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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE
The NGO-ization of feminism
and resistance to anti-gender politics

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Editorial.

Between a rock and a hard place – the NGOization of feminism and resistance to anti-gender politics

ALEXANDRA ANA

Issue Coordinator

The intensification of governing processes started during 1980s profoundly altered the relationship between states, markets and civil societies. This new mode of governance understood as neoliberal bureaucratization was characterized by a gain in autonomy and generalization of the proliferation of norms, rules and procedures stemming from the market, at all levels of life and, by a high degree of formalization, resulting from operations of abstraction that opened the possibility to enclose the complex reality into general, formal categories (Hibou 2015), transforming empirically assembled populations – categories of governmentalities, into morally constituted communities (Chatterjee 2004). The multifaceted process of state reconfiguration included horizontal and vertical shifts in power and policy responsibility together with a transformed state and society relationship (Banaszak et al., 2003, 7). While transnationalization, Europeanization and democratization after the second half of the 1970s were part of the process of uploading power to international institutions, the process of NGOization supported the offloading of state responsibilities to civil society actors. The strengthening of neoliberal governance as “a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are cast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (Ong, 2006, 3), translated into an increase in importance of New Public Management (NPM) and evidence-based policy-making, and the dismantling of the welfare state, laying down the conditions, for the proliferation of NGOs (Harvey, 2005, 78).

In this context, the organization of United Nation's (UN) series of World Conferences on Women, marked the development of a global gender equality regime (Kardam, 2005), through the build-up and proliferation of international norms, embedded in international treaties and declarations, of policy recommendations for governments, and of transnational networks that became crucial in the implementation of public policies (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; True and Mintrom, 2001). One of these recommendations – following the 1975 UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, was the creation of women's policy agencies that was adopted by national governments throughout the next three decades. States' engagements at international level, constituted an opening in the political opportunity structure (POSs), for feminist movements to bring their demands in the official political arena and to participate in the policy-making process (Ana 2024). State feminism as a concept emerged to designate the alliances between the newly created women's policy agencies and feminist movements (Kantola and Squires, 2012). The former was supposed to bridge between the latter's claims and the governmental bodies involved in policymaking, but they, however, were criticized to have privileged particular demands that were in line with the dominant state policies and that profited a small elite of women (Idem). Once feminist activists gained access to influence politics through official channels, their claims started to be pursued mostly through institutionalized forms of political intervention. Feminist movements shifted their tactics from contentious, disruptive actions towards institutional advocacy and lobbying within NGOs (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Bernal 2000; Haley 2006). In order to be considered stable, legitimate partners of dialogue and to participate in policymaking in official settings, feminist movement actors underwent a pressure to professionalize and, as such, invested time and other resources to train professional experts. This entailed organizational costs that led to feminist organizations' financial dependence on donors, whose burdensome accountability mechanisms to assess the management of targeted population and social phenomena, loaded activists with bureaucratic work and created new subject categories. These processes of institutionalization, professionalization and bureaucratization have been understood as dimensions of the wider process of NGOization characterizing civil society, more generally, and feminist movements, particularly, in different parts of the world, from Western Europe (Lang 1997), Latin America (Alvarez 1995), to Central and Eastern Europe (Guenther 2011; Jacobson & Saxonberg 2013), Africa (Britton & Price 2014), Arab countries (Jad 2004) and South Asia (Roy 2015). While some emphasized the benefits of instilling feminist ideas within states, others focused on the drawbacks of the transformations induced by NGOization and affecting feminist movements. Scholars emphasized that cooperation with states in an institutionalized manner might translate into an alteration of activists' claims and tactics in order to fit without disruption into the normal practice of politics and ultimately into co-optation. Donor dependency and bureaucratization were associated with channeling and goal displacement. Engagement with institutionalized politics was thought to lessen grassroots mobilization and coupled with professionalization to widen the gap between activists and professionals, on the one hand and communities and constituencies, on the other (Jad 2010). Scholars argued that professionalization and financial dependency lead to demobilization (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Lang 2013) and, coupled with bureaucratization to depoliticization and co-optation (Squires 2012; O'Reilly 2014). These diagnoses constituted the subject of normative and polarized debates about NGOs as contributors to the welfare and empowerment of communities or as

channels for reproducing neoliberal policies and imperial and neocolonial power relations. In public debates some argued that feminism became capitalism's handmaiden (Fraser 2013) and others that the NGOization of women's movement turned Western liberal feminism into the norm of what constitutes feminism (Roy 2014).

Debates about NGOization have softened during the second half of the last decade, related to at least two major transformations. First, a new wave of mass mobilizations emerged around the world. Ni Una Menos, addressing femicide and gender-based violence, started in Argentina, in 2015, and quickly spread throughout the continent. It also reached Europe, where mobilizations took place in Spain and in Italy. Similarly in 2016, in Poland, large-scale protests took place – Czarny Protesty, under the form of a Women's Strike, against the proposed total ban on abortion. In 2017, the International Women's Strike was coordinated in several countries. Still in 2017, the #MeToo movement began to spread virally on the digital sphere, eleven years after it was initiated by Tarana Burke, on MySpace. This new wave of mobilizations questioned the previous diagnosis about feminist movements as being demobilized – aspect to which NGOization have been thought to largely contribute. How can we understand this new wave of mobilization in relation to the NGOization hypothesis?

Second, gender and sexuality became highly politicized as anti-gender politics started to strengthen in terms of visibility and campaigns results. Part of larger trends of de-democratization and gender backsliding, anti-gender mobilizations contributed to a reversal and dismantling of policies and institutions for emancipatory politics of gender in various locations (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), favoured by the selective in- and exclusion of NGOs, as governments attempted to reorganize the civic space (Roggeband and Kriszán 2021:23). This made the enduring feminist, LGBTQI, and anti-racist resistance more visible, questioning previous diagnosis of depoliticization and co-optation. How can we understand the politicization of gender and sexuality in relation to previous diagnosis of co-optation and depoliticization, at a time when feminist actors seem to have lost monopoly over gender debates in official politics and public debates?

Today, feminist resistance to external threats seems at least two-folded – facing the anti-gender mobilizations, whose influence increased during the last decade, and the neoliberal technologies of domination – at the basis of the NGOization process, such as governmental precarization and neoliberal bureaucratization deployed through the expansion of market norms to all spheres of the society, including civil society (Ana 2024). More than a backlash against gender advancements, anti-gender politics seem to be part of the wider and profound process of political, social and cultural reconfiguration of societies, in which gender backsliding represents a symbolic consequence – one amongst others (Paternotte 2020).

While the state was never feminist, the neoliberal governance opened the POS for pro gender-equality NGOs, to contribute to policy making through their expertise and take on

responsibilities for the retreating welfare state. Today the rapid expansion of a new conservative governance, through illiberal norms diffusion and cross learning effects (Glassius et al 2020), opens the window of opportunity to anti-gender and conservative groups that gain popular legitimacy through involvement at grassroots/ community level, while closing it for gender equality advocates, through restrictions in resources, including funding (Krizsán and Roggeband 2020). From privileged partners in gender policy matters, feminist actors are now in competition with conservative organizations addressing gender and family through traditional heteropatriarchal lenses. However, neither are homogenous entities and challenges permeate both the constellation of feminist and the one of anti-gender actors. While opposition to gender serves as the “symbolic glue” for alliances between conservatives and the far-right political forces (Kováts and Põim 2015), a narrow focus on gender and sexuality seems to undermine coalition building between feminist actors, which, in turn, might weaken resistance. For example, to counter the new wave of anti-gender mobilizations, some proposed to replace the term gender by women, aspect that reflects not just strong bias against certain groups, such as trans (Paternotte 2020) and non-binary people, but also the long-lasting synecdochal representation, whereby women (some), more implicitly or more explicitly, represented feminist movements. It also reflects the presumed “natural” alliances between certain movements, in this case between the feminist and LGBTQI movements. Thus, in the context of intensification of techniques of neoliberal governance – deployed through NGOization and of the escalation of anti-gender politics – as part of de-democratization processes, it seems necessary to go beyond single-issue movements and claims or implicit alliances and to address the interlocking oppressions, engrained and shaped by multi-layered systems of power at both global and local level and that carve the possibilities for broader coalitions within and between movements (Ana 2024; Ana 2023).

This special issue aimed to understand the challenges posed by these recent transformations of feminist movements and to explore the possibilities of broader solidarities and coalitions as well as the tensions that hinder the advance of gender equality. Is the NGOization paradigm still helpful to understand recent transformations of feminist movements and how? How does the politicization of gender and sexuality struggles and the remobilization of women at mass scale challenge previous understandings of feminist movements as being NGOized? In what ways does NGOization impact feminist activism today?

Natasza Quelvennec’s article addresses NGOization by looking at the emergence and development of a new Polish feminism in the context of the reconfiguration and intensification of attacks on reproductive rights, gender equality and democracy. The author explores the transformations of the women’s cause field after the emergence of massive mobilizations in 2016 and that continued in 2020-2021, against the proposed total ban on abortion, by addressing several divides and tensions: (1) women/ feminists; (2) activism/ non-activism; (3) movement/ institutions. This wave of mobilization, driven by “ordinary” women for whom this was the first political commitment, stood out from previous feminist initiatives, designed as “couch feminism” or “big city feminism”, without completely alienating them. Rethinking the

activism/non-activism divide, the author traces the process of politicization women by mobilizing “traditional” roles and the move towards feminist activism. The new feminist movement was characterized by multiple affiliations, organizational ties, and sites of convergence. Despite reticence towards institutions and valuing their autonomy, the Polish feminist movement united beyond the feminist cause, making alliances with other marginalized communities or actors fighting for democracy, but also with powerful actors inside the official political arena who had the capacity to advance their agendas. The author shows that insiders’ involvement consolidates the resistance of progressive actors to the opportunistic synergy between conservative civil society and illiberal power. This article revives the debates about the autonomy of the feminist movements and about affording not to engage with institutions, particularly in the context of the consolidation of anti-gender campaigns and democratic backsliding. Building large collective identities that bridge the gap with local communities, favouring an intersectional understanding of structural inequalities and revealing the interdependence of democratic, and reproductive and sexual issues, the Polish new feminism seems to provide an alternative to neoliberal elite activism and a space to resist the conservative initiatives.

Sabine Lang revisits the NGOization paradigm in the light of recent transformations of women’s movements and the challenges raised by the reactionary right. She poses that while NGOized feminism continues to be the dominant form of organization and advocacy for gender equality, resistance to NGOization fostered alternative modes of feminist activism and mobilization. The author discusses the effects and challenges brought by three decades of “NGOization pull”, related to organization, resources, and strategy dimensions. First, NGOization favored a project-based culture and marketization of the civil society, in which NGOs compete for grants, potentially leading to “association overload” and self-referentiality, with organizations replicating each-other’s projects and missions. Second, the “projectification” of feminism strengthened donors’ logic that shaped the priorities, project goals and activities undertaken by feminist organizations. However, as critiques related to the short-term logic and the precarity of projects gained momentum, some donors reimagined the relation with their grantees. Sabine Lang explores some of the initiatives that incorporate these critiques and support a transformative funding ecosystem, responding to the long-term challenges feminist movements face. She argues that resistance to NGOized forms fostered new ideas and challenged established practices by donors and traditional women organizations. Third, NGOization supported the rule of expertise and NGOs strategically favoured communication with governments and donors rather than engaging larger publics. Based on the observation that most women NGOs were not at the forefront of the new waves of feminist mobilizations such as the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter or reproductive rights mobilizations, the author raises the question of a division of labour between the incorporated NGO sector and street-level activism. To explore it, Sabine Lang looks at the 2023 mobilizations in the United States against the Supreme Court overturning of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* right to abortion. She points out to the lack of visible responses from the NGOized women organizations besides calls to donate or sometimes to volunteer. It was a new and younger generation of feminist activists and Black women leaders who stepped in and publicly mobilized in response. Rather than a

division of labour between the “K Street” (Washington DC advocacy hub) lobbying and the protests actions initiated by grass-roots groups, Lang points out to a lack of coordination and alignment, indicative of the challenges brought by NGOization. In times of expansion of reactionary politics, for Sabine Lang the question is how to make contingencies productive and allow for a “feminist crossover politics” between institutionalized actors and new forms of feminist mobilization.

Alexandra Ana’s article is situated at the level of the consequences of NGOization. The author explores how the last decades transformations of the feminist movements associated with NGO-ization, shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it made insecurity a central concern and created new sources of pressure that amplified the risk of burnout among activists. Taking a comparative stance, the author analyses activist burnout in relation to the professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization of the feminist movements in francophone Belgium and Romania. The financial dependence on donors and the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies normalized project-based work within feminist organizations and made insecurity – organizational and individual, a central concern among activists in NGOs. The polyvalence expected from professional activists in NGOs became a source of workload pressure and stress when they must juggle between advocacy campaigns, legal work, grassroots activities, fundraising and paperwork related to donor’s accountability. With the multiplication of accountability demands and fundraising activities, due to the fragmentation of subsidies, the bureaucratic load increases. Activists find themselves running after funds to alleviate insecurity, doing paperwork for subsidies or accountability at the expense of political or grassroots work. The pressure of insecurity is enhanced by the martyrdom culture stemming out of the activists’ sense of responsibility and commitment for social change but also by the competition among themselves in conditions of volatile financial resources. Activists are caught in the militant/professional tension, between fulfilling the requirements of the job and doing extra-work that enhances the risk of activist burnout. Some activists talked about a burnout epidemic within the institutionalized feminist movement and questioned the ostrich policy within the movement that worked to silence in the name of solidarity activists who talked about the pressure to overwork and burnout, about precarity and competition. A few activists broke the silence about burnouts and some NGOs proposed care as a response. With a few exceptions, care appeared more as an individual antidote, rather than a collective commitment to tackle activist burnout.

Zelie Jobert explores NGO-ization also through the lenses of its effects, between depoliticization and repoliticization, by addressing the development and spread of the Men Engage approach in addressing gender equality within the Rwandan civil society. Her analysis brings forward the challenges related to the involvement of men in fostering equality between men and women. At the core of the NGO-ization debate, the tensions between activists and professionals, between commitment versus career building are addressed by looking at Men Engage NGOs in Rwanda. What is the relationship between men Engage NGOs and feminist activism? What is the relationship between political commitment to the feminist cause and

career opportunities brought by the availability of funds to address gender inequality? What do these NGOs do to the space of women's cause? What are the effects of their involvement on the distribution of resources allotted to addressing equality between men and women? What is the relationship between the NGO activism and disruptive feminist movement protests and contentious actions? According to the author, Men Engage NGOs seem to address the very critiques of NGO-ization, namely the depoliticization of gender and development programs and NGOs and propose to address the causes male domination by involving men. Jobert's ethnographic study addresses the paradoxes and contradictions brought by the engagement of men within the space of women's cause, in the context of NGO-zation.

Lastly, Diana Neaga's contribution examines neoliberal discourses opposing gender studies in the context of anti-gender mobilizations in Romania. The analysis juxtaposes these discourses with the perspectives and employment experiences of graduates. The author highlights the inadequacy of the neoliberal perspective held by detractors of gender studies, especially when compared to graduates' experiences. These graduates found that the gender expertise gained in their postgraduate studies facilitated employment in their field. However, the scarcity of available positions posed a significant challenge, attributed by the author to the weak institutionalization and professionalization of the field, acting as a barrier to accessing related employment opportunities. Neaga advocates for a thorough examination and multi-level assessment of Gender Studies master programs in Romania. This approach is crucial for obtaining a more profound insight into how anti-gender attacks and opponents exploit the deficiency of information on this specific topic in a subversive manner.

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Polish feminism in the (battle)field: resisting and building a new identity

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Abstract

Polish feminism is undergoing a refoundation following the emergence, in 2016, of massive, intersectional, and radical mobilizations known as Black Protest. It faces two challenging objectives: 1/ the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy following illiberal turn since 2015, 2/ the need to distance itself from earlier feminist organizations, considered as inefficient, elitist, and too institutionalized. This article examines how both these attacks and boundaries between different forms of commitments (as woman, as feminist, as citizen and as institutional insider) shape feminist movement in Poland. To analyze its structuring, I use Laure Bereni's concept of women's cause field, rooted in Bourdieusian tradition, that describes the architecture of collective protest. My analysis is based on empirical materials collected through a qualitative methodology that includes interviews, participant observation, archival research, and processing of prosopographical data. Structurally heterogeneous and divided, Polish women's cause field builds its new collective identity through innovative repertoires of action: 1/ mutual aid and exchange of experiences as women, 2/ networks of groups and individuals interconnected by multiple affiliations, organization ties and sites of convergence, but acting locally according to activists' sensibilities and needs, and 3/ civic commitment and participatory democracy measures. While responding to a global attack on human rights and citizen freedoms, these tactics reflect a certain disavowal of the state, its institutions, and too institutionalized forms of feminism. However, while competing with established fractions, new formations show a pragmatic approach focused on problem-solving beyond ideological divisions and use its most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, in the legal and medical field, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies. The convergence of all sites of resistance, different but cooperating on a large scale, makes Polish feminism able to resist illiberal power.

Keywords: *feminism, illiberalism, Poland, gender equality, abortion, women's cause field*



In August 2016, a bill proposing a total ban on abortion and punishment for women undergoing the procedure¹ was presented to the Polish parliament. It was presented by an expert from the Institute Ordo Iuris for Legal Culture (hereafter Ordo Iuris)², an organization actively involved, since its creation in 2013, in the offensive against the social order based on the principle of gender equality in Poland. This attack on reproductive rights was at the root of the first massive collective mobilization since the fall of communism in 1989. On September 21, an activist from the leftist party Together (Razem) launched the hashtag #BlackProtest (#CzarnyProtest), and ten days later, on Monday October 3 - so-called Black Monday - 200,000 Poles participated in protests in 142 cities and towns across the country (Szczygielska 2019:139). All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, hereafter OSK) brought together hundreds of thousands of people dressed in black in solidarity with the strikers, including 150,000 who posted their photos on a dedicated web page. (Majewska, 2018:234). This unprecedented protest action forced the parliament to back down. As feminist philosopher Ewa Majewska, declared, "September 21, 2016, marked the beginning of feminism in Poland" (2016)³.

Attempts to impose a complete ban on abortion and women's mobilization against such proposals have punctuated Polish public debates for several years, and the politicization of reproductive rights far from novel in Poland. Abortion has been a structuring issue in the political field since the beginning of the post-authoritarian transition in 1989 (Heinen and Matusiak-Krasuska 1992; Szelewa 2016). The Catholic Church and successive governments have entered in a tacit agreement where the Church would support various policies in exchange for the state's marginalizing women's voices in society (Graff 2020). In 1993, that arrangement made possible the passage of the first law partially banning abortion, labeled as a "compromise" by conservative circles.⁴

The offensive of the Church and conservative mobilizations against women's rights have set in motion a process of structuring a feminist mobilization in Poland. Despite the successful lobbying for equality policies before the far-right Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or PiS) came to power in 2015 (Gruziel 2015), the movement had not managed to federate widely. It was instead centered around a small group of middle-class women interconnected through a network of NGOs and academic institutions (Graff 2020:231). With Poland's illiberal turn and PiS's attack on democracy and gender equality (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), political discourse on gender became what Kováts and Põim (2015) called a "symbolic glue" enabling the ideological convergence between ultraconservative

¹ The 1993 law introduced penalties for anyone assisting women to have an abortion. They themselves were not punished.

² The empirical data collected in Polish (interviews, publications, names of organizations, etc.) were translated by me. Ordo Iuris is a Polish think tank made up of legal professionals. Occupying a central position within a conservative network of state and academic institutions, NGOs, law firms interconnected by multiple affiliations of its experts, this organization successfully influences public policies (Quelvennec 2023).

³ Quotations from Polish- and French-language scientific works have been translated by me.

⁴ The 1993 law avoided the total ban proposed initially and made possible abortions where: 1/ the pregnancy is the result of a rape and incest; 2/ it presents a threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman; 3/ the fetus has a severe and irreversible handicap or an incurable life-threatening disease and if the pregnancy.

organizations and illiberal power. This connection is part of the phenomenon that Graff and Korolczuk (2021:7) theorized as "opportunistic synergy", in which so called anti-gender mobilizations (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017) provide populist actors with the rhetorical tools and human resources to influence the social order through the politicization of gender issues.

In this context, two major phenomena could be observed: on the one hand, the reconfiguration and intensification of attacks on reproductive rights leading to the almost total ban on abortion in 2020⁵, on the other hand, massive mobilizations for women's rights (Graff 2019a; Graff 2020; Korolczuk 2017; Kowalska and Nawojski 2019; Majewska, 2016; Majewska, 2018; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017) and repertoires of action to enable access to abortion and resist to repressions targeting activists (Quelvenec 2023). Part of a transnational trend of de-democratization, the dismantling of a state-civil society consultation mechanisms (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017) and the selective closure of civic space, promoting ultraconservative NGOs, while intimidating and delegitimizing progressive ones (Roggeband and Krizsan 2021; Bill 2022), have been observed. Favored by this context, the mobilizations led under the aegis of *Ordo Iuris* have deployed several mechanisms to influence and support illiberal actors (lobbying, draining of power positions, production of antifeminist expertise, litigation...) and have contributed to the backsliding of gender equality institutions and policies (Quelvenec 2023; Szczygielska 2019).

Emerging following the first mass mobilizations of 2016, the new Polish feminism is undergoing a "revolution" (Leśniewicz 2023) and faces two challenging objectives: 1. the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy, and 2. the need to distance itself from earlier feminist movements but without alienating them to gain their support. What repertoires of action are mobilized to meet these challenges? What dynamics currently animate the women's cause field in Poland? How do divisions between different fractions, as well as the diversity of commitments (as woman, as feminist, as citizen and as institutional insider) shape the feminist movement? These are the questions I answer in this article.

To analyze the structuring of current Polish feminism I use the concept of "women's cause field" developed by Laure Bereni in her investigation of the campaign for gender parity in France. Bereni defines the concept as "a relational structure of groups mostly devoted to advancing women/challenging the gender order in variety of social settings, cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions" (2021:209). Adopting Bourdieu's definition of social fields (1984) and incorporating a critical approach of a protest movements outside and inside institutions (Buechler 1990; Staggenborg 1998; Taylor 1989; Katzenstein 2006; Bereni 2006) and state feminism scholarship (Banaszak 2010, McBride and Mazur 2010), this concept allows to map the relational structure of this new multi-sited Polish feminist. It describes not only the resistance of the women's cause field against attacks on gender equality in Poland, but also the architecture of collective protest within the field itself where different fractions of feminism compete.

⁵ On October 20, 2020, the Constitutional Court, dominated by judges appointed by PiS, abolished the provision allowing abortion when the embryo is severely affected. Embryological pathology until then constituted 98% of all legal abortions performed in Poland.

To describe the diversity of Polish feminism, I organize my discussion around the three intersections that Bereni and Revillard (2012) draw to map the dichotomies of women's cause field while inviting to relativize them, namely between private and public, activism and non-activism, and movement and institution (*ibid*: III). Thus, the first part of this article questions the ambiguity between the commitment to collective practices of aid and exchange of experiences among women, especially in the face of the state's failures and repressive policies, and the feminism that tries to impose its political agenda. In the second part I think about the movement beyond activism, understood as active and regular participation in a feminist collective, and move out of the organizational perspective by focusing on the culture and collective identity of the mobilization. A particular attention will be paid to the shift between feminist and citizen commitment. Finally, the third part addresses the relationship between movement and the wider institutions (state, political parties, structures of the medical and legal field), as well as the strategies that mobilize the insiders to advance feminist cause and defend women and activists in the context of the illiberal turn.

My analysis is based on empirical materials collected through a qualitative methodology that includes thirty interviews (with feminist activists, lawyers, and politicians), archival research (judicial sources, reports, websites, social media), and processing of prosopographical data. My participant observation was especially significant: I observed the Advisory Board of OSK movement during the intensification of its activity linked to the ruling of the Constitutional Court making the access to abortion more restrictive. I also assisted to other activist events, including several editions of the annual meetings of the coalition Wielka Koalicja za Równością i Wyborem (hereafter WKRW, Grand Coalition for Equality and Choice) in which I represented Polish diasporas organizations.

From private to public, from woman to feminist

The 2016 women's mobilization is described by feminist scholar A. Graff (2019a) as a "female people" that is heterogeneous, inclusive, and unifying. It is also the opinion of Marta Lempart (2019)⁶, the leader of the OSK movement, she gave me during the interview:

"There were all these angry women, some for the 'compromise' to remain, others for the liberalization of the 1993 law, some practicing Catholics, others militant atheists, some living in Warsaw, others in small villages where everyone knew them, both the priest and the mayor from the right-wing majority, some voters for PiS, others for the left. This allowed us to federate very widely. The common denominator was this anger."

Majewska (2016) describes the movement by mobilizing Vaclav Havel's concept of "power of the powerless" and arguing that the participants were motivated by a sense of weakness and vulnerability, qualities traditionally assigned to women. According to Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez (2019), the activists see themselves as "ordinary women". Given the heterogeneous approach to the abortion issue mentioned by Marta Lempart, can we call this

⁶ Cited empirical data (interviews, observations, media sources, documents...) are listed in the text with the name of the respondent (organization, event, author, title of document...) and the year in which they were collected. The list of cited data can be found in the article's bibliography.

mobilization “feminist”? Where is the boundary between engagement as a “woman” and as a “feminist”?

There is no doubt that these grassroots mobilizations can be seen as a “feminine” collective practice that exercises beyond the movement and its supporters through an exchange of experiences among women, as activist Paulina (2021) explains in an interview she gave me:

"I was collecting signatures. I was alone next to a sign with the rainbow on it. An older lady was walking by. She said she wasn't going to support fags, but we started talking. This is also the role of activists in small localities. This grassroots work, this outreach to the people who live here. She told me that she had 9 children, that her husband cheated on her and beat her, and then he left her. I told her that I was fighting for women to be able to live better than her in this country. At first she had said she wasn't going to support fags; in the end I told her I was a lesbian and we hugged."

Moreover, the public commitment of some of my respondents began as an extension of the private role socially assigned to them, namely that of mother, in the context of parental opposition to religion in the public school, or else for purely practical reasons:

"The Federation office was right next to my home, next to the preschool, so as soon as my son went there, I applied. I had no activist awareness of the issues at all at the time. It happened afterwards; I got caught up in the cause." (Kacpura 2021)

"I arrived in Warsaw. A citizens' initiative was born - Stop Religion in School. We were collecting signatures. I had the experience of the mother whose child was the only one in her school who did not go to catechism classes. That's how I got to know Bożena Przyłuska⁷ who was organizing OSK in Warsaw." (Suchanow 2021)

Similarly, while denouncing male domination some activists perform family roles within the mobilizations for access to abortion (participation in demonstrations with their children, use of slogans such as *"Do not teach mothers how to give birth to children"*⁸ and *"I am your mother, your sister, your daughter, your wife. I stand with my head up. You can't forbid me"* (Rolak 2016; Tatarska and Lukasiak 2016). This is also the case for the most diverse commitments. In this regard, we can mention the initiative Mothers on the Borders (Matki na Granice) which helps refugees, or the association Ciotki Klotki⁹ - mentioned in the report of Feminist Fund (Fundusz Feministyczny, hereafter FemFund 2022:88) - which organized medical examinations for women affected by transport-related social exclusion. The logic of these commitments "hybridizes [an activist or even feminist focus] with other repertoires of action, such as providing services to women" (Bereni and Revillard 2012:XI). While analyzing the proliferation and activities of organizations applying for the mini grants, the FemFund report (2022:6) specifies that *"feminism is a grassroots action, undertaken spontaneously,*

⁷ Bożena Przyłuska also co-founded the Congress of Secularism. She became a founding member of the Advisory Board of the Women's Strike created as part of the Polish protests in October 2020.

⁸ The "Do not teach mothers how to give birth to children" slogan is the feminist reappropriation of the Polish saying, "Do not teach the father to make the children".

⁹ The name of this organization refers to the family role of aunt ("ciotka" in Polish).

close to the people, without an external and hierarchical coordination [...], directed to the down-to-earth things, which concerns a material 'here and now'".

The Foundation for Family Planning and Women's Rights (hereafter Federa), an important feminist organization created in 1991, constitute at the same time a women's (helping women to have abortions), but also feminist mobilization (imposing a political agenda). Krystyna Kacpura (2021), the current president of Federa, explains this intersection and the strategies for redirecting activist energy where it is possible and necessary in the interview, she gave me:

"We are in a big gap, on the one hand our mission is to liberalize this [abortion] law, on the other hand we want to help women, we can't focus on what is and what is not feminist. Helping women is one of the pillars of our activity and it has developed because there was this need. On the other hand, reproductive health, and political advocacy, we are interested in."

This same duality has been observed in the context of Planning Familial in France (Pavard 2012; Bereni and Révillard 2012) and exists within the NGO Abortion Dream Team (Aborcynjny Dream Team, hereafter ADT) organizing alternative channels of access to self-managed and cross-border abortions with the support of foreign NGOs and governments. In a trial in which Ordo Iuris claimed to represent an aborted fetus, the help between women linked by the common experience as victims of domestic violence have constituted the major argument of the lawyers representing ADT's activist judged for having provided abortion medication (Wydrzyńska 2022).

These examples demonstrate how a private identity can become a vehicle for politicization and public engagement, while showing the close links between female and feminist mobilizations. By avoiding the feminist label, still stigmatizing in Poland, the commitment as women and mobilization of roles traditionally assigned to them could facilitate the adhesion of newcomers. Moreover, as activists report, in small communities any social life of women outside of family circles is mediated by the church and its supporters (WKRW 2021), so any alternative already represents an emancipatory potential to free from the symbolic power of this institution (Zubrzycki 2006) and to cross the boundary between the private and the public. Yet, as one of the major strategies of resistance against anti-gender politics the FemFund's report indicates the transmission of knowledge between women, which can concern both the circulation of practical knowledge (computer skills, self-defense, DIY) and alternative circuits of taboo, ideologized or inaccessible knowledge, particularly in small localities (e.g. sexual education courses).

I argue that the federating power of the movement and its proliferation may reside in the practical character of Polish feminism, oriented towards sharing common experiences of femininity, the transmission of knowledge, and mutual aid. This first stage of commitment - anchored in roles traditionally assigned to women - may be necessary, at least for some women and in some localities, for their politicization and their transition from "woman" to "feminist" to take place.

From organization to identity, from feminist to citizen

Bereni and Revillard propose two crucial shifts to understand social movement communities: thinking of the social movement beyond activism per se and moving away from an organizational perspective by refocusing on the culture and identity of the mobilization. These shifts allow to grasp Polish women's cause field in two ways: firstly, as a range of initiatives in line with the needs and aspirations of the groups and individuals whose primary vocation may be, but is not necessarily activist, and secondly, as a feminist activism within a collective identity built around the opposition against democratic erosion.

Rethinking the boundary between activism and non-activism helps to capture the temporalities of activism both on an individual and on a movement community's levels. This approach makes it possible to understand under what circumstances the transition to feminist commitment takes place, and to seize all the forms that it has taken: from primary commitment, through the redirection of existing political commitment to feminist activism, to the politicization of individuals in the context of non-activist activities. These temporalities can be observed in the context of social movements existing beyond the peaks of mobilization, such as those in 2016 and 2020-2021 in Poland, through networks, practices, and places of socialization that guarantee the sustainability of the mobilization (Bereni and Revillard; Taylor 1989; Staggenborg 1998).

Agnieszka Graff (2019b:485; 2020:232) points to the parallels between the Black Protest and women's mobilizations in the nineteenth century. Engaged as women for the patriotic cause, they had mourned the Fatherland after the fall of the 1861 insurrection against the Russian occupiers. Yet, in contrast to this mobilization of noble women, activists in the grassroots mobilizations in 2016 claimed to be "ordinary women" and had relatively diverse socio-professional profiles (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019; Kowalska and Nawojski 2019). The people I interviewed unanimously emphasize the inclusive nature of this mobilization, which allowed them to collectively commit to the cause of women. Beyond a broad definition of the abortion cause, Korolczuk (2017) and Majewska (2016) explain this inclusiveness by the flexibility of protest forms. Besides demonstrations in the streets, softer forms of protest, such as dressing in black, posting one's photo on social media or taking a day in solidarity with the strike, have emerged.

Another aspect that accentuates the inclusivity of the movement undoubtedly relates to the temporality of individual commitments already mentioned. For many of the people I interviewed at the protests, this was their first commitment (to the feminist cause or at all). According to some researchers only 25% of OSK protest coordinators were committed to the women's cause prior to 2016 which shows the movement's ability to recruit newcomers who lack protest organizing and feminist theory skills (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019). Comparing the group Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca (hereafter PK8M, Women's Alliance March 8), which has been organizing annual feminist "Manifa" demonstrations, researchers believe this initiative "to a much lesser extent enables the spontaneous participation of 'people from the street', because it uses the existing networks in the feminist milieu and the involvement of a small group of people with specialized skills and knowledge" (*Ibid.*:103).

I argue that this mobilization of "ordinary women" and the "revolution" of Polish feminism observed since 2016 is located precisely at the symbolic border between activism and non-activism. Because the movement has been able to integrate mainly newcomers and focus not only on activist concerns, it could be seen as a new form of engagement that provides a response to the attacks of illiberal power, but also to a certain elitism and institutionalization of women's cause field. Several arguments seem to corroborate this hypothesis. Already observed when analyzing the place of women's cause in pro-democracy mobilizations in Poland and Polish diasporas (Quelvenec 2019), I notice a weak institutionalization of the movement and the emergence of cooperation that some researchers describe as "loose" (Cîrstoccea 2017:113) or "translocal" (Dufour 2016:152). Formal and informal groups gathered around a general cause, reinvent it on a daily basis according to activists' sensibilities and local needs. Thus, between the peaks of mobilization, organizations engage in more or less militant activities, such as organizing alternative channels of access to abortion, helping refugees or coordinating medical examinations for women.

The same mechanisms seem to emerge within OSK, whose coordinators enjoy a great autonomy due to flexible decision-making structures and a "promotion of horizontal organization and of the 'sorority' concept" (Bereni and Revillard 2012:X). *"We do things"*, a phrase that became famous (Lempart 2022), illustrates this intentionally vague framework of mobilization that allows groups and individuals to make a "detailing" of their feminism (FemFund 2022:15). At the local level, this new feminism seems more practical than politically colored: it constitutes "a response to a multidimensional crisis" (*Ibid*:16) and to the dysfunction of the neoliberal state, regardless of the majority in power, which "women [...] replace or abandon, creating alternative solutions and networks of mutual support" (*Ibid*:10). At the central level, it wants to impose its political agenda, but is wary of established organizations, as evidenced by the ban on displaying logos other than OSK's during protests or the refusal of formal political representation. At the video conference meeting of the Advisory Board members (2020-2021), one of the movement's leaders declares:

"Everyone should be afraid of us, the left, the sympathetic right¹⁰, PiS, nationalists, the Church and Ordo Iuris. All of them. We must impose our political agenda, so that they are forced to count with our opinion. We are not going to create a political party, it doesn't work today, but we will encourage and help all those who want to get involved at all political levels, locally and centrally to carry our ideas."

The desire to stand out from the crowd is evident in statements of autonomy towards organizations in general (Korolczuk 2016:106), a certain distancing from feminist initiatives before 2016 (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017:8) or the terms *"couch feminism"* or *"big city feminism"* that I sometimes heard in interviews or during ethnographic observations. Despite these declarations, networking et alliances within mobilizations for the same or different issues are strategies developed by Polish feminism promoting the construction of its new collective identity. Korolczuk (2019) notes the support of new initiatives by the knowledge and commitment of feminist experts. The FemFund (2022:16) report mentions the *"shift from the pedagogical-expert model in feminism:*

¹⁰ It is about the center-right party Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform).

knowledge, experience and feminist values do not flow only from the center, from educated people, feminist elites, their source is also local communities (rural feminism) or communities so far marginalized in feminism (transgender people, people with disabilities, teenagers)". These two observations, which I was able to see confirmed in the field, describe the reality of the women's cause field in Poland. Although structurally heterogeneous, marked by ideological divisions, conflicts of interest and internal logics of the social segments in which activists are positioned (electoral-partisan, bureaucratic and associative poles of the political field, academic; legal, medical and religious fields...), it is also subject to the three mechanisms of convergence, namely multiple affiliations, organizational ties and sites of convergences (Bereni 2021:218).

First, many feminist activists (current and historical) can be active (simultaneously or not) in several organizations of the movement and have/had multiple affiliations at least within the electoral-partisan (Katarzyna Kotula¹¹, Wanda Nowicka¹²) or academic field (Klementyna Suchanow¹³, Natalia Broniarczyk¹⁴, Agnieszka Graff¹⁵), or even in several fields (Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic¹⁶, Elżbieta Korolczuk¹⁷, Magdalena Środa¹⁸, Małgorzata Fuszara¹⁹). Other cross-cutting commitments can be observed beyond the feminist cause alone including among the leaders of the movement: Marta Lempart was an activist in Committee for the Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, hereafter KOD,) and Klementyna Suchanow is very much involved in the protests the dismantling of the judiciary (Graff 2019a). The limited number of potential activists could be the reason for the multiple engagements observed in small localities or regions dominated by the ruling majority. Marta Lempart (2019)

¹¹ Currently a New Left MP, Katarzyna Kotula was one of the leaders of OSK in her region.

¹² Currently a New Left MP, Wanda Nowicka was co-founder and executive director of Federa.

¹³ Klementyna Suchanow is an OSK leader and a researcher in the history of literature.

¹⁴ Natalia Broniarczyk is an ADT's leader and a PhD student at the Institute of Applied Social Studies of the University of Warsaw.

¹⁵ Agnieszka Graff is a co-founder of PK8M, a member of the Women's Congress (Kongres Kobiet) Program Board, and a researcher and teacher of Polish and English literature, American studies, and gender studies.

¹⁶ Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic is a president of Association for Women of Lubuskie Chick (Lubuskie Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Kobiet Baba), member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress, co-organizer of the Black Protest. She is also an MP and vice-president of Nowa Lewica (New Left), and researcher at the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Zielona Góra.

¹⁷ Elżbieta Korolczuk is a former activist of PK8M, a researcher in sociology at the University of Södertörn in Stockholm and at the Center for American Studies of the University of Warsaw, and an actress at the Powszechny Theater, where she plays herself in a dystopian play "Radio Mariia".

¹⁸ Magdalena Środa is a co-founder, member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress and Minister of Education, Science and Sport in its Shadow Cabinet. She is also a researcher in history of ideas, applied ethics, political philosophy, and feminism at the University of Warsaw. In 2004-2005 she held the position of Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men.

¹⁹ Małgorzata Fuszara is a member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress, vice president of the Board of Directors and Minister for Gender Equality and Anti-discrimination in its Shadow Cabinet, a lawyer and sociologist specializing in issues related to the sociology of politics, gender studies, the sociology of ethnic, cultural, and social minorities and the sociology of law. A professor of humanities, she was Secretary of State in the Prime Minister's Office and Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment in 2014-2015.

explains: *"In small towns or in the East²⁰, the 'democrats' are not numerous, so they get involved in everything: women, ecology, secularism of the state... "*

Secondly, beyond these multiple affiliations that make the limits of the organizations porous, numerous organizational ties favor the circulation of ideas, expert knowledge, and activists within and beyond the feminist cause. The WKRW coalition gathers more than a hundred formal and informal structures, sometimes representing very small communities committed to the feminist and queer cause. Beyond these "natural" cooperations, following the wave of protests that took place in 2020-2021, Polish feminism has entered a new dynamic that is characterized by the scope and diversification of alliances, but also of the issues it takes up.

Intergenerational alliances are part of this dynamic. The ideological war on sexual and reproductive rights declared by PiS and the response of civil society influenced young people's political commitment. The narrative targeting sexual minorities has become increasingly present in the public space. During the 2020 presidential election campaign, President Andrzej Duda declared that LGBT people are not people, but an *"ideology"* compared to a *"kind of neo-Bolshevism"* (Su 2020). In August 2020, demonstrations in support of Margot, a young LGBT activist who was remanded in custody for vandalizing a van with homophobic slogans, took place in most major cities (Ptak and Gocłowski, 2020). The OSK was one of the organizers. As a result, an alliance was created between feminists and youth organizations, including pro-LGBT activists, anti-fascists, and anarchists involved in the protests. Invited to Brussels where she met then-President of the EU Council and former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, European leaders and media, Marta Lempart came accompanied by two young environmental activists and called for *"uniting in the struggle with pro-ecology organizations"* (Women's Congress 2020). Similarly, the older generations, for example the organization Polish Grandmas (2023) (Polskie Babcie) which *"defends democracy, the Constitution, the Courts and Prosecution, the right to choose, human rights, the harassed and excluded"* have supported the feminist protests since 2020.

Following the wave of protests in 2020-2021 the cooperations between feminists and groups committed to democratic issues are intensifying: feminist mobilizations placed access to reproductive and sexual rights within a broader contestation of the retreat of democracy, legal professions united around the cause of the rule of law intensively engaged in a *pro bono* defense of activists targeted by police and judicial repression (Quelvenec 2023). OSK was a signatory alongside pro-democracy organizations of the Agreement for the rule of law (2021), which calls for *"all pro-democracy and pro-European political forces to meet with [...] citizens [...] for the repair of the rule of law"*. While advancing the feminist agenda the movement supports the democratic cause in Poland within European institutions. The following mention in the European Parliament (2021) resolution on the rule of law crisis in Poland was discussed

²⁰ Poland is traditionally split in two during elections: the supporters of conservative Catholics and nationalists in the East, and the pro-European liberals in the West. According to historians and political scientists, this split echoes the division of the country between foreign powers in the 19th century (Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the west, Russia in the east). Cf. Rupnik, Jacques, "Variations centre-européennes" in Badie, B. et Vidal, D. *Le retour des populismes. L'état du monde 2019*, Paris, Editions la Découverte, p. 181-189, 2019.

in Brussels between OSK activists and MEPs, specifically Malin Björk, who proposed it (Magnuszewska 2021; Wolska 2021):

"[...] whereas on 22 October 2020, the illegitimate 'Constitutional Tribunal' was also used politically to attack women's rights [...]. [The Parliament] underlines the illegitimacy of the ruling of 22 October 2020 [...] and recognizes that these severe restrictions on women's reproductive health and rights are unlawful."

Thirdly, the sites of convergence, or large meetings between activists, organizations and sympathizers constitute a privileged moment of exchange and crystallization of the movement. The creation of the Advisory Board (2021-2022)²¹ at the OSK movement following the wave of protests in 2020 was undoubtedly one of these great moments that promoted the circulation of expert knowledge among the public and activists, but also valued the experience and voice of previously marginalized communities. Teenagers, people with disabilities, LGBT+ people, OSK activists and newcomers can discuss with representatives from the academic, legal, medical, and political fields. A particular attention paid to integrate an intersectional perspective is shown, for example, by the postulate concerning the training of medical units *"on the gynecological and contraceptive needs of disadvantaged groups: non-heteronormed, non-binary, people with disabilities, people in the process of gender transition or who have transited, migrants and refugees"* or the term *"people with an uterus"* which partially replaced the term *"women"* used to talk about access to abortion.

But the creation of the Advisory Board also marked the emergence of a political commitment that transcended the feminist cause. Considering the magnitude of the protests in which crystallized a general anger against the government, the OSK stated:

"Abortion has become a symbol of the struggle for freedom. People in the streets are shouting for LGBT rights, are demanding help for female entrepreneurs and workers, restoring the independence of the courts, reversing education reform, removing religion from schools. We guarantee that the Board will only play a subservient role to your voice on the streets." (Ciastoch 2020)

The body was intended to gather the demands expressed during the demonstrations and through a digital platform open to the public to propose short-term (feasible with the current right-wing majority) and long-term (to do in case of political changeover) solutions to achieve them. Numerous personalities (Barbara Labuda²², Michał Boni²³ ...) were invited to join it and to work with a few hundred volunteers in a dozen working groups: women's rights, LGBT+ rights, disability, climate and animal rights, secularism of the state, rule of law, pandemic, education, labor market, health, culture, media. Organized during COVID-19 crisis, the Advisory Board sessions were held online, making the process even more democratic. The results of its work

²¹ All data presented in this section of the article were collected during participant observation of the Advisory Board's work from November 2020 to June 2021.

²² Barbara Labuda is a Polish politician, feminist activist, diplomat, and philologist. She was one of the great figures of the Solidarity union, MP, and undersecretary in the Chancellery of the President Kwasniewski.

²³ Michał Boni is a Polish politician. He was the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, MP, and MEP.

were presented in a series of press conferences translated into sign language and some articles in major media during the first half of 2021.

On the symbolic level, taking possession of public space - achieved through shouting and using insults - and hijacking military, nationalist, and religious symbols, (Graff 2019b, Quelvenec 2021), are signs of the rejection of men's domination and a civic agency awakening of this new "female people". Movement's leader and author of the book *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze*²⁴ (This is War. Women, Fundamentalists, and the New Middle Ages), Klementyna Suchanow (2021) interprets this shift in feminist rhetoric and aesthetics as an appropriate response to the anti-gender mobilizations' language and the result of new representations attached to women's presence in public space and political engagement:

"This slogan 'This is war' is not us. The fundamentalists start their interviews or speeches like that. We are forced to go to war and adapt to that narrative in order to be able to defend ourselves and emerge victorious to, in a sense, heal society."

"We were not listened to, and now we came and gave ourselves this voice all by ourselves. It's also a shift from a passive to an active citizen who is not afraid or ashamed to say and shout."

Some voices were raised, particularly in the feminist camp, to criticize this overly generalized approach to the movement, which risked drowning the feminist cause in a sea of postulates. Klementyna Suchanow (*Ibid.*) sees in these postures the reminiscences of the compartmentalization of women outside the political field. She explains movement's ambitious and idealistic vision of a new civil society, proactive and replacing compromised political circles traditionally dominated by men:

"These comments irritate me. It's like even women and feminists are telling us that we can only deal with chick topics. We can discuss women's rights for a bit and then go get our nails done. But above all, don't discuss the health system, the management of culture or the rule of law. We are pushing those boundaries, starting with abortion we are mobilizing around other issues, we are creating an alternative model of how society works, how people cooperate with each other, without all these archaic, incompetent, masculinist political institutions."

I argue that the capacity to unite beyond the feminist cause, a civic commitment, participatory democracy measures and strong intersectionality issues constitute major innovations of Polish feminism that contribute to the construction of its new identity. On the one hand, these strategies respond to a global attack on the rights and freedoms of citizens, manifested not only through increasingly severe restrictions on reproductive and sexual rights, but also through police and judicial repression, a subject I'll develop further below. The interdependence of both democratic, and reproductive and sexual issues highlighted by these repressions may also have played an essential role in directing the militant energy of feminist organizations towards defending the rule of law. On the other hand, these tactics can also be

²⁴ The slogan "This is war" was also present during the protests after the ruling of the Constitutional Court in 2020.

interpreted as a critique of the political class that has so far ignored women's and other marginalized communities' voices.

From movement to institution, from outsider to insider²⁵

The disavowal of the political class, emphasized by the activists, can be seen as a part of a general reticence towards institutions that situates the protesters always outside them. The few examples of multiple affiliations cited above, as well as existing work on feminist repertoires of action within state institutions (Mc Bride and Mazur 2010; Banaszak 2010) and other institutionalized contexts (Katzenstein 1998; Bereni 2006) challenge this one-sided view of the movement.

Shifting the focus from organization to the social movement community united around a collective identity despite ideological divisions and multiple loyalties, as I did above, encourages me to go beyond this movement/institution dichotomy. The transversality of commitments (woman/feminist and feminist/citizen) described below, can also be observed at the movement/institution intersection. Multiple affiliations in associative and electoral-partisan fields makes the boundaries between the engagement as activist and as politician blurred both in terms of protagonists' representations and in terms of repertoires of action. In her interview with me, co-founder and former Federa's director Wanda Nowicka (2021), a long-standing MP, declared that her initial aim was not to win the election, but to use the campaign to advance the feminist agenda : *"It wasn't to get elected either. It was to bring out this debate on women's rights, to force opposing candidates to speak out."* Once a member of parliament, her two commitments continually intertwine, even though she self-defines herself primarily as an activist: *"I think you are a politician from time to time, my deepest identity is activist. I'm an activist, a feminist."*

The movement/institution dichotomy is even more questionable because the gendered model of political engagement discussed above by Klementyna Suchanow has undergone significant upheaval in recent years: the number of women elected to parliament is increasing and many new female MPs have activist roots or focus on gender issues²⁶. These shifts are probably due to the popular success of the massive protests of 2016 resulting in awakening of feminist consciousness, the willingness to support female candidates of the movement, and the three mechanisms of convergence described above. Wanda Nowicka (*Ibid.*) finds herself *"competing"* in parliament with politicians from these new activist backgrounds: *"Finally, I am not the only feminist in this parliament. We have to fight among ourselves who is going to deal with the pro-abortion law or the state-Church relations, these were subjects that nobody was dealing with."*

²⁵ These are terms used to describe cooperations between feminists located outside institutions and those using their positions and knowledge to promote the cause inside them (Banaszak 2010).

²⁶ In the new 2019-2023 legislature of the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament), the highest number of women since 1989 was noted: 131 female deputies, or almost 29% and two - three times more than in the first parliaments after the fall of communism. About 20 MPs very committed to reproductive and sexual issues were established in the 2019 elected parliament. For most of them, this was their first political mandate.

Moreover, carried out jointly by the illiberal government and ultraconservative mobilizations since 2015, the attacks on reproductive and sexual rights have made it possible to organize feminist counteractions (demonstrations, competing projects in parliament, petitions, media coverage of gender issues...) and have opened political opportunities. This new dynamic has been at the origin of growing public support for the liberalization of abortion law²⁷ and the repositioning of reproductive issues at the center of political debate. The evolution of social representations and the penetration of the electoral-partisan field by feminist circles have favored cooperation between movement and institutions and encouraged political parties to integrate the access to abortion into their agenda.

The cooperations established between activists and politicians make it possible both to advance the feminist cause and to resist attacks on abortion-seekers and activists. On the political front, these collaborations are manifested in several citizens' initiative bills put to the vote in parliament. For example, "Legalna Aborcja. Bez Kompromisów" (Legal Abortion. No Compromise), which is the result of cooperation between left-wing MPs, Greens, and several feminist organizations was presented to the parliament by the activists who bring their expertise from the field (Chrzczonowicz 2022a; Szczerbiak 2022).

Beyond promoting the legitimacy of the cause within the parties, the popular success of outsider's actions constitutes an opportunity to instrumentalize it by the movement (for example by negotiating positions in exchange for its support in the elections). Thus, in the Civic Coalition of liberal parties, the access to abortion has become a crucial issue and the acceptance of the right to unrestricted abortion under 12 weeks of pregnancy a prerequisite for the 2023 parliamentary elections candidacy (Szczęśniak & Chrzczonowicz 2022). This is a revolution for the Polish center-right that has advocated for almost 30 years to maintain the 1993 law. The cause could become the object of an alliance between the coalition and some feminist milieus, particularly the Women's Congress close to neo-liberal circles²⁸, and bringing together middle-class women (Graff 2020: 231). The organization awarded in 2022 its annual prize to former Prime minister and leader of the Civic Coalition, Donald Tusk. In statements quoted by the press, organization's activists recall his recent electoral promises and recognize a pragmatic, even transactional, nature of this choice:

*"He publicly advocates for the legalization of civil unions, and recently made a declaration that he will not accept on the lists anyone who does not advocate women's right to free choice in reproductive matters [...]. We will hold the laureate to his word [...]"*²⁹. (Sitnicka and Chrzczonowicz 2022)

²⁷ In a November 2022 poll, 70% of respondents supported the right to unrestricted abortion under 12 weeks of pregnancy (Chrzczonowicz 2022b).

²⁸ The annual meeting of the Women's Congress organized since 2009 is a key moment where a few thousand participants can meet the leaders of the movement, experts, politicians, but also organizations of doctors and legal professions, as was the case during the 2022 edition (Kongres Kobiet 2022). Two of the organization's current leaders held positions devoted to equality policies in previous governments, including Malgorzata Fuszara in Donald Tusk's government. See footnotes 18 et 19.

²⁹ Despite some positive changes in the field of equality policies (anti-discrimination law introduced in 2010, creation of the governmental office of Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, implementation of electoral gender quotas in 2011, New Program for the Prevention of Domestic Violence for the Period 2014-2020, in vitro

"[...] we hope that he will form a coalition, where the parity lists will include many women from Congress. [...] We can't be on the street all the time; we must look for allies in a future potential government." (Dudek 2022).

This "credit" decision and the former prime minister's mixed record has been criticized by other feminist organizations and activists, especially connected with new movement's fractions. One of the OSK leaders states that Donald Tusk was awarded for *"evolution of views, which was the result of reading the polls with understanding, while [...] [activist's] work of many years, paid with professional and personal lives and dragging in the courts is just a background for the 'leader'"* (Ibid.). This criticism of the liberal candidate and the flagship organization of "established" feminism are reminiscent of the antagonisms that exist between new and "old" fractions of the movement. Yet, as demonstrated above, ideological divisions do not exclude cooperation, *a fortiori* in the current political context in which the feminist agenda can only advance because of political alternation, an alternation impossible without Donald Tusk and his formation. Thus, the OSK movement was behind a campaign to improve election turnout and called on women to vote *"for abortion"*, i.e., for all the liberal coalition and left-wing candidates, and even some of the moderate right-wing bloc needed to swing the majority (Dudek 2023). I argue that while demonstrating a distrust of institutions and the political class, even the most critical organizations cooperated with them to eliminate the common ultraconservative enemy.

Beyond this political cooperation, the support of the most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, but also highly institutionalized structures of the legal and medical field, is necessary to ensure respect for rights of movement's members and abortion-seekers. Especially, opposition MPs use their status to provide concrete help to activists and women by cooperating with feminist organizations, some lawyers, and doctors (Ferenc 2021, Biejat 2022, Bzdyń 2022, Podgórski 2022). Two types of intervention were observed. On the one hand, these networks defend the rights and freedoms of demonstrators targeted by police violence and judicial repression (so called SLAPP lawsuits³⁰), in which, according to interviewees, lawyers cooperating with Ordo Iuris are involved:

"It was 2020 with many cases of these LGBT activists being detained. And after it was this ruling about abortion. A wave of protests was sweeping through Poland, and [...] they began to be very brutally pacified. [...] I got involved then in the work of this pro bono advocacy group. Lawyers associated with Ordo Iuris became the trial attorneys for police officers in cases of these 2020-2021 protests, when there was an allegation of insulting a police officer or violating his physical integrity." (Podgórski 2022)

refunding policy and finally signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention) (Gruziel 2015), the Civic Platform under Tusk's leadership (2007-2015) has not met these two key assumptions.

³⁰ SLAPP is an acronym for a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. Several of my respondents reported a very large number of lawsuits filed against protesters and activists; one of the people defended by the interviewed lawyers has almost 200 lawsuits in progress (Ferenc 2021; Podgórski 2022; Bzdyń 2022).

MPs intervene to prevent police violence and illegitimate actions during demonstrations and detention of activists³¹, cooperate with networks of lawyers offering them free of charge legal aid, and support them by attending the trials:

“It was necessary to determine where the person arrested during some protests is (...). And these MPs, performing their parliamentary duties³² even very late at night, appeared at some police station and tried to determine.” (Ibid.)

“After the August 7, 2020, detentions of LGBT people, [...] a network of cooperation [was formed]. [...] That same year there was an abortion ruling, more protests and detentions. Having these contacts, the girls made such a list of pro bono lawyers.” (Bzdyń 2022)

“Senator Bogdan Klich was present during one of grandma Kasia's trials, he often sits as an audience, he is a man of legend³³.” (Ibid.)

On the other hand, the help provided by insider networks ensures that women who wish to have an abortion in Poland, and who are entitled to do so, have access to their rights. Yet, the 2020 ruling invalidating the embryo-pathological reason triggered a wave of chilling effects which have been amplified by the SLAPP procedures targeting activists and the pressures exerted on the medical professions, prosecutors, and the police through the "legal opinions" addressed to them by Ordo Iuris³⁴. These measures could be at the origin of abortion refusal and several deaths of pregnant women (Bauer-Babef & Vasques 2022) because, faced with fetal damage, health professionals waited for the fetus to die *in utero* and were slow to perform abortions, even if women's lives were at stake. To guarantee access to reproductive rights some doctors cooperate with feminist organizations by issuing prescriptions for emergency contraception, providing women whose pregnancies have embryo-pathological features with certificates on the state of mental health, and performing abortions within the legal framework if others refuse (WKRW 2022, Kacpura 2021, Ferenc 2021, Biejat 2022). As part of Parliamentary Rescue Network (Poselska Sieć Ratunkowa 2021) MPs accompanied by lawyers and/or medical experts close to the movement intervene 24 hours a day to force hospitals to apply the law.

Extremely disruptive strategies, involving physical risks or interventions in police stations or hospitals at all hours of the day and night, seem to constitute an innovation in the repertoire of actions of insiders within the institutions. However, this type of engagement is part of the major trend of this new feminism, namely that of aid and support within movement's unities and individuals. The cause lawyering constitutes a typical form of legal professions' commitment with the movement (Sarat and Scheingold 2006). Like the radicalization of insiders' actions, an exponential development of this practice brings a response to the physical

³¹ Several female MPs have themselves been victims of tear gas use by the police during their official intervention.

³² Under Polish law, all public institutions from which MPs request explanations and documents as part of their parliamentary prerogatives have to react.

³³ The presence of this senator, himself a victim of repression under the Communist regime, during activist trials is a powerful symbol when illegitimate procedures for appointing judges call into question their impartiality.

³⁴ A Polish hospital cited the Ordo Iuris opinion in refusing an abortion on the grounds of mental health impairment following the diagnosis of a fetal lethal disease (Bielska 2021).

and symbolic violence the State and the profiles of its allies - lawyers mobilizing the law to politicize gender issues.

In the current illiberal political context, the movement cannot do without the support of insiders, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies, despite a certain reticence towards political institutions. I argue that through insider involvement, institutions can be seen as the continuity of the movement and constitute important sites of resistance. The strategies deployed respond to the needs of the movement and react to actions mobilized by the ultraconservative power and the countermovement.

Conclusion

The women's cause field is currently undergoing a profound "refoundation" following the emergence, in 2016, of massive, intersectional, and radical mobilizations that have attracted "ordinary women" and have put abortion back at the heart of the political debate. This emerging feminism faces two challenging objectives : the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy, as well as the need to distance itself from earlier feminist organizations, considered as inefficient, elitist, and too institutionalized. However, while competing with established fractions within the women's cause field, it cannot do without their support, which is necessary to resist illiberal policies and the failure of the state in the face of multiple crises. In addition to these cooperations, which reflect a pragmatic approach focused on problem-solving beyond ideological divisions, the new formations are resorting to practices of mutual aid and exchange of experiences through common feminine identity. The mobilization of "traditional" roles assigned to women observed in certain contexts can become a vector of emancipation and commitment. This new feminism stands out from established fractions by "doing things" locally, without hierarchy or instructions: groups, organizations and individuals engage in more or less militant activities according to activists' sensibilities and local needs.

Structurally heterogeneous and divided, the women's cause field finds its strength and builds its new collective identity through networks and alliances of groups and individuals interconnected by multiple affiliations, organization ties and sites of convergence. This new identity of Polish feminism is emerging through its capacity to unite beyond the feminist cause and major innovations such as civic commitment, participatory democracy measures and strong intersectionality issues. While responding to a global attack on the human rights and citizen freedoms, these tactics reflect the disavowal of the political institutions that has so far ignored women's and other marginalized communities' voices. Yet, despite this reticence, the movement cannot pass by the support of its most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, in the legal and medical field, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies. It is the convergence of all these sites of resistance, so different but cooperating on a large scale, that makes Polish feminism capable of resisting the opportunistic synergy between the conservative civil society and the illiberal power.

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NGOization revisited: Feminist Mobilizations Amidst Organizational, Resource, and Strategic Challenges

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, the term NGOization has turned from a heuristic concept conceived to analyze the power dynamics in a particular organizational form of feminist civil society into a concept in danger of normative overstretch. NGOization has come to stand for a postfeminist politics that is coopted into the mainstream and incentivizes depoliticization and deradicalization. I argue in this essay that it is time to take stock of the conceptual framings of NGOization and examine the contingencies and resistances it produced.

Feminist organizations have encountered the tensions produced by the pull to NGOize early and debated its effects more ardently than other civic sectors. Since the mid-1990s, feminist NGOization literature had identified a pull among women's movement actors to formalize organization and thus to professionalize, institutionalize and bureaucratize feminist civil society.

The apparent fit of an NGOized feminist civic sector with neoliberal economic and individualizing societal imperatives can, however, not account for the breadth of feminist activism worldwide. NGOization, in other words, is not an iron cage, it is a political, economic, and cultural pull factor that invites stretching, bending, tensions, opposition and thus dialectical responses. The essay identifies three sets of challenges that an NGOized feminist civil society faces, pertaining to resources, strategy, and mobilization capacity.

Keywords: *feminism, civil society, NGOs, NGOization, mobilization, social movements*



Introduction

Over the past three decades, the term NGOization has turned from a heuristic concept conceived to analyze the power dynamics in a particular organizational form of feminist civil society (Lang 1996; Alvarez 1997; Ana 2024) into a concept in danger of normative overstretch. Neera Chandhoke's instructive quip "...people struggling against authoritarian regimes had demanded civil society, what they got instead were NGOs" (Chandhoke 2003: 9) evokes a narrative in which the nongovernmental sector in essence has turned into a pillar of neoliberal governance. In feminist discourse, NGOization has come to stand for a postfeminist politics that kindles the "cooptation and erasure of critical social movements" (Charkraborty 2021: 1). Cooptation into mainstreamed gender politics, specifically, is argued to lead to depoliticization and deradicalization (De Jong/Kimm 2017). Those working in the sector are frequently perceived as having 'sold out' and being part of elites "with closer ties to international institutions than to their local communities" (Arda/Banerjee 2021: 1691). By some accounts, NGOs have become what botanists call an 'indicator species': "The greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs" (analogy by Roy 2016: 335).

I submit that it is time to lower the normative heat in order to take stock of the conceptual framings of NGOization that emerged over the past three decades and examine the contingencies and resistances it produced. The substantive critique of the NGO sector has political, economic, and cultural roots: Politically, as neoliberalism has led to the outsourcing of crucial social services to civic sector actors, those working in these sectors are seen as stabilizing and abetting a system that perpetuates inequalities and compensates for a politics of minimizing public sector resources. Economically, the 'commercialization of the sector' that leads to a particular strata of NGOs receiving considerable funding from governments, business and private donors and in turn urges organizations to utilize business models to advance their public-facing goals (Mitchel et al., 2020; Prakash & Gugerty, 2009), invites critics to see NGOs as the source of economizing society and as unfit to initiate radical social change. Moreover, the impressive rise of the nonprofit sector as one of the largest employment sectors globally, spurred by foundations whose budgets dwarf those of many governments, has accentuated how civil society has the potential to hollow out representative democracy by practicing undemocratic agenda setting. Culturally, the 'bonds' between the aid industry in the Global North and the receivership of deprived and poorer communities in the Global South have been identified as neo-colonial oppressive practices.

Feminist organizations have encountered the tensions produced by the pull to NGOize early and debated its effects more ardently than other civic sectors. Since the mid-1990s, feminist NGOization literature had identified a pull among women's movement actors to formalize organization and thus to professionalize, institutionalize and bureaucratize feminist civil society. Empirical evidence and effects of gendered and NGOized civil societies have been

studied in Europe (Lang, 2013; Paternotte, 2016; Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Bernal/Grewal 2014; Ana, 2024) in the Americas (Alvarez, 2009), the Middle East (Herrold, 2016; Arda/Banerjee 2021), and Africa (Al-Karib 2018). As some scholars criticized the NGOization paradigm for stipulating a pre-NGOized “innocent” autonomous women’s movement (Bernal/Roy 2017),³⁵ others pointed to the shifts in women’s organizing as an empirically observable and heuristically validated development (Lang 2013; Ana 2024).

The apparent fit of an NGOized feminist civic sector with neoliberal economic and individualizing societal imperatives can, however, not account for the breadth of feminist activism worldwide. NGOization, in other words, is not an iron cage, it is a political, economic, and cultural pull factor that invites stretching, bending, tensions, opposition and thus dialectical responses. As feminist research attends to power dynamics and tries to avoid static and hermetic conceptualizations, feminist theorizing has rightly situated NGO activism within a broad range of intersectional claims making and diverse subjectivities (Bernal/Roy 2017; Irvine et al 2019). Feminist mobilizations today reside in a multitude of places from hyper-local to transnational, in diverse spaces from grassroots and physical to the cloud, and exhibit a delimited set of strategies from productively engaging the political and economic political status quo to resisting it altogether. With powerful street-level protests such as the Polish Black Protests or the Latin American NiUnaMenos mobilizations, women and gender activists have reclaimed public spaces and harness the power of physical or social media-based mass action. Established women’s NGOs often concentrate on changing legal and policy aspects of gendered inequalities and carry gender equality demands into the institutional spheres of parties, governments, business and international organizations. Street-level organizers and institutional actors alike harness the power of social media to advance their issues and bolster campaigns. New technologies enable feminist actors to jump scale between different locales and modes of intervention and align mobilizations across borders at low cost.

Does the ‘flowering landscape’ of recent feminist mobilizations in the first quarter of the 21st century debunk earlier assessments that articulated NGOization as a core mode of early 21st century feminist organizing (Lang 1996 and 2013, Alvarez 2009, Ana 2024)? Have feminist activists proven those wrong who saw the future of gender equality claims encapsulated and moderated in an incorporated women’s civil society sector? I would like to offer a cautionary perspective on abandoning the heuristic lens of an NGOized civil society altogether. I argue that, to the contrary, NGOized feminism continues to be the predominant mode of organization and advocacy for gender equality. Resisting NGOization, however, as well as producing alternative mobilization strategies has become a central modality of gender activism today. Opposition to NGOized modes of addressing gender equality has led to counter-movements, challenging the organizational form of institutionalized feminism and offering alternative

³⁵ In the area that I mostly study, Western Europe, there has been a self-identified autonomous women’s movement in the 1970s and 1980s that, far from innocent, nonetheless did deliberately not take state money and instead operated women’s shelters, centers, and self-help groups through personal time investment and small donations.

modes of doing politics. Younger generations of feminists, in particular, have become impatient with another round of gathering facts that might eventually inform evidence-based policy making, with another conference in which impact assessments of policies on women's lives are being debated. In other words, what we are witnessing as a broad range of gendered mobilizations might also articulate itself as resistance to institutionalized, bureaucratized, and professionalized advocacy. Social media enable these activist voices on a scale that nobody anticipated in the 1990s.

Three Challenges of NGOized Feminist Civil Society

After three decades of the NGOization pull in civil society, we can observe its effects as well as challenges to its dominance in three ways, pertaining to organization, resources, and strategy: One, incorporating as an NGO continues to be the predominant operational form of the struggles for gender equality worldwide. Organized women's NGOs help convert equality agendas into legislation and are part and parcel of global policy accomplishments. At the same time, the quest for radical feminist societal change is frequently reduced to more adaptive strategies for reform under the auspices of neoliberalism. As a consequence, and pushed also by the affordances of social media campaigns, younger feminist generations, in particular, are eschewing organizational forms and instead develop mobilization repertoires that rely less on hierarchical professionalism and more on distributed networks of activism. Two, as the perceived tensions inherent in an NGOized feminist civil society sector have borne innovative and more radical forms of feminist activism and resistance, the resource question has gained more urgency. New forms of mobilization that incite street level resistance do rarely synergize with and do not count on the support and on resources of NGOized feminist organizations. An observable effect is that some larger donors now incorporate aspects of the NGOization critique into revised funding strategies. Embedded in the resource issue, moreover, are questions pertaining to the financial and emotional costs of feminist engagement and the making of feminist expert 'careers'. An increasingly prolific literature investigates the self-exploitative nature of political care work (De Jong 2017; Wang 2022; Ana 2024) under NGOized conditions and seeks to identify alternatives. Three, as institutionalized gender equality actors have carved out particular spaces for political advocacy in government and legal contexts, they have witnessed different strategic decisions by feminist activists outside of these institutions. This has ambivalent effects, because the current challenges to gender equality are in need of a renewed coalition building. In order to counter the massive anti-feminist challenges we are currently witnessing, a 'division of labor' argument between institutional actors and street-level and networked feminist resistances won't suffice – the recent U.S. decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade* being a case in point, or the massive violence against women in areas of limited statehood. The strategic challenge ahead is how to coordinate NGOized feminist actors and street-level mobilizations, harnessing the respective powers of each.

Organizational Challenges

Women's organizations have become an ingrained part of a project-culture based civil society. Like civil society organizations in other advocacy fields, they have learned to adapt their goals to institutional norms of feasibility (Lang, 2013; Banks et al. 2015). Managerial practices

established within a shared social space result in the production of “good projects” as a commodity that NGOs sell. Through the sale, beneficiaries “become part of” this commodification of civil society (Krause, 2014: 4). As donors and other stakeholders provide funds only for specific projects, showcasing short-term results becomes paramount and admitting to failure is not an option. Instead, civil society development needs to be ‘measurable’ and thus in essence quantifiable according to mostly economic or government-led data points. Accountability thus becomes directly related to the “marketization of the nonprofit sector” (Eikenberry/Kluver, 2004, also Sandberg et al., 2020). Within this market of projects, moreover, NGOs are pitted against each other in competing for grants and thus often forced to operate highly individualized. At the same time, this might lead to ‘association overload’ as layers of NGOs, alliances, and networks potentially replicate each other’s mission and projects (Lang, 2023, also Herrold/Atia, 2016).

Countering these trends in organizational self-referentiality, an increasingly visible number of gendered mobilizations deliberately avoid formal organization (Armstrong 2002) and instead build horizontally-networked communities of activists that do not rely on established women’s organizations to advance their messages (Irvine et al. 2019). The #MeToo movement, Women’s March actions, street-level reproductive choice marches and many others point to what researchers have labeled an explosion of feminist organizing (Forester et al. 2020; Htun/Weldon 2018). Young feminists, in particular, have risen to counter NGOized civil society. In a 2016 survey by the *Frida* network’s *Young Feminist Fund* and *Awid*, only a small majority of young feminist organizations were registered in their respective countries and fall under NGO laws. (Frida et al. 2016: 4). In Latin America and the MENA region, in particular, less than half of the groups of young feminists had registered as an NGO, and aside from financial reasons (registration being too expensive) one third articulated not being registered as a political choice and instead preferring “not to ask for money from ‘regular funders’ to avoid being politically controlled from the outside of the collective” (Frida et al. 2016: 32). Thus, the pull to NGOize has also bred resistances, enabling conscious decisions among young activists not to formalize their engagement and actions and instead pursue other, strongly networked, horizontally structured, and social media driven modes of organizing.

Resource Challenges

NGOs tend to “projectify” feminism (Scott/Rönblom 2022) and sell their projects as ‘products’ in settings in which donors are turned into the *prima facie* consumers (Krause, 2014, p. 4). As private and public donor demands structure the operational logics of NGOs (Heiss/Kelley 2017; Mitchell/Schmitz 2014) more generally, women’s and feminist organizations cannot evade donor logics. The European Union funding structures, for an example, while enabling project-and evidence-based activities by women’s actors, at the same time curate their work in three ways, shaping their priorities, project goals, and public outreach activities. In terms of priorities, women’s activities are narrowed to a specific set of intergovernmental priorities that are defined by EU institutions and member states. EU goal orientation makes funds available for specific activities by women’s NGOs which might be well spent and guarantee survival and growth of a certain arena of gender equality; but this

might invite “goal-displacement at the micro-level” (Sanchez Salgado, 2010: 526) by way of signaling what is more likely to be funded and what not. Finally, this focus on donor rationales undermines “citizen’s appropriation of the policy process” (ibid: 527) and potentially stifles bottom-up engagement with gendered inequalities. Research has delineated how particular funding streams for advocacy deter “organizations from engaging in contentious or transgressive social movement activity” (Suarez 2020: 502).

The resource question in NGOization is not just about organizational survival and modes of mobilization, it also impacts individual survival in an organization. With the growth of the NGO sector in the gender equality arena, precarious work conditions have become embedded in a professionalized structure that counts on temporary, project-driven labor by committed and caring feminists (de Jong 2017; Ana 2024; Wang 2022). *Frida* and the *AWID Young Feminist Organization* find in their report on the state of young feminist activism that “despite the fact that young feminist organizations are using innovative strategies to tackle some of the most pressing issues of our time, with some of the most vulnerable populations, they are strikingly under-resourced and their sustainability is in jeopardy” (Frida/Awid 2016: 3). According to Alexandra Ana, financial dependency of feminist organizations “functions both as a channel through which governmental precarization as a mode of governance is being deployed and as an instrument that helps to hierarchize, classify and distribute precariousness in relations of inequalities (Ana 2024). In effect, lack of resources, precarity of work and self-exploitation in the care economy structure not just what kind of actions are being promoted, but it informs relationships within organizations and between them.

As this critique has gathered momentum globally, it has led some donors and funders to start re-imagining their tenders and modes of engagements with grantees. New approaches to women’s NGO funding are again at the forefront of this change and reflect resistances to NGOized women’s organizations. Initiatives such as the feminist collaborative ‘*Count Me In!*’³⁶ founded the ‘Money and Movement Initiative’³⁷ (MMI) in 2018 to articulate and address the complex relationship between donors and project-based feminist organizations in the Global South. MMI organizes dialogues between funders and grantees that focus specifically on the power dynamics built into their relationships and offers best practice models of funding. Based on Michael Edwards concept of a transformative funding ecosystems (Edwards 2013), activists from *Count Me In!* have pushed for stronger reflection on the ‘ties that bind’ in project-based funding for gender equality and offered ideas for change (Count Me In! 2018). An example of structural adjustments on the funders side is the Dutch development engagement with women’s organizations. Instead of project evaluations based on outcomes, the Dutch

³⁶ The Count Me In! (CMI!) consortium consists of eight member organizations: Mama Cash (MC), the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), CREA, Just Associates (JASS), and the Sister Funds Urgent Action Fund (UAF) and Urgent Action Fund Africa (UAF-Africa). The sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund (RUF) and the Dutch gender platform WO=MEN are strategic partners of the consortium.

³⁷ <https://cmiconsortium.org/money-and-movements-initiative/>

Foreign Ministry has adopted a ‘theory of change’ model of evaluation that “focuses more on qualitative results and outcomes than on output and activities” (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). The model allows for adaptation and change to be part of women’s NGO work, validating local experience over grant execution metrics. Thus, resistances to NGOized forms of project culture and execution breed new ideas that challenge established practices; and these new ideas originate often in spaces where funders and established women’s NGOs are confronted with new, younger, non-incorporated groups.

In the Global North as well, some large international foundations are in the process of altering their grantmaking in response to critiques about ‘project funding’ calls for reaching gender equality and intersectionally grounded goals. The *Ford Foundation* sponsored *Black Feminist Fund*, for an example, articulates directly “We want to model for the philanthropic sector to fund Black feminists like you want them to win. That means you fund them for a long time because the struggle is long. You fund them at large levels; you don’t ask them to win freedom with \$25,000” (Ford Foundation 2021).³⁸ These initiatives, at this point in time, are far and few in-between and limited in scope. But as the discursive context for civil society work changes, they might gain momentum and lead to new gender equality engagement practices based on constructive critiques of NGOization.

Strategic Challenges

NGOization has not just fostered specific organizational architectures and resource challenges, it has also molded strategic decisions on how to communicate and mobilize (Lang 2013). As expertise has become the prime currency to be validated by donors and governments, organizing broader public engagement and political activism has taken a back seat. NGOs’ focus on organizational reproduction incentivizes a reorientation of communication from publicity to public relations, delivering different types of communication (policy reports, press releases, donor reports) to different audiences (Powers, 2016: 7). Managing their brand (ibid.) has become an area of increasing attention, which in turn deters from public outreach in a more inclusive and participatory sense. Organizing publicness by making issues known to wider audiences and organizing these audiences into powerful citizen voices are the most pressing among challenges for an NGOized civil society. But all too often these public-facing empowerment projects are the ones that are least ‘fundable’ in the eyes of donors as they showcase little immediate results and measurable output. The call for rethinking NGOs’ role in public mobilization processes thus has become louder across policy fields (f.e. Tortajada, 2016; Crosman et al., 2022), but it is particularly loud in the arena of feminism.

Feminists mostly acknowledge that NGOized feminism occupies a specific space and plays a central role in the overall push for gender equality. Similar to the femocratic move into

³⁸ Expanding on the dynamics of large funders such as the Ford Foundation creating long-term funding relationships with particular groups is beyond the scope of this essay, but should be on the agenda of feminist organization research.

institutions since the 1980s, professionalized women’s organizations are now present in most countries as experts that lobby institutional actors, help draft laws and regulations, and watch over implementation of gender equality measures. At the same time, most of these women’s NGOs have not been at the forefront of the #MeToo mobilizations, the *Black Lives Matter* actions, or global reproductive right protests. Are we observing an increasingly visible ‘division of labor’ between an incorporated women’s NGO sector and street-level activism? And, if so, what are the costs to such a strategic dual track approach to gender equality?

Illustrating Mobilization Challenges

An instructive example presents with the 2023 mobilizations in the U.S. against the Supreme Court overturning of the 1973 *Row v. Wade* right to abortion. A draft of the decision had already been leaked about two months before the ruling was handed down – time to prepare immediate, visible, and strong responses on the streets of Washington D.C. Institutionalized American women’s organizations, however, did not showcase preparedness for public protests. No nation-wide walk out or strike was planned by “K-Street”, the organizational advocacy hub of lobbying and social justice organizations in the U.S. capital. Instead, it was diverse locally coordinating women’s groups who took to the streets, their numbers small in regard to the magnitude of the decision. A similar pattern emerged during the following months, when many states outlawed or severely limited the right to abortion. As, for an example, the Idaho legislature on March 31, 2023 announced that any aiding of abortion would be a felony that could get a mother or a helpful friend up to five years in prison, the major women’s organizations in the U.S. showcased the following on their websites:

24 hours after the decision was made public, the Washington D.C. based *Center for Reproductive Rights* under their ‘events section (“panels and events. Addressing current topics in reproductive rights”), had no events scheduled for the future.³⁹ The *National Organization for Women* (NOW) under ‘upcoming events’ had a header “NOW is taking action” that read “NOW it taking action. Attacks on abortion care keep coming. But NOW is defending our access to reproductive freedom. Donate and together we can secure equality for all women”.⁴⁰ The *Feminist Majority Foundation* had published their last news on abortion on International women’s day more than three weeks before the Idaho decision.⁴¹ *NARAL*, the premier national pro-choice organization in the U.S. targeted a ‘National Ban on Medication Abortions’ on their site with the tag-line “Help NARAL fight back. Donate”.⁴² Finally, *Planned Parenthood*, the most visible reproductive rights provider in the US, as well only offered donations or volunteering as possible strategic choices to counter anti-abortion policies. The ‘get involved’ tab took the interested party to a 501c(4) political advocacy organization, separate from Planned Parenthood, that offered exactly one option: to volunteer for the organization.⁴³ In

³⁹ <https://reproductiverights.org/events/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.now.org/events/>

⁴¹ <https://feminist.org/news/>

⁴² <https://www.prochoiceamerica.org> access 4/1/23

⁴³ <https://weareplannedparenthood.org>

sum, collective preparedness to respond directly and publicly to these massive and cumulative attacks on women's reproductive rights by NGOized women's organizations was not visible.

These points of evidence challenge Suzanne Staggenborg's notion that the Pro-Choice movement in the US had managed to effectively organize a division of labor between "K Street" (Washington DC advocacy hub) oriented lobbying and direct action as a grassroots strategy, and that formal organizations are in fact frequent supporters of local/regional direct-action activities (Staggenborg 1988 and 2013). I submit that the lack of a massive, large scale and coordinated women's movement response after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States is indicative of the challenges that an NGOized women's civic sector presents as it forfeits the option of aligning itself with or coordinating street-level activism. To be clear, this is not to deny the important contributions of lobbying and legal struggles that K-Street women's organization spearhead. As the U.S. reproductive rights struggle to some large degree has relocated into the state- and city-levels legal system, the professional resources that the D.C. beltway organizations provide are crucial. At the same time, many organizations have put their public mobilization coordination function aside and appear unable to muster decisive support for street-level protests and direct action.

On the upside, another generation of feminist activists stepped in to "meet the moment" (Flowers, op. cit. Kinery 2022). Black women leaders of several groups across the country harnessed the feeling of being "unsure of what was next" that many women experienced and networked to stage 'Day Without Us', inviting protesters to skip work and instead attend an online teach-in or meet up for "local pop-ups" to discuss ways to move forward in the aftermath of the Supreme Court ruling and show public presence on and offline (ibid. 2022).

In sum: Challenging the depoliticisation effect of NGOization (Ana 2024), groups of younger and diverse feminist activists take up the void in public presence that institutionalized women's organizations left and channeled omnipresent women's frustration with the ruling into direct action. In other conflicts and in other parts of the world, young feminist organizations use similar strategies and carry out a range of public protests with low organizational density, no vertical lines of decision making, and very little financial support. With their actions, they bridge not only different gender constituencies and act interjectionally, they work specifically also across generational lines of activists (Frida 2016: 3) and thus bridge different mobilization strategies. The same survey indicates that half of the young feminist activist groups surveyed were created within the last decade since 2010 (ibid.) and thus in response to earlier and heavily NGOized modes of organizing.

Conclusion

Different groups of feminist actors today work within, with, parallel to and against the women's spaces they inherited. The rising mode of organizational practices that respond to the

NGOization pull can also be seen as an expression of what Scott and Rönnblom in the tradition of Deleuze call ‘assemblage thinking’ (Scott/Rönnblom 2021: 252): the notion that contingencies and selective adaptations in the process of feminist transformations are not only ‘living’ in theoretical projects, but live in organizational structures as well. Projectified feminist cultures under neoliberal conditions are a result of NGOization. But, at the same time, feminist activism challenges, continuously re-works, and re-imagines the affordances of feminist mobilizations. New, often younger, actors immersed in queer and intersectional practices try to compensate resource challenges with crossover strategies and the use of new technologies, in the process staying attuned to social cleavages in how we design, utilize and implement activism (Benschop 2021). This does not de-validate the questions that the NGOization concept raises; instead, it highlights the ambiguities that an NGOized feminism left gender activists with. The central task for the future is how to make these contingencies productive and allow for a feminist crossover politics between institutionalized actors and new forms of mobilization.

One way to assess this re-imagining is to orient towards Latin America’s development of NGOized feminism and the resistances in produced in the past decade. Here, attempts to recruit younger feminists into the established structures of organized feminism failed. This failure, however, did not turn into antagonistic younger generation mobilizations, but instead into “spin-off” activism (Friedman/Rodriguez Gustá 2023). In Ecuador and Peru, for an example, older feminist organizations were committed to recruiting younger generation participants, but they did so with what Anna-Britta Coe calls “in/exclusionary practices” (Coe 2020: 22). They offered, on the inclusionary side, participation in formal activities, training and leadership skill development in order to foster institutional change. These very offers, however, had also an exclusionary dimension by employing mainly trained experts, investing in a bureaucratized organizational structure, and emphasizing state institutions over other sites of inequality (ibid.). As a consequence, “...younger participants turned to generating their own spaces, structures, and practices of feminism. As a result, the younger generation was able to make use of experiences gained within an older women’s movement. However, they did so by establishing ‘new forms of activism’ emphasizing horizontality and autonomy” (Friedman/Rodriguez Gustá 2023), while building on the inclusive aspects of NGOized feminism. The way forward thus might need imagining feminist spaces “in which formal official organizations and informal groups” not just “co-exist” (Ana 2024), but communicate and collaborate to address the massive challenges that the reactionary right poses to gender equality worldwide.

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Activist burnout in times of NGO-ization: comparing feminist movements in Belgium and Romania

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Abstract

The NGO-ization of feminist movements, under conditions of financial dependence, profoundly transformed feminist activism, by bringing upfront the paid/unpaid and militant/professional divisions. By looking at the transformations of the contemporary feminist movements in Belgium and Romania, namely their professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization, this paper aims to understand how is NGO-ization related to activist burnout. It is argued that organizational and job insecurity became a concern among feminist activists as the fragmentation of funds exacerbated and the project-based work became commonplace.

Keywords: *NGOization; activist burnout; feminist movements; precarization; financial dependence; insecurity*

Summary

In this paper I explored how the last decades transformations of the feminist movements associated with NGO-ization, shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it created new sources of pressure, amplifying the risk of burnout among activists. I have identified different sources of pressure in feminist organizations, related to the NGO-ization of social movements. First, the organizational and job insecurity, related to the volatility of funds, stemming from the fragmentation of subsidies available to movement organizations. Second, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms related to their bureaucratization, and which increases the amount of paperwork activists do, at the expense of political work and work with beneficiaries. Third, the polyvalence of tasks, stemming from project-based work and related to the professionalization of the feminist movement as well as to their financial dependence. Running after funds to alleviate insecurity and working to exhaustion between frustrating

paperwork, to justify how the money was used and political work for the cause, led feminist activists to burnout.

Introduction

The openings of the political opportunity structure (POS) occasioned by the UN world conferences on women and the creation of gender equality and women's rights agencies, supported the institutionalization of the feminist movements which started to pursue their aims, through lobby and advocacy in official politics, besides contentious actions (Lang, 1997; Alvarez, 1999; Bernal, 2000; Halley, 2006). The need for legitimacy to participate in formal politics drove feminist activists and organizations to professionalize (Alvarez, 1998), by using the feminist knowledge produced in collectives and NGOs in policymaking or acquiring expertise through university programs. The availability of funds (Della Porta and Diani 2006) and the accessibility of official political channels turned activists to invest full-time in militancy, becoming professional or career activists, employed in feminist organizations. Some argued that NGOs receive not only funds from donors and institutions, but also agendas that shape strategies, practices and discourses, diminishing the voices of feminist activists (Bernal and Grewal, 2014, p. 5; Grunberg 2000; see also Aksartova 2009). Financial dependence on donors led to the bureaucratization of feminist organizations and translated into the spread of new public management (NPM) practices (Kantola and Squires, 2012) within the civil society. More specifically the neoliberal bureaucratization of NGOs meant the adoption of norms, rules and practices stemming from the market in civil society organizations (Hibou 2015). This happened by responding to calls for tenders to access funds and through accountability requirements that bound donors and NGOs through financial dependence, in the name of transparency. The fragmentation of funds and multiplication of accountability mechanisms drew organizations in a funding race and to bureaucratic exhaustion, as activists become more involved more in paperwork than political or community work (Ana 2024). The availability of short-term fragmented funds and the financial dependence of NGOs vis-à-vis donors regulate a minimum guarantee, the possibility of organizational survival and job preservation, while at the same time increase instability through the uncertainty of winning projects and securing funds (Ibidem). Thus, feminist activists become increasingly concerned with organizational and individual insecurity.

While there are neoliberal specificities, governing through insecurity started from the eighteenth century as a liberal political and economic mode of governing, based on liberalism that "turns into a mechanism continually having to arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals by reference to this notion of danger" (Foucault, 2008, 66). The mechanism of governmental precarization, as a liberal mode of governing through insecurity, is based on the public/private division and on the gender specific division of labor that produced and reproduced in turn the autonomy/dependence separation. Isabell Lorey (2015) argues that this contributed to the hierarchization, and distribution of precariousness based on structural

inequalities and discriminations, that created and marked the Others, being thus a heteronormative, gendered and racialized process. In neoliberalism, while retaining these hierarchizing mechanisms, governmental precarization does not solely repose on marking the Others but moves towards the middle of the society and normalizes and individualizes precarization as a process in which the precarious are isolated, often working on short-term jobs, in precarious conditions of employment (Lorey, 2015, 5-6, Lorey, 2006). The role of individual participation in the process of self-governing and self-creation reposes on self-responsibility mechanisms, individual risk management, under the mirage of the possibility of autonomy.

NGO-ization as a specific form of neoliberal governmentality derives from the formalized encounter between state, the market and civil society (Ana 2024). In the case of the feminist movements, NGO-ization is built on the decades-long transformations of the feminist movement, namely their institutionalization and professionalization, shaped by processes of neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization as technologies of domination (Ibidem). The aim of this paper is to show how these decades transformations of the feminist movements shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it puts additional pressure on activists, amplifying the risk of burnout among those engaged. The NGO-ization of feminist movements translated into a volatile and precarious sector characterized by project-based work that supports organizational and job insecurity, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms, and the polyvalence of tasks for professional activists. High commitment to the cause, the sense of responsibility but also the guilt for earning money out of a social cause, favour self-precarization and overwork that lay the ground for burnout. To show this, I draw on the NGO-ization theory and the activist burnout literature. They inform my analysis of how activist burnout is related to NGO-ization and associated processes of professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization. The paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the methodology. The third section addresses the feminist movements in Belgium and Romania, in relation to their institutionalization and NGO-ization. The fourth section examines the literature on activist burnout. The fifth section covers the empirical findings, and it comprises three subsections: governing through insecurity; martyrdom culture; questioning the ostrich policy about burnout.

Methodologies and methods

The data at the basis of this paper stems from a wider research project on the NGO-ization that I conducted for my PhD, between 2014 and 2019, at Scuola Normale Superiore. The results of my PhD are forthcoming as a monograph, “The NGO-ization of social movements in neoliberal times: Contemporary feminisms in Romania and Belgium”, at Palgrave. I adopted a cross-national comparative research strategy involving two different cases, namely francophone Belgium and Romania, with distinct political architectures, opportunity structures and historical development of feminist movements, but which are both affected by the process of NGO-ization. To study NGO-ization I drew on on feminist ethnography through in-depth interviewing and participant observation at selected events, complemented by documents analysis, such as organizations’ reports, video and audio material related to the activities of

movement organizations and groups. The research accounts for the feminist landscape after the 90s, but focuses more specifically on organizations active after the 2000s. In Romania, after the fall of the state-socialist regime in 1989, the first feminist organizations emerged. In Belgium, the 1990s marked the beginning of a new ‘wave’/period, marked by the institutionalization of main feminist claims (Dental, 2004, 64) and development of the feminist movement towards professionalization expertise. I focused on the meso-level, specifically on the feminist movement community embodied in different locations, spaces and organizational structures out of each I loosely distinguished between Street feminism, more informal groups and collectives and NGO-ized feminism, more formal and institutionally tied, nevertheless understood as imbricated in a spatial and locative web. To define the field boundaries in Belgium and Romania I combined a nominalist approach prior to starting the fieldwork in which I identified feminist organizations and groups according to predefined criteria, with a realist approach in which I relied on the on feminist activists’ perceptions of who is part of the field, of the feminist movement community. In Romania I conducted 44 interviews with feminist activists from NGOs, informal groups and two major networks as well as government employees working for gender equality bodies or politicians who addressed gender equality. In Belgium, I conducted 33 interviews with similar actors. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and almost three hours and were transcribed, coded and analysed using NVivo. Documents and notes from participant observation were organized, coded and analysed manually. The data was collected between 2015 and 2017. Annexes I and II provide further data about the interviewees and the selected organizations in the two countries.

The feminist movements in Belgium and Romania: a brief historical overview

Several historical works that trace the origins of the Belgian feminist movement and the emergence of a series of issues that run through the movement today (Boël et Duchène 1955; Gubin 1998; Gubin et Jacques 2018; Jacques 2009). The fight for women's education is documented as the first feminist issue politicized and addressed during the 1830s, contributing to the gradual opening of universities to women (Jacques 2009). However, the difficulty of access to a profession represented a ground for mobilization afterwards. The issue of women's right to vote arrived only later on the agenda of the feminist movements as their initial concerns revolved around civil and economic equality. Feminist activists initially attempted to bring women under a common front but ended up split along traditional political lines into secular and liberal feminism, Catholic feminism and socialist feminism. This division, called pillarization, reflects the organization of ideological and confessional pluralism (Bracke, Dupont and Paternotte 2017). Pillarization structured the development and the evolution of the feminist movements throughout the XXth century, characterized by an important presence of three big movement organizations associated with the three pillars. While reformed and transformed they lasted until today. Earning the right to vote in 1948, feminist activists mobilized during the 1960s and 1970s around economic demands and issues related to the gendered division of labour, but also around reproductive and sexual autonomy leading to the creation of family planning centres. During that period, several new collectives and

organizations were created with a focus on non-hierarchical organizing and street mobilizations. During the second half of the seventies, under the pressure of the International Women's Year, two advisory bodies were created to amend policies regarding women. A decade later the first women's policy agencies were created (Celis and Meier, 2007). At the end of the eighties and beginning of nineties, the intellectual feminist production developed and consolidated, with the emergence of research centres mostly without financing and independent feminist groups such as GRIF Groupe de Recherche et d'Information Féministe (Feminist Research and Information Group). After sustained efforts from NGOs, activists, and researcher, a master programme on gender studies was created in 2017. At the level of official politics, the federal women's policy agency was restructured, and the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (Institute for Equality of Women and Men) was created in 2002. During the 2000s Belgian feminism was institutionalized with different governmental structures and federal administrations for equality between men and women, with a reception and support centre for the activities of women's organisations and state subsidies for these organizations (Peemans-Poullet 2003). At the same time, feminist activists and scholars deplore the instrumentalization and watering down of feminist knowledge reflected in concepts such as "gender mainstreaming" and "equality of chances" that are used as alibies in neoliberal policies (Peemans-Poullet 2003; Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2002).

New feminist foundations have consolidated over time, reflected in the emergence of different collectives and spaces that challenged the unitary feminist subject and demystified the universality of the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class women, mainstream throughout the XXth century (Ana and Aromatario forthcoming) and analysed the role of coloniality in reproducing social relations of domination and the contributions of feminists of Maghrebian origin in Belgium (Semah 2018). The increase in visibility of the intersection of different forms of oppression at both theoretical and practical levels opened the possibility for the multiplication of its voices and perspectives. However, the voices of racialized collectives, non-binary, non-heterosexual people, poor women and the working class remain marginalized (Ana and Aromatario forthcoming).

Similar to Belgium, the emergence of the feminist movements in Romania is related to the rise of bourgeois revolutions in Europe and creation of the modern states. The first women organizations emerged at the beginning of the XIXth century and made claims about emancipation through education and charity (Mureşianu, 1926; Mihailescu, 2002). Involved in national liberation movements, feminist activists later framed emancipation in terms of national interest (Mihailescu, 2002). At the beginning of the XXth century, with the support of the socialist movement and the international women's movement for universal suffrage feminist activists demanded juridical, political and economic rights (Mihailescu, 2002, 28). Class tensions upsurged among feminist organizations between a bourgeois framing of political claims and a more inclusive framing regarding the political rights of peasant and factory women workers (Mihailescu 2002). In 1928, women obtained the right to vote and to be elected in municipal and county councils, but the electoral law imposed discriminatory conditions

(Mihailescu 2006). They achieved the full right to vote in 1938, considered to be purely formal as the consolidation of fascisms throughout the 1930s and the authoritarian tendencies of King Carol II crushed the democratic forces. Throughout the thirties, women organized to stand against fascism, at national and international level. After the Second World War, the Union of Anti-fascist Romanian Women was created as a unique mass-organization gathering all organized and non-organized women around Partidul Comunist Roman's (PCR's) (The Romanian Communist Party's) programme (Mihailescu, 2006, 74) with the scope of building solidarity with all women despite religious, national or class differences, improve their rights and connect with antifascist women organizations in other democratic countries (Jinga, 2015, 66-67). At international level the different women organizations that succeeded until 1989, as women organization of the PCR, were affiliated to the WIDF and followed the resolutions and action plans of the international organization. During the seventies Consiliul National al Femeilor (CNF) (The National Council of Women) composed of all delegates elected at regional level, every four years started to lose decisional power and implemented decisions taken by the Central Committee of the Party, being reformed at the end of the decade (Jinga, 2015, 96-99). Jinga argues that during the 80s, when the demographic policies hardened and the number of illegal abortions increased, CNF was part of the control entities, together with doctors, prosecutors or the militia, but in 1989 at its last National Conference on Women there was disinterest as there was no stake anymore (Jinga, 2015, 139-140).

Both in Belgium and in Romania, feminist movements went through a process of NGO-ization that included the institutionalization, professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization of important parts of the movements. Institutionalization was related to the openings of the political opportunity structure (POS), brought by the World Conferences on Women (WCW), when states committed to create governmental bodies at national level for the implementation of gender equality policies. In Belgium, the process started in 1985, with the creation of a State Secretary for Environment and Social Emancipation, headed by Miet Smet, who also negotiated an Equal Opportunities portfolio (Celis and Meier, 2007, 65). After several changes and restructuring the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (Institute for Equality of Women and Men) was created in 2002 under the authority of the Minister of Equal Opportunities. After the disappearance of the National Council of Women (CNF) in Romania, brought by the fall of the state socialist regime, the next institution in charge of women's rights was created in 2004 - *Agenția Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între Femei și Bărbați* (ANES) ('The National Agency for Equality between Women and Men'). However, the build-up of an infrastructure for women's rights and non-discrimination was considered a top-down and import process, labelled room-service feminism, out of the need to comply with the *Acquis Communautaire* prior to accession to the European Union (EU) (Miroiu 2004). Both in Belgium and Romania, women's agencies have been threatened to disappear along the years and it was feminist movement organizations who protested and fought to maintain these entities (Ana 2024). The creation of women's agencies marked the debut of a process of inclusion and marginalization (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) through which the state granted access and participation in policymaking to formal organizations who were able to provide professional expertise, while marginalizing inputs from dissident parts of the movements. Moreover, the

creation of gender studies programs supported the acquisition of expertise by NGO professionals, while at the same time gender studies academics sometimes also contributed with their knowledge to policymaking. While professionalization was supported in Belgium by the availability of structural funds, for feminist organizations who won accreditation, for example through popular education or as development NGOs, the restructuring of these financing mechanisms during the last decades, through fragmentation and reduced timespan, led organizations to respond more and more to call for tenders and adopt a project-based work mode of functioning. In Romania, after 1989 and throughout the EU pre-accession period professionalization was supported by the availability of international and European funds (Grunberg 2014; Grunberg 2000). Project-based work became the mode of functioning of feminist NGOs. Both in Belgium and in Romania, donor's accountability increased the bureaucratization of feminist organizations who's the budget of feminist NGOs is composed of a mosaic of volatile funding sources. Different than in Belgium, liberal feminism became mainstream in Romania, after the fall of state socialism (Ana 2023; Sandu 2021; Molocea 2015) and coupled with anti-communism, impeded the politicization of class and a critique of neoliberalism (Ana 2020). While other feminism developed in parallel, such as Roma feminism and queer and anarcho-feminism they remained more marginal until a process of bridge-building and a move towards a more intersectional politics of hope took place during the second half of 2010 (Ibidem).

Activist burnout: a brief review of the literature

Activist burnout has been defined as a condition in which the accumulated stress related to militant engagement, particularly long-term activism is debilitating, affecting the health of activists and contributing to their temporary or permanent political disengagement (Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising 2019; Gorski, 2015; Chen and Gorski 2015; Maslach and Gomes 2006). Activist burnout has been discussed in relation to racial justice movements (Gorski and Erakat, 2019), animal rights activism (Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising, 2018), women's rights activism (Barry and Dordevic 2007; Bernal 2006) or environmental activism (Driscoll 2019; Kovan and Dirxx, 2006), among others. Scholars have distinguished between three categories of causes for activist burnout (Gorski and Erakat, 2019; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising, 2018): (1) internal, associated with high levels of commitment, including emotional and a sense of responsibility (Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Barry and Dordevic 2007); (2) external, concerning retaliation repercussions related to challenging power structures (including corporate, legislative) and structural injustices (Cox 2011; Barry and Dordevic 2007); (3) within-movement causes, referring to internal conflicts among activists, including social movement organizations' leaders (Gorski 2018; Shields 2008). It is critical to consider that burnout causes are not distributed equally within movements and that sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism experienced within movements affect disproportionately marginalized identity activists compared to more privileged fellows. For example, analysing burnout in antiracism movements Paul Gorski and Noura Erakat (2019) showed how the behaviours and attitudes of white racial justice activists led to burnout in racial justice activists of colour.

Activist burnout has been understood as opposed to activist sustainability (Cox 2011), with damaging effects on movements which are deprived of the knowledge and the experience of activists who burn out (Retting 2006). Thus, social movement scholars interrogated about the relationship between activist burnout and turnover or movement exit (Klandermans 2005; Fillieule and Broqua 2005). While some scholars are more straightforward in associating burnout with exit (McAdam 2005), others are more equivocal about their relationship (Downton & Wehr 1997).

In a study about activist burnout in US racial justice activists, Gorski (2018) found out that while the external causes of burnout, associated with retaliation, and the internal causes of burnout, linked to overwork out of a sense of responsibility and moral commitment stemming from an understanding of the structural oppressions, seemed to be “predictable burnout sources”, within-movement causes such as judgements and ego-clashes were described as main sources. Similarly, in Romania, within movement tensions arose among Roma feminists and white feminists, between mainstream liberal feminists and left-wing feminist activists (Vlad 2013). While conflicts among activists, the reproduction of oppressive behaviours or the martyrdom culture among activists have been studied as within movement causes of burnout, less attention has been paid to the way long-term processes of transformation of social movements, such as their NGO-ization and social movement’s organizational culture are related to activist burnout. To fill in this gap, in what follows, I explore how does burnout relate to the NGO-zation of feminist movements, under the conditions of financial dependence of organizations. How do the paid/unpaid or the professional/militant tensions play out in shaping activist burnout?

Compared to Belgium, where parts of the feminist movement are anchored in the tradition of civil society actors as entities who organize the interests in society and make contributions to policymaking (Meier and Paternotte, 2017), in Romania there is a lack of public legitimacy of NGOs and low public trust coupled with a weak civic participation (Grunberg 2008) explained by some in relation to the compulsory membership before 1989 that created an aversion to formal participation in organizations (Jaconson and Saxonberg 2013) and by others in relation to the unmasking of NGOs as front for other businesses or as tax dodgers during the first decade of post-socialism (Arpad 2008, 13). While there are differences in terms of public legitimacy of civil society actors, NGO-ization seems to work to evening out the organizational culture characterized by project-based work, insecurity, and martyrdom.

I. Governing through insecurity

Three processes related to NGO-ization increase the pressure on activists, ultimately affecting the likelihood of burnout in institutionalized feminist environments. These processes are professionalization, neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization. The specificity of financial dependence in neoliberalism resides in the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies. As such, project-based work, short-term contracts or the accumulation of several positions and contracts with different responsibilities, within the

organization characterize the work of professional militants, those who are employed in movement organizations. In this context the professionalization of the feminist movement was accompanied by versatility/ polyvalence that refers both to the multitude of skills and competencies that professional activists must constantly develop and to the multiplicity of responsibilities and positions held in the organization that sometimes translates into several different working contracts in the same organization (Ana 2024 forthcoming). Versatility can become a source of workload pressure and stress for activist who feel they work “on fifteen fronts, doing thirty jobs, with no backup or solidarity” (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; other interviewees express similar feelings: Camille – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels; Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels). At the same time, the multiplication of sources of funding and their fragmentation translated into the multiplication of the accountability mechanisms, increasing the bureaucratic burden (Catherine – Garance, Brussels ; Nadia – Vie féminine, Brussels ; Simone – Garance, Brussels ; Mona – Université des femmes, Brussels ; Zoe 2 – Front, Bucharest; Monica – ALEG, Sibiu ; Florina 2 – Filia, Bucharest), although activists find it reasonable to justify how they used the money they received (Study day – Professionalisation! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels). As the bureaucratic load increases, activists feel frustrated that instead of being on the field they fill in reports and responds to call for tenders, to bring new projects and money in the organization and justify what they received.

Insecurity, related to the survival of the organization and the security of jobs, became a central concern for feminist NGOs. Hoping to mitigate it by responding to call for tenders, organizations managed to briefly reduce insecurity while increasing it on the middle and long-terms. Precarization involves the governing of feminist professionals in NGOs through insecurity and is based on reproducing the distribution of precariousness in relations of inequality.

Activists in feminist NGOs, including those in leading positions, spend enormous time in between their activities with women, bureaucratic paperwork, and fundraising, to ensure the security of jobs for the employees. Fragmented funding, funding that fluctuates or diminishes translates into an unbalance between the amount of work employees can deliver and the resources at their disposal. Hilde recalls when she was a coordinator of Maison Plurielle in Charleroi that fights against domestic violence, holding multiple roles and trying to make ends meet:

When I was working there, there were a half-time administrative assistant, a half-time facilitator, a three fourths social worker to take care of the socio-professional insertion, a full-time psychologist and myself as full-time coordinator. We were given as a mission to do – be careful, information and awareness, the training of doctors, of police personnel, a little bit of everyone, social workers obviously, the reception and monitoring on the short and medium term of the victims - needless to say that this was

already a lot. And in addition to this awareness campaigns, so posters and so on. While we were not even five, with a small budget, we were not paid for our activities. So, it was not possible because in addition I spent my time trying to find ways to survive because the budget envelopes were too small and there is a game that is played at the level of the subsidizing rules so that you never receive all the money you are entitled to because they will tell you the justifying documents did not conform to the rules. (Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels)

Organizational and job **insecurity** pressure organizational leaders and activists who risk burning out. Hilde explains how she was juggling between responding to call for tenders and writing reports for donors while being stressed not only about her salary at the end of the month, but about the salaries of other activists, employees of the organization, leading her to depression:

And you've barely finished applying for one funding package when you have to hand in the justification report for another funding and you're worried because you don't know how you're going to get paid next month. So you have no security, and the worst thing is that you're being asked to put other people in insecurity.

When you yourself have none.

And so I fell into depression and while I was having this breakdown and I was actually pregnant. (Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels)

Feminist professionals, especially those in leadership positions, not only feel the pressure of insecurity for themselves and for the organization, but also for the people employed. To counter this uncertainty, they are in an almost never-ending endurance run to secure complementary funding to ensure salaries.

While Belgium has a tradition of financing structurally civil society organizations through different financing mechanisms, such as popular education or development that offered more long-term funding, during the last decade and a half, these mechanisms started to slowly disintegrate, diminishing the period for which they were awarded and replacing some categories through call for tenders, consolidating project-based work as a new mode of work within civil society organizations.

In Romania, in the absence of structural financing mechanisms and state subsidies, project-based work reposing on funds from international and European donors was a reality from the 1990s on. Project-based work, with its short-time logic increases the pressure for extra-work, exploitation and self-exploitation.

Clara, activist and employer of feminist organization ALEG, in Sibiu explains how the fact that many people employed on a project-basis accept to work beyond the limits of the contract

helps the organization to survive. She also acknowledges that it is not something sustainable on the long run:

We are very lucky that people are willing to work a lot over the contract, beyond the contract's time limits and beyond the norm in the contract, most of them. But this on the long-run is not ok and you cannot expect this from any new employee in a project – as if yes, they will work with us forever. After all, he or she has a firm responsibility for what's in the contract, and people are forced when the contract ends to find something else. And they continue to help us but in their spare time. Clara 1 – Aleg, Sibiu)

Project-based work increase pressure within organizations and favours turnover. This was the case of Centrul parteneriat pentru egalitate (CPE) (Center Partnership for Equality). CPE expanded, after winning multiple projects and grants when they hired many new people. When the projects ended, some employees were insecure about their job as they did not know if additional funds will be secured and if they will be able to continue to work in the organization (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). Eventually, most of the people remained, but they had their salaries diminished (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). This is similar to the situation in Belgium in some organizations which saw their funds diminishing, but wanted to keep most of the staff, which translated in a heavy workload for those employed, with fewer resources, fostering an “epidemic of burnout”:

I do not know how I realized there is this epidemic of burnout in the feminist milieu. It happened from the moment our subsidies began to decrease more and more [...] and suddenly we had to ask the employees to run more and more after subsidies. We have decreased the resources in the feminist milieu, but we do not want to reduce the staff because it is our responsibility as an employer to keep as many staff blah blah blah... But suddenly we will ask staff exist to work three times more. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

Similarly, during a workshop organized for a study day on professionalization in Brussels, a participant, activist in a Belgian feminist association talked about an increase in the frequency of burnouts within the feminist movement related to financial precarity and fundraising pressure:

I think of something particular that occurs in today's feminist movement. It shocks me even more because it is the feminist movement. This specific thing is the frequency of burnouts which is also linked to the fact that we are constantly looking for funding, so there is an enormous pressure on employees and maybe what we see as practice in the feminist movement is that no one takes care of each other. (Study day –

Professionnalisation ! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels)

Continuing the discussion, other feminist activists added to the enormous time spent on fundraising or the worries related to job insecurity, the versatility/polyvalence of the NGO work, as a serious source of stress. Contrary to some organizations that managed to offer stable employment and had low or no turnover, such as *Université des femmes*, during the study day, many feminist professionals, for example, from *La voix des femmes*, mentioned high turnover rates as related to the decrease in financial resources and the fragmentation of subsidies as a source of burnout of activists. Job polyvalence added to the workload pressure, the constant search for funds and the generalized job insecurity within the NGO environment. While organizations tried to find ways to offer decent employment conditions, they felt trapped because they depended financially on external donors and the fluctuating subsidies they offered. Employees and also the management of NGOs overwork to secure the survival of the organizations in conditions of fluctuating finances. Simone from *Garance*, a feminist self-defence organization, explains how the leader of the organization, while trying to offer correct working conditions, she exploits herself:

It's true *Garance* makes great efforts to hire people in a correct and non-precarious manner, but the problem is that we depend so much on external financing that it is sometimes completely impossible.

Corinne, the director, is employed on a part-time contract of 3/5 while she works two full time jobs. That's self-exploitation. So, I think that unfortunately it is not possible to do otherwise in the associative world. (Simone – *Garance*, Brussels)

Governmental precarization translates not only into governing through insecurity at the level of NGOs and their employees, but also at the level of their beneficiaries. Beyond the liberal ordering and distribution of precarity as the hierarchized difference in insecurity categorized and marked people in the society, between the worthy and non-worthy (Lorey 2015, 21-22). In neoliberalism, precarization is actualized, being normalized and individualized (Lorey 2015) as vulnerability is distributed differentially (Butler 2004). In neoliberalism, within NGOs, the relationship between professional activists or NGO employees and their beneficiaries, different categories of target women, appears less as a hierarchical relationship, on the model of old charity organizations. It is rather “a graded relationship in terms of a regulated threshold of being (still) governable” (Lorey, 2015, 11). Participants, both NGO employees and beneficiaries seem to invest in themselves professionally and precarity appears as manageable, governable. In Romania, where project-based work is intensified compared to Belgium, activists in NGOs reflected about gap between professionals and beneficiaries, but also between the realities on the ground and the social issues financed by donors. For example, for European donors, priority was given to the integration of vulnerable categories on the labour

market, aspect considered illusory by activists who stated ironically as if the labour market was an endless supply of decent jobs and the problem was people's lack of training:

You know the problem is that anything that works in neoliberalism, who do you exploit for it? If it works for you, it means that... something is happening, that you are exploiting a theme, that you are exploiting people directly, through their work, but in order for it to work for you it means that for someone not working [...]

I think that everything that this new wave of financing meant was extremely important [...] the moment you start to believe things like if we will train 500 women to become nannies, we helped them [...] I honestly believe that this is an absolutely systemic phenomenon [...] But for example, I open Facebook and I see this organization that has been an organization for equality with feminists for a long time and they have activities like this: we will meet to teach women to write their CV better and to perform better at the interview, I'm sweating and all these and many other projects that theoretically pursue a thing that for me is an illusion, namely the fact that we can do this for all women, as if the labor market would be an endless supply of decent jobs and decent in the social sense of the word [...]. (Claudia – Filia, Bucharest)

II. Martyrdom culture: how does the professional tension play out in burnout?

In Belgium and in Romania, within movement causes of burnout, related to conflicts among activists due to power relations and hierarchies were mentioned to cause a stressful environment and led certain activists to temporary or more permanent demobilization (Rosa Vie féminine, Brussels; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Erin – Filia, Bucharest; Sabina – CPE, Bucharest). High commitment and a sense of responsibility together with the incapacity sometimes to solve specific problems and cases related to injustices suffered by people with whom feminist activists work, were also mentioned as factors that increased the levels of stress (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels; Camelia – Filia, Bucharest; Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Ellen – Isala, Brussels). But the internal, external and within movement factors affecting burnouts are interrelated. The high levels of commitment and devotion to the feminist cause are related to internal conflicts and power relations and the pressure stemming from financial dependency meaning scarce resources and funding fragmentation, job and organizational insecurity and heavy workload for bureaucratic activities. Two crucial factors favour exploitation and self-exploitation in NGO environment enhancing the risk of burnout. First, motivation and commitment to work for social justice serve to legitimize both self-government by activists through overwork and self-precarization through poorly paid work, and exploitation by the organizations they are working for. **Precarization** and self-precarization seem acceptable because of the **high commitment** to the cause and of the sense of **responsibility**. Second, peer pressure related to competition at work but also between the organization, shaped by the volatile finances of NGOs who compete for the same resources and the project based work compel professional activists to overwork, to

prove themselves as devoted and available to work for the cause, hoping to ensure the possibility to continue working for the organization, when projects end or when resources are diminished and for organizational managers to win projects and ensure the survival of the organization. High commitment to the cause and competition sets in a **martyrdom culture** (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest) in NGO workers that seems to be shaped by the insecurities related to the labour conditions in the sector.

Both in Belgium and in Romania, feminist professionals in NGOs feel proud to do a job that is meaningful for them and considered to be part of their identity. But what makes the work of feminist activists, professionals in NGOs to be more a part of their identity than any other job? The structural sexist and racist oppressions suffered by those involved in the movement, including those who work in professional organizations, and which affect the daily reality of those subjugated and the collectivization of efforts to fight against these oppressions, create possibilities of self-creation and liberation from subjugation while working with others for collective emancipation. But commitment to individual and collective emancipation in conditions of financial dependence contributes to blur the boundaries between work and private life and feminist activists find it difficult to set limits. Many feminist professionals mention that feminist NGOs are not a healthy workplace since it is impossible for them to go home after work and leave the things that they work on behind, because the injustices that they witness for them and for others, affect their life and the life of others and question them permanently (Florina 1 - Filia, Bucharest; Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels; Mona – Université des femmes, Brussels; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest).

I'm afraid to say some nonsense. But I want to tell you that sometimes I thought why I didn't do a secretary or a job, or another job super simple where I would not have been as involved as I am. It's true when there is something that goes wrong you are so involved that everything touches you. You're not like a dentist. You cannot tell yourself in the evening: I finished my workday and I go to sleep. There are things that follow you and that are chasing you all your life and sometimes it's hard because you think it would be easier to do something that does not affect you but at the same time, I'm so happy not having done otherwise, because that's what makes me now, every day when I arrive at work, I'm happy to be there. I am really happy. Because I tell myself that I'm doing a job but I'm doing something that I love, that I respect and what I'm doing now I would be proud at the end of my life to tell myself that I did all that and that I did not just look at society and tell myself that I do not agree with it - I'm really trying to change it. (Florina 2 – Filia, Bucharest)

Beyond what might be potentially understood and criticized as a hierarchized value of work, or a paternalistic attitude in an endeavour to help others, this is also a process of self-creation and self-help. The two are interrelated. What is collective emancipation and what are equitable relations within the movement and outside the movement, in an attempt of care of oneself

together with others in this shared subjugation and shared existential precariousness that is at the same time something that is common and that differentiates one from the others. Feminist activists constantly reflect about this issue of self-creation in relation to their work and the way this translates in their relationship with others, especially where there is a risk for hierarchical or paternalistic relationships but also about the possible ways to make equitable the work with others, for emancipation (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Diana – Dysnomia, Bucharest; Victoria – Dysnomia, Bucharest; Claudia – Filia, Bucharest; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Virginie - Vie féminine, Maison Mosaïque, Brussels).

When motivation to work for the feminist cause and a sense of responsibility related to heteropatriarchal oppression serves as a self-regulation mechanism for governmental precarization in neoliberal context, at least two things are at stake. First the devaluation and non-recognition of women's work, historically, politically and economically, relegated to the domestic sphere, to care and reproductive work that served to support the autonomy of the male breadwinner in the development of capitalism (Federici, 2004). Second, an ideal, romanticized vision of political engagement, *outside* the capitalist economy; a political work idealized as non-work, non-profit, which under neoliberalism becomes contradictory, almost impossible with the intensification of precarious work.

Scarce and fragmented financial resources that give rise to concerns about organizational and job insecurity for feminist professionals coupled with feminist political engagement as an ideal, as a non-work, as not political work, for the cause, for the sake of contributing to ameliorate women's lives and not as a profession, create tensions that play a crucial role in the dynamics of self-governing and self-creation within feminist organizations. Being engaged within the feminist movement, because one believes in the imperative of addressing heteropatriarchal oppression and earning money while doing it – transformation supported by professionalization, is often resented as a tension. Some feminist activists explain this tension as if one takes advantage of a social injustice by earning money while fighting against (Gabi – ACCEPT, Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest). At the same time some of them believe it is a great opportunity to be paid to fight for social justice (Nadia – Vie féminine, Brussels). The workload pressure in conditions of scarce financial resources and financial dependence is enhanced by the professional-militant tension: to fulfil the requirements of the job description and to do extra-work enhanced by competition amongst professionals and justified by the political engagement and commitment for social change. This tension contributes to burn-outs within the feminist movement.

The dynamic of **competition** and **martyrdom** among NGO workers, affected by the insecurities related to the labour conditions in the sector enhances the risk of burnout. Organizations and professional activists are asked to or try to do a lot with few resources. Sometimes employees seem to be indispensable to the organization, while at the same time they seem not to do enough (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Erin – Filia, Bucharest; Monique - Sophia,

Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels): “for years now, we've been putting everyone into burnout, pushing them into depression or whatever, but it's an institutional logic to make people think that they can't cope, that they can't cope because they're not strong enough, that they've made the wrong choice, that they're not the right person for the job” (Monique – Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels). The limits between private life and work become more and more blurred and people work late, they receive phone calls from work late at night or are asked to do work during the weekends (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). During fieldwork in Belgium (2016 and 2017), several feminists, from different associations, such as Vie feminine or Garance, left their organizations because of burnout. Smaller organizations such as Garance seemed to be able to better secure support for those who took some time off because of burnout (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). However, the question of sustainability was raised as the organization adopted individualized response to burnout:

So for Marie I think we did everything we could to support her; we tried, I think it was Garance who sent her home and said take care of yourself, we'll manage the activities, workshops you will not do, we will share them. Yes, but that puts pressure on the others. You can do that once every five years, but not every three months for everyone. (Catherine – Garance, Brussels)

While some feminist organizations are mindful about the different possibilities and capacities of their employees, the limits are very fragile. Precarization and governing through insecurity in conditions of financial dependence and fluctuating funds translates into competition between organizations and professional activists. Pressure to overwork comes both from job insecurity and commitment to the cause that serve as an underlying implicit justification for self and for the others to work more than the contract.

Both in Belgium and in Romania, it seems difficult for those working in feminist organizations to draw **boundaries** regarding the amount of extra-work done and to express these difficulties within the organization, to ask for help or to discuss it collectively (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Camille – Garance, Brussels; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels; Corentine – Vie féminine, Feminime Yeah!, Brussels; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Simone – Garance, Brussels). Peer pressure to over-work, beyond one's possibilities is deplored by activists:

And things where employees are pitted against each other and so you can have people who are themselves in a situation close to burnout or in burnout, but who will still integrate the collective message so much that they will continue to harass others. It's pretty crazy. It makes you lose all hope in humanity, to start pitting one against the other (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

However, while insecurity and commitment to the cause pressured employees to overwork and caused a stressful situation, the causes of burnout interrelated with and exacerbated by dynamics of competition, power relations and hierarchical functioning. Sometimes there are underlying expectations from persons in leadership positions who over-work that all colleagues work to exhaustion (Simone – Garance, Brussels; Camille – Garance, Brussels; Ema – Filia, Bucharest). Organizational and job insecurities in conditions of fragmented and volatile funding pressure people to work more, to prove themselves, sometimes entailing competition dynamics (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels). Ema from Filia recalled about one of her colleagues who “put all her energy in the work and waited for everyone to do that” and while she felt exhausted, she could not say “no” out of commitment and out of the pressure she resented (Ema – Filia, Bucharest). She further explains the pressure resented within the organization: “Lena has been pushing me a lot to produce, to read, to do, to do. I could not keep up, so I was very exhausted and drained, and I was trying to keep up, I was running all the time. And she had these expectations from everyone to work like this” (Ema – Filia, Bucharest). Similarly, Camille from Garance explained how she resented different rhythms and availabilities on the one hand from employees and on the other hand from volunteers, especially compared to those in leadership positions within the organization who gave a lot of their time and life to the organization (Camille – Garance, Brussels), an aspect raised by other colleagues as well (Simone – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels). Camille recalls that she resented from the beginning that the missions proposed were over-ambitious and they were related to constraints coming from popular education financing mechanism that subsidized their activities and this caused tensions between paid and non-paid stuff (Camille – Garance, Brussels). Beyond the heavy working pace to which one tries to adapt, the structure in place that adopts from the corporate culture does not encourage to express one’s limits regarding work rhythms that are too intense, while paradoxically this is exactly at the basis of self-defence practice, to be responsible and express your own limits (Camille – Garance, Brussels).

Sabina, from CPE recalls the pressure she resented for months and the extra work she did when many projects finished and employees received some evaluations questionnaires, being asked what salary they would accept to stay in the organization:

We had the evaluation discussion and were asked at the end what salary we would accept to stay. And I said a minimum hourly amount of 20 and a bit as I knew it was this period. Let's get over it and see afterwards [...]

And after three months, we stayed three months in this state of tension in which we didn't know if we were going to have a job, we worked like crazy because we had to finish the projects as they were SOPHRD and with SOPHRD projects you don't mess around. And when we finished the SOPHRD projects, the discussion of what to do next came up and I was somehow invited into the office and told that in the spirit of solidarity I would stay.

Sabina describes this as the martyrdom culture within the NGOs: the pressure to stay late at work and in the context of the projects coming to an end, with the fear and uncertainty of jobs in the organization (Sabina 2 - CPE, Bucharest). During this period, while most employees remained in the organization, one of her colleagues did not have her contract renewed.

The boundaries between volunteer work, professional paid work, unpaid work in NGOs are hazy. Financial dependence and the volatility and sometimes scarcity of financial resources coupled with the underlying expectations that work out of passion or belief and political engagement should break away from the monetary rewards enhance the blurriness between different forms of paid and unpaid work. Feminist professionals in organizations try to do a lot with few money, as Monica from ALEG, in Sibiu explains (Monica – ALEG, Sibiu). Other professionals working at ALEG evoke the pressure to constantly be creative and innovative in their work, to do all the necessary work with few resources and to be able to secure future funding (Clara 2 – ALEG, Sibiu). Additionally, for many feminists working in professionalized organizations, **volunteering** represents another **contradiction**. While recognizing that the volunteer work is indispensable to maintain the activities of the organizations (Clara 1 – Aleg, Sibiu ; Monica – Aleg, Sibiu; Ilinca – Filia, Bucharest; Florina 1 – Filia, Bucharest; Simone – Garance, Bruxelles; ST – Isala, Bruxelles), many do not find it fair (Camille – Garance, Bruxelles; Simone – Garance ; Ema – Filia – Bucharest). One employee and then volunteer from Garance explains that while differentiating between militants outside professionalized structures that do volunteer work and volunteers in professional organizations, she finds it unfair that she is paid as an employee while one of her colleagues doing the same work as a volunteer, is not paid (Simone – Garance, Brussels). To her it seems impossible to do otherwise than through volunteering and self-exploitation when depending on external scarce funding (Simone – Garance, Brussels).

This blurring of **boundaries** between **work** and **private life**, more specifically the spillover of work in other areas of one’s life is not specific just to the feminist movement or the NGO sector. It happens in autonomous collectives. It serves for self-precarization of other categories of people who do passionate work (Lorey, 2006; McRobbie, 2011). What is specific to NGO-ization is that **commitment** for individual and collective liberation from structural oppressions works to legitimate the blurring of boundaries not just between private life and work but between paid and unpaid work, legitimizing exploitation and self-exploitation, through underpayment and devaluation of work, among others.

III. Questioning the ostrich policy: Breaking the silence about burnouts

As insecurity and precarization affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their feminist members and employees, activists find it extremely difficult to overtly discuss about the pressure to overwork, competition, and harassment in feminist NGOs and ultimately about burnout: “and when it comes to these recurring burnouts, it's more or less the same thing;

we can't talk about it, it's really like burying our heads in the sand” (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Study day – Professionnalisation ! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels). In some cases, when they talked about it, activists were accused of destroying the solidarity (Sabine CPE; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

One of the former employees of Vie féminine, Lisette Lombé decided to talk about the issue in a slam conference “La magie du burnout”, at the end of which she read several texts of former employees who experienced burnout; the slam conference was also the object of a book with the same title. Monique, who attended the conference explains how it seems paradoxical to her that a movement whose well-known slogan “the personal is political” encourages to speak out, in its institutionalized form it silences its members:

I listened to Lisette Lombé's poetry slam conference which made me think a lot because she read a lot of texts at the end of different employees of Vie feminine; I think that it marked her a lot. She thought that what she was experiencing at Vie féminine as burnout was a local issue, related to the people she was working directly with, and then realized that it was like that everywhere in Vie feminine and that there were burnouts everywhere.

But what shocks me more is the law of silence that is there.

We cannot really talk about it. As soon as we speak, we are accused of lack of sorority, and we are told...in fact the feminist movement said in the 70's the personal is political. We must break this law of silence that says that what happens behind the closed doors must stay there, this law what happens in family stays in family and suddenly we have no opportunity to talk about the violence that takes place in the institutionalized feminism. But I believe in more alternative environments there is also violence, but there is a tradition to talk about it and sometimes it gets to impossible dynamics, but this tradition is there and in the institutionalized environment we are not supposed to talk about it, we cannot say bad things about other organizations. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

Defining herself as an activist⁴⁴, doing slam poetry and collages, writing novels and poetry Lisette Lombé talked about her experience of activist burnout when she was working at Vie féminine in an interview given to Nicolas Crousse, published in *Le Soir*⁴⁵. She explains that what she lived while working in the organization was the antipodes of feminist practice:

⁴⁴ Lisette Lombé, femme d'intersections, Entretien Marie Baudet ; La Libre Belgique CULTURE, mercredi 16 décembre 2020 1316 mots, p. Cult_5, accessed November 14, 2023

⁴⁵ « Je suis une négresse ailée. Mes ailes me permettent de m'élever », Entretien Nicolas Crousse, *Le Soir* GENERALE, Week-end, samedi 5 décembre 2020 1613 mots, p. GENERALE42, accessed November 14, 2023

At the time, I was working at Vie féminine, in a militant environment, as a trainer in popular education, in a feminist environment. What I experienced was a real siphoning off of meaning. I was in a place that defended women's rights and I no longer felt totally respected as a worker. I had accumulated a kind of fatigue linked in particular to the time given to others... to the detriment of my own. That's what we call militant burn-out: you have great ideals, great causes, and in the end, you realise that you don't have much control over things.⁴⁶

In her book, “La magie du burnout”, Lisette Lombé describes the experience of acknowledging burnout personally and through medical diagnosis: “Your body has cried out to you to stop the abuse. Intransigently, radically. Now it's refusing your blind race and asking you to make amends for what you've done to it. Whether you like it or not, there will be a before and an after to this shock-diagnosis of burnout” (2018:20). She also avows the difficulty of naming it as such, talking about exhaustion rather than burnout, “as if this word is stuck in our stomachs, full of innumerable preconceived ideas, and can't quite reach our ears” (Lombé, 2018: 20).

As insecurity and precarization largely affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their members and employees, feminist activists try to provide care and support within the movement and organizations. Breaking the silence about burnout and about associated issues of precarity and violence within the feminist movements, by naming the problems is a prerequisite to adequately address burnout and provide support. Rather than breaking the harmony within feminist movements, bringing discussions about burnout upfront seems to be a call for solidarity out of shared precariousness among people. Recognizing the ambivalence of techniques of governing, of neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization, means not just revealing the domination mechanisms, in their external dimension of governing by others, and the internal forms of self-governing, from within the movement and as such breaking the ostrich policy, but also revealing the contradictions, the points of resistance, emancipation and liberation. In recognizing the shared existential precariousness, care within the movement seems to be the radical point of resistance and the common ground for liberation. While co-existing, care goes against workload pressure and precarization, hierarchies and power relations that enhance the risk of burnout. This makes it difficult to practice care in organizations, collectives and movements and “there were plenty of times when things went wrong because we had to invent ways of taking care of each other” (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

While hearing more and more about burnout within the feminist movement, in different organizations, Monique from Sophia reflects about the fact that while hearing from a lot of friends and activists within the movement about burnout she felt “extremely well surrounded”

⁴⁶ Je suis une négresse ailée. Mes ailes me permettent de m'élever », Entretien Nicolas Crousse, Le Soir GENERALE, Week-end, samedi 5 décembre 2020 1613 mots, p. GENERALE42, accessed November 14, 2023

in her organization where the limits of work were always respected, employees were encouraged to count very well their working hours and there was a space to discuss when things did not work well:

There are always people for whom it does not work so well, but overall Sophia was extremely well surrounded, with the possibility to talk about it, with respect to all that.

It's not always easy, but suddenly I always felt very far from these problems [burnout].

Then we work part time. I have always heard at Sophia: count your hours well, recover your overtime, avoid overtime, be realistic about what you can do in order not to have everything to recover afterwards. You have been given a part time and suddenly if you cannot do an infinite work, it's normal and it does not matter but you have to be able to say it, to evaluate your work well.

So here we are very well supervised. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

While the versatility of NGO work, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms and the job and organizational insecurity create a stressful environment and put pressure on activists in NGOs both to overwork, enhancing the risk of burnout, some organizations try to find time to take care for each other. When Sandra, from Garance took a break because she was in burnout, the team supported her, sent her home and shared her work among other employees of the organization (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). While acknowledging that the measures might put additional pressure on other employees as well, the organization launched a process of reflection about more viable ways of taking care of each other (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). In a more preventive manner and starting from the acknowledgement that the feminist struggle is a long term struggle, Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF) created K-Fem as a space where feminist activists could meet, share and discuss among themselves, as a way to release pressure from work and to find ways to continue their struggle while caring about each other in a hostile environment:

What is important for us is to be attentive towards the outside and at the same time when we are unhappy and miserable, we created this space, the K-Fem to be able to speak, so this is it, to try to dream, to seek in the culture, to seek in the connection and contact with others. It is a utopia, feminism is still the utopia.

Often it is true that we must calm young people who say it is not possible, we must get there. But you know it's more than twenty centuries of patriarchal system, it is not in two generations, three generations that things change. It's hard to realize that anti-sexism, anti-racism are very long-term struggles. (Françoise – LMSF, Brussels)

Conclusions

NGO-ization as a form of neoliberal governmentality profoundly transformed feminist movements in such a way that insecurity became an important concern for organizations who embarked on the pathway of professionalization. The financial dependence on donors combined with the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies cemented project-based work as a mode of functioning of organizations. The polyvalence required from professional activists in NGOs became a source of workload pressure and stress for feminists who slalom through different kinds of work, from political work in official settings to grassroots work in communities, advocacy and raising-awareness campaigns or fundraising and paperwork related to donor's accountability. As the bureaucratic load increased, through the multiplication of accountability demands but also of through fundraising activities, related to the fragmentation of subsidies, activists became frustrated with the amount of paperwork done at the expense of political and grassroots work. Running after funds to alleviate insecurity, organizational and individual, and working to exhaustion between bureaucratic and political work, feminist activists faced an enhanced risk of burning out. But the pressure of insecurity was complemented, first, by the exploitation and self-exploitation of activists legitimized through their commitment to the cause and their sense of responsibility and second, by competition among activists and organizations in conditions of volatile financial resources. These contributed to normalize precarization and a martyrdom culture within feminist NGOs, enhanced by the historical devaluation and non-recognition of women's work and a romanticized vision of political engagement, outside the capitalist economy, giving rise to the militant-professional tension. The workload pressure in conditions of scarce financial resources and financial dependence is enhanced by the professional-militant tension: to fulfil the requirements of the job description and to do extra-work enhanced by competition amongst professionals and justified by the political engagement and commitment for social change. This tension contributes to burn-outs within the feminist movement.

As insecurity and precarization affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their feminist members and employees, activists find it difficult to overtly discuss about the pressure to overwork, competition, harassment, related to burnout in feminist NGOs. While a few activists broke the silence about burnouts and proposed care as a radical point of resistance and ground for liberation, it seems that care is not yet proposed as a collective antidote for activist burnout, but more as an individual one.

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Annex I. Organizations

Belgium	Organization/Group
Principal	Vie féminine Université des femmes Garance Cercle féministe de l'ULB Isala Le monde selon les femmes Abortion Rights Network Le Réseau pour l'Élimination des violences entre partenaires (REV)
Secondary	Femmes et santé La voix des femmes Sophia Fat Positivity CEFA the group around Reclaim the night march European Women's Lobby (EWL) Le collectif des femmes sans papiers
Romania	Organization/Group
Principal	Asociatia FRONT Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate, CPE Centrul de Dezvoltare Curriculara si Studii de Gen Filia Asociatia pentru Egalitate si Libertate de Gen, ALEG Dysnomia The feminist group of A-CASA collective Rupem tacerea despre violenta sexuala Reteaua pentru prevenirea si combaterea violentei impotriva femeilor, VIF
Secondary	E-Romnja Romanian Women's Lobby Centrul de Mediere si Securitate Comunitara (CMSC) Accept Biblioteca Alternativa Centrul Feminist Sofia Nădejde Feminist theatre group Giuvlipen

Annex II. Interviews

Belgium

Ref.	Association/Place	Duration	Date
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Nicole	Adviser popular education, Ministry of Culture, Childhood and Popular Education, Brussels	49:38	15.01.2017
Carlie	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	69:54	01.12.2016
Kim	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	48:48	29.11.2016
Fabienne	Université des femmes, Brussels	56:11	08.12.2016
Caroline	Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF) Isala, Brussels	44:22	25.02.2017
Corentine	Vie féminine Feminisme Yeah! Brussels	67:24	17.02.2017
Virginie	Vie féminine, Maison Mosaique, Brussels	73:25	17.11.2016
Monique	Sophia Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels	90:46	03.04.2017
Nour	Garance, Brussels	82:15	27.03.2017
Sandra	Garance, Brussels	69:14	01.12.2016
Catherine	Garance, Brussels	53:43	22.03.2017
Nadia	Vie féminine, Brussels	71:01	22.02.2017
Simone	Garance, Brussels	64:23	20.03.2017
Anne	Garance, Brussels	72:02	30.11.2016
Danny	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	39:10	25.01.2017
Rosa	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	38:47	18.11.2016
Hilde	Université des femmes, Brussels	45:24	21.02.2017
Agnès	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	45:24	19.01.2017
Elena	Isala, Brussels	73:03	22.11.2016
Alice	Isala, Brussels	51:05	05.12.2016
Françoise	Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF), Brussels	71:47	26.05.2017
Louise	Isala, Brussels	60:21	13.01.2017
Valérie	Ministry of Education, Social Promotion, Youth, Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, Brussels	37:52	25.01.2017
Els	Vie féminine, Brussels	112:41	20.01.2017
Beatrice	Axelle, Vie féminine, Brussels	53:01	26.01.2017
Mona	Université des femmes, Brussels	58:29	20.01.2017
Nicole	Vie féminine, Brussels	66:04	06.11.2016
TM	Vie féminine, Brussels	54:00	11.01.2017
Erna	Université des femmes, Brussels	48:57	29.11.2016
Sara	Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes (FPS) Brussels	48:49	07.06.2017
Nadine	Femmes et santé, Brussels	50:16	25.05.2017
Claire	CEFA (became Corps écrits in 2018), Louvain-la-Neuve	64:00	16.02.2017

Olivia Abortion Right, Brussels 36:37 24.01.2017

Romania

Ref.	Association/Place	Duration	Date
Anca	A-Casa, Cluj	63:41	05.07.2016
Florina 1	Filia, Bucharest	86:31	23.06.2015
Florina 2	Filia, Bucharest	84:58	26.01.2016
Bianca	Agentia Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între femei și bărbați (ANES), Bucharest	62:41	19.02.2016
Cezara	Filia, Bucharest	67:44	27.01.2016
Claudia	Filia, Bucharest	163:37	25.06.2015
Ema	Filia, Skype	131:10	27.02.2016
Greta	Agentia Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între femei și bărbați (ANES), Bucharest	30:55	03.02.2016
Alex	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest	82:47	01.02.2016
Iris	A-Casa, les sisterhood Cluj	36:22	05.07.2016
Lidia	Dysnomia, Bucharest	53:54	08.07.2016
Nina	Front, Skype	62:47	22.06.2015
Silvia	Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	68:26	26.06.2015
Clara 1	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	57:12	12.02.2016
Clara 2	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	57:08	21.06.2016
Sabina 2	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	107:23	04.02.2016
Sabina 1	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest	65:40	23.06.2015
Gabi	ACCEPT Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	98:41	26.06.2015
Luiza	Front, Bucharest	66:25	29.06.2016

Monica	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	77:33	21.06.2016
Sorana	Dysnomia, Bucharest	34:38	01.07.2016
Victoria	Dysnomia, Cluj	34:56	05.07.2016
Mara	Front, Bucharest	141:39	28.06.2016
Zoe 2	Front, Bucharest	36:19	03.07.2016
Marina	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	32:19	29.06.2016
Zoe 1	Front, Bucharest	31:52	21.06.2015
Teodora	Front, Bucharest	71:37	01.07.2016
Tania 1	Front, Bucharest	82:28	21.06.2015
Tania 2	Front, Bucharest	60:23	07.07.2016
Teo	Aleg, Sibiu	43:02	21.06.2016
Raluca	Dysnomia, Bucharest	49:32	30.06.2016
Ilinca	Filia, Bucharest	94:55	01.02.2016
Emilia	Transcena, VIF, Bucharest	37:49	08.07.2016
Eliza	Filia, Bucharest	60:04	25.06.2015
Dana	Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	43:54	22.06.2015
Laura	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	57:39	29.06.2016
Corina	A-Casa, Cluj	52:12	06.07.2016
Erin	Filia, Bucharest	57:05	29.06.2016
Camelia	Filia, Bucharest	68:35	06.02.2016
Ana 2	Front, Bucharest	60:46	28.06.2016
Ana 1	Front, Bucharest	41:20	28.06.2016
Diana 2	Dysnomia, Bucharest	77:08	03.06.2016
Diana 1	Dysnomia, Claca, Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	111:39	25.06.2015
Greta	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	52:08	03.02.2016

DISSEMINATING THE MENENGAGE APPROACH TO ADDRESS GENDER-
BASED VIOLENCE IN RWANDA:
BETWEEN (RE)POLITICIZATION OF GENDER PROGRAMS AND
MASCULINIZA-TION OF THE WOMEN'S AGENDA

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, there has been increased use of the MenEngage approach to address gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV) in Rwanda. It aims to encourage men to become actively involved in the fight against gender inequalities and to make them question their place as men within a patriarchal system. This contribution intends to show that the MenEngage approach is introduced by its advocates as an attempt to (re)politicize GBV prevention programs, on the one hand by trying to take into account the importance of all the masculine norms, practices and representations that govern the mechanisms of domination of men over women; on the other hand, by trying to mobilize men to play a role in the movement for gender equality. However, this approach can raise criticisms, and even competitive relationships between actors involved in this movement, particularly those who favor accompanying and supporting women. These tensions arising from the gradual expansion of the MenEngage approach in Rwanda relate to the increasing space given to men - practitioners or beneficiaries - within a space initially devoted to the cause of women.

Keywords: *MenEngage Approach, Masculinities, NGOs*

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the MenEngage approach has been increasingly used to address gender-based inequalities and violence in Rwanda. While this fight was previously led mainly by women's organizations supporting and defending women's rights, over the past fifteen years,



organizations founded and led by men, whose programs are aimed at men, have emerged⁴⁷. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promote the MenEngage approach, which consists of encouraging a male audience to support gender equality and deconstruct their representations and behaviors in order to embody a so-called « positive masculinity ». In their implementation, these programs combine awareness-rising campaigns, educational sessions on gender relations and male domination, and training sessions on male practices and behavioral changes. The Rwandan NGOs that promote the MenEngage approach have received significant support from government institutions⁴⁸, which have increased their support for their programs and adopted their lexicon. At the same time, governmental institutions seem to participate to a form of « state relief » (*décharge de l'État*)⁴⁹ to these organizations regarding gender policies. This growing support and institutionalization of the MenEngage approach is leading to a shift in the « space for women's cause »⁵⁰ (*espace de la cause des femmes*). The development of the MenEngage approach, carried out mainly by men and targeting men, has thus led to a form of masculinization of programs to address gender inequalities. This masculinization of the women's agenda is subject to numerous criticisms. Whether it is the capture of material and financial resources allocated by donors by men for men, discursive strategies to encourage the mobilization of men centered on a rhetoric of the costs of masculinity, an over-valorization of male figures considered « positive », or the investment of social configurations characteristic of a patriarchal system to facilitate the implementation of certain programs; certain aspects of the MenEngage approach may constitute pitfalls in a project that claims to eradicate gender inequalities.

However, the targeting of men as beneficiaries of gender and development programs, as well as male involvement in the fight for gender equality, are core arguments of the advocates for MenEngage approach. Thus, it is conceived as a way to overcome the criticism of NGOs as being too depoliticizing. This article aims to interrogate this ambivalence, this paradox, in the MenEngage programs implemented in Rwanda. How can we explain the fact that the fight against male domination produces a masculinization of the movement against gender inequalities? And what are the effects of a struggle against male domination that is based on male involvement in it? This contribution intends to study the way in which the advocates of this approach try to legitimize their action. This attempt at legitimization is based in particular on the assertion that they repoliticize the treatment of gender issues by placing male domination as the main target of their action. The notion of politicization here refers, on the one hand, to the process of designating the absence of men as part of the movement for gender equality as a problem that institutions and organisations must address. Accordingly, the promoters of the

⁴⁷ Carlson, K. & Randell, S. « Gender and development : Working with men for gender equality in Rwanda ». *Agenda*. 27(1), 2013, pp. 114–125.

⁴⁸ Debusscher, Petra, Ansoms, An. « Gender Equality Policies in Rwanda: Public Relations or Real Transformations ? ». *Development and Change*. The Hague : Institute of Social Studies, 2013

⁴⁹ Hibou Béatrice. «Retrait ou redéploiement de l'État ? », *Critique internationale*, 1, 1998, p. 151-168.

⁵⁰ Laure Bereni. « Penser la transversalité des mobilisations féministes : l'espace de la cause des femmes ». Christine Bard. *Les féministes de la 2ème vague*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012, pp.27-41.

MenEngage approach are willing to change the routine, rules and norms underlying gender policies. On the other hand, the notion of politicization refers to the desire to take into account and objectify the power relations that govern gender relations and male domination. Therefore, the framing proposed by the promoters of the MenEngage approach, which identifies male participation and the transformation of masculine norms as the solution to the public problem of gender inequality, would underpin an examination of the root-causes of women's oppression and exploitation. Nevertheless, this masculinization of the women's agenda could participate in the maintenance of a balance of power where men are in a dominant position. To a certain extent, using the MenEngage approach is not just a method to address effectively gender issues, but can be seen as a strategy for accumulating the resources needed to access to privileged positions within the social space of the fight against gender inequality.

This article focuses on the practitioners who hold positions of responsibility within these local NGOs, in order to examine the way in which this approach is discussed. The analysis presented in this article is based on a qualitative ethnographic study currently being carried out for a political science PhD dissertation. As part of this study, twenty-five interviews were conducted with various practitioners, founders, executives, programme managers and programme officers from NGOs and programmes using the MenEngage approach. The survey protocol also involved participant observation of training sessions for the programmes in question, as well as preparatory meetings. Finally, the qualitative material collected using the ethnographic method is cross-referenced with the analysis of a body of documentation drawn from the grey literature produced by the NGOs studied, their partners and Rwandan government institutions involved in the formulation and implementation of gender policies.

By positioning itself in a critical perspective of gender and development programs, in which the institutionalization of feminism, the individualization of the conditions of female emancipation and the disinterestedness of social relations between the sexes would have failed to effectively subvert the gender order, the MenEngage approach claims a project of politicization of the fight against gender inequalities. The following paragraphs will focus on the tensions and criticisms directed to this conception and what they reveal about the actors involved in the fight against gender inequalities in Rwanda. We will see first that the involvement of men in this cause is put as a criticism of some effects of the NGOization of feminist movements, in particular the effect of depoliticization of the programs linked to the absence of consideration for the social relations between the sexes. Carried and defended by men who present themselves as "gender conscious", the MenEngage approach can nevertheless be seen as a way for men to access and to maintain within the space of the women's cause.

BEWARE OF BLIND SPOTS. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The positive reception of the MenEngage approach in Rwanda has been facilitated by a context of a proliferation of NGOs at the international level, promoting a shared agenda that addresses gender inequalities through the transformation of male behaviors. The last two decades have been characterized by the development of programs that seek to shape a counter-hegemonic

masculine agency⁵¹ and supportive practices by NGOs involved in addressing male violence⁵², HIV/AIDS, and gender inequality⁵³. The multiplication of these initiatives has notably contributed to the constitution of a transnational network, the MenEngage Alliance, bringing together NGOs, associations and United Nations agencies. This network of actors and groups of actors who promote this common approach that seeks to transform men's behaviors has helped to legitimize and institutionalize the MenEngage approach in national contexts, as was the case in Rwanda. The growth, dissemination and acceptance of the MenEngage approach should be situated in a global context of critical reflection on the Platform for Action issued by the United Nations at the end of the World Conferences on Women. To a certain extent, the initiatives led by MenEngage NGOs are part of the Gender and Development approach adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which was held in 1995 under the aegis of the UN. This approach tends to differ from previous ones by taking into account the distribution of roles and activities of women and men in each context and in each society, in order to move towards a balance of power relations between men and women. The systematic integration of a gender perspective in development programs (gender mainstreaming) is thought to be necessary to apprehend the root cause of male domination over women. However, if their action is in line with the Beijing Conference, actors and groups of actors promoting the involvement of men in the fight against gender inequalities are committed to pointing out the unanswered questions raised by UN conferences concerning the role of men in this effort⁵⁴. For them, evacuating the male subject, both in the analyses of the mechanisms of domination of men over women, and in the implementation of tools and programs to fight against inequalities between these two groups, constitutes an impasse⁵⁵. According to this criticism, the majority of gender and development programs have failed because they do not take into account the deep-rooted structural process by which sexual difference becomes hierarchy and a source of inequality⁵⁶. It appears from this research that the advocates of the MenEngage approach in Rwanda tend to highlight the blind spots in gender policies that focus solely on aid to women, or those that promote an entrepreneurial conception of female emancipation. In interviews with program managers, they seek to legitimize their action by their ability to place the study of male domination at the heart of their approach, in order to subvert the structure of

⁵¹ Connell, Raewyn. « Hégémonie, masculinité, colonialité ». *Genre, sexualité et société*, n°13, 2015.

⁵² Chopra, Radhika. *From Violence to Supportive Practice : Family, Gender and Masculinities in India*. New Delhi, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2002.

⁵³ Cornwall, Andrea. « Men, masculinity and 'gender in development' ». *Gender and development*, Vol. 5, 1997, 105 pp. 8-1.

⁵⁴ MenEngage Alliance, « Language from the Beijing Platform for Action and UN CSW agreed conclusions (1995-2017) on the roles of men and boys in achieving gender equality », April 2017.

⁵⁵ Cornwall, Andrea. « Men, Masculinity and 'Gender in Development.' » *Gender and Development*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, p. 8–13.

⁵⁶ Cornwall, Andrea. « Taking off International Development's Straightjacket of Gender », *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2014), pp. 127- 139

gender relations in society. By pointing to examples of programs run by established women's NGOs or associations in the country, MenEngage program leaders highlight the practical and theoretical failures of programs aimed at female empowerment.

« There was a project that was implemented by [name of NGO]⁵⁷, which aimed at the economic strengthening of women [...]. But the problem was that there were no results. Because the money that these women earned... At the end of the day, it was the husbands who collected it and spent it. And since nothing was explained to them, they didn't like it. That's why we came here to work on the commitment of men for the economic strengthening of women »⁵⁸.

This excerpt illustrates how the shortcomings of women's emancipation programs - which have been highlighted in various studies⁵⁹ - are being pushed aside by those who promote the idea of male integration. At the heart of the MenEngage approach is a criticism of the shift from "acting on gender" to "acting for women". Thus, the claimed objective of NGO leaders is to get out of a sclerotic situation, where women are subjected to male domination, do not benefit from the effects of the programs from which they should benefit, and where men are neither considered as a target audience, nor held accountable for their role in the perpetuation of hierarchical gender relations. To overcome these pitfalls, the solution would therefore be to deconstruct and transform male behaviors and representations, and to engage men in the cause of women.

⁵⁷ For the sake of anonymity, we do not mention here the names of the interviewees or the names of the NGOs studied.

⁵⁸ Excerpt from an interview with a MenEngage NGO Head of programs, February 2020. Translated from French.

⁵⁹ For a case study of the contrasting effects of empowerment, see:

Verschuur, Christine. "L'« empowerment », des approches contrastées ; études de cas en Amérique latine", in Christine Verschuur et Fenneke Reysoo, *Genre, pouvoirs et justice sociale, Cahiers Genre et Développement*, n°4, Genève, Paris : EFI/AFED, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 235-250

On the challenges and difficulties of defining and measuring empowerment, see:

Kabeer, Naila. "Réflexions sur la mesure de l'« empowerment » des femmes", in Christine Verschuur et Fenneke Reysoo, *Genre, pouvoirs et justice sociale, Cahiers Genre et Développement*, n°4, Genève, Paris : EFI/AFED, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 253-274,

On the idea that empowerment programme have contributed to formalizing some forms of exploitation of women's labour , and thus have failed to reduce gender and class inequalities, see : Destremau, Blandine. « 9. Au four, au moulin... et à l'empowerment. La triple captation et l'exploitation du travail des femmes dans le développement », Margaret Maruani éd., *Travail et genre dans le monde. L'état des savoirs*. La Découverte, 2013, pp. 89-97.

In the Rwandan context, the dissemination and circulation of the MenEngage approach, as well as the desire to "raise men's awareness," cannot be analyzed separately from the trajectories and sociological profiles of its advocates.

AN APPROACH CARRIED BY « GENDER CONSCIOUS » MEN

The profile of MenEngage program managers in Rwanda provides an insight into the reasons for claiming a "gender conscious"⁶⁰ stance in order to legitimize the approach they defend.

In most interviews with male practitioners, they invoke the register of commitment by vocation, the disgust they feel towards injustice and gender-based violence. Moreover, they refer to biographical narratives describing the family as a very first place of observation of gendered socializing injunctions. According to them, these observations would have made possible the emergence of feminist convictions. Similarly, getting involved in activist circles during their university studies would have helped them become aware of the mechanisms intrinsic to the patriarchal system. The register of fatherhood or the heterosexual couple relationship is also used to confirm a desire to deconstruct their masculinity. However, it is more their trajectories and the resources they have at their disposal that seem to shed light on the one hand, on the putting forward of a "gender conscious" posture, and on the other hand, on their will to place the transformation of masculinities at the heart of the programs they defend. These founding members have all studied social sciences, and claim an activism for women's rights that often predates their professional careers. The male managers of the MenEngage NGOs interviewed for this research have studied humanities, social sciences or education and hold various higher education degrees. Their careers are systematically distinguished by their time spent at the Center for Gender Studies, a department attached to the Kigali Institute of Education. Most of them have had international work experience during their professional career. Thus, these different practitioners have a high level of higher education, characterized by a specialization in gender studies. This specialization allows them to assert their capacity to use critical and deconstructed views on gender-related issues. The high level of mobility of these actors within the world of development, at a national and/or international level, also helps to identify the features of the build-up of their professional careers, as well as the resources acquired during that time, which they use to highlight the empirical foundations of their work on masculinities. The interviews conducted with founding members of MenEngage NGOs are marked by the systematic demonstration of solid knowledge on gender that allows them to affirm that masculinities constitute the blind spot of most programs to fight gender inequalities. The specific socialization of these actors, as well as their strong endowment of capital, especially cultural capital, is critical to understanding the place they give to empirical knowledge and scientific knowledge that shed light on mechanisms of male domination, as well as how they put it into practice in program implementation.

The observational research, in particular of the "positive masculinity" training sessions offered by MenEngage programs, is useful for identifying this willingness to place social science and gender studies knowledge at the center of program implementation. These trainings do not

⁶⁰ Jaunait, Alexandre. "Investigating gender in a world of gender consciousness". *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 153(1), 2022, p.8-45.

simply prescribe good behavior or disqualify some representations or practices deemed negative. For example, in some of the trainings spread over several weeks, the different sessions include the study of fundamental notions or concepts to highlight the relationships of domination that are at play in gender relations. For instance, these programs begin with an in-depth study of the concepts of "power," "domination," "biological sex," "gender," "masculinity" and "femininity," before moving on to "putting gender equality into practice" in subsequent sessions. In doing so, the aim is twofold: on the one hand, it raises awareness on gender inequalities among beneficiaries. On the other hand, it ensures that violent male trajectories are not individualized, by revealing the social mechanisms governing the construction of male and female roles and gender relations.

THE RISK OF MALE MONOPOLIZATION OF THE WOMEN'S CAUSE

The MenEngage approach and the high representation of men in the NGOs that promote it are being challenged. This can be seen in the competition between women's organizations and organizations that claim a male engagement approach, but also in the dilemmas of feminist activists working in MenEngage programs. Indeed, in interviews with female practitioners, they express concern about the likelihood of men dominating the women's space in Rwanda. In the 1990s, initiatives for gender equality were structured around the formation of numerous women's rights NGOs and associations, particularly in support of women survivors of the genocide against the Tutsis⁶¹. They played a leading role in the mobilization to put on the agenda the fight against gender inequalities in Rwandan public action, and subsequently made possible the systematic introduction of a gender mainstreaming approach in the content of public policies⁶². The shift towards the end of the 2000s with the development of the MenEngage approach and the arrival of NGOs fighting against gender-based violence targeting a male audience led to a form of masculinization of the women's cause. This has been facilitated by donor support for this approach, as the extract below suggests:

« For the first time now men are opening their eyes, and you see feminist men in the public sphere, like saying the right thing at the right moment. So there was also a big excitement for that. Then I think, because a lot of this work is strongly evidence based [...] they [the donors] have the evidence showing that it works. So I also understand the donors : why would you want to maybe... I mean, you would want to see something that works so if you have evidence, that for example this positive masculinity programme works, why not financing it ? So definitely that was this excitement... And then I think, on the other hand, well sometimes, you might also feel like « I don't know, like maybe okay, let's also bring the men back and occupy some space ? » There might be also a little bit of it. »⁶³

⁶¹ Mwambari, David. « Women-Led Non-Governmental Organizations and Peacebuilding in Rwanda. » *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, vol. 7, no^o1, 2017, p. 66–79.

⁶² Debusscher, Petra, Ansoms, An. « Gender Equality Policies in Rwanda: Public Relations or Real Transformations ? ». *Development and Change*. The Hague : Institute of Social Studies, 2013.

⁶³ Excerpt from an interview, conducted in English, with a program manager, November 2022.

« Bring[ing] the men back » to « occupy some space » is precisely one of the major criticisms of the MenEngage approach. Some NGOs, for a long time, operated without female participation - on the part of both practitioners and beneficiaries. In addition, the dissemination and gradual adoption of this approach has changed the programs, discourses and tools used to address gender inequalities in Rwanda. This has therefore contributed to reinforcing the opposition between two approaches that lead a claimed project to fight against gender inequalities: one giving priority to accompanying and supporting women, the other to deconstructing and transforming masculine practices and representations. This tension and this criticism of the masculinization of the space of the women's cause is regularly formulated by women working in feminist organizations:

« All the men who want to be allies, feminist allies, but they're not really involving women in their programs, they are not targeting women, they are not ,you know, doing feminist analysis [...] So we have organisations headed by men, not inclusive at all in their programs, yet engaging men and boys for women rights, it's ridiculous [...] they are using that ticket to get money. You know, that has been the case in so many organisations, especially NGOs that say « we're working around empowerment of women through engaging men ». So it's really important to make sure that we are not giving the men space that they shouldn't occupy »⁶⁴

As this excerpt suggests, these programmatic tensions and disagreements occur in a context of competition for resources provided by the State and by international funders, who seem increasingly keen to value the participation of men in addressing gender inequalities. This implies a situation in which men control the resources that women need to make their claims effective,⁶⁵ and it is not only a concern that men will take over a space that is supposed to be dedicated to women's causes, but also a fear of monopolization of resources by men in charge of programs designed for men.

In fact, if the representation of men within organizations fighting against gender inequalities is questioned, this criticism is linked to a questioning of male capitalization for professional purposes.

MALE CAPITALIZATION FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES

The NGOization of the fight against gender inequalities, its institutionalization as a result of the appropriation of gender issues by public authorities, as well as the multiplication of organizations and programs that these phenomena underlie, contribute to the

⁶⁴ Excerpt from an interview conducted in English with a women's organization executive, March 2020.

⁶⁵ Raewyn Connell, « Change among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena », *Signs*, vol. 30, n°3, 2005, p. 1801–1825.

professionalization of this cause⁶⁶. The insistence on expertise and technical skills in programs to eradicate gender-based violence within various institutions and organizations leads to a demand for trained staff and to a recruitment based on specific skills and professional experience in the world of development. Thus, the NGOs mentioned in this paper represent places where professional trajectories are built for a certain number of actors. Therefore, the dissemination and implementation of the MenEngage approach contributes in a certain way to increasing the professional career prospects of men within the gender machinery. As mentioned earlier, male MenEngage program managers tend to justify their professional situation with a narrative that invokes a sense of vocation, coupled with a strong commitment to feminist causes and social justice. However, the professionalization of the fight against gender inequality has made it a space of professional opportunities, which implies the possibility of making a career in it. The point here is not to suggest that men's commitment is self-serving, or solely motivated by financial and symbolic rewards. In fact, it is conceivable that their position articulates these different dimensions, and that their feminist commitment may even be reinforced by socialization and politicization at work, depending on the capital and resources available to the practitioners⁶⁷. As we have seen, program managers share a specific socialization, characterized by the accumulation of knowledge and technical skills that give them a position as "experts" in the fight against gender inequalities and in the implementation of development programs. Also, when they relate this expertise to the individual level and when it comes to talking about their career prospects or their professional choices, the managers interviewed anticipate possible rewards:

« The great thing about working in this field is that gender is everywhere. Gender is absolutely everywhere. So basically we're needed in a lot of areas... In education, in health, even in agriculture! And everybody needs gender, the young, the old... So it basically leads us to collaborate with a lot of people, to have working meetings with the ministries. Also participate in conferences, even workshops... And sometimes even at the international level. So that's a lot of great opportunities. »⁶⁸

The opportunities mentioned by this respondent, which can be interpreted in the sense of symbolic rewards, seem to promote inter-connection with ministry representatives and are therefore likely to constitute important professional resources, particularly in a context

⁶⁶ Jad, Islah. "L'ONGisation des mouvements de femmes arabes" in Christine Verschuur, *Genre, postcolonialisme et diversité de mouvements de femmes*, Genève, Cahiers Genre et Développement, n°7, Genève, Paris : EFI/AFED, L'Harmattan, 2010, pp. 419-433

⁶⁷ Romero, Alice. *Le travail féministe. Le militantisme au Planning familial à l'épreuve de sa professionnalisation*. Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022.

⁶⁸ Excerpt from an interview, conducted in English, with a founder and executive director of a MenEngage NGO specializing in the education of young men, November 2021.

favorable to gender mainstreaming⁶⁹. For some managers, putting gender issues on the agenda seems to have motivated certain choices:

- So I got my bachelor's degree, and then I made the choice to do my masters in development studies, with a focus on gender.
- Why did you make that choice?
- Well... you know... I think that somehow... I wanted to find a way to work for a good cause... Actually, it could have been ecology, but at the time I thought there would be more opportunities in the gender area. »⁷⁰

In a way, gender expertise contributes to the achievement of professional goals to the construction of a "gender and development compatible" career. In a national and global context of dissemination and implementation of the MenEngage approach, this allows some men to capitalize professionally in the fight against gender inequalities.

This male professionalization of the struggle for gender equality is being questioned, in particular because of two consequences that it induces and that seem to be interconnected in the case of the MenEngage approach: on the one hand, the neutralization of the protest dimension linked to the need to operationalize the eradication of gender inequalities. And on the other hand, the invisibilization of feminist claims and practices that results from it.

APPROPRIATION AND NEUTRALIZATION OF FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE

The NGOization of the fight against gender inequalities can give rise to criticism regarding the disqualification of the protest dimension of the movement for equality, the diluted register of advocacy, or the dependence on donors⁷¹. In the case of the MenEngage approach in Rwanda, the professionalization, technicalization and masculinization of the fight against gender inequalities cannot be analyzed separately. It is precisely the intersection of these three phenomena that is at the heart of the criticism formulated by women, which concerns the appropriation of feminist knowledge and women's experiences. On the one hand, the need to operationalize the eradication of inequalities between men and women, as with any gender and development program, implies certain choices of tools and notions. These choices would be motivated by a willingness to produce consensus. This need for consensus covers the satisfaction of the expectations of donors and the strategies of adherence of the beneficiaries to their cause. Because of these constraints, the feminist scope of the MenEngage approach, as claimed by its promoters, is watered down, if not erased. The most significant example of this

⁶⁹ Burnet, Jennie. « Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda ». *African Affairs*, Vol. 107, N°428, 2008, p. 361-386.

⁷⁰ Excerpt from an interview with a program manager of a MenEngage NGO specializing in the prevention of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, September 2022. Translated from French to English.

⁷¹ Siméant, Johanna. « 6. La transnationalisation de l'action collective », Éric Agrikoliansky éd., *Penser les mouvements sociaux. Conflits sociaux et contestations dans les sociétés contemporaines*. La Découverte, 2010, pp. 121-144

is the fact that program managers have assumed that the term "feminism" is not used, which could discourage a male audience from joining the cause. The views of women activists in feminist groups, working in MenEngage programs, reveal a strong tension over the neutralization of feminist tenets:

« Those guys only focus on a MenEngage approach and I don't believe in it. To fight gender inequalities, you need to take a real feminist approach, and it is surely not by focusing on men that you could reach that. Well, actually they might argue they take a feminist approach. But those guys aren't feminist activists, so I think they don't really fight patriarchy. Women are the key. Women experience patriarchy. And all of them are men, so...»⁷²

This excerpt, which suggests that the MenEngage approach is not *really* feminist, is interesting in that it excludes MenEngage NGO practitioners from feminist activism. This identification of « real activism » seems to be part of a broader critique of the erasure of the protest dimension within programs addressing gender inequalities, which argues that the NGOization of women's issues is a hindrance to the visibility of a feminist social movement in Rwanda, as elsewhere. While the phenomenon of NGOization of feminist movements in Rwanda predates the emergence of the MenEngage approach, feminist critics point to a further invisibilization of the social movement and more contentious collective actions through the foregrounding of men committed to the cause of women. These positions, in the context of this research, are expressed by the respondents through a criticism of the valorization considered as exaggerated of male practices of support or expression of « positive masculinity ». In this sense, the use of the expression « male champions » to designate non-oppressive male behavior is often mocked by the interviewees - when they are not obviously tired of seeing men being given such labels - when it is women's mobilizations that, in their opinion, allows for a real subversion of gender norms. This tension between the NGOization of the cause and the "real activism" is perceptible in the identity tug-of-war and the socialization conflicts that some feminists working in NGO MenEngage display. Their double anchorage, within an NGO and within feminist activist groups induces difficulties of positioning, in particular in their relations with feminist circles.

ENGAGING MEN IN THE WOMEN'S CAUSE WITHOUT MAKING IT A MALE-DOMINATED AREA: A CRITICAL CHALLENGE FOR MENENGAGE NGOS

« Not taking all the spotlight is something we are now working on. And we are conscious, our executive director is conscious, I am conscious, people also, the project coordinators are conscious. But it's not an easy process at all, because whatever you do, whatever you touch... definitely I am aware that sometimes we have a lot of fundings because we are MenEngage. And, how do we redistribute them? How do we

⁷² Excerpt from an interview, conducted in English, with a program manager, February 2020.

sometimes even hold on so that the women rights, women led organizations also can... Can have them. But now it's also the fault of the donors to sometimes... So yeah, it's not easy, it's not easy at all. »⁷³

The MenEngage approach is supported and promoted by a network of actors who claim to have expertise in gender issues and who assert their possession of a certain amount of skills and capital in the area of development programs. The legitimacy of the approach they defend is based in large part on their ability to overcome the limitations of other gender and development approaches. By claiming a critical perspective, which would compensate for the theoretical and practical neglect of gender relations and gender socialization, they claim a greater capacity to place relations of domination at the heart of their program. Addressing men and changing their masculinity in order to eradicate gender inequalities is seen as a way to tackle systemic injustices « by the root », thus legitimizing the MenEngage approach and its ability to politicize its action. However, this attempt to address one of the main challenges to the NGOization of women's issues, has been challenged by the male monopolization of a space of struggle by women for women. As a result, the claim of politicization does not seem to resist the maintenance of a specific situation where NGOs participate in the institutionalization and professionalization of the women's cause while contributing to its masculinization.

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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 (Pető, 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.

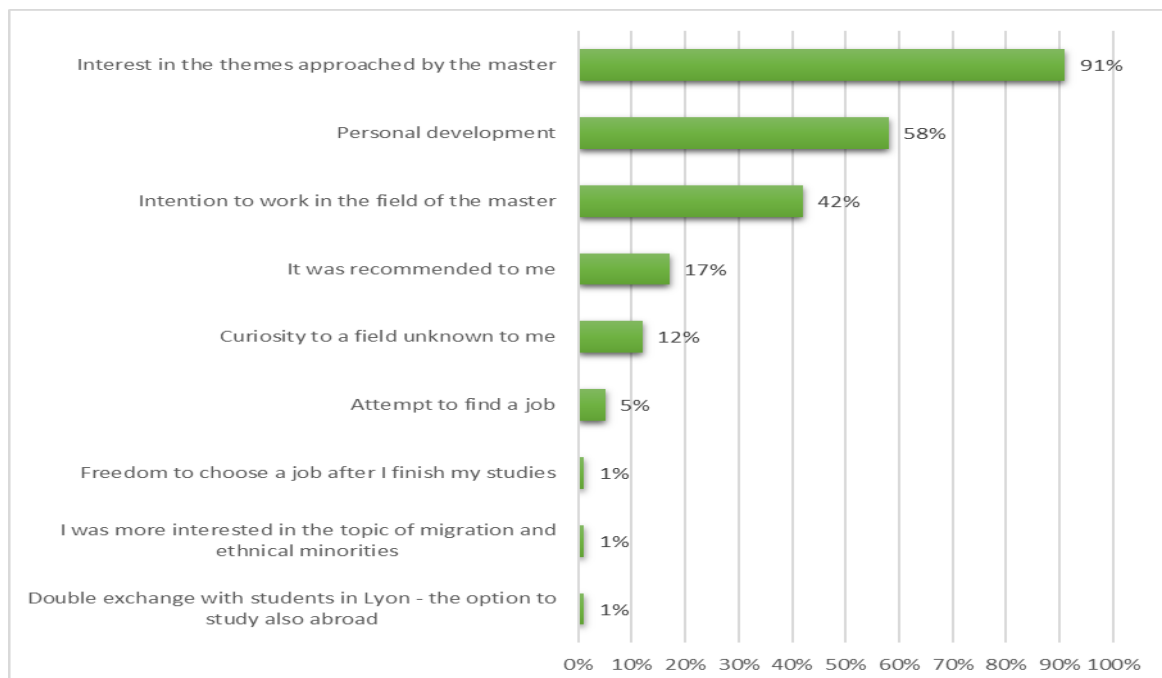


Figure 1. Reasons for enrolling into the MA program

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).

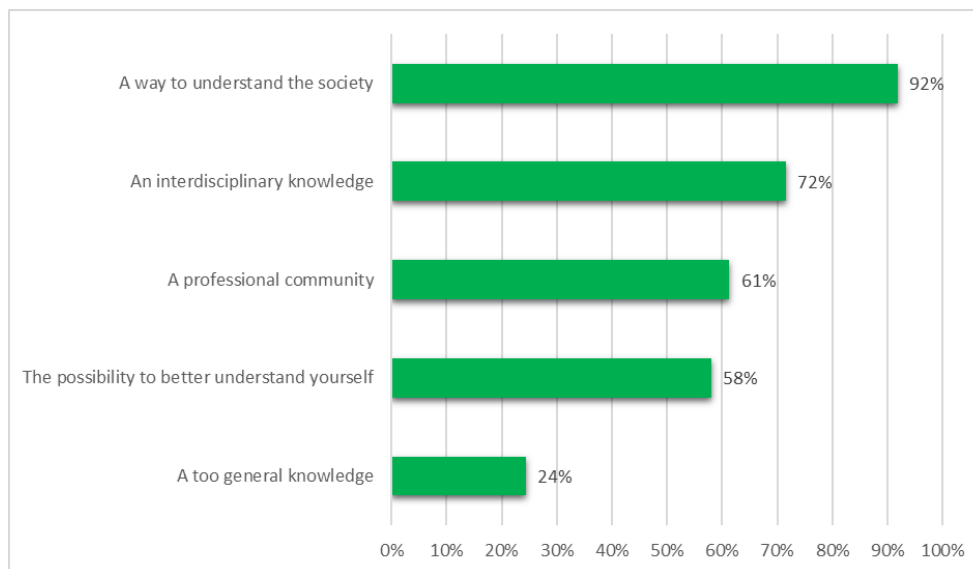


Figure 2. Level of agreement with the considered aspects

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.

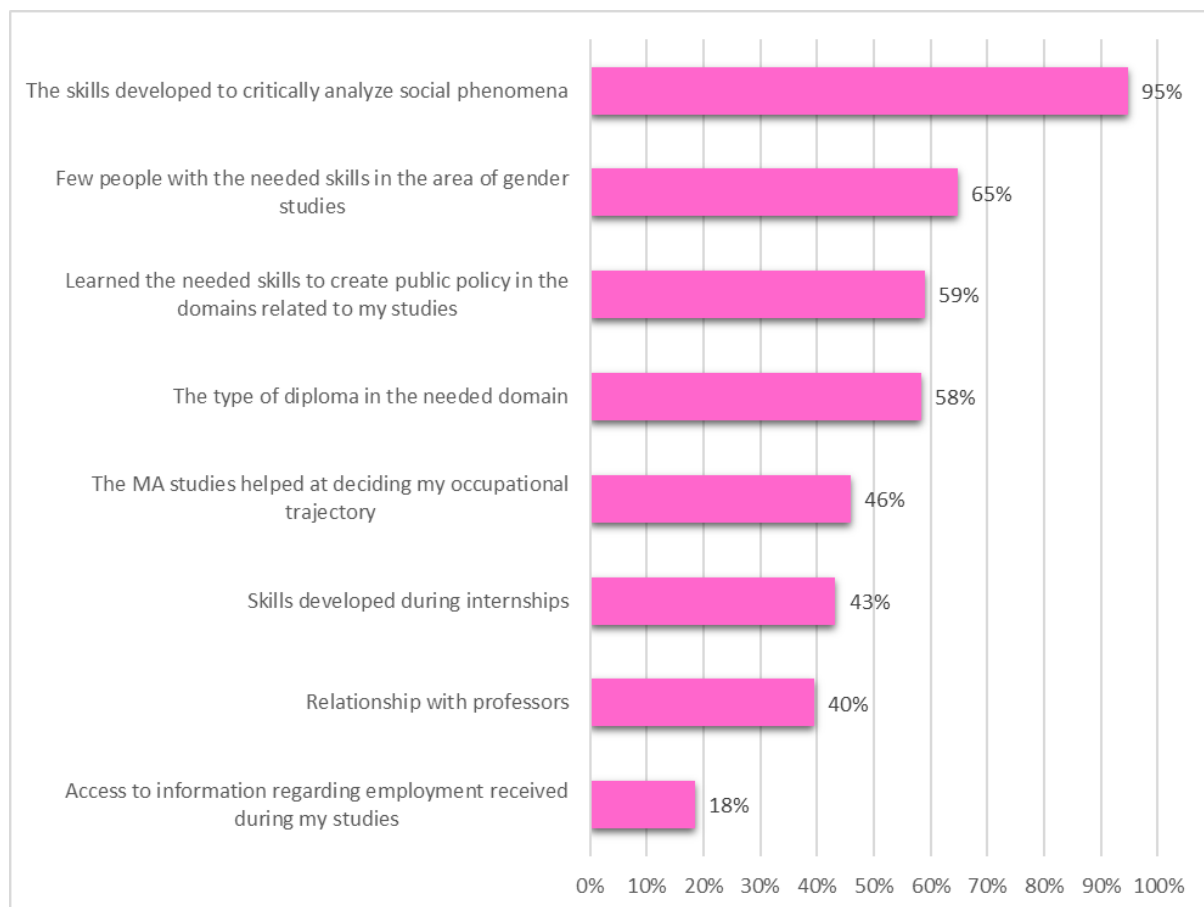


Figure 3. Aspects that facilitated graduates’ work in the field (subsample: graduates who worked in the field of their studies)

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.

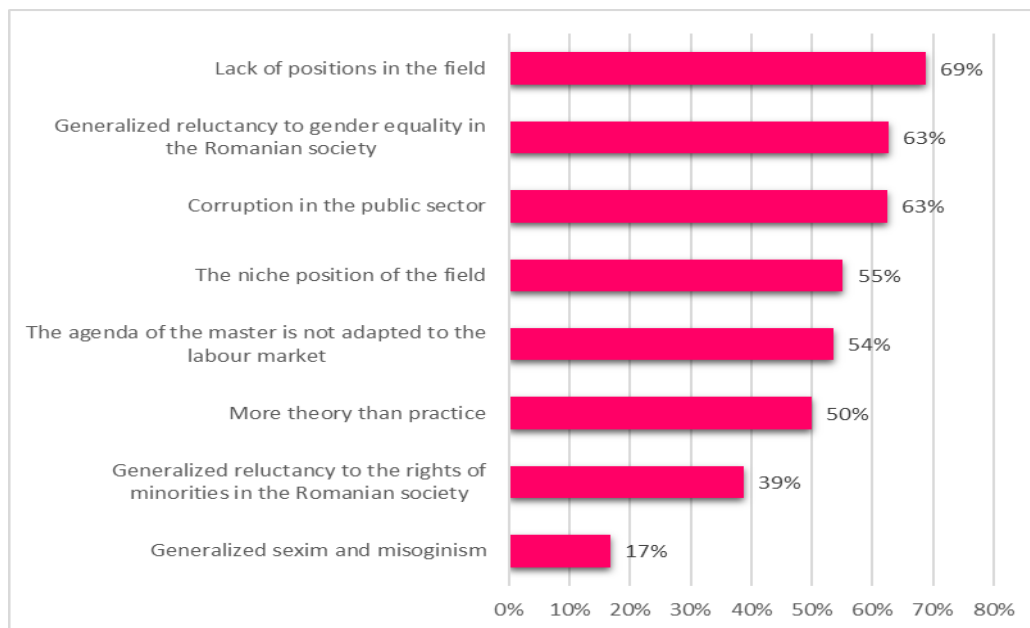


Figure 4. Barriers in getting a job in the field of study (subsample: respondents who did not occupy a position in the field of study) *Note: The figure presents the sum of the answers of 5 to 7 to the question: “Please provide a grade from 1 to 7, where 1 means total disagreement and 7 total agreement,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

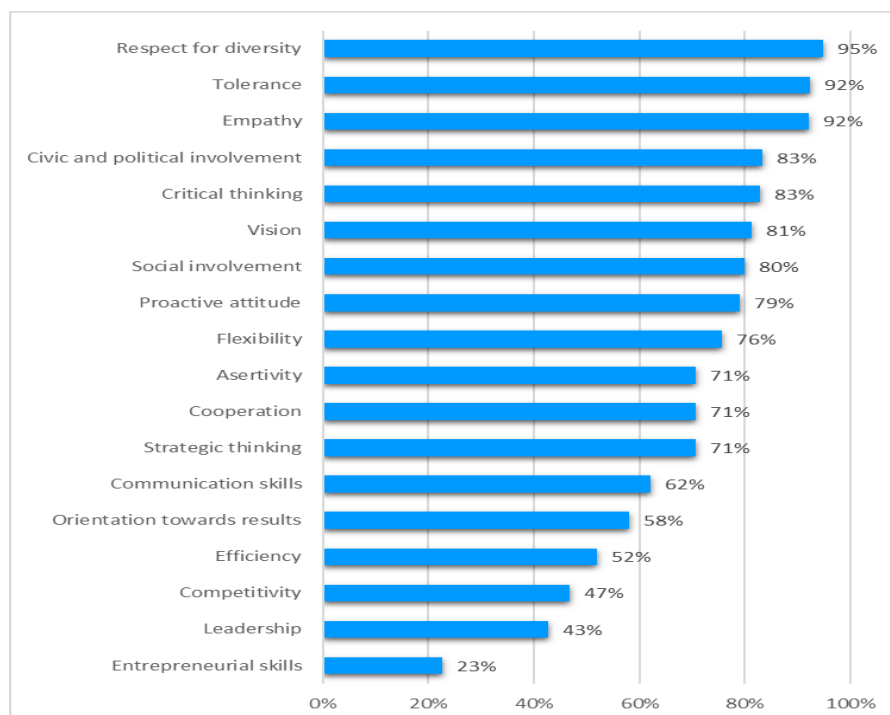


Figure 5. Ranking of acquired skills

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.

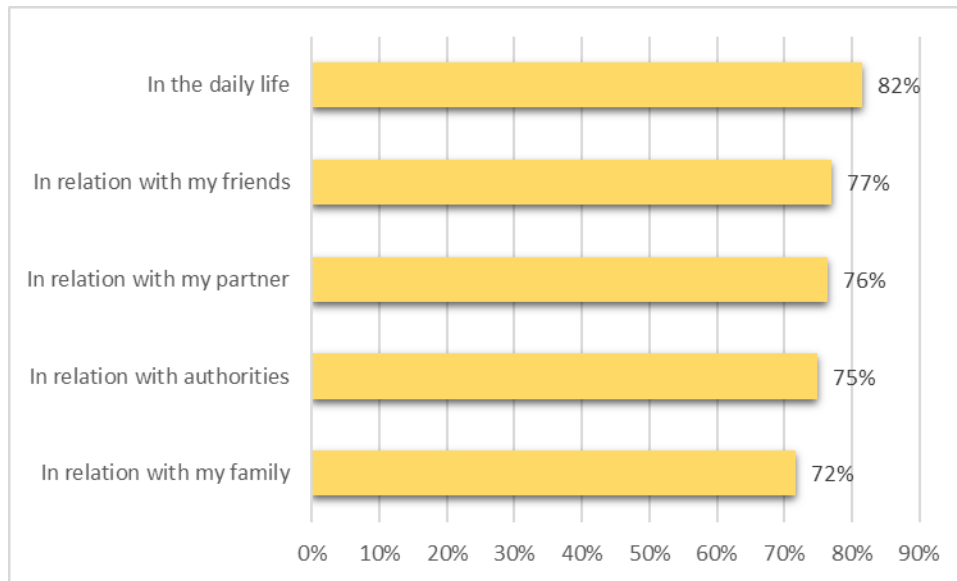


Figure 6. Perceived usefulness of the program of study

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;

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Alexandra Ana is a doctor in political science and sociology, from Scuola Normale Superiore with a thesis on comparative feminist movements and NGOization. She is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), working on resistance to anti-gender movements and politics in France and Romania. Her project – CORESIST, addresses the role of coalitions in strengthening and/or weakening the resistance to anti-gender politics, but also the challenges and tensions that permeate coalition-making. In 2023, she won a Fonds National de Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) postdoctoral scholarship with a project titled “Strange bedfellows and unholy alliances: the role of coalitions in conservative movements” based on a comparative study between the UK, France and Romania.

Besides research, Alexandra was previously a Teaching Fellow at Sciences Po Paris – where she taught from 2018 to 2022, gender, visual, urban and general sociology. She was invited as a guest lecturer at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Sciences Po Paris, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Linköping University (LiU), University of Bucharest.

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ⁱ See Cătălin Avramescu, lecturer at Bucharest University and his interview (18 Jun. 2020) about gender studies as pseudo-science: <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/catalin-avramescu-studiile-de-gen-sunt-pseudostiinta-3039462> (accessed on March, 5th, 2021); Adina Papahagi, lecturer at Babeş Bolyai University, facebook post about gender studies as being ideology and propaganda, https://www.facebook.com/papahagi/posts/595211791109749/?_rdc=1&_rdr (accessed on March, 3rd, 2021) or his article about gender studies as being non-science, intellectual imposture and leftist indoctrination published in June, 17th 2020 at <https://inliniedreapta.net/monitorul-neoficial/adrian-papahagi-studiile-de-gen-nu-sunt-stiinta-ci-impostura-intelectuala-indoctrinare-stangista/> (accessed on March 1st 2021); Daniel Funeriu's (former minister of Național Education) facebook post about academic freedom and political correctness cited in the article published by Newsweek in June, 19th 2019 at <https://newsweek.ro/educatie/teorii-opinii-gen-aparare> (accessed on February, 27th 2021); Alexandru Lăzescus article about gender studies as pseudo-science and neo-marxist ideology published in June, 2nd 2020 at <https://inliniedreapta.net/monitorul-neoficial/alexandru-lazescu-studiile-de-gen-sunt-pseudo-stiinte-ce-ar-trebui-studiate-ca-parte-a-curentelor-neo-marxiste/> (accessed on March, 13th 2021);

ⁱⁱ The Amicus Curiae was elaborated in support of the Notice of unconstitutionality on Law no. 87/2020 for the amendment of art.7 of the National Education Law no.1 / 2011, which the President of Romania formulated on July 10th, 2020, was submitted on Thursday, September 24th, 2020 and was signed among others by Judith Butler (Professor, University of California at Berkeley), Delphine Dulong, (Professor, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France), David Paternotte, (Professor, Université Libre de Bruxelles), Joan W. Scott, (Professor Emerita, Princeton, New Jersey), Mieke Verloo (Professor, Radboud University, Netherlands).

ⁱⁱⁱ The external evaluation of all master programs in Romania is made once in five years, and the normative requirements are related to acquiring the mission and objectives of the MA programs, mission and objectives that need to reflect the economic, social and cultural context, the needs of the employers and of the labour market. On the other hand, the objectives of MA programs are required to reflect and address: (1) the university mission; (2) the employment opportunities of the graduates; (3) the possible developments of the field of studies; (4) the opportunities of continuing studying at a Ph.D. level and (5) the students' interests (ARACIS 2019, pp. 3-4)

^{iv} Other similar programs have been organized, for short period of times, in other important academic centers such as Timișoara and Cluj Napoca, but they failed in the process of institutionalization, due the rigid and powerful tradition of disciplinarity, the lack of financial support, the conservative narratives that dominated the academic environment and/or due to other political contexts (Dascăl, 2002; Văcărescu, 2006, 2011; Vincze, 2002).