parts of the report relevant to the issue of care: the summary, the chapter on care, and the final chapter with the major results.

IV.1.a The Summary

The report proceeds from the problem definition that demographic change has led to an increase of the elderly relative to the young, which requires major decisions about collective provision of pensions and the health care system (WRR, 1999:9). Changes in the life-course of people (longer schooling, early retirement) are affecting the economic dependency ratio, and as transfers to the elderly are necessary, will constitute an extra burden for younger generations. At the same time, transfers to the young are also required for education, the development of technological knowledge and the sustainability of the environment. The WRR formulates two criteria in order to study intergenerational relations: the sustainability of the present system of transfers of provision (taken as the expression of current preferences) and justice. According to the WRR, the latter proves well-nigh impossible to operationalise, so that sustainability of collective provisions constitutes the major policy goal.

The WRR states that three social developments have informed its inquiry (WRR, 1999:10):
the relationship between the micro- and macro-level: generations have always taken care of each other within the family, and these arrangements are still intact. But at the macro-level problems are becoming evident due to ageing of the population and the ensuing shift in the economic dependency ratio;

changes in the life course of people. Young people are dependent on transfers for a longer period of time because of the extension of education; they enter the labour market at a later stage in life than previous generations. The period of working life as an adult has become shorter and in this period too, social obligations of family and work are at a maximum. The period in which people no longer work but are still healthy and could still carry “social responsibilities” has been extended gradually (WRR, 1999:10). These changes raise the dependency rate – if life course patterns do not change, maintaining collective provision will become a problem;

nearly all collective social security have been developed within a national context; however, the financial means to alleviate the problems are under pressure from international economic competition and the obligations of the EMU. (WRR, 1999:10).

This leads the WRR to conclude that a ‘generationally aware’ policy is required, given that political decision-making is traditionally concerned with short term and current interests and distribution. Such a policy would include taking into account those decisions which form points of no return as in the case of the environment. The report concludes that the demographic shift has direct consequences for the collective system of old age pension (AOW), the health care system, science policy and environmental policy. It would also have to take into account the total of government spending and its financial obligations, such as the rent on the national debt. Sustainability therefore requires three conditions (WRR, 1999:11):

1. increased labour market participation to improve the economic dependency ratio, by distributing work/non-work more equitably over the life course of individuals. Institutional barriers to employment should be eliminated. Paid work can be started at an earlier age and conditions for continuing work after statutory retirement age (now 65 years) “can be created”. Labour market participation of women “should be promoted” (WRR, 1999:11).

2. increased costs for health care arising from non-demographic factors should be controlled in order to achieve sustainability. Technological improvements and higher aspirations of people have led to health care costs increasing faster than per capita income. This contradicts the preference for retaining a more stable relation between public and private spending.

3. the demographic development makes it necessary to anticipate future costs. If the national debt is paid off, current rent payments can be used to finance these costs in the future. Reducing the national debt is part of ‘generationally aware policy’.
The WRR report provides four major policy recommendations (WRR, 1999:12). First of all it advises maintaining the old age pension on a pay-as-you-go (PAYG) basis as a basic provision for all, to be supplemented by private insurance to safeguard continuity in income in the later stages of life. Secondly, it recommends a basic collective responsibility for care, to be supplemented by private health insurance, which is the personal responsibility of young and old. The WRR is also in favour of further investments in technology, lifelong learning and decent education for younger generations, and collective commitment to the sustainability of the environment.

IV.1.b Gender in the Summary
What is striking about the summary is its gender-neutral discourse; the debate talks of the old and the young, the family, adults, life-courses of people, not distinguishing between men and women as categories and not using sex-as-a-variable. It assumes that women and men are in equal positions to each other: at this level the content is not gendered. The only distinction is made in the conditions outlined for sustainability where the report stipulates that women’s labour market participation needs to be promoted. Implicitly comparing their rate to men’s, the latter’s rate becomes the standard.

The underlying causes of this ‘deviance’ are not mentioned. The gender-neutral discourse hides the prevalent gender order: no mention is made of the fact that the arrangements of the welfare state still reflect the original model of the male breadwinner-female housewife family system. Its contemporary guise has been called the ‘one-and-a-half earners’ model: the husband is still in full-time employment and the wife has a part-time job of 16-20 hours a week. Most social benefits, excepting basic social security (Bijstand) and old age pension (AOW) are tied to employment record of the husband, whose income is the one protected by the social insurance system. Transfers are therefore not gender-neutral, a situation glossed over in the discussion of intergenerational transfers. There is no acknowledgement of the gender order’s allocation of care work, which is also unequally divided over the sexes, women taking on 75% of all unpaid care work.

The existing differences in life-courses of women and men are also not discussed. In fact the male life-course is taken as the point of reference: after receiving education and training a ‘person’ takes on work, has a family, retires early to enjoy a period of good health and then enters the final stage of life with its infirmities. Women’s life courses (on average) diverge from this male model; although today they are educated for an equal length in time, the majority opt out of the labour market after the birth of their first child, and only part of them return to (mainly) part-
time work after the last child (usually a second) enters school. Of the 40+ generation more than x% has been a housewife for all of their married lives: there is no retirement age for housewives! Women also enjoy lesser health than men (from 58 years compared to 65 for men, on average they begin to suffer from serious complaints) but they do live longer.

Taking a closer look at the recommendations reveals the following. The first recommendation is to maintain the basic state old-age pension. This is especially important for women, as 90% of all people who only have the state pension to live on are women, a figure that will not improve when the baby boom generation becomes eligible for retirement, as very few women of that generation have any working record and therefore have no part to an occupational insurance scheme. The report also recommends that the elderly should also pay for maintaining public provisions. Depending on the method, this could either be beneficent or detrimental to women; the suggestion of fiscalising the contribution to be paid after 65, would be fair from a gender point of view. The same goes for the report’s recommendation on health care, here implicitly defined as medical care, making no mention here of other forms of care. Maintaining a basic health care provision from public insurance is more important to women than men, given their minimal income and inability to pay for private insurance. (One may object to this analysis by pointing to breadwinners’ benefits accruing to women, but one should realise that one in three marriages end in divorce and the majority of women do not remarry, ending up living on social welfare).

From the basic assumptions of the summary one can identify its core values and norms. The report takes as this the assumption that people want a just and fair contract between generations. It postulates that younger generations are worried about the current distribution of financial burdens and the future obligations the ageing of older generations will impose on them. It also maintains that people are still taking care of each other at the micro-level (WRR, 1999:10). Sustainability, based on current preferences, is the core value; justice set aside (and therefore also excluding matters of gender justice) for methodological difficulties of defining future preferences. Settling for current preferences means no questions are raised whether everybody’s preferences have been taken into account, an assumption gender-loaded as women’s representation in the intermediary structures between state and society, and in society itself is still numerically skewed and substantive interests insufficiently articulated. The other core values of the report are ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘solidarity between generations’. Responsibility is linked to necessity of providing oneself with supplementary income and health care insurance in the market; it is not linked to taking care of others. Responsibility, being linked to income and work, is thus implicitly linked to masculine values; taking care of others, a time-honoured activity of
women also constituting a highly regarded feminine virtue, is not linked to responsibility. Solidarity is linked to intergenerational transfer, but this covers cash transfers, technology and the environment. The report mentions that people are still providing care for others at the micro-level, but does not differentiate this along gender lines. The effect is to downplay activities performed by women and to render invisible a central feminine value.

IV.2.a The concluding chapter of the report

The final chapter of the report, Towards a generationally aware policy, provides an overall discussion of the previous chapters. The problem that needs fixing is named ‘the generation problem’, originating from the demographic shift towards an ageing society. The report explicitly intends to broaden the debate about the shift, and therefore chose to define it in the terms of generation. According to the WRR, at stake are a number of (re)distributive issues: at the micro-level between parents, children and grandparents, at the macro-level the matter of risk-sharing and exit from collective provisions of care. The report confirms that at the micro-level “traditional solidarity” (WRR, 1999:327) is still intact: children look after parents, and parents raise children in family and kinship networks. The cause of the problem can therefore is not to be located in inadequate informal care: there is no generation conflict or cleavage in the Netherlands on this point, according to the WRR.

The final chapter does not contain different key concepts or different policy goals, but is more elaborate in their justification in comparison to the summary. It assumes a contract between generations, consisting of tacit, implicit agreements, expectations and obligations (WRR, 1999:330). The guideline to a generationally aware policy is to sustain this implicit understanding between generations, but it needs to be reconsidered when changing circumstances affect the distribution of costs and benefits. Such a policy aims at maintaining current provisions, but at the same time should actively anticipate the future and the interests of future generations, taking into the different positions of generations. According to the report, this is sufficient legitimisation of shifts in (re)distribution across generations.

It is in the reflections on societal change that a number of issues are raised that have been submerged in the summary. Firstly, the chapter, drawing on the earlier chapter on care, succinctly discusses the relationship between the micro- and the macro-level. The welfare state, so the report holds, changed the pattern of familial solidarity with its collective social security and ‘care system’. This reduced the dependency of the elderly on their children. Currently there is a new interaction between care by relatives at the micro-level and the care provided and funded by the state. “It is seductive to fall back (for more care due to ageing – JO) on family support and care –
in practice this support is given (mostly by daughters or daughters-in-law) to cater for demand, but the possible limits should be taken into consideration, given a policy aiming at higher labour market participation of women” (WRR, 1999:334). It is therefore not realistic, according to the report, to want to solve future shortages in supply by relying on the informal care sector. It will not only fall short in supply, but the necessary professionalism within care will also affect the future financing and the organisation of care for the elderly. Younger generations should now assume the responsibility by starting to save for their own future care. A system of private and professional care arrangements for personal help and care to supplement the public system, is also a requirement. Demand for care will exceed supply of labour, and therefore it is necessary to increase labour supply in health care, by calling on women returners to the labour market; preventing the exit of personnel from the care sector and by making the work more attractive. (WRR, 1999:334). The chapter notes there is more informal care being provided than is often assumed, but care for the very old without a partner will cause problems. Improving conditions in informal care is therefore essential.

Secondly, the chapter discusses the consequences in the changes in life course of people. The problem here is that people in the middle part of life are overburdened. While younger people stay in school for longer periods of time and the 50+ generations take out early retirement, the middle generation has to combine wage-work, childcare for children and often care for the elderly as well. A third stage of life is emerging: a group of healthy and prosperous older people of 55 to 70 years old who are participating less in the formal work and care system, but who “are still able, healthy and independent”. According to the report, both extended youth and the third stage cause problems in relations between the generations (WRR, 1999:335). Policy solutions offered by the WRR include:

- more simultaneous working/learning apprenticeships for the young
- life-long learning for all
- prevention of exit from the labour market by older people because of skills becoming obsolete
- increase of labour market participation of older people (55-65).

Thirdly, women are explicitly targeted. Their labour market participation is seen as a necessary condition for the sustainability of collective provisions. Their exit from the labour market after childbirth, including opting for part-time work, leads to their skills becoming obsolete. It also damages family income at a stage when costs are high because of child rearing. About children the chapter notes: “Here women do provide a contribution to new generations” (WRR, 1999:336), suggesting this is not the case in other areas. From a generation point of view, transfers to households with children, along with policy measures aimed at reconciling work with
family life, “could be considered”: attuning income-education- and labour market policy “might be considered”.

Finally, the report also targets the elderly themselves. It holds that for many retirement comes too soon; many of the older generation are still healthy and do not need to stop work. They also have fewer caring tasks. In the eyes of the WRR, early retirement is not desirable, as work means participation in society, preventing feelings of exclusion. Moreover, “one might well expect that older workers partly provide the formal care of the very old” (WRR, 1999:336). Flexible retirement is also suggested.

The WRR summarises the final chapter by holding that current policy debate focuses too much on (re)distribution within generations; it should make a shift to intergenerational (re)distribution. Generationally aware policy should proceed from three principles:

- it should involve estimates of the consequences of the demographic shift, reflect on how to increase participation (JO: this means labour market participation) and take on the reduction of the national debt.
- all generations have to shoulder their responsibility
- a balanced distribution of activities over the life-course should be a policy goal.

Collective provisions should be sustainable, defined as “the continuation of the system in a form we now think of as acceptable” (WRR, 1999:336). This does not mean freezing the system, but society must be prepared to preserve it and to finance the consequences. The report points to the relatively favourable Dutch system of pensions, but reminds its readers of the necessity of observing the requirements of the EU Stability and Growth Pact and maintaining a basic level of health care provision by the state, supplemented by private insurance, where people have to take their own responsibility (WRR, 1999:341). The report recommends that the government should therefore strengthen the fundament for its expenditures on (health)care by increasing labour market participation, reduce early retirement, enable flexible retirement age and remove barriers for women entering employment. It should also call on elderly people themselves to contribute by the fiscalisation of the state old-age pension (AOW). The costs for care should not exceed the rise of GNP, and cabinets should utilise the reduction of rents on the national debt to cover the costs of a generationally aware policy (WRR, 1999:342).

IV.2.b Gender in the final chapter

In comparison to the summary, the final chapter is far less gender-blind. Although generations, families and people still seem to be made up of one sex only, three distinctions between the sexes are now deemed relevant. One is the already familiar one about the necessity of increasing the
number of women in the labour market, as essential to maintaining collective social benefits. Women leaving their jobs to look after children or taking part-time work should be prevented from doing for the same reason. Moreover, their exit is also hurting family income and their own skills. Rearing children is acknowledged as a contribution to future generations. Furthermore, the chapter recognises that it is women who are providing care within the family – daughters and daughters in law. Women are also seen as a reservoir for the recruitment of care-workers in formal care. It is assumed they are presently exiting from such jobs because the work is not “attractive” (WRR, 1999:334). No mention of the pay or workload is made in this context, suggesting women do not regard these as important. In the policy recommendations one of the four explicitly targets women (removing barriers to their employment), one does so implicitly (increasing labour market policies).

But at the same time this chapter too fails to make some other distinctions. Life courses are still defined in terms of the male life course, while at the same time the WRR writes as if in the middle life stage wage-work, childcare and informal care are divided equally between men and women. All research in this is shows this is far from the case (e.g. Keuzenkamp and Hooghiemstra, 2000). Two of the recommendations do not distinguish between the sexes, and are in fact about men: the reduction of early retirement and flexible retirement. In 1998 only 14% of the women of the 55+ generation are in paid employment (for men the figure is 43%, Van Ewijk c.s., 2000:88). It is also misleading to describe the 50+ generations as less active in work and in informal care. Women of those generations (and the generation below them) take on the bulk of informal care. So implicitly this passage is about men (older workers) who are not taking their share of the responsibility, but this is not stated outright. The prevention of exit of older people can only be about men given the age-structure of the labour market. Also, increasing older people’s labour market participation does not take into account that the 50+ generation of women has little experience in paid work and is often working in informal care. Who will take over that work were they to enter the labour market? (or would they be able to claim money for it –that would hardly reduce the costs of care!).

Further solutions to raise labour market participation also display gender bias. Simultaneous working/learning for the young will burden young women extra, as they already contribute more to the running of the household in their family of origin than their male peers. Life-long learning has, given the existing division of labour in the family, the same effect: women will have a three-fold responsibility: running the family, working and schooling/training.

The chapter does offer a glimpse of the gender order underlying collective provisions by pointing to the care-work of the generations of daughters, and relating part-time work and exit
from the labour market to children. But there is no account of the still existing breadwinner-housewife model which still leads to current inequities, and the inequities are hardly acknowledged. No description or explanation is provided of why women are taking on the informal care-work or why they form a suitable reserve for the care sector. Implicitly this takes women’s caring capacities for granted.

The core values in the text are again individual responsibility, the need to maintain solidarity across generations, and sustainability. Responsibility is linked to saving for one’s own future care, employment, and taking part in the care of the very old. It is women who are insufficiently responsible as they are not participating in the labour market and earning their (future) keep, although their contribution by having children is acknowledged. So is their contribution to intergenerational solidarity in providing informal care.

**IV.3.a The chapter on care for the elderly**

In the report care for the elderly is examined in detail, with the necessary statistics, in the eighth chapter. There is no disagreement with the other two parts of the report in the definition of the problem that needs fixing or in assigning causes or blame. The chapter defines formal and informal care and mentions the tension between the professional view of informal care and the government’s view. Professionals see informal care as complimentary to professional care, while the government tends to see informal care in a positive light and suspects that people turn to professional care too quickly, substituting it for informal care (WRR, 1999:228). The WRR stresses that the number of people offering informal care and the hours spent on it are already very high. It also demonstrates clearly that it is mainly partners offering informal care at the later stages of life; and that it is daughters who take the ‘responsibility’ and provide additional care.

As to the causes of the problem, the chapter shows that health care is fast becoming health care for older people: people require the majority of their health care in the last year of life. The WRR outlines a number of possible policy options, mostly related to health care insurance (It had already come out in favour of a basic insurance for all in its earlier publications).

Surprisingly, there is no mention of the fact that the partners and children of an insured person under the present national health insurance (Ziekenfonds) are now covered by the Ziekenfonds by paying only a nominal contribution. It distinguished between a limited collective provision in which care for household and daily maintenance is excluded and to be privately financed, and an extensive provision covering all costs of care. The advantage of the first would be that it enhances consumers’ choice of the carer, while the disadvantage is that it isolates ‘care’ from ‘cure’. The
disadvantage of the extensive provision is that it will increase the burden of the costs for people in the second (middle) stage of life (WRR, 1999:248).

The chapter also provides a detailed analysis of who is doing the caring. It concludes that the current system of care provision is endangered because of the distribution of the costs and the increasing economic dependency ratio. It will be necessary to spread the costs over the whole of people’s life course, make choices about essential and non-essential health care and how to finance it, and to keep up labour supply in the care sector, which requires investment of the younger for the category of the oldest. Formal care should become more flexible to enable the combination of work and family, it should provide better career prospects and the workload should be accommodated to workers’ age. Policy recommendations further include the suggestion of fiscalising the current Algemene Wet Bijzondere Ziektekosten (AWBZ) (the insurance covering care for all) and having the elderly pay more for the care of old age themselves, in order to maintain the system of collective provision.

Special attention is paid to labour supply for care-work (WRR, 1999:248), aimed at the meso-level of hospital management. The report remarks that the implicit assumption up to recently was that the younger generation would take on informal care and become nurses/workers in the formal care sector. However, the increased labour participation of women and the decrease in the number of young people choosing to enter the health care sector, are undermining the assumption. Care institutions will now have to contend with a diverse labour force of different ages, taking into account that older personnel costs more. They will have to attract young people and prevent exit of the older ones. It will be necessary to increase flexibility to allow for the combination of family and work, encourage private nurses on the market, and offer better career prospects for nurses and carers. The group of employees between 35 and 45 years are the most vulnerable: they are most dissatisfied, according to the WRR. (1999:249). Attention should be paid to the age of employees and their workload accordingly differentiated.

IV.3.b Gender in the chapter on care for the elderly
This chapter distinguishes itself from the other two parts I have analyzed, in having more eye to the distinctions between women and men. The demographic data are split along sex-lines. Women have longer life-expectancies; single males above 80 will increase in and there will be a rise of single people not having a partner to take on informal care on a day-to-day basis. The chapter does not comment on its own figures that show there are more old age women singles than men (WRR, 1999:234) Older men nearly all have partners, while women do not. Despite this fact, the men more often claim formal care than the women of that category, a finding the chapter
does not mention. The report also shows unequivocally that it is daughters who are doing the informal care work, a substantial number of whom are also looking after their own children at the same time.

However, gender neutrality prevails in the discussion of substitution of informal and formal care, and in the matter of labour supply (except in the matter of invalidity and sickness benefits). The WRR is in favour of distributing burdens equitably over the life course, holding a plea for a balance of care, but this is also not differentiated along gender lines. The analysis of the meso-level of health care is also gender-neutral, and here it demonstrates a familiar dilemma: women are presently doing the care-work and they were doing in the past, but in the future men will also be required to work in the care-sector. This realisation of the WRR leads them to a gender-neutral discourse about the solutions and recommendations, but this in turn renders invisible that women are presently doing most of the work. It has led to gender-neutral policy recommendations. When one then reads these carefully, one sees they are actually talking about women: they have to reconcile family and work, they have dead-end jobs without perspectives in the health care sector (there are few complaints about men’s careers in the sector) and it is the 35-45 age group who is grumbling. Why is left implicit, but the gap is easily filled by notions of overload from working the double shift of family and employment, with a slight hint of the troubles of pre-menopausal women. (WRR, 1999:249).

The gender-order is present in the text in an implicit way; it can be read off in the discussion in the chapter about informal care. Apparently there is still a supply of carers to do the day-to-day care work, who have the time available; in addition an ethics of care and feelings of obligations are assumed to present which leads them to take on the work. These rest on the existence of housewives and female identities. The report does question the future of this state of affairs by stating that “it is not clear in how far the higher education of the younger cohorts, different life-patterns and the emancipation of women will influence the availability of care. For the time being the massive choice of women for part-time work seems to constitute a ‘buffer’ for the deployment of informal carers (the Dutch uses the feminine form of the noun here - JO) in the future” (WRR, 1999:237). The chapter therefore concludes that it is unlikely informal care by partners and daughters will decline, assuming (hoping?) they will continue to do so in the future.

The gender-order remains hidden in the discussion of social benefits and entitlements connected to employment. The fact that women work part-time is noted but nowhere in the reports an attempt is made to account for this state of affairs. This turns part-time work and exiting the labour market after childbirth into a ‘choice’ of women. In the recommendations some of the shortcomings of the report’s analysis emerge. In the idea of having additional private
insurance for cure and care the ability to pay for this is assumed, while only 25% of women have sufficient income to do so. The alternative is that the male income earner takes out a family policy, but this will strengthen the dependency of the woman part-time worker and the housewife. We have already seen the assumptions in the discussion on labour supply and in the idea of fiscalising the old age pension. In general, women, given their position in the gender-order, stand to profit from decent collective provisions.

From the discussion in the chapter on the emerging third stage of life, some interesting new images arise. The report holds that there will be more healthy seniors, better educated, and more diverse than in the past (WRR, 1999:231). They will demand better care; they want to remain independent and live at home as long as possible. They are also more capable of taking of themselves, have a more active lifestyle, are more mobile, spend more time outside the home, are more active in sports and the voluntary sector. They want an active and independent life. The key normative concept here is independence. The description tends to see the new senior as an autonomous person who does not seem to have any ties to significant others. This is of course the familiar figure of the autonomous individual, a gender-loaded concept which has been deconstructed skillfully by feminist theorists (e.g. Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998) The core values in the chapter point in the same direction: independence and “zelfredzaamheid”, the almost untranslatable Dutch concept denoting one can take care of one’s self. Caring for others as a valuable and pleasurable activity in itself is not imaginable in this discourse. The normative value of solidarity is also a key concept; in this chapter the tendency to see it in purely in terms of financial transfers is less present than in the final chapter or in the summary.

**VI Tentative Conclusions**

As the previous analysis is not systematic enough yet, my conclusions can only be tentative. What is most notable about the report is its reductionism: although the chapter on care contains a detailed analysis of formal and informal care, the final chapter already simplifies the issues at hand, and in the summary gender difference is only noted in employment, where women are not taking their responsibility. The important finding that not much more labour can be extracted from informal carers, becomes transformed into the comforting finding that people are still taking care of each other in the family and there seems to be no reason why women will not take on care-work in the future in the informal sphere. Reductionism is also in evidence in the final chapter and summary when it comes to problem definition. The WRR attempted, as evidenced by the chapter on the sociology of generations, to broaden the debate by framing the demographic
shift in generational terms and solidarity, but both the summary and final chapter, and more specifically, the recommendations are very much about the financial consequences, and the usual technical-economic discourse is much in evidence.

In how far then does this report debate still assume a gender order in which women are first and foremost carers and men breadwinners? What notions about the gender order circulate? What notions of gender are used in debate? In how far does the report challenge the gender order? It must be said that the report still takes the gender order for granted: its form is not discussed as the breadwinner-housewife model it still uses as the bottom line; and this fact is revealed in the report at several points. It assumes that women choose to work part-time or exit the labour market, while at the same time assuming that the life course of men and women follow parallel lines. It displays little understanding how the gender order still structures the labour market and the system of collective benefits. It does bring to the fore that women are the ones taking on care and are working in the formal care sector. It does want women to take on employment, but having no analysis of the gender order, it has no solution of preventing the double work-load women take on when employed. This hardly challenges the prevalent gender order. Although men are implicated in the necessary responsibility for intergenerational care, this becomes obscured by the same gender-neutral discourse. The notions of gender are therefore partial and tend to the ‘traditional’: women are mentioned as carers, their inclination to care briefly but reassuringly confirmed, and their lack of engagement in the labour market implicitly portrayed as a lack of responsibility.

Doing a gender-discourse analysis is a time-consuming and intensive way of studying texts, as are other forms of discourse analysis. An essential requirement is field-knowledge; without it, it becomes hard to see the omissions, the lack of relevant distinctions between men and women, and the assumptions of the authors of the text. However, I am convinced that only a gender approach can show how policy-makers tend to reproduce the existing gender order, make gender-blind policy and in that way produce unsatisfactory solutions. The area of ageing is no exemption to this basic assumption of mine in my research.
List of references


Jong-Gierveld, Jenne de ???


Oldersma, Jantine and Marjolein Morée???


Notes

1 Van Ewijk c.s.(2000:132) have already pointed out that migration from Third World countries will not solve the problem in the Netherlands as migrants have much lower labour market participation rates and a much higher dependency on benefits compared to natives. They state that immigration will aggravate the problem of costs.

2 The elderly dependency rate is defined by the number of 65+ people as a percentage of the number of 20-64-year olds (Van Ewijk et al, 2000:13). The relatively favourable position of the Netherlands is due to the longer lasting baby boom after WW II in the Netherlands. An increase of the ratio is inevitable from 2010 onward when the baby boom generation will be retiring. Pension age is normally 65 years.

3 This option is no longer in the current debate, as most experts have realised that increasing births is (a) notoriously hard to achieve and (b) it takes at least twenty years before the new generation would enter the labour market, requiring major investments in the field of education and training.

4 This policy involved excluding home-carers (“alpha-hulp”) from social security benefits by setting their work limit under 12 hours. Above that limit they would have been eligible for benefits. It aimed at recruiting married women, who, in the policy reasoning, did not need benefits as they had a breadwinner.

5 Labour market participation increased from: NOG

6 The network was founded at Leiden University in 1995, when European and North American scholars, mainly political scientists, joined forces for the cross-national project. It now encompasses sixteen country cases. Policy debates are selected from four issue areas, each addressing an important aspect of women’s lives: job training (pertaining to work), abortion (reproduction), prostitution and trafficking (pertaining to sexuality) and equal representation in politics as an issue (pertaining to politics). In addition, for each country a ‘hot issue’ is studied in order to see whether women’s groups or women’s policy agencies have been able to alter the discourse. Two books (on job training and abortion) will appear in 2001. This paper is part of the hot issue case for the Netherlands, which is on care.


8 The major problem with their original scheme is that they did not develop questions about each layer systematically, only posing three further questions about the text:
   a. Does the text make an explicit distinction between women and men? How?
   b. Which values about human behaviour and nature can be extracted from problem definition, goals and remedies?
   c. Which characteristics/behaviours are implicitly attributed to women and men?


10 Justice is hard to apply, “as inevitable historical circumstances will always lead to different distributions of costs across generations”. The assumptions underlying a cost-benefit analysis are always uncertain, especially in the case of transfers related to technology and the environment (WRR, 2000:9).

11 Work in the report refers to paid work; by implication people outside the labour market are not ‘working’. As is well-known, unpaid work is not taken into account in GNP or other economic indicators. Feminist scholars have long since pointed to the inadequacy of such computing.

12 The Dutch word used here is ‘knowledge’ (=kennis).

13 The report is unreflective in its terminology on care. The Dutch text here speaks of ‘zorg’ and ‘verzorging’, which both can be translated as ‘care’. Sevenhuijsen (2000:22) points out that in the report care sometimes denotes care-work and at other times medical care. The dominant meaning in the report is “a conglomerate of goods and services”(idem). It is also used in the sense of ‘caring about’ or ‘taking responsibility for’.

14 The EU directives on equal treatment of the eighties have brought several important changes for working women, but as only 25% of all women earn enough income to be economically independent, and the older generations of women have no employment record, they are still dependent on their husband’s income and his benefits

15 Here again the ambiguity of the word ‘care’ is striking. The context of the paragraph is informal care, but here ‘to care for’ and ‘to provide care’ are conflated. See n 13
Note the tentative character of these recommendations. Transfers to families with children is controversial as economists—and many of the public—tend to see children as consumer goods: some choose to children while others spend their money on cars or houses. The other measures are less controversial, but cost money (day-care centers, after-school care) or difficult to achieve (coordination of policies cross-sectorally).

SCP Tijdsbesteding onderzoek nagaan.

Home care is severely rationed in the Netherlands, due to shortages in labour supply and insufficient budget of the home care institutions. The gender bias in obtaining care has come to the fore in several studies.