

The practical political significance of gender studies educational programs in the realization of gender equality

Keynote lecture of Zita Gurmai, Member of the European Parliament
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Ladies and gentlemen,
dear friends,

thank you very much for giving me the floor. I am very happy to be here with you today, and to be able to discuss a subject that is of a crucial importance: the practical significance of gender studies educational programs in the realization of gender equality. All the more, today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. A day when we should reflect the role of gender in our lives, and when we should reflect on the roots of inequalities and power relations between men and women.

I am delighted at this Tuning Brochure I hold in my hands, a text that will allow European gender studies departments and educational programs to converge their requirements and curricula.

I am no scholar in the field of gender equality. I am a woman of action by nature. But let me tell you, I think that this Brochure is a product that any progressive person of action will find practical and useful. This Brochure, if implemented, will have a wide impact on gender equality, an impact that I am quite looking forward to. This impact is the focus of my current lecture: I wish to elaborate my vision on the practical importance of gender studies, gender equality educational programs and this Brochure. (Well, I have to elaborate, as it is clear for one thing that policy makers will not be running up and down the corridors of parliaments with this Brochure in their hands...)

My lecture will be divided into four parts. In the first part, I will talk about the significance of gender equality sciences in the policy making process. In fact, I will speak about my personal experiences and opinion on the matter. In the second part, I'll develop my views more concretely on gender equality educational programs. In the third part, I will analyze the importance of gender scholars, theorists and gender studies graduates in day-to-day politics and political debates. Finally, as a fourth and last part, I will talk a little bit about what lies ahead for those scholars and politicians who consider the subject of gender as important.

The significance of gender equality sciences in the policy making process

When I was asked to participate, as a member of the validation panel, to the creation of the this Tuning Brochure, I accepted it because I always thought that gender studies were intimately linked to the practical work I do, to the policy decisions I make every day. Gender studies in fact are the theoretic and scientific background for my policy decisions. It is a scientific field that provides supporting data and arguments for my day to day work in the field of gender equality. To put it a little bluntly: those people, who work in gender studies, are either those who provide help and input for me in order to make good policy decisions, or the ones who afterwards carry out the

decisions, the policies in practice.

But, the sad truth is, that this link is not always as strong as it should be. For me, this link between policies, politics, and gender studies should be even more strengthened in the future.

In the European Parliament, I am a member – among other Committees – of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. There, we have a recurring problem. In the case of many legislative proposals, action plans, opinions, reports, we have no or few data to rely on, we have no real assessment process when it comes to the implementation; and if the proposal is adopted, we have a real hard time to get feedback and evaluate the outcome.

However, in my view, equality policies should work the same way as any other policy area: by going along the complete policy circle. That is, by not bypassing any of these phases: observation, research and information gathering, goal setting and planning, the evaluation of alternatives, decision making, implementation, follow-up, evaluation, termination or continuation.

It is clear to me that the acts of goal setting and decision making are the sole responsibility of politicians and elected officials. But before and after that, gender equality policies desperately need the input of scholars and gender studies graduates in order to make these policies work in practice. It is not sufficient to decide and adopt. Decisions and policies should be well founded, executable and efficient. We cannot create good policies without the input of gender studies scholars and graduates.

We have to work closely with each other. I believe that the strengthening of the link between practice and theory, may not only strengthen gender equality policies and make them more credible and applicable. They may also fasten the development of a certain gender mainstreaming vision among all European decision makers, may they work on a European, national or a local level.

This Tuning Brochure is one step towards this, on the part of the academic field. Another step, on the part of the political field, that I am delighted to mention here, is the foundation of a new EU agency, the European Institute for Gender Equality based in Vilnius, the task of which is to gather, analyze and disseminate the data and information I was talking about earlier.

So, in a nutshell, the subject of gender studies and gender studies educational programs is a personal issue for me for practical reasons: I experience their importance each and every day with my work.

On gender equality educational programs

I participate to a lot of discussions, conferences and panels on gender equality. There is a recurring theme among feminists, scholars and politicians: the problem of awareness raising and the force of stereotypes. It is often said that in order to reach real equality among men and women, we should break the stereotypes impregnated to the public thinking. There, I agree completely.

But awareness raising and stereotype breaking have at least two dimensions to distinguish, one of which is formal education. (I'll be back to the other dimension, to the dimension of public debates

later).

Now, as for the dimension of formal education, gender equality educational programs may have an awareness raising effect in two ways.

The first one: classical gender equality educational programs, the ones the Tuning Brochure talks about. I have already explained the practical importance of gender studies in policy making. But I have a broader social argument as well. We must also understand that gender is a vision, a critical method of interpreting the world around us. Gender equality graduates voluntarily or involuntarily acquire this vision, this sensitiveness, and when they get to work in any area of the labor market, they help this vision to penetrate and impregnate our social thinking. I find it evident that it would be very good to enroll as many students as possible in these programs.

Now, as for the second way to awareness raising. The Tuning Brochure focuses mostly on standalone educational programs, but I have to mention the fact that in the majority of universities, specialized departments usually also provide modules and courses for students who work in other educational programs. So I think that gender equality departments should reach out to students who are enrolled in other fields than gender equality and should help them to explore and understand this vision of society, this branch of social sciences.

What is more, the majority of higher educational institutions require the completion of a certain amount of core modules and courses, regardless of the program you are enrolled in. In the majority of cases, these modules and courses contain philosophy, sociology, economics, political sciences, statistics, or any other basic sciences.

I wonder what if gender studies would become one of these basic modules or courses? What if every student would be required to work, at least once during their studies, on the problem of gender equality? One may say that it is a distant dream, an unattainable goal. I myself think it is a realistic aspiration, only we won't be able to carry it out instantly, only in time. There are already examples to watch, and eventually, to follow.

For example, a French *grande école*, the famous Institute of Political Sciences, also known as Sciences-Po, requires, from 2011 on, that each student spends at least one semester studying the question of gender equality, understanding the fact that there are indeed differences between men and women, but apart from the biological differences, they are not natural at all. Anyway, this program is supposed to be a multidisciplinary one, policy matters including. We should not forget that this *grande école* is one the most important ones in France – the one that educates many of the political and economic leaders of the future. If this program succeeds, then the future leaders of France will be in fact sensitized to the problem of gender equality. I will closely follow and study this example during the coming years, because I firmly believe that this is an important path on the road we call awareness raising.

The importance of gender theory in day-to-day politics

As I mentioned before, awareness raising has another dimension as well, and with this, I am moving on to the third part of my lecture, that is, the importance of gender theory in day-to-day politics.

We need a lot of consciousness here. And when I say consciousness, I am talking about a certain consciousness concerning the nature of the words we use. Because, in fact, when we say that we have to break stereotypes, we also have to break meanings. It is easy to say, but harder to do. And it may be trivial, but it is all the more important.

The words we use in politics, the words we appoint as values in political discourses, are in fact polysemantic words: ambiguous words. This polysemantic nature of words makes public debates possible. If there were no concurrent meanings, there would be no debates either. However, for the majority of people, for the majority of voters, words are just words. They will settle for a single meaning and won't think about concurrences and alternate meanings. Therefore, in the public sphere, political forces battle for these meanings in the heads of voters. Again, it may be trivial, but it is of an utmost importance.

For instance, the use of the word "gender" presupposes a clear value choice among concurrent meanings of the words "woman", "man", and "family". Just let me put one short and practical example here. When conservatives say "family", they think about a man and a woman, preferably in marriage, with children. In my country, Hungary, conservatives like to add the assumption that it is the task of the man to be the primary breadwinner, and it is the task of the woman to stay with the children. That is the conservative meaning of the word family.

For us, feminists, and socialists, "family" is an emotional and financial community, where two people chose voluntarily to share their lives and to raise children. "Family" has many practical forms of appearance: classical marriage, companionship, gay marriage, registered partnerships, these all with or without children, then there are single-parent families and other family-forms I will not enumerate here due to lack of time. You notice that I put no requirements here concerning the sex of the participants or the legal framework they chose. That is our feminist, socialist meaning of the word "family".

I have to admit, that the conservatives score now much better at this linguistic battle than progressives do, even if families in practice are rarely the way the conservatives want them to be. But it is a constant battle to try to render our meaning the primary meaning in the case of words of importance. The case of the word "family" is a striking example, but I could have enumerated numerous others as well. The linguistic battle is a practical power struggle that we can never ignore.

During these hard political debates, I really find it necessary to turn to gender theories, and thus solidify my arguments. The linguistic battle is another field where gender studies can be absolutely useful in practice. I believe that this is another area where the cooperation between gender equality scholars and progressive politicians is desperately needed. Winning the linguistic battle is an obligatory precondition for us to realize gender equality, and I am counting on the theoretical input of the gender studies academic community in the future as well.

Dear friends,

using the word "gender" presupposes the acceptance of the fact that in society, there is a power relation between men and women, and that this relation is structural and of a social origin. When

you are studying or working in the field of gender equality, and when you use the word “gender”, you are likely to accept this. After all, that is the point in using the distinction between biological sex and social gender. (At least for those who do not believe that the only way to keep a woman happy is to keep her barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen...)

I would like to stress something very important here. Feminism is a critical movement. Gender studies are a critical theory, a critical science based on the assumption that this structural power relation between men and women exists; that this power relation is of a social origin – and far from natural. In the field of feminism and gender, like it or not, research and any action necessarily mean work in order to put an end to this unjustifiable power relation.

Maybe I'll be harsh here, but that is why there is no such thing as right-wing feminism. Certain conservatives declare themselves protectors of women's interests, and do everything to push women back to their traditional role in the old power structure – but that is not feminism. They may call themselves “feminists”, “real feminists”, whatever, but they are not feminists. They are simply conservatives, protectors of an outdated power structure. When a progressive person says “feminism”, they think about a critical, but open and progressive agenda.

I think that this linguistic and scientific rigor concerning the notion of feminism is necessary. We must pay attention to the labels we use, either in politics or in science. You understand the reason why: the word feminism itself has become a polysemantic, ambiguous word, as the opponents of critical feminism began to give it a concurrent meaning.

This is another task I mentally assign to gender equality educational programs. Gender equality educational programs are able to pass on this methodological and linguistic rigor to graduates who will be able to pass it onward to other members of the society. A slow process of awareness raising, I admit, but an effective one, as the arguments of a graduate are always founded and supported by scientific evidence.

Remember, no one believed that the Earth was round when it was first said centuries ago. It took years and years of public debate, time, research and persuasion to make it acceptable for everyone. And, I may add, it took centuries to rehabilitate those who were the first to say that the Earth was not flat...

I hope that it will work more quickly with gender equality than with the shape of the Earth. I hope that gender studies and their vision will be able to impregnate, as soon as possible, policies, politics, and then the whole society. Just as stereotypes did once.

What lies ahead

I should warn you, that the task will not be easy. And with that, I am arriving to my fourth and last point.

Conservative political forces are completely aware of the significance of the word “gender”. They understand its implications. That's why they fight it tooth and nail, that is why they try to pose themselves as “feminists”.

They are completely aware of the fact that the roles of women are about to change. They are completely aware of the fact that women are educated, that they are not less capable than men. Conservatives are completely aware of the fact that modern women are more likely to bear children if they feel safe on the labor market and if men take their part in child raising and household duties. Conservatives are completely aware of the fact that the vision of gender is about to turn our societies upside down. For the better, I might add. Conservatives are aware of the fact that the outdated order, or what they consider as order, is about to perish; for it will be harder and harder to push women back to the private sphere. There will be a new model of society, eventually, but there, women will be more free than ever before, and less easy to be prevailed over.

But the slow change in society does not mean that conservatives don't aspire back to a world where women had their "due place and role", to the world that conservatives believe to be order.

We should not kid ourselves. There are, and there will be conservative backlashes and threats to women's liberties. In times of crisis, for example, it is easy to say, that all problems are due to the fact that the "natural order of things" was blown over.

Just let me give you one striking threat. There is a strong pressure now on the labor market. The unemployment is high. Many men have lost their jobs due to the crisis. Now let's forget the fact that many women have lost their jobs as well. Conservative and neopopulist governments may decide to ease the tension on the labor market to the detriment of women, by trying to pull women back to the private sphere. A few policy ideas here so you can understand what I'm talking about: pushing back women to the private sphere, to the sole role of mothers; encouraging outdated role models in the name of morals and traditional values; creating or maintaining long maternity leaves; offering too high tax credits for those with children; creating a family taxation system where women's income becomes less important; attempting to end the individualization of rights in pension, health care and other social systems; abandon the promotion of paternity leave; threatening sexual and reproductive health rights, especially when it comes to planned parenthood, contraception and abortion.

If I had more time, I could spend long minutes just enumerating the concrete measures similar to the ones I mentioned above, introduced or planned by the new Hungarian right-wing government, in order to push women back to the kitchen, barefoot, pregnant and all. This time, I would only suggest that if someone pronounced the words "order", "women", and "natural" in the same sentence, begin to be very mistrustful.

Anyway, if it weren't really tragic, I would be quite amused by the brand new rumor I've heard concerning the upcoming Hungarian Presidency of the Council: it is said that the Hungarian government will try to replace all occurrences of the word "gender" with the word "family" in legislative texts. Well, I am quite looking forward to such linguistic innovations such as "family pay gap" or "family-based violence"... you see, they try to extend the domestic linguistic battle to a European level.

Conclusion

As I haven't got much time left, I am proceeding to my conclusion.

To sum up, in my opinion, gender studies graduates may provide either input to gender-sensitive policy measures, or they may take care of the practical implementation thereof.

Horizontal or general gender equality educational programs may help to disseminate the vision of gender equality among our societies, therefore they are of an utmost importance. We should closely monitor all already existing horizontal programs and good practices, and we should evaluate them very carefully.

Gender studies graduates and gender theory scholars may provide arguments to progressive forces during public discussions and political debates as well. I believe that they should analyze those conservative and neopopulist measures and ideas that threaten women's liberties, and I also believe they should come up with alternative policies, solutions and ideas whenever the progressive agenda seems to be exhausted. Well, even before the progressive agenda would ever become exhausted!

And one last point. One might say that my vision of gender studies and of gender equality educational programs is over politicized. It may be true, and I gladly acknowledge it. But there is one thing I am sure of: gender equality educational programs, like it or not, are politically committed educational programs. I believe that gender equality educational programs are committed to the fact that the so-called order where women are put down is not a natural one, but a social one. And an unjust one, I might add. If it is to be considered as partisan politics, so be it.

Thank you very much for your attention.