

Should we all be feminists? Feminist identification and labour market histories of Baby Boomer women in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Although women's participation in paid work has increased across Western countries over the past century, gender inequalities in the labour market continue to persist. Women still earn less than men, and the difference in earnings cannot be fully explained by differences in observable characteristics such as sector, occupation, and human capital (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Goldin, 2014). Part of the explanation is that women are promoted less often (Blau & Devaro, 2007), have more often career breaks (Arun et al., 2004), and work less hours compared to men (Landivar, 2015; Luekemann, 2021). Such circumstances are often experienced as a result of trade-offs between work and family. Indeed, life-course researchers highlighted the role of women's early family and marital histories in long-term work and earnings trajectories (Damman et al., 2015; Muller et al., 2020).

Recently, the literature started considering gender norms as a core explanation which directly and indirectly affects women's choices and considerations in the work and family sphere (Begall & Hiekel, 2025; Grunow & Lietzmann, 2021; Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2018). A traditional view of society sees women's primary role as caregivers. Because these norms act as an invisible barrier, women experience less often circumstances that increase their financial position in the labour market, reinforcing gender inequalities in earnings.

Such roles have been questioned by feminism, which is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes (Burkett & Brunell, 2025). Feminist movements, and especially Second Wave feminists, fought in the '60s and 70's for equal pay, job opportunities, and division of household tasks (Burkett & Brunell, 2025). These movements had a strong impact on female labour force participation of Baby Boomer women, who suddenly could pursue (some) career next to their family responsibilities. While feminism has contributed to create more gender equality in the workforce, little is still known about how adhering to feminist ideas at a young age affects women's individual career paths.

Feminism raises awareness of systemic inequalities between men and women. Moreover, it enables individuals to recognize and question gender norms that constrain their agency. In the work domain, it may encourage women to recognize and confront sexist behaviours (Ayres et al., 2009), seek support from other women (Diekmann, 2022), and vouch for themselves. In the family domain, it may empower women to negotiate the division of care and household tasks with their family members. Previous research suggests that feminist identification promotes women's career and leadership aspirations and decreases willingness to compromise work for family (Lee & Wessel, 2022; Leicht et al., 2017). However, research on feminist identification and actual labour market outcomes is still scarce. In this article, we ask: to what degree does identification with feminism in youth, improve women's labour market position and participation? Overall, we expect that women who identified with feminism in their youth (from now on referred to as "feminists") have more often experienced events that improved their position in the labour market, such as spending more years in the labour force, being more often promoted, and working more hours, compared to non-feminist women.

Data and methods

To address our research question, we use the NIDI Pension Panel Survey (Henkens et al., 2017). Its target population are older workers born between 1950 and 1955. Respondents who worked at least 12 hours per week were sampled through the three biggest pension funds in the Netherlands, which cover five economic sectors: government, education, healthcare, social work, and construction. They filled a paper-and-pen questionnaire which asks questions about work, retirement, family and health. This cross-sectional dataset collected in 2015 also includes life-course histories and identification with cultural movements of the '60's and '70s, including feminism. Our analytical sample consists of 2431 women aged 60-65 engaged in paid employment at the time of the survey. Using OLS and logistic regression analyses, we look at differences between feminist and non-feminist women in three outcomes: years spent outside of the labour force since first entry, likelihood of receiving a promotion over their career, and the number of weekly hours worked at the time of the survey.

Preliminary findings

Descriptive findings (Table 1) suggest that 31% of the sample (N = 764) identified either strongly or very strongly with feminist movements of the '60s and '70's. Overall,

feminist women have on average higher levels of education (68% went to university compared to 43% of non-feminist women). Moreover, they have less children on average (1.84) compared to non-feminist women (2.04). Finally, they seem to experience a divorce slightly more often (30% compared to 25% of non-feminist women).

Further descriptive findings on our variables of interest (Table 1) suggest feminist women spend less years outside of the labour force compared to non-feminist women. On average, feminist women spent 4 years and 2 months outside of the workforce, whereas for non-feminist women this average was 6 years and 8 months. Linear regression analyses (Table 2, Column 1) show that, taking other life-course predictors including education level, number of children, and marital histories into account, feminist women's career gaps are one and a half years shorter compared to non-feminist women's ($B = -1.50$, $p < 0.00$).

Moreover, more feminist women are promoted at least once at work (60%) compared to non-feminist women (46%). Logistic regression analyses (Table 2, Column 2) show that, compared to non-feminist women, the odds of feminist women receiving a promotion increase by 47%, while keeping the other variables constant ($B = 1.47$, $p < 0.00$). Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of women that received at least a promotion at different time intervals. The gap between feminist and non-feminist women appears especially pronounced in the thirties and forties, reaching respectively 11 and 10 percentage points.

Finally, feminist women work more hours per week at the time of the survey compared to non-feminists. On average, women in the sample work 26.5 weekly hours, but the number of hours is higher for feminist women (28.30 hours) compared to non-feminists (25.68 hours). When accounting for the other variables in the model, linear regression analyses (Table 2, Column 3) suggest that on average older feminist women work 1 hour and a half more per week at the end of their careers compared to non-feminist women.

These results suggest that early feminist identification had long-term consequences for the labour market participation and position of Baby Boomer women in the Netherlands. Exposure to feminist ideas during formative years appears to have influenced women's agency in both work and family domains. Such findings have important implications for understanding and fighting gender inequalities in economic resilience, career advancement opportunities, and representation in leadership positions.

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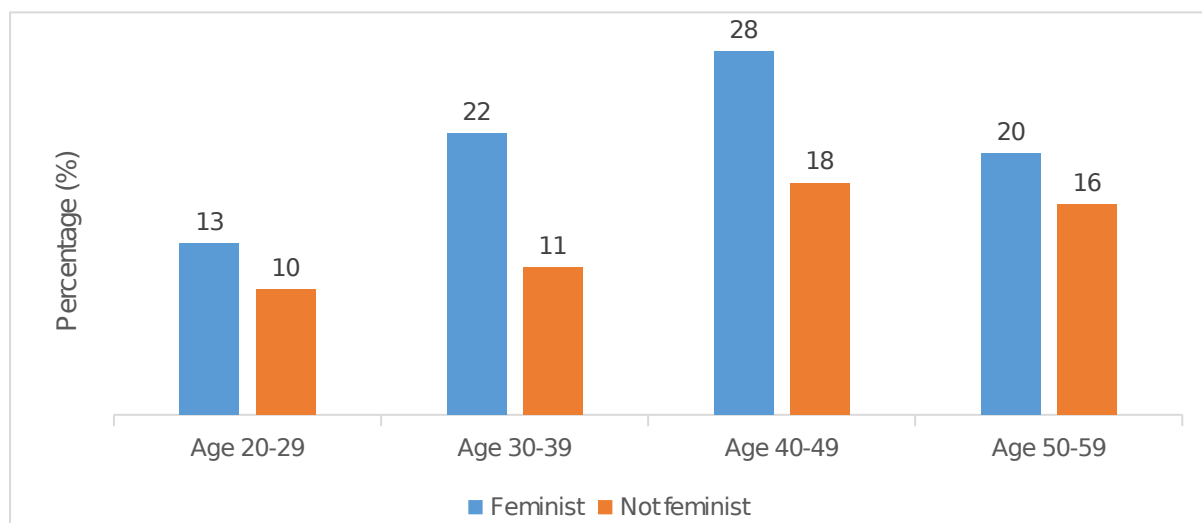
Tables and figures

Table 1. Summary statistics of the analytical sample

	Total	Non-feminist	Feminist
	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>
Years outside of the labour force	5.95 (6.84)	6.74 (7.24)	4.22 (5.48)
Ever got a promotion (%)	0.50	0.46	0.60
Work hours at the time of the survey	26.50 (7.84)	25.68 (7.87)	28.30 (7.48)
Age	61.97 (1.60)	61.94 (1.59)	62.02 (1.61)
Education level (%)			
Low	0.20	0.25	0.10
Medium	0.29	0.32	0.22
High	0.51	0.43	0.68
Number of children	1.98 (1.20)	2.04 (1.22)	1.84 (1.15)
Number of children (categorical) (%)			
0	0.16	0.15	0.18
1	0.10	0.09	0.12
2	0.45	0.46	0.44
3 or more	0.29	0.30	0.25
Ever divorced (%)	0.26	0.25	0.30
Ever widowed (%)	0.10	0.10	0.09
N	2,431	1,667	764

Source: Nidi Pension Panel Survey.

Figure 1. Share of working women who got a promotion in their life course, by age period (N = 2431)



Source: Nidi Pension Panel Survey. Standard Deviations in brackets.

Table 2. Regression Estimates of the Relationship Between Feminist Identification and Career Outcomes

	(Column 1) Years spent outside of the workforce ¹		(Column 2) Ever got a promotion ²		(Column 3) Weekly work hours at the time of the survey ¹	
Feminist identification	-1.50***	(0.28)	1.47***	(0.14)	1.56***	(0.33)
Age	0.37***	(0.08)	1.01	(0.03)	-0.06	(0.09)
Education (ref. Low)						
Medium	-0.90*	(0.36)	1.58***	(0.19)	1.19**	(0.43)
High	-3.25***	(0.34)	2.18***	(0.25)	3.23***	(0.40)
Number of children (ref. none)						
1	3.24***	(0.50)	0.49***	(0.08)	-3.94***	(0.60)
2	4.87***	(0.37)	0.62***	(0.08)	-4.23***	(0.44)
3 or more	7.21***	(0.39)	0.47***	(0.06)	-4.55***	(0.47)
Ever experienced a divorce	0.34	(0.28)	1.48***	(0.14)	3.39***	(0.34)
Ever experienced widowhood	-0.10	(0.42)	0.90	(0.13)	0.67	(0.50)
Constant	-19.26***	(4.89)	0.32	(0.53)	30.57***	(5.85)
Observations	2431		2431		2431	

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.005. Standard errors in brackets

Source: NIDI Pension Panel Survey.

^aOrdinary least squares (OLS) regression

^bLogistic regression (odd ratios)