

(Com)promises in institutionalizing gender studies

Expert in gender (in Romania)-What for?

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1 Introduction

In Romania and in general in CEE region, it looks like the success story in terms of promoting gender equality in higher education is to be found at the level of gendering the content of higher education mainly by institutionalizing gender/women studies¹. In many of our countries, taken advantage of the university autonomy and the chaotic reforms of higher education, women/gender studies programmes and departments flourished. Being in various stages of development they confront with same types of dilemmas that challenged Western academic feminism in the past:

- mainstreaming vs. curriculum transformation;
- autonomy vs. integration;
- naming the programmes (women/gender/feminist studies);
- level of introducing gender studies;
- relations between academic and activism (validation of gender studies as mainstreaming theories or mainly as practical oriented, as research with a purpose)

2 Gender studies in Romania. Brief overview, some local contexts and dilemmas

Gender studies are a reality within the academic life in Romania. In Bucharest and outside Bucharest, in Cluj, Timisoara or Iasi gender studies programmes have been developed, some of them having already “a history of their own”. There is today a core group of committed academics (in majority self-educated women but there are few men too) that have initiated and introduced modules on gender issues within their disciplines.

A series of gender sensitive publications have appeared over the last 10 years covering the huge gap of information existing in the field in 1989. From 1995 a Journal for Feminist Analyses (“AnaLize”, edited by the Romanian Society for Feminist Analysis AnA) is regularly published. A journal on gender

¹ See UNESCO-CEPES publication on “Promoting Gender equality in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe, Laura Grunberg (ed), CEPES, 2001, and “Guidelines for Promoting Gender Equity in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe”, Mihaela Miroiu, Papers on Higher Education, CEPES, 2003

studies is also produced in Timisoara by the Gender Center established within the English Department of the West University of Timisoara. In Cluj, a collection on gender studies has also been launched by the Foundation Desire. All these publications have been mainly initiatives taken by NGOs (limited number of copies, limited distribution and impact).

Starting from 2000, with financial support from the World Bank, a prestigious printing House (Polirom) launched a collection of publications on “Gender Studies”. Together with major translations (books of Susan Gal and Gail Kligman; Mary Lyndon Shanley, Uma Narayan; Gloria Steinem; Andreea Dworkin; Moira Gatens) a number of volumes produced by Romanian feminists have been published and widely disseminated².

Another visible success of the academic feminism in Romania is the establishment of the *MA in Gender studies* created in 1998 at the Faculty of Political Sciences within the National School for Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest (now called MA in “Gender and Social Policies”). From 1998 on, each year, a group of 10-12 students (in majority women but not only) have undertaken this post university programme, getting a MA diploma in “Gender and Social policies”. Ph.D in the field of feminism is also possible starting with 2002 (not only feminist themes/gender approaches within various disciplines as it was the case up to that moment).

If the first generation of academic feminists in Romania was mainly self-educated (few benefiting from scholarships abroad), now there is a new generation of properly trained specialists in gender issues. A new elite stratum of gender experts is being created. Who needs them? Their impact on gendering Romanian research, on professionalization of the Romanian public discourse on gender (within politicians, within civil society, etc), on demarginalizing the women movement is, up to the moment, weak.

2.1 Some local contexts

- Conjunctural factors in the establishment of gender studies. There was no special social demand for problematizing women issues in Romania; The MA programme appeared due to a “window of opportunity” (a committed woman and a favorable position of power within the higher education system at the (right) moment of World Bank investment in reforming higher education). The same is true for other gender programmes;
- Problems with regard to the two components of Gender Studies: education and research. On the *education* side- little know-how (if any) on how to teach gender studies (heterogeneous students-different age, backgrounds, interests; interdisciplinary approaches, sensitive issues-not just informing but building self esteem and trust; “feminist” pedagogies). On the *research* side-initially there was lack of national relevant teaching materials. When the MA programme started-almost all course were based on American texts. Talking in Romanian about gender was difficult (how to translate gender- still divergent opinions, (de)gendered institution, etc). Now the situation is much better, although there is still a lack of applied gender sensitive research and of any connection with “regional” (CEE or SEE) gender studies, feminist research. The MA team (students, professors, associate professors-working in certain research institutes) together with few NGOs representatives (AnA Society, Filia Center, Cluj Center for Gender studies) have participated in some national gender sensitive research programmes³. The majority of the MA dissertations are nevertheless still more theoretical and not research oriented, not really using

² *Convenio. About Nature, Women and Morality*, Mihaela Miroiu; *Feminist Lexicon*, Otilia Dragomir, Mihaela Miroiu (coord.), *(R)evolutions in Feminist Sociology. Theoretical Frameworks, Romanian Contexts*, Laura Grunberg; *From the History of RomanianFeminism. Anthology of Texts* (1838-1929), Stefania Mihailescu; *Domestic Work in Romanian Village of Today. Case studies*, Valentina Marinescu; *The Gender Dilema of Education*, Doina Stefanescu; *The Last Inequality. Gender Relationships in Romania*, Vladimir Pasti.

³ Such as: (1) *The Gender Barometer*, 2000- financially supported by the Open Society Foundation; (2) *Women and Men in Romania-2000*-published by the National Institute of Statistics with support from UNDP (in the framework of a programme on Gendering statistics in Romania); (3) Volume “School at the Crossroads. Change and Continuity in Compulsory Education. Impact study”, (L. Vlăsceanu coord. ed. Polirom, 2003) containing 2 thematic studies on the gender dimension of education: *Explicit and implicit manifestations of gender in programmes and schoolbooks* (Laura Grunberg, Doina Stefanescu) and *Education for private life* (Otilia Dragomir, Elena Balan, Cristina Mihai)

- gender sensitive research tools and/or applying them on Romanian realities. There is still a huge need for concrete, updated quantitative and qualitative information on women/gender issues.
- Looking at the evolution of gender studies in the West, one usually identifies the following development stages: (1) curricula reform produced by the introduction of such courses produces initially awareness of the absence of women and is filling in a gap of information; (2) women are treated as disadvantaged group (courses such as: “Women and Politics”, “Women and Mass media”); (3) women studies develop within a “women centered curricula”- epistemological separatism; (4) a need, concern for integration, for a more general curricula transformation proposing an inclusive vision on the human experience based on difference, diversity . In Romania-there was a combination of all. We have condensed stages, not fully internalized each period, being in a hurry to “catch up” the Western feminisms and experience of “waves of feminisms” and do in a couple of years what has been done over decades in the West, often taking as granted the western models/theories and not contextualizing, adapting them to Romanian/region specificities.
 - No real links between the Romanian academic feminism and the women movement (activism). In Romania the academic feminism is more evolved than the women movement. Although there are plenty of NGOs (more than 60)⁴ there is a lack of solidarity around priority issues and between NGO and governmental institutions, no lobby experience and culture; a local hostile environment (mainly fiscal), less and less international support (together with an unsystematic, not long-term planned international assistance towards gender issues) and more and more an “unfair” competition for funds between NGOs or between them and governmental bodies (as more funds are coming for our European Integration-bigger the corruption)

3 Questions/Challenges/Dilemmas

- Are graduates of the MA in gender studies really “gender experts”? Are the type of programmes (mainly MA but also modules on gender introduced within various faculties) coherent, combining theoretical interdisciplinary approaches with policy national oriented perspectives, using modern pedagogical (why not feminist) approaches and equipping students with gender competence? No qualitative assessment of these programmes has been made. It is time for evaluating the quality of the qualification offered for gaining credibility and respect in the academic and scientific community (and as part of the requirement of the whole Bologna process Romania is part of).
- Is it a market out there, “crying”, demanding for gender experts? In Romanian there is not (only in a job advertisement for UNDP “gender expertise is an asset” was mentioned). Who needs gender specialists in Romania? How/by whom such a market should be created?
- Civil society sector (in general and women NGOs in particular) badly needs professionals (including gender specialists) coming from various interdisciplinary fields. Specialists never end up here due to various reasons (instability of the sector, scarcity of resources, low status of the sector, etc). What can be done to infuse with (gender) professionalism the civil society?
- How (and if) universities are willing to “use” the gender specialists (produced by them!)? Although gender studies appeared quite easily, the academic and scientific community marginalizes them, not seeing them as an alternative/complementary useful type of knowledge. Will the academic world integrate gender knowledge or will be just tolerant towards these new approaches keeping them at the margins of mainstreaming disciplines?
- How/if will research institutions use this new expertise? Developing and using gender sensitive indicators, launching qualitative gender sensitive researches request funds and expertise. We lack funds, very few gender specialists are within research institutions, initiating gender sensitive research is not on the national research priority list.
- Brain drain having gender studies as ” block-starts” for further carriers outside Romania. What happened with generations of graduates of MA (or other modules, programmes) in gender studies in Romania or abroad (such as CEU)-how/if they used (inside or outside Romania) their gender

⁴ See “Women and Civil Society. Directory of Romanian NGOs”, AnA Centre, www.anasaf.ro (English, French, Romanian version, 2003)

- knowledge. (my personal experience: huge disproportion between recommendations” given over time and any kind of information/contacts/collaboration in return).
- Does this domain offer a respectable future oriented carrier opportunity? Teaching gender studies in university is not as prestigious as teaching other things. 2002 year candidates who failed entering an MA programme on anthropology “choused” the MA in gender –some of them never hearing about gender!. Paradoxically, in the end they proved to be among the best students).

4 Some lessons (un)learned or to be learned

- An **integrative approach** to gender based knowledge. After the separation period, necessary and justified up to a moment, it is now time to infuse gender sensitivity, gender knowledge, gender relevant research within various disciplines. It is time to come from the margins to the center!
- Promotion of existing national, regional gender expertise (using/trusting existing gender experts in national and regional research programmes; start **mobility** between local experts within one country and within the SEE region)
- More **pragmatically** institutional approaches, attitudes towards “gender experts” produced (coordination between the market needs and the competencies offered). “Help” market absorb them and not waste such competencies; match the market needs with the gender knowledge and competencies offered by these students, “use” MA, PhD students for launching coherent, systematic programme of gendering research in Romania.
- Pay special attention to the **quality** of gender studies programmes-with a special focus in the pedagogical side and on the outcomes of the learning programme. Look also at selection of students (motivation, minimal level of knowledge), the coherency of the education offer; make use of learning standards and indicators. Pay attention to the quality of gender sensitive types of research initiated.
- Make better use of ICTs impact on education and connect better among individuals and institutions in the benefit of strengthening and enriching gender studies programmes (virtual universities, virtual tours, distance learning programmes) and gender sensitive relevant research. Using new educational technologies should be an indicator of the quality of educational offer, of the competencies produced in the area.

This is for the moment a wishful list. Beyond the “success story” of institutionalizing gender studies in Romania there is still a long way to go in order for society to really benefit from its potential. Much is to be done for transforming this official qualification of “gender expert” from a peripheral, conjunctural, marginalized (or not integrated), narrow carrier option, into a needed and prestigious academic qualification to be used in researching, understanding and consequently combating the still existing explicit and implicit gender discriminations in our societies. Much depends on those already committed to the domain -- few but... stubborn.