

Article

Disputing “Gender” in Academia: Illiberalism and the Politics of Knowledge

Yasmine Ergas¹, Jazgul Kochkorova^{1,*}, Andrea Pető², and Natalia Trujillo¹¹ School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, USA² Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Hungary* Corresponding author (jazgul.kochkorova@columbia.edu)

Submitted: 14 March 2022 | Accepted: 24 August 2022 | Published: 31 October 2022

Abstract

This article explores the attacks to which gender studies programs in Central and Eastern Europe have been subject and the responses such attacks have elicited in the context of analogous phenomena in other parts of the world. The undermining of gender studies in recent years has been aggravated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that has exacerbated financial crises of educational institutions while also—in some contexts—providing cover for restrictions on academic freedom. Our specific focus here, however, is on how illiberal policies have limited the scope of academic gender studies, sometimes calling into question their very existence. To identify the modalities through which illiberal governments may narrow gender studies programs, we draw on Pirro and Stanley’s analysis of illiberal policymakers’ toolkit based on “forging,” “breaking,” and “bending.” We consider these categories useful for our analysis but add a fourth: “de-specification”—a purposeful submersion, or redefinition, of gender studies into other programs, such as family studies. Our purpose is not to present an exhaustive analysis but rather to delineate a framework for analyzing such attacks and the responses to which they have given rise, and then to indicate some questions for further research. As such, this article should be read as a work in progress that seeks to explicate the modalities of the attacks on gender studies in higher education to which contemporary illiberalism has given rise concomitantly with attacks on gender rights and emerging forms of resistance that bespeak the resilience of the gender academy.

Keywords

anti-gender attacks; Eastern Europe; gender studies; illiberalism; resilience; resistance

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Gender and Illiberalism in Post-Communist Europe” edited by Matthijs Bogaards (Central European University) and Andrea Pető (Central European University).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

That gender rights—understood as both women’s rights generally and rights related to gender identity and sexual orientation and expression—have been targets of populist/illiberal movements and governments in the past decade, both nationally and internationally, is well documented (Ergas, 2019; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Pető, 2021c). Attacks on “gender,” often represented as critiques of “gender ideology,” have been seen to function as the “symbolic glue” of illiberal coalitions (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Grzebalska et al., 2017; Kuhar &

Paternotte, 2017; Pető, 2015). As was confirmed by a (non-representative) survey by the Women and Gender in Global Affairs (WGGGA) network conducted among directors of gender programs, in a general context marked by declining academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2021), the “gender academy” (understood here as the ensemble of institutions and scholars who have advanced critical knowledge variously focused on women’s, LGBTQI+, and gender generally) can—and, at times, has—become subject to marginalization, defunding, stigmatization, and, even, outright closure or de-facto silencing and expulsion. At the same time, significant counter-movements have

become visible both inside and outside academic institutions as scholars, and, at times, administrators, have sought to protect (and sometimes enhance) the gender academy and its work.

This double-movement between repression and resistance portends an ongoing struggle to maintain a space for research and teaching on gender that is simultaneously theoretical and practical. It is theoretical since it references academic disciplines and centralizes intellectual debate; it is practical since it self-consciously constitutes a critical “pedagogy” of future practitioners of gender equality. As scholars participating in the WGGA workshop in Paris in 2018 (conducted under the Chatham House rule), academia has come to play a key role in defining the vocabulary of practitioners (WGGA, 2018). And although this poses risks on both sides—flattening academic discourse into technocratic training on one hand and freighting practical knowledge with extraneous discursive apparatuses on the other (Ergas, 2019)—the importance of academic centers as crucibles of critically trained practitioners seems undeniable. We can only conjecture—but, based on our own experience and the accounts of other scholars, we are willing to risk guessing at what we cannot (yet) substantiate—that gender studies programs have proven to be incubators not simply of future critical gender studies academics (although that, in itself, would be significant) but also of policy-makers and politicians engaged in multiple arenas, from international organizations to national and local governments, as well as from INGOs and NGOs to the corporate world. In short, gender studies programs have contributed to the re-visioning of gender as a fundamental dimension of social organization, providing a perhaps paradoxical explanation for why illiberal states and movements—intent on negating the legitimacy of “gender” as an organizing frame of knowledge—have expended resources to undermine the programs that have advanced the understanding of gender as an organizing principle of so many societies. Far from being seen as marginal centers of esoteric intellectualism, the “gender academy” and its sites have been perceived by illiberals as crucibles of “dangerous” thought. Pirro and Stanley (2021, p. 88) note that “the *common set* of liberal democratic principles...on which the post-1989 political order was founded,” included “the creation of a pluralistic public sphere...and cultural pluralism.” In this perspective, gender studies may be seen as a manifestation of liberalism, and thus an object of concern for illiberal politics.

But how have the attacks on the “gender academy” proceeded, and how have they been countered? Let us begin by saying that we do not present an exhaustive analysis of such attacks. Rather, we use a largely qualitative mixed method approach to delineate their principal modalities and to identify possible (and actual) responses. It is important to stress that our analysis builds on the work of previous scholars—often but not always focused on individual case studies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), but that we have also for sev-

eral years we have gathered data through mapping gender studies and the attacks to which they have been subjected. After briefly outlining our methodology, we first discuss how the processes through which gender studies were institutionalized in the academy may create particular vulnerabilities (ATHENA-Network, 2010; Petó, 2019; Rossman, 2021; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003; Zimmermann, 2008), then explore the modalities through which illiberal states may and have undermined the “gender academy” (Coughlan, 2018; Kourou, 2020; Teixeira, 2019), and finally delineate emerging resistance strategies (Aktas et al., 2018; Lilleslåtten, 2018; WGGA, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

In analyzing the modalities that illiberal states have deployed, we draw on the framework articulated by Pirro and Stanley (2021) in their analysis of the “illiberal playbook” utilized in Hungary and Poland. Pirro and Stanley identified three principal modalities of illiberal policymaking: forging, breaking, and bending. We adopt—and adapt—these modalities but add a fourth: de-specification. Pirro and Stanley (2021, p. 90) understand forging as the process of making “changes that break substantially with a mainstream consensus without necessarily challenging the rule of law.” Breaking refers to the process of enacting “legislative actions that are contrary to both domestic and international law, constituting a direct breach of the constitutional order and of liberal-democratic principles” (Pirro & Stanley, 2021). Bending entails a “policy change consistent with the letter of the law but in contradiction to its spirit. It involves the reinterpretation or disabling of existing legislative constraints in ways that are not procedurally illegal but subvert/defy liberal democratic norms” (Pirro & Stanley, 2021). Finally, *de-specification* refers to the rebranding and submersion of gender studies into other programs, generally under different names, in ways that effectively empty them of critical import. Although states have mobilized different strategies, the net effect has been to weaken gender studies programs as sites of knowledge production, transfer, and academic authorization and, thus, at least hypothetically, as crucibles of critical advocacy and policymaking.

Pirro and Stanley (2021, pp. 87, 90) note that “there is more than one way to deploy” the liberal playbook, and we agree: We illustrate bending, for example, with instances in which state allocations for university budgets have been restricted, but also with maneuvers to limit access to foreign funders (Surman & Rossman, 2022, p. 36). Overall, we find that each modality may have drastic consequences and that the gender academy is developing a variety of resistance strategies in response. Although we advance some hypotheses about the relationship between the typology of attacks, the vulnerabilities associated with the pathways to the institutionalization of gender studies programs, and the forms of resistance that have become manifest, we conclude that further analysis is required to understand these connections.

2. Methodology

This article draws primarily on qualitative reports regarding attacks on gender studies programs and the forms of resistance they have engendered. Between 2017 and 2019, the WGGGA network mapped the development of gender studies programs globally. Building on these initial mappings, for this article we sought to identify programs that had come under threat and the modalities by which they were being targeted. To this end, we drew on media reports and advocacy platforms as well as on published comprehensive research (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Petó, 2020). We complemented the results of our analyses with findings derived from discussions hosted in 2020 and 2021 by the WGGGA network with gender scholars, directors of gender programs, and formal and informal academic networks—and with the results of a survey we conducted before such discussions—as well as with insights from webinars organized in 2018–2020 on the politics of language and the issue of gender, gender under threat, and the gendered effects of Covid-19. A survey regarding pressures on the gender academy, the forms they may have taken budgetary restrictions, and possible countervailing measures was conducted before WGGGA met with directors of academic gender programs. We further deepened our analysis by focusing on the attacks related to the gender academy that we had identified in a subset of countries—Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan—which is not intended as a representative sample of the universe of illiberal governments that have, or may, target the gender academy. Overall, we found that, while in some contexts the gender academy continues to operate and, indeed, thrive, it has come under threat in multiple regions. Those attacks have sometimes followed one another in a phenomenon we could term an “illiberal cascade.” Thus, for example, Poland threatened to end gender study programs in the aftermath of Hungary’s ban on gender studies (Wilson-McDonald, 2021). We subsequently identified strategies deployed by gender scholars to counter the attacks to which they had been subjected.

3. Pathways to Institutionalization and the Underlying Vulnerabilities of Gender Studies Programs

Research conducted in recent years has highlighted the multiple trajectories that have led to the institutionalization of women’s studies, and, subsequently, gender studies programs in Europe (ATHENA-Network, 2010). But although the specific trajectories have varied, the political imbrication of the gender academy seems to frequently recur—in this sense, both the integration of gender studies into the academy and the connotations it acquires differentiate it from, let us conjecture, engineering. Gender studies (under whose capacious label we include women’s studies and LGBTQI+ studies) almost inevitably appear first as a site of critical knowl-

edge, although it has now, at times, also come to be perceived as a depoliticized and depoliticizing locus of, at best, technocratic professionalization (Halley et al., 2018, 2019; Scott, 2008). In North America and Western Europe (at least), political critique was constitutive of a field that emerged as a result—and accelerator—of gender-based mobilizations. Here, early gender studies programs grew out of “second wave” feminist mobilizations, which, in turn, were frequently associated with student and other mobilizations (for the United States see, e.g., Howe, 1979; for the case of Italy see Balbo, 1981; Balbo & Ergas, 1982). The nexus with the women’s movement also entailed a close connection with feminist organizations, and sometimes resulted in the establishment of extra-academic centers for the production and socialization of critical knowledge regarding gender (Addis Saba et al., 1992).

In other parts of the world, however—including several countries on which we touch here—the institutionalization of gender studies programs is associated with processes of democratization, including, albeit not exclusively, the incentives provided by international organizations and governmental and private foreign entities for the integration of gender rights—especially, perhaps, women’s rights—into both national policies and academia. In either case, whether gender studies emerged as a result of feminist mobilizations outside the academy that also, and inevitably, engaged women either already in or oriented towards academic careers, or in association with processes of democratization, their institutionalization bore the marks of politics. The political imbrication of gender studies programs is, then, related to their institutional trajectories as well as to their intellectual foundations in critical thought. It is important to stress that the constitutive link between politics and gender studies in no way implies a uniformity of political orientations among gender scholars or in their programs—where, indeed, technocratic policy analysts may be found as well as radical critical thinkers. Nonetheless, this linkage—as well as the role played by extra-academic organizations—has partially contributed to the vulnerability of gender studies in contexts of rising illiberalism independently from its different historical antecedents.

These vulnerabilities may be accentuated by the international connectivity that has come to characterize the field. In part, that connectivity is manifest in the construction of gender studies bibliographies (Griffin & Braidotti, 2002). But it is also evident in the development of international scholarly associations and networks, including WISE, AIOFE, and ATHENA, which ultimately merged in the establishment of ATGENDER, the European Association for Gender, Research and Documentation (ATHENA-Network, 2010). This conspicuously international—and, for many, European—dimension has surely heightened the gender academy’s susceptibility to “nativist” populist illiberal accusations that cast gender as a concept and the gender academy

as a set of individuals and institutions as importers of foreign influences, hostile to national traditions. The issue was further explored in the WGGA webinar “The Politics of Language and the Question of “Gender” in 2018. In this optic, “gender” is a per se foreign idea. But it also scrambles organicist visions of the nation—as well as of theologically-embedded views of the sexual order—opening a space for a critique of the (potentially or latently as well as overtly) conflictual power relations that forge gender identities and trajectories.

Indeed, in several of the countries we explored, the emergence of women’s movements—and the engagement of scholars within them—provided an essential impetus to the development of academic programs. In Brazil and Turkey, women’s and gender studies emerged in parallel with feminist social movements and the growth in feminist scholarship (Veleda da Silva & Lan, 2007; Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019). For instance, feminist movements with varying orientations and sociological characteristics flourished in Brazil, fuelled by leftist and Marxist ideas, and emboldened by the resistance against the military regime (Veleda da Silva & Lan, 2007). This broad mobilization of women gave rise to the establishment of groups and research centers in various Brazilian universities beginning in 1983 (Centre for Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies, n.d.). In Turkey, feminist scholars’ mobilizations laid the groundwork for the creation of women’s studies programs: The first one opened officially in 1989 at Istanbul University, with the inauguration of an MA program in women’s studies the following year (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019).

But in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, the political changes at the end of the 1980s prompted scholars to undertake extensive research focused on the application of what was then viewed as “Western theories” and concepts to contextually and culturally different geographies (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003) and facilitated international exchanges regarding theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to issues concerning women and gender relations (Pető, 2019). In Eastern European states, gender studies education often started with individual courses, which then evolved into programs, certificate programs, and accreditation for MA or PhD degrees. The enthusiasm catalyzed by the fall of totalitarian regimes was reflected in the efforts of individual scholars and activists to establish gender and women’s studies, with the first centers opening in the early 1990s and operating under the auspices of academies of sciences and national institutions. The Moscow Centre for Gender Studies was founded in 1990 as part of the Institute for Socio-Economic Population Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The center collaborated with international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank, as well as with the Russian government in supporting its effort to fulfill its international obligations in gender policy (Zimmermann, 2008). In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, gender studies continued to spread from Moscow and St. Petersburg to

other cities in the former Soviet space, such as Samara and Ivanovo (Rossman, 2021).

Women-focused NGOs also played an important role in developing and teaching knowledge relating to gender in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. Some women’s NGOs established women’s studies centers that either found some support in state-run universities—the Belgrade Women’s Studies Centre, for instance, obtained accreditation for several courses from the University of Belgrade—or remained independent (University of Belgrade, 2015). In the second half of the 1990s, several Western foundations—including MacArthur, Soros, Ford, and Carnegie—provided opportunities for both state and private universities in Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the former Soviet Union, to establish gender and women’s studies programs (Minchenia et al., 2017). However, the state-supported initiatives proved more vulnerable to state involvement (Zimmermann, 2008).

In Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries, gender studies followed the Russian path and began emerging in the mid-1990s with financial support packages earmarked for democratization processes (Zimmermann, 2008). Initially, they were limited to single courses or research centers at state institutions despite the thriving NGO scene dominated by organizations focusing on women’s rights and women’s empowerment (Sabitova, 2018). The first centers for gender studies emerged in the early 2000s: In Kazakhstan, the Centre for Gender Studies was established at Al-Farabi Kazakh State National University with the support of UNESCO (Shakirova, 2017); in Kyrgyzstan, the Centre for Critical Gender Studies was officially launched in 2017, offering a minor degree and specialization programs for students from the American University of Central Asia (Kim & Karioris, 2018).

In sum, gender studies programs in the countries we considered for this article were shaped through processes of institutionalization that reflected the emergence, strength, and longevity of women’s (and likely also LGBTQI+) mobilizations and of affiliated NGOs, impacted their ability to integrate into state-supported universities or private institutions, and affected their financial sustainability and intellectual autonomy, especially in contexts in which neoliberalism informed university policies (Bellolio, 2022; Labanino & Dobbins, 2022; Pető, 2021a). Public programs were exposed to disabling state interventions, including budget cuts, program renaming, dean or rector removal, and closure. Privately supported programs became reliant on foreign funding and hence were vulnerable to state interventions that limited access to such funding (Rossman, 2021). But it may be that the continued (or perhaps renewed) links with gender-based movements and the NGOs associated with them, as well as the links established with international gender studies programs and organizations have contributed to fostering the search for innovative responses to the attacks to which they

have been subjected both by neoliberal restructuring and by illiberal attacks.

4. Threats to Gender Studies Programmes

Anti-gender campaigns are highly organized, well-funded, and global anti-gender players, which might include concerned citizens' initiatives, faith-based organizations, and governments from Russia, Brazil, United States and more (Washington et al., 2021). But how do such campaigns operate in different contexts? As noted above, building on—and further articulating—the frameworks proposed by Pirro and Stanley (2021), we identify four principal modalities utilized to undermine gender studies programs in our focus countries: Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Turkey, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan. While we address the various modalities separately, it is important to note that each may be deployed in combination with others. Moreover, the boundaries of the different modalities are somewhat porous; nonetheless, as the following paragraphs show, we find that each has a distinctive core, and may be identified with distinct policies.

4.1. Breaking

Breaking is defined by Pirro and Stanley (2021) as entailing legislative changes that directly challenge the constitutional order. Arguably, this definition may be applied to any intervention that undermines established norms regarding academic freedom. We use it, however, in a narrower sense, to indicate the shuttering of gender studies programs. We found breaking emblematically expressed in the Orbán government's decision to close academic gender studies programs in Hungary. That decision—adumbrated in the declaration of a spokesman for President Orbán that “we do not consider it acceptable to talk about socially constructed genders” (Kent & Tapfumaneyi, 2018)—appeared to spark analogous policies by governments elsewhere in the region. Thus, we also saw the Romanian parliament, in June 2020, attempt to ban educational institutions from teaching theories that separate gender from biological sex (Coughlan, 2018; Ilie, 2020). Whereas in Hungary the policy of closure succeeded, forcing Central European University's gender studies programs to relocate to its Vienna campus in Austria, in Romania, countervailing student mobilizations effectively helped to block the proposed legislation from becoming law.

4.2. Bending

Bending is understood as policy changes that conform to existing law (or policy) but contradict its basic purpose, undermining existing “legislative constraints in ways that are not procedurally illegal but subvert/defy liberal democratic norms” (Pirro & Stanley, 2021, p. 90). Applied to the gender studies context, we can see bending where established norms regarding the alloca-

tion of funding for universities, or their ability to raise extra-governmental resources, are legalistically complied with but de-facto undermined. Academic institutions will come under pressure, for example, even though they continue to be funded in line with existing legislation, when their resources are severely restricted, re-directed through compliant intermediary organizations, or channeled through intermediary organizations whose leadership has been recast to be government friendly. Analogously, academic institutions will come under pressure when their ability to access their funders is curtailed in fact even if not in principle by the imposition of onerous or even vexatious administrative procedures.

By way of example, in 2017, Brazil's government started targeting gender education by eliminating the term “gender” from comprehensive sexuality education in Brazil's National Common Curricular Base to protect public schools from “indoctrination” of “gender ideology” (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Agitating fear of “gender ideology” played a crucial role in the election of President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 who vowed to “fix” Brazil from “bad influences” that purportedly threaten the “traditional family” (Teixeira, 2019, p. 943). His cabinet reportedly continued the attack on universities' institutional autonomy by implementing budget cuts, discouraging the teaching of philosophy and sociology as well as research on gender issues (Teixeira, 2019, p. 943), and appointing agreeable conservative rectors (Baiocchi & Silva, 2020). Scholars and human rights activists have decried Bolsonaro's “ideological crusade” (Kubík Mano, 2021) and attempts to curtail academic freedom, but their attempts have not yet proven successful (Green, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

“The most powerful blow to gender studies programs in Russia” may be the 2012 law on “foreign agents” (Rossman, 2021), which—together with subsequent legislation, including on “undesirable organizations”—has made it difficult if not impossible for NGOs to access independent funding. The law obligates organizations that engage in what may be construed as political activity or in attempts to influence public opinion to submit narrative and financial reports about their activities. Failure to do so may result in fines, suspension of activities, and even imprisonment. Yet, the law neither provides a clear definition of a “political act” nor specifies how the state identifies such organizations or individuals (Machalek, 2013). The effects of the law include the discontinuation of programs dependent on foreign funding, including tuition payments by foreign students (Turkova, 2021).

Kyrgyzstan seems to have followed in Russia's footsteps by adopting a law requiring NGOs to report their sources of funding and the nature of expenditures; as in Russia, failure to do so may result in forced closures. As gender studies in Kyrgyzstan remain in a nascent stage and are mainly led by NGOs that may receive international grants, scholars and activists are concerned about the potential repressive uses of this legislation (Putz, 2021; Zhanybek kyzy, 2021).

4.3. Forging

Pirro and Stanley (2021, p. 90) define forging as occurring when changes are made that break with “a mainstream consensus without challenging the rule of law.” We see this somewhat differently, as the process whereby an established pluralistic consensus that allows and perhaps fosters critical perspectives is challenged in favor of one that insists on a uniform set of values: State actors’ evocations of national identity and conservative family values while attacking “gender ideology,” for example, may be seen as a form of forging. Forging can also entail delegitimizing gender studies (inter alia) by applying parameters—like the volume of student enrolments—that may be generally relevant to higher education but whose application may allow for administrative discretion. Thus, in Hungary, the legitimacy of gender studies was undermined when the efficiency and desirability of international education was called into question (Pető, 2020).

In Russia, anti-gender discourse has been embedded in the promotion of “traditional values.” Even the academic establishment has reportedly functioned as the primary constructor of anti-gender discourse, expressed through “academic homophobia” and backed by relevant legal measures banning “propaganda of non-traditional relationships” (Moss, 2017, p. 200).

In Kyrgyzstan, attempts to discredit students and faculty of the American University of Central Asia (which was financially supported by the Open Society Foundations and the US Government) have accused them of promoting LGBTQ+ values and of being “trained” to serve in Western-funded NGOs to destabilize the country and promote homosexuality (Djanibekova, 2020). The government went so far as accusing the former dean of the “illegal acquisition of psychotropic substances” and reportedly deported him from the country (Kuchins, 2021). The only known Centre for Critical Gender Studies at the American University of Central Asia has not held public events after the discreditation campaign against its students and faculty in 2020.

4.4. De-Specification

Lastly, gender studies programs lose their significance when they are integrated and sometimes dissolved into other programs. De-specification denotes policies of discursive redefinition, but such policies can also entail the institutional dislocation of previously independent gender studies programs, which come to be placed under the jurisdiction of another entity, such as a program on “the family.” The discursive redefinition that characterizes de-specification may be viewed as a form of “discourse-capture.” This involves “the intentional resignification, shifting, mimicking, or twisting of existing concepts and terminologies with the result that their dominant meaning and ideological underpinnings are altered, or replaced,” in ways that “undermine and ultimately

dismantle the discursive frameworks crucial to women’s rights” (Lewin, 2021, pp. 255, 257). We have seen de-specification occur in policy and policy research contexts, as when entities charged with promoting women’s or gender equality are rebranded or submerged into agencies for families and children. Such processes can be seen in Hungary and Poland (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). And we have heard anecdotally of gender scholars in Turkey, Brazil, and elsewhere who have found themselves in “family studies” programs. Nonetheless, the de-specification of gender studies academic programs requires further research.

5. Resistance Strategies

Opposition to anti-gender mobilization is not new—there are many examples of (partially) successful campaigns that have advanced the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people amidst anti-gender attacks. Ireland’s “Together for Yes” campaign to remove a constitutional ban on abortion provides one such example (Denkovski et al., 2021, pp. 53–57). It may be that activists are, at times, better able to respond to backlash than the scholars, whose formal institutional affiliations may render them especially vulnerable. But universities may also offer protection that activists cannot access because faculty is tenured; because universities are subject to administrative restraints or judicial oversight that hampers their ability to enact repressive measures; or because academics visibility—both nationally and internationally—make raise the costs of repression. Generally, current expressions of resistance may seem insufficiently organized and effective (Pető, 2021b), and dissident groups may appear fragmented and isolated (Surman & Rossman, 2022). Nonetheless, the tactics we identify below can be seen as overall, multipurpose responses to attempts to restrict (through bending and de-specification), delegitimize (through forging), or, indeed, eliminate (through breaking, and possibly de-specification) gender studies programs.

5.1. Universities in Exile and Informal Academies

Gender scholars are also proving resilient and committed to continuing their work, whether at home or in new contexts abroad. In Hungary, where the repression has been harsh, scholars and activists nonetheless continue to stress the importance of gender. In the words of Marianna Szczygielska, a graduate student at the now exiled Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University (Vienna campus) and a current post-doc at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin:

When we are under pressure, we should stand up for what our research field actually works with. Say that it includes queer studies, trans studies, crip studies, and so on. We must be careful so that

we don't undermine our field because we don't dare to show all of its various niches. (as cited in Lilleslåtten, 2018)

One strategy has been to reconstitute communities of learning and teaching—sometimes, “officialized” as universities, at others operating more informally, through individual organizations and scholarly networks. They form groups and circles to prepare lectures, run workshops, publish materials (Aktas et al., 2018), and brainstorm and share resistance strategies, as well as support each other during “experiences of hostility, dismissal and unnecessary critique” (as cited in Macoun & Miller, 2014, p. 298). Faced with charges and possible detention following the attempted coup in 2016, Turkish scholars participated in founding the Academy in Exile in Germany to help threatened scholars continue their research and teaching abroad and participate in “solidarity academies” such as Birarada Academy. Similarly, Off-University provides an alternative platform for teaching and learning, as do, in Brazil, the Citizenship, Study, Research, Information, and Action (CEPIA) and the Free Feminist University (Molyneux et al., 2021). The same happens in Russia with online universities like Arzamas Academy and Free University Moscow (Surman & Rossman, 2022, p. 34). In Kyrgyzstan, the Bishkek Feminist Initiatives epitomizes the extra-institutional organization of knowledge production and dissemination (Cernat, 2020). As a participant in Birarada Academy said in an anonymous interview: “The academy is no longer limited [to being] inside the university. It is freer now. There are street academies now—academic knowledge is in the streets!” (as cited in Aktas et al., 2018, p. 176).

5.2. Solidarity Networks

Along with many other academic scholars and human rights advocates working on women and gender issues in global affairs, the authors of this article are part of the interdisciplinary, international network WGGGA. WGGGA addresses issues relating to the rise of illiberal movements and governments by fostering the resilience of the gender academy, providing a platform for information-sharing regarding research and teaching, supporting at-risk scholars, and furthering critical gender knowledge and awareness (WGGGA, 2021a, 2021b). Forming solidarity networks like Aramizda Gender Studies Association was a critical response to attacks against gender studies departments in Turkey to “defend the spaces for academic and intellectual production” (Lévy-Aksu, 2021, para. 5). Other networks also provide support to scholars under pressure from illiberal states and movements, including ATGENDER, the informal but efficient Gender International, and the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), as well as less “grassroots” organizations such as Scholars at Risk and the Scholars Rescue Fund.

5.3. Everyday Resistance

While anti-gender attacks and the protests they have elicited have been the subject of significant research, the everyday resistance of gender studies programs and scholars has been little explored. Scholars have been engaging in everyday resistance in non-dramatic, nonconfrontational, or “non-recognized” ways that may escape detection as forms of opposition (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Some scholars may opt for self-censorship rather than risk losing their positions (Aktas et al., 2018). Others may choose to operate “under the radar,” rebranding their programs and merging with others that are considered acceptable, eliminating references to “gender” from publications, grant applications, and courses, turning to networks of colleagues and activists to continue to teach and produce research even when formal academic channels are closed, and looking for means of support abroad. Whether this will amount to the “educated acquiescence” that Perry (2020, p. 2) defined as an implicit exchange between scholars and the state, whereby political compliance buys an “attractive package of privileges and benefits (social prestige, political influence, material goods, and the like) for successful recipients of higher education—where the criteria for success are also defined by the state” or provide cover for the continuation or re-elaboration and re-ignition of critical paradigms remains to be seen.

6. Conclusion

In sum, we have identified ways in which illiberal states in Central and Eastern Europe may use breaking, bending, forging, and de-specification to undermine the gender academy and we have identified analogous instances in Latin America and Eurasia. Furthermore, we have detailed some forms of resistance. We have also shown that, although attacks on gender studies may lead to programs being restricted and even dismantled, they do not necessarily entail the erasure of gender studies. Rather, repression may catalyze institutional innovation (as with the universities in exile and informal academies), and prompt further interest, including on the part of prospective students. The capacity for resistance bespeaks the solidity of the “gender academy” and the gender rights communities it references. If illiberals have aimed at reducing the impact of gender studies programs as crucibles of critical thought and practice, they have only been partially successful—thus far. As existing gender studies centers have been weakened or altogether eliminated, for example, by policies of breaking, bending, and de-specification, scholars have continued to focus on gender in other sites, including universities in exile and informal academies, and to disseminate and debate their work through networks of scholarly exchange.

As gender scholars have faced threats that have forced them into exile, they have sometimes found protection through organizations such as the Scholars

Rescue Fund and Scholars at Risk, but also through extensions of hospitality (and, at times, employment). Such extensions of hospitality can—and perhaps have already—helped to distribute “reputational capital” that can counter strategies of stigmatization—against individuals, but also against gender studies in general. Thus, networks provide intellectual as well as practical and political support and mobilize internationally as well as nationally to break the isolation that stigmatization and marginalization can bring. In this perspective, research, teaching, and the construction of relations may prove an essential—activist—mode of scholarly engagement at a time of global crisis and domestic repression (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009). But further research is needed, to track the modalities we have hypothesized, identify in which specific situations illiberal governments deploy them, and which specific strategies of resistance are brought into play, when, by whom, and with what results.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Addis Saba, M., Noack, S., & Levin, T. (1992). Women’s studies in Italy: The story of feminist historiography. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.2307/40003709>
- Aktas, V., Nilsson, M., & Borell, K. (2018). Social scientists under threat: Resistance and self-censorship in Turkish academia. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 67(2), 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2018.1502872>
- ATHENA-Network. (2010). *Tuning educational structures in Europe: Reference points for design and delivery of degree programs in gender studies*. Publicaciones de la Universidad de Deusto.
- Baiocchi, G., & Silva, M. K. (2020, November 9). Bolsonaro’s war against reason. *Boston Review*. <https://bostonreview.net/articles/gianpaolo-baiocchi-marcelo-k-silva-bolsonaros-war-against-reason>
- Balbo, L. (1981). International notes: Women’s access to intellectual work: The case of Italy. *Signs*, 6(4), 763–770.
- Balbo, L., & Ergas, Y. (1982). *How trade unions, the women’s movement and the university have produced women’s studies in Italy* (A Women’s Studies International Monograph). The Feminist Press.
- Bellolio, C. (2022). An inquiry into populism’s relation to science. *Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957221109541>
- Centre for Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies. (n.d.). *Apresentação* [Introduction]. <http://www.neim.ufba.br/wp/apresentacao>
- Cernat, M. C. (2020, March 12). Feminism in Kyrgyzstan: A dangerous option. *The Barricade*. <https://thebarricade.online/feminism-kyrgyzstan>
- Coughlan, S. (2018, December 3). University “forced out” from Budapest. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-46427810>
- Denkovski, D., Bernarding, N., & Lunz, K. (2021). *Power over rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement* (Vol. 1). Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/60c865e5f8c3ce53222039e3/1623746023308/PowerOverRights_Volume1_web.pdf
- Djanibekova, N. (2020, June 5). Zhertvy kuklovodov: kto i zachem prodvigayet uzhestocheniy kontrolya nad NKO v razgar pandemii i krizisa? [Victims of puppeteers: Who is pushing for tighter control over NGOs in the midst of a pandemic and crisis and why?] *Kloop.kg*. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/06/03/zhertvy-kuklovodov-kto-i-zachem-prodvigaet-uzhestochenie-kontrolya-nad-nko-v-razgar-pandemii-i-krizisa>
- Ergas, Y. (2019). Take back the future: Global feminisms and the coming crisis of the Beijing settlement. *Journal of International Affairs*, 72(2), 19–36.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.
- Green, J. N. (2019). *Brazil’s far-right president, university autonomy, and academic freedom*. American Association of University Professors. <https://www.aaup.org/article/brazil%E2%80%99s-far-right-president-university-autonomy-and-academic-freedom>
- Griffin, G., & Braidotti, R. (2002). *Thinking differently a reader in European women’s studies*. Zed Books.
- Grzebalska, W., Kováts, E., & Pető, A. (2017, October 7). Gender as symbolic glue: How “gender” became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order. *Political Critique*. <http://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order>
- Grzebalska, W., & Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 68, 164–172.
- Halley, J., Kotiswaran, P., Rebouché, R., & Shamir, H. (2018). *Governance feminism: An introduction*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Halley, J., Kotiswaran, P., Rebouché, R., & Shamir, H. (2019). *Governance feminism: Notes from the field*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Howe, F. (1979). Introduction: The first decade of women’s studies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(4), 413–421.
- Human Rights Watch. (2022). “I became scared, this was their goal”: Efforts to ban gender and sexuality education in Brazil. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/05/12/i-became-scared-was-their-goal/efforts-ban-gender-and-sexuality-education-brazil>

- Ilie, L. (2020, December 16). Romanian top court overturns ban on gender identity studies. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-lgbt-rights-idUSKBN28Q2NF>
- Kent, L., & Tapfumaneyi, S. (2018, October 19). Hungary's Viktor Orbán bans gender study at colleges. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/19/europe/hungary-bans-gender-study-at-colleges-trnd/index.html>
- Kim, E., & Karioris, F. (2018, December 5). Educating on sexual and gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan. *SVRI*. <https://www.svri.org/blog/educating-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-kyrgyzstan>
- Kinzelbach, K., Saliba, I., Spannagel, J., & Quinn, R. (2021). *Free universities: Putting the academic freedom index into action*. Global Public Policy Institute. https://gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2021_Free_Universities_AFi-2020_upd.pdf
- Kourou, N. S. (2020). *Right-wing populism and anti-gender movements: The same coin with different faces*. Global Political Trends Centre. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25189>
- Kubík Mano, M. (2021, December 4). By banning “gender ideology” Bolsonaro feeds his far-right ideals. *Countering Backlash*. <https://counteringbacklash.org/gender-ideology-and-neo-liberalism-an-ideal-marriage-in-bolsonaros-brazil>
- Kuchins, A. (2021, December 3). *Fear and loathing in Kyrgyzstan: An American story* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUflrUifQ04>
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (2017). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against equality*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Labanino, R., & Dobbins, M. (2022). “The goal is not necessarily to sit at the table”: Resisting autocratic legalism in Hungarian academia. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76(3), 521–536.
- Lévy-Aksu, N. (2021, April 21). Alternative knowledge production and transmission in Turkey: Solidarity academies (II). *TRAFO Blog*. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/28215>
- Lewin, T. (2021). Nothing is as it seems: “Discourse capture” and backlash politics. *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3), 253–268.
- Lilleslåtten, M. (2018, November 19). European gender scholars unite in resistance against right-wing attacks. *Kilden*. <https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2018/11/european-gender-scholars-unite>
- Machalek, K. (2013). Factsheet: Russia's NGO laws. In A. Puddington, T. Roylance, K. Machalek, & M. Huston (Eds.), *Contending with Putin's Russia: A call for American leadership* (pp. 10–13). Freedom House.
- Macoun, A., & Miller, D. (2014). Surviving (thriving) in academia: Feminist support networks and women centres. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(3), 287–301.
- Minchenia, A., Sasunkevich, O., & Cope, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Postsotsialisticheskoye bespokoistvo: gendernye issledovaniya v Vostochnoi Yevrope v usloviyah konservativnogo perevorota* [Post-socialist anxiety: Gender studies in Eastern Europe in the context of the conservative backlash]. *Crossroads*, 2017(1/2). https://ru.ehu.lt/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CrossRoad_2017_1_2.pdf
- Molyneux, M., Dey, A., Gatto, M. A. C., & Rowden, H. (2021). *Background paper prepared for the 25th anniversary of the Beijing platform for action, 64th session of the committee on the status of women*. United Nations. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Discussion-paper-New-feminist-activism-waves-and-generations-en.pdf>
- Moss, K. (2017). Russia as the saviour of European civilization: Gender and the geopolitics of traditional values. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 195–214). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Perry, E. J. (2020). Educated acquiescence: How academia sustains authoritarianism. *China Theory and Society*, 49, 1–22.
- Pető, A. (2015). Epilogue: “anti-gender” mobilisational discourse of conservative and far right parties as a challenge for progressive politics. In E. Kováts & M. Pöim (Eds.), *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe* (pp. 126–131). Foundation for European Progressive Studies.
- Pető, A. (2019). Eastern Europe: Gender research, knowledge production, and institutions. In B. Kortendiek, B. Riegraf, & K. Sabisch (Eds.), *Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung, Geschlecht und Gesellschaft* [Handbook interdisciplinary gender research, gender and society] (pp. 1–11). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-12496-0_153
- Pető, A. (2020). Academic freedom and gender studies: An alliance forged in fire. *Gender and Sexuality*, 15, 9–24.
- Pető, A. (2021a). Current comment: The illiberal academic authority; an oxymoron? *Berichte Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 44(4), 461–469.
- Pető, A. (2021b). *Four reasons why gender studies have changed because of illiberal attacks, and why it matters: Heinrich Böll stiftung: Brussels Office—European Union*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. <https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/05/03/4-reasons-why-gender-studies-has-changed-because-illiberal-attacks-and-why-it-matters>
- Pető, A. (2021c). Gender and illiberalism. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 313–325). Routledge.
- Pirro, A. L., & Stanley, B. (2021). Forging, bending, and breaking: Enacting the “illiberal playbook” in Hungary and Poland. *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924>
- Putz, C. (2021, July 15). Concerns rise as Kyrgyzstan enacts new NGO controls. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/concerns-rise>

[as-kyrgyzstan-enacts-new-ngo-controls](#)

- Rossman, E. (2021, October 7). Rossiyskiye vlasti snachala ne vosprinimali issledovatelei gendera vser'yez, a potom nachali ih presledovat. I, konechno zhe, ob'yavlyat "inostrannymi agentami". Vot kak eto ustroeno. [The Russian authorities did not take gender researchers seriously at first, and then began to persecute them. And, of course, declared "foreign agents". This is how it works]. *Meduza*. <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/10/07/rossiyskie-vlasti-snachala-ne-vosprinimali-issledovateley-gendera-vseriez-a-potom-nachali-ih-presledovat-i-konechno-zhe-ob-yavlyat-inostrannymi-agentami>
- Sabitova, A. K. (2018). Gender studies in Central Asia, Kazakhstan case. *The Journal of World Women Studies*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.46291/wwsj.v3i1.8>
- Scott, J. W. (Ed.). (2008). *Women's studies on the edge*. Duke University Press.
- Shakirova, S. (2017). Gendernyye issledovaniya kak chast' bolshogo politicheskogo proekta: Vzglyad is Kazakhstana. [Gender studies as a part of the big political process: A view from Kazakhstan]. *Crossroads*, 2017(1/2), 153–163. https://ru.ehu.lt/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CrossRoad_2017_1_2.pdf
- Sudbury, J., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2009). Introduction. In J. Sudbury & M. Okazawa-Rey (Eds.), *Activist scholarship: Antiracism, feminism, and social change* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.
- Surman, J., & Rossman, E. (2022). New dissidence in contemporary Russia: Students, feminism and new ethics. *New Perspectives*, 30(1), 27–46.
- Teixeira, A. B. M. (2019). A growing threat to human rights? Gender and political ideologies in Brazil. *Gender and Education*, 31(7), 938–944.
- Temkina, A., & Zdravomyslova, E. (2003). Gender studies in post-Soviet society: Western frames and cultural differences. *Studies in East European Thought*, 55(1), 51–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20099818>
- Turkova, K. (2021, October 6). "I tak pochti nikogo ne ostalos": Olga Shnyrova o sud'be gendernykh issledovaniy ["And so no one is left": Olga Shnyrova on the fate of gender studies]. *Golos Ameriki*. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/interview-with-olga-shnyrova-center-for-gender-studies-inoagent/6262766.html>
- University of Belgrade. (2015). *Master academic studies of political science—Gender studies: Faculty of Political Sciences*. <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/en/master-academic-studies-of-political-science-gender-studies>
- [academic-studies-of-political-science-gender-studies](#)
- Veleda da Silva, S., & Lan, D. (2007). Geography and gender studies: The situation in Brazil and Argentina. *Belgeo*, 2007(3), 371–382.
- Vinshagen, S., & Johansson, A. (2013). "Everyday resistance": Exploration of a concept and its theories. *Resistance Studies Magazine*, 2013(1). <https://resistance-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Vinshagen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf>
- Washington, K., Denkovski, D., & Bernarding, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Power over rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement. Volume II: Case studies*. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/60cb90dc89619a5c8234aadf/1623953630210/PowerOverRights2_web.pdf
- Wilson-McDonald, A. N. (2021, June 7). *Eastern Europe's anti-gender movement and what it means for America*. Ms. Magazine. <https://msmagazine.com/2021/06/07/eastern-europe-anti-gender-movement-poland-slovakia-czech-republic-conservative-abortion-women-lgbtq-democracy-right-wing>
- Women and Gender in Global Affairs. (2018). *Politics of language and the issue of "gender."*
- Women and Gender in Global Affairs. (2019). *Gender under threat*.
- Women and Gender in Global Affairs. (2020). *Meeting of the heads of the gender studies programs*.
- Women and Gender in Global Affairs. (2021a). *Meeting of informal academics*.
- Women and Gender in Global Affairs. (2021b). *Meeting of the gender networks*.
- Yelsali Parmaksız, P. M. (2019). Thirty years of gender and women's studies in Turkey. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102279>
- Zhanybek kyzy, M. (2021). Kyrgyzstan: Controversial NGO law passes. *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-controversial-ngo-law-passes>
- Zimmermann, S. (2008). The institutionalization of women's and gender studies in higher education in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: Asymmetric politics and the regional-transnational configuration. *East Central Europe*, 34/35(1/2), 131–160.

About the Authors



Yasmine Ergas is the director of Columbia SIPA's Gender & Public Policy specialization, a member of the executive committee of the Committee on Global Thought, a co-chair of the University's Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies Council, the founder of the Women and Gender in Global Affairs Network, and former director of the Institute for the Study of Human Rights. Among numerous other fellowships, grants, and honours, she is the recipient of the inaugural IIE-SRF Vartan Gregorian Research Grant to study the rise of "illiberal democracy" and the backlash against gender equality. A lawyer and sociologist, she publishes and lectures widely and her work has been published in multiple languages.



Jazgul Kochkorova is a project manager of the Women and Gender in Global Affairs Network, at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights. She earned her master's degrees in international development, gender studies, and management from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and in public policy analysis from the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Public Policy. Her prior experiences include working in democratic governance, monitoring and evaluation, youth, and peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan.



Andrea Pető is a historian and a professor at the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, a research affiliate of the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest, and a Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her works on gender, politics, the Holocaust, and war have been translated into 23 languages. In 2018 she was awarded the 2018 All European Academies Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values. She is doctor honoris causa of Södertörn University, Stockholm and writes op-ed pieces for international and national media about academic freedom, attacks on gender studies, and illiberal higher education.



Natalia Trujillo is a global philanthropy and corporate responsibility professional at JP Morgan Chase. Prior to this role, she graduated from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, where she focused on gender studies and financial inclusion. Most recently, she worked for the Women and Gender in Global Affairs Network. Natalia is from Colombia and has spent time working in Latin America both in the private and public sectors.