

Anika Thym, Annette von Alemann

RINGS conference „The State of the Art of Feminist and Gender Studies: Convergences, Divergences and Plurality of Views“



Teilnehmende der Konferenz.

Conferences organised by the International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender Studies (RINGS) are usually like a global news broadcast on gender studies and struggles around gender relations in different countries all over the world. They assist participants to understand better differences and similarities in global and local developments and to strengthen global solidarity.¹ After conferences in the Czech Republic, South Africa and Iceland, the fourth RINGS conference “The State of the Art of Feminist and Gender Studies: Convergences, Divergences and Plurality of Views” took place in Portugal from the 17th to the 19th of October 2018. It was hosted by Anália Torres, Paula Campos Pinto and their team at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (CIEG) in collaboration with the Institute for Social and Political Sciences (ISCSP) at the University of Lisbon. It took into consideration the growth of Gender Studies and its contributions for understand-

ing the persistence of gender inequalities and emancipatory approaches. A starting point was the differences within the field – theoretical, empirical, (geo)political or generational – which are always also linked to the specific social and political circumstances. The goal of the conference was to address the potential that may arise of this plurality of views. Questions that were present throughout the conference were: How and when were Gender Studies established and why are gender equality issues under attack in some countries? Why are they not in others? How are gender issues situated in the political spectrum – in post-Soviet countries, in the ‘West’, and in the ‘Global South’? How can we understand recent political developments around gender and how can we use those insights to contribute to emancipatory change?

In many countries, Gender Studies were established in the 1990s and 2000s. Until now, they have been institutionalized as fields of teaching

¹ This is the reason we decided to write this report in English: We would like our colleagues from RINGS to be able to read this conference report.



Rosemarie Buikema.



Von links nach rechts: Anália Torres, Jeff Hearn und Clara Oliveira.

and research with study programmes and centres for gender research and scientific coordination. Gender Studies and gender research have a strong presence in Swedish academia. At the same time, there are persisting gender inequalities and the relation between academic gender mainstreaming and gender studies is often a challenging one (Liisa Husu; Anne-Charlott Callerstig). As regards Germany, there has been a strong institutionalization of gender research and studies, but new struggles and attacks, often from right-wing political actors, but also from within academia, have arisen concerning the value of gender equality and Gender Studies in society (Annette von Alemann). In South Africa, gender studies were established in 1994, after the end of apartheid (Tamara Shefer). Until now, there are strong patriarchal and colonialist logics in research and pedagogy, but there are also new forms of resistance and activism, including art performances. In Russia, Gender Studies were established in the 1990s after the end of the Soviet Union (Olga Shnyrova), through funding from Western programmes, but also arising from an internal demand for new theorizing. Marxist theory was rejected and gender research could contribute to developing the social sciences. After a "golden age" from 2000 to 2008, Gender Studies entered a crisis. The authoritarian regime that was being established along with patriarchal family values was incompatible with gender equality. This shift was followed by a rise of anti-gender movements and the closing of several Gender Studies programmes which is itself part of a wider attack on critical research. The currently most prominent example of these kind of attacks is Hungary, where on the 15th of October 2018 Gender Studies was removed from the list of approved accredited programmes to study at universities without any public explanation (Jasmina Lukic). As the Central European University is also accredited in the USA,

the university is able to continue with its Gender Studies programme, by way of US-American certification. The latest example of severe attacks against gender equality and gender diversity was given by keynote speaker Adriana Piscitelli from Brazil. Having been one of the first Latin American countries to establish Gender Studies, Brazil had made progress on gender equality issues. Legalization of abortion, LGBTIQ issues, sex markets, and the relations of violence and sexuality all became socially discussed topics. These achievements have been questioned recently under a "moral crusade" against social change and in defence of traditional family values. The recent election of the authoritarian far right president Jair Bolsonaro is likely to worsen the situation for those who are not rich, male, white, heterosexual and Christian. A similar situation can be found in the Czech Republic, which is already dominated by right-wing populism, attacks on feminism and gender policies, and a revival of the (Catholic) church (Iva Smidova; Blanka Nyklova). Discussions about the implementation of the Istanbul Convention expose polarized perspectives on human, women's and LGBT rights. The Gender Studies centre at Masaryk University was closed in 2017 by reference to a lack of students; Gender Studies at the Czech Academy of Sciences and NKC in Prague remains. At the same time, however, NGOs and student groups began organizing events on feminist topics, and the Czech women's lobby recently sued an 'anti-genderist' for spreading panic. In all these countries, the discontent about social changes and increased social inequalities – especially after the 2007/08 economic and financial crisis – is manifested in form of polarizations. The collective struggle against any form of discrimination and violence is opposed and hindered by the right-wing authoritarian and neoliberal forces that contribute to increasing inequalities. Authority and the promise to put a specific nation or



Teilnehmende der Konferenz.



Von links nach rechts: Tamara Shefer, Anália Torres und Paula Pinto.

group first are offered as an efficient solution to the felt and experienced injustice, neglect and social dissent.

In Albania the situation is similar, yet slightly different. In the 1940s, there had been feminist writings, which were (made to be) forgotten during the Soviet regime. At the present time, Ermira Danaj informed about a lack of feminist activism and debates about feminism. In Albania, the danger does not come from the extreme-right, but from neoliberal forces. A gender institute was established at the University of Tirana in 2000, but the number of students is decreasing. As in the Czech Republic, students think they will not find a job with that course of study, although statistics confirm the opposite. Gender Studies was established in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, with the help of the UN Development Programme, and gender equality is a constitutional right (Roza Zharkynbayeva). There is government support for gender research and studies, but large parts of society oppose both gender equality and feminism. However, and unlike Russia, Kazakhstan is interested in positioning itself as open to both the West and the East. In Portugal, neoliberal discontent is captured by the left, as the memories of the fascism, which only ended in 1974, are still fresh. Unlike communist parties in post-Soviet countries, the Portuguese communist party was not seen as repressive, but rather as one of the main actors to resist fascist oppression. Gender Studies was established as a result of feminist struggles after the fall of the dictatorship, and gender equality is today mostly seen as a human rights issue. Women's labour force participation and their share of jobs in STEM is higher than in other European countries because women did not leave the workforce after the war, due to the post-68 and second women's movement context at the time. Furthermore, after the poverty that the country suffered due to the dictatorship and the wars, the recent years are characterized more by

upward than downward social mobility.

Some contributions expounded on how to best react in Gender Studies to the polarizing tendencies and the confrontations from the political right-wing. These critiques and questionings take place in several countries, even in Sweden, where gender equality (as exemplified by the previous government describing itself as a "feminist government") has been part of the national identity for many years (Katarina Giritli-Nygren and Angelika Sjösted Landen). The so-called migration crisis of 2015 can be seen as a turning point in the political landscape. The presenters asked if gender researchers and feminist politics overlooked important developments and tendencies that led to the shift to the political right and against Gender Studies. Anika Thym (Switzerland) reflected on how best to confront the questioning from the left and the right. Concerning the left-wing critiques, she suggested the need to acknowledge the importance of class, which is often neglected in intersectional discourses and identity politics. Concerning the right-wing attacks, she suggested not to see the questioning as misunderstanding, but as part of a cultural war and, therefore, to act offensively, responsibly and self-critically. Similarly, Blanka Nyklova (Czech Republic) warned against a "bunker mentality" that feminist and gender researchers may adopt when they are under attack. Ulrike E. Auga (Germany) pleaded for a stronger cooperation of empiricism, theory and activism. She stressed the importance of religion as a field of Gender Studies and proposed to consider gender and religion as discursive means to reflect on and de-essentialize categories of knowledge. Rosemarie Buikema (Netherlands) presented a project that aims at confronting patriarchal and colonial structures in museums by strengthening the participation and adequate representation of women and people of colour. Different forms of artistic and creative political protest can also be found in South Africa, Brazil and many other countries.

Several presentations considered challenges and tensions within the field. Ulrike E. Auga mentioned critiques from radical queer activists as well as traditional feminists, both of which seem to have less engagement with current gender theories but may see themselves as “true” fighters for gender equality and against academic gender studies. The situation is aggravated by a political climate of populism and “fake news” and the need for gender scholars to defend their field of study. Maria do Mar Pereira (UK) pointed at a different but equally important threat from within: the intensified work load due to the neoliberal restructuring of universities. Initially, the “corporate university” made the acknowledgement of gender research possible by stressing the importance of performance and key indicators, accounting for the aim of high productivity as a life-line for many gender researchers. As a consequence, the field of Gender Studies prospered. However, gender researchers, like other academics, may come to feel drained and stressed, and many of them don’t have time for, for example, reading and peer-reviewing. The presenter pleaded for a new style of working and not to normalize exhaustion. Jeff Hearn (Sweden/Finland) talked about academic non-feminist approaches, which may mark an epistemological shift away from Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities. After the #MeToo debates, new phenomena such as practices of self-marketing by male masculinity researchers, mansplaining, allying with men’s rights activism, exploiting work of women and of doctoral students, sexual misconduct and bullying need to be discussed. These tendencies point to a new need to rethink and critique hegemonic masculinity in Gender Studies. Ulf Mellström (Sweden) expressed the need to problematize masculinity in the “posthumanist” debate on automation and to look at both tendencies of domination and new, emancipating, modes of living. Ann Öhman (Sweden) observed that the recommendations for interdisciplinary research from the Swedish Research Council normally neglect Gender Studies in favour of the natural sciences, which are always stressed as examples of interdisciplinarity. Anne-Charlott Callerstig (Sweden) showed that the interest in gender aspects by professional practitioners is often low at first but increases due to the high relevance of gender-related questions for their clients and customers. She stressed the value of interactive research (with and not on practitioners) for the implementation of gender knowledge in society. The presentations of Deevia Bhana (South Africa) and Abza Bharadwaj (India) emphasized the

need for Gender Studies to enhance its perspectives on children and (especially) on the Global South. Both of them elaborated on the effects of (gendered) socialization, leading to violence (mostly) against girls and (in India) only mild penalties against perpetrators. They stressed the need for looking at the specificities of socialization in the Global South and the (still lacking) conditions to develop girls’ power.

In the roundtable about “Teaching critical gender studies – dilemmas of identity and politics”, Rosemarie Buikema (Netherlands), Tamara Shefer (South Africa), Kari Jegerstedt and Christine M. Jacobsen (Norway) discussed about dilemmas that arise from ‘intersectional identities’ teachers and students bring to the class room. Questions that arose were: Who does research on who and to what ends? Who can (i.e. is legitimized to) speak about what? Who are the ones who speak, and is it necessary to let everyone speak? How can intersectionality be researched but also put into practice? Questions turned, then, to explicitly political aspects: How to reconcile academic and political debates? How to deal with ‘policing’ in gender-related issues? Questions went as far as: Why is Gender Studies one of the first disciplines to be cut if there are cuts in academia? And: What is science?

The roundtable closed an enlightening conference about the different situations of Gender Studies worldwide but also the common challenges having to be faced. In retrospect, the conference began with the attacks against equality movements, feminism, and Gender Studies and the question who the actors of these attacks are. It was asked what feminism is and whether different “feminisms” are thinkable. Many of the presentations focused on resistance and activism, not only by gender scholars and feminists but also by victims of violence and those who are submitted to gender inequalities. One prominent topic was the body – both as an object that can be violated or neglected and as a means of protest and political activism. The conference closed with reflections on how the multitude of gender perspectives (and of feminisms) can be dealt with productively in Gender Studies.

As in previous years, the RINGS conference turned out to be a valuable opportunity for gender researchers from all over the world to come together and analyse the situation, potential and challenges for Gender Studies institutions, and to engage (self)critically and in solidarity in pushing forward feminist and gender research and gender equality. The next RINGS conference and annual meeting will take place in Tallinn, Estonia, from October 2nd to 4th, 2019.

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