

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER STUDIES. AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the evolution of gender studies in the Romanian academic system, highlighting the influence of the European Union in promoting gender equality and the integration of gender studies in the education system. We refer to the first gender studies programs in Romanian universities, mentioning bachelor and master degree programs, as well as working groups dedicated to gender studies, providing an overview and giving concrete examples such as the Master's program at SNSPA and the Interdisciplinary Group at the "Babeş-Bolya" University. We emphasize the existence of discussions and controversies related to the way gender studies are integrated in the Romanian academic system and draw attention to potential polemics with various social groups, which are often called conservative. We appreciate that the topic of gender studies is one that generates heated debates in society.

Keywords: *gender mainstreaming; gender studies; academic curriculum; integration and inclusion; academic education, traditional norms;*

INTRODUCTION

Romania, as part of the European Union, has been influenced by international trends to promote gender equality and to integrate gender studies into the education system, and this process is a complex and ongoing one.

Through the "Istanbul Convention" of 2011, ratified by Romania on February 29, 2016, or various "European Parliament Resolutions", a Romanian legislative framework was created, such as "Law 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence" republished in 2020 with amendments to reflect international documents or "Government Decision no. 1547/2022 for the approval of the National Strategy on promoting equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men and preventing and combating domestic violence for the period 2022-2027".

This legislative framework has set in motion many gears that promote "gender equality" and has created the context for the establishment of non-governmental organizations and "advocacy groups" that campaign for gender equality and support gender studies in Romania (we mention only by way of example "FILIA Centre", "ANESIA", without wishing to highlight their work).

1. FIRST GENDER STUDIES PROGRAMS AT ACADEMIC LEVEL

We note from the outset that, before the introduction of gender theory in Romanian education was legislated in any way, various forms of studies had appeared that integrated ideas of this new ideology. We mention the *Master of Gender Studies* degree program, initiated in 1998 at the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences, as the first one that we identified as dedicated to this field. However, in the more than twenty years that have passed since then, other Bachelor's and Master's programs have appeared in higher education institutions, or just working groups that propose disciplines or even specializations that address "gender studies".

In this regard, we note that Enikő Magyari-Vincze stated in 2002¹ that the *Interdisciplinary Group for Gender Studies* was established in 2000 at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj *within the Institute of Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of European Studies*. What is interesting in Enikő Magyari-Vincze's article is that the author knows that the principle of *gender* mainstreaming "must be taken into account" at academic level, but she would have been more satisfied if she could have set up a "gender studies" program on her own, as we see in the following text: "*Although I am firmly convinced that the institutionalization of gender studies must take into account the principle of mainstreaming and the more recently named "gender mainstreaming" policy, I am becoming increasingly aware that such programmes need an autonomous organizational status.*"²

The author begins by expressing her strong belief in the importance of both integration and "gender mainstreaming" in institutionalizing gender studies. Although she advocates for mainstreaming, she seems to believe that gender studies programs may need a degree of "organizational autonomy" to truly thrive. This suggests that simply incorporating gender studies courses into pre-existing departments may not be enough. Magyari-Vincze seems to advocate for dedicated centers or departments focused specifically on gender studies, as autonomous programs often have greater control over their own budgets, allowing them to allocate funds for gender studies research projects.

An interesting position on the teaching of *gender* integrated courses is presented by Mădălina Nicolaescu, a lecturer at the *Department of English Language and Literature* at the University of Bucharest. She identifies and highlights three reasons why such integrated course programs should be implemented: a) their subversive force; b) the fulfillment of the European Union's policy desideratum - *gender mainstreaming*; c) sensitizing future teachers to the "gender issue": "... we must emphasize **the subversive force** they can have. [...] A second argument in favor of integrated courses is that they **facilitate** what has become a desideratum in European Union policies, namely **gender mainstreaming**. [...] ... even if in a diluted form. The feminist courses taught at university are aimed at future schoolteachers, the future trainers responsible for creating new sociocultural and gender identities. Sensitizing these future trainers to gender issues can be a strategy to counteract the sexist ideologies promoted by school textbooks and traditional patriarchal models that are still used in the teaching process"³.

¹ Enikő MAGYARI-VINCZE, 2002, "Gender Studies in Cluj", in *Direcții și teme de cercetare în studii de gen din România*, volume coordinated by Ionela Băluță, Ioana Cîrstocea, Bucharest, Edit. Colegiu Noua Europă, 2002, p. 213.

² Enikő MAGYARI-VINCZE, 2002, p. 215.

³ Mădălina NICOLAESCU, 2002, *Rolul cursurilor universitare cu tematică feministă*, in *Direcții și teme de cercetare în studii de gen din România*, volume coordinated by Ionela Băluță, Ioana Cîrstocea, Bucharest, Colegiul Noua Europă, p. 224.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER THEORIES OR "GENDER MAINSTREAMING"

Mădălina Nicolaescu emphasizes the potential of courses integrating gender theory to challenge traditional gender norms and argues that integrating feminist content aligns with the European Union's goal of gender mainstreaming. Although she believes that these courses may offer a watered-down form of feminist thinking, the author emphasizes their importance in preparing future teachers by raising awareness of gender issues, arguing that these courses can lead future teachers to promote inclusive learning environments for gender advocates.

The text quoted above, from the author's perspective, emphasizes the importance of integrating "gender studies" into the university curriculum as part of the *gender mainstreaming* effort. Thus, *gender mainstreaming* turns out to be a strategic approach, which aims to promote gender equality and the inclusion of a 'gender perspective' in all policies, plans and activities, in order to address structural inequalities between men and women.

The arguments presented in the quote suggest that this type of education functions as a subversive force that can challenge traditional structures and facilitate cultural and social change. Furthermore, by training future teachers and trainers who will help shape the socio-cultural and 'gendered' identities of new generations, feminist studies at academic level are seen as a means of combating sexism and traditional models, considered outdated, that may persist in education and teaching materials.

In essence, 'gender studies' education is presented as a vital part of the systemic change needed to counter outdated 'gender models'. This approach is recognized and supported in some current educational policies of some EU Member States.

The implementation of integrated curricula that address "gender issues" is considered by Mădălina Nicolaescu to be a fundamental step in promoting a more inclusive academic environment. According to her, integrating the "gender perspective" into the curriculum would undermine traditional "gender norms" and sensitizing future teachers to "gender issues" is seen as essential for the education they will provide to be inclusive in relation to "gender differences".

Moreover, the European Union's objectives in the field of equal opportunities between women and men, such as those in the "Strategic Commitment for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2016-2019" emphasize the importance of mainstreaming the "gender perspective" in all EU activities and policies to ensure equal opportunities⁴.

3. "DISGUISED" METHODS OF INTEGRATING GENDER THEORIES

In order to illustrate how to initiate academic study programs that disseminate the new theories of *gender* ideology in the Romanian academic environment, we refer to the speech of Mădăline Nicolaescu from the University of Bucharest. She states in the above-mentioned article that the first courses peppered with *gender* ideology held at the *Department of English Language and Literature* were 'masked', not explicit, which only raises a question mark as to the purpose of the courses. Below is the text in which he testifies to the method used: "*The method adopted in the first courses in feminist theory was one of "insinuation", of disguised introduction of feminist theories under the broader rubric of poststructuralist and*

⁴ Directorate-General Justice and Consumers (European Commission), 'Strategic Commitment for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2016-2019', Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

postmodern critique. The success with the students was unexpectedly great, leading me to set up the *Center for Feminist Studies - Gender*⁵.

Mădălina Nicolaescu seems to have adopted a strategic approach in teaching 'gender theory', gradually introducing the concepts under the broader umbrella of poststructuralist and postmodern critique. This method has had a significant impact, arousing such great interest among students that it prompted the author to set up a center dedicated to the study of the subject. This tactic may be interpreted by some as an effective method of integrating 'gender studies' into the academic curriculum, but we see it as rather manipulative.

The 'disguised' introduction of feminism into academia can be seen as a way of overcoming initial barriers and encouraging an open discussion on issues of 'gender ideology'. The author drew on the link between feminism and other contemporary currents of thought, such as poststructuralism and postmodernism, which often share a critique of power structures.

The ripple effect of a "gender studies" center spreads throughout society, potentially leading to change and transforming cultural, political and legislative attitudes under the guise of the broader goal - to build a more equitable society.

However, we also point out some concerns about the effects that such studies may have on traditional values and norms, as well as concerns about political impositions based on the results of such studies that do not take into account the diversity of public opinion, the opinion of Christian communities.

4. GENDER IDEOLOGY IN SCHOOLS AND THE REACTION OF THE CHURCH

The subtle attempts to introduce *gender mainstreaming* in the Romanian educational legislation had a quick and prompt reaction from the Romanian Patriarchate, a reaction considered by the Romanian press as "trenchant"⁶ or "virulent"⁷, depending on the position taken towards the decision of Mrs. Ligia Deca, Minister of National Education, who integrated the following regulations in the text of the draft education law:

Article 2 - "*The pre-university education system is based on the following values: [...] b) Diversity - respecting and valuing different cultural, ethnic, identity, sensitivity and empathy perspectives, as well as strengthening and positivizing individual and collective self-image*".⁸

Article 11, paragraph 1 - "*in pre-university educational establishments and in all premises intended for vocational education and training, as well as in online activities of*

⁵ Mădălina NICOLAESCU, *loc. cit.*, p. 225.

⁶ Marius OLARU, *Romanian Orthodox Church, TRANSIENT position regarding the study of gender ideology in schools*, available at <https://www.gandul.ro/actualitate/biserica-ortodoxa-romana-pozitie-transanta-vizavi-de-studierea-ideologiei-de-gen-in-scoli-19943083> (accessed on 15.03.2023).

⁷ Raluca PANTAZI, *Romanian Orthodox Church, virulent reaction to Deca laws: Gender ideology was proposed "without discernment" in the education laws / The obligation to promote "sexual diversity" in schools is totally "abusive" and "harmful"*, available at <https://www.edupedu.ro/biserica-ortodoxa-romana-reactie-virulenta-la-legile-deca-ideologia-de-gen-a-fost-propusa-fara-discernamant-in-legile-invatamantului-obligatia-de-a-promova-diversitatea/> (accessed on 15.03.2023)

⁸ Hotnews.ro Editor, Patriarchate: "The obligation to promote sexual diversity in schools, totally abusive and harmful". The Church's arguments for the 13 changes they demand to the education laws - DOCUMENT, available at <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-educatie-26141002-patriarhia-obligatia-promova-diversitatea-sexuala-scoala-total-abuziva-nociva-argumentele-bisericii-pentru-13-modificari-care-cer-legile-educatiei-document.htm> (accessed on 15.03.2023)

*pre-university educational establishments, discrimination on grounds of age, ethnicity, sex, social origin, political or religious orientation, **sexual orientation** or other types of discrimination shall be prohibited [...]*".

The Hotnews.ro editorial staff relayed a message from the spokesman of the Romanian Patriarchate, Vasile Bănescu: "The position of the Romanian Orthodox Church and of the other religious denominations in Romania that sent a joint address to the Minister of Education, regarding the issue of ideology in general and, in the context of "gender ideology", proposed without discernment for introduction in the new education laws, in particular, is a clear and constantly expressed one"⁹.

The document in which the recognized religious denominations in Romania make these requests to the Ministry of National Education is more extensive, including other aspects related to the organization of education in schools with theological specificity. Like the Romanian Orthodox Church, other sister Churches have taken a firm stand against this ideology.

CONCLUSIONS

We are skeptical about the effectiveness of "gender politics" in addressing inequalities and about possible gender-based countermeasures that might disadvantage certain groups, such as female athletes, and there have been debates for some time about the participation of *transgender* people in women's competitions, with some participants expressing concerns about their safety and comfort, raising questions about how to manage changing rooms and other facilities. Many such complicated situations can also arise in the education system.

The topic of gender politics and inclusion of transgender people is a complex and sensitive one, generating heated debates in various fields, including sport and education. These discussions must be approached with empathy, respecting dignity and legitimate concerns. The situation in sport is delicate, as fair competition should be ensured. The main argument against the participation of transgender people in women's competitions relates to the potential physiological advantages linked to biological sex, such as muscle mass and bone structure. Ideal solutions should involve a rigorous scientific analysis of the physiological advantages and disadvantages, close collaboration with medical experts.

Transgender inclusion challenges can arise in the education system. Managing changing rooms and other shared facilities requires a sensitive and pragmatic approach. There are no simple solutions to these complex issues.

We are therefore concerned that such studies could lead to social polarization on "gender issues" and the erosion of recognized biological distinctions between the sexes.

⁹ Hotnews.ro Editor, Patriarchate: "The obligation to promote sexual diversity in schools, totally abusive and harmful". The Church's arguments for the 13 changes they demand to the education laws - DOCUMENT, available at <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-educatie-26141002-patriarhia-obligatia-promova-diversitatea-sexuala-scoala-total-abuziva-nociva-argumentele-bisericii-pentru-13-modificari-care-cer-legile-educatiei-document.htm> (accessed on 15.03.2023)

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