The Role of Gender Studies in Transforming Society

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Abstract

Gender Studies represent a relatively new field in the area of humanistic and social sciences. Since their apparition, they generated major changes in academy and society; they are responsible, in part, for the way that social universe looks nowadays, continuing to shape its form, drawing attention to gender inequalities and designing ways to remedy injustice. The purpose of our study is to analyze the evolution of gender studies focusing on the way they contributed to the dramatic transformations of society in the last decades. We try to find, at the same time, some answers to the questions that this academic field must face in the light of the new challenges imposed both by its evolution and by the development of society.

Keywords:
gender studies, women’s studies, society, gender relations, academism, activism, gender mainstreaming

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**Introduction**

Gender studies represent, along many other disciplines in the area of social sciences, a new field, whose existence barely counts four decades. Despite their short existence, gender studies represent one of the most innovative and dynamic fields in this area. They constitute a very good example of the way in which the academic sphere has been transformed in the last half of century, through the acknowledgement of the fact that knowledge production is a historic, cultural and social phenomenon. Therefore, gender studies imposed, facing many difficulties, though, as we shall see in the present paper, the acknowledgement of gender as a category that intervenes at all levels and stages of the knowledge process, thus challenging the traditional view of knowledge production and contributing to the transformation of the traditional academic sphere. At the same time, gender studies through their contribution to a better understanding of gender construction and meaning, contributed to the transformation of social and cultural practices, thus transforming society in a durable and efficient way. Gender studies imposed, in the course of their short existence, gender as a fundamental category for the analysis of all forms and systems of human organization and social life.

The present paper intends to analyze the evolution of gender studies and the influence they had in the transformation of the academic sphere and of the society in general. We will draw, in the following pages, a short sketch of the evolution of gender studies in the last decades and will discuss a few of the challenges that this new field in social sciences has to confront with in the light of new developments both in the academic sphere and in the social life.

**Gender studies evolution and impact on society**

Gender studies appeared, for the first time, in the 1970, in American universities, in a time when the simple fact of saying that women can become an object of study was conceived as a radical act (Boxer, 1998, 10).

Initially, the field was called “Female Studies”, but this name was soon abandoned for the more comprehensive “Women’s Studies”, that highlighted the fact that the field contained studies conceived by women, concerning women and belonging to women. At the beginning of the 7th
decade of the last century, the foundations were set for a new field of study, in universities: “For the first time, women were not only learning about themselves, but were actively creating and owning knowledge based on their own personal and political experiences” (Ginsberg, 2008, 10). Women’s studies were born out of the protest that women in the universities directed against the way academic knowledge was silent about women and their scientific contribution and ignored the power relations in academia and society: „From its very inception, Women’s Studies had a very clear purpose and that was to transform the university so that knowledge about women was no longer invisible, marginalized, or made ‘other’.” (Ginsberg, 2008, 10-11).

The first days of women’s studies were not the brightest ones. Universities did not welcome courses and related activities: those who wanted to teach or hold seminars and attend meetings had no available spaces where to develop these activities: “It was not unusual for programs to form around meetings in bathrooms and broom closets.” (Ginsberg, 2008, 11). Lectures and courses were promoted through word of mouth or ways that did not involve high expenses, since there was no specific finance for these activities from the universities. Moreover, many of the scholars „worried that their association with the field would reflect poorly on them and derail their careers in their various disciplines (e.g., they would not get tenure)” (Ginsberg, 2008, 11). This was happening because those who held courses or gave lectures were not specialized in women’s studies, but in other disciplines and were doing this work in their spare time, as an additional activity to the one they were paid for by their universities. Their lack of specialization was often looked upon and the main argument against their acknowledgement as specialists in the field was that they could not teach a discipline that did not existed, and even if it existed, they could not teach a discipline that they did not know.

All these obstacles were meant to discourage those who aimed to open the universities and the universal knowledge as to include women and their scientific contribution and to transform society in order to balance the relations of power based on gender.

The first thing that the feminist scholars were criticizing was the apparently neutral character of scientific knowledge concealing the male domination in every field. Inspired by the women movements of their time, the feminists in universities grounded their undertaking on two epistemological premises. The first of them was empiricism – the will to
make women visible in all fields of knowledge, as subjects and agents of knowledge. The second one was positionism (standpoint) – according to which the experience, identity and knowledge of individuals are determined by their physical and social position, therefore the feminist phrase: who I am is what and how I know.

The papers published at that time witness the strife of women scholars to impose women as subjects and agents of knowledge in all fields of research and study and in the academic hierarchies, as well. For instance, in her article Women’s Studies – Renaissance or Revolution? Adrienne Rich argues that women’s studies not just broaden the curricula, they rather challenge the very disciplinary grounds of universities. She highlights the radical potential of women’s studies in universities, considering them a ‘pledge of resistance’ (Rich, 1976). In Toward a Woman-Centered University, Adrienne Rich argues that universities encourage and maintain certain power relations that allow men to dominate women both in respect to knowledge production and in respect to their positions in universities (Rich, 1975). Thus, universities are built on hidden assumptions that keep alive a conception according to which men’s work in academia becomes a sacred value justifying the emotional and economic exploitation of women. Women accede only to inferior positions in hierarchy, they are secretaries, teaching assistants, etc. while men get easier promotions on high positions where they are allowed, in the name of the their sacred work, to benefit from the invisible work and merits of women. In other words, the men-centered structures of universities constantly reaffirm women’s status as means for the ultimate goal of men’s work (a goal translated into carriers and professional success, whose existence and availability are only male).

Despite all difficulties, the field grew stronger, especially thanks to the scholars, the students, the administrative staff or the sponsors who wanted to make visible the field of women’s knowledge and that of knowledge about women. Women’s studies were gradually introduced in universities, they began to be accepted and, as a consequence, to be financed by universities. Moreover, joining the feminist activists, the women scholars succeeded in obtaining national financed programs promoting gender equity in education at all levels and programs combating gender discrimination in schools.

Until the first half of 1980s, women’s studies focus on explaining the reasons for women’s subordination and oppression; starting with the second half of the 1980s, women’s studies perspective changes radically.
Different women movements appear, such as the black women movement. These movements contest the centrality and the universal character of the notion of ‘woman’, and the field of women’s studies has to identify and justify the use of this notion.

This happened because, although it was never explicitly defined as such, the concept of ‘woman’ used so far in the theorizations of the field contained characteristics that could have led to a new form of domination, this time inside the category of women in general. The studies developed until that moment focused on a restrictive understanding of the notion of ‘woman’; they implicitly referred to the category that the women initiators of the women’s studies belonged: white, middle-class, heterosexual, usually Christian etc. It was inevitable that the other women who did not belong to this category would feel left aside, unrepresented and it was also inevitable that they would make their voice heard, because their interests and needs were not addressed by the dominant perspective in the women’s studies of their time.

The problem of the difference between women thus became extremely important in the development and evolution of gender studies. The claim for difference became a vivid subject of debate in gender studies over the 1980, the 1990 and in the 21st century, and made an important shift in the problematic of gender studies: the problem of the power relations inside the categories corresponding to each gender became as important as the initial problem concerning the power relations between genders. In the 1990s, as well as nowadays, women of different color, religion, social condition, sexual orientation claimed to be treated differently, according to their needs and interests. Therefore, gender studies, though still focusing on gender differences between women and men that explained the male domination and women oppression, begin to explore the power relations and the inner hierarchies of each gender.

Gender studies had to address two important challenges in the 1990s. Ironically, the first major challenge was imposed by the positive effects that the women movements, supported by the academic feminism have had for society. Since the results of the feminist struggle became visible (women and gender studies were already accepted in universities, women became visible in the academic space, women’s and gender programs were financed by the universities, women rights programs and programs for combating discriminations were on a large scale financed by the states, legislation was modified by introducing
antidiscrimination and pro-equality measures, etc.), the germs of a new discourse entered the public sphere. The discourse continues nowadays and claims that since women’s problem was solved, there is no need for a field of studies dedicated to them anymore. Of course, progress is undeniable but reality shows that until *de facto* equality between women and men is reached and until the various problems of the different groups of women are solved, there is still much work to do and this work is impossible in the absence of a specific field of study and research dedicated to them.

The second challenge of the 1990s was linked to the introduction of sexuality as a field of study and research. The scholars soon noticed that women’s studies became a too restrictive area when faced with the necessities and interests of the different categories of individuals. Thus, ‘gender studies’ became the ‘official’ name of the field, in an attempt to include and address all those differences. The problem regarding which name is better for a field addressing women’s issues, whether gender studies is a more appropriate name or not, was then and still is a subject of debate and we will approach it in the following pages. The challenge of introducing sexuality studies within the field of women’s studies and the broadening of the scope of women’s studies reflects the evolution of society in those times and is another reason to argue that gender studies were the result of the politics of their days and that they both reflected and influenced the evolution of society. For instance, in those times, sexuality studies addressed only questions related to the rights of the homosexual persons, but they gradually extended their scope to include studies and research concerning bisexual, trans-sexual or trans-gendered persons.

Gender studies in the 21st century witness a development that their initiations would not have dreamt of: at the beginning of the century, there were over 1500 gender studies programs in more than 700 universities, only in the United States (Howard, Allen, 2000, XXIII). Their development in the last three decades in the United States was easier thanks to the flexibility of universities in respect to curricular changes, especially in the newest universities, where ‘tradition’ did not action as an obstacle. The United States functioned as a model for many countries from all over the world: „very soon there were women’s studies programs in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, India, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. By the 1980s, there were programs in all countries in Western Europe, plus Thailand, South
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Africa, China, the Caribbean, and Uganda. Finally, after the change from communism in Eastern Europe, programs were instituted in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Russia, Ukraine, and others, in addition to Malaysia, Vietnam, and other African nations.” (McFadden, 2005) In Romania as well, gender studies were introduced after the fall of communism, in the 1990s, and they developed relatively fast: now, there are offers of gender studies programs in the main universities, especially at the M.A. and graduate level (a discussion on gender studies in Romania and the way they influenced the Romanian society can be found in Răducu, 2010).

Gender studies development continues, simultaneously with the development of society: now gender studies are broadly available, thanks to the introducing of computers and internet. The possibility to teach gender studies courses and to have discussions on-line allows a greater opening of the field to the population and to the community. Those persons that did not have the chance to follow gender studies programs in universities now have at their disposal a virtual space for collaborative learning, for dialogue and for sharing resources with a minimum effort. But perhaps the greatest advantage is that on-line gender studies now get out of the rigid academic sphere, re-shaping the relation between the student and the professor and re-shaping communities also, helping people interact and giving a voice to those that could not speak before because of the lack of resources or because of spatial, temporal, cultural or social limits.

We can say, therefore, that from the beginning of the 1970s until now gender studies had an essential impact on the transformation of society. We can say now, when we look behind, that the academic and social space would not have been the same without gender studies and the social movements that grounded them.

Ever since their beginning, gender studies established the purpose to transform, besides the academic sphere, the social universe. They appeared as a natural result of the politics of their time, especially the women movements, and were designed to support and enforce the results of the women’s movement: „From the beginning, the goal of women’s studies was not merely to study women’s position in the world but to change it” (Boxer, 1998, 13). The pioneers of gender studies assumed since the creation of the field the mission to study women and other groups with a view to obtain „positive social change in the rest of the world for women and other oppressed groups alike” (Ginsberg, 2008, 10). By imposing the acceptation of women as subject of study and
the acknowledgment of women’s contribution to the scientific knowledge, by helping introducing anti-discrimination legislation and gender equality policies in education, by supporting women’s and other groups’ movements, gender studies accomplished their initial goal and proved their influence to the transformation of our society.

Present challenges for gender studies

However, in spite of the undeniable results mentioned above, there still are theoretical, methodological and practical challenges that gender studies have to face. Although the field consolidated its position in the academic sphere, it has to offer answers to a series of questions that appeared in the course of its development, such as:

Questions concerning the statute of gender studies: Are gender studies a discipline or rather they are an interdisciplinary field that includes different approaches concerning all the implications of gender as a social construct?

Questions concerning the way gender studies should be taught in universities: Should they be taught as separate courses or rather gender problematic should be mainstreamed as broadly as possible in all disciplines, so that a true sensitivity to gender is obtained? If they remain separate from the other disciplines, are they not they risking closing themselves in a marginal area of the academic sphere? Could gender mainstreaming lead to a change of perspective and a real acceptation of the gender problematic, given the suspicion with which gender is still treated in traditional disciplines?

Questions related to the relation between academism and activism: Are gender studies a ‘bridge’ between the academic discourse and the reality they investigate? Are there still a ‘pledge of resistance’, do they still have a real influence over society or rather they are positioned in a rigid academic sphere, where educated and usually well socially and economically positioned persons change general and technical opinions, distanced from the real subjects of their theories?

Finally, questions related to the very nature of the field’s name: Is it possible that under the generic phrase of ‘gender studies’ the initiators’
message and goals were somehow attenuated, dissolved? Is it possible that including women’s studies, sexuality studies, men’s studies and other researches under the generous ‘umbrella’ of gender studies the importance of gender relations is minimized? Is it possible for a kind of disinterest to hide under the ‘polite’ name of ‘gender studies’?

We will begin our discussion with the last debate. In the 1990s, under the double pressure imposed both by the limitation of a universalistic approach of the women’s problems (which would have hidden in fact a real domination of a group of women over other groups of women), and by the introduction of other types of studies than those strictly related to the women-men relations (such as homosexuality or trans-sexuality), the initially well-formed field of women’s studies had to accept a broadening of its scope and approaches. Starting that moment, an infinite series of debates concerning the proper name for the field was initiated; the debates continue today. The programs and courses in universities received new names; alternative denominations appeared – feminine studies, feminist studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, gender and feminist studies, feminist, gender and sexuality studies, etc. Many programs added the phrase ‘gender studies’ to their initial denomination, others simply abandoned the initial denomination of ‘women’s studies’ and adopted that of ‘gender studies’.

The main challenge is related to the subject matter of the field and to the concern that the inclusion of women problematic in the larger field of ‘gender studies’ could lead to an ‘abandon’ of the aims and efforts of the feminist movement that set the grounds for and supported these studies along their short and troubled history. The most frequent formulated concerns relate to the fear that broadening the scope could also lead to a dilution of the preoccupation with women’s status and with gender power, a dilution that would have negative consequences for women in general. Eliminating women from the name of the field could lead to an abandon of their specific problematic, a loss of contact with the women movements and a loss of the advantages earned along decades of women movements.

Although we admit that it is difficult to formulate a point of view in this matter, as difficult as it is to give a ‘verdict’ referring to the name of the field, our opinion is that the term ‘gender’ in itself is not so ‘guilty’ as it has been considered by those who feared that women’s problematic would be dropped in a second or third place of academic or scientific interest. We believe that the term ‘gender’ indicates a transition from the
feminist approaches treating women as an isolated group, to more complex approaches concerning the relations between and within genders. We believe that the fact that gender studies include now men’s and masculinity studies, and studies concerning the relations the two gender developed historically and continue to develop in new cultural, social, economic contexts is not, in its essence, threatening for women.

It is a new approach concerning both women’s and men’s specific ways of thinking and communicating in their social interactions as well as a new approach concerning the roles that each of them might play in the public and private spheres. In our opinion the use of the term ‘gender’ signals both the awareness of the fact that gender identities, roles and relations have a certain cultural specificity and the awareness that inequalities between and within genders is, eventually, the result of a social process that can be contested and must not be not taken as a biological given.

Finally, we think that the phrase ‘gender studies’ can be used for a generic field including specific areas of study. These range from women’s studies (with a clear focus on women’s problematic), to gender equality studies (with insistence on historic and social inequalities and on the measures needed to correct injustices suffered by individuals or groups of individuals), sexuality studies (reflecting the problematic of persons with different sexual orientations, transsexual or trans-gendered persons). Men’s studies should also be included here, as most recent approaches show that there are men’s problems deserving a separate space of study, such as power relations inside the men’s group that need to be addressed in a specific manner, etc.

This would not lead, we think, to a decrease in interest for women’s problems, except in the situation when the women themselves would wish this to happen. The history of the field shows us that when social reality must be changed, because it disadvantages a category of individuals, there are ways and means to do it. Moreover, nowadays, when much of the way has been covered, women do not have reasons to consider themselves threatened by a simple denomination. The reality shows us that it is in their power to continue the road. Therefore, we believe we have reasons to be optimistic in this matter.

Besides the concern about a dilution of women or other disadvantaged groups movements’ political message, there is a justified concern that institutionalizing gender studies could lead to a withdrawal in a ‘ivory tower’ of the gender studies scholars and to an abandon of the
pioneers’ aim to build a bridge between the academic and social spheres. This is, as we have shown elsewhere (Rădu cu, 2010), a genuine reason of concern in post-socialist countries, where, for instance, formal equality was intensely promoted for decades by the communist discourse, although in substance it never existed. In these situations, the voice of non-governmental organizations is weak, the politicians do not assume the theme of gender equality in their programs and the gender scholars rarely communicate in an efficient manner with the activists.

However, gender studies assumed since their appearance and continue to assume today their mediating role between theory and activism, personal and political, academy and community. By providing the students with the theoretical and methodological instruments for analyzing gender relations, by encouraging them to apply these critical analyses to the family, the group or community they belong to, gender studies do not lack the activist part. In this matter, as well as in the matter concerning the name of the field, gender studies could detach from the society they intended to transform from the very beginning only in the unfortunate case when the gender studies scholars would wish to withdraw in a theoretical sphere of a rigid discourse over distant realities. But our opinion in this matter, is optimistic again.

Trying to answer the second problem indicated, we will answer, indirectly, to the first problem, concerning the statute of gender studies. Thus, gender and gender relations can be studied as well in the frame of a discipline in itself, as in the frame of a research area and a complex, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of study. Moreover, gender studies, as we have seen in the first pages of our paper, generated transformations in the traditional academic disciplines, developing new perspectives and approaches within those disciplines. Since gender studies evolved in an independent field of research and study with implications over other disciplines and fields of study, we think that a bi-directional approach of this question could bring the most benefits, both to the gender studies and to the academic sphere in general.

Thus, our opinion is that gender studies need to continue to develop as a separate field of study, because they build the theoretical framework in which gender relation research takes place. Also, because they are still regarded with suspicion and tend to be ‘pushed’ in a marginal area in the corpus of academic disciplines and fields of research, it is equally important to mainstream a gender perspective in other disciplines. Human knowledge is historically and socially
determined; therefore, transgressing the borders between disciplines is most of the times inevitable. Gender, too, is implied in all forms of human organization and social life, and becomes more and more an ‘inevitable’ element in scientific research, especially in social sciences.

Conclusion

In the light of all the things shown in this study, we have reasons to believe that irrespective of theoretical, methodological and practical challenges they meet, gender studies are a solid field of research and study, in a continuous development and transformation and their evolution on a long term in the academic sphere is granted by the transformations that are taking place in society on a global scale. We may thus speak, at this moment, of a bi-directional transformation: from the gender studies towards society and from the society towards gender studies. Therefore, the interdependent relation between gender studies and society can generate benefits both for the academic field of gender studies and for the social reality they investigate and permanently seek to transform, with a view to re-balance the power relations between and within genders and to remedy injustice where it appears or is maintained by social practices.

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