

Gender Studies in Europe

– Challenges, Trends
and New Perspectives

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What is the state of gender studies in Europe today? How do gender scholars view the field and how do they look at the future of gender studies? These questions were highlighted in the AG About Gender Round Table, a chaired forum which was organized virtually. Eleven European countries were represented in this forum as well as Canada (Quebec).¹ Gender researchers from these countries answered questions about the state of gender studies in their country, and their view on emergent challenges. They were also asked to look ahead and try to identify some trends and perspectives for gender studies in Europe (and Canada). The results of the Round Table discussions were published in a special issue of *About Gender* in 2015. I will discuss challenges, trends and new perspectives on gender studies- and teaching, from the viewpoint of a Swedish gender scholar.

“Are the aims and goals of feminism still relevant in the 21st century?” is a crucial

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question when buzzwords like the ‘post-modern’ and ‘postfeminist’ society are used to characterize a new situation. Research does not need to focus on women, which the shift from women studies to gender studies indicates. However, looking at the situation of women it is obvious that gender equality is far from being realized in most European countries. In Sweden where the welfare system aims at involving both parents in family life one would expect a high birth rate as well as shared parenting. This is not the case; the birth rate in Sweden today is on the same level as European countries with much less developed support for parents, and less than thirty percent of fathers in heterosexual relationships choose to take parental leave. Mothers still take the main responsibility for children in spite of an advanced welfare system which often is seen as a role model for other countries. So even in a country like Sweden there is still a need for feminists who advocate feminist aims and goals. These shifts with time but the ‘post-feminist’ society will not be in place until gender equality is a reality and not just policy making. There is still a need for gender research which scrutinizes society. That said, one has to acknowledge that there is a more privileged situation for gender scholars in countries like Sweden and Norway compared to, for example, Italy where the institutionalization of gender studies has been slow. There are clearly differences between countries, which makes it difficult to compare experiences and to find common grounds. It is therefore important to recognize differences and include diversity when starting cross-European cooperation in gender studies.

The existence of gender studies both as a discipline in its own and as a multidisciplinary field is often referred to as the ‘two legs’ of gender research. Different universities have taken different paths in how gender research is organized. Some have more focus on integrating gender studies in existing disciplines whereas others have estab-

lished centres hosting multidisciplinary research. Regardless which path is chosen one has to acknowledge the need for both mainstreaming gender studies and for developing gender studies as a research discipline in its own right. There is a concern among scholars that what I call the ‘two legs’ are not all that easy to unite. Both national and EU research policies aim at mainstreaming gender and it is included in the societal challenges which need to be met by new research. In this process gender studies risks being reduced to gender perspectives in research programmes which are mainly dealing with other issues. Of course, the demand from EU and other funding agencies that researchers need to consider the relevance of gender in their research programmes is a positive development. However, it is important that the mainstreaming of gender is not carried out at the expense of developing gender studies as a discipline. There is a risk that this dilemma could pose a threat to gender studies in the future should gender mainstreaming be the preferred road taken by universities and funding agencies.

During the past decades gender studies has been established at many universities throughout Europe. Gender studies is taught at all levels but more frequently on the master level. There are interdisciplinary master degrees as well as gender specialization in master degrees in other disciplines depending on how gender studies is institutionalized within the universities. The creation of master courses has strengthened gender teaching but there is a concern that there are not enough courses on the undergraduate level. In Sweden many universities offer a gender graduate degree, which is not the case in all European countries. However, today there is a growing number of gender courses which are integrated in undergraduate programmes in other disciplines than gender studies. This is a positive trend but there is still a need to strengthen programmes in gender studies.

Today, budgetary restrictions are facing universities and there is a fear that gender studies will be affected when universities are cutting costs. Neoliberal values which promote notions of utility have influenced university policies during the past years. Gender studies which is fundamentally critical and challenges societal norms is at risk if such values are allowed to dominate. One cannot ignore that gender studies, even in Sweden, still evoke resistance. Looking back, women's studies was tolerated as long as it seemed only to concern women. Gender studies claims to be part of all disciplinary research, and so it is far more threatening. In Sweden, the official discourse promotes gender equality and gender studies but there still exists a more or less hidden resistance against the field as such. In Norway the concept 'state feminism' was introduced in the 1980's to show how the Scandinavian welfare states have furthered feminism, and state feminism has been important for the institutionalization of gender studies in academia. However, today Norwegian gender scholars have seen a backlash with public criticism of state policies on gender equality. At the same time the aims of state feminism within gender studies are being questioned and there is a fear that the government is not interested in supporting critical gender studies. In Sweden, gender research has not been prioritized in the latest governmental research proposition which has led to public discussion. Gender research in social sciences has played a vital role in developing policies for gender equality and there is a worry that this will not be the case in the future.

Participants in the AG Round Table often express their concern that gender studies is not highly acclaimed in academia. I would say that this is not surprising due to the fact that gender studies is fundamentally critical and rethinks knowledge. In social sciences and humanities, however, the theoretical approaches of gender studies are often shared with researchers in other disci-

plines. Post-colonial perspectives and intersectionality, for example, are frequently used, not only by gender scholars. Looking at natural sciences and medicine the marginalization of gender studies is obvious. To counteract this, the Swedish Research Council in 2006 funded a gender excellence programme at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University: *GenNa: Nature/Culture and Transgressive Boundaries*. The aim of the programme was to develop a research environment where disciplinary differences became methodological advantages which would enrich the kinds of questions asked and the theories produced. The focus of the programme was gender and gendered knowledge and how these are developed in the borderland between the cultural and natural sciences, and in the knowledge-producing interactions between research, theory, and teaching. As examples, the programme investigated the relationship between gender and body/embodiment, the diffuse boundaries between human and animals, and the gender didactic between nature and culture. The broad scope of the GenNa programme made it possible to rethink gender in collaboration between cultural and natural sciences. Otherwise there is a risk that gender studies in the natural sciences and medicine is reduced to counting men and women, focusing on the question of similarities and differences and thus reproducing a binary gender model. In Uppsala, researchers from different disciplines worked closely together and shared their knowledge. This is a slow process; multidisciplinary research which aims at developing new and groundbreaking knowledge takes time.

This raises concern about, for example, the grand EU research programmes. There has been criticism against the EU-research programme on *Gendered Innovations*. Gender researchers have pointed out that the programme conveys a binary sex model and that most case studies deal with individual male and female practices. Cultural norms

and the construction of heteronormative gender models are not discussed. The core of gender studies is thus neglected which also means that knowledge and knowledge production in research isn't being questioned. It is important that gender scholars, from different disciplines, are involved in establishing influential programmes like *Gendered Innovations* to make certain that the approaches of gender studies are integrated. The experience from the GenNa programme is that it is crucial to take into account the different outlooks researchers from gender studies and natural sciences bring to a research collaboration.

The future of gender studies depends on educating young scholars. The challenge gender research faces is that the research environments tend to be rather small. It is therefore vital to cooperate. In Sweden, the Swedish Research council has financed the research school *InterGender*. It is a research school for interdisciplinary gender studies that establishes interconnections between Swedish PhD programmes as well as four major European research schools. It involves all gender departments and centres in Sweden and serves to gather the country's PhD students on a regular basis. This initiative is crucial for the future of gender studies and could serve as a model for other countries to follow. However, it demands the support of a research council and generally today there seems not to be an advantageous situation when it comes to funding possibilities for gender studies. Gender research communities have to keep on fighting for funding, which will secure the future for gender studies.

The GenNa programme, which was described earlier, involved many young researchers who had been trained in different disciplines. During their work in the programme they developed a double competence, in their first discipline as well as in gender studies. However, this is not always beneficial when building an academic career. New collaborations in gender studies

between researchers from diverse fields often find it difficult to be evaluated by national research councils since these are organized according to disciplines. This needs to change so that new and groundbreaking research initiatives have better chances to receive funding. Young researchers who have broadened their fields need to be encouraged not to be hindered by the disciplinary boundaries. This is crucial for gender studies to successfully broaden its scope and establish collaborations outside the humanities and social sciences.

In gender studies the link between researchers who are more theoretically oriented and those who work more empirically needs to be strengthened so that new theories can be used in gender practice. The knowledge of gender researchers should be used to influence state policies which has been the case in Sweden where the presence of gender research in public debate and political life is unique in a European context. This makes Sweden an interesting case to learn from. Many researchers in the AG Round Table emphasize the importance of creating transnational networks to cooperate and exchange experiences. One result of networking between gender researchers is the joint Erasmus Mundus master programme in Women's Studies and Gender, GEMMA, involving eight European universities.² More transnational cooperation is needed both in research and teaching to strengthen gender studies.

The most positive trend in gender studies today is the growing interest among students. As mentioned earlier, many universities in Sweden offer undergraduate programmes in the discipline, *Genusvetenskap*, which attract a lot of students. For example, at the beginning of 2015, Stockholm University received one thousand applicants to the undergraduate level. The engagement and interest students show, is to me the most encouraging sign for the future of gender studies.

NOTES

1. The European countries represented were: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom.
2. The eight universities participating in GEMMA are Granada University, Bologna University, Central European University, Hull University, Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, Lodz University, Oviedo University, and Utrecht University.