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The present study of Belgian pre-war feminism as a socio-political movement starts from two main angles of inquiry. First, the deconstruction of the prevalent 'pillarised' categorisation in Belgian historiography – based on the superseded use of party labels as an interpretative scheme (Aerts & Everard, 1999) – dividing the feminist movement into an authentic 'bourgeois'-liberal equality-feminism, a socialist women's movement that subordinated women's emancipation to the class struggle, and a catholic 'feminism of difference' that did not challenge but rather reinforced a religious patriarchal doctrine. Second, the analysis of the transnational networks in which this national movement for women's emancipation was embedded. These two angles are interconnected through the approach of *histoire croisée* (Werner & Zimmermann, 2006). Such an 'entangled history' requires the abandonment of

a priori categorisations and the historicisation of the object of study as an 'entangled product' of transnational inter-crossings (Cohen & O'Connor, 2004). Applied to the present research, this method of so-called 'pragmatic induction' led to a focus on Dutch and French connections and on the international organisations that shaped Belgian pre-war feminism, in interaction with the national context. Inspired by the international literature moving beyond the dichotomist constructions that underlie the perspective of partisan ideological separatism in Belgian historiography – equality *versus* difference (Aerts, 1986; Scott, 1988), 'bourgeois' feminism *versus* the socialist women's movement (Everard, 1985; Boxer, 2007), feminism *versus* Catholicism (Aerts, 1992; Allen, 2007) – I place the agency of feminists themselves and the internal dynamics of the movement at the centre of the analysis. The present study thus examines the mutual identifications, interactions, and interconnections among the politically 'neutral', the socialist, and the catholic factions, and compares their programs, ideologies, and strategies, as they developed over time.

These new perspectives and approaches, combined with consultation of previously unexplored source material in Belgium and abroad, have allowed me to trace a history of Belgian pre-war feminism that radically changes the prevailing image of a moderate movement, weakened by unbridgeable internal divisions, supposedly caused by a 'hedging in' of feminism by the socialist and the catholic parties (Gubin, 1992; 1994a; 1999). With regard to the origins of organised feminism in the early 1890s, the emphasis was hitherto placed on the Popelin Affair (1888) – i.e., the refusal to admit Marie Popelin, the first woman doctor of law, to the bar – as the national catalyst for the creation of the first organisation for women's rights, the *Ligue belge du droit des femmes* (*LBDF*) (1892), an autonomous association that defined itself as politically 'neutral', but is usually qualified as 'bourgeois-liberal'. Inspired by the groundbreaking recovery of a Dutch political transfer that triggered the birth of organised feminism in Belgium (Aerts & Everard, 1999; Aerts, 2005), the present study moves beyond the national framework and the almost exclusive focus on the so-called 'bourgeois-liberal' faction. The transnational angle reveals not only a Dutch but also a French political transfer, which intertwined the origins of the politically 'neutral' *LBDF* and the first socialist feminist associations – the previously un(der)-researched *Union pour la solidarité des femmes* and its sister-organisation the (autonomous) *Hollandsch-Vlaamsche Vrouwenbond*. The transnational inter-crossings that shaped all three of the pioneering Belgian feminist associations, completely blur the presumed boundaries of party politics,

ideology and class, and therefore invalidate the distinction between so-called 'bourgeois'-liberal and socialist feminism.

This finding is confirmed by the analysis of the larger transnational network in which these Belgian-French-Dutch entanglements were embedded. All of the actors involved in the *histoire croisée* of the genesis of the Belgian feminist movement were connected to two previously unknown (international) organisations – the British Women's Progressive Society and the International Women's Union – that (partially) embodied what Ulla Wikander has termed the 'French style' of feminist internationalism (Wikander, 1992). This predominantly European radical feminist movement cut across the boundaries of party politics: it was made up of – mostly unaffiliated – socialist or left-leaning feminists, who emphasised not only women's political but also (and especially) their economic equality to men as the key to their emancipation – and who therefore opposed the separate legal protection of women's labour. Consequently, the transnational perspective likewise undermines the assumption of the moderateness of Belgian (politically 'neutral') feminism – a label based on a one-sided reduction of radicalism to suffragism. The *LBDF* did follow a moderate strategy, prioritising civil over political rights, but Belgian politically 'neutral' feminists, like their socialist feminist compatriots, also identified with and participated in the 'French-style' radical movement.

The complexity of the interaction between the national and transnational levels in the construction of the Belgian movement for women's emancipation is also demonstrated by the paradoxical traits of one of the key gatherings of this left-wing radical feminist network: the Brussels international congress, which the *LBDF* organised in 1897 with the aim of reinforcing their own feminist politics in the national context. This congress is analysed as one element of the way in which Belgian feminists tried to build their movement after the inception phase. The examination of this consolidation process of organised feminism in Belgium – based on the 'collective identity' approach of social movement studies – further upsets the dichotomist construction of 'bourgeois'-liberal *versus* (working-class) socialist feminism. Class positions did not parallel political convictions or affiliations, and the class differences that were at play did not preclude the reciprocal feminist identifications of the politically 'neutral' and socialist organisations. The decisive distinction between the two factions lay in the extent to which they challenged the patriarchal marital and sexual order. Whereas the *LBDF* carefully avoided crossing the boundaries of (sexual) respectability – focusing chiefly on the civil reform of marriage into an egalitarian bond and on the elevation of male sexuality to the prevailing moral standard for women

– the *Union pour la solidarité des femmes* and the *Hollandsch-Vlaamsche Vrouwenbond* stressed women's sexual autonomy and advocated free union, sex education and even contraception. These controversial sexual politics provided the fuel for (public) scandals regarding the personal life of two of their leaders – Julia van Marcke de Lummen and Emilie Claeys – which led to the demise of these first two socialist feminist organisations by the mid-1890s.

Furthermore, the analysis of the contentious construction of a feminist collective identity within the *LBDF* – involving conflicts over the role of men within the feminist movement and over the appropriate strategy – reveals what the prevailing use of party labels tends to obscure: the politically 'neutral' faction was anything but a unified block adhering to a so-called 'bourgeois'-liberal definition of feminist politics and neglecting the interests of working-class women. In addition to the *LBDF*, which preferred a juridical approach – i.e., lobbying for legal reforms to improve the condition of all women, including proletarian women – a more grassroots strand of equally unaffiliated feminism developed. This strand was embodied by the debating groups of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond's *Cahiers féministes* (1896) and the *Société belge pour l'amélioration du sort de la femme* (*ASF*) – the latter created as a result of a political transfer from Great Britain in 1897. Especially the *ASF* defined its feminist politics as the complement or underpinning of the *LBDF*'s juridical top-down approach. Both Gatti's feminist circles and the *ASF* also advocated women's rights – i.e., legal reforms – and endorsed or joined the campaigns of the *LBDF*, but focused on grassroots consciousness-raising instead, so as build and strengthen the feminist movement from the bottom up as it were.

According to the prevailing account, Belgian feminism was subsequently 'hedged in' by the socialist and the catholic party around the turn of the century (Gubin, 1992; 1994a). This 'pillarised' perspective of partisan ideological separatism, which reduces both the socialist women's movement and catholic feminism to mere party politics (Aerts & Everard, 1999), and stresses internal divisions precluding feminist cooperation across ideological boundaries, needs to be thoroughly revised. By fixating on the postponement of women's suffrage imposed on socialist women by their own party in 1901-1902, Belgian historiography has assumed that, strictly speaking, there was no such thing as a socialist feminism, because when push came to shove, the socialist women's movement accepted the enforced prioritisation of the class struggle over women's emancipation and consequently refused collaboration with 'bourgeois' feminists (Gubin, 1994a; Gubin, Piette, & Jacques, 1997). Moving beyond the distortive emphasis on the dichotomy between

identification with class or sex and concentrating instead on the complex ways in which socialist women negotiated their feminist and socialist politics in interaction with both the male-dominated party and the feminist movement (Hannam & Hunt, 2002), the present study shows that key dividing line ran not between socialist women and 'bourgeois' feminists, but, rather, through the socialist women's movement itself. I argue that the revival of the socialist women's movement around the turn of the century was rooted in the entanglements of middle-class feminism, reformist socialism, and progressive liberalism. Spear-headed by Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, the newly created National Federation of Socialist Women initially made common cause with politically 'neutral' feminists. It was only in response to the party's turnaround of 1901-1902 with regard to women's suffrage and to a coinciding rapprochement of feminists of all persuasions – resulting in the creation of a short-lived *Union féministe* in 1902 – that a Brussels-based working-class wing of the socialist women's movement introduced the doctrine of non-cooperation with so-called 'bourgeois' feminists. However, this strategic rejection of 'bourgeois' feminism by the National Federation of Socialist Women did not go unchallenged. The socialist women of Ghent refused the imposed trade-off between socialism and feminism, and continued to cooperate with their politically 'neutral' and catholic colleagues – that is, until they were forced to toe the party line in 1907. Moreover, these working-class socialist women of Ghent developed strong ties with the Dutch middle-class and autonomous *Vereeniging ter Behartiging van de Belangen der Vrouw*, based on a shared opposition to the separate legal protection of women's labour. The transnational approach has thus brought to light the persistence within a part of the socialist women's movement of the radical 'French style' feminist tradition, introduced during the inception phase of Belgian organised feminism.

Similarly, and to an even greater extent, the transnational history of the emergence and development of a Belgian catholic feminism upsets the prevailing reduction of this faction to partisan politics. For, unlike the women's movement of the socialist party, *Le Féminisme Chrétien de Belgique* (*FCB*) was an unaffiliated, autonomous association – free of party or clerical control. Instead of being entrenched in the catholic 'pillar' – the (conservative) party, Christian-democracy, and/or social Catholicism – Belgian catholic feminism was rooted in transnational feminist inter-crossings that invalidate the assumption of an insurmountable opposition between catholics and non-confessionals. The organisation of the catholic faction of the Belgian feminist movement was the result of a political transfer from France, brokered chiefly by the politically 'neutral' *LBDF*, and it was

finally triggered by the rapprochement of feminists of all persuasions in the *Union féministe* in 1902. The *FCB* defined itself as a separate but integral part of the movement for women's emancipation, and was acknowledged as such by the politically 'neutral' associations and the dissident radical faction of the socialist women's movement. These mutual identifications constituted the basis for the joint or coinciding campaigns of feminists of all or different persuasions that brought about key legal reforms after the turn of the century – the most important being paternity suits and professional voting rights for women.

These mutual feminist identifications and collaborations across the boundaries of partisan politics, also show that the catholic feminist project cannot be reduced to an inherently flawed product of a patriarchal, conservative and anti-modern religion, as was hitherto presumed (Gubin, 1994b; Gubin, Piette, & Jacques, 1997). Moving beyond the presumed inherent irreconcilability of feminism and religion, I argue that the ideology of *FCB* was the 'entangled product' of the transnational inter-crossings out of which this organisation emerged. The catholic feminist project combined the non-confessional body of thought of the politically 'neutral' feminist associations with catholic faith and attuned these two sources of inspiration to one another, adapting the former so as to fit the catholic teachings – in particular with regard to the pre-eminence of the husband in marriage – and investing the latter with modern concepts of self-realisation and empowerment. This religious translation of feminism with its emphasis on women's difference from men – i.e., on their primary roles as mothers – did not preclude the defence of women's equal rights as autonomous human beings. Contrary to what has hitherto been presumed, one cannot reduce catholic feminist politics to a feminism of difference that inevitably endorsed patriarchy, as opposed to a so-called liberal equality-feminism as the only avenue towards women's emancipation.

Moving beyond the equality-versus-difference dichotomy, the present study has shown that feminists of all persuasions not just catholics, regularly referred to women's moralising mission in society and politics – i.e., the extension of women's maternal function inside the family to a caring and nurturing role in the public sphere –, using a combination of equality and difference arguments. Without reducing the entire and diverse Belgian feminist body of thought to a maternalist strand of feminism, I suggest that these specific articulations of what Joan Scott (1996) has called the feminist paradox of equality and difference were at least partially shaped by the transnational *nébuleuse réformatrice* (Topalov, 1999) in which the Belgian feminist movement was entangled. Within this closely-knit mostly pluralistic

network of interconnected social reform movements and institutions of intellectual sociability the woman question was debated in relation to the social question. Striving towards 'social regeneration' through the 'remoralisation' of society, these reformers focused on women's responsibilities as moral guardians of the home as the key to the solution of the social question. They developed a 'maternalist' – not necessarily feminist – ideology under the influence of sociology and/or social Darwinism, stressing functional differentiation between the sexes as a mark of (evolutionary and) social progress. Rather than assuming that this intellectual framework, with its emphasis on women's difference from men, inevitably hindered the feminist pursuit of equality between the sexes (Gubin, 1994b), I contend that Belgian feminists – both strategically and ideologically – appropriated this social reformist science-oriented maternalist discourse and subverted it from within, using it to bolster their claims for equal rights.

The analysis of the entanglement of women's rights and social reform demonstrates that feminists of all persuasions constructed abolitionism (the fight against state-regulated prostitution and the trafficking in women), temperance, pacifism and progressive educational reform, as causes closely related to feminism. They actively sought to turn these pluralistic transnational social movements into coalition partners – although their abolitionist activity slightly pales before their commitment to the other three causes. Only with regard to free thought and freemasonry was ideological separatism between non-confessional and catholic feminism – for obvious reasons – of decisive relevance. However, unlike Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, who defined her freethinking (and Masonic) involvement as intrinsic to her feminism, both the *LBDF* – in spite of its marked roots in and connection to both free thought and progressive freemasonry – and *FCB* tried to avoid polarisation along the lines of clericalism *versus* anticlericalism. The exploration of the interconnections between women's – and men's – social reform activism and feminism, reveals an entangled process of reciprocal influences. The feminist consciousness of some activists originated in a prior commitment to abolitionism, temperance, pacifism and/or educational reform, while the first Belgian women's temperance and pacifist associations that were created around the turn of the century were rooted in transnational inter-crossings with the feminist movement. This women's wing of the social reform movement became an important coalition partner of feminism. In 1905 the National Council of Belgian Women, the Belgian section of the International Council of Women (1888), was born out of an alliance between politically 'neutral' feminist associations and a women's temperance organisation, soon joined by pacifist and other social reform groups.

According to the prevailing account Belgian feminists finally took up the women's suffrage claim on the eve of the First World War at the instigation of this women's social reform movement (Gubin, 1999). This assumption needs to be abandoned. The conception of women's political enfranchisement as a means to combat alcoholism and war was put forward by feminists of all persuasions virtually from the outset, whereas the women's temperance and pacifist associations would only start to embrace it when the feminist women's suffrage campaign was already taking shape. The fact that Belgian historiography has tended to focus chiefly on votes for women – to the detriment of other feminist themes and claims – partly explains why pre-war feminism has hitherto been (dis)qualified as a moderate or backward movement and why the image of partisan ideological separatism has prevailed. The present study confirms that, rather than constituting a pro-active campaign sustained in the long term, Belgian feminists' pre-war suffragism tended to follow the waves of the political process of the democratisation of the male vote, reactive to and dependent on the political opportunities presented by the socialist drives around 1893, 1902, and 1913. Moreover, whereas non-confessional and catholic feminists were able to find common ground in the case of civil and economic rights – even on those issues where ideological differences were at play, i.e., paternity suits and marriage law reform –, when it came to suffrage, the ideological divide was initially harder to bridge, because some of the feminists who defined their project as politically 'neutral' shared the liberal and socialist fear of women's presumed clerical vote.

However, the transnational perspective does invite a profound revision of the history that is known with regard to the Belgian movement for women's suffrage. Thus far the creation of a suffragist coalition in 1913 was attributed to an initiative of the leading politically 'neutral' organisation, the *LBDF*, coupled to an incentive by catholic feminists, in which socialist women refused to partake (Jacques & Marissal, 1994). By staying mainly within the national framework and by concentrating on the Brussels-based centre of the feminist movement, the prevailing accounts have overlooked the crucial part played by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in the development of a suffragist movement in Belgium, as well as the involvement of the dissident radical faction of the socialist women's movement and of new feminist organisations in Ghent and Antwerp. The introduction of organised suffragism in Belgium was the result of a political transfer, brokered by an officer of the IWSA, Martina Kramers, who was also a proponent of the radical 'French style' feminist tradition and a leading figure in the Dutch *Vereeniging ter Behartiging van de Belangen der Vrouw*.

Initially Kramers built upon her pre-existing connections to the Ghent socialist women to promote the creation of a Belgian affiliate to the IWSA – a non-partisan international organisation. When in 1907 the Ghent socialist women association was brought to heed by the socialist party, Kramers lost her initial suffragist foothold in Belgium and turned to young feminist associations in Ghent and Antwerp instead. The study of this previously unresearched new generation of feminists brought to light that already in 1909 they founded the first Belgian section of the IWSA, together with a Brussels-based circle of radical socialist-feminists. However, these small groups operated in the margins of Belgian feminism. Only when the socialist campaign for universal suffrage placed women's voting rights high on the political agenda, would the IWSA be able to move to the centre of the feminist movement in Belgium. Kramers first recruited catholic suffragists and subsequently persuaded the main politically 'neutral' organisations to co-found the Belgian Federation for Women's Suffrage in 1913. The women's suffrage campaign that emerged on the eve of the First World War was thus the result of the interaction between transnational impulses and national opportunities, in which non-partisan international suffragism was entangled with radical socialist feminism, and later on with catholic feminism.

Party labels, dichotomist interpretative schemes and national frameworks cannot cover the overtones of the complex and diverse landscape of pre-war feminism in Belgium. If anything, Belgian feminists continuously moved beyond boundaries, both national and ideological.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASF	Société belge pour l'amélioration du sort de la femme
FCB	Le Féminisme Chrétien de Belgique
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
LBDF	Ligue belge du droit des femmes

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Julie Carlier
julie.carlier@ugent.be