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**GENDER STUDIES IN ROMANIA - BETWEEN THE EU AND  
BUREAUCRATIC OPPORTUNISM**

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**Abstract**

In the context of promoting economic dynamics as the driving force of designing public policies, some fields of studies (areas of education) proved to be more provocative regarding the way they managed to create their own area both in relation with the democratic imperative of making citizens good people and with the neoliberal one, the one of training skilled market/profit-oriented labour force. Gender studies are one of the fields whose institutionalization (establishing/recognizing as a norm) and professionalization (the establishment of new professions in the employment sector has always been complex, difficult and even contested. Lots of variables are being used in order to explain this multidimensional reality, and it is necessary to underline once again that to train competences for the labour market as well as for the human activity (as values and needs) is quite difficult. In order to emphasize the process of institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies I will use two frames of analysis. I will first present what I consider important - the macro-European dynamics which over time drew up the frame for the institutionalization, consolidation and professionalization of genders studies. Secondly, I will have a closer look into the Romanian case which will be in-depth described, analysed and used as an example in order to have a better understanding of the on-going and subtle process that links gender studies education to the labour environment.

2672-815X © 2023 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Gender studies, gender expertise, institutionalisation, profesionalisation, Romania**1. Introduction**

Even though all over the world we are still living in the gender inequalities real world the gender backlash perfectly describes what is happening now in academia and beyond it. We have recently witnessed a growing coalition of conservative, neoliberal and religious forces that promotes strong public discourse against the so called ‘gender ideology’, targeting minority rights in general and particularly LGBTI human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, sexual education, politically correct policies, feminist and women’ movement (Băluță, 2020; Frey et al., 2014; Juhász & Pap, 2018; Kováts & Poim, 2015; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2019; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018, etc.). Gender Studies programs have become a key target for all these anti-discourses, acting like a *sui generis* container for all the complaints. As a consequence, in many countries, including Romania, the Gender Studies field is under threat. Opponents are using also a neoliberal rhetoric, saying that gender studies programs waste public money, are not market oriented, do not attract students, and do not guarantee the successful integration of graduates into the labour market, shortly failing in linking schools and trainings to labour market (a sin too serious to be overlooked). In this context I consider particularly important to have a closer look to the institutionalisation and professionalisation of gender studies and trainings also at a macro (European) level, but also at a micro (country specific level).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Competences training for the labour market is a topic that aroused the interest of many scholars in different fields (economy, sociology etc.) but also of the policy makers and politicians. Nowadays skills training for “the market” and “the market” it as a solution for any type of problem represent the spill-over effect of neoliberalism (Nicolescu & Neaga, 2014, p. 106). But even though the economic dynamics have been promoted as the driving force of designing public policies, the equation proved to be a bit more complicated in education and research and, I would say it should be addressed in a more in-depth way if we still assume that school must “produce” knowledge and good citizens apart from the applicable knowledge to secure global competitiveness, as Sabine Hark (2016) points out.

Gender studies represent one of the fields of whose institutionalization (established/recognized as a norm) and professionalization (the establishment of new professions in the employment sector (Silius, 2007) have always been complex, difficult and even contested. Lots of variables are being used in order to explain this multidimensional reality, underlining once again that training competences for labour market and also for the human activity (as values and needs) is not an easy thing to do. In order to throw some light into the process of institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies, with special regard to the Romanian case, I will use two frames of analysis. I will first present what I consider important macro-European dynamics which overtime drew up the frame for the institutionalization, consolidation and professionalization of genders studies. Secondly, I will have a closer look into the Romanian case which will be in-depth described, analysed and used as an example in order to have a better perception of the on-going and subtle process that links gender studies education to the labour environment.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main research question I will try to find an answer for is: how we can map the complex process of the institutionalisation and professionalization of gender studies, gender trainings and gender expertise in Romania? Other important related questions are: What are the factors that helped the process of institutionalisation and professionalization of those competences in Romania?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to offer a clearer image about the way in which the process of doing competences and expertise in the area of gender inequalities has been established and consolidated (if so). The process will be analysed in relation with the European frame in the field, but also with the more local perspective offered by the national Romanian context.

#### **5. Research Methods**

In order to give relevant answers to my herein research questions I choose the exploratory research in which I used mainly qualitative methods, namely documents analysis but also participant observation, as I am a researcher in the Romanian gender studies field and a teacher, deeply involved in the process.

#### **6. Findings**

##### **6.1. The EU - setting the stage for gender studies**

Even though we can currently say that gender studies (women and gender studies) is now a consolidated academic field of teaching, learning and research, that has immensely grown in recent decades (has space in buildings and on library shelves, being represented by professorships and scholarships, specialist degrees and courses, dedicated conferences and publications, physical and online networks, and professional associations) (Pereira, 2018, p. 180) the process can hardly be described as being easy, uniform, linear, progressive. Au contraire, lots of debates, attacks, back steps, critiques were brought to the light over time, some of them related even with the name of the field (Hemmings, 2006; Pereira, 2017; Pereira, 2018). For instance, it is notorious that the case of the Central European University (CEU) attacks against gender studies programs ended in closing the university and moving it to Vienna.

Coming back to the macro framework that shaped the institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies & training it is important to have a closer look to the process, but also to the principles and values that have been put to the table for this alleged support of this study field, and as a consequence the transfer to the labour market.

I consider the EU to have been an important player in the process of institutionalization of gender studies (especially in former communist countries), but also of the transition from institutionalization to professionalization. Some elements which have contributed to this alliance, that might not be undertaken and acknowledged as such, had an impact both on the aspect of the present educational and on the aspect of the labour market, regarding the integration of the themes related to gender issues.

First of all, the EU was an important player in officially and politically recognizing gender inequalities and the need for intervention in order to stop them. Through treaties, the EU commits to the

objective of promoting gender equality amongst men and women (see Art. 2 and 3 (2) EC) and has designed over the years a series of directives in the field. A red line of acknowledging gender inequalities and the measures to fight it is visible within the EU, maybe not fortuitous, starting in the 70s, even though to various intensities and especially with a focus on certain fields such as the labour market (Arribas & Carrasco, 2003). The initial focus on labour market was underlined also by Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2008, pp. 101–129) who state that in the nineties, and partially also in the eighties the EU gender policy was mainly based on the concept of equal opportunities in the labour market. This approach based on ensuring equal opportunities complies with the liberal view on the appropriate strategies aimed on ceasing inequalities.

Second of all, adopting these directives, as well as other recommendations, declarations and later on the founding of the European Institute For Gender Equality has clearly acknowledged the need for data, research and expertise to implement such policies. And this could not have been accomplished without the institutionalization and also professionalization of knowledge that approaches feminist and gender themes, knowledge that is the guarantee of generating real and sustainable solutions going to be implemented in policies regarding gender inequality.

Moreover, the clear intention to contribute to the fight against gender inequality, including the professionalization and institutionalization of gender studies which in fact offer the needed expertise in an efficient intervention, can be best observed in the way the EU has designed the guidelines of the financing process. Thus, we mention on one hand the EU funds destined to gender equality, and here we have as an example the Daphne programme which has benefitted since 1997 (since the Daphne initiative) up until now (Daphne objective in REC Programme) of no less than approximately 311 000 000 euro (FEEM Committee, 2019, p. 22). At the same time, it is worth mentioning the fact that the EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025 “includes specific “enabling conditions”, requiring a Member State to have a national gender equality strategic framework as a precondition to use the funds when investing to improve the gender balance in the labour market, work-life balance or childcare infrastructure. Another horizontal ‘enabling condition’ on effective implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights includes gender equality as one of its key principles” (A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, p. 16). The availability of funding is mentioned by Pereira (2018) as an important macro-level factor favouring the institutionalization of gender studies (p. 183).

Given the fact that the EU has committed to the 17 objectives of long-term development drawn by the UNO, which must be accomplished by 2030, amongst which we can name objective number 5 concerning gender equality, the EU has committed the cross-sectional implementation of this objective, also through financing mechanisms. This commitment is comprised in the 8th article in TFUE: “Through all its actions, the EU aims at eliminating inequality and promoting equality amongst men and women.”

Also, starting with the Amsterdam Treaty (1997-1999), by committing to gender mainstreaming as a main strategy to fight against inequality, the EU opens the way to a formal and analytical, and all the more practical acknowledgement of the complexity of gender inequality and of the need to intervene accordingly. In other words, we are referring to the EU transitioning from policies based on inclusion or affirmative policies (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, pp. 21-46), carried out especially towards tackling gender inequality in the labour market to “the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation,

design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programs, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination” (EIGE, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, we are referring to an acknowledgement of the complexity of gender inequalities which requires a matching intervention, meaning a sustained intervention based especially on a deep understanding of the way in which the figures that encompass gender inequalities are designed. The complexity of gender mainstreaming is obvious (Bustelo, 2003; Daly, 2005; Hubert & Stratigaki, 2016), all the more so if we have a look at the perspective it states - the deconstruction one (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 24) – a frame that needs a continuous critical and analytical effort. Therefore, it is easy to raise the legitimate question: who can perform gender mainstreaming in the public policies from within the members of the EU. Who has the expertise required and how is it attained and validated on the labour market in the member states as well as in the EU at large?

The effort to find answer to these questions leads us to the fourth element by means of which we consider the EU to have contributed to the institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies, namely the Bologna process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. The Bologna process could have had a substantial impact on the institutionalization of gender studies within various state members due the establishment of a European system of credits and the promotion of mobility. In the same time Isabel Carrera Suárez and Laura Viñuela Suárez (2006) explain in fact the paradox that implementing the Bologna process was rather taken over by national mechanisms and practice and it was disconnected from its European dimension which would have had potential in institutionalizing and professionalizing gender studies (Suárez & Suárez, 2006, p. 105).

The above-mentioned factors are useful to understand the premises created in the EU for the institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies, implicitly for the labour market integration of gender studies graduates. Despite this, we cannot talk about uniformity on a European level from this point of view. The particularities of what happened in Romania in respect with the overall process of institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies will be described in the following pages.

## **6.2. The Romanian case study**

Describing the way feminist issues entered on the formal agenda in Romania, Mihaela Miroiu says that, in countries like Romania, where the vibe of conservatism was still vibrant and in contrast with the women emancipation and empowerment promoted in the field of gender studies, the EU forced the adoption of a legal framework in the field of equal opportunities and non-discrimination promoting a room service feminism (Miroiu, 2004, p. 257). In line with the room service feminism, Romania has adopted, as pre-conditions for the EU accession, the Law 202/2002 regarding equal opportunities and treatment between women and men, the Law no. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence, Government Ordinance no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination. Also, in the same pre-accession process two new central public institutions have been designed: The National Council for Combating Discrimination and National Agency for Equal Opportunities. The Law 202/2002 regarding equal opportunities and treatment between women and men includes important provisions regarding the principle of mainstreaming gender in all the public policy decision, but also the recommendation for the public institutions with more than 50 employees to

have/hire an “equal opportunity expert (art.2, alin 4. introduced in 2013). Also the law has provisions regarding the need for public and private institutions to develop and implement gender equality plans and internal policies regarding gender based discrimination and harassment. All his provisions are stating, on the one side, that gender-based inequalities are a problem that needs to be systematically addressed, but on the other side that this problem can and must be addressed by experts. But who are the gender experts in Romania? This is a question that I will try to give an answer in the following pages.

Besides these formal steps taken by Romania, other important and maybe less visible dynamics are useful in understanding the process of institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies/expertise in Romania. In order to have a better understanding of the process we should look at three main actors (and their strategies/paths) that had decisive influence in this respect: the academia, the civil feminist society and the state.

### **6.2.1. The academic path (the beginning)**

In Romania the beginning of institutionalization of gender studies in academia can be placed in the 90s – 1992-1993, when some avant-garde teachers like Ludwig Grünberg who coordinates Mihaela Miroiu<sup>1</sup> in writing the first Romanian PhD thesis on feminist philosophy (Miroiu, 2006, p. 90). We are talking about few isolated classes held in public universities which started to introduce feminism as a research area (Miroiu, 2004, pp. 34-35). A chronology of the most important moments in the development of the academic path must not skip the following moments: 1993 – *Analize*, first Romanian feminist journal; 1994 – first class on gender – faculty of philosophy, Bucharest University (Mihaela Miroiu); 1998 – first MA in gender/feminist studies National School of Political Studies and Public Administration; 2000 The Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Group – Cluj Napoca (think-tank); 2003 The Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Center - West University, Timisoara (think-tank); 2011- The Center for the Study of Equal Opportunities Policies, Bucharest University (think-tank); 2011 - MA Le Master les Politiques de l'égalité des chances en Roumanie el l'Union Européenne, Bucharest University (Băluță & Cîrstocea, 2002; Miroiu, 2004, pp. 34-35). The maximum success of this path is represented by the two MA programs under the umbrella of the Political Sciences Faculties from the two prestigious Romanian Universities: National School of Political Studies and Public Administration and the University of Bucharest. We can say that we are in a phase of integration where the Gender Studies modules become part of the core compulsory provision of traditional disciplines (Griffin, 2005, pp. 89–90; Tuori & Silius, 2002).

### **6.2.2. The civil society (feminist NGOs) path**

The Romanian feminist civil society was also an avant-garde of the feminist movement, due his extremely important critical role in a democratic society (Miroiu, 2004, p. 243). The first feminist NGOs in the post-communist Romania were deeply connected to the academic feminism, many feminist scholars being also founders of NGOs like AnA The Society for Feminist Analyses, Filia Centre (Miroiu, 2004, p. 243). Later on, the academic feminism fuelled with expertise at least a part of the feminist civil

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most important feminist thinkers in Romania who was a key actor in building the gender studies school for National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest.

society organisations like ALEG, Front, Centre Partnership for Equality. Those NGO's were always in close contact with feminists from academia and with their work and produced over time by contagion competences in the area. There were also persons in this NOGs which obtained their competences in practice and from grass-roots field work – like Irina Sorescu (CPE), Daniela Draghici (AnA&ROWL), Camelia Proca (ALEG), just to give some name of important/publicly recognized Romanian women rights activists. We are talking here about an informal/public recognition of the competences and not a formal/legal one due the fact that these persons were trapped into the process of institutionalisation and professionalisation of gender studies in Romania. Some of them had been working in the field long before the gender studies had a place in the Romanian Universities and long before they had a formal and legal recognised occupation in the field in the Romanian Occupations Nomenclator. It is also important to say that founding institutions like Open Society Institute, Mama Cash, and later on EEA and Norway Grants and the European Commission had an very important and publicly assumed role in the consolidation of this part of the Romanian civil society.

All this time, one of the most important problem academia and feminist civil society faced was *the missing formal recognition* of the educational training and expertise developed in those institutions and, as we shall see, *the lack of public/political institutional support* in recognizing the competences developed in the higher education system (Vincze, 2002, p. 215). Until 2014 in Romania there were no officially recognised occupation to certify the expertise and the competences in the specific field of equal opportunities, non-discrimination, gender equality. The need for such a recognition took the shape of an advocacy campaign that was initiated in 2008 by Centre Partnership for Equality (CPE). The NGO advocated for the formal recognition of a new occupation, namely the gender expert. In that year CPE had advocacy meeting with National Agency for Equal Opportunities Between Women and Men (NAEO) and the Ministry of Labor. Even NAEO supported the first intervention done by CPE, the Ministry of Labor gave a formal and evasive replay and did not back up the initiative. Furthermore, CPE brought the problem into discussion every time the Mistry of Labour initiated changes in the Occupations Nomenclator, but with no positive outcome. Also, CPE sent official letters to NAEO in this respect in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2014. An official letter was sent in 2013 to the agency of occupation and equal opportunities; other working/advocacy meetings with official representatives of NAEO and The Ministry of Labor followed. The problem was also stated in the national commission for equal opportunities between women and men but with no results.<sup>2</sup>

### **6.2.3. The government(s) solution – or the third path**

As we have noticed, the governments into power over time did not actively get involved in recognising gender expertise and in consolidating the institutionalisation and professionalization in the field even though they had the main responsibility (as EU recommends) but also the needed resources (especially of authority) in doing so. Even more, the governments were reluctant in addressing the need of formal recognition of gender expertise. But, in 2014 – the govern (National Agency For Equal Opportunities Between Women and Men (NAEO) and the Ministry of Labor), in a very fast process were obtaining the formal recognition of two new occupations - equal opportunity expert and equal opportunity

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<sup>2</sup> Data offered by CPE.

technician. Nor the academia/higher education experts, nor CPE NGO experts were asked for cooperation, even though they campaigned at least 6 years for this issue. When asked, NAEO said they worked with experts for the Ministry of Labor. They also decided to change the occupation from gender expert to equal opportunities expert (even though the occupational standard is more appropriate for gender expert). In the same time, they decided also to have a secondary education level expert - the equal opportunities technician (for medium level of education). The result was the two positions in the nomenclator in August 2014.

But what happened in 2014 that produced this important shift in the political/public institution approach regarding the institutionalization and professionalization of the competences in the field of gender studies? The answer is for us to consider going back to the macro level influencing factors of the process that were theocratized by Pereria, namely the availability of founding. More exactly, in November 2014 the Department for Equal Opportunities Between Women and Men (NAEO) together with Mihai Viteazu National Academy of Information was launching EU founded START project (POSDRU /170/6.3/ S/146738), 170.207.156 lei, around 38 millions of Euro. Among the main activities of the project there were: obtaining credentials for training futures “equal opportunities” experts and technicians and training for no less than 1100 equal opportunities experts and 3978 equal opportunities technicians from public structures<sup>3</sup>. The training program was the responsibility of Mihai Viteazu National Academy of Information and the occupational standards were written mainly by experts from The Police Academy Alexandru Ioan Cuza<sup>4</sup>. The epistemological authority in the field of gender studies of those two universities is at least debatable (they do not have classes on gender, nor other programs in the field) as it is surprising that NSPSA and Bucharest University, which had the only two recognized MA programs in the field. Also, none of the existing gender studies programs or experts have been involved in the process, neither as a resource for training new experts, nor as a resource of experts already trained. CPE NGO that advocated for years for having in the Romanian Occupations Nomenclator an occupation related to the gender studies field was also not involved in the process.

## 7. Conclusions

In order to have a better understanding of what happened in Romania from the perspective of institutionalising and professionalising gender studies/expertise some milestones are needed. First, the gap between on the one side the academia/higher education system and the feminist civil society, and on the other side the governmental institutions in charge with gender issues/inequalities (Miroiu, 2004, p. 277). This gap resulted in three different ways of institutionalizing and professionalising gender studies/gender expertise, the relevant agency factors developing different strategies in order to specifically address the Romanian reality of gender-based inequalities. The academia agency played the

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<sup>3</sup> Form the data released by The Romanian National Authority of Qualification, 2021 in Romania there were 7 training providers in the field of equal opportunities. All of them are doing training only for equal opportunity experts. From the same data we find out that until 2021, 1990 equal opportunities experts were trained in Romania, 1243 women and 747 men.

<sup>4</sup> Mihai Viteazu National Academy of Information expertise in gender/equal opportunities studies need to be further investigated.



card of academic autonomy, of the freedom of critical exploring the social space offered by the field and the openness to the western values and ideologies offered by the post-communist transition (Miroiu, 2004; Miroiu, 2005). The feminist civil society played the card of external founding used in the process of democratisation and the “at work”, informal professionalization strategy. This strategy implied a lot of vulnerability due its lack of legal/formal recognition and we can assume this is an important reason for the advocacy campaign developed by CPE NGO in order to have an occupation in the field. The political/public institution agency played the card of bureaucratic opportunism - bureaucrats trying to maximize their benefits (Niskanen, 1975) - due the fact that even the academia and NGO pushed the issue on the formal agenda for years, the EU was also promoting gender equality as a core European value, even if the internal legislation was in favour, no space for public/political intervention on the field being funded until an important amount of money was found – see the START project.

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