

At work with gender studies in Romania.

The subtle neoliberal anti-gender rhetoric vs the graduates' assessments

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Abstract

When they rail against gender studies, opponents are using also more subtle rhetoric, namely the neoliberal one. Simply put, according to their arguments, gender studies programs waste public money, are not market oriented, do not attract students, and do not guarantee the successful integration of graduates into the labour market. On the other hand, significantly less information is available on the perceptions of gender studies graduates themselves regarding their acquired skills. Thus, my aim in this article is to bring to the fore, based on a quantitative methodology, the perceptions of the graduates from MA in Gender Studies in Romania, in the context of the anti-gender movement. The findings of my research reflect the inadequacy of the neoliberal perspective adopted by the detractors of gender studies, since half of the respondents felt their gender expertise helped them to get jobs in their field of studies. Also, they identified the skills acquired as essential for today's labour market.

Keywords: *gender studies, Romania, neoliberalism, anti-gender, students' assessments*

1. Introduction

The anti-gender rhetoric and/or the gender backlash has been well documented in the last years (Petö, 2018; Frey et al. 2014; Do Mar Pereira, 2018; Juhász and Pap, 2018; Kováts and Poim, 2015; Krizsan and Roggeband, 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, 2020; Garbagnoli, 2016; Case, 2019; Băluță, 2020; Corredor, 2019; Verloo, 2018, etc.). Still, the resistance to gender equality needs to be further studied in a **dynamic, complex, multi-dimensional and context-specific way**, in order to better understand how gender equality evolves as political project. In this respect and in order to underline the complexity of illiberal/conservative attacks, *David Paternotte (2020) warns us also about the risks and limits of understanding the anti-gender*



actions only by using the backlash framework, which became very attractive for feminist scholars. He is stating a very important critique of the backlash narrative by arguing that it is “excessively drives scholars, observers and practitioners into the study of what is under attack and does not allow them to see that the assaults on women’s or LGBTI rights take part in a wider project, which strives to establish a new political – less liberal and less democratic – order.” (David Paternotte, 2020) This is why, in this article, I make a contextual critical analysis for a particular way of articulating the anti-gender discourse: the claims that gender studies are not-market oriented and are uselessly spending public money. In doing so, I briefly present the state of the art in literature, focusing particularly on actors and discourses. My aim, at this point, is to underline the diversity of discourses and rhetorics, one of them being the neoliberal one. I use the term “neoliberalism” in the sense defined by Mieke Verloo (2018), namely “shrinking the power of the polity domain in favour of the domain of the economy—submitting it to conditions of global free-market capitalism- and giving market actors specific powers in the polity that are not subject to democratic rules” (8, p. 50)

Secondly, in the quantitative research-based section of this article (see detailed methodology in Appendix 1.), I present the inadequacy of the neoliberal/market oriented anti-gender studies perspective, by opposing them the less visible, but equally important perspective of the graduates of such academic programs in Romania.

2. Different, but all against gender equality

In order to better understand the global anti-gender movement and the gender backlash is important to know who are the voices which throw attacks, what are their discourses/visions/strategies, and in which context they become credible/attractive. A crucial contribution in this respect is the book edited by Mieke Verloo in 2018 - *Varieties of Opposition to Gender Equality in Europe*. Additionally, I feel important to underline the fact that the detractors’ voices come from very different, sometimes contrasting, ideological positions, exhibiting very different, strongly context-dependent, attack strategies.

Different groups of gender opponents and topics of contestation have been identified by scholars over time and I consider worth mentioning them here, for a better understanding and contextualizing of the neoliberal anti-gender studies discourse, as the main focus of this article.

I will start from the framework proposed by Verloo (2018), where she identifies the oppositional actors among the politicians, governments, citizens, policy makers, churches. Verloo (2018) also frames the political arenas of the fights – parliament, courts, the Internet, while analysing, as well, different and opposing visions of gender+ equality promoted in different contexts.

Graff, Kapur, Waltes (2019) outline the variety of actors involved in the global anti-feminist movement: “believers and non-believers, nationalists and universalists, populists who demonize global capital and traditional Reagan/Thatcher-style conservatives with a neocon love for the market” (p. 541).

Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) use classifications that also underline the need for a more in-depth analysis of our perspective on the anti-gender movement. They use two categories when referring to actors and allies involved in the anti-gender movement. In the first category they include already-existing and sometimes well-established groups, as well as newly established

ones and their allies (Kuhar, Paternotte, *Anti-Gender*, 259) .As for the second category, taking a micro perspective, they identify a complex hub of actors in each country: traditional family supporting associations, anti-abortion groups, religious conservatives, Catholic dignitaries, nationalists and populists, far Right groups and others. Identifying gender studies as one of the targets (with arguments as waste of public money, or being ideologically oriented, not scientifically-focused) Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) underline that the targets were brought to focus, in various countries, depending on the opportunities offered by their particular national policy debates (pp. 257-260).

Juhász and Pap (2018) analyse how the anti-gender ideological umbrella accommodates a plethora of “anti” discourses, such as those of religious fundamentalists, enemies of identity politics, detractors of political correctness, critics of minority rights and of affirmative policies, pro-life groups. They also note the fact that the backlash vis-à-vis women’s rights evolves in connection to specific topics, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, institutional mechanisms, Istanbul Convention’s ratification rhetorics, women’s rights civil space, the academic discipline of gender studies (Juhász and Pap, 2018, pp.15 - 16).

Regarding the Romanian context, Oana Băluță (2020, pp. 24-25) makes the following classification of the most relevant anti-gender actors: 1) NGOs – the Coalition for Family, the Civic Platform Together; 2) Religious actors – Romanian Orthodox Church, but also the Romano Catholic Archbishop of Romania; 3) Public(conservative) Institutions, as The Romanian Academy; 4) Politicians and political parties - from the entire political spectrum. 5) Mass media (on print and on-line/ social media).

Oana Băluță (2020, pp.22-24) also identifies the most important topics of the anti-gender attacks in Romania as being the following: 1. Gender equality *per se*, understood as “making the girls boys, and the boys girls”, or conservative rhetoric pro traditional gender roles ; 2) Feminist movement; 3) LGBTQ rights – see the 2018 Romanian referendum for the traditional family; 4) Istanbul Convention, 5) Sexual and reproductive rights; 6) Formal gender education, including gender studies; 7) Non-formal gender education.

So, it is erroneous to consider that only traditional opponents – conservative/right-wing and religious groups - are rising voices against gender equality and it is, as well, important to understand how anti-gender studies discourses evolved, becoming more and more sophisticated and subtle. Băluță (2020, p. 20) tackles this issue when saying that some important left-wing politicians from Latin America (Mexico, Ecuador) have been associated with anti-gender campaigns, and similarly, in France, the Socialist Party has been split on topics related with LGBTQ reproductive rights. Juhász and Pap (2018) are say that “there is also growing left-wing criticism of the (often also left-wing) backlash discourse, especially focusing on East-Central Europe, which seeks to examine regional differences and to move away from ideological oppositions to understand how the transition to the market economy policies have affected women and why this region has become susceptible to such attacks on modernism “ (pp.15 - 16).

To sum up, is also important to say that the anti-gender discourses are context-dependent, based on this vast variety of actors and topics, on purpose to gain more and more space as a political project against gender equality. As Verloo (2018) states, “there are varieties of oppositions (...) positioning on a continuum from direct to indirect, from democratic to violent, from issue-

based to broad anti-gender, from explicitly intersectionally specific broad-brush forms, and from showing patterns that are predominantly discursive to ones that are profoundly material based” (p. 227). Also, Roggeband (2018) underlines the distinction between the traditional opponents of gender equality or antifeminists (those being easier to identify), and other oppositional actors that attack in a more disguised, even subtle manner. “These actors do not so much reject the idea of gender equality in itself, and may even invoke language of equality and rights.” (Roggeband, 2018, p. 31)

Still, they remain anti gender-equality, event though, as we will see further, some of them are putting forward a different rhetoric, part of which may not be directly connected to the anti-gender movement, but to the so-called neutral, efficient, rational and fair market rules.

3. Gender studies vs market/capitalism, or towards a more subtle anti-gender rhetoric

During the last forty years Gender Studies has grown into an important field of academic knowledge. Its format and content differ from country to country. Autonomy, integration and/or mainstreaming tactics have been applied in various degrees in different places (Lykke, 2010). From setting up Gender Studies to mainstreaming gender in different areas of studies, former communist countries, for example, tried, post-1990, different approaches, in an attempt to fill in the gaps in knowledge, practices and information which existed and widened under the communist regimes (Grünberg, 2011). Paternotte (2019) also discusses the differences in institutionalization and consolidation of gender studies, especially the ones between U.S and Europe: “while European gender scholars have been carrying out gender research for decades, they are still struggling to institutionalize their field of study.” He also labels gender studies in Europe as a poorly consolidated field, with many countries, such as Italy or Poland, having no specific masters or other academic programs in gender studies. Where these do exist, most of them are fairly recent, as in Belgium or France. Also, few independent gender studies departments exist in the region, and almost no institution awards PhD degrees in the field (Paternotte, 2019), due “the powerful tradition of disciplinarity” (Suárez &Suárez, 2006, p. 105), namely due to the fact that in most situations gender-studies have not been recognized as an independent field, but annexed to other disciplines as political science, or sociology.

However, another possible explanation is linked to the anti-gender attacks. Although we have witnessed a process of professionalization and institutionalization of gender studies in different European national contexts (European Commission, 2003; Griffin, 2005), the best way to describe what happens now in academia, is gender backlash.

Is already well known that an important component of the anti-gender discourse is specifically oriented against genders studies. We may quote, as emblematic, the case of Central European University (CEU) in Hungary, who eventually had to move its headquarters to Vienna (Petö, 2018). Similar attacks have been noticed in Germany, Canada, Sweden, Italy, but also in Romania.

Frey et.al. (2014) classify different groups of gender studies opponents as: 1. “journalistic gender enmity”, 2. “Christian fundamentalists”, 3. “guardians of scientificness”, 4. right-wing organizations and 5. “explicitly anti-feminist actors” (Frey et al. 2014, pp. 6-7). Two of these categories require, from my point of view, special attention, due to their explicative value in

relation to more subtle strategies of being antifeminist. Those are: guardians of scientificness and right-wing organizations/voices. I put them together in order to analyze a similar way of constructing a discourse that may seem attractive for a non-initiated public. The “guardians of scientificness” are a group that “presents itself as being politically neutral and merely interested in scientific quality” (Frey et al. 2014, pp. 6), in order distance themselves from other categories mentioned above, the traditional anti-gender actors (the conservative, the religious groups) that can be blamed for steering a never-ending ideological war. We are, in fact, witnessing a different, more subtle strategy of acquiring and using the power against the gender equality discourses by means that are not so obviously contrasting with the values of liberal democracies. *Au contraire*, they seem to be in perfect harmony with the language of equality and individual rights, as well as with the wording of the mainstreams’ hegemonic neoliberal/capitalist discourse.

And this seems not to be a new tendency, due the fact that, as Eisenstein (1981) argues, “powerful political projects against feminism may not just be led by the usual suspects from conservative or right-wing political parties or by religious actors, but also by potential allies and “progressive” parties and actors, because they view feminism as an attack on the state and capitalism.” (in Roggeband, 2018, *Varieties of oppositions*, p. 31) And here Eisenstein introduces the second category of detractors also mentioned by Frey, namely the neoliberals (right-wing organizations and voices) as I will refer to them from now on.

In order to better understand this particular discursive rhetoric, we need to take a more in-depth look to the line of reasoning stating that *gender ideology can lead to economic decline*. This is because free market is bypassed by the regulations demanded by political correctness like women’s quota, contributors’ money is wasted on gender issues (also on gender studies programs) and women are encouraged to study unproductive subjects at university and work in sectors of little economic value (Mayer, Sauer, *Anti-gender*, 2018, p.32)

As I mentioned above, when it comes to attacking gender studies, their opponents are also using a more subtle discursive rhetoric, in order to separate their actions from the sexist, homophobic, religious biases, linking them to a more “rational”, “argumentative”, “accepted” framework, namely the neoliberal one.

There are several contexts typical for this rhetoric. For instance, in Germany, even though universities chronically lack funding and the gender studies programs represent a small, though important, slot of the academic disciplines, the attacks were mentioning tremendous waste of public money (“our taxes”) (Villa, *Anti-gender*, 2017, p.88). Also, David Paternotte notes that “in October 2018, despite a massive international outcry, the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán revoked the accreditation of the country’s two master’s degree programs in gender studies. According to state officials, these programs are ideological, violate Christian values, waste public money, do not interest students, and do not guarantee the successful integration of graduates into the labor market.” (Paternotte, 2019) The illiberal, anti-gender rhetoric is obvious when it comes to the Hungarian case of Central European University, which was not financially supported by the Hungarian state, thus the neoliberal critiques invoking inefficient spending of public money had, in fact, no real standing.

To sum up the core of the neoliberal anti-gender discourse I quote the words of Conny Roggeband: “women can thus enjoy sexual and consumer freedom so long as they do not

become a burden to the state” (Roggeband, 2018, p. 31). Paraphrasing, gender studies may exist as far as they are producing adequate workers for the labor market.

Considering all this complicated context, significantly less information is available on the perceptions of the gender studies graduates themselves on the usefulness of the qualifications acquired for their future personal, civic and professional lives (see also Griffin, 2005). This is why the second part of this article will analyse the perceptions of graduates of master programs in Gender Studies in Romania, on the background of the wider context described above. The perceptions were collected based on a quantitative/survey research methodology (see Appendix 1), by asking the alumni of the two existing Gender Studies public master programs in Romania to fill in survey forms. Even though there are numerous arguments that underscore the pitfalls associated with an exclusive focus on employability and demand for gender studies programs (see A. Werner and Lundberg, 2016), the field work results that I present below are at least questioning the validity of the neoliberal anti-gender argumentative rhetoric.

If we refer to Romania, there is a quite limited number of studies monitoring the institutionalization and professionalization process of gender studies in our country (see Băluță. Cîrstocea, 2002; Miroiu, 2010, Băluță 2020, Văcărescu 2006, 2011). Also, there are even less studies providing to the need to track what happens with the graduates of gender studies once in the labour market: what are the skills they think they have acquired, which are their strengths and weaknesses when confronted to the labour market expectations, but also to other areas - such as, in relation to their community, family, state authorities, how their training impacts on their employability. Two of my most important research questions are:

Q1: Are gender studies useful from the perspective of the alumni of such educational programs?

Q2: Is the neoliberal framework, in the case of Romania, a more subtle and presented as neutral, anti-gender discourse?

In order to answer to these questions, in the second part of this article, I oppose to the neoliberal anti-gender studies discourse the students’ assessments and perceptions about such academic offers. But, before presenting the field work results, I feel necessary to briefly present the main elements of the anti-gender studies discourse in Romania.

4. The politics of academic gender backlash in Romania at a glance

The anti-gender ideology works in Romania also as an ideological glue for a variety of conservative groups (around 30 Romanian NGO) that became visible and took the shape of the Coalition for Family. This Coalition initiated in 2018 a National Referendum for changing the Constitution of the country. On the same track of hostility, in November 2019, a senator – member of a young right-wing party (Popular Movement in Romania) known as the Parliamentary Prayer Group, which includes prominent supporters of the Coalition for Family, proposed a law that should forbid any kind of sex/gender proselytism in education, because gender theory is not scientifically proven and gender sensitive education artificially creates different kinds of minorities. As a follow-up, the Romanian Parliament passed in June 2020 an amendment to the education law, banning all educational institutions from “activities propagating theories and opinions on gender identity according to which gender is a separate concept from biological sex”. Again, the core argument was the idea of gender studies as not

being scientificⁱ. A significant reaction from the Romanian and international academia and civil society came in different ways: from public statements of different prestigious Romanian universities regarding the dangerous, illiberal attack to the academic autonomy, to hundreds of people protesting in front of the Romanian Presidency, to an *Amicus Curiae* from signed in autumn 2020 by 885 supporters and sent to the Romanian Constitutional Courtⁱⁱ. At the end of 2020, the Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional in response to claim of the Romanian president. Furthermore, in the context aroused by the debates around this legislative proposal, in Romania voices that attacked gender studies programs from a so called “neutral” perspective were heard. From my research perspective in this article, the most important was that of Cătălin Avramescu, associate professor at Faculty of Political Science, Bucharest University, who said: “One of the questions that needs to be answered is: should we use public money to support educational programs (see gender studies programs) that are pseudoscience? This is the problem. Let’s see if this kind of studies, as specific programs, should parasite programs like political science. And the answer is a categorical no.” (Avramescu, Libertatea.ro – interview, June 2020).

It is also worth saying that the field research whose results I present in the following part of the article was undertaken in 2019, before the initiation of the education law amendment, and also before Cătălin Avramescu’s interview. Looking carefully at what happened in the region, especially in the case of Hungary, being aware of the existence of an anti-gender movement in Romania, but also having in mind the fact that the MA programs are evaluated, *inter alia*, from the perspective of their adaptability to the needs and objectives of the labour marketⁱⁱⁱ, I forecast, with a high probability, that a neoliberal anti-gender attack will, at a certain moment, appear in Romania. Consequently, I initiated an independent, unfunded research of my own, just to find out the other side of the story, as well, namely the student’s assessment of their situation.

5. Anti-gender studies discourse vs student’s assessments

5.1. Gender Studies programs in Romania: an overview

In Romania, there are two institutionalized MA Gender Studies programs developed by two state universities in Bucharest: The National School for Political and Administrative Studies (NSPAS) and the University of Bucharest (UB). Both programs smartly combined over time a catching up component with a theoretical reconstruction, offering a “room of their own” to students and professors, in order to move gender research from the margin to the centre. The MA Program *Policies, Gender and Minorities* was introduced only in 1998 within the Faculty of Political Science, from NSPAS but the initial efforts to introduce it date from the mid-1990s. It was the first program of its kind in Romania (and the only one in place until 2002) and among the very few at that time in Eastern Europe. Initially designed as an MA program focused on gender studies and public policies, the curriculum has been modified as of 2008, to include courses related to minorities and minority rights. It has taken an inter-disciplinary approach from the beginning, being framed within Political Science, Sociology, International Relations and Cultural Studies. Between its establishment and 2019, it had 293 students enrolled in total, out of which 158 graduated by defending their master thesis.

The MA program in *Policies of Equal Opportunities in European and Romanian Context*, established since 2011 at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Political Sciences, enrolled

157 students until 2019, their vast majority defending also their master thesis. The master program is part of a European master program called E.G.A.L.E.S. (European Master in Equality and Gender Studies) which is meant to support advances in gender equality, and more generally the fight against discrimination. E.G.A.L.E.S. brings together various universities. The MA in *Policies of Equal Opportunities in European and Romanian Context* aims at preparing its students as experts in analysing the priorities of national policies related to equal opportunities and in correlating them to the European policies.

Nevertheless, since 2019, these programs have been at the core of the anti-gender discourses and attacks in Romania, and their existence is seriously threatened by the education law amendment mentioned above.

5.2. Results

A) Useful, but not in a classical way: individual development reasons surpass employment benefits reasons in the option for an MA program.

As reasons for enrolling to the master (see Figure 1), respondents mentioned as the most important one *the interest in the themes proposed in the program* (91%). *Personal development* (58%) and *intention to work in the field* (42%) have been also considered important drivers. At the same time, only 5% of the respondents said that they have chosen this program because they considered it may enable them find a job on the labour market. Even *curiosity* is evaluated as a more important reason (12%) than employability.

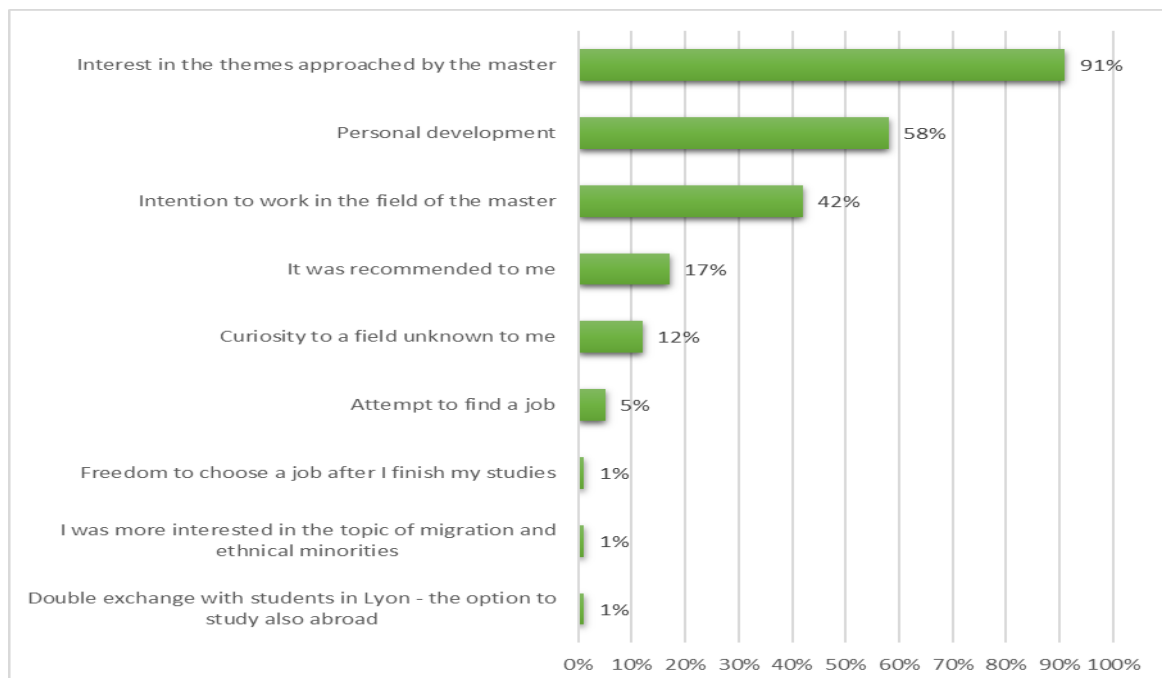


Figure 1. Reasons for enrolling into the MA program

Note: the values figure represent the number of people that chose the reason divided by the total number of respondents, i.e., 77.

The relative high percentage of those who choose the program because they intended to work in the area of gender equality needs to be highlighted. It pinpoints to a paradoxical situation.

Students want, theoretically, to become gender experts and to work in the field, but they are, nevertheless, aware of the fact that, on Romanian labour market, enrolling in a gender studies program does not substantially contribute to getting a job. Even though, *students (majority of them adults) choose gender studies due to personal reasons and intend to work in the field*, they are also aware of the importance of such studies (especially on personal level), they are waiting for changes on labour market in order to have their competences validated and valorised and, in a conservative context, they “took the risk” of doing an MA program that might not yield a specific advantage when getting a job.

Also, prospective expectations match with retrospective evaluations. Graduates consider, in general, that the GS programs helped them mostly to understand society, provided them with interdisciplinary knowledge and made them part of a useful professional community (see Figure 2).

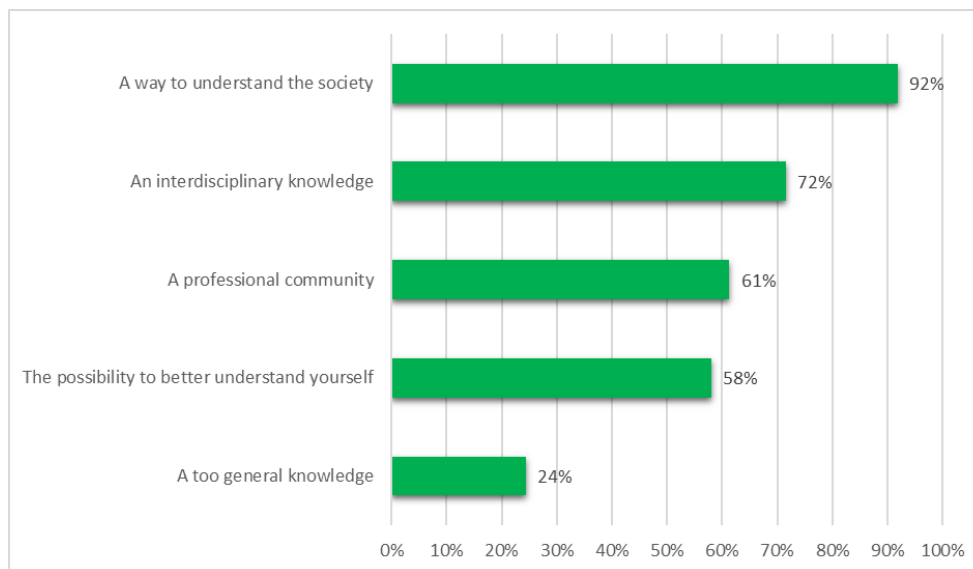


Figure 2. Level of agreement with the considered aspects

Note: the figure presents the sum of the items 5 to 7 representing agreement from the question: “On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 for total disagreement and 7 complete agreement, do you consider that your master offers: ...”

61% of the respondent said that the MA programs offered them a professional community, this meaning the they are identifying gender studies as a field in itself and they feel part of a profession, but a profession that is less institutionalized, as we will see below, and that offers them a solid understanding of society and of themselves. The results are somewhat in line with what Le Feuvre and Andriocci (2005) are saying about the skills that Women’s Studies students and graduates have developed, namely the fact that “their Women’s Studies training provides them with ample understanding of the ‘reconciliation’ (...) they are better able to pre-empt the tensions they will almost inevitably experience at some point in their lives” (p.61)

B) At work with gender studies

To start with, 92% of the respondents said the they are employed and 83% said they do not have MA diplomas in other fields (not following gender studies program as a secondary

degree). Also, the rate of graduates that either completed or were enrolled in a PhD program is of 43% of the respondents, and 24% form the graduates,

Half of the respondents said that after graduating from gender studies they had at least one job in the field and 15% said that they worked only in the fields for which the MA programs offered competences. Also, even in a poor institutionalized and professionalized field as we saw, *a third of the graduates used their MA diploma at one point in their carrier*, either when applying for a job, seeking for a promotion or further training, but only for eight respondents their MA diploma was an employment requirement. Also, *half of the respondents declared that they are working in a field/ place of employment for which they received training/ skills during the post-graduate studies*.

When I asked those graduates which had, after graduation, at least one job closely linked to their gender expertise about the most valuable capability acquired during the master programs, the majority (95%) declared that “the skills developed to critically analyse social phenomena” were particularly helpful. This highly valued skill (critical thinking) is, consequently, seen as a practical ability, enabling graduates to find a job and work in the area of gender issues, using their gender-based knowledge. Two thirds of the sample declared that the low percentage of people with gender expertise available on the labour market was an advantage for them in terms of getting a related job.

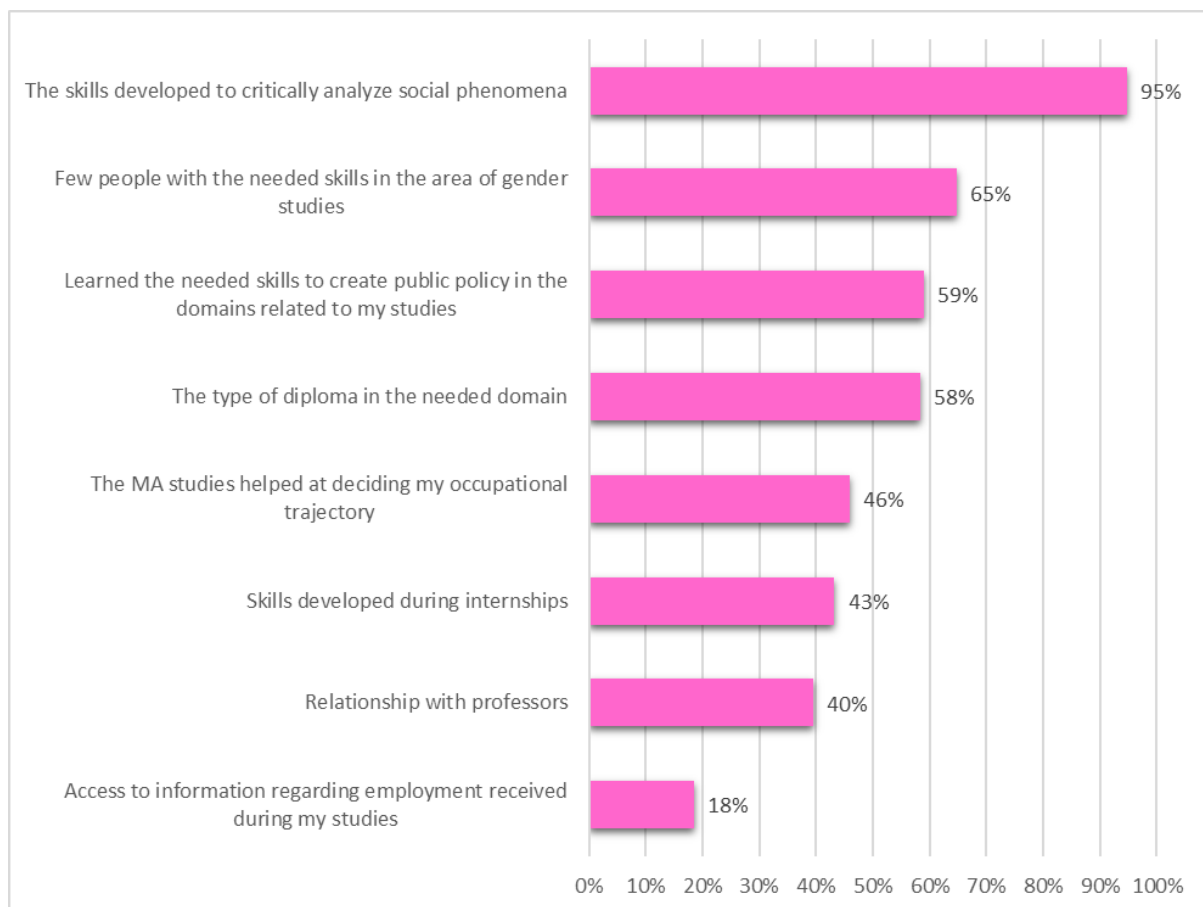


Figure 3. Aspects that facilitated graduates’ work in the field (subsample: graduates who worked in the field of their studies)

Note: The figure presents the sum of codes 5 to 7 of the following question: “Please provide a grade from 1 to 7, where 1 means total disagreement and 7 total agreement, to the following factors that you consider that helped you to work in the field”.

The skills needed to develop public policies are also highly seen as useful when getting a job in the field – 59% of the respondents chose these skills as an advantage. It is important to mention at this point that these are among the skills highly demanded by the European Union, which is promoting gender mainstreaming as an important tool in fighting gender inequalities (EIGE, 2020).

C) Working in a poorly institutionalized field.

As I mentioned above, Paternotte (2019) is labelling gender studies in Europe as a poorly consolidated field. Also, Nicky Le Feuvre and Muriel Andriocci (2005) bring additional arguments to support the idea that the weak institutionalisation of the field is one of the aspects to be considered when analysing the market efficacy of gender studies. They state that in countries where the institutionalization of equality policies has provided specific job opportunities, a considerable proportion of Women’s Studies graduates move into equality policy implementation (p. 60). This fact is supported by the figure below, where the barriers in getting a job are presented.

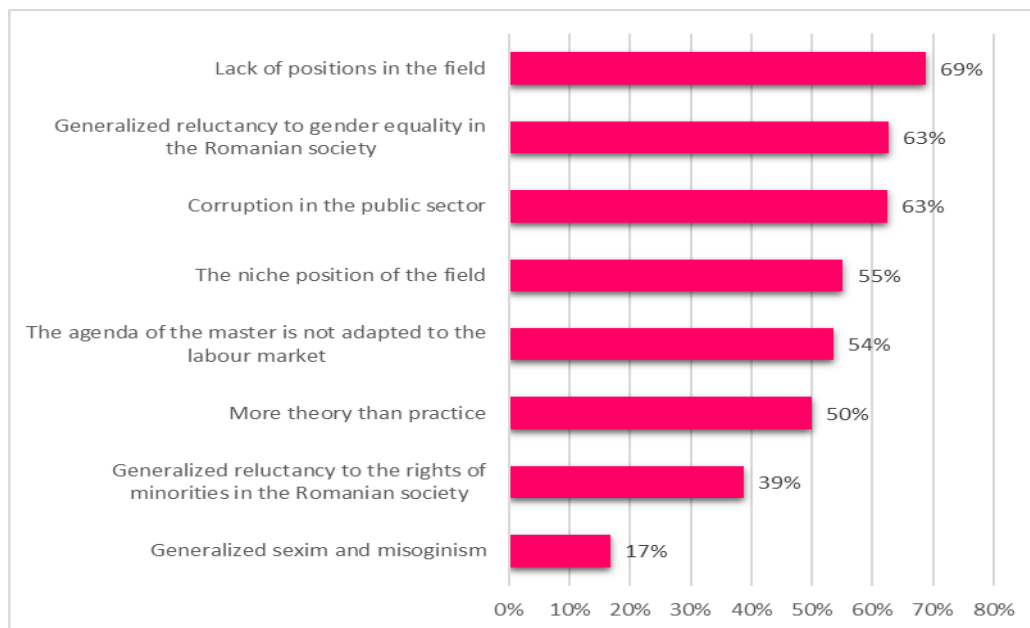


Figure 4. Barriers in getting a job in the field of study (subsample: respondents who did not occupy a position in the field of study) *Note: The figure presents the sum of the answers of 5 to 7 to the question: “Please provide a grade from 1 to 7, where 1 means total disagreement and 7 total agreement, to the following factors that you consider that did not allow you to work in the field”.*

Lack of vacant positions in the field was identified by 69% of the respondents as the most important barrier in getting a gender study related job. At first sight this may be interpreted as no need for such competences, but at a closer look we see that other barriers are also named: generalized reluctance to gender equality in Romanian society, mentioned by 63% of the respondents, corruption in the public sector, mentioned by the same number of respondents, and poor institutionalization and professionalization of the field (the niche position of the field) – mentioned by 55% of the respondents. Those barriers are directly linked with the weak institutionalization and professionalization of the field. We may also add that **9 out of 10 of our respondents considered that there is a need for experts in gender studies in the present Romanian society**, underlining once more the poor institutionalization of equality policies in our country. Beyond this inconsistent context almost all respondents think that there should be an expert on gender issues in every Romanian institution. 50% of respondents say that this kind of employee should hold an MA in the field, whereas 42% consider that anyone who graduated a program in the field is qualified for such a position. Only few respondents thought that such a compulsory employment policy is unnecessary. Last but not least, assessing the achievements in the area of gender equality in Romania was also part of the questionnaire. The existence of the GS master programs is highly appreciated by the respondents: 81% of them consider it an important success in the area of gender equality. Only legislation on domestic violence surpasses in appreciation the existence of these master programs.

D) Skills of the future

Almost all respondents declared that respect for diversity, tolerance and empathy are important skills that they acquired during the master programs. Civic and political involvement, social involvement and pro-active attitudes are also well appreciated. At the same time, only 23% of respondents consider that they gained entrepreneurial skills within the master program and only 43% picked leadership as an important skill acquired during their studies (see Error: Reference source not found4).

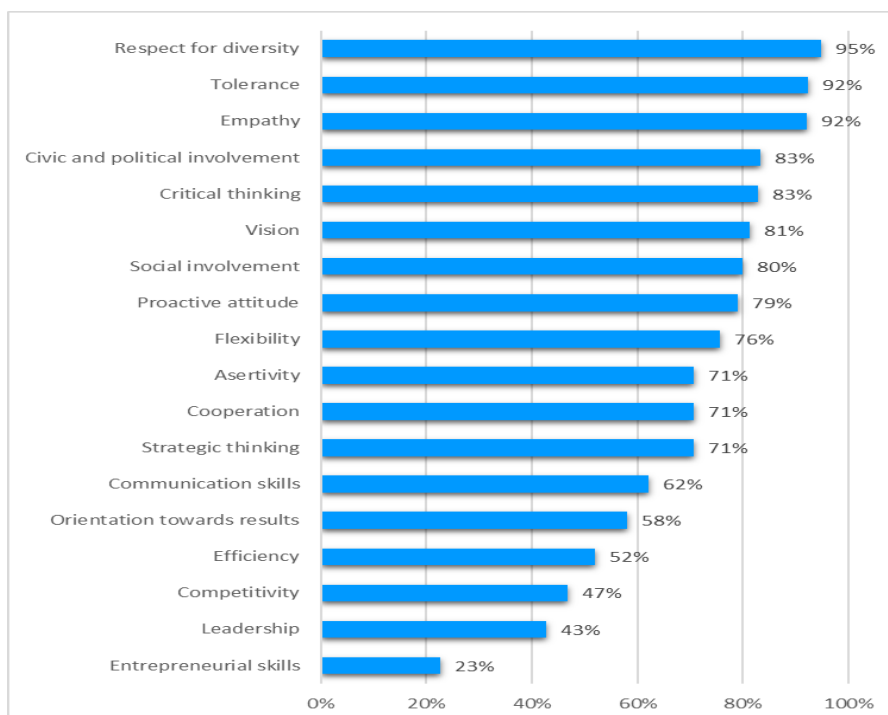


Figure 5. Ranking of acquired skills

Note: The figure presents the sum of the codes 5 to 7, representing the positive scale of the question: “Evaluate on a scale from 1 (none) to 7 (total) your skills level gained within our master for each of the following competences”.

The types of skills which respondents perceive as less developed during the master programs (entrepreneurial, leadership, competitiveness) are exactly the ones important in the classical neoliberal discourse about what kind of education we should receive. We may thus conclude that the GS programs are not affiliated to this line of logic for the time being. But, in fact, the most recent trends of (re)defining the needed skills for the labour force of the 21st century are proving the opposite. For example, an important OECD and International Labour Office (2018) report outlines the major changes that the labour market is facing, mentioning “rapid and deep changes brought about by technological development, demographics, globalization and climate change” (p. 2) and the need of new skills for the future. The report concludes: “would include strong general cognitive skills, like literacy and numeracy, which can provide a solid foundation to pursue lifelong learning. It also includes basic ICT skills, analytical skills and a range of complementary skills like creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Interpersonal and communication skills, as well as emotional skills like self-awareness and the ability to manage stress and change, are also increasingly important” (p. 11).

In another OECD document, a distinction between three different types of required skills is made:

- (i) cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, which include critical thinking, creative thinking, learning-to-learn and self-regulation;
- (ii) social and emotional skills, which include empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility and collaboration;
- (iii) practical and physical skills, which include using new information and communication technology devices (OECD, 2019).

As a conclusion, by analysing more closely the data summarized in Figure 5 and correlating it with the above-mentioned developments, we get a clearer image concerning what is taking place, in fact, at the intersection between the skills acquired by the post graduates of the GS programs and the labour landscape in Romania. My assumption, that needs further investigation and reflection, is that we are facing a rather underdeveloped, obsolete qualification skills requested in some sectors of the labor market and not, as some critics are claiming, an inefficient and not adjusted Gender Studies master programs that produce unskilled human resources for the labor market. In fact, the acquired skills that the graduates appreciate most are deeply connected to the democratic, pluralist, participative, people/stakeholders-oriented societies. Here, I have in mind the recent work of scholars like Francis Fukuyama (2018) and his call on moving from “econometrics, cost-benefit analysis, decision analysis, and, most recently, use of randomized experiments for program evaluation” to “stakeholder analysis” or to what David Bromell names “the so-called soft skills (that) are critical to working well with stakeholders who want and value different things” (2019, p. 8).

E) ‘Reconciliation’ – a skill of the future?

The reconciliation framework mentioned above is further confirmed. The respondents offered a non-dual approach to their private and public lives. They largely perceive their lives as a personal-public mix of interests and needs and, consequently, they look for a Gender Studies post-graduate degree able to offer them a set of skills and qualifications that enables them to match both spheres of needed competences. They are aware that their everyday lives are influenced also their relations with authorities, not only with peers and families.

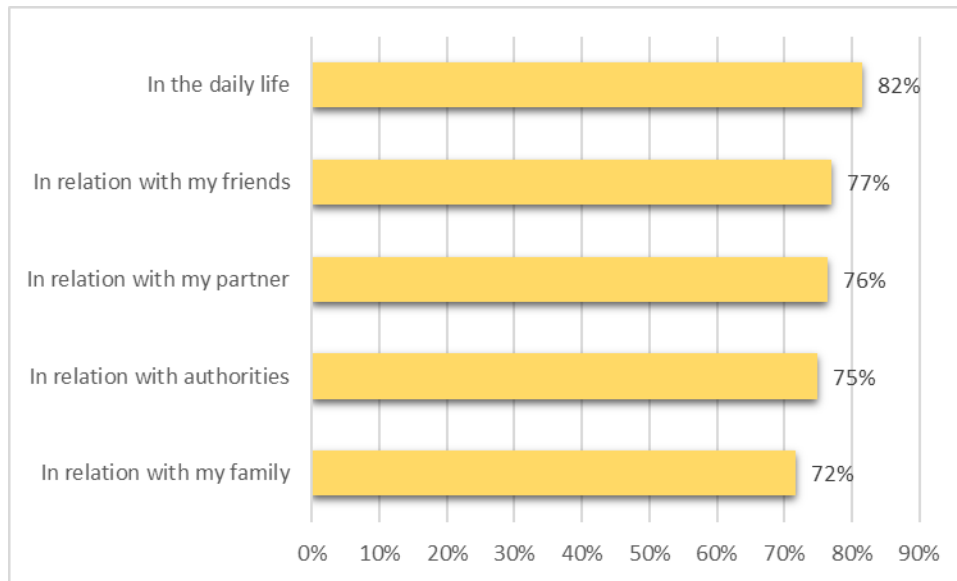


Figure 6. Perceived usefulness of the program of study

Note: the sum of the codes 5 to 7 representing usefulness were presented in the figure, whereas the question was: “How useful are your knowledge and competences gained during your master? Provide a grade from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning useless and 7 very useful”.

The importance assigned to the MA programs in GS in terms of the usefulness for their personal relationships should be further considered. In the context of the visible redefinition of power relations within families/between partners in our contemporary societies, graduation from a GS master program means coming in contact with diverse critical perspectives on the gendered dimension of social institutions - such as family and labour. It will be interesting to see if such skills are useful and valorised on the labour market and if they can be integrated within the skills of the future.

Conclusions

This research was aimed as a starting point for a more extensive multi-level assessment of the Gender Studies master programs in Romania, that is needed in order to get a better understanding of how anti-gender attacks and opponents use the lack of information on this specific topic in a subversive way.

Focused on the post-graduates’ perceptions, the research outlined a number of features that, in my view, reflect the inadequacy of the neoliberal perspective adopted by the gender studies detractors, the most important being that MA programs are useful in getting a job in the field,

as half of the respondents declare, and the skills provided are in line with the skills of the future requested by OECD and International Labour Office. At a glance, most respondents are employed. Even in the context of a poor institutionalisation and professionalisation of gender studies in Romania^{iv}, a quarter of the respondents consider that they are employed in jobs closely linked with their MA specialization and half of them declare they had at least one job in which their specialization was relevant for their activities. I consider that such results indicate that the graduates find the competences acquired within the MA programme as necessary and useful in a large spectrum of jobs. The set of skills greatly appreciated by students, both at entry level and after graduation, is closely related to the set of skills currently promoted at international level as being vital for the labour force of the 21st century: critical thinking, empathy, creativity, respect for diversity.

Furthermore, what place should be given to other reasons for undertaking gender studies and how important are they in the everyday life of the graduates? Are personal reasons of self-development and better grasping the complex social realities important in the official assessment? Or neoliberal public/market-private/self-development divide remains important and force us to conclude that the programs do not fit into the market and, in consequence, they must be re-evaluated especially from the perspective of public funding? When answering this question we should also take into consideration the findings of professor Griffin (2005). She argues that because students do not connect the competences achieved with subsequent employment on the labour market, they are contributing to the invisibility of the discipline. They tend to subscribe to these MA programs for personal reasons, because of an awareness of gender discrimination, or because they are, or they became, interested in the topic (Griffin 2005, p. 99). But this does not mean that the gender studies programs are not connected to the labour market. Unfortunately, as Griffin notes, even if “there have significant challenges to that ideal (personal reasons exclusively connected with leisure) it still drives public perceptions including those of the Women’s Studies students themselves. (Griffin 2005, *Doing Womne's Studies*, 2005, p. 100).

This public perception is strengthened also by the way competences useful on the labour market are standardized in a neoliberal context. For instance, “private” aspects of citizens’ lives are not being captured and operationalized within the institutional evaluation process of the master programs done by the governmental authority in the field (ARACIS) which focuses on employability, and such a framework can be at least critically approached. Firstly, it ignores and reduces to silence the beneficiaries’ subjective voices based on their own experience as students and graduates of these GS programs. Secondly, the official institutional assessment grid reinforces the patriarchal public-private division (due to the focus on employability and the disembodied needs of labour market) and suggests a neoliberal paradigm dominance in the higher education policies that can be easily used in straightening an anti-gender discourse. Therefore, there are only two ways of explaining the attacks of gender studies as not being market oriented. First, an obsolete view of the opponents regarding the labor market or, second, an intended misleading of the anti-gender supporters.

Finally, it is obvious that a more thorough assessment of the Gender Studies master programs is needed in order to test the results from this initial research. This implies, firstly, the implementation of a viable institutional tracking mechanism, but also in-depth qualitative

research with both the students and their employers. In the context of an anti-gender rhetoric (the global gender backlash), the importance of an evidence-based diagnosis is vital for gender studies, as we have seen in the Romanian case, where the amendment of the education law literally banned gender studies.

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Annex 1: Methodology and descriptive statistics

The questionnaire, designed to be sent out to the graduates of the Gender Studies master programs in Romania, covered the following main topics:

- (i) the student’s motivations for enrolling in a gender studies master program;
- (ii) the graduates’ assessment of the programs in terms of general skills acquired and
- (iii) the perceived usefulness of the GS programs in different societal contexts, with a special focus on employability benefits.

The data were collected between August and October 2019 by a team of researchers. We have pretested the questionnaire by discussing with three graduates of different specializations and their feedback was integrated in the final design of the questionnaire. The study was carried out in strict accordance with the ethical requirements for human subjects research. In this respect the research project was reviewed and approved by the head of The Political Science Department/ National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, even though

it was an independent (unfunded) project. It is important to mention that the research involved adults and not children, animals or any other vulnerable groups. All the efforts were made to protect the participants privacy and anonymity, all the collected responses were anonymous. In the questionnaire we used inclusive language which acknowledge diversity, conveyed respect to all people, was sensitive to differences. Restoring the database with graduates' contact details proved to be a difficult process, mainly due the GDPR policy. That was why a snowball method was used in order to reach as much absolvents as possible, this included: using alumni community⁷⁴, contacting absolvents on Facebook, using LinkedIn network. Because of GDPR regulations⁷⁵ in the first phase an on-line **informed written consent** of participation form was sent (May-July)⁷⁶. The response rate of this first wave was low, with a little more than 50% of the sample giving accord. Those that agreed to participate received through email an extended self-applied survey (August-October 2019). We have received 77 valid replies from the self-administered questionnaire by the end of the data collecting period.

For presenting the results, I used descriptive statistics and mainly distributions. Distributions were either presented entirely, or as a sum of the positive categories of a scale. Each figure is accompanied by notes on how the question was asked and the method used for presenting the data.

The sample consists of graduates that agreed to participate in this research and also answered the questionnaire. Thus, my data are not statistically representative of the population of graduates in Gender Studies, being collected from a convenience sample, and the reading of my results should take into account this aspect. I also specify that, just for better visualization, I used absolute values, but also percentages in my data analysis.

Respondents coming from the University of Bucharest account for 21% of the sample, whereas the majority others (79%) come from the National School for Political and Administrative Studies. A third of the sample also enrolled in a PhD program after graduation from these programs. Most respondents are females (86%), aged from 24 to 68 years of age, with an average of 35. Graduates come from urban settings, most likely from big cities (87%) and medium cities (10%), which is not a surprise for this kind of critical, “controversial” and still niche-kind of low institutionalized studies.

⁷⁴ One of the researchers involved in the study is part of the Alumni at the MA Program *Policies, Gender and Minorities*. We were also helped by Ionela Băluță who is one of the coordinators of the MA programme from Bucharest University. Ionela put us in contact with the alumni community from the MA program in *Policies of Equal Opportunities in European and Romanian Context*.

⁷⁵ Source: <https://gdpr-info.eu/>

⁷⁶ See the googleform available here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Fp_PUp3EMeIa75Y12k9yOOgSG5HXcIE4vwFksHX_WD0/edit;