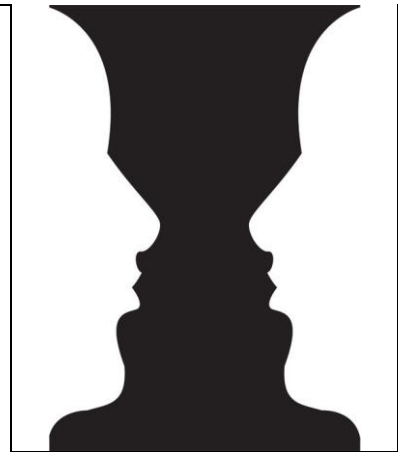


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## Gendering research: from skepticism to trust

### *General contexts, local comments*

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#### **Abstract**

*The article presents the current volume in relation to the context of gender research and education in present-day Romania. The author discusses, from a participant's perspective, the development and the state of gender studies in Romania, while addressing questions such as 'why study gender?' – and how should gender be studied.*

#### **Keywords**

*Gender, gender sensitive research, gender studies*

#### **Introduction**

For more than 15 years I have « done » and lived feminism in Romania: as an activist within a Romanian NGO, as a teacher in Gender Studies, as a woman, wife and mother in post communist Romania. The years spent in reading and doing feminism(s) in Romania have been a long series of personal lessons about innocence and pragmatism, enthusiasm and bureaucracy, successes and failures, contradictions between theoretic and applied feminism, about women, femininities, women movement, Balkan and post communism transition specificities. It was not always easy, comfortable to call myself 'feminist' in Romania: ironical smiles, self imposed censoring when expressing in public feminist views (e.g. avoiding, when possible, pronouncing the term feminism, paying more attention than usual to 'appropriate' appearances), visible skepticism and marginalization within the academic community. Lately the climate has changed in Romania as it was already the case in many other parts of the world. From a stage of a

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polite cohabitation in conformity with some not internalized western standards, academic feminism and gender sensitive research in general are today, more and more, not only tolerated but encouraged, and perceived as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ knowledge ventures.

It is in this normalized accepted context of sharing among scholars gender sensitive research that I would place this special issue on ‘Women and Men’ proposed by the *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* edited by the Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania. Before briefly introducing the articles I allow myself to comment on the need and benefits of gendering education and research and to offer a quick look at the developments in the area of gender studies in Romania.

### **Why study gender**

Why study gender? Why not – would be my first reaction. For me paying attention to gender is just an intelligent way of looking at life and, from this perspective, it is intriguing for how long gender has been ignored, pseudo included or alienated in the social and political knowledge (March, 1982). It is at least curious for me for how long research has been insensitive to gender issues taking into consideration that our everyday lives are so deeply gendered, that we think, do, feel, and act with our bodies that are gendered.

Why study gender? Another possible answer would be: because it still makes a difference in terms of social expectations, needs, opportunities, carrier paths, life cycles, resource allocation, etc. Looking at the gendered realities of today one may easily notice that quantitative and qualitative data show that, beyond progress, gender equality is still more of a desideratum. There are still significant gender gaps in sectors such as employment, health, education, and, maybe more important, conservative cultural gender models persist in societies<sup>2</sup>. In Romania for example, according to different statistics, women live below the average life expectancy in Europe, earn less money than men (because their involvement in lower paid domains), are victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. Less men than women are going to universities, representation of women in politics is low, domestic work is still heavily on women shoulders, media is full of gender stereotypes, there are visible hierarchies and discriminations among women and among men (not only between women and men) and some specific groups of women (Roma women, elderly or rural women, adolescent, lesbian women) face more problems in comparison with other more ‘privileged’ ones<sup>3</sup>. Complementary to such major visible, direct, explicit gender discriminations there are also a series of cumulative disadvantages, many apparent small things (‘boys networks’, cultural tolerance for

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<sup>2</sup> See for example global sources such as *The global Gender Gap Report 2009*, World Economic Forum: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf> .

<sup>3</sup> See sources such as [www.anes.ro](http://www.anes.ro), [www.insse.ro](http://www.insse.ro), and <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/eurostat/home>

sexual harassment, supportive discouragement, condescending chivalry, etc) well researched by now (Benokraitis, 1997) which maintain, in an unjustified and old fashioned way, gender discrepancies and even gender discriminations in Romanian society. So both hard and soft data show the prevalence of gender gaps that need to be understood, studied, in view of coping better with them and changing them.

Why study gender? Because of contained ingredients such as the hermeneutic of suspicious, the critical spirit, the desire not only to research but also to change, that could be found in the majority of feminist discourse and gender sensitive researches. Any good quality gender analysis is (or at least aspire to be) a refined intellectual exercise that helps the researcher to contextualize, to perceive the role of power in defining realities, to adapt personal views about life, readjust certainties, question norms, behaviours and practices, listen and be empathically to others needs and voices.

At first level talk about gender is for most people like fish talking about water (Lorber, 1997). It seems as something natural, it seems we all are 'connoisseurs' when, in fact, the intellectual journey of unraveling gender is a complicated and full of pitfalls one. Not an attribute but a verb, not (only) a social variable, universal but not uniform, about nature and culture, not (only) something that is learned, done, achieved but something that is 'always contextually defined and repeatedly constructed' (Scott, 1986. pg 1066), gender is not an explanation (or at least it should not be) as much as it should be an analytical category within which human think about and organize their social activity (Harding, 1986). Gender is about women, men and their femininities and masculinities in their multidimensional contexts, something that is 'constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the category of sex' (Butler, 1990, pg 21). In the same time gender could be a social practice (Connell, 1987) or perceived and discussed in terms of agency. Recent efforts to theorize gender involves subtle shifts from an account of 'how' gender operates under specific historical conditions to a universal claim about why gender performs particular social function (Hawkesworth, 1997, pg 680). From a maximalist stage (with focus on gender differences) theories moved to a minimalist approach (with accent on similarities). From an inclusionist phase (just adding women or gender) reflection on 'what is gender' moved to the separationist phase (emphasis on differences, on women's epistemological privilege) and then to the stage of deconstructing everything by following the postmodern trend. Today we speak about gender as intersectionality enriching the discussion started by Kimberley Crenshaw some years ago (Crenshaw, 1991). We try to include more than exclude learning from bell hooks (hooks, 1984), to be self critical with our perspectives on gender, to be informed and use the ongoing scientifically discoveries in other fields of research (biology, medicine, history, etc), to ungender gender, to avoid oversensitivity (only) to gender etc. Incomplete as it is, this quick tour of various theoretical perspectives on gender shows the affluence of the domain, the diversities of approaches and its dynamics. It makes the answer 'why study gender', even for the most conservative and skeptical ones, a rhetorical one.

So why study gender should no more be a question. *What* is gender is still an unanswered question. *How* to study gender is still a challenge. *What* is or should be the

role of feminist theory within the area of gender studies is still disputable. If today 'Why study gender' is no more a question and we are witnessing a wide variety of innovative self critical gender sensitive researches, this is the result of the last decade of international development of academic feminism, of women studies, feminist studies, gender studies (and more recently men's studies!). The development should continue as there is a need for gender know-how, for researches coming from interdisciplinary areas that will continue to infuse a gender dimension in social research. Consequently 'Gender Studies' should continue to be a fabrique of expertise, a laboratory of producing and sharing ideas from inter and multidisciplinary perspectives. I am pleased that, in the context of global growth of gender studies, Romania can today 'report' having a Gender Studies history of its own.

### **Gender studies in Romania at a glance**

Looking at Romania of 2010 through gender lens, one may easily notice a series of initiatives in the area of promoting gender equality that have been undertaken since 1990. Activists entered the women's movement in 1989 in a ideologically mined territory, full of stereotypes and unfavorable cultural clichés, stuffed by imported terms, concepts, strategies, experiences, many of them without any significance in a space dominated by the clones of Manole, the master Builder, and his sacrificial Ana's<sup>4</sup>. Immediately after 1989, there followed a period of exaltation, emotions, making up for the past for women and the women's movement in general. As we had been politically and ideologically invaded inside their bodies, we were happy they were allowed to have as many abortions as they wanted. As we had had enough (from a numerical point of view) women in positions of power, but all of them ugly, stupid and with a loop of hair, we refused being involved in politics (what a mistake!) and got more involved in an organizational life unknown until then- the civil society. In the last decade a lot has been done in the area of gender equality. At the level of normative environment the Constitution, Penal Code, Code of Work have been revised, containing now up to date provisions concerning equal opportunities between women and men. Important gender sensitive laws have been introduced (e.g. the law on parental leave; the law on domestic violence; legal provisions for addressing sexual harassment and, very important, the law on equal opportunity between women and men containing, beyond other aspects, reference to the multiple discrimination concept-much debated today).

In terms of **institutionalizing gender equality**, new institutions and mechanisms in support of equal opportunities between men and women have been created: the National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES) – established in 2002 and responsible for

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<sup>4</sup> The sacrificial theme of the legend of Manole is intensely circulated in the folklore of many other peoples. Whatever Manole, the Master Builder, may build by day it would collapse by night. The legend tells that it was only when Ana, the pregnant wife of Manole, was built alive inside the walls of the edifice that the monastery would stand erect.

the elaboration of the national strategies in the area<sup>5</sup>; the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD); the Parliamentary Commissions for Equal Opportunities; many women NGOs/networks and coalitions. Paradoxically this over-institutionalization was not followed by an increased creativity and efficiency but, on the contrary, by a process of ideas deflation and energy dispersion. The culture of dialogue and collaboration in the framework of this institutional ‘mushrooming’ was poor, monologues (inter-institutions, inside institutions, between women/men, etc) prevailed dialogues, reinventing permanently the wheel each time a new institution was created has been an unwritten rule. Lately this mushrooming of institution is decreasing due to lack of financial support and sustainability, an unfriendly fiscal environment, the global economic crisis and the orientation of EU money towards other regions of the world or to governmental bodies in the detriment of civil society. At this moment, women movement in Romania (and civil society in general) is benumbed, in danger of being silenced by the hostile internal and external environment<sup>6</sup>.

In terms of creating expertise in the area, professionalizing the domain, in Romania, **institutionalizing gender studies** at higher education level looks like the success story. At the level of primary and secondary education, in terms of reforming them from a gender perspective, not much has been done beyond some research initiatives in the area of analyzing curricula and school books, producing some recommendations or infusing some gender sensitivity within other disciplines (such as civic education or education for parenthood)<sup>7</sup>. At the level of higher education, in the framework of university autonomy, more freedom for establishing modules on Gender Studies at various higher education institutions was possible. These programmes, in various stages of development, have been confronting with the same types of dilemmas that challenged Western academic feminism in the past: mainstreaming vs. curriculum transformation (the option was for curriculum transformation introducing separately gender studies programmes); autonomy vs. integration (only autonomy was possible at the beginning; now it is time for integration); naming the programmes women/gender/feminist studies (‘gender studies’ was considered to be a more appropriate umbrella for the Romanian context); level of introducing gender studies (for us MA level was the window of opportunity); relations between academic and activism (although perceived as a necessity, strong links between the two are not yet a reality), validation of gender studies as mainstreaming

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately in 2010 the Agency has been restructured and transformed in ‘General Direction’-with less visibility, prerogatives and budget.

<sup>6</sup> For a synthesis of the developments in women movement in Romania see (Grünberg, 2008) and (Borza, Grünberg, Vacarescu, 2005)

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Institute for Educational Sciences and UNICEF, 2004, *Perspective de gen în educație* [Perspectives on the Gender Dimension in Education], Bucharest, or Grünberg, L., Ștefănescu, D., 2002, ‘Manifestări explicite și implicite ale genului în programe și manuale școlare [Explicit and implicit manifestations of gender in school programmes]’, In: Vlăsceanu, L. (coord) (2002), *Școala la răscruce. Schimbare și continuitate în curriculum-ul învățământului obligatoriu. Studiu de Impact* [School at crossroad. Change and continuity in compulsory curriculum], Iași, Polirom.

theories or mainly as practical oriented, as research with a purpose (emphasis is placed on the second option for the time being).

Looking further 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 from the beginning 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 simultaneously all '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 specificities. Only recently things have settled and we started to have our own theoretical identities as feminists. Just recently we have been able to go beyond a 'room service feminism' (Miroiu, 2004), interrogate us on what wave of feminism we may place our discourses today, 'label' our work and orientations (as liberal, radical, postmodern, post humanist, etc). We have now acquired the necessary expertise not only in 'translating' western products but in producing local relevant, original research<sup>8</sup>.

Today gender studies are a reality within the academic life in Romania. In Bucharest and outside the capital, in Cluj, Timisoara or Iași gender studies programmes have been developed, some of them having already a history. Important human resources have been mobilized and specialized in view of working in the area. There is also today a core group of committed academics (in majority women but there are few men too) that have initiated and introduced modules on gender issues within their disciplines. The National School for Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest opened since 1998 a MA programme in Gender Studies within the Faculty of Political Sciences<sup>9</sup>. The programme produced 10-15 MA students per year, some of them continuing with a PhD in the same area, working in certain governmental and nongovernmental bodies specifically dealing with gender equality, developing interesting research projects within specially created academic NGOs<sup>10</sup>. The changes in the title of the programme show its adaptability to the market: 'Gender Studies', then 'Gender and European integration', 'Gender and social policies' and more recently 'Policies, Gender and Minorities'. In Cluj, a Gender Studies

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<sup>8</sup> Mihaela Miroiu in the area of philosophy and political sciences, Eniko Magyari Vincze in the area of gender and ethnicity, Mihaela Frunză in the area of gender and ethics, Petruța Teampău in the area of gender and body, Adriana Baban in the area of gender and health, Ștefania Mihăilescu in the area of women's movement, Maria Bucur on women/gender and history to name just a few.

<sup>9</sup> MA programme on 'Policies, Gender and Minorities' , coordinator: Prof. Mihaela Miroiu, [www.politice.ro](http://www.politice.ro)

<sup>10</sup> As for example Filia. The Center for Curriculum Development and Gender Studies, [www.centrulfilia.ro](http://www.centrulfilia.ro)

Programme is benefiting from a team of national but also international experts<sup>11</sup>. Since 2010, at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, a course on Gender Studies is within the English MA programme on 'Research in Sociology'.

Complementary to teaching gender studies, 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. In the period 1995-2006 a Journal for Feminist Analyses ('Analize', edited by the Romanian Society for Feminist Analysis AnA) was regularly published. A journal on gender 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. Since 2000 one of the major printing houses in Romania (Polirom) has launched a special collection on Gender Studies<sup>12</sup>. Alongside to major translations (volumes of Susan Gal and Gail Kligman; Mary Lyndon Shanley, Uma Narayan; Gloria Steinem; Andreea Dworkin; Moira Gatens) a number of volumes produced by Romanian experts have been published. From books on the history of women movement in Romania, to volumes on lived histories, from the first feminist lexicon in Romania to volumes covering issues of domestic work, education, politics, media, civil society, the collection is an essential instrument in promoting gender sensitive research. There are also other kind of researches and publications not directly linked to a 'gender studies' collection per se but with a visible gender component that complement the offer at this moment<sup>13</sup>.

At this moment in Romania the academic feminism is more evolved than the women movement. After a long period of just translation and consumption of western expertise, gender studies in Romania started to find 'a room of their own'-in terms of both content and organization. What I consider to be necessary in the future is an integrative approach to gender-based knowledge (after the separation period that was, up to a certain moment, necessary); a more pragmatically institutional approaches and attitudes towards the 'gender experts' produced (coordination between market needs and competencies offered), more inclusive and intersectional approach to studying gender, and, last but not least, more attention to the quality -with a special focus in the pedagogical side and on the outcomes of the learning programme.

### **Hypostasis of normality in gendered research**

Quite recently I participated in an international conference 'Beyond European Gender Studies-transversal connections' organized by the new academic network ATGENDER (European Association for Gender, Research, Education and Documentation), a network

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<sup>11</sup> MA programme on 'Gender and Equal Opportunities', coordinator Prof. Eniko Magyari Vincze, <http://www.polito.ubbcluj.ro/masterate/cercetaredegen.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Coordinator of the collection Prof. Mihaela Miroiu; see [www.polirom.ro](http://www.polirom.ro) for titles and details about publications.

<sup>13</sup> As for example Zoltán Rostás, Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu (coord.) 2008, *Cealaltă Jumătate a Istoriei. Femei povestind*, Curtea Veche, București, or a series of gender sensitive researches produced by experts of the Institute for Quality of Life.

of academic women active in the field of developing and promoting gender studies courses and research in Europe. The discussions around issues of interculturality and gender, travelling concepts on interdisciplinary, gender as intersectionality, the contacts with qualified and committed women in the field of gender studies and the discussions around the forthcoming launching of the European database with feminists text (the so-called *Fragen* project<sup>14</sup>) gave me a gratifying sense of belonging to a mature intellectual community that needs no more confirmation from outside, building with confidence a professional dialogue with 'others'.

It is this type of open dialogue that I rediscovered reading the research, notes or reviews articles included in this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*. On one hand, in my opinion, the volume as a whole offers an image of the **potential of doing gender sensitive research**. The texts included prove, in various ways, the value added of a gender expertise to be used in researching, understanding and consequently combating the still existing explicit and implicit gender inequalities and discriminations in our diverse societies.

On the other hand the volume pinpoints to the **benefits of interdisciplinary perspectives**. Since 1960s sociology (and not only) has been marked by increasing theoretical disagreement and fragmentation. Sociology conceived as a systematic and rigorous form of inquiry generating comprehensive knowledge of society has failed (Cuff, Sharrock and Francis, 2006). Gender studies have offered one possible solution to this crisis investing on interdisciplinary, on transcending disciplinary frontiers, on celebrating diversity of knowledge. The set of articles in this volume are a reflection of this beneficial theoretical stand.

The authors in this volume, young researchers or more experienced academics, are gender connoisseurs, familiar with recent approaches to gender. Consequently, the reader is not exposed to an old-fashioned, traditional reversed paradigm 'women vs. men', not to oversensitivity to gender or to an explicit inefficient intention to explain everything through gender. With few exceptions, articles are using gender in the spirit of today's theoretical discourses: as intersectionality, in its plurality of expressions, with due attention to methodological approaches avoiding overgeneralization and contextualizing results, ideas.

The key word for the volume is **diversity**. Focusing on the theme of 'Women and Men' the issue brings together different perspectives from different regions around the world on the study of 'gender'. Various countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand,

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<sup>14</sup> Within the *Fragen* project-part of the European research project QUING (Quality in Gender + Equality Politics, [www.quing.eu](http://www.quing.eu)) European women's libraries and scholars from all over Europe are working together to collect the most important texts from the feminist movements of the second part of the 20th Century. The objective of the project is to make information available which will allow for comparative research into the history of feminist ideas in different European countries. The selected texts from across Europe will be digitized and added to a database so that scholars in the future can use the texts as a source of information for their research.



Nigeria, Spain, Romania) with diverse social-economical-political backgrounds in which gender is lived, done and constructed are included. There are also various methodological approaches (quantitative and/or qualitative) in which different gendered aspects of life are approached. A diversity of themes is also visible.

We have a combination of particular issues (such as perceptions on AIDS among students in Nigeria universities; gender patterns of time use within dual earner families; differences in carrier transition to becoming lawyers for women teachers and policemen in Australia and New Zealand; gender assessment and self assessment of quality of life, etc), with more general views on aspects dealing with the evolution of approaches to gender in anthropology, women in politics and the glass ceiling problem or texts commenting Jean Claude Kaufmann approach to the theme of romantic relationship and their changes inside the reflexive society. One may also find more focused type of researches concentrating on a particular aspect (e.g. gender differences in impact formation) or articles (e.g. Catarina Delaunay) that starts from a specific issue (the case of emergency physicians: controversies and appropriations between work and family by dual earner couples) as a starting point for discussing a more general analysis model on concepts of social use of time associated with values about their daily use (time for one's own, conjugal time, professional time, etc). This diversity of diversity is in my opinion a winning combination –as it makes reading exciting, offering, due to the gendered grid of lecture, coherence within diversity.

From a radical feminist stand, which does not reflect my views, one could be critical with regard to the perpetuation of an unbalanced presence of men among contributors to this volume dedicated to 'Women and Men', to a more emphasis on 'research on' and not on 'research for', to a subtle, implicit avoidance of the word 'feminism' even in contexts in which feminist theories, already 'classical' that proved in time their reliability, could have been included in some of the bibliographies. Maybe my perception of normality in which gender sensitive research is done today is just an expression of wishful thinking. Or, maybe not. Undoubtedly this volume illustrates that gender sensitive research, contributing to the breakdown of color coding –the black and white view of the world that failed to account for more people whose identity does not fit into this color regime (Griffin, 200, 2000, pg 103) is alive, taking note and learning from its mistakes, celebrating its still youth history with some successes behinds and reasonable hopes ahead.

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