This paper examines the question of mixity and non-mixity\(^1\) in feminist structures and how, as a strategic choice, it is entangled with individual and collective identity. Mixity and non-mixity are often opposed as contradictory options, defining opposite point of views in the feminist field. Whichever option is defined, however, has to be justified by activists as they are both subject to criticism.

Despite this apparent contradiction, we will here see how these options are forming not only complementary perspectives but also a continuity.

1. **Non-mixity and mixity**

Women-only spaces were developed as a tool by radical feminism in the 1970’s with the purpose to allow women to evolve in safe spaces, exempted from male domination, and where women’s own demands and achievements can receive proper attention, without being dissolved in the dominant male standpoint (Delphy, 1977). In this context, the main purpose of feminism is to address patriarchy and it is then necessary to assemble women as per their feminine identity. Buy determining this feminine identity as political subject, female activists also develop consciousness of their shared condition, which is the prerequisite of forming collective action. Non-mixity is then not only a tool but also the symbol of an autonomous feminist movement (Kandel, 1992).

Whereas non-mixity was instated as a response towards the struggles inherent to the participation of men in feminist structures (overrepresentation in leading position, refusal to remain as subordinates, minimization and underrating of feminine emotions, experiences and abilities), it has always faced a lot of criticism about being non-inclusive and refusing men as allies. Non-mixity then remains associated with

---

\(^1\) The terms “mixity” and “non-mixity” have here been preferred to more common expressions (such as “women-only spaces”) since they refer to the choice based on a political approach of gender that they each represent, whereas “women-only” can also refer to traditional gender roles and spaces, in which gender segregation is a product of norms.
the repertoire of collective action belonging to the second wave radical feminism, from which more recent feminist activism tries to take distance.

More recent perspectives on queer theory have indeed renewed those critiques, by underlining the limits of a binary gender approach that would miss the point of deconstructing gender. Along with the conceptualization of gender as a norm to deconstruct (Butler, 2006), a binary gender division between men and women could then appear as a reinforcement of essentialized and normative gender identities. Issues of ethnicity, class or transidentities raised by the third-wave feminism (Fortier et al., 2009), along with the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) added to the need to overcome this dual gender division. Mixity then must specify a collective identity that relies on one or several minority traits, such as class, sexual or racial identities, that where otherwise dismissed by radical feminism as secondary oppressions (Lepinard, 2005). Nevertheless, if the focus is displaced from gender to multiple identities (Lamoureux, 2006), the critique addressed towards mixity is the risk of dissolving activism into a multiplicity of individual point of views. Mixity is also seen as the symptom of the misconception according to which gender equality would be already earned, rendering non-mixity unnecessary.

2. **Identity and strategy**

In this state of play, identity appears as a central issue, not only a basis from which a social movement and its mobilization are structured but also as a strategic option, that will define different goals for the collective action. As mentioned, gender identities have grown to more complexity and feminism can no longer rely on a mere feminine identity nor on being a woman as a universal condition and experience. Identities are then to be considered as plural in the light of intersectionality. The political subject of feminism is fundamentally related to the concept of gender; and this subject must be embraced through a heteronomous scope (as the perpetual other) and a heterogenous scope (reflecting the multiplicity of experiences) (Lamoureux, 2014).

Social movements theory offers some useful views to analyze feminist activism in terms of identity. I use Mary Bernstein’s identity politics (Bernstein, 2005) to characterize how collective action is based on a shared collective identity, which is then deployed in strategic ways in terms of similarity and difference or as transgressive or reassuring. This identity may also represent a goal per se, by the way activists try to reinvest and promote a stigmatized identity or by deconstructing and analyzing the stigma that defines the identity. Identity is also at stake in a movement’s strategy and forms of organization (Bernstein, 1997).
According to Francesca Polletta, strategy is declined in several styles and forms of organization that are rooted in the movement’s collective identity and values so that they may become constitutive of this identity. Those organizational forms can then, at their turn, become strategic in order to identify a movement with specific values or trends and encourage mobilization in different ways (Polletta, 2006).

I also draw from Verta Taylor analysis of gender processes (Taylor, 1999) in which she examines how mobilization relies on a mobile gender regime: gender identity can be a basis for mobilization, especially in the case of feminism, but it is also forming the goal of the collective action, by aiming at reshaping gender relations and identities.

3. Fieldwork

Fieldwork was based on participant observation and interviews with two activist groups based in Brussels, one organized in mixity and one in non-mixity, during their respective cycles of activity.

The first group, which is called MALFRAP², is the feminist and women-only council of a student union, the USE (which mostly includes men). The council is constituted within the union but has entire autonomy regarding their activities and political statements. Their main goals are to support a feminist point of view in the union’s analysis and actions, and to defend the rights of female students and/or workers. They do so by organizing demonstrations and protests, meetings or speech groups, mostly in non-mixity as well. Through their segregated organization, they also work on their own empowerment and education as activists, since their autonomy from the union requires that they take care of tasks that are otherwise done by more experimented male activists in the union’s meetings.

The second group is the Ladyfest Brussels, a feminist rock festival, rooted in riot grrl and DIY culture. The festival concept “Ladyfest” has been created in 2000 in Olympia (USA) and has since expanded in many cities across the world, each with their own vision and appropriation. The Ladyfest Brussels is a multidisciplinary festival, with music, workshops or talks, in a friendly and inclusive environment. The core team includes all genders but the festival tends to a women-only program, with the aim to display the image of women in non-traditional roles, as punk rock musicians or as manual workers or activists in workshops. The festival’s objectives are to share these feminist knowledge and

² « Militantes Actives et Libres pour un Féminisme Révolutionnaire Anti-Patriarcat » which translates in “free activists for revolutionary and anti-patriarcal feminism”.
skills, to offer a safe space for all genders and sexualities, for the audience as well as for the artists, and to create networks for female artists and activists.

Although these groups may appear as very distinct, they present several similarities that supported their selection and made a comparison possible: they both are structured per a non-hierarchic structure – although they have designated leaders to coordinate the collective work – and their organization is supported only by volunteers. Those aspects contributed to a better analysis of the gender power relations inside the groups as they were less combined with other sources of authority. Furthermore, when feminism is the main purpose of activism, there are more groups working in non-mixity than in mixity. How this option determines the goals of the group, thus explaining apparent differences between both groups, will also be discussed below.

4. **Comparison**

*(Non-)mixity as organizational strategy*

Among the MALFRAP, non-mixity is useful for activists to build themselves a space for self-determination and collective subjectivity. Women-only environment allows women to become aware of the power relations shaped by gender, that they did not notice previously (i.e. men interrupting women, taking credit for their ideas, being more legitimate when speaking in public…). Sharing experiences as women and, through it, revealing the systematic aspect of gender discrimination leads to the construction of a collective subjectivity, confirming the transition of the personal to the political. The gender division of labor encountered in family and professional life has also been described to happen in similar ways in social movements (Fillieule, 2009). In opposition, the segregated organization encourages the female activists to be in charge of a range of tasks (such as planning meetings, writing reports or press releases), through which they develop theoretical knowledge and practical skills, but also confidence and trust in themselves and in their peers. As a consequence, they raise their consciousness of their own value and abilities, not only as individuals but also as a group. Another consequence of the absence of men is that it allows them to identify some of the mechanisms causing gender inequality in their organization and propose solutions. In this perspective, the female students notably argued for instating a strategy of alternate turn-taking for men and women in the union’s debates, which revealed to be a powerful mean for more equality. It is to be noted yet that if the multiplication of non-mixity spaces (women-only spaces, but also spaces for racialized people or for any kind of minorities) increases awareness of the specific situation of minorities, it also leads to multiple tasks and commitments for those people, especially those
who encounter multiple oppressions and are, consequently, likely to be involved in several causes and sub-groups. The presence of a non-mixt council may also appear as a pretext for the broader organization to show interest in minorities’ rights when actually dismissing them as something to be discussed only in the non-mixity spaces.

In the Ladyfest Brussels, volunteers see mixity in their organization as more representative of a social diversity and thus making them appear as more legitimate and more inclusive (Henneron, 2005). People not familiar with feminism and non-mixity would then be more likely to have sympathy and give attention to a group that gives a more “universal” representation of their cause. Furthermore, the inclusion of men as allies leads to a better concern from those men to gender issues and sexism in general but also a better diffusion of feminist discourse in society (Jacquemart, 2015; Christian, 2009) – although this somehow would validate the idea that minorities’ rights start to matter when they are supported by elites and non-minority people. Including men and women in the team is also seen as a step towards non-binariness in terms of gender politics. In this group, mixity is also justified by the concern towards LGBTQI rights and the fight against heteronormativity, and would then lead to a better inclusion and recognition of multiple gender identities and sexual orientations. However, one of the conditions for gender mixity is putting aside the question of gendered power relations (Jacquemart, 2015) – in this case by focusing on art, music and culture – leading to a less political organization. This explains why both groups selected for fieldwork may appear so different as per their objectives. Mixity seems indeed to be encountered mostly in groups focusing not primarily on feminism or defining their goals in a way that doesn’t directly address structural patriarchy. Those aspects are confirmed in the present case, with the consequence of a softer and less political activism and also an obliteration of power relations behind the interindividual prism. As other experiences show, when men are involved in feminist activism, they are often overrepresented in leading roles despite being a smaller number inside the structures (Jacquemart, 2015). Therefore, mixity requires for activists to bear attention to the roles and functions of men in the organization, using quotas or maintaining some positions for women only (leaders, spokespersons…). In this case, there are indeed only a few men involved in the team although they are very aware of the importance of this gendered task repartition and agree with their secondary place in the organization. However, due to the lack of politicization, the team has not specified any official restriction regarding specific positions for men or quotas of men in the organization; this could eventually lead to disagreement as per the future of the group, as interviews showed. Finally, it is interesting to point that mixity is here never seen as the only or compulsory principle since the gender mixity of the organizing team is balanced by featuring only women artists and activists in the activity program.
**Mobilization**

In terms of mobilization, fieldwork with the MALFRAP showed that the non-mixity context was gathering only persons with a pre-existing activist background, where non-mixity is already known and approached as a political tool. Even though most of the activists hadn’t a wide knowledge of feminism, it is through other political activities that they have discovered feminism. They then progressively share the concepts that they each learn, in a form of horizontal transmission. Their previous activist background leads those women to use forms of organization mostly from unions and political organizations, such as complex democratic procedures, rather than the non-hierarchic procedures from the original radical feminism. Even though this formalization requires more effort and must be learned, it seems to contribute maintaining horizontal relations between the volunteers, with equal legitimacy among them.

In the Ladyfest Brussels, on the other hand, most of the volunteers had no or little activist background; the artistic and cultural content of the festival is the main reason of their mobilization, along with existing friendship and acquaintances – and the friendly and informal atmosphere in the group. Those indirect means of mobilization make it easier for them to embrace the political content when they are already involved. Indeed, even though all of them mention a prior interest for feminist and gender issues, only a minority of them had previously considered to be involved in proper activism. In this way, mixity and its image of inclusion appears as strategically facilitating a wide mobilization. This may also explain why they function per a horizontal structure and informal hierarchy, inherited from traditional feminist forms of organization, which facilitates mobilization for people not used to a political formalism and/or considering a less formal and less political activism (Polletta, 2014; Fillieule, 2009). In this context, however, the leaders' legitimacy is founded on their previous knowledge of feminist theory and practical organizational experience, showing that hierarchies reappear implicitly in informal contexts.

**Identity**

Comparing mixity and non-mixity helps understanding how collective identity is shaped for mobilization, and transformed through it. Indeed, in both structures, the main collective identity recognized by the activists and volunteers is the feminist identity. All of them perceived this feminist identity as latent until they decided to be involved as volunteers in feminist groups, and it is the collective dimension of the commitment that results in their proactivity as activists. As such, defining themselves as feminists requires for them to be consistent with this commitment, from daily life to political activism, and representing feminism also outside the activist community. “Feminist” is considered as a strong label, sometimes even disapproved by their relatives, that they have to fully endorse and be accountable for. As this feminist
identity is likely to be criticized or mocked, mostly for men (whose commitment is seen as opportunistic or questioning their masculinity); the collective space then represents a safe space to discuss and resource activism for the volunteers.

This collective identity draws a line between “us” and “them”, the inside and the outside of the group. Every definition of this identity is strongly rooted in the group’s strategy in terms of the definition of gender. We can then consider that each and every feminist groups brings its own nuances in the concept of gender inside the feminist movement in its globality. The feminist collective identity inevitably brings with itself a questioning about gender identity, on the collective as well as on the individual level.

In terms of gender identity, it appeared, among the MALFRAP, that non-mixity reinforces the consciousness of a feminine identity – not as essentialist but as a shared experience that leads to a better understanding of gendered power relations. In addition to this perceived sorority, activists nevertheless acknowledge non-binary identities and gender as a construction that should be dismantled. This shows that the women-only organization doesn’t necessarily lead to an essentialist perception of identity but instead to the affirmation and reinvestment of a stigmatized identity through the collective experience.

Among the Ladyfest volunteers, the feminist identity is sometimes extended into a wider questioning of their gender identity towards a non-binary or less binary gender identity. This questioning is also promoted by the non-heteronormative values of the organization. This transformation is mostly explicit for the men of the team, who also found in this feminist space a mean to valorize aspects of non-hegemonic masculinities in their personalities that were otherwise depreciated. Additionally, the option of mixity for the volunteers team seems more inclusive for persons who do not identify as “women” and would not fit into a binary perspective. However, despite the conception of gender as a spectrum, volunteers confess the difficulty to make abstraction of masculinity and femininity as structuring poles in their definition of identity.

Through these collective identities, combined with distinct goals in terms of gender (revealing structures of oppression versus deconstructing gender stereotypes), activists go through a transformative experience (Whittier, 1997) that nourishes or questions the way they envision their gender identity.

**Conclusion**

Mixity and non-mixity are strategic choices that shape the collective action and depend on its goals: it is the women-only composition of the first group that allows them to identify the patriarchal structures
that cause gender inequality, and find modes of resistance; in the second group, the politics of inclusion aims to the subversion of traditional gender identities and roles. By defining those goals, they frame different individual and collective identity in the gender spectrum.

The collective identity displayed by the group but also its form of organization are two major factors influencing mobilization: the difference of mobilization between the two groups here show that conventional and complex organizational forms along with non-mixity seen as a radical political statement will attract people with a pre-existing activist background. On the other hand, mixity requires not to frontal address the question of gendered power relations and approach it through another purpose. This distance, in addition to a more inclusive vision of collective identity leads not only to mobilize people less familiar with activism but also to reach a wider audience (Polletta, 2014).

It is to be noted that mixity and non-mixity in the two observed groups were not considered exclusive one to the other: meanwhile the non-mixt group pertains to a broader mixt organization – and to society in general – that it both intends to influence; the mixt group considers that non-mixt spaces (on stage and in some workshops) are a necessary tool to achieve their anti-stereotype and inclusive perspective. If mixity and non-mixity represent tools that lay on opposite strategic visions of gender, this paper showed that they actually serve complementary objectives in terms of a wider vision of feminism. They also contribute to enrich the gender perspective through shaping different individual and collective identities.

We have observed how gender is at stake at different levels of the collective action: specific aspects of gender and gender issues must be framed, along with a collective identity, in order to define strategic choices that will, in their turn, shape different goals in terms of gender definition. Those multiple reinvestments of gender create a dynamic feminist movement, where gender, as the fundamental concept on which it relies is constantly redesigned and remains in motion. Options such as mixity and non-mixity should consequently not be considered in opposition but as complementary ways to frame gender issues in a constellation of identities.
Bibliography


