

4.2 Smooth and Stumbling – Knowledge Sharing on Transcultural Gender and Diversity Studies

Olten – Zürich – Fez – Cairo

As part of the two-day international online conference “Critical Gender and Diversity Knowledge. Challenges and Prospects”, the panel “Smooth and Stumbling – Knowledge Sharing on Transcultural Gender and Diversity Studies” took place on November 21, 2020. The panel explored the conditions for the creation, dissemination and preservation of critical gender and diversity knowledge in different localities and under different circumstances.

The **participating panellists** are academics who develop and teach critical gender and diversity knowledge; in addition, some engage in feminist activism. All of them work on the development and dissemination of feminist gender and diversity knowledge, but in different places and under different conditions. Included are Hoda Elsadda (Professor of English and Comparative Literature, The Women and Memory Forum (WMF), Cairo, Egypt), Fatima Sadiqi (Professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies, ISIS Center for Women and Development, Fez, Morocco), Bettina Dennerlein (Professor of Gender Studies and Islamic Studies, Zurich, Switzerland) and Nathalie Amstutz (Professor of Gender and Diversity, University of Applied Sciences of Northwestern Switzerland), who is also moderating the panel. The four experts are currently working together in the international Consortium for Education and Research PRO GED (“Promoting Gender Equality and Diversity through Shared Knowledge Production”), funded by *swissuniversities* as part of the SUDAC programme between 2018-2020.¹ As part of this project, the FHNW School of Business in Olten has developed a pilot online Graduate Course “Introduction to Transcultural Gender & Diversity Studies” in 2020, in which students from universities in Morocco and Switzerland participate and discuss key topics of transculturality, gender and diversity from their specific perspectives and contexts.

Introduction

Based on the panellists long-standing experience and exchange with different modes of gender and diversity knowledge in transcultural settings of teaching and research, this panel starts with the assumption that feminist gender and diversity knowledge is always located. At the same time, it is always necessarily transnational, and hence, transcultural, as it is embedded in various overlapping, intertwined entanglements of local intellectual and political histories of feminist critique, thought and activism. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, Donna Haraway established that feminist knowledge and epistemologies are situated and represent “partial perspectives” (Donna Haraway 1988). In this debate, feminist research was criticized as being embedded in post-colonial power structures (Spivak 1988). The problem of representation and appropriation of intersectional studies was raised by Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1994; Collins / Bilge 2016) and led to an ongoing debate about the (impossible) feminist object (Butler 1990; Knapp 2005). These different bodies of knowledge seem to face various obstacles on the path into a current debate and into the archives of science and society. This panel discusses possible descriptions of these knowledges, their relation to activism and the conditions of their

¹ For more information see <https://www.swissuniversities.ch/en/themen/entwicklung-und-zusammenarbeit/p-6-swissuniversities-development-and-cooperation-network-sudac/cofer-pro-ged>.

development, dissemination and preservation, based on the experience and exchange in building transnational networks in gender and diversity studies and in developing new modes of dialogue and transfer mechanisms in research and teaching.

Rethinking Specificities of Critical Gender and Diversity Knowledge

Nathalie Amstutz opens the panel with her first question on the specificities of the panellists' personal and professional histories and localities as well as the specificities of the gender and diversity knowledges they have been working on. The aim of this exploration into their respective histories of expertise is not only to establish common grounds and similarities, which are assumed to be a necessary precondition for any possible dialogue and exchange, but equally to highlight their contextualization and historicization.

Institution Building

Fatima Sadiqi explores this specificity of knowledge building by recounting her personal experiences with the institutionalization process of gender studies in Morocco. In the 1980s, she and her colleagues were beginning to engage with issues of gender studies from the perspectives of different disciplines and research backgrounds. Of particular importance in this emerging collaboration was to embed gender studies in the locality of the region and to create novel empirical knowledge through field research. Without institutional support, the only available, yet powerful tool of this research was the group's motivation. Together with students, they conducted first workshops and began to publish on these topics. The anchoring of gender studies in the local context was also a decisive criterion for the institutionalization of the field. Thus, for Fatima Sadiqi, institution building remains of central importance in generating and developing innovative bodies of knowledge. The initially loose structures successfully developed into university study programs and doctoral programs. Later, institutes such as ISIS and INLAC, two NGOs of which Fatima Sadiqi is co-founder², were established to bridge the gap between universities and civil society. She calls this a process of "self-generating institution building" that has increasingly taken on a transnational character. For her, PRO GED and the newly established Graduate Course are good examples of this development.

NGOs and Feminist Activism as Pioneers of Gender Studies

Hoda Elsadda also locates the beginning of gender studies in the Arab world in the 1980s, the only exception being the Arab Institute for Women (AiW, former Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World) in Beirut, founded in 1973. Expanding on Fatima Sadiqi's account, she highlights that gender studies were initially more of an NGO phenomenon than an academic development. Feminists, activists, and the internationalization of human rights subsequently have opened new perspectives on the history of the Arab world and critically questioned the imagination of the modern nation state. Fieldwork and research were conducted to counter the figures and reports of the states. Additionally, publishing houses played an important role in the developing field of gender studies. Not only did they disseminate feminist literature and research, they also became important forums bringing women together and exchanging ideas. The topics discussed ranged from postcolonial questions of representation, to economic and social challenges, to the role of women in the family. Hoda Elsadda reveals many similarities and exchanges between activism and academia in the Arab world. Many of the founders of gender studies are activists and members of NGOs, with research centres and NGOs often receiving grants from the same donors. While in Europe there is a strong and problematic activist-scholar divide, engagement in the public sphere and activism increases the social capital of a scholar in the MENA region.

Pervasive Politics in Feminist Research

² For more information see ISIS Center for Women and Development, Fez (<https://www.centerisis.com/>) and INLAC Center for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Fez (<https://www.inlac-institute.com/>).

For Bettina Dennerlein, critical feminist thought has many roots, as the respective knowledge produced is highly self-reflexive, sometimes even cacophonous. Therefore, being aware of one's own histories and trajectories of intellectual knowledge formation is of great importance. When she herself began to engage in gender studies, theories of neo-Marxism, the Frankfurt School and critical theory resonated strongly throughout academia. Non-European perspectives, however, completely lacked in these theoretical debates. Since Bettina Dennerlein also studied Arabic, she frequently travelled North Africa, where she attended public discussions and debates from intellectuals and activists. Not only did she learn a lot about local contexts, but it also helped developing a more global view of Europe such as learning about French feminism from Algerian colleagues. At the same time, the classifications and labels as introduced in the European context for feminism didn't apply in other geographical and historical contexts and became fragile. It thus became increasingly clear that feminism is a highly political and contextualized movement. Having feminist conversations in different places and at different times is therefore key to a critical knowledge formation that rejects categorical thinking but remains relevant on a political level. Therefore, for Bettina Dennerlein, critical knowledge production remains first and foremost a political challenge. This cannot be tackled on an epistemological or theoretical level only but requires an international exchange in practice.

Dissemination and Reception of Critical Gender and Diversity Knowledge

The panel concludes with the second question round. How are feminist knowledges, critical gender and diversity knowledges communicated and received in the specific contexts? How are they entering a collective memory and what are the instruments to do so? What are challenges in building up this memory?

Interaction and Inclusion

For Fatima Sadiqi, methodology is crucial in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Her approach has always been characterized by interaction and inclusion. Channelling knowledge and comparing regions in North Africa and the Middle East is an ongoing process of lecturing, theorizing, and publishing. Both female and male students have specifically been included in the learning and teaching process from the very beginning on. They jointly organized numerous events to give students the opportunity to exchange on their received knowledge with international scholars. This inclusion was an important factor for Fatima Sadiqi and her colleagues in the process of democratizing the field of higher education in Morocco. On the other hand, students also undertook concrete interventions, such as fieldwork in NGOs. This political aspect of exchanging knowledge with civil society has been present from the very beginning and remains until today an important form of engagement for many Moroccan scholars.

Creating Counter-Knowledges

For Hoda Elsadda, the question of the dissemination and preservation of knowledge is a question of power struggles. As co-founder of the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo³, the creation of an archive constitutes a political act in her view. Archives construct and control what we know, they are an instrument of memory and, ultimately, of our histories and identities as we recount and construct them. As the voices of women have always been marginalized in archives, a critical rethinking of the knowledge received through such institutions is required. Therefore, women's archives function as "counter-archives", challenging official knowledge in not seeking grand narratives, but instead revealing the fragmentation of history and thus allowing for knowledge from different actors to be included (e.g. from the women's movement). Hoda Elsadda emphasizes the importance of such "situated knowledges" and argues that their positions and localities must be made transparent to enable a better understanding, hinting to Haraway when stating that to be from everywhere is

³ For more information see <http://www.wmf.org/eg/en/>.

to be from nowhere (Haraway 1988:590). Thus, feminist archives and gender studies constitute in a sense the “strong backbone” of the women's movement in politicizing debates and pushing for further changes.

Entanglements

When Bettina Dennerlein took up the professorship at the University of Zurich, she had the opportunity to bring together the fields of gender studies and Middle Eastern studies, which was and remains until today a novum in Continental Europe. She recalls the positive feedback she received in opening up new pathways for the institutionalisation of gender studies with a non-European focus. However, she also highlights that the complexity of this work isn't always easily comprehensible. Bettina Dennerlein thus emphasis once again the importance and potential of international collaborations. In doing so, the focus should lie less on differences, categorizations, or comparisons, but rather on the interconnected structures. She therefore suggests "entanglements" as a useful analytical approach for any transnational endeavour since it allows different localities and issues to be understood as interrelated fields of exchange.

Summary

With concluding remarks from students and the public, the panel highlighted not only the interest in issues related to a transcultural perspective of and engagement with gender and diversity knowledge, but also, how emerging dialogues from this approach largely lack in our respective established academic infrastructures. While theoretical debates exist at large focussing on manifold aspects on feminism from a transnational angle, the practical, simultaneous exchange of students and scholars in teaching and disseminating gender and diversity knowledges is in need of further development and inclusion into our daily instruments of teaching and research. Creating new paths of enabling and 'doing' transcultural learning such as the pilot Graduate Course “Introduction to Transcultural Gender and Diversity Studies”⁴ are therefore innovative and instructive tools in deepening our knowledge on both local specificities of gender and diversity issues as well as their relation to and entanglement with global debates.

Literature

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⁴ For more information on the Graduate Course, please visit <https://www.aoi.uzh.ch/de/genderstudies/pro-ged/material/Graduate-Course.html>.