

The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Exchange of Views on Gender Studies in Hungary

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## **Statement**

### **The Situation of Gender Studies and Interference with Academic Freedom in Hungary and Other Countries<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1 The situation of Gender Studies in Hungary in the context of the development of other countries including Germany**

##### **1.1 Incidents in Budapest**

On 12 October 2018, the Hungarian Government published a list of approved courses, from which the subject Gender Studies had disappeared. The decree 42294/2018 intends to abolish Gender Studies as a study discipline – at the prestigious private Central European University (CEU) as well as at the Eötvös Lorand University (ELTE), the largest state university in Budapest.<sup>2</sup> The current

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the extended English version of my statement as a representative of RINGS, the International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender Studies, at the Exchange of Views on Gender Studies in Hungary at the invitation of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality at the European Parliament in Brussels on 8 November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “[The] Central European University (CEU) reiterates its strong opposition to the removal of Gender Studies from the list of accredited MA programs in Hungary. This is a major infringement on academic freedom and university autonomy. Gender Studies is an

initiative aims at an accredited, well-functioning MA programme in Gender Studies with consistently high enrolments and international reputation.

Eastern Europe expert Andrea Pető wrote that since 2006, the CEU has graduated 139 international students. In 2017, the first study group with ten participants started at the state-owned ELTE. In the autumn of 2018, the next ten students should begin their Master's Degree in Gender Studies in Hungarian.

The Gender Studies at the CEU are also part of an Erasmus-funded European network of eight universities, which would also have a negative impact in terms of the cessation of programmes in Hungary.

Several government politicians cited various incomprehensible reasons for the closure of the Gender Studies discipline, examples include:

- Taxpayers' money should be better spent more responsibly. However, the CEU programme is run by a private university.

- There would be no use for Gender Studies graduates in the labour market. On the other hand, an CEU Alumni Report confirms that graduates worldwide have received very good positions in science, education, business, culture and finance.

- The pretext that there is a shortage of students contradicts the average number of more than 200 applications for 22 places at the CEU. The admission number of 10 students at the ELTE was determined by the Ministry.

Another argument was that Gender Studies would not meet Christian values. However, one of the world's largest Catholic educational institutions, the University of Notre Dame du Lac, also offers a Gender Studies programme in the State of Indiana and advertised it as part of a university partnership at the Catholic Péter-

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internationally recognized academic field, which produces socially relevant knowledge, and which has been taught at CEU for well over two decades. Eliminating this program will be a significant loss to the Hungarian scholarly community and for democratically-minded public policy makers. CEU will continue teaching and research in this field via its US accredited MA and PhD programs." Official press release of the Central European University, "CEU Reiterates Opposition to Removal of Gender Studies Programs in Hungary", 16 October 2018.

Pázmány University in Budapest.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, gender-sensitive religious research and theology have long been part of emancipatory approaches to scientific work in the study of religion worldwide.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Interference with academic freedom

The Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) announced on September 1, 2018, that it had not participated in the drafting of the government proposal to revoke the license of the Master's Programme in Gender Studies. The HAC stated that it did not confirm the formal and substantive content arguments used to justify the license revocation. The government thus appears to be the only institutional actor responsible for ideological and political intervention in the design of an academic study programme. It violates freedom of education and professional standards.

Never before had a government of an EU Member State tried to regulate the curriculum of a university without consulting the relevant university in advance in this way. The closure of the Gender Studies programme in Hungary represents a dangerous precedent for state intervention in all other university courses. It also violates the Hungarian Basic Law<sup>5</sup> as well as the agreements of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The European University Association made a statement on

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.insideindianabusiness.com/story/38731937/notre-dame-to-partner-with-hungarian-university> [6/11/2018].

<sup>4</sup> Auga, Ulrike, "Resistance and the Radical Social Imaginary: A Genealogy from Eastern European Dissidence to New Social Movements: Connecting the Debates between Activism and Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Epistemology and Theology", in: Ulrike Auga; Guðmarsdóttir, Sigríður et al. (eds.), *Resistance and Visions: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Contributions to Theology and the Study of Religions*, Journal of the ESWTR, 22 (2014), 5-30.

<sup>5</sup> The Fundamental Law of Hungary 9.1: "Hungary shall ensure the freedom of scientific research and artistic creation, the freedom of learning for the acquisition of the highest possible level of knowledge and, within the framework laid down in an Act, the freedom of teaching". Quoted after: Pető, Andrea, "Gender as a symbolic glue makes European freedom of education at stake", in: *The Progressive Post Magazine*, 2. September 2018. <https://progressivepost.eu/gender-as-a-symbolic-glue-makes-european-freedom-of-education-at-stake/> [6/11/2018]. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) allows governments to directly regulate the licensing of study programmes, but criteria of the common European quality assurance framework must be respected.

24 August 2018: “If the Hungarian Government does so, it would be a case of state interference in higher education, which is unique in the European Union”.<sup>6</sup>

### **1.3 The violence against gender research has a new quality**

In many more countries, intensified and structured attacks on scientists and the field of Gender Studies can be observed. Attacks appear on the net, as physical threats, media attacks or withdrawal of financial support.

At the University of Verona academic teachers, were aggressively threatened by right-wing and Lega Nord activists on the Net because they wanted to organise a workshop for LGBTIQ asylum seekers.

In Paris, Île-de-France, the Institute for Gender Studies, Emilie du Châtelet Institute (IEC), has withdrawn state funding. Such incidents exist in various French regions, where the government is formed by the political right, as well as in Hungary and Poland.

In addition to the political right, there are also certain conservative religious groups that are gaining influence. In France, there are in particular members of the movement against same-sex marriage and for conservative family ideas (La Manif pour tous). A similar development can be observed in Italy. There are many interfaces to the political right, such as the Lega Nord in government and even more extreme groups.

In Finland there are attacks on the discipline of Gender Studies as well as individual scientists through extreme right-wing individuals and right-wing populist groups.

It is a decisive political concern of the right-wing parties to denounce and abolish gender research – as is publicly demanded by the so called Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), for example, whereby Beatrix von Storch and Gabriele Kuby polemicize about supposed “gender delusion” and “genderisation”. Ever since the AfD became a member of the German Bundestag, this far-right party

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

has used small and large parliamentary questions to try to bring about the abolition of gender research.<sup>7</sup>

Certain issues of the political right concerning the notion and the study of gender are repeated: wrongly presuming the elites were disconnected from the real problems; Gender research would be a threat to children and would promote “paedophilia” – as the parliamentarian of the Slovak National Party (SNS), Pavol Gorisak, holds. It is claimed that biologically there would only exist a binary of gender as male and female and gender research would disturb the supposedly natural and God-intended heterosexual order.<sup>8</sup>

## **2 Post-democratic conditions as the context of current discourses on equality policy and gender research**

### **2.1 Gender ideology as a keyword to criticise neoliberalism and to delegitimise progressive policies**

It is well known that especially in societies experiencing social transformation the symbolic gender order is a central place of political, social and religious conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

The globalised (neo-)liberal democratic order is in a deep crisis of distribution and representation, therefore, some experts speak of “post-democratic conditions”. Established politics too often focus on the execution of constraints due to a supposed “lack of alternatives”. Right-wing populist parties (in Austria, Germany, Hungary and Poland) benefit with their own supposed “alternative” from depoliticised governing.

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<sup>7</sup> In Germany, Gender Studies have been subject to allegations of “non-scientificness” for about 15 years.

<sup>8</sup> The positioning of the Confederation of Christians in the AfD (ChrAfD) against the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany on the registration of a “third sex” in the birth register reads: “God’s creation order envisages exactly two sexes: man and woman. And both can usually be distinguished very precisely on the basis of anatomical features. Everything else springs from the flourishing imagination of self-proclaimed gender activists.” Schumny, Hardi Helmut, ChrAfD Aktuell. Kein drittes Geschlecht - nirgends!, 10/11/2017. <https://www.chrafd.de/index.php/75-kein-drittes-geschlecht-nirgends> [6/11/2018].

<sup>9</sup> See Auga, Ulrike; Braun, Christina von (eds.), Gender in Conflicts: Palestine – Israel – Germany, LIT: Berlin 2006.

For several years, there have been worldwide movements that are directed against a common enemy – namely the alleged “gender ideology”.

In order to work out the central role that gender policy plays in the current paradigm shift, Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető speak of gender as a “symbolic glue”. The term “gender ideology” has become a metaphor in the vocabulary of illiberal-populist forces, “[...] for all the uncertainties and injustices produced by the current socio-economic order. This makes it possible for them [...] to divert the attention of many people dissatisfied with their life situation to issues of equality.”<sup>10</sup>

Different tactics are used:

“[...] The right [has] created a dynamic that has led to perceiving [...]” gender “as a threatening concept [...]. ‘Gender ideology’ also stands for the failure of democratic representation and, accordingly, defending oneself against this [supposed] ‘ideology’ is tantamount to criticizing different aspects of the present socio-economic order.”<sup>11</sup>

The debate about the alleged gender ideology has the rhetorical function of being able to assert something that is reasonable and lawful. In doing so “[it] does not limit itself to just [...] demonising the worldview of the opponents and rejecting a human rights paradigm [...]. Instead, it offers an [...] alternative based on family, nation, religious values, and freedom of expression [...] and against individualism”.<sup>12</sup>

The political right uses polemical gender criticism to form broad alliances of various kinds – with some conservative parts of Christian churches, some Orthodox Jewish groups, fundamentalist currents of Islam, political conservatives of the centre and right-wing parties.

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<sup>10</sup> Grzebalska, Weronika; Kováts, Eszter; Pető, Andrea, Grzebalska, Weronika; Kováts, Eszter; Pető, Andrea, “Gender as Symbolic Glue: How ‘Gender’ Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo)Liberal Order”, in: Luxemburg. Gesellschaftsanalyse und linke Praxis, Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation: Berlin 2018, 32-38, here 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

## 2.2 Nationalism, gender and sexuality

The Hungarian government uses the concept of “gender ideology” to divert attention from instability in the socio-economic order with its structural injustices and to channel popular dissatisfaction to issues of gender equality. Anti-gender movements have formed in response to the crisis of the neo-liberal world order in the populist, neoconservative camp, which is the gender concept not only against Gender Studies, but also against LGBTIQ rights, the Istanbul Convention, sex education in schools, international institutions such as the European Union, the United Nations and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Gender mainstreaming, which is being implemented as a gender equality strategy in many countries and at the level of the European Union, is being defamed as a “European doctrine”. In Eastern Europe – as in the example of Hungary – it is argued that gender research often comes from abroad and is not “national” enough.

A naturalised and hierarchical symbolic gender order is at the centre of nationalist ideas. The individual reproduction is seen in connection with the reproduction of the presuming “pure national body”. Therefore, inclusion and exclusion of a subject into the alleged collective body are closely controlled. Sex is naturalised exclusively as construction of only male or female. The binary understanding serves to create and justify the hierarchy “male over female”.

Since the 1970s/1980s, however, in biology, the objections to models of a strict gender dichotomy became clearer. Biologist Heinz-Jürgen Voß writes: “There are more than two genders. In biology, this is now recognized. [...] Biological sex is not simply divided into two variants – “female” versus “male” [...]. The assumption that there are two sexes is too simplistic. The current state of research in biology assumes a broader range of sexual development opportunities.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Voß, Heinz-Jürgen, “Gender in der Biologie. Es gibt mehr als zwei Geschlechter”, in: Tagesspiegel Wissen, 31/03/2016, 8-9, translation Ulrike Auga. See also Voß, Heinz-Jürgen, “Introduction”, in: Making Sex Revisited: Deconstructing Sex/ Gender from a Biological and Medical Point of View, Transcript: Bielefeld 2011 [2010], 11-36. Since January 2019, in Germany a person can – if applicable – be registered without an indication

Furthermore, variants of neo-nationalism appear as homonationalism and femonationalism in various political camps. Under homonationalism, the inclusion of some “gays” and “lesbians” in nationalism – previously excluded from the national collective – is understood by granting some rights (such as marriage) in the nation state. This happens at the expense of generating the discourse of supposedly homophobic “Muslims”. Homophobia is portrayed as a Muslim trait and the West as supposedly not homophobic. Nationalism also appears in some right-wing currents as so-called “femonationalism” with seemingly contradictory concepts of the enemy. Western feminism can suddenly be considered as the alleged core component of “Western subjectivity.” Homonationalism and femonationalism work as anti-Muslim racism.<sup>14</sup>

Sara Farris shows how feminist gender and sexual politics are captured in the anti-migration policies of the European, extreme right-wing parties. All women with headscarves and full-body veiling are portrayed as victims of their (heterosexual) Muslim men, who are also portrayed as dangerous to the rest of society.<sup>15</sup>

### **3 The need to protect Gender Studies and critical scientific work**

Gender research incorporates well-established general critique of knowledge and science and furthermore explores how a particular knowledge about an object is constructed in a certain time in a particular context. Scientific knowledge is also not produced independently of material conditions and interests. Therefore, the

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of sex, as female, male or diverse. See Personenstandsgesetz (PStG), § 22/3, [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/pstg/\\_22.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/pstg/_22.html) [14/01/2019].

<sup>14</sup> See Zülfükar, Çetin, “Homo- und Femonationalismus als Ausdruck der Dominanzkultur. Vom rechten Rand in die Mitte der Gesellschaft”, in: <http://streitwert.boellblog.org/2016/04/25/homo-und-femonationalismus-als-ausdruck-der-dominanzkultur-vom-rechten-rand-in-die-mitte-der-gesellschaft/> [6/11/2018].

<sup>15</sup> See Farris, Sara R., “Die politische Ökonomie des Femonationalismus”, in: *Feministische Studien*, Band 29/2, 321-334. See also Puar, Jasbir K., *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University Press: Durham, NC 2007. Femonationalism is based on homonationalism. See also Auga, Ulrike; Hawthorne, Sian Melvill, “Homonationalism and the Challenge of Queer Theology”, in: Hawthorne, Sian Melvill (ed.), *Gender: God*, Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Gender Series, Macmillan Reference USA: Farmington Hills, MI 2017, 367-383.



American scientist, Donna Haraway, speaks of “situated knowledge”.<sup>16</sup> It is asked, in this context, how dominant and resistant discourses about gender arise. Gender Studies are accused of being hostile to science, because the discipline usually undertakes a de-constructivist questioning of the nature of gender. On the contrary, it can be shown that the neo-reactive knowledge resources and knowledge production of the political right which is fuelling nationalisms, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and fundamentalism are highly unscientific, e.g. they consider ideas of naturalised, hierarchical orders of gender, nation, religion and other categories of knowledge to be scientifically “true”, which have long since been disproven in both natural and human sciences. The well-known Indian-US American theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, defines epistemic violence (following Edward Said and Michel Foucault) as a process of repressing, sanctioning and delegitimising certain possibilities of knowledge production while simultaneously enforcing others. There is no “power-neutral” knowledge – every knowledge is discursively produced and is a power-knowledge. Epistemic violence carries the dangers of stereotyping, essentialisation, exclusion and hate crimes.<sup>17</sup>

Essentialisation (ontologisation) is a process of ascribing an essentiality (entity) – that is the attribution of characteristics that are made to be considered “natural” and “essential” to members of a specific culturally defined group (e.g. “gender”, “sexuality”, “nation”, “culture”, “age”, “species”, “ethnic”, “racial”, “class”, linguistic). Essentialisation is based on the assumption that individual differences can be explained by inherent, biological, “natural” traits shared by members of a constructed group. The essentialist mode is often anchored in dualistic thinking and assumes

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<sup>16</sup> See Haraway, Donna, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in: *Feminist Studies* 14, 3/1988, 575-599.

<sup>17</sup> This raises the following questions: 1. Who or what can be object or subject of knowledge and in what way is knowledge classified and represented? 2. Which form of knowledge has been able to assert itself historically and still functions as dominant today? 3. Which knowledge is allowed to be considered as legitimate knowledge in the context of colonial power relations? For a short critique of nationalism and alternative ideas of collective belonging by Spivak, see Butler, Judith; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull: Calcutta 2007.

that there are a number of attributes necessary for each specific entity to serve its supposed “identity” and function. In the current questions about the adequate production of knowledge, essentialisation still plays a central role, although it is highly controversial.

#### **4 Summary**

The ban on Gender Studies in Hungary is part of a larger attack on democracy, which can also have international consequences. It is a problem that should not be underestimated that once right-wing parties come to power, they have access to the Ministry of Education and thus can change important achievements, the threat to deny academic freedom then comes not only from some parts of society, but from the government side.

The attack on Gender Studies is an attack on the freedom of research and teaching as well as of self-determination, sexual freedom and reproductive rights. The example of several states demonstrates that attacks on the freedom of the sciences and the press are part of pushing back democracy.<sup>18</sup>

The violation of academic freedom is a violation of the values and principles of the European Union.

The criticism of social problems, however, should be taken seriously and solutions should be sought. Different experiences should be appreciated. It should be understood that multiple perspectives can allow for multiple opportunities of individual and collective agency and thus the design of solidary democratic sociability.

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<sup>18</sup> Hark, Sabine, “Fünf Fragen an: Prof. Dr. Sabine Hark, Technische Universität Berlin”, [23/10/2018]. [https://rogatekloster.wordpress.com/2018/10/23/fuenf-fragen-an-prof-dr-sabine\\_hark-tuberlin-genderstudies-hungary/](https://rogatekloster.wordpress.com/2018/10/23/fuenf-fragen-an-prof-dr-sabine_hark-tuberlin-genderstudies-hungary/) [6/11/2018].

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